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# Death and Resurrection of Gods

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**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Dr. Bolchazy, Christianity offers us so many beautiful concepts: death and resurrection of Christ; sacramental communion in which we eat the body of our God and drink his blood, and in so doing we become one with Him, and secure eternal bliss with our risen savior. Are these concepts unique to Christianity?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Nancy, here comes my stock answer again. Yes and no. The concept of the death and resurrection of a god is a very ancient concept in our Indo-European history. The gods of vegetation died every year, and every year in the spring they resurrected.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** What was the origin of the concept of the death and resurrection of a god?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** It seems that the concept reflects the changes in season: winter is death; spring is new life. Winter is the death of the god of vegetation; spring is his resurrection. The seed must die, and then it springs to new life. The seed is the god, who must die in order to resurrect. In the Mesopotamian culture, it was Tammuz who died and resurrected. Osiris in Egypt, Attis in Phrygia, Adonis in Syria, and in ancient Greece Persephone and Dionysus died and resurrected as deities of vegetation, or as personification of the seasons. These gods were the saviors of our cultural and religious predecessors. They saved our predecessors from starvation, by dying and resurrecting.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Did they save them from eternal death, like Christ does?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** No. Not when these gods were viewed only as gods of vegetation. Later, however, around the seventh century B.C. in Greece, a new phenomenon appears, namely, mystery religions. These mystery religions promise a blissful life, not just a mere continuation of one's terrestrial form of existence beyond the grave.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** And what is a mystery religion?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** It's a religion in which the initiation or baptism is kept secret. To the initiates, the religion promises eternal bliss. To those who refuse to become initiated, eternal punishments are promised.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** When did the belief in reward and punishment after life originate?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** In the seventh century B.C. in these mystery religions, which became very popular throughout the Greco-Roman world, and in fact competed with Christianity for several centuries.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Can you give me some examples of these mystery religions?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Certainly, Nancy. During the first couple of centuries of Christianity, Mithraism was a very popular religion with its taurobolium or baptism in the blood of the bull. The mystery religion of Cybele, the great mother goddess, was also very popular. Males became eunuchs in her honor by castrating themselves; they fasted before sacramental communion, and they believed they would die and rise again as did Attis, the male consort of the great goddess. The Dionysiac mysteries were also very popular. This mystery religion began in Greece around the fifth century B.C. and flourished into the second and third century A.D. All of these mystery religions competed successfully with Christianity because they offered similar things to people as Christianity did and were characterized by similar beliefs.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** For example?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Dionysus was born of a mortal woman, Semele. His father, however, was a god, the great Zeus himself. Dionysus was a product, in other words, of a virgin birth. Dionysus suffered a violent death. He was torn to pieces by the Titans. Then he resurrected. He went to the underworld to raise his mother Semele from the dead and then he ascended with her into the abode of the gods. His followers would sacrifice a goat or a bull and partake of the sacrificial animal, believing they were eating the body of Dionysus and drinking his blood. Those who were initiated into the mysteries were promised eternal bliss with him.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** You said these mystery religions were secret religions. I assume you mean that those who were initiated into these mysteries could not divulge any of the rites.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Exactly, Nancy.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** But, how do we know that the Dionysiac mystery religion promised eternal bliss to those who were initiated and participated in sacramental communion? Do we have any documents?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** There are several documents that came down to us. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the goddess of the Eleusinian mystery religion, we read, "Happy is he who has seen these mysteries; he who hath had no share in them hath a worse destiny after death in the world below." This statement clearly states that there is salvation for those who have been initiated into the Eleusinian mysteries.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** It also seems to indicate that the underworld contains two extremes: suffering or happiness, depending on whether or not one is initiated and accepts the god as one's savior.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Exactly. Also, we have a later inscription found near Naples, Italy, which dates to the fifth century B.C. It reads: "It is not lawful to lie buried here unless one is bacchanized." Bacchus was another name for Dionysus. One who became baptized or initiated in to the mysteries became bacchanized, that is he/she became Bacchus.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** As we become christened when we're baptized.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** That's right. Now, the most important document we have consists of four golden tablets which date to the fourth century B.C. Three of these tablets were found on the island of Crete. One was found in the southern part of Italy. Let me give you the gist of these four tablets in my own words: "When you die, you will come to a crossroad. Take the road to the right. Soon you will arrive at a well of water of memory. The water is guarded by guards. Say to them: 'I am the offspring of earth and starry heaven, and by birth I come from god. I am thirsty unto death. Give me a drink.' The guards will give you a drink of the water of memory, and will say to you: "Theos egenou ex anthropou" ("Thou has become god out of a human being"). Enter among other heroes where you shall have lordship."

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I'm sure there is a symbolic meaning to the waters of memory. What is it?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** The preservation of one's self-identity as opposed to the waters of Lethe, forgetfulness. Let me get back to the words of those three tablets: "You have become a god." In other words, through sacramental communion you have become metamorphosed. You have been transubstantiated into the god whose body you ate in sacramental communion. Once you have done that, you are told: "Enter into eternal bliss commensurate with your divinity."

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Do we have any other evidence that has been found?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Let me cite one more. In the city of Pompeii in Italy there is a famous set of frescoes which were buried by the violent volcanic explosion of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 A.D. The frescoes are believed to be representations of the Dionysiac initiation ceremonies. The subject matter of one of these frescoes is this: A woman in the process of initiation is shown a basket containing fruit and a phallus. The phallus, at this time, seems to be used as a symbol of new life, and also it is symbolic of the sensuality of the eternal life awaiting the initiates. In another fresco, you see a huge woman, with large wings and wielding a whip. She is the punisher in everlasting life.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** So, if you refuse to accept the saving grace of Dionysus, you will be punished by this demoness.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** That's right. Perhaps the most beautiful motif is found on the last of the frescoes. There, if you can picture, is the god Dionysus reclining with his wife Ariadne, in nuptial bliss.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** What does it mean?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Well, remember that Dionysus raised Ariadne from the dead. The suggestion is that he will also raise from the dead those who are initiated into his mystery religion. And more than that, for when you become initiated, you enter into an intimate relationship with Dionysus. Dionysus is the bridegroom and the faithful become his brides.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** I would gather from that that women could become initiated into the Dionysiac mysteries, or was it only for the men?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** No. Based on the frescoes of Pompeii, women were initiated also in spite of the fact that at this time some religious sects denied that a woman had a soul.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** There was no ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] back in those days.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** I'm afraid not. We also know that children could be initiated also. According to one document dating to the second century A.D., it was a great crime to cause the death of a child. Some scholars think that the reason why this was considered a heinous crime is that, unless a child had been initiated into the mysteries, the child would be deprived forever of eternal bliss.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Does that mean they believed in the resurrection of the dead?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** No, instead of resurrection, there was the belief in deification. The initiate became a god after death. In fact, there is one document which suggests an absence of the belief in resurrection. This is an epitaph found on the tombstone of a child. It reads, "While we, overcome by our loss, are in misery, you, in peace and once more restored, live in the Elysian Fields." Everlasting bliss, yes, but no resurrection.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Dr. Bolchazy, twice you answered "yes and no" to my questions. One of those questions was: Is the concept of the death and resurrection of god unique to Christianity?

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** The reason I answered yes and no is this. The question actually is, are the similarities that we talked about real or are they superficial? Scholars are in disagreement on this point. Perhaps the answer ultimately depends upon one's own faith.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** The other question was, is Christianity nothing but a syncretism of the beliefs, promises, and concepts contained in the mystery religions which antedated Christianity? Why did you answer with "yes and no?"

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Again I suppose there are several alternative answers. It's true that a number of people claim that Christianity is nothing but a sophisticated syncretism. But then you have others who claim that "Christ of my faith is the fulfillment of all these prototypes." Christ, in other words, is the true Dionysus.

**PROFESSOR BOYLE:** Thank you, Dr. Bolchazy.

**DR. BOLCHAZY:** Thank you, Nancy.