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BOOK REVIEW

THE TWO BABYLONS: A Case Study in Poor Methodology

a review of

The Two Babylons, or The Papal Worship

by Alexander Hislop

(Lorizeaux Brothers, 1990)

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In my earlier Christian experience, certain literature fell into my hands that claimed a considerable amount of Babylonian paganism had been mixed into Christianity. While the Roman Catholic Church was the primary target of this criticism, it seemed the customs and beliefs with which pagan parallels could be found had also contaminated other churches. Much of what I encountered was based on a book called *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop (1807–1862).

Over the years *The Two Babylons* has impacted the thinking of many people, ranging all the way from those in radical cults (e.g., the Jehovah's Witnesses) to very dedicated Christians who hunger for a move by God but are concerned about anything that might quench His Spirit. Its basic premise is that the pagan religion of ancient Babylon has continued to our day disguised as the Roman Catholic Church, prophesied in the Book of Revelation as "Mystery Babylon the Great" (thus, the idea of *two* Babylons — one ancient and one modern). Because this book is detailed and has a multitude of notes and references, I assumed, as did many others, it was factual. We quoted "Hislop" as an authority on paganism just as "Webster" might be quoted on word definitions.

As a young evangelist, I began to preach on the mixture of paganism with Christianity, and eventually I wrote a book based on Hislop, titled *Babylon Mystery Religion* (Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Assn., 1966). In time, my book became quite popular, went through many printings, and was translated into Korean, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and several other languages. Hundreds quoted from it. Some regarded me as an authority on the subject of "pagan mixture." Even the noted Roman Catholic writer Karl Keating said, "Its best-known proponent is Ralph Woodrow, author of *Babylon Mystery Religion*."¹

Many preferred my book over *The Two Babylons* because it was easier to read and understand. Sometimes the two books were confused with each other, and once I even had the experience of being greeted as "Reverend Hislop"! As time went on, however, I began to hear rumblings that Hislop was not a reliable historian. I heard this from a history teacher and in letters from people who heard this perspective expressed on the *Bible Answer Man* radio program. Even the Worldwide Church of God began to take a second look at the subject. As a result, I realized I needed to go back through Hislop's work, my basic source, and prayerfully check it out.

As I did this, it became clear: Hislop's "history" was often only an arbitrary piecing together of ancient myths. He claimed Nimrod was a big, ugly, deformed black man. His wife, Semiramis, was a beautiful

white woman with blond hair and blue eyes. But she was a backslider known for her immoral lifestyle, the inventor of soprano singing and the originator of priestly celibacy. He said that the Babylonians baptized in water, believing it had virtue because Nimrod and Semiramis suffered for them in water; that Noah's son Shem killed Nimrod; that Semiramis was killed when one of her sons cut off her head, and so on. I realized that no recognized history book substantiated these and many other claims.

The subtitle for Hislop's book is "The Papal Worship Proved to Be the Worship of Nimrod and His Wife." Yet when I went to reference works such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *The Americana*, *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, *The Worldbook Encyclopedia* – carefully reading their articles on "Nimrod" and "Semiramis" – *not one said anything about Nimrod and Semiramis being husband and wife*. They did not even live in the *same century*. Nor is there any basis for Semiramis being the mother of Tammuz. I realized these ideas were all Hislop's inventions.

If we sought to base an argument about George Washington and his wife, we should at least start out with facts. We could show who George Washington was, that he had a wife named Martha, when they lived, and continue from there. But if no historian was certain who George Washington was, or if he even had a wife, or when they lived, this would not be a sound basis on which to prove anything. Such is the inherent weakness of Hislop's thesis that papal worship is the worship of Nimrod and his wife.

I saw that a more direct and valid argument against errors in the Roman Catholic Church (or any other group) is the *Bible itself*, not ancient mythology. For example, the Bible speaks of a minister being "the husband of but one wife" and that "forbidding people to marry" is a doctrine of devils (1 Tim. 3:2; 4:3). This provides a stronger argument against priestly celibacy than trying to show that ancient priests of Semiramis castrated themselves.

While seeking to condemn the paganism of Roman Catholicism, Hislop produced his own myths. By so doing, he theorized that Nimrod, Adonis, Apollo, Attes, Baal-zebul, Bacchus, Cupid, Dagon, Hercules, Januis, Linus, Lucifer, Mars, Merodach, Mithra, Moloch, Narcissus, Oannes, Odin, Orion, Osiris, Pluto, Saturn, Teitan, Typhon, Vulcan, Wodan, and Zoroaster were all one and the same. By mixing myths, Hislop supposed that Semiramis was the wife of Nimrod and was the same as Aphrodite, Artemis, Astarte, Aurora, Bellona, Ceres, Diana, Easter, Irene, Iris, Juno, Mylitta, Proserpine, Rhea, Venus, and Vesta.

Take enough names, enough stories, and enough centuries; translate from one language to another; and a careless writer of the future might pass on all kinds of misinformation. Gerald Ford, an American president, might be confused with Henry Ford, the car manufacturer. Abraham Lincoln might end up as the inventor of the automobile, the proof being that many cars had the name "Lincoln." The maiden name of Billy Graham's wife is Bell. She has sometimes gone by the name Ruth Bell Graham. The inventor of the telephone was Alexander Graham Bell. By mixing up names, someone might end up saying Billy Graham was the inventor of the telephone; or that he invented Graham Crackers. In fact, the inventor of Graham Crackers was *Sylvester* Graham. Again, similarities could be pointed out. Both men were named Graham. Both men were ministers. But the differences make a real difference: Sylvester was a Presbyterian and Billy a Baptist, and they were from different generations.

Building on similarities while ignoring differences is an unsound practice. Atheists have long used this method in an attempt to discredit Christianity altogether, citing examples of pagans who had similar beliefs about universal floods, slain and risen saviors, virgin mothers, heavenly ascensions, holy books, and so on.

As Christians, we don't reject prayer just because pagans pray to their gods. We don't reject water baptism just because ancient tribes plunged into water as a religious ritual. We don't reject the Bible just because pagans believe their writings are holy or sacred.

The Bible mentions things like kneeling in prayer, raising hands, taking off shoes on holy ground, a holy mountain, a holy place in the temple, pillars in front of the temple, offering sacrifices without blemish, a

sacred ark, cities of refuge, bringing forth water from a rock, laws written on stone, fire appearing on a person's head, horses of fire, and the offering of first fruits. Yet, at one time or another, similar things were known among pagans. Does this make the Bible pagan? Of course not!

If finding a pagan parallel provides proof of paganism, the Lord Himself would be pagan. The woman called Mystery Babylon had a cup in her hand; the Lord has a cup in His hand (Ps. 75:8). Pagan kings sat on thrones and wore crowns; the Lord sits on a throne and wears a crown (Rev. 1:4; 14:14). Pagans worshiped the sun; the Lord is the "Sun of righteousness" (Mal. 4:2). Pagan gods were likened to stars; the Lord is called "the bright and Morning star" (Rev. 22:16). Pagan gods had temples dedicated to them; the Lord has a temple (Rev. 7:15). Pagans built a high tower in Babylon; the Lord is a high tower (2 Sam. 22:3). Pagans worshiped idolatrous pillars; the Lord appeared as a pillar of fire (Exod. 13: 21–22). Pagan gods were pictured with wings; the Lord is pictured with wings (Ps. 91:4).

I realized that citing a similarity does not provide proof. There must be a legitimate connection. Let's suppose on May 10 a man was stabbed to death in Seattle. There were strong reasons for believing a certain person did it. He had motive. He was physically strong. He owned a large knife. He had a criminal record. He was known to have a violent temper and had threatened the victim in the past. All of these things would connect him to the murder, except for one thing: on May 10 he was not in Seattle; he was in Florida. So it is with the claims that are made about pagan origins. They may appear to have a connection, but on investigation, often there is no connection at all.

Because Hislop wrote in the mid-1800s, the books he refers to or quotes are now quite old. I made considerable effort to find these old books and to check Hislop's references; books such as Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains*, Kitto's *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, Wilkinson's *Ancient Egyptians*, as well as old editions of Pausanias, Pliny, Tacitus, Herodotus, and many more. When I checked his footnote references, in numerous cases I discovered they do not support his claims.

Hislop says, for example, that the "round" wafer used in the Roman Catholic mass came from Egyptian paganism. For this he cites a statement in Wilkinson's *Ancient Egyptians* (vol. 5, 353, 365) about the use of thin round cakes on their altars. When I checked Wilkinson's work, however, he also said the Egyptians used oval and triangular cakes; folded cakes; cakes shaped like leaves, animals, and a crocodile's head; and so on. Hislop failed to even mention this.

While condemning round communion wafers as images of the sun-god Baal, Hislop fails to mention that the very manna given by the Lord was round. "Upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small *round* thing....And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat" (Exod. 16:14–15, KJV, emphasis added). Round is not necessarily pagan.

Hislop taught that Tammuz (whom he says was Nimrod) was born on December 25, and this is the origin of the date on which Christmas is observed. Yet his supposed proof for this is taken out of context. Having taught that Isis and her infant son Horus were the Egyptian version of Semiramis and her son Tammuz, he cites a reference that the son of Isis was born "about the time of the winter solstice." When we actually look up the reference he gives for this (Wilkinson's *Ancient Egyptians*, vol. 4, 405), the son of Isis who was born "about the time of the winter solstice" was not Horus, her older son, but Harpocrates. The reference also explains this was a premature birth, causing him to be lame, and that the Egyptians celebrated the feast of his mother's delivery *in spring*. Taken in context, this has nothing to do with a December celebration or with Christmas as it is known today.

In another appeal to Wilkinson, Hislop says that a Lent of 40 days was observed in Egypt. But when we look up the reference, Wilkinson says Egyptian fasts "lasted from seven to forty-two days, and sometimes even a longer period: during which time they abstained entirely from animal food, from herbs and vegetables, and above all from the indulgence of the passions" (Wilkinson, *Ancient Egyptians*, vol. 1, 278). With as much credibility, we could say they fasted 7 days, 10 days, 12 days, or 42 days. Hislop's claim appears to have validity only because he used partial information.

If we based claims on partial information, we could even prove from the Bible there is no God: "...‘There is no God’" (Ps. 14:1). When the entire statement is read, however, it has a different meaning: "The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’"

For these and many other reasons, I pulled my own book, *Babylon Mystery Religion*, out of print despite its popularity. This was not done because I was being threatened in any way or persecuted. This decision was made because of conviction, not compromise. While my original book did contain some valid information, I could not in good conscience continue to publish a book against pagan mixture knowing that it contained a mixture itself of misinformation about Babylonian origins.

I have since replaced this book with *The Babylon Connection?* a 128-page book with 60 illustrations and 400 footnote references. It is an appeal to all my brothers and sisters in Christ who feel that finding Babylonian origins for present-day customs or beliefs is of great importance. My advice, based on my own experience, is to move cautiously in this area, lest we major on minors. If there are things in our lives or churches that are indeed pagan or displeasing to the Lord, they should be dealt with, of course. But in attempting to defuse the confusion of Babylon, we must guard against creating a new "Babylon" (confusion) of our own making.

-- reviewed by *Ralph Woodrow*

Ralph Woodrow has spoken to many different churches, groups, and conferences over the past 42 years, sharing the glad news of Jesus Christ. He is the author of 13 books with more than 500,000 copies in print. Ralph and his wife, Arlene, live in Palm Springs, California.

NOTES

1. Karl Keating, *Catholicism and Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Pree, 1988), 157.