



Recently I've been reading 'The White Goddess' by Robert Graves, a fascinating book, and one that I intend to re-read very carefully at least once in the near future. Its author calls it a 'historical grammar of poetic myth' and that is what it is, but in the course of a most detailed argument it brings together all kinds of facts and speculations about European culture of the neolithic and later periods. I'd never realized until I read this book how unified the Europe (including the middle east and north Africa) of ancient times was. I knew about the Roman empire, of course, but it never occurred to me to suppose that the contacts had always been there - in trade, religion and so on.

Graves even goes into the christian religion in his book, and regards the dogma of the Holy Trinity as a classical mystery in the full sense. This is an interesting idea, and his evidence for it is quite persuasive. I'm quite sure that if Jesus Christ returned to the Earth, he'd be totally unwilling to accept any connection at all with modern christianity. We too often forget that Jesus was a Jew, and operated completely within the framework of the Jewish religion. After his death his followers formed themselves into a Jewish sect, and were quite narked when Paul (a Hellenicised Jew) came along and preached his own brand of christianity to the gentiles: the original christians, led by James the brother of Jesus, favoured keeping christianity Jewish. Meanwhile the Romans were also getting narked, with the whole Jewish problem, and after the revolt beginning in AD 66, they destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem, and dispersed its inhabitants. In this exercise they incidentally destroyed the Jewish christians, who were largely Jerusalem-based. Thenceforth, christianity was Pauline christianity, which gradually took on many of the elements of the pagan religion in its various forms, and became a very different thing than that which the original christians, and Jesus himself, knew.

Now, one of the peculiar things about christianity now, is how its followers persist in confounding myth with historical happening. Anyone of the ancient world would have been quite at home with the accounts of the birth and death of Jesus; they have many parallels elsewhere. Jesus was certainly born and died, but that he was born of a virgin, and rose from the dead, and bodily ascended to heaven (not to mention all the later accretions such as the Coronation of BVM) - these are myths, and perfectly valid as such. But they are no more historical fact than the Creation myth in Genesis, which was once on an equal footing of history as far as christians were concerned, but which they were (most of them) forced to drop by the advance of the evidence to the contrary. To insist on a historical resurrection or virgin birth is to render the historical Jesus absurd, and to debase the myth to an equally absurd level.

But how many christians today would agree with me? Precious few. The attitude of the churches seems to be: this is the Truth, and you must believe in it, even if it conflicts with your powers of reasoning. They overlook the origins of christianity, and its development over the centuries, which are there for those who look to see. Most christians, indeed, have only the most shadowy of notions of the theology and the history of their own religion: and even of those who read the bible regularly (quite a lot), how many ever bother to relate what they read to the contemporary situation? (very few). How many christians have read Josephus, for instance, or bothered to learn about the findings of biblical archaeology? They for the most part are content as an article of 'faith' to accept a weird confusion of myth and history, which does service neither to myth nor to history.

I've even been told that as an atheist I have no right to argue with those who call themselves christians about such matters - but why not? Perhaps my perspective on these things is wider than theirs.