

The Glory and Challenge of a Historical Faith

Every faith has a story about a god who dies and journeys to the underworld before rising again. Whether it was Osiris in Egypt or Ishtar in Babylon or Pare and Hutu in New Zealand or Sayadio of the Iroquois or Marwe in Kenya, everywhere that human beings settled, someone told a story of a god who died, then rose again. All these stories are told as happening in a distant past, when things were different and gods walked the earth, as they no longer do. And generally, these myths reflect the seasons and are understood to take place in a cycle. For instance, when her daughter Persephone is bound in Hades, Ceres the goddess of grain weeps and nothing grows. This is winter. When Persephone escapes, Ceres rejoices, and the earth is fruitful again.

So it is not surprising that when anthropologists in Europe began to put all this together, many people looked at the story of Jesus and concluded that here was just another expression of this myth, reflecting a universal human wish for rebirth. In fact, one young Oxford atheist set out to prove that Jesus was nothing more than the latest version of a very old and very false myth. That scholar's name was C.S. Lewis, and his investigation into the historical Jesus led him where he did not expect. He became an ardent Christian. Yes, the dying-and-rising god is an ancient archetype, but – as Lewis bemusedly put it – “It seems as if one time it actually happened.”

This is one of the glories of our faith, this clear message that God is not just an ideal figure somewhere out there, but that God has been present in the mud-tracked, blood-spattered real life of history. This is a god who cares about us, in real life. But this glory comes with its own challenges. The discipline of history today is not impressed with miracles. History requires corroborating sources and physical evidence. Moreover, every time some new document or artifact is uncovered, modern history gets thrown in a hopper and given another spin, producing a new interpretation.

The Jesus history has been through this mill. Every few years someone comes up with a new interpretation of what Jesus was really all about. He was a zealot, seeking to lead a rebellion against Rome. No, he was an apocalyptic preacher of the end times. No, he was a mystic, perhaps trained in India or China. And so on and so on.

This month many of us are reading one (or both) of two different interpretations the historical Jesus, one by a devout Catholic (Bill O'Reilly, *Killing Jesus*) and one by a Muslim (Reza Aslan, *Zealot*). Both seek insight into this historical personage by delving more deeply into the world in which he lived. Both can provide readers with a deeper appreciation of Jesus the man. Neither is going to prove or disprove anything, really, but both can lead us into the arena where our God chose to operate: the real world. Come along for the ride, even if you don't have time to read the books. Just keep in mind why we are able to do this, why examining the historical record provides new insights into Our Lord. (See Faith Formation pages for discussion times.)

It's because, as Lewis put it, “it seems as if . . . it actually happened.”