The Internet has made it possible for anyone to reach a wide audience without having to go down traditional media avenues such as corporate publishers and movie theaters. In 2007, an online movie titled Zeitgeist (a German word that refers to the cultural climate or “spirit” of a given time period) exploded onto the Internet, captivating viewers with its own interpretation of the “spirit of the age” today. Lasting approximately two hours, Zeitgeist is filled with heavily dramatized music and images, some with no apparent connection to the movie’s message. The theme of the film is that “we’ve been lied to by every institution” that governs our lives—with religion and government topping the list of deceiving institutions.

The film is divided into three parts. The first part alleges that there have been numerous savior figures with the same essential life story as Jesus (crucified, buried for three days, then resurrected; having twelve disciples, etc.), and that Christianity is simply one more version of an archetypal “solar myth” that has emerged in many places throughout history. In offering this thesis, Zeitgeist appeals to a pantheon of deities from a wide range of cultures, such as the Persian deity Mithra and the Egyptian divinity Horus. The film goes on to argue that Jesus himself never existed as a person and that references to Jesus in secular literature from his era (such as the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus) are either forgeries or are of no use in establishing the existence of a historical Jesus. The second portion of the film argues that the World Trade Center tragedy was an engineered disturbance created by the Bush Administration, and the third section of the film claims that the Federal Reserve is used by international bankers to control world events.

It is difficult to gauge how many people have seen Zeitgeist, but statistics offered on video-library websites such as YouTube have logged hundreds of thousands of views for Zeitgeist material, and the producer of the film, Peter Joseph, sponsored a “Zeitgeist Day” on March 15, 2008, and again on March 15, 2009, during which the film was screened at hundreds of venues worldwide. The Zeitgeist website claims that the film has been viewed more than one hundred million times.¹
Christian apologetics ministries have received numerous requests concerning the information contained in part one of Zeitgeist, and thankfully, there is plenty of material available to answer it. However, Zeitgeist presents us with some strenuous challenges in answering its claims, because it engages in a tactic that I have termed hurling the elephant. Hurling the elephant occurs when a claimant attempts to overwhelm their ideological opponent with an enormous number of truth claims, each of which would require significant research to answer. Zeitgeist’s rapid-fire assertions about various pagan deities, and about Christianity being a reconstructed solar myth, would take literally weeks or months to adequately untangle if we did not have answers immediately at hand.

It is a simple matter for Zeitgeist to say, for example, “The pagan deity Mithra was crucified, buried, and rose from the dead after three days.” We may perhaps be tempted to answer just as simply, with a bare denial, but few would consider this to be a sufficient response. Therefore, we would be practically compelled to seek out sources on Mithraism—most of them rather obscure, or available only through academic libraries—in order to show that indeed Mithra was not crucified and did not rise from the dead. Because of the obscurity of the topics at hand, most viewers will be unable easily to confirm or deny the claims made in Zeitgeist.

Zeitgeist is particularly unrevealing in terms of the sources for its claims, which stand firmly against the consensus of modern scholarship, including scholarship that is not associated with Christian scholars or institutions. Indeed, when the film does name any sources, we do not find scholars used, but rather, uncredentialed commentators such as the deceased comedian George Carlin, the American revolutionary Thomas Paine, and the conspiracy theorist Jordan Maxwell.

To determine what sources the film uses, the viewer must consult the Zeitgeist website, where we find that Joseph acknowledges the film’s indebtedness to works such as The Christ Conspiracy, authored by Dorothy Murdock (under the pen name of “Acharya S”). The character of the sources used by Zeitgeist is manifest even upon a cursory examination: Murdock’s book, for example, was produced by Adventures Unlimited Press—a publishing house that also prints books that suggest that NASA faked the moon landings and that Egypt’s Great Pyramid was part of an ancient “weapon of mass destruction.”

The chief premise of part one of Zeitgeist, that Jesus did not exist, is popularly referred to as the “Christ myth” thesis. The Christ myth is manifested in two forms of argument, which are not necessarily used exclusively of one another. One form of the Christ myth argues that the relative “silence” of the New Testament epistles concerning the life of Jesus indicates that the authors of those epistles did not consider Jesus to be a human who recently walked the earth. The other form of the Christ myth, the one primarily engaged by Zeitgeist, argues that the human figure of Jesus was a figment of the church’s
imagination, created from a pastiche of pagan mythologies, and later historicized in the Gospels, which are supposed to have all been written as late as two hundred years after the time of Jesus.

The “Christ myth” is a view not held by any responsible, credentialed historian. For this reason, if Joseph is earnest about validating Zeitgeist’s claims, the film ought to be able to produce source material of two types: (1) it should offer views by credentialed scholars who stand against the consensus of the majority of scholars and maintain, for instance, that Mithra was crucified and had twelve disciples. (2) It should offer citations from primary sources such as ancient texts that indicate that Mithra was crucified and had twelve disciples.

Zeitgeist is glaringly deficient on both counts. To continue with the given example of Mithra, there are a number of scholars who are recognized as authorities on the topic of Mithraism. However, we do not find that Zeitgeist shows any awareness of these scholars or their works. This, however, is quite understandable, since these scholars, in turn, show no awareness of Mithra’s reputed crucifixion or resurrection, nor of his possession of disciples. Rather, they are unanimous in their agreement that Mithra himself never died, and that his greatest act was the slaying of a cosmic bull (a representation of the constellation Taurus). Naturally, if Mithra never died, he also was neither buried nor resurrected. There is also no record of Mithra having twelve disciples, although other adherents to the Christ-myth thesis promulgated by Zeitgeist have erroneously appealed to a post-Christian carving of Mithra surrounded by figures representing the twelve signs of the Zodiac. They misinterpreted these zodiacal figures as “disciples.”

We might hope that this sort of refutation would settle the issue of Zeitgeist’s reliability, but therein lies one of the great challenges presented by the film. It is not so much that Zeitgeist’s claims of fact are difficult to refute—once we have the right sources in hand—but that it is difficult to convince a Zeitgeist-believer that a refutation has actually taken place.

Zeitgeist assures the viewer that we have been “lied to” by the powers that be. Therefore, the viewer has been given a response that answers all refutations automatically: Any dissenting source—even a neutral, non-Christian scholar such as Mithraic scholar David Ulansey—must be in on the “conspiracy,” and academia must be one of the institutions that have “lied to us.” Zeitgeist provides the “true believer” with a ready rationale for dismissing all contrary data and for regarding any person purporting to refute the film’s claim as deluded by, or part of, the same cover-up. While it may not be impossible to instill some reasonable doubts about the film by asking why serious, credentialed scholars who are specialists in ancient religions do not reflect Zeitgeist’s conclusions in their own works, it may nevertheless be extremely difficult to do so.
In terms of primary (ancient) sources, a rather telling confession was offered by Joseph on the Zeitgeist website in answer to general requests for such information: “Well, even though we do not have many of the original texts from the Egyptian religion, many other religions have no available primary sources, and the information comes down through analysis of traditions that each religion practiced, as recorded by historians. The idea that the ‘original’ must be available in order to prove truth is absurd and a double standard.”

In this, Joseph has clearly confused a request for documentation from original writings (e.g., verification from the text of a work of a Roman author such as Plutarch, as may be found in any public library) with a request for “hard copies” of original ancient texts (e.g., an actual text handwritten by Plutarch himself). Nevertheless, using again the example of Mithra, if there were some ancient text or picture of Mithra being crucified, or resurrected, or surrounded by twelve disciples, then it should not be difficult for Joseph to produce a copy of this text or picture, and thus lend support to the film’s claims. Yet he does not. However, should he do so, he would be well advised to share that text or picture with leading Mithraic scholars, who are apparently unaware that such documentation exists!

Although parts two and three of the film do not concern Christianity, it is worth pointing out that the claims made in those portions are just as easily answered. There are a number of resources available debunking both WTC and Federal Reserve conspiracy theories, and we may find these refutations useful as “neutral ground” for questioning the reliability of the film in general. In a manner reminiscent of how critics of part one have responded to the film, critics of parts two and three note that Zeitgeist frequently quotes source material out of context and relies heavily on persons who are conspiracy theorists, and who are not credentialed experts in relevant fields such as engineering. It is also noteworthy that rather negative critiques of part one of the film have been offered by ardent non-Christians who have otherwise been highly critical of Christianity.

There are many serious problems with Zeitgeist, but the greatest difficulty for those in the practice of apologetics is not in confronting the film’s claims. Rather, it is that the film’s creators have encouraged viewers to engage a siege mentality that blocks off any consideration of contrary claims. The battleground in which we confront this “spirit of the age” is not so much the realm of fact as it is the realm of psychology.

—James Patrick Holding

notes


5. This statement was found at http://www.zeitgeistmovie.com/q&a.htm on April 4, 2008. It has since been removed, but has been preserved by numerous witnesses such as http://www.listal.com/video/3916104.

6. For example, for part two, see *Debunking 9/11 Myths* by the editors of Popular Science, available online at http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military_law/1227842.html and later expanded into a book by the same title (New York: Hearst, 2006). For part three, see *Don’t Mind the Men behind the Curtain* at http://www.conspiracyscience.com/articles/zeitgeist/part-three/.