

# The dependence between the gospels and pagan literature with regard to death and return; towards a method for evaluation

**JR MULVIHILL**  
**0000-0002-7637-1022**

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Promoter: Prof dr FP Viljoen  
Co-promoter: Prof dr JG van der Watt

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## Chapter One

### 1.0 RESEARCH PROPOSAL

#### 1.1 PROPOSED TITLE & KEY WORDS

##### 1.1.1 Proposed Title

“The dependence between the Gospels and pagan literature regarding death and return—toward a method for evaluation”

##### 1.1.2 Key Words

*myth, parallels, influence, Jesus, pagan, Greek, Roman, homogeneity, distinction, method, Gospels, death, resurrection, Zalmoxis, Romulus*

#### 1.2 BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

##### 1.2.1 Background

A subcategory of the claim that the Gospels belong in the genre of mythology is a position attempting to answer the question of causation—that is to say, which data and events best explicate the origination of the Gospel narratives. It has been said that the salient characteristics of the profile of Jesus of Nazareth find their origination in various antecedent figures featured in the Greco-Roman host culture of the first century. Over the past thirty years there has been a subtle return to what was initially assumed to be a formidable objection to traditional Christianity (John G. Jackson, 1985:67; Robert Price, 2000:75-96, 2002, 2005; Richard Carrier, 2002, 2009, 2014; Tom Harpur, 2004:51; Rene Ruttiman, 1986; Dennis MacDonald, 2000, 2015;

Richard C. Miller, 2010, 2015; Payam Nabarz and Caitlin Matthews, 2005; Stephen Harris and Gloria Platzner, 2004:255, 414-15; James Robertson, 1985:292-94; Burton Mack, 1995:75-7; Giovanni Casadio, 2003:263; Alan Dundes, 1990:179-90).

In the late nineteenth century this thesis was a challenge to Christianity's uniqueness and credibility by way of a then new analysis and subsequent genre classification (Priestly, 1804; Dupuis, 1801; Strauss, 1835:56). The Gospels were alleged to be first- and second-century-constructed Jewish amalgams of antecedent ancient near eastern and Greco-Roman pagan background religious beliefs related to myths and/or Mystery religions (Carus, 1902:416-25; Pfliederer, 1910:24-5; Bousset, 1913:19-20; Bultmann, 1953:15-6, 1962:32-5, 1962:7). The four New Testament Gospels were, according to proponents of this theory, not to be considered reports of authentic historical events but rather imaginative cultural composites, finding their genesis in the contours of long known pagan paradigms and narratives. I will refer to the family of arguments related to this idea as the "*strong homogeneity thesis*," which posits that the Gospels are so similar to the pagan religious and mythical ideas of their host culture that it is credible to view them as having derived from these sources.

The claim that the Gospel narratives are mythical has had a long pedigree; it seems as though Jesus' original followers had to meet similar challenges (1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16; see Dinckler, 1962:3:487; Oswalt, 2009, location 439, location 3131; Bruce, 1976:2:643-47; Hughes, 1984:747-9; Keener, 1993:608, 631, 637, 727). Relegating the Gospels to a mythic category is still common—considered by some to be an esteemed choice to designate an alternative genre assignment to this particular first-century content. The designation of

“myth” as a genre for the Gospels—from the least informed internet skeptic to credentialed scholars of the ancient world such as Richard Carrier (Carrier, 2014:56-60, 2009:14, 2005:145-51) or Robert Price (Price, 2000:250, 259-60, 2005:145-51) to the anonymous skeptical blogger—is so ubiquitous that it is difficult to evaluate “myth” as an appellation. My evaluation will not engage directly with this critical label. Once one decides to view these documents as mythic, the concomitant question of causation presses; the question here undertaken will not be whether the accounts in the Gospels actually correspond to real space and time events from the past but rather whether it is warranted to believe that the Gospels were spawned from a mythical pagan source, either directly, by way of authorial borrowing, or indirectly, through application of ubiquitous pagan socioreligious notions. How could one responsibly evaluate such a claim? Is there a method that could be employed that does not stack the deck in favor of a predetermined conclusion? Is there a way to limit bias and curtail personal subjectivity in terms of acceptance or denial of the strong homogeneity thesis?

These secondary questions related to causation will be my focus; this issue will obviously have ramifications with regard to the plausibility of the resultant genre assignment. Some scholars attempt to isolate individual sayings of Jesus, minus crucial context, and thereby reconstruct Jesus with an alternate identity, linking him with nearly any prominent ancient group (Aslan, 2014; Borg, 1991; Crossan, 1991; Vermes, 1973; Allegro, 1970).<sup>1</sup> I will refer to proponents of this

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Craig Evans authored an entire book in response to this way of envisioning Jesus. He lists numerous scholars in whose works this theme of analytic distortion is writ large; see Evans (2006:123-48); see also Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1911).

idea as those attracted to the strong homogeneity thesis—as those who believe the Gospel data to be strongly correlated to pagan mythic and religious accounts.

Although this theory has been assailed in a number of interesting and varied ways over the last century (Case, 1912; Rahner, 1955:171-72; Orr, 1965; Metzger, 1968:6-9, 16-21; Alsup, 1975; Smith, 1986; Nash, 2003:126-27; Porter and Bedard, 2006; Davis, 2006; Boyd and Eddy, 2007), this idea has nonetheless found its way back into some areas of the cultural mainstream and has emerged again in the contemporary scholastic community. In its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century instantiation, this proposition contained several strong assertions regarding Gospel composition. For instance, it was variously posited that there was a robust correspondence between the language of the Gospel writers and antecedent pagan linguistic content that could be delineated and connected by way of exposition (Bousset, 1913:65-6); that Jesus could be best understood as having chosen an ancient near eastern comparative religious framework rather than a Jewish one (Pfleiderer, 1910:199, 210, 348-49, vol. I:5-6, 24-5; vol. II:186, 371-72; vol. IV:76; Bousset, 1913:66; Bultmann, 1953:10-16, 1962:32-5, 1981:96); that the apostle Paul clearly manipulated and distorted the inherited Christian tradition through an obvious pagan lens (Fairweather, 1924<sup>2</sup>; Weigall, 1928; Hyde, 1946; Reitzenstein, 1978; Bousset, 1913:66; Randall, 1970; Maccoby, 1982); and that the New Testament was a predominantly mythical product (Strauss, 1835:55-6; Bultmann, 1934: 8; 1953:15-6) with little or no historical content.

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<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that Fairweather does unequivocally state that, regarding the essentials of the Christian faith there is clear independence of these ideas from the Greco-Roman cultural matrix.

Strategies were employed to strip away what was seen to be false or legendary, with the aim that the reader could know the true content and proper genre of these popular biblical texts. Currently, the three credentialed champions of this thesis are Richard Carrier, Dennis R. MacDonald, and Robert M. Price. Carrier holds a doctorate in ancient history from Columbia University, MacDonald a doctorate in New Testament studies from Harvard University—he is currently a professor of Religion and New Testament at Claremont Graduate University—and Price two doctorates from Drew University, one of which he took in systematic theology in 1981 and the other in New Testament studies in 1993. All three scholars hold nuanced versions of a strong homogeneity thesis and defend their contentions publicly (Price, 2000:75-96, 250-60; Carrier, 2014:56-60, 2009:14, 2005:145-51; Macdonald, 2015:1-4, 10, 2000:11, 22-3). There are other contemporary credentialed scholars who hold to similar forms of this thesis in their published work (Ruttiman, 1986; Africa, 1974; Campbell, 1972; Frazer and Frazer, 1998; Wolmarans, 2008; Krauss, 2011; Miller, 2010, 2015; Nabarz, 2005; Harris and Platzner, 2004; Mack, 1988, 2001, 2008; Jones, 1969; Fogelin, 2003; Allegro, 1979).

### **1.2.2 Problem Statement**

Generally absent from critical works offered by proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis is a rigorous and robust academic method that readers can track to a relatively clear conclusion. This is true of both past and present scholars who were and are convinced of this particular way of explicating the authorship and cultural power of the Gospels. If a method is clearly specified, it will often preclude critical data that would significantly modify the strong homogeneity conclusion or undermine the particulars of the claim in question. Authors given to this thesis rarely explain how they constructed their method or why they chose the methodology they

employed. Finally, there is troubling absence of bias qualification in these works; this is pointed out time and again by scholars critical of the strong homogeneity thesis (Sandmel, 1962:1-2; Alsup, 1975:215-16; Boyd and Eddy, 2007:21-4; Riches and Millar, 1985:46). My treatment attempts to confront these shortcomings by offering a method of literary evaluation that addresses these issues. I will attempt to rationally and objectively evaluate the Gospels' descriptions of particularly decisive episodes in the life of Jesus and then compare them to similar activities of characters in pagan literature, utilizing a method I believe could be employed profitably for further investigations of this nature.

### **1.2.2.2 Introducing the Strong Homogeneity Thesis as an Evaluative Approach to the New Testament Data**

One of the common assumptions of past European New Testament scholars (Bousset, 1913; Pfleiderer, 1910; Frazer, 1915; Strauss, 1902; Bultmann, 1934, 1953, 1962) was that certain poignant episodes in the literary portrait of the life of Jesus, as well as particular points of Pauline theological dogma, are best explained by reference to religious traditions outside the theological orbit of first-century Judaism. Time and again ideas gleaned from discoveries from the ancient world have been wrested from their original contexts and placed, pro forma, over the Gospels or Paul's theological instruction in the hope of a content match (Frazer, 1915:2:21-5, 2:112-14; Bousset, 1913:58-9, 81-2, 102-3, 131, 138-44; Pfleiderer, 1905:63-82, 1910:1:5, 22-5). If the content had a strong resemblance, this apparent link was viewed as confirmation that the Gospel stories of Jesus of Nazareth are an authorial attempt to forge a similar character *typos* to that found in antecedent, non-Jewish religions.

This attempt to explain the cultural power of the person identified as Jesus places the emphasis on the common, cross-cultural psychological desires and religious activities of all people. This is one of the reasons this scholarly movement was titled “The History of Religions School” (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*). Though subsequent scholarship significantly challenged this analytic paradigm and New Testament scholars (Metzger, 1968; Pannenberg, 1968; Boyd, 2007; Wright, 1992b, 1996, 2003; Johnson, 1996; Aune, 1981; Habermas, 1996; Evans, 2006; Vermes, 1973, 1983; Sanders, 1985; Meier, 1991; Rahner, 1955; Porter and Bedard, 2006) have largely found this thesis wanting and moved on, some of the ideas consonant with this movement have found a new voice in the works of modern scholars (Price, 2000; Carrier, 2009, 2005; MacDonald, 2000, 2015; Harpur, 2004) generally critical of the New Testament and particularly sceptical about the activities of its central character.

If atheism is the operative assumption and, hence, divine communication to humans considered impossible, one is left with the task of explaining the cultural power of these ancient documents. Subsuming the portrait of Jesus left to us under the concept of ubiquitous socioreligious activity is one way of understanding the Gospels’ perpetual persuasive power. This thesis intends to offer a better way to test these kinds of claims concerning the authorship of the narratives about Jesus of Nazareth. Are the past and present approaches attempting to establish the strong homogeneity thesis adequate, or is there a better way? How can one responsibly compare and analyze the Gospels in relation to similar pagan data to better evaluate the credibility of the strong homogeneity thesis?



### 1.2.2.3 Questions

The particular pagan traditions that feature supernatural occurrences with relation to the deaths and afterlives of the main characters will be the focus. I will utilize the death and resurrection data primarily from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark for comparison. I lack the space and time to walk through all or even most of the possible pagan characters that have a novel death and return *typos* and run it through the method in comparison to Jesus of Nazareth. However, I will compare the best pagan exemplars (Zalmoxis, Romulus) offered by the current credentialed champions of the strong homogeneity position, using my proffered methodology.<sup>3</sup>

The meta-question for this project is: How can one properly evaluate the claim of authorial mimicry of pagan literature with regard to the Gospels?

From this meta-question the following secondary questions derive:

1. What does one mean by “strong homogeneity” with regard to Gospel authorship? Who has made this claim in the past, and who is currently making it?
2. What are the respective source data, parallels, and divergences between Zalmoxis and Jesus of Nazareth with regard to the topics of death and return?

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<sup>3</sup> These are the pagan figures most frequently mentioned by Richard Carrier and most often cited by Robert Price as the two with the strongest degree of critical similarity to Jesus of Nazareth. This Thracian teacher and Roman king are much more compelling comparisons to Jesus than the entire wide-ranging conglomerate of characters drawn by Dennis MacDonald from Homer’s *The Iliad and the Odyssey*.

3. What are the respective source data, parallels, and divergences between Romulus and Jesus of Nazareth with regard to the topics of death and return?
4. How was the method constructed, and how was it prioritized?
5. Where do the results take us?
6. What are its methodological shortcomings, and why should anyone utilize this method?

### **1.3 THE AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

#### **1.3.1 The Aim**

To offer a rigorous evaluative method for evaluating claims regarding any relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and pagan parallel narratives

#### **1.3.2 The Objectives**

1. To explain the position of strong homogeneity; bring attention to the primary problems with the thesis; identify the pertinent scholars, past and present, who have held this position; and show how the issue has been presented and concluded in the past
2. Utilization of proposed method in the attempt to provide missing evaluative controls using the pagan exemplar of Zalmoxis and Jesus concerning death and return event(s)
3. Utilization of proposed method in the attempt to provide missing evaluative controls using the pagan exemplar of Romulus and Jesus concerning death and return event(s)
4. To delineate method construction and explain key features of the method

5. To highlight the correspondence of the methodological results with the current general scholarly consensus
6. To qualify my position and explain and champion the proposed new method

#### **1.4 CENTRAL THEORETICAL ARGUMENT**

The central theoretical argument of this study is that past and current attempts to justify strong homogeneity between the Gospels and ancient pagan literature have been deeply flawed, largely due to faulty method implementation or the lack of a defined methodology. I will attempt to offer a specific method that minimizes bias, is versatile, and provides a better means for substantiation with respect to the query.

#### **1.5 Methodology**

My first step following historic contextualization will be to find credentialed contemporary scholars who hold the strong homogeneity view and defend it publicly, by way of a literary study. I will then isolate what they claim to be the best pagan character data substantiating their claim of Gospel authorial acquisition and incorporation, after which I will arrange the data culled for analysis. An inductive method will be employed as we assess the probability of a match.

I will confine myself to the central events in the Jesus narratives—his death and resurrection—to keep the scope of the project manageable.

I will engage the pagan exemplars offered by the current credentialed scholars as having influenced the Jesus authors.

I will then narrow the range of comparison to death and return and offer the original source stories connected to these exemplars in context, as best I can. For many years scholars who have taken issue with the comparative religions (strong homogeneity) approach to Gospel interpretation have made the general claim that when one has had the ancient pagan source documentation laid before them, their prior claims of borrowing or parallelism have vanished (Nash, 2003:126-27; Metzger, 1968:9; Sandmel, 1962:10-3; Boyd and Eddy, 2007:142-46; Forbes, 2009). That is to say that when one has been given context and provided with the entire narrative, rather than with carefully selected bits and pieces, the parallel claim has been weakened considerably. Couple this with the puzzling lack of original sourcing, or sometimes even of source *citation* by published proponents of strong homogeneity, and one is confronted with a clear methodological imperative to correct this oversight. To address this issue, I will offer the original source language, interpretation, and documentation for the reader's consideration. The English translations of the Greek and Latin sources utilized are from Loeb Classical Library and Tufts University's Perseus Digital Library.

I will then analyze the pagan mythic narrative in comparison to the Jesus accounts covering the same topic (death and resurrection)

The comparative method I plan to employ will proceed through five steps:

Competition—Are there competing ancient accounts to consider that describe significantly different events within the same narrative time frame as the event offered?

Chronology—Does the data come from authors who wrote before the Gospel authors from whom these Gospel authors could possibly have drawn content?

Word and event similarity—With regard to passages addressing death and return, which words are identical, and which event descriptions seem to strongly correlate between the pagan character under consideration and Jesus?

Number and quality of contacts—How many contact points exist linguistically and descriptively between the accounts in question? What is the contextual strength of the connection(s) relative to local differentiation?

Centrality of the event under analysis—Is the pagan event in question decisive and climactic, or is the death and return event subordinated to other events or literary themes in the narrative?

This method is principally derived from four internationally respected scholars who do not share my Christian worldview commitments but consistently make or break connections between the Gospel accounts and chronologically disparate ancient literature. All four of these scholars use one or more of these criteria when they assess ancient literature for potential links that would indicate influence or borrowing of data between discreet narratives. Their work has been found to be the most credible by those who have devoted their lives to the study of the ancient world, and their collective comparative literary prowess is currently considered second to none. The scholars of which I speak are Jaan Puhvel of Johns Hopkins University (*Comparative Mythology* 1987, *Hittite Etymological Dictionary* 1984); Walter Burkert of the University of Zurich (*Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis* 2004, *Greek Religion* 1985, *Homo Necans* 1972); Martin Litchfield West of Oxford University (*The Making of the Odyssey* 2014, *The Making of the Iliad* 2011, *The East Face of Helicon* 1997); and Charles Penglase (*Greek Myths and Mesopotamia: Parallels and Influences in the Homeric Hymns and Hesiod*). There are, of course, others who could have been included,

but these particular scholars have provided peer-reviewed research and have successfully established the types of literary connections assumed by those adhering to the strong homogeneity thesis.

Constructing my composite comparative method from the various methodologies suggested and employed by these scholars seems prudent. Once the pagan narrative in question has been compared to the Jesus data through the proposed methodological grid, one can better approximate the probability of influence or borrowing. By focusing on criteria or methods one will be able to arrive at a more plausible conclusion with regard to the question of authorial mimicry or the relative strength of narrative influence from the alleged pagan source to the Jesus accounts.

I have chosen to forego explaining the finer points of the method application until the penultimate chapter. Instead, after offering an historic summation I will run through the comparative steps I have proposed with respect to two ancient pagan characters (chapters three and four, respectively) whose narratives have been offered as conspicuous, strong literary influences on the Gospel authors. Any questions about the rubric or criteria will likely be answered in chapter five, after the reader has been provided the two discreet examples of how the proposed method would be utilized for analysis. I realize that this ordering is unorthodox (brief description, history, application of method *then* explication of method) but the intention is to briefly highlight past failures of strong homogeneity efforts and then immediately see the method in action wrestling with contemporary homogeneity attempts as it addresses said issues.

## **1.6 Ethical Considerations**

I am working from an evangelical Protestant theological conviction. However, anyone on the theological spectrum can pick up and utilize this method, whether they find the Gospel data to be compelling or superstitious. I will conspicuously attempt to qualify my biases and consistently display this in my method. The aim of my conclusion is at the same time modest and ambitious. I am offering what I believe to be a superior process of evaluation for anyone investigating the central events in the life of Jesus. In this sense I am not foreclosing on a genre assignment for the salient concluding details of the Gospel data. However, my method might produce a negative verdict for the supposedly most promising exemplars offered by the strong homogeneity scholars and thus could be an indirect and partial step in an eventual genre classification. My suggestion of new analytical controls is intended as a step in a new and more academically viable direction with regard to the presentation, evaluation, and persuasion either for or against particular collections of data that are presumed to be axiomatic and genetically linked to the particulars in the Gospels.

### **1.6.1 Metacognition**

It is clear that what I am offering will fail to produce what one could term as definitive “proof” for or against the strong homogeneity thesis. However, I am convinced that if some specific data can be shown to positively correspond to the majority of proposed criteria the investigator is rationally justified in believing that the preponderance of correspondence inductively validates the strong homogeneity thesis. Conversely, there should be a considerable amount of dissonance if the ancient figure in questions fails to correspond to Jesus with regard to the majority of contact points.

It is possible that some specific non-Christian narrative served as thematic inspiration for the Gospel author(s), even if the content of the narrative itself fails to meet many of the criteria I have laid out. There is no magic number of similarities that automatically confers credibility on any proposed parallel or categorical distinction between two things. What I hope to highlight are often overlooked or bypassed and yet crucially decisive evaluative features that are routinely accounted for and presented by experts making such comparisons in their relevant, nonbiblical fields of study.

Though one can challenge whether my method is definitive, it is my hope that it will represent an improvement over what has been offered for the evaluation of content creation by the Gospel authors. It is my further desire that it will assist the reader in coming to terms with the importance of differentiation in parallel assessment. Far from bypassing or ignoring the differences between the Gospel data and pagan data, I will present distinctions with emphasis. This is not only because such emphasis is in keeping with the methodologies of other scholars who regularly make what appear to be valid literary and thematic connections but also because such a control tends to prevent forging illegitimate links. The challenge will clearly be to avoid overplaying the differences while attempting to strike a balance where such differences are noted.

I clearly need to be vigilant in avoiding any temptation to stack the deck in the opposite direction. I understand that the words *superficial* and *substantive* are charged with subjectivity and open the door to bias, but this is no less true in any other area of human inquiry. If one were to believe that there is no logical way to qualify bias and subjectivity and ensure rational



adjudication, this conclusion would logically mark the end of education altogether—not simply, in this case, an easy win for proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis. It is my hope that those who follow the argumentation will appreciate my striving to qualify my own biases and subjectivity—an intention I see only rarely from promoters of the strong homogeneity thesis.

It is my contention that, just as Christians are improved by investigating other religious traditions, so Christian reflection on eponymous pagan individuals in the ancient world can provide understandable context and deepen the commitment of believers. Analyzing nonbiblical characters who have garnered much attention, enjoyed ubiquitous appeal, and inspired devotion in some is clearly beneficial for those who rightly describe the life and impact of Jesus in such terms. This thesis will address the modern scholarly effort to reapply to Gospel literary analysis *Religionsgeschichtliche* methodologies that undermine modern “third quest” controls for studying the life of Jesus. If there is to be a return to this style and approach for Jesus literature evaluation, a reform of the analytic controls such as I am offering can yield a conclusion less vulnerable to the general fallacies related to comparison.

### **1.6 Concept Clarification**

*Myth* is a word with strongly subjective impact. The standard definition of the term—and the one I am utilizing—sets it in opposition to what is commonly considered to be historical data.

*The Oxford Dictionary* defines “myth” as follows:

1. a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.
2. a widely held but false belief or idea (2014).

The *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* entry reads as follows:

1 *a* : a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon *b* : parable; allegory

2 *a* : a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone; *especially* : one embodying the ideals and institutions of a society or segment of society *b* : an unfounded or false notion

3 *a* : a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence.

The operating presupposition among the majority of professional historians is that it is quite possible to delineate the categories of history and mythology. I am aware that many scholarly attempts to nuance the definition of “myth/mythology” have been undertaken over the years (e.g., Fontenrose, 1966; Edwards, 1972; Kirk, 1973; Burkert, 1979; Cotrell, 1996; Lincoln, 1999; Segal, 2004; Dow, 2008:xi-xv). It is my hope that this investigation will prove helpful regardless of whether the reader assumes that the New Testament, and the Gospels in particular, are more mythological in nature or leans more toward the historical view. Either way, the result of my analysis will have an inferential impact on genre assignment for the New Testament Gospel data.

*Pagan* as a descriptive adjective will be used to demarcate socioreligious beliefs and practices outside of the orbit of Judeo-Christian thought and application. This does not stack my argument illegitimately by begging the question, primarily because this is minimally assumed by those proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis. This basic differentiation, I would argue, has to be assumed in order to proceed with the comparative enterprise at all.

I will employ the phrase “strong homogeneity” to identify the stance of those individuals who believe that the salient, central points of the Jesus composite presented in the New Testament find clear and consistent expression in an antecedent pagan cultural matrix. This connection can ostensibly be established by familiarizing oneself with the relevant ancient literature. I use the adjective “strong” to move beyond those ubiquitous superficial or weak similarities that are common among nearly all religious traditions, ancient or modern.

The word *resurrection* has had and still carries a specific Jewish definition with particular conceptual associations. For the sake of argument I will treat this as a term that minimally presupposes a death and some sort of recognizable return or revivification of the formerly deceased individual. The pagan data lacks universal conceptual links to the Jewish position with regard to this word.

## **1.7 Provisional Classifications of Headings/Chapters**

### 2.0 HISTORY OF THE STRONG HOMOGENEITY THESIS

#### 2.1.1 Introduction

#### 2.1.2 History of the Homogeneity Thesis

#### 2.2 Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 40.3-4

#### 2.3 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 21 & 22; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 69

#### 2.4 Celsus, *Contra Celsum*, 2.55 & 3.24

#### 2.5.1 Charles Francois Dupuis, *A History of All the Forms of Worship and of All the Religions of the World*

#### 2.5.2 The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

2.5.3 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

2.5.4 Bruce Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*

2.5.5 John Alsup, *The Post Resurrection Appearance Stories in the Gospel Tradition*

2.5.6 Tryygrave Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection* and the Debate

2.6 A New Means of Analysis

2.6.1 Qualified Homogeneity

2.6.2 What Will Not Be Pursued

2.6.3 Conclusion

3.0 ZALMOXIS and JESUS

3.1.1 Introduction

3.1.2 Richard Carrier

3.1.3 Carrier Examined

3.1.4 Mircea Eliade and Later Interaction

3.2.1 Herodotus' *Histories*

3.2.2 Description of Zalmoxis

3.2.3 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event

3.2.4 Strabo's *Geographica*

3.2.5 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event

3.3.1 The Similarities

3.3.2 The Differences

3.3.3 Scholars' Position

3.3.4 Conclusion

## 4.0 ROMULUS and JESUS

### 4.1.1 Introduction

### 4.1.2 Richard Miller

### 4.1.3 Richard Carrier

### 4.2.1 The Death and Return of Romulus

### 4.2.2 Cicero

### 4.2.3 Dionysius of Halicarnassus

### 4.2.4 Ovid

### 4.2.5 Livy

### 4.2.6 Plutarch

### 4.2.7 Cassius Dio

### 4.3.1 Evaluation

### 4.3.2 Similarities (Death)

### 4.3.3 Differences (Death)

### 4.3.4 Similarities (Appearance)

### 4.3.5 Differences (Appearance)

### 4.4.1 Scholars' Position

### 4.4.2 Conclusion

## 5.0 METHOD CONSTRUCTION and CONSENSUS SAMPLING

### 5.1 Common Fallacies in a Project of This Nature

### 5.2 Method Proposed

### 5.2.1 Proposed Method Utilized in Chapters Three and Four—Step One

5.2.2 Step Two

5.2.3 Step Three

5.3 Step Four—The Application of Proposed Rubric/Controls

5.3.1 Walter Burkert

5.3.2 Martin Litchfield West

5.3.3 Jaan Puhvel

5.3.4 Charles Penglase

5.4 Scholarly Consensus

5.4.1 Consensus Samples

5.4.2 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Lack of Conclusive Parallel Source Data

5.4.3 Reversal of Strong Homogeneity Based on the Sociocultural Power of Nascent Christianity

5.4.4 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Ancient Jewish Socioreligious Context

5.4.5 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Cumulative Critique

5.4.6 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Genre Disqualifications

5.5 Close

6.0 CONCLUSION

6.1 Qualifications

6.2 Possible Falsification

6.3 Research Questions and Answers

## Chapter Two

### History of the Strong Homogeneity Thesis

#### 2.1.1 Introduction

#### 2.1.2 History of the Homogeneity Thesis

#### 2.2 Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 40.3-4

#### 2.3 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 21 & 22; *Dialogue with Trypho* 69

#### 2.4 Celsus, *Contra Celsum*, 2.55 & 3.24

#### 2.5.1 Charles Francois Dupuis, *A History of All the Forms of Worship and of All the Religions of the World*

#### 2.5.2 The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

#### 2.5.3 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*

#### 2.5.4 Bruce Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian*

#### 2.5.5 John Alsup, *The Post Resurrection Appearance Stories in the Gospel Tradition*

#### 2.5.6 Tryygrave Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection and the Debate*

#### 2.6 A New Means of Analysis

#### 2.6.1 Qualified Homogeneity

#### 2.6.2 What Will Not Be Pursued

#### 2.6.3 Conclusion

### **2.1.1 Introduction**

The aim of this chapter is to present the history of the development of the strong homogeneity position and to submit a new path of analysis that will attempt to address errors in presentation often committed by proponents and noted by opponents of the thesis. I will analyze and evaluate specific past scholars, Christian and non-Christian, who have claimed that the Gospels were significantly shaped by a strong pagan religious influence (Justin, Tertullian, Celsus, Dupuis). I will also present twentieth-century scholars who significantly challenged this idea (Mettinger, Smith, Metzger, Alsup). Among the questions addressed in this chapter are: Which scholars have historically held to various degrees or iterations the homogeneity thesis? How did the proponents support their contention of Gospel and pagan literature homogeneity?

I will begin by offering an abbreviated historical synopsis of how this challenge of strong homogeneity has evolved over the past eighteen hundred years. The purpose of the initial historic presentation is to identify the different ways in which this challenge has been advanced and to spell out how my method will address the common shortcomings in past and present attempts to justify strong homogeneity with regard to pagan literature and the Jesus narratives. This chapter is intended to equip the reader with a general understanding of how the theory of strong homogeneity has developed as a challenge to the truth of Christianity by attempting to decouple the central events (the death and resurrection of Jesus) in the Gospels from a historic instantiation and assigning these events instead in a mythic genre on the basis of perceived literary and conceptual similarity. The reader should also sense a strong need to address the troubled development and application of the strong homogeneity challenge to the Gospels.



The idea that the Gospel portraits of Jesus were the result of religious/mythic/cultic homogeneity is an old one. To be sure, there is conceptual borrowing to some degree among all faith traditions. Religious assimilation was widespread in ancient cultures, where annexation and conquest were common. The Persians conquered many diverse cultures in the ancient near eastern world and borrowed ideas from the conceptual capital of the conquered (Anon., 2008:xxxv; Waters, 2014:73, 78). However, ethnocentrism was also a ubiquitous cultural phenomenon, and the militarily dominant group would strive to retain the sociological momentum of their conquests by way of asserted conceptual superiority of their own ideas over against any that might otherwise have been adopted from their defeated adversaries (D'Souza, 1995:30-36; D'Souza, 2002; Adams and Barden, 1952:1-54; Yahaya, 2008:9-12). When the Romans came to dominate the ancient world, one can most easily see this adoption and retention interplay in their incorporation and transformation of the Greek pantheon into a more Roman polytheistic hierarchy (Johnson, 2009:36-7; Beard, 2012a:166-70; Stark, 2006:31-2; Cameron and Athon, 2004; Grant, 1986:4-12; Miller, 2015:10-11).

Assimilation and integration, as well as ethnocentricity, were common features in cultures given to the conquest ethic (Stark, 2006:29; Rajak 2008:61). Ancient Jews were far more ethnocentric and religiously exclusive than their ancient neighbors, even while being largely subjugated, enabling them to maintain a strong minority presence and to generally resist assimilation within those host cultures (Hurtado, 2016; Hurtado, 2005:26-30, 111-34; 1998:20-22; Sanders, 1992:8; Rajak 2008:61-2). Indeed, ancient Jews were known for their religiocultural exclusivity. This certainly does not mean that they never attempted religious assimilation; the covenant-violating

attempted integration of pagan polytheism by Jews in the ancient world is well documented (Williams, 1998:81-2; Sanders, 1992:38-50, 303; Johnson, 2009:112).

At the time of Jesus and his followers Jews were dominated by the world power of Rome, and first-century Jews who adopted some features of their particular pagan subjugation matrix were likely present. Additionally, there was assimilation and integration activity as Rome adopted and transformed ideas from the cultures it conquered (Stark, 2006:32; Brown, 1995:3-5). The crucial question is how heavy an emphasis should be placed on this one side (adoption and assimilation) of the social influence spectrum. The “other side”—that of insistent, implemented cultural *exclusivity*—must be factored in to the equation if the investigator is to avoid overestimating the role of integration and assimilation. Thus some rigorous criteria are vital when assessing the strong homogeneity literary approach to gospel narrative causation and explication of the gospels’ subsequent sociocultural power to enable one to come to an informed and balanced conclusion.

One can see this social assimilation versus resistance contrast very clearly in the Elliot-Balch debate over the purpose of the domestic code found in 1 Peter (Horrell 2007, 1-3). The radically divergent interpretations of this New Testament passage by two professional and competent academics serves as a reminder to be judicious and cautious in the use of a controlling paradigm. Thankfully, one very rarely finds a perfect evidential equilibrium, with exactly the same amount and type of information supporting opposing perspectives. The best one can do is present the data in favour of which socio-cultural pole was more powerful in particular eras with specific groups and then let the evidence provide a trajectory toward an inductive interpretive

conclusion. Balance is difficult in any endeavor, and there seem to be undeniable tensions in scholarship. If these tensions are unheeded, a compromise in the integrity of the research is all but guaranteed.

Finally, the reader should be open to a new way of evaluating and addressing this issue that might not be vulnerable to past and present foibles associated with linking pertinent Jesus data to pagan religio-cultural data. What I refer to as the “homogeneity thesis” constitutes a more provocative claim: that virtually every major theological concept or central religio-narrative event in Christianity can be found in one form or another in non-Christian antecedent religious traditions. Applying this thesis in various ways to central texts of Christianity has been attempted in past eras, but this approach was later abandoned as an explanatory category/method and has only recently begun to reemerge in varied forms applied by both professional and amateur modern scholars.

### **2.1.2 History of the Homogeneity Thesis**

Some might claim that a type of homogeneity argument, with regard to Jesus, was first offered by Christians. Most often referenced are two early church figures; Septimus Tertullian and Justin Martyr. Both of these men attempted to defend Christian belief and practice to those who in doubt and had power. Another ancient figure and interlocutor to Origen was the skeptic Celsus who also utilized a homogeneity argument in addition to ideas used to discredit the growing Christian religion. In what follows, I will examine the claims made by these men and briefly evaluate their claims in reference to gospel homogeneity with pagan data.

## 2.2 Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 40.3-4

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullianus (A.D. 160–220) was a Roman lawyer who converted to Christianity ca. A.D. 195. After his conversion he took to authoring defenses of Christians against the magistrates of the Roman Empire (Dunn 2004, 1-5). Tertullian claimed that any antecedent pagan parallel was the work of the devil to beguile the mind of the recalcitrant idolater<sup>4</sup>:

The question will arise, 'By whom is to be interpreted the sense of the passages which make for heresies?' By the devil, of course, to whom pertain those wiles which pervert the truth, and who, by the mystic rites of his idols, vies even with the essential portions of the sacraments of God. He, too, baptizes some—that is his own believers and faithful followers; he promises the putting away of sins by a layer (of his own); and if my memory still serves me, Mithra there (in the kingdom of Satan) sets his mark on the foreheads of his soldiers; celebrates also the oblation of bread, and introduces an image of the resurrection, and for a sword wreathes a crown. What also must we say to (Satan's) limiting his chief priest to a single marriage? He, too, has his virgins; he, too, has his proficient in continence. Suppose now we resolve in our minds the superstitions of Numa Pompilius, and consider his priestly offices and badges and privileges, his sacrificial services, too, and the instruments and vessels of the sacrifices themselves, and the

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<sup>4</sup> This is referred to as "diabolical mimicry" by the authors Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy in *The Jesus Mysteries* (Thorsons, 2000:7): "Early 'Church fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Irenaeus, were understandably disturbed and resorted to the desperate claim that the similarities were the result of 'diabolical mimicry'. Using one of the most absurd arguments ever advanced, they accused the devil of 'plagiarism by anticipation', if tediously copying the true story of Jesus before it had actually happened in an attempt to mislead the gullible!"

curious rites of his expiations and vows: is it clear to us that the devil imitated the well-known moroseness of the Jewish law? Since, therefore he has shown such emulation in his great aim of expressing, in the concerns of his idolatry, those very things of which consist the administration of Christ sacraments, it follows, of course, that the same being, possessing still the same genus, both set his heart upon them, and succeeded in, adapting to his profane and rival creed the very documents of divine things and of the Christian saints—his interpretation from their interpretations, his word from their words, his parables from their parables. For this reason, then, no one ought to doubt, either that ‘spiritual wickedness,’ from which also heresies come, have been introduced by the devil, or that there is any real difference between heresies and idolatry, seeing that they appertain both to the same author and the same work that idolatry does (*De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 40.1-8).<sup>5</sup>

Tertullian seems to have been claiming that the devil was imitating a previously authored Jewish sacrificial legal code, along with various other antecedent Jewish practices, and then transmitting pseudo-cultic activity to pagan worshippers. It appears that he was also asserting that Satan impels heretics and pagans to pervert and manipulate then current Christian religious practice. According to Tertullian the Christian rites so perverted were baptism, redemption of sins, marking the foreheads of soldiers by a crown (*signat illic in frontibus milites suos*), oblation

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. “Let us take note of the devices of the devil, who is wont to ape some of God’s things with no other design than, by the faithfulness of his servants, to put us to shame, and to condemn us” (*De Corona*, 15).

of bread (*Celebrat et panis oblationem*), “an image of a resurrection” (*imaginem resurrectionis inducit*), emphasis on virginity and single marriage for priests, and “the administration of Christ’s sacraments” (*res de quibus sacramenta Christi administrantur*).

It seems as though Tertullian was *creating* similarities to prove his larger causation point rather than explaining away mistakenly perceived similarities. There is no indication here that Tertullian believed that these were antecedent pagan practices that had inspired Christians and, as such, stood in need of explanation. The context for his work here (*Prescription against Heretics*) is one of correction; for Tertullian the heretics and pagans *currently* shared with orthodox Christianity some ideas and praxis, and he attributed those imitated by the non-Christians to deceptive, malevolent spiritual influences (40.4).

Tertullian was citing similarities in ritual practice, but the conceptual bridges he offered were vague. Baptism and repentance of sins are easily traceable to Judaism, and the offering (oblation/*oblationem*) of bread, the administration of sacraments, and markings on the foreheads of the faithful were common religious practice in both ancient paganism and Judaism that were variously adopted by Christians as the religion developed (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, “Forehead”; Lucian, *De Syria Dea*, 59).<sup>6</sup> It is unclear to what Tertullian was referring when he claimed that Mithraists “introduce(d) an image/representation of resurrection” in that Mithra/Mithras scholars overwhelmingly deny a death for Mithra/Mithras,

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<sup>6</sup> There is no proof that the activities of bread offering and forehead marking were practiced in middle-first to early second-century Christian communities. Forehead symbolism was used by some Greeks and Romans to designate slaves (Philo, *De Monarchia*, I) but also for identification within a religious context.

much less a resurrection (Gordon, 1996:96; Yamauchi, 2009:172, 1990:502-03; Beck, 2004:175; Casadio, 2003:263; Burkert, 1987:76). It is clear that Tertullian was not attempting to address recognized pagan resemblances that undermined Christianity; rather, he seems to have been attempting to establish common causation between heretical practices and pagan religious traditions, on the one hand, and Christianity on the other, to the end of castigating both the heretics and the pagans for cultic mimicry. Tertullian clearly explicates his aims

If you please now you may receive this great truth in the nature of a fable like one of yours, till I have given you my proofs; though it is a truth that could not be unknown to those among you who maliciously dressed up their own inventions on purpose to destroy it. The Jews likewise full well knew from their prophets that Christ was to come, and they are now in expectation of Him; and the great clashing between us and them is chiefly upon this very account, that they do not believe Him already come (*Apology* 21).

Tertullian cannot be considered a proponent of the homogeneity thesis in that he was hypothesizing connections rather than recognizing actual continuity among the groups in question.

### **2.3 Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 21 & 22; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 69**

Justin Martyr was one of the earliest Christian apologists (ca. A.D. 110–165), a philosopher who studied pagan philosophy before converting to Christianity around A.D. 130. Justin is best known for three works: the *First Apology*, addressed to the Roman emperor of the period; the *Second Apology*, addressed to the Roman Senate; and a *Dialogue with Trypho*, which features a debate between Justin and a Jewish skeptic (*The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 3:1133).

His *First Apology* is dedicated to Emperor Antoninus, who ruled from A.D. 138–161.<sup>7</sup> Justin has often been cited by those who embrace some version of the homogeneity thesis with regard to the Jesus accounts.

When we say that he, Jesus Christ, our teacher, was produced without sexual union, was crucified and died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, we propound nothing different from what you believe regarding those you esteem Sons of Jupiter (*First Apology*, 21).<sup>8</sup>

Also, “He was born of a virgin, accept this in common with what you believe about Perseus” (*First Apology*, 22).

Justin’s explanation, akin to that of Tertullian, was to credit demons with the deceit of imitation intended to confuse the otherwise devout:

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<sup>7</sup> His first apology may be dated internally from the statement in chapter 6 that “Christ was born one hundred and fifty years ago under Cyrenius.” Since Quirinius entered office in the year 6 C.E., according to Josephus, the apology may be dated to the year 156 C.E.

<sup>8</sup> “For you know how many sons your esteemed writers ascribed to Jupiter: Mercury, the interpreting word and teacher of all; Aesculapius, who, though he was a great physician, was struck by a thunderbolt, and so ascended to heaven; and Bacchus too, after he had been torn limb from limb; and Hercules, when he had committed himself to the flames to escape his toils; and the sons of Leda, and Dioscuri; and Perseus, son of Danae; and Bellerophon, who, though sprung from mortals, rose to heaven on the horse Pegasus. For what shall I say of Ariadne, and those who, like her, have been declared to be set among the stars? And what of the emperors who die among yourselves, whom you deem worthy of deification, and in whose behalf you produce someone who swears he has seen the burning Caesar rise to heaven from the funeral pyre? And what kind of deeds are recorded of each of these reputed sons of Jupiter, it is needless to tell to those who already know. . .But, as we said above, wicked devils perpetrated these things.”



For we forewarn you to be on your guard, lest those demons whom we have been accusing should deceive you, and quite divert you from reading and understanding what we say. For they strive to hold you their slaves and servants; and sometimes by appearances in dreams, and sometimes by magical impositions, they subdue all who make no strong opposing effort for their own salvation. And thus do we also, since our persuasion by the Word, stand aloof from them (i.e., the demons), and follow the only unbegotten God through His Son (*First Apology*, 14).

Justin was endeavoring to show that the Christian doctrine was not to be prima facie written off as absurd by opponents who believed propositions similar to those espoused by Christians. Justin's aim, like Tertullian's, was to demonstrate that Christianity was similar to other religions approved by Rome and that the persecution of Christians should therefore be halted. Justin had to stretch the pagan case to make this connection in the service of his multifaceted defense of Christianity to a hostile Roman government. Justin's appeal here to recognition of general similarity is an understandable, though misguided, tactic. It is crucial for us to understand that Justin, far from trying to explain away the alleged parallels of which everyone was ostensibly already aware, was attempting to convince his pagan audience that some commonality might actually exist (Ruttiman, 1986:197-98). The parallels Justin attempted to establish were between Hebrew writings/prophecies and pagan myths. Justin Martyr oddly identified the causal element in the alleged parallels; the Greeks in fact plagiarized key ideas from the ancient Israelites

(Ruttiman, 131).<sup>9</sup> Like Tertullian, Justin was appealing to the earlier Jewish evidence and claiming subsequent demonic distortion of this content:

“Be well assured, then, Trypho,” I continued, “that I am established in the knowledge of and faith in the Scriptures by those counterfeits which he who is called the devil is said to have performed among the Greeks; just as some were wrought by the Magi in Egypt, and others by the false prophets in Elijah’s days. For when they tell that Bacchus, son of Jupiter, was begotten by [Jupiter’s] intercourse with Semele, and that he was the discoverer of the vine; and when they relate, that being torn in pieces, and having died, he rose again, and ascended to heaven; and when they introduce wine into his mysteries, do I not perceive that [the devil] has imitated the prophecy announced by the patriarch Jacob, and recorded by Moses? And when they tell that Hercules was strong, and travelled over all the world, and was begotten by Jove of Alcmene, and ascended to heaven when he died, do I not perceive that the Scripture which speaks of Christ, ‘strong as a giant to run his race,’ has been in like manner imitated? And when he [the devil] brings forward Aesculapius as the raiser of the dead and healer of all diseases, may I not say that in this matter likewise he has imitated the prophecies about Christ (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 69)?

Notice again here that Justin was not desperately attempting to rid Christianity of the charge of copying but, rather, was consciously trying to *convince* his pagan audience that the parallels—

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. As disseminated by Israel’s prophets to the rest of the world. It is this content that was allegedly the source for the demonic spiritual entities’ illegitimate and deceptive facsimile of truth.

which were ostensibly so weak that the pagans were failing to make the connection—did in fact exist. Justin went so far as to accuse Plato of copying Moses! (*First Apology*, 64). Again, Justin's argument was that Greek myths were copied from Christianity via its Hebrew prophetic background context and that this data was subsequently distorted by demonic influence, resulting in various non-Christian myths.<sup>10</sup> Justin did see minor connections in some aspects of moral teaching and structure (e.g., Logos truth / Christology) between Christianity and various pagan myths, but he insisted that the similar pagan stories were all lies peddled by demons to the confused Greek poets and philosophers who had rejected monotheism (*First Apology*, 11.8-10; see also 1.46, 11.10).

Yet again, it appears that Justin was endeavoring not to explain away the parallels but to *establish* a hitherto obscure connection (*First Apology*, 32-3). At a time when Christianity was regarded as a barbarous new religion and/or atheistic, Justin was trying to convince his pagan interlocutors that parallels did in fact exist and that pagan myths were nothing more than misunderstood, mutated copies of stories from ancient Hebrew prophetic writings (*Ibid.*). He assigned the supernatural causation to demons that had also misunderstood and subsequently

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<sup>10</sup> According to Justin these parallels were so weak that the pagans failed to recognize them because the demons that had copied them had misunderstood Jewish prophecies and rituals: “these things were said both among the Greeks and among all nations where they [the demons] heard the prophets foretelling the Christ would specially be believed in; but that in hearing what was said by the prophets they did not accurately understand it, but imitated what was said of our Christ, like men who are in error, we will make plain” (*First Apology*, 54). There seems to have been no “diabolical mimicry” operative here except in the sense that both Tertullian and Justin were claiming that the devil (through the pre-Christian pagans) had copied the prophecies of the Hebrews and had gotten them wrong.

passed along maligned information; these were allegedly the same malevolent spiritual forces that had framed Socrates and conjured lurid tales about Jupiter.<sup>11</sup>

Justin offered no proof to substantiate these accusations but stated them as bald facts. It is worth noting that most of Justin's rather weak parallels are presented in the form of the alleged pagans' poor attempts at mimicking older Hebrew prophecies, not of Christians copying antecedent pagan stories and traditions and then applying them to Jesus (Keener, 2009:334). Esteemed comparative religion scholar, Jonathan Smith, points out that Justin's appeal in this section is unsubstantiated rhetoric that bypassed dissimilarity which was prominent in all the examples Justin uses when one surveys the original sources (Smith, 1978:428).

When one investigates the parallels cited by Justin in the effort to make a case for the homogeneity thesis, the apologetic value of Justin's claims diminishes considerably. Some examples:

(1) Dionysus was not virgin born. There are many competing divergent tales concerning this god of wine and revelry, but the dominant myth related to his origin is that he was the progeny of a union between Zeus and a human woman named Semele<sup>12</sup> who was later inadvertently killed by her paramour, Zeus (Euripides, *Bacchae*, 88-104; Seneca, *Hercules Furens*, 455ff.)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 14, 25, 31-3, 54-60. See also *Second Apology*, 10.1-5.

<sup>12</sup> Or, alternatively, an original, pre-Semele union, as Zeus is described as having raped his daughter Persephone in the hope of siring an heir to his throne (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 5.75.4).

<sup>13</sup> Pausanias records Semele surviving in a waterborne box with her newborn and eventually having him raised in secret (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 3.24.3-4). Still another account has Dionysus being saved by a shepherd's daughter, earning the wrath of Hera (Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica*, 4.1128ff.). There are also competing

(2) Dionysus' death and resurrection were radically dissimilar to those of Jesus; in one account, Dionysus was tricked by Zeus' enemies (Titans) as an infant, dismembered, and boiled in a cauldron. The Titans were annihilated by Zeus, and Dionysus' heart alone was preserved, then somehow reconstituted by Zeus and transferred by way of sexual intercourse to the human maiden Semele. In the wake of Semele's untimely demise, the child Dionysus had to be sown into Zeus' thigh to develop once again (Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 5.75.4; Gaius Julius Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 167; Appolodorus, *Bibliotheca*, 3.4.3; Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks*, 2.17-18; Arnobius of Sicca, *Adversus Gentes*, 5.43).<sup>14</sup>

(3) Dionysus' connection with wine was that he gave it as a gift to humankind for the purpose of relief via drunkenness, obscenity, and revelry (Toy, 1924:39-40; Nillson, 1975:131; Euripides, *Bacchæ*, 131; cf. Aeschylus, *The Seven against Thebes*, 541; Porphyry, *De Abstinencia*, 2.54). Jesus' first recorded miracle at Cana can be linked to this account by way of the substance itself and nothing else.

(4) With regard to Justin's mention of Heracles/Hercules, the Hercules accounts are extraordinarily disparate when placed alongside descriptions of Jesus' life, ministry, passion, and resurrection.<sup>15</sup> Hercules was translated to heaven by way of apparent immolation and

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accounts of Dionysus' adult death, with no corresponding resurrection/return narrated (Julius Maternus & Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 2.38.3-6).

<sup>14</sup> The most vivid account of the Titans' attack on the young, vulnerable Dionysus is found in one of the latest accounts from the Greek epic poet Nonnos (Nonnos of Pannopolis, *Dionysiaca*, 6.169-206).

<sup>15</sup> Hercules was known for his famous twelve labors or tasks to make amends for his murdering of his wife and children, which are remarkably disparate when compared to the earliest accounts of the life of Jesus.

thunderbolt. His death is unclear in the data (Sophocles, *Trachiniae*, 1239-1260; Appolodorus, *Library*, 2.7.7; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 4.38.3-5; Lucian of Samosata, *Hermotimus*, 7), though a divine/human hybrid parentage was clearly affirmed of him. Justin attempted to parallel the strength of Christ with Hercules' most conspicuous quality, bridging the two characters by way of Psalm 19:5: "Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber; It rejoices as a strong man to run his course." Justin was creating an illegitimate parallel here, as Psalm 19 makes no reference to Jesus of Nazareth:

1. The heavens are telling of the glory of God;  
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
2. Day to day pours forth speech,  
And night to night reveals knowledge.
3. There is no speech, nor are there words;  
Their voice is not heard.
4. Their line has gone out through all the earth,  
And their utterances to the end of the world.  
In them He has placed a tent for the sun,
5. Which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber;  
It rejoices as a strong man to run his course.
6. Its rising is from one end of the heavens,  
And its circuit to the other end of them;  
And there is nothing hidden from its heat. (Psalm 19:1-6 NASB)

The context of Psalm 19 is one of general revelation, expressing the idea that conspicuous features of our shared physical reality decisively point to a higher power. To use this passage as a bridge between a pagan character and Jesus is completely unwarranted.

(5) With regard to Justin's claims about Asclepius, although the Asclepian cult was likely a rival to Christianity, and there are numerous accounts of Asclepius' healings, there is far more dissimilarity between Jesus and Asclepius than there is connective data.

There exists no required Christian fealty to *all* of the ideas expressed by early church fathers and defenders. A line from Justin's chapter before the parallel discussion is worth considering:

If, therefore, on some points we teach the same thing as some poets and philosophers whom you honor, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching, and if we alone afford proof of what we assert, why are [we] unjustly hated more than all others (*First Apology*, 1.20)?

And,

People think we are insane when we name a crucified man as second in rank after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all things, for they do not discern the mystery involved (*First Apology*, 1.13).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 1.13.

Although Justin's case was overstated and strained, it should not be forgotten, once again, that his aim was precisely the opposite of those espousing the homogeneity thesis. Justin was here quite clear in his affirmation of dissimilarity; his claim was that the Christian tradition, which he promoted, constitutes weightier and more unique theological truth ("fuller and more divine"). Justin added that Christianity is the sole religious tradition in an attempt to offer "proof" that the salient ideas it claims are true, in distinction from those of mythic storytelling.<sup>17</sup>

Further, the ancient pagans likely would not have considered Christians "insane" (*insani*) if Jesus were just another name for exactly the same types of beings they were currently worshipping. This qualitative distancing by Justin is never cited by proponents of the homogeneity thesis. Neither Tertullian's nor Justin's arguments yield strong data in favor of data mining from antecedent non-Christian streams, either by the Christian from the pagan or by the pagan from the Jew. In the case of Justin in particular, his parallels are weak and often exaggerated, appearing to be somewhat contrived in an evident attempt to make his case. Additionally, there is no requirement for us to believe that any of the early church fathers had *everything* correct, either theologically or anthropologically.<sup>18</sup> It is in fact accepted as uncontroversial that Justin

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Wallace, J. Ed Komoszewski, and M. James Sawyer, *Reinventing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishing, 2006), 231: "[A] careful reading of Justin shows that at every turn he sees the gospel as ultimately unique and thus superior to pagan religions." Even Richard Miller, who is a scholar given to the strong homogeneity thesis and believes that these various admissions by Justin are interpretationally axiomatic for the Jesus narratives, admits that most scholars do not find this method of antecedent application of Justin's comments correct. Commenting on Justin's statements; "the supposed gravity of this confession, it would appear, extend well beyond the language of mere comparison, *contrary to the summary of many*" (Miller, 2015: 8).

<sup>18</sup> Notable church fathers and early church figures leap to mind. For example, Irenaeus believed that Adam and Eve were children during their sojourn in the garden of Eden (*Against Heresies*, 3.22.4, 4.38; also *Epideixis* 12). The



erred at certain points in his exposition.<sup>19</sup> As expressed by the New Testament scholar Craig Keener,

Some of the [“parallels”] appear in Christian interpretations of the mysteries, not in the pagan sources (which naturally kept mysteries more secret). That the Fathers understood the Mysteries as *‘imitation demoniaque du Christianisme’* may suggest that they, like many early modern students of these cults, read them through the grid of their own Christian background, and the ready-to-hand explanation of demonic imitation may have led them to heighten rather than play down the similarities between the two (Keener, 2009:335).

Keener even suggests reverse causation, the notion that a variety of Roman Mystery religions likely borrowed salient theological and praxis ideas *from* the early Christians (Ibid.).

Neither Justin nor Tertullian, as we have seen, was advocating strong homogeneity between Jesus and various non-Christian deities and associated rituals. Both men affirmed mild

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brilliant Origen, who perished after being tortured in the Decian persecution, left us a trove of questionable doctrines and ideas concomitant to his essential Christian faith commitment.

<sup>19</sup> It is also worth remembering that for all Justin got correct elsewhere, there are some notable inaccuracies in some of his polemics. This is most conspicuous when it comes to his knowledge of Judaism, as expressed in the following quote: “Only a few of the early church fathers were very familiar with the Jewish context of Jesus and Paul. While such as Jerome and Hippolytus were such exceptions, the Philosopher Justin . . . is less so. [T]hough raised as a Gentile in Samaria, he claims no knowledge of Judaism before his adulthood. Although Justin shows acquaintance with many Jewish traditions (e.g. details about the scapegoat; polygamy, the hidden Messiah; “Man” as a divine title), he often misunderstands or misrepresents Judaism (e.g. lack of law-keeping before Moses; the Messiah’s divinity or suffering; application of Psalm 110 to Hezekiah rather than to Abraham) . . . [E]ven Justin’s Trypho did not know Hebrew and generally handled Scripture in a non-rabbinic way. (Craig Keener, *Remarriage and Divorce in Today’s Church*, edited by Paul E. Engle and Mark L. Strauss, p. 50.

connections but clearly espoused a position of Christian claims having a unique degree of credibility. Tertullian excoriated pagan ritual practice and linked it to heretics, and Justin attempted to *create* parallels for the Roman authorities to recognize, constructing an odd and elaborate argumentative tapestry reaching back to the Old Testament patriarchs. The parallels both cite are for various reasons suspect.

#### **2.4 Celsus, *Contra Celsum*, 2.55 & 3.24**

The early church scholar Origen (Ὠριγένης, ca. A.D. 185-253) is best known through his interaction with a second-century Greek philosopher named Celsus (ca. A.D. 180–250), who, writing in a time of communal persecution of Christians, penned an extensive work criticizing the Christian movement of his time (*Contra Celsum*, 8, 69). Celsus titled his polemic against Christianity “The True Word” (Λόγος Ἀληθείας); it is possible today to access his work only by way of choice quotations from Origen’s response. In Origen’s work, aptly titled *Against Celsus* (*Contra Celsum*), he attempted to address Celsus’ numerous critiques of Christianity. Origen responded ca. A.D. 248, and most scholars believe that his refutation constitutes a reliable representation of Celsus’ thoughts (Anon., 1999:362; Cook, 1988:51-60; Wilken, 1984:97-123). One of Celsus’ arguments against the Christian belief in the resurrection was that there were mythological figures who were also purported to have returned from death and that all of these pagan accounts were universally repudiated by Christians as spurious.

2.55 The Jew continues his address to those of his countrymen who are converts, as follows: Come now, let us grant to you that the prediction was actually uttered. Yet how many others are there who practice such juggling tricks, in order to deceive their simple

hearers, and who make gain by their deception?—as was the case, they say, with Zamolxis in Scythia, the slave of Pythagoras; and with Pythagoras himself in Italy; and with Rhampsinitus in Egypt (the latter of whom, they say, played at dice with Demeter in Hades, and returned to the upper world with a golden napkin which he had received from her as a gift); and also with Orpheus among the Odrysians, and Protesilaus in Thessaly, and Hercules at Cape Tænarus, and Theseus. But the question is, whether anyone who was really dead ever rose with a veritable body. Or do you imagine the statements of others not only to be myths, but to have the appearance of such, while you have discovered a becoming and credible termination to your drama in the voice from the cross, when he breathed his last, and in the earthquake and the darkness? That while alive he was of no assistance to himself, but that when dead he rose again, and showed the marks of his punishment, and how his hands were pierced with nails: who beheld this? A half-frantic woman, as you state, and some other one, perhaps, of those who were engaged in the same system of delusion, who had either dreamed so, owing to a peculiar state of mind, or under the influence of a wandering imagination had formed to himself an appearance according to his own wishes, which has been the case with numberless individuals; or, which is most probable, one who desired to impress others with this portent, and by such a falsehood to furnish an occasion to impostors like himself (*Contra Celsum*, 2.55).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See also Origen's response to Celsus in *Contra Celsum*, 3.22, where Celsus proposed Asclepius, Hercules, and the Dioscuri as possible rivals to Jesus. Origen responded that Jesus experienced a completely different kind of death event than these figures—not to mention, especially in the case of Hercules, living a much more ethically acceptable

Celsus here highlighted other examples of characters who had themselves purportedly visited the realm of the dead and returned in some fashion—in particular, Zalmoxis, Pythagoras, Rhampsinitus, Orpheus, Protesilaus, Heracles (Hercules), and Theseus. He identified these figures with known myths and then asked why Christians believe Jesus to be different. Here Celsus also revealed his philosophical issue with a bodily resurrection and his disdain for the first reported witnesses of the risen Jesus (“frantic” women). Celsus later revealed two possible explanations for the empty tomb and Jesus’ alleged appearances: either hallucination / subjective vision or an intentional lie intended to dupe gullible people (Cook, 2000:56).

Celsus was not positing a genetic influence in this passage but was offering what he believed to be similar figures from common mythography. Interestingly, he distanced Jesus from these fictional characters in light of the Christians’ claim of his physical resurrection or return. Celsus continues,

2.56 But since the Jew says that these histories of the alleged descent of heroes to Hades, and of their return thence, are juggling impositions, maintaining that these heroes disappeared for a certain time, and secretly withdrew themselves from the sight of all men, and gave themselves out afterwards as having returned from Hades,—for such is the meaning which his words seem to convey respecting the Odrysian Orpheus, and the Thessalian Protesilaus, and the Tænarian Hercules, and Theseus also—let us

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life (3.22). Origen also pointed out that Asclepius, Hercules, and the Dioscuri were supposed to have had an immaterial continued existence—not surprising, considering that this particular immortality belief was ubiquitous among the Greeks and Romans. Jesus, on the other hand, was reported to have returned in an empirical sense. (3.22-3).

endeavour to show that the account of Jesus being raised from the dead cannot possibly be compared to these. For each one of the heroes respectively mentioned might, had he wished, have secretly withdrawn himself from the sight of men, and returned again, if so determined, to those whom he had left; but seeing that Jesus was crucified before all the Jews, and His body slain in the presence of His nation, how can they bring themselves to say that He practised a similar deception with those heroes who are related to have gone down to Hades, and to have returned thence (*Contra Celsum*, 2.56)?

Celsus made it clear that he was not looking for an answer to the question of how Jesus was different from the figures he had listed; he accepted that the Jesus proclamation minimally included a historic, public death and that this was a distinctive in the tradition. Origen pointed out that Greeks sometimes claimed to have individually seen shadowy apparitions of the dead around tombs at night and that most of the appearances of Jesus took place during the day and in public (2.60), rendering Celsus' hallucination theory unlikely.<sup>21</sup> Origen posited that Jesus' resurrection would have even more fantastic than that attributed to the mythic characters, since no surrogate intervened on his behalf except the very God of the universe itself and that Jesus' resurrection had produced better results for those that believe (2.58).

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<sup>21</sup> Origen further pointed out that the uncommon event of waking illusion or vision would have been highly unlikely in the case of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances (2.60), and he took issue with the tendentious way in which the women were described by Celsus. Origen later reminded Celsus that the eyewitnesses were willing to endure persecution and death for what they claimed to have experienced; this exhibited psychological clarity, as well as suggesting another factor that distanced Jesus from other mythic personas (3.23).

Celsus clearly believed, for two reasons, that Asclepius was a more plausible candidate for a resurrected divine person: (1) Asclepius was a part of the Greek pantheon to which Celsus subscribed, and (2) his followers in Celsus' time related having experienced Asclepius' presence long after he had reportedly died (3.24). Origen argued that Jesus' death was distinct from Asclepius' alleged expiry and that he was doubtful about the number and quality of witnesses one could summon who might be willing to put themselves at risk to assert a risen Asclepius (3.24). For centuries after Celsus, there is very little by way of scholarship or polemics of which we have access that take the strong homogeneity position in their denunciation of Christian uniqueness and truth.

#### **2.5.1 Charles Francois Dupuis, *A History of All the Forms of Worship and of All the Religions of the World***

Much closer to our own day, the homogeneity thesis can be plausibly traced to the Protestant polemics against the Roman Catholic rituals and worship traditions that they contemptuously compared to earlier pagan practice. One such example appears in Isaac Casaubon's *Exercitationes de Rebus Sacris*. This was the first work to attempt a serious, scholarly study of the Greek Mystery religions in relation to Roman Catholic Christianity. Casaubon's chief aim of that work, published in Geneva in 1655, was to cast the Roman Catholic sacramental system in the light of its alleged precursor—the various rituals of the ancient Mystery religions. This critique would eventually evolve from a Protestant conceptual barb against the Roman Catholic

Church to an overarching explanation accounting for the Gospel data *en toto*, culminating in the voluminous works of scholars like Priestley, Dupuis, and Frazer.<sup>22</sup>

Most notably, Charles Francois Dupuis (1742–1809), professor of Latin Rhetoric at the College de France, proposed a three-stage development for all religious traditions: according to his schema stage one was a type of pantheism, and stage two degenerated into mythology and the worship of heavenly bodies, culminating in stage three with the transition to a cult of particular heroes (Dupuis, 1794:1:1-124). Dupuis further claimed that all developed religious traditions of the West owed their genesis to the ancient Persian concentration on divine duality (Ibid., 1:229-41). Dupuis studied astronomy and its effect on various cultures of the past, and he attempted to link all of the major ancient cultures through their astronomical and religious practices. In his final volume Dupuis directed the reader to what he saw to be the clear consequence of his research on Christianity:

Christ will be, for us, what Hercules, Osiris, Adonis and Bacchus have been, that is to say, a form of the solar deity, and affirmation followed by the more radical claim, ‘if he [Christ] seems to have assumed mortal body like the heroes of ancient poems, this will be only the fiction of legend . . . We conclude that, despite the differences in stories and

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<sup>22</sup> The British scientist and theologian Jason Priestley published *The Doctrines of Heathen Philosophy Compared with those of Christianity* (1804), a work that had a profound impact on the American revolutionary founders John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Priestley’s contention was that Christianity needed to be purged of the corrupting influence of Platonism and that both Paul and the early church fathers were to blame for polluting the original (“simple” and “pure”) brand of the faith with Greek paganism to make it more palatable to the Gentile masses. It was Priestley’s influence on Jefferson that led to the publication of the now infamous “Jefferson Bible” (cited in Smith, *Drudgery*, 7).

names, there is nothing that belongs to Christ which [does] not belong to Bacchus and Osiris, that is to say, which does not belong to the sun honored under his various names (Ibid., 3.1:iv, 69).

And,

In order to understand the Christian legend concerning Christ, we have collected the legends of the different religions which have appeared in the West contemporary with Christ. We are shown that they have common characteristics as they can be reduced, totally, to a singular idea: salvation by the Sun, supposedly born at the time of the winter solstice and triumphant over darkness at the spring solstice, after having been mourned as dead and then celebrated as the conqueror of the shadows of the tomb. Thus we have seen that the religion of Christ is nothing other than the [same] cosmic allegories which we find among the Mithraists in the mysteries of the Great Mother, etc. [L]ikewise, we have shown that the Christian theology is founded on the same principles as those of the pagans, Egyptians, Greeks, Chaldeans, [and] Indians (Ibid., 3.1.92).

Dupuis was the first professional academic in the post-enlightenment era to underscore and defend the strong homogeneity thesis across multiple parallel figures and conscientiously linking Jesus to solar worship. Dupuis was motivated to establish a genetic relationship between antecedent religious data and the Jesus narratives, a connection that would in his view illuminate Christianity's inception and subsequent sociological success (Weaver, 1999:45-50).



### 2.5.2 The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

Moving ahead chronologically to a more recent timeframe, the famed *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (the History of Religions School) motivated a particular challenge to Christendom in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beginning with an analysis of the Old Testament (McDonald, 1979, 84-85). The group of scholars behind this movement strove to operate by way of methodological naturalism, working in the long shadow cast by the philosopher Hume whose efforts were aimed at eliminating any justification of supernatural causation. The *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* attempted to explicate the salient contours of the Jesus narrative via cultural syncretism (Orr, 1965:235-61; McNaugher, 1947:157; Anderson, 1959:55-7; Habermas, 1976:146), and the group's collective verdict was that the early Jesus movement resulted from a rather mundane and routine pagan cultural appropriation.

Contemporary strong homogeneity proponents follow their predecessors in purporting that various New Testament motifs and themes reveal a strong correlation to the philosophical framework of the Greco-Roman host culture of the period. Since this associative recognition has been achieved, these individuals have attempted to argue beyond correlation to conceptual genealogy. Their investigation and linking endeavors have also eclipsed the more proximate host culture of Jesus and his followers: first-century second-temple diaspora Judaism. In many ways the contemporary strong homogeneity approach to New Testament analysis is an attempted counterblast to the current esteemed scholarly approach to Jesus studies, sometimes referred to as "third quest," in which Jesus is conscientiously situated in his alpha milieu of ancient monotheistic Judaism.

Until more recent times, the galvanizing conviction of these scholars was the notion that *all* religious phenomena could be fully explicated by way of antecedent socioreligious activity and tradition (McDonald, 1979:84-5). The scholars of this era, along with their successors who most consistently applied the homogeneity idea to Jesus, were David Strauss (1835, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* [*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*], 56), Otto Pfliederer (1906, *Primitive Christianity*, vol. I, 5-6, 23-5; vol. II, 186, 371-72; vol. III, 270-71, vol. IV, 76; 1910; *The Early Christian Conception of Christ*, 63-82, 84-133); Wilhelm Bousset (1913, *Kyrios Christos*, 19-20, 60-8, 102-03, 131, 138-44),<sup>23</sup> and Rudolph Bultmann (1934a, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 240-41; “The Study of the Synoptic Gospels,” 36-9, 66, 72, 1934b, *Jesus and the Word*, 8; 1953, *The New Testament and Mythology*, 15-16, 42; 1968, *History and Eschatology*, 7;).

Their desire was to explicate what could be authentically said about Jesus; to this end they analyzed the supernatural elements and the text divergences among the Gospels with relation to the post-Jesus community of faith (Gerrish, 1975:16). Commentary on the authorial process was undertaken with reasoned speculation on the origin and development of these existentially powerful narratives. All religious sentiment was assumed to be interrelated, and this presumed connection could in their view be made conspicuous through rigorous investigation of the early Christian community and the broader culture it inhabited. These men would begin by describing the similarities between the Gospel accounts and alternative religious data in terms of “analogy,” moving from that point to treating them as “genealogy” (Boyd and Eddy, 2007:141).

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<sup>23</sup> Bousset endeavored to link these antecedent figures to Jesus through the writings of Paul and some of the vocabulary utilized by him.

The interpretive grid widened to allow more of the interplay between the early Christians and the broader Greco-Roman culture via Hellenization.

The professor of Anglican studies Gerald Bray comments,

For this group of talented scholars, the emergence of Christianity was entirely explicable in the context of Hellenistic religious history. Christian theology is an appropriation of pagan mythology, imperfectly assimilated into a select form of Judaism. Its uniqueness, and presumably also its success, can be explained by the degree to which its synthesis matched the spiritual yearnings of contemporary Greeks and Romans (Bray, 2000:365).

From this axiomatic starting point it was seen as entirely reasonable to look at the stories pertaining to Jesus in light of the genre they were presumed to instantiate—mythology. The prudent scholar would ostensibly go on from there to look for points of contact with pagan mythology and religious traditions in an attempt to tunnel back to the genesis of these powerful narratives of Jesus. These methodological presuppositions of naturalism and heavy syncretism led to the corporate search for alternative religious traditions and mythology as interpretive keys to understanding the Gospels. The Oxford theologian Alister McGrath points out that the entire search for syncretistic linkage was largely motivated by a desire to discount the uniqueness of the Bible (Barton and Watson, 2005:35-50). Ludemann concurs and tracks the development of this History of Religions syncretistic approach as leading to implausible connections such as that proposed between the last supper and Aztec cannibalism! (Ludemann, 2008:175).

This assumption of axiomatic religious syncretism made it inevitable for the investigative enterprise to be dominated by the scouring of non-Christian ancient texts for point of contacts with Christianity (Ibid., 174). These scholars would go on from there to offer reasoned speculation, first on how and then on why the community of Jesus' followers would have adopted and adapted these ideas.<sup>24</sup> The pagan cultures most commonly claimed to have influenced the Gospel authors were the Greco-Roman, Egyptian, Persian, and Babylonian (Anderson, 1959:55-6).

One can see two poles emerging in the advent of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* criticism of the Bible, the first in which the traditional position of a generally trustworthy, largely historic New and Old Testament was being severely challenged and new vistas of analysis and interaction with the text consequently emerging. The bifurcation between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith" was initiated at this point. However, a new dialectic or second divide began to form in the wake of these critical methodologies: a divide between the content that could be reasonably determined about the historic Jesus of Nazareth and the wholesale denial of his very existence.<sup>25</sup> The idea of Jesus as a fully imaginary creation is an extension of the

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<sup>24</sup> For example, the Greek word κυριος ("Lord") and the apostle Paul's extensive travels together served as a catalyst for Otto Pfleiderer to import volumes of pagan religious texts as examples of likely sources from which early Christians supposedly drew.

<sup>25</sup> The two most recognized nineteenth-century scholars who proffered this thesis were Bruno Baur, *Kritik der evangelischen Geschichte und der Synoptiker*, vol. 2. Leipzig, Wigand 1841-42; see also Douglas Moggach, *The Philosophy and Politics of Bruno Bauer*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 184, and Arthur Drews, *The Christ Myth*, London: Unwin, 1910. The second most influential individual who popularized this idea in the twentieth century was the professor of the German language George Albert Wells (*The Jesus of the Early Christians*, 1971), who has since abandoned this position (*The Jesus Myth*, 1999) with regard to Jesus' purported nonexistence, although his skepticism remains about every other detail of Jesus' life.

mythical parallel thesis that has always been strained and on the fringe; space forbids a robust presentation of the scholarly challenge to this thesis. However, a cross sampling of New Testament scholars can be briefly presented here.

The eminent Roman historian and agnostic Michael Grant pointed out that there is more evidence for the existence of Jesus than for a large number of famous pagan personages, yet no one would dare to argue their non-existence<sup>26</sup> (1992:199-200), and Charlesworth asserted that “Jesus did exist; and we know more about him than about almost any [other] Palestinian Jew before 70 C.E.” (1988:168-69). E. P. Sanders agrees: “We know a lot about Jesus, vastly more than about John the Baptist, Theudas, Judas the Galilean, or any of the other figures whose names we have from approximately the same date and place” (1993:xiv). Concerning the crucifixion Harvey writes: “It would be no exaggeration to say that this event is better attested, and supported by a more impressive array of evidence, than any other event of comparable importance of which we have knowledge from the ancient world” (1982:11). The New Testament scholar James Dunn calls the mythological Jesus hypothesis “implausible” and “speculative,” involving too many non-evidenced assumptions that are far from necessary or theoretically elegant (1985:29).

Dunn is also on record as having stated that the theories of the nonexistence of Jesus are “a thoroughly dead thesis” (Dunn, 1991:35-6). Says Oxford’s Graham Stanton,

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<sup>26</sup> Grant further notes that what we know about Alexander the Great could fit on only a few sheets of paper, yet no one doubts his existence (cited in Meier, 1991:23).

The early Christians' opponents *all* accepted that Jesus existed, taught, had disciples, worked miracles, and was put to death on a Roman cross. As in our day, debate and disagreement centered largely not on the story but on the significance of Jesus. Today nearly all historians, whether Christians or not, accept that Jesus existed and that the gospels contain plenty of valuable evidence which has to be weighed and assessed critically (1989:145).

Even the emeritus professor of history and skeptic of Christianity Morton Smith observed,

I don't think the arguments in (Wells') book deserve detailed refutation . . . he argues mainly from silence . . . many (of his arguments) are incorrect, far too many to discuss in this space . . . (Wells) presents us with a piece of private mythology that I find incredible beyond anything in the Gospels (Smith, 1986:47-8).

Thomas James Thorburn observed, "Indeed it has been argued—and I think very rightly—that myth theories of the beginnings of Christianity are modern speculative hypotheses motivated by an unreasoning prejudice and dislike." Further, "In none of these various testimonies to the fact of Christ is there any slightest hint or idea that he was not a real historical person" (1908:158).<sup>27</sup>

Even the strong homogeneity proponent, Robert M. Price, agrees that this particular denial perspective runs counter to the views of the majority of scholars (Beilby and Eddy, 2009:61). The

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<sup>27</sup> See also Robert E. Van Voorst: "Biblical scholars and classical historians regard theories of the nonexistence of Jesus as effectively refuted" (*Jesus Outside the New Testament: An Introduction to the Ancient Evidence*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000, p. 16), as well as Richard A. Burridge: "There are those who argue that Jesus is a figment of the Church's imagination, that there never was a Jesus at all. I have to say that I do not know any respectable critical scholar who says that any more" (Burridge and Gould, 2004, p. 34).

atheistic New Testament scholar Joseph Hoffman also discredits the arguments presented for Jesus' nonexistence (Hoffman, 2006, 2010), and the late agnostic New Testament scholar from the University of Nottingham Maurice Casey roundly rejects this thesis in multiple works (1991, 2010, 2013). Even Bart Ehrman, arguably the world's best-known New Testament skeptic, concurs in his recent monograph *Did Jesus Exist? The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth* (2012). Echoing the theme of his book, Ehrman remarks,

With respect to Jesus, we have numerous, independent accounts of his life in the sources lying behind the Gospels (and the writings of Paul)—sources that originated in Jesus' native tongue Aramaic and that can be dated to within just a year or two of his life (before the religion moved to convert pagans in droves). Historical sources like that are pretty astounding for an ancient figure of any kind. [ . . . ] [T]he claim that Jesus was simply made up falters on every ground (2013).

Whatever the merit of the arguments given against the sheer existence of Jesus, the most accomplished scholars from across conceptual spectra clearly find this position untenable.

Nevertheless, the scholars who posited a fully mythic Jesus now had the proper medium of skepticism to launch their critique. The late Shirley Jackson Case, Yale University and University of Chicago historian and theologian, openly denied the nonempirical Jesus position (Case, 1912:4-5). Case was a liberal academic largely in agreement with the History of Religions approach to New Testament interpretation. He lamented that there had come to be conceptual space between the traditional, older perspective on Jesus and the perspective of proponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*; this created in his mind a kind of plausibility matrix that

allowed for a new and unexpected antithesis between the basic contours of the truncated portrait of Jesus held by the German critics and those who denied Jesus as a historic personage altogether (Ibid., 8). Somewhere in the center of this latter polarity is the synchronicity/homogeneity thesis variously used by proponents of both sides of this divide. It was promoted in a limited fashion by those propounding the theologically desiccated Jesus, as well as by those who affirmed only his imaginary existence in the minds of those enthusiastic to create a new, albeit entirely fictional, salvific character.<sup>28</sup>

These eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth-century scholars incorporated Dupuis' approach into their methods in an effort to understand the origination of the Jesus tradition. They further elaborated and applied the homogeneity thesis to the Jesus narratives, underwriting this way of arriving at conclusions concerning Jesus and the early Christian community.

### **2.5.3 James Frazer, *The Golden Bough***

A notable Harvard scholar and Cambridge social anthropologist of the early twentieth century, James Frazer (1854–1941), produced in 1915 a voluminous, multi-volume work titled *The Golden Bough*, in which he applied the homogeneity thesis to a handful of sacred ideas, narrowing it precisely to the narrative and cultic event of death and resurrection/return. Frazer attempted to gather as much cross-cultural data as possible and to present it to the reader in the hope of establishing a socioreligious vector of thematic syncretism.<sup>29</sup> Frazer argued that claims of the

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<sup>28</sup> Obviously, those who proffered a fictional Jesus leaned more heavily on this thesis than did the actual scholars of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Frazer argued for the ubiquitous cross-cultural themes of magic, sorcery, the evolution of kings (vols. 1 & 2), sickness and immortality transference to a surrogate, care of the soul (vol. 3), the dying god (vol. 4),



dying and rising of deities were so common in the ancient world that they warranted the appellation of cross cultural “motif” or “theme” (vols. 4, 5, 6). Frazer focused on the gods Adonis, Attis, and Osiris in particular as the most conspicuous examples of his proposed religious motif, linking their collective resurrection stories to an agrarian paradigm (vols. 5, 6). Frazer’s endeavor to run a line through the mosaic of ancient data in support of the ubiquity of the “dying and rising” *typos* has been recognized as the most popular and robust scholarly attempt to date. He began with a euhemerist methodological presupposition<sup>30</sup> and then culled ancient religious sources for worship traditions connected to a singular figure, moving finally to mine those traditions for any possible parallel to the salient contours of the Jesus narratives.

Methodological controls proposed by various authors connected to the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* have been abandoned, as has been reported by a majority of New Testament scholars (Evans, 1993:15-18; Stanton, 1992:63; Stanton, 1997:137; Blomberg, 1987:19-72, 1995:22; Blaiklock, 1983:34-5; Rist, 1993:100; Rose, 1950:42-3; Thomas and Gundry, 1978:282-83; Taylor, 1957:41; Brown, 1967:233; Dunn, 1985:76; Davis, 1999:57-8; France, 1986:4-117; Hengel, 1989:i-ix, 1997:ix); this includes refutation of the supposition of strong religious thematic

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Attis/Adonis/Osiris (vols. 5 & 6), the corn spirits and the agrarian deity connection (vols. 7 & 8), and the scapegoat in world religions (vol. 9). He finished his work in 1915 by adding an investigation and analysis of Balder (vols. 10 & 11) and a full bibliography and index (vol. 12).

<sup>30</sup> Euhemerism is the position postulating that alpha characters in religious texts and various mythologies are based on actual, living human leaders—ancient kings and monarchs. The idea is that there was an actual human being around whom the Attis myth (or any other myth) was built. Myths are said to originate in concrete human events in our spacio-temporal world, followed by accretions built around the historic events surrounding the person(s) posited. The Euhemerist paradigm has been roundly repudiated and rejected by scholars.

homogeneity.<sup>31</sup> The more particular application of the homogeneity thesis, the incorporation of dying and rising deities by Frazer and those he influenced, has been largely repudiated as well (Pannenberg, 1968:91; Bailey, 2009:266-67; Smith, 1987:2535-540; Gary and El-Shamy, 2004:19-20; O'Collins, 2008:710-14; Schaffer, 1979:301; Endsjø, 2009:257-60; Metzger, 1968:3-20; Mettinger, 2001:4, 7, 11-6, 17, 41; Burkert, 1979:100-01, 1987:75; Monford and Lenardon, 1999:2-3; Powell, 2001:645; Grant, 1977:199-200; Klauk, 2003:151-52; Eddy and Boyd, 2007; MacMullen, 1981:55; Nock, 1964:29; Speer, 1968:100; Lambrechts, 1955:208-40; Fear, 1996:40; Evans, 1995:5, 47, 243; Blackburn, 1991:183; Barstad, 1984:48-51; McKenzie, 1997; Smith, 1998:04-31; Dunn, 1977:294; Keener, 2009:336-38; Gasparro, 1985:30; Aune, 1981:48; Orr, 1965:238; Sandmel, 1962:1-13; Wallace, Sawyer, and Komoszewski, 2006:232; Manson 1961:64-5; Hengel, 1977:10; McKenzie, 1997:46; Fox, 1987:19-22; Harnack, 1911, 2:191; Baker, 2003:1-13; Habermas, 1976:153-62; Orr, 1965:236, 249-53; Hengel, 1976:25; Rahner, 1963:5-9; Wright, 1950:26; Wagner, 1967; Brown, 2009:61-8).<sup>32</sup> One cannot undertake a task related to this

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<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that all of their presuppositions and controls have been discarded or that they are not useful for text analysis.

<sup>32</sup> T. N. D. Mettinger summarizes the negative scholarly reaction to Frazer's thesis in "The Dying and Rising God': A Survey of Research from Frazer to the Present Day," in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts*, edited by B. F. Batto and K. L. Roberts (Winona Lakes, IN: Eisenbrauns 2004), pp. 373-86. The twentieth-century history of the "dying and rising gods thesis" has in his words been one of "initial triumph and subsequent demise" (386). The critiques of Frazer are many: he chose too wide a spectrum of data (chronologically, geographically, culturally, and thematically) with which to collate; he bypassed a variety of differences/dissimilar data in his constructions; he seemed forced to equivocate terminologically; he freely mixed cultic, narrative, and archaeological data when it supported his thesis; he interpreted certain ideas and events in ways that have been repudiated in the light of new discoveries; he did little to manage his biases; he failed to come to terms with the unique facets of ancient and modern cultures; and he failed to give his chosen exemplars of his position (Attis, Adonis, and Osiris) the analytical attention necessary to support it. Nevertheless, *The Golden Bough* stands as a herculean effort by Frazer and provides an incredibly entertaining read.

subject without highlighting Frazer's position and role in the acceptability of the strong homogeneity thesis. It is also instructive to point out that his once popular particular application of the homogeneity thesis is now a minority position among scholars (Mettinger, 2001:4, 7, 11-6, 17; Wallace, Sawyer, and Komoszewski, 2006:231-32; Evans, 1995:5, 47; Anon., 1999:2-3; Powell, 2001:645; Hurtado, 2012, 2016; Jake, 2014; Smith, 1987: 2535-540; Marshall, 1977:16; Metzger, 1968:119).

#### **2.5.4 Bruce Metzger, *Historical and Literary Studies: Pagan, Jewish, and Christian***

Bruce Metzger (1914–2007) was recognized as one of the most competent scholars in the field of ancient languages and ancient manuscript studies. At the time of his death he was the George L. Collord Professor Emeritus of New Testament language and literature at Princeton Theological Seminary. Metzger taught in the New Testament department at Princeton for 46 years, beginning in 1938, and his treatment of ancient subject matter is still seen as worthy of emulation by scholars across the spectrum of belief.<sup>33</sup> In the late Ron Nash's book engaging certain aspects of this topic, *The Gospel and the Greeks*, Nash asserts that there are certain works that simply *must be read* in order to fairly assess the homogeneity idea particularly

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<sup>33</sup> Metzger was well known for his work in New Testament textual criticism. He served on the committee that produced the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* and wrote several books on textual criticism, including *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (1964, 1968, 1991) and *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible: An Introduction to Palaeography* (1981). The British Academy made him a corresponding fellow in 1978, an honor few American scholars receive. Metzger did extensive work in Bible translation, serving on the committees of both the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. He took over as chair of the NRSV committee in 1975, serving in that position for the 14 years it took to complete the revision process. In 1986 he was elected to the American Philosophical Society, and in 1994 the British Academy awarded him the F. C. Burkitt Medal for his work in biblical studies ("New Testament Scholar Bruce Metzger Dies at 93," *Christianity Today*, February, 2007. Accessed Online 5/8/2011; <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/februaryweb-only/107-42.0.html>).

pressed on the Jesus tradition: "Metzger's essay is required reading for any student of the subject" (Nash, 2003:290).

Metzger did indeed write a brief treatise on the question of genetic relationships between the Gospel accounts and pagan parallel stories; this appeared as a small part of a broader book he authored in 1968 on the subject of history proper. Unlike Mettinger, Metzger strongly criticized the application of the homogeneity thesis with regard to death and resurrection in general and in application to Jesus in particular. Several scholars at the time he authored this challenge were attempting to link Christianity with Greco-Roman Mystery religions and the myths that inspired them. After laying out a brief history of the scholarship for and against this thesis and of discoveries that underwrote some of the analyses, Metzger offers some methodological criteria he claimed had been either overlooked or bypassed by those supporting the homogeneity thesis (1968:4).<sup>34</sup>

First, he admonishes the investigator to look at chronology and understand the paucity of evidence for this thesis. Metzger also reminds the reader not to commit the *essentialist fallacy* of assuming rigid uniformity to be read backward into either the myth that inspired the Mystery religion or the resultant practices of the said cult (Ibid., 6).<sup>35</sup> He then follows many other scholars

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<sup>34</sup> "In what follows an attempt is made to outline some considerations which, it is suggested, must be taken into account in estimating the amount of influence of the Mysteries upon early Christianity."

<sup>35</sup> "The nature and amount of the evidence of the Mysteries create certain methodological problems. Partly because of a vow of secrecy imposed upon the initiates, relatively little information concerning the teaching imparted in the Mysteries has been preserved. Furthermore, since a large part of the scanty evidence regarding the Mysteries dates from the third, fourth, and fifth centuries A.D., it must not be assumed that beliefs and practices current at that time existed in substantially the same form during the pre-Christian era. In fact, that pagan doctrines would differ

in pointing out that evidence for syncretism in the first century Jewish/Christian cultures is also missing, further stating that there is virtually no archaeological evidence unearthed from Palestinian geography that would tend to substantiate this thesis (Ibid., 7-8). He goes on to admit to *superficial* parallels having been recognized by critic and church father alike closely following the inception of the Christian movement and cautions the reader to be aware of mixing sources with little regard to the credibility of their assimilation in the effort to create an impressive parallel:

Some of the supposed parallels are the result of the modern scholar's amalgamation of quite heterogeneous elements drawn from various sources . . . Even reputable scholars have succumbed to the temptation to be more precise than the existing state of information will permit . . . In a word, one must beware of what have been called 'parallels made plausible by selective description' (Ibid., 9).

Metzger goes on to discuss the difference between similarities that are genealogical in nature and others that are analogical, using chronology and cultural studies and the assessment of the stock conceptual suppositions to make this crucial determination (Ibid., 9-10) and further admonishing homogeneity proponents to delineate between generic and specific religious ideas, dispensing with the former and focusing on comparison of the latter (Ibid., 9-11).

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somewhat from place to place and from century to century is not only what one should have expected, but also what the sources reveal to be a fact . . ."

He points out the probability, given the manuscript evidence, of influence moving in the *opposite* direction—starting from Christianity and growing in affinity and scope *in the direction of* the pagan Mystery religions and myths by way of imitation. He cites the cult of Cybele as a clear example of just such a reversal of assumption with regard to the issue of genetic relationship (Ibid.). Attention, he states, must be given to the differences in both language and underlying conceptual usage (Ibid., 12).<sup>36</sup> Metzger highlights how few instances there are of common pagan religious language having found its way into the New Testament corpus. He argues that the utter absence of common Greek terms found in an abundance of mythological and pagan religious literature of the period also militates against this strong homogeneity position (Ibid.).

Metzger continues by noting the discernable genre differences between the New Testament material and the narratives from which the ancient religions proceed, as well as the free, publicly accessible nature of Christianity in contradistinction to that of the pagan Mystery religions (Ibid., 13).<sup>37</sup> At this point he begins a lengthy argument against the case for sacramental copying by Christians of various pagan religious rites and practices, after which he logically

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<sup>36</sup> “Finally, in arriving at a just estimate of the relation of the Mysteries to Christianity as reflected in the New Testament, attention must be given to their differences as well as resemblances. These differences pertain both to language and ideas.”

<sup>37</sup> “In the nature of the case a most profound difference between Christianity and the Mysteries was involved in the historical basis of the former and the mythological character of the latter. Unlike the deities of the Mysteries, who were nebulous figures of an imaginary past, the Divine Being whom the Christian worshipped as Lord was known as a real Person on earth only a short time before the earliest documents of the New Testament were written. From the earliest times the Christian creed included the affirmation that Jesus ‘was crucified under Pontius Pilate.’ On the other hand, Plutarch thinks it necessary to warn the priestess Clea against believing that ‘any of these tales [concerning Isis and Osiris] actually happened in the manner in which they are related.’”

follows with a number of differences between the Christian practice of baptism and the pagan rite of washing/cleansing.

Metzger then launches into a discussion of revival/resurrection distinctions between the Jesus narratives and various pagan mythical offerings: Jesus dies willingly for the cause of redemption, in contrast to the pagan gods of the Mystery religions, who submit by compulsion and in bitterness and despair; Christianity views the cross of Christ as a triumphant event, while pagan gods/heroes lament and mourn the imposition of suffering upon their god; and the events of Jesus' life are grounded in verifiable history, whereas the Mystery religions make no attempt at such a connection (Ibid., 18-9).<sup>38</sup>

This brief synopsis of Metzger's position on the subject is intended to show that some scholars were content to disregard some of Frazer's postulates and abandon various *Schule* methodologies in the wake of new discoveries and criticisms, while others engaged in a more robust challenge. Metzger was a Christian, so he was particularly motivated to engage the finer points of this thesis and, as indicated in the title of his chapter, concerned about the broad academic ramifications of weak or spurious links created among ancient texts.

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<sup>38</sup> See also A. D. Nock, "A Note on the Resurrection," in *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation*, ed. A. E. J. Rawlinson (London, 1928), p. 48; reprinted in Nock's *Early Gentile Christianity and its Hellenistic Background* (New York, 1964), 49 & 106; George C. Ring. S. J., "Christ's Resurrection and the Dying and Rising Gods," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vi (1944), 216-229; G. Bertram, "Auferstehung (des Kultgottes)," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart, 1950), 919-930; C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London, 1936); and A. M. Hunter, *Paul and his Predecessors*, rev. ed. (London, 1961).

### 2.5.5 John Alsup, *The Post Resurrection Appearance Stories in the Gospel Tradition*

In 1975 John Alsup published a monograph titled *The Post Resurrection Appearance Stories in the Gospel Tradition*, wherein he carefully sifted through data pertaining to Apollonius of Tyana (Alsup, 1975:221-23), Romulus (Ibid., 224-26), and Aristeas (Ibid., 226-27) to test the hypothesis that any of the aforementioned figures served as an authorial backdrop for the tradition of contributors concerning Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>39</sup> Alsup attempts to answer the question of whether one can detect pre-redactional forms of the postmortem appearance sections of the Jesus narrative. Alsup utilized a form-critical approach to engaging the New Testament appearance descriptions of the risen Jesus and the various Hellenistic texts that featured similar appearance stories (Ibid., 19-22, 53-4). He presented the comparative data, discussing similarities and differences, and then analyzed both the form and the content of all of the accounts he chose (Ibid., 150-211). Alsup rejected assuming the category of a dying and rising *typos* or form into which ancient data could be categorized as a tendentious approach to the question of genetic connection, altogether useless for the purposes of analysis (Ibid., 215-16), choosing instead to focus on identifiable, individuated examples evaluating whether some sort of connection could be derived from the data he deemed worthy of comparison.

Alsup limited his scope of investigation to individuals in the ancient world who, like Jesus, were singled out as in some way divine, who died or disappeared, and then returned/rose (Ibid., 219-20). He found nothing approaching a particular New Testament *Gattung* (genre/type)

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<sup>39</sup> Some of the other characters Alsup briefly analyzes are Cleomedes (Ibid., 227), Alcemene (Ibid.), Peregrinus (Ibid., 228), and Demainete (Ibid., 229).



appearance in the pagan data he chose to use; the differences were in fact striking and numerous, while similarities were rare and admitted to divergent interpretations (Ibid., 230-39). Alsup concluded that one needs to move cautiously with an undertaking of this kind and needs a conspicuous and rigorous method, as well as noting that the Old Testament narratives are a much more plausible fit for authorial inspiration of the Gospel appearance accounts (Ibid., 251-63, 266-73). The investigation in this thesis will take cues from Alsup's use of key New Testament texts, as well as his comparative scheme in assessing the pertinent Greco-Roman data.

### **2.5.6 Trygraave Mettinger, *The Riddle of the Resurrection* and the Debate**

In 2001 the scholar Trygraave Mettinger published a work titled *The Riddle of Resurrection* wherein he compared a number of ancient near eastern deities with the purpose of underwriting the possibility of a dying and rising religious theme in the ancient world.

Mettinger's superlative work on this subject deserves our attention here for numerous reasons:

(1) The concessions and critical summaries laid out by Mettinger in the book should be seen as conspicuous warnings to those who wish to defend the homogeneity approach to interpreting the Gospels. (2) It is magnificently crafted scholarship, meticulously detailed and careful in its handling of data—truly a work to be emulated by professional academic and lay investigator alike. (3) Mettinger's narrowing of focus to a singular, axiomatic issue such as resurrection is wise.

In his monograph Mettinger takes issue with the harsh treatment the proponents of the mythical parallel thesis have endured through the decades. For example, the University of Chicago professor of comparative religion Jonathan Z. Smith, referred to by some as the greatest

living scholar of comparative religion (Ehrman, 2012), excoriates this death and resurrection homogeneity position; Smith's 1969 Yale dissertation directly challenged Frazer's work (Smith, 1969).<sup>40</sup> In his entry under "Dying and Rising Gods" in Mircea Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* Smith states:

The category of dying and rising gods, once a major topic of scholarly investigation, must now be understood to have been largely a misnomer based on imaginative reconstructions and exceedingly late or highly ambiguous texts (1987:2535).<sup>41</sup>

Smith goes on to dispense with the assertion of any recurring major motif or archetype of dying and rising deities in the ancient world (Ibid.). His article tackles the proposed evidence for this being an authentic thematic category in the eras preceding or concomitant to the Christian milieu and finds it wanting. Smith takes issue with two of Frazer's methodological assumptions: euhemerism and naturist myth-making, both of which play an axiomatic role in his eventual arrival at his conclusions of strong parallelism between the Jesus of the Gospels and various pagan religious personages (Ibid.)<sup>42</sup>:

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<sup>40</sup> His thesis was titled "The Glory, Jest and Riddle, James George Frazer and The Golden Bough," diss. Yale.

<sup>41</sup> Smith is a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Chicago, former president of the Society of Biblical Literature (2008), and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is also the general editor of the HarperCollins *Dictionary of Religion* and is no friend of Christianity.

<sup>42</sup> "Euhemerist" refers to the man named Euhemerus who propounded that the gods had been actual men and women of ancient days. Frazer added to this by claiming that ancient individuals had not only been deified but had also been connected to the agricultural cycles; this is referred to as the "naturist" theory relating to ancient pagan worship.

There are empirical problems with the *euhemerist* theory. The evidence for sacril regicide is limited and ambiguous; where it appears to occur, there are no instances of a dying god figure. The *naturist* explanation is flawed at the level of theory. Modern scholarship has largely rejected, for good reasons, an interpretation of deities as projections of natural phenomena (Ibid.).

And

As applied in the scholarly literature, 'dying and rising gods' is a generic appellation for a group of male deities found in agrarian Mediterranean societies who serve as the focus of myths and rituals that allegedly narrate and annually represent their death and resurrection . . . All the deities that have been identified as belonging to the class of dying and rising deities can be subsumed under the two larger classes of disappearing deities or dying deities. In the first case, the deities return but have not died; in the second case, the gods die but do not return. There is no unambiguous instance in the history of religions of a dying and rising deity (Ibid.).

The recognized mythology expert and emeritus professor of Classics at the University of Zurich Walter Burkert concurs, calling attention to the anachronistic chronological situation of the texts often utilized to make these links:

Moreover, the key examples so favored by the early myth-ritualists and their followers among biblical scholars—the Babylonian Akitu Festival and *Enuma Elish*, and the tales of Attis, Osiris, and Adonis—all turn out to be examples supportive of myth-ritual conclusions only if one utilizes very late and unreliable evidence (1979:100-01).

Burkert moves briefly to specific examples:

The Frazerian construct of a general 'Oriental' vegetation god who periodically dies and rises from the dead has been discredited by more recent scholarship. There is no evidence for a resurrection of Attis; even Osiris remains with the dead; and if Persephone returns to the world every year, a joyous event for gods and men, the initiates do not follow her. There is a dimension of death in all of the mystery initiations, but the concept of rebirth or resurrection of either gods or mystai is anything but explicit (1987:75).

So for Smith and many of his colleagues divine death/disappearance is discernable, while antecedent pagan deific resurrection is a chimera. One can see Smith's concurrent disdain for the methodological presuppositions of the euhemerist and naturist theories espoused by the likes of Frazer, given the evidential paucity in support of these theories. Mettinger spends his lengthy introduction admitting his intention of undertaking the defense of a minority scholarly position and accordingly, striving for a rather modest aim: "What we have said so far makes one thing obvious: Major scholars in the fields of comparative religion and the Bible find the idea of dying and rising deities suspect or untenable" (2001:17). And "From the 1930s . . . a consensus has developed to the effect that the 'dying and rising gods' died but did not return or rise to live again . . . Those who think differently are looked upon as residual members of an almost extinct species" (Ibid., 4, 7).

This consensus-challenging proposal is an attempt by Mettinger to prove at least *the possibility* of a dying and rising figure prior to the first century A.D., and, in the process, to marginally justify and rescue the ideas popularized by Frazer. His project was necessarily restrained, not only

because he was swimming against the tide of scholarship but also because he was laying aside nearly any other potential parallel possibility beyond the conception of a dying and returning/rising deity.<sup>43</sup> Mettinger wisely delved no deeper than the already tenuous extrapolation of the bare noetic possibility of pre-c.E. resurrection/revivication figure(s), astutely choosing to forego the task of composite analytical comparison.<sup>44</sup> One is immediately struck by how erudite and cautious Mettinger is in this work; he undertook a herculean task in *Riddle*, endeavoring to link meager ancient near eastern data divided by centuries, as well as mediums.<sup>45</sup>

Mettinger directly interacted with Smith, as well as others, who were critical of the possibility of an antecedent dying and rising divine character or archetype. It is clear that Mettinger felt as though he had somewhat succeeded in his undertaking, though he was understandably tentative throughout his work. Conservatively, Mettinger seems to offer one clear pre-Christian deity purported to have departed the realm of the living by way of death and to have

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<sup>43</sup> He also refers to this as “special bilocation,” “revivication,” “revival,” and other terms.

<sup>44</sup> J. S. Burnett assessed Mettinger’s case as “plausible but at best tenuous” (online review of *Riddle of the Resurrection* in *Review of Biblical Literature* 04 (2005), 5, accessed online April 2011. [www.bookreviews.org/pdf/2958\\_4897.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/2958_4897.pdf)).

<sup>45</sup> Such as connecting pre-first-century artwork (reliefs, paintings) with post-c.E. manuscript evidence. “I would like to stress two points pertaining to the present investigation. One is the difficulty involved in the interpretation of ritual and myth in dead civilizations. We have no informants with whom to check our conclusions. The other is the limits of our task: we do not assume to be giving overall interpretations of myths and rites involved. Our investigation has one clear and limited focus: it concerns the possible justification for speaking of dying and rising gods” (52).

subsequently returned, in some fashion, to the human plane of existence.<sup>46</sup> According to Mettinger the Phoenician/Canaanite storm god Baal and the account of his battle with Mot is the most compelling candidate to legitimately lay claim to the appellation “dying and returning deity” prior to the first century A.D. In point of fact, this is the only pagan deity Mettinger highlights for which we have narrative manuscript evidence of both his death and his sudden return event.<sup>47</sup> However, even this resurrection/return interpretation for Baal is contested by scholars (Driver, 1956:1-11; J.Smith, 1987: 2536-37; Gordon, 1949:4; Yamauchi, 1980: 197, 1990; M. Smith, 1986, 1998; De Moor and Spronk, 1984: 1-8; Gibson, 1984:202-19; Barstad, 1984: 49-52), and Mettinger admits as much (2001:36-37). He also believed that modest cases could be made for the possibility of the Syrian/Greek character Adonis (Ibid., 113-54), for Melquart/Hercules (Ibid., 83-111), and for Tammuz/Damuzi (Ibid., 197-203) returning from death in their respective traditions.<sup>48</sup> Mettinger closes his book as he opened it, with a reminder of the limitations of the analyst, as well as of the texts affecting the research contained therein (Ibid., 217-22).

It may be profitable to think of Mettinger’s laudable work in *Riddle* as “stage one” in the overall construction of a possible death and resurrection homogeneity argument, or even a very careful

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<sup>46</sup> In the cases of Damuzi and Adonis, Mettinger admitted that the cumulative arguments rest on a number of disputed assumptions.

<sup>47</sup> As opposed to subjectively extrapolating linkage through analysis of artwork, religious ritual, and vague word similarities. This story appears in the Ugaritic Baal accounts but is found in no other Baal story; as such, it is the lone exception, as storm gods did not tend to have death and return stories as a part of their mythos (218).

<sup>48</sup> Mettinger, *Riddle of the Resurrection*, 113-154 (Adonis), 197-203 (Tammuz/Damuzi).

proto-step in the argument common in the cases we will later consider. One must establish, at minimum, the existence of any possible dying and rising exemplars prior to the first century A.D. serving as an alpha point for a strong homogeneity interpretation of the Gospels.

This unfortunately brief foray into Mettinger's work has also been presented to remind the reader of the *prima facie* negative verdict that has been assigned by the majority of those most engaged with the data *against* the homogeneity thesis being applied to the death and return events in the Jesus narratives. The secondary reason is to underscore the limited availability of strong, plausible motif expressions/exemplars in the ancient data, and the final is to alert the reader that the homogeneity thesis has been recently and profitably analyzed by credentialed scholars.

Mettinger, Alsup, and Metzger were first-rank scholars representing a spectrum of theological fidelity. They and others have undertaken rigorous comparative assessment with the aim of clarifying the plausibility of proposed links or parallels among the diverse texts of various religious sects. It is in this tradition that this work intends to follow.

## **2.6 A New Means of Analysis**

To my knowledge there has been no work commensurate to the monographs above that has collectively analyzed deities from the Classical period and compared them to New Testament texts in the attempt to adjudicate the question of genetic relationship. The aim of this work is to offer a new analytic method to aid in arriving at warranted conclusions concerning the homogeneity question for any literary data in which an attempted link has been constructed and is being offered for consideration.

I will use this new method to take the relevant information available for two antecedent deities from the Greco-Roman world and to compare them, conceptually, to the New Testament data from the Gospels describing Jesus' death and resurrection. I will utilize the method first and then, subsequent to the analyses, explain the rationale behind the method construction.

This will not be a search exclusively for a common theme to bind or unite the Greek, Roman, and Jewish data, à la Mettinger. Nor will it be an overview of the issues besetting any version of the strong homogeneity thesis, also à la Metzger, or an extended rendering of divergent data. I will look at the similarities and differences between Jesus and two proposed Greco-Roman parallel religious figures and determine what one can learn by way of a comparison. The scholar Hugo Rahner's warning seems apt:

I must again stress that this whole business of comparison is a task of immense difficulty, a task so arduous that something like downright rashness might well be imputed to anyone that attempts it, so vast are the problems that arise when we seek to find a common denominator of thought—let alone a genetic connection—between the two entities in question (1963:5).

The sections of pagan literature purported to relate strongly to Jesus of Nazareth will take priority in terms of comparison to the relevant sections of the New Testament Gospel texts, particularly regarding the central events in the Jesus narratives: his death and resurrection. The reasons for this narrowing of focus are as follows:

- (1) There seems to be a steadily growing stable of scholars, both professional and amateur, who claim that there are pervasive ideas common among various religious figures predating the



first century that clearly connect them to Jesus (Hugh Schonfield, 1968:10; John G. Jackson and Robert Price, 2000:75-96; Richard Carrier and Tom Harpur, 2004; Rene Ruttiman, 1986:131; Thomas Africa, 1974:340-42; Hansie Wolmarans, Dennis MacDonald, Richard C. Miller, Payam Nabarz, Caitlin Matthews, Stephen Harris, and Gloria Platzner, 2004:414-15; James Robertson, Burton Mack, Earl Doherty, D. G. Bostock, Giovanni Casadio, W. T. Jones, and Robert Fogelin, 1969; John Allegro; the late Alan Dundes).<sup>49</sup> These ideological parallels are said to inevitably color one's view of the oral transmission and subsequent authorial activity of the Jesus traditions; i.e., the homogeneity thesis is beginning to gain traction among various scholars with regard to the death and resurrection narratives connected to Jesus of Nazareth.

(2) One cannot take all of the direct and indirect Greco-Roman data that might pertain or connect to any idea in the entire corpus of the New Testament and expect to have a manageable project. Alsup offers an illuminating comment here:

[I]t would be a mistake to exceed those contours and select a broad principle, e.g., the "concept" of epiphany or the "idea" of resurrection in the non-Christian world, as a basis for sifting through and comparing ancient texts. Such a broad approach would necessitate a comparison of practically all Greek, Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Hellenistic/Jewish religious thought dealing with the question of deities and the

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<sup>49</sup> Sometimes these scholars offer information and allow the readers to draw their own conclusions, but many of them often arrive at negative conclusions from their discovery and dissemination of the thesis, determining that this issue undermines the uniqueness, integrity, and value of the New Testament.

problem of death and/or afterlife and thereby make our task unwieldy at best—if not quite impossible. That it would be interesting is no question, but it would allow the examiner an arbitrary and journalistic freedom to select whatever materials appeal to his own interpretive predilections. This would lame any control on historical and—in terms of the analogy question—essential accuracy (1975:215).

This warning from Alsup is one we will heed; we will limit ourselves to death or assumed death narratives combined with a return/resurrection idea and will confine ourselves to the Greco-Roman data and at least two of the particular characters that have been presented by credentialed, non-Christian proponents as plausible candidates for a match with Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>50</sup>

(3) Jesus' resurrection was and still is perceived to have been *the* alpha miracle among all of his purported wonders, as this event was perceived as substantiating his radical ministerial activity and self-identification.

Attempting to determine to what extent contemporaneous popular opinion of the era colored the Gospel accounts is an endeavor fraught with pitfalls, though it has been attempted countless times and in numerous ways. Given the cacophonous din of divergent conclusions in the last 150 years of Jesus studies, one is advised to proceed with caution. In terms of the necessary narrowing of focus with regard to this question, it is extraordinarily helpful to have an ancient character, with a narrative nexus of his own, offered as paradigmatic of the ideas that might

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<sup>50</sup> Mettinger already adroitly presented the ancient near eastern comparisons in his *Riddle of the Resurrection*.

have supplemented the authorial endeavors forging the character and structuring the activity of Jesus of Nazareth. When one or more of these exemplars is offered, one has an evaluative target to mine for information related to Jesus.

I will proceed according to the following steps: (1) I will offer two subsequent chapters, each covering one ancient pagan deity whose data is antecedent to the first century A.D. and who is viewed by various professional scholars as having been significantly similar to Jesus of Nazareth. Within each chapter I will first focus on the work of a scholar or scholars who in some way link Jesus to the deity in question. (2) I will present the original source data with regard to the deity in question purported to be related to Jesus. (3) I will present both explicit and possible similarities between the figures in question. (4) I will list the differences between the descriptions of the deity and the Gospel narratives to which each god is being linked, considering explicit divergence and even distinctions possibly embedded within the various similarities. Following these two chapters I will offer an explanation for my controls and then conclude with a summary chapter suggesting a model for scholars who aim to undertake future homogeneity investigations. At the conclusion of each analytic chapter I will present a five-point evaluative grade for each proposed figure in relation to Jesus. These criteria will be explicated in the final chapter, with suggestions for future analysis.

The primary question driving my research endeavor is: Can a more structured and responsible evaluative method be constructed to assess the claims of strong homogeneity with regard to the Gospels? The ancillary questions I intend to answer are: Can a scholarly case be made for a strong claim of homogeneity between particular descriptions of Jesus and those of certain

deities found outside the Judeo-Christian culture? Are there significant similarities between the portrait given of Jesus and those of antecedent deities? Are there substantive differentiations between Jesus and the chosen Greek deities? Are there possible controls to help one make a responsible and scholarly evaluative summation of culturally and chronologically disparate narratives? My aim is binary and modest; I intend to offer a structured way forward to proceed with comparisons of this type and, in utilizing this method, to carefully weigh the case for a few proposed parallel figures related to the death and return of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **2.6.1 Qualified Homogeneity**

In the words of William Edward Hartpole Lecky,

Christianity had become the central intellectual power of the world, but it succeeded not so much by superseding rival faiths as by absorbing and transforming them. Old systems, old rights, old images were grafted into the new belief, retaining much of their ancient character but assuming new names in a new complexion (1872:223).

Lecky is considered to have been one of the greatest historians who ever lived<sup>51</sup>; his encyclopedic acquaintance with the ancient world placed him in a class with few peers. The quote above cites an easily discernable reality in the history of Christendom post third century.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Lecky earned an incredible *five* advanced degrees, from St. Andrews University, Dublin University, Glasgow University, Oxford University, and Cambridge University, respectively.

<sup>52</sup> This may be true in a qualified way with regard to orthopraxy, though certainly not to orthodoxy.

However, if one infers that Lecky was here referring to the inception of Christianity, whether by Jesus or his followers, I maintain that his statement is misleading.<sup>53</sup>

As discussed earlier, there are certain grand unifying themes to be found in religion and myth.

For example, when a divine figure offers a transcendent or temporal good to a specific individual or group, such as the possibility of a positive afterlife experience common to nearly every religious tradition on the planet, this would not qualify as a significant similarity. These themes are too common to establish historic linkage. Other examples of this kind of motif are any sort of *battle with malevolent forces, consecration or fealty, rebirth in some sense, and sacrifice*—all aspects that are too quotidian to be used as parallel references. There are many generic ideas and terms common to world religions and to basic religious psychological data that do not constitute warranted examples of parallels or copying (Rahner, 1955:171).

Scholars bifurcate *weak* literary dependence versus *strong* literary dependence (Bergsma, 2011:66-89). Another way of articulating this is “dependence versus influence.” Weak dependence is used today, especially by Christian missionaries, when they utilize common linguistic constructs familiar to the culture in which they are witnessing in order to explain Gospel themes and ideas. As recorded in Acts 17, Paul did just this sort of thing in his address to

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<sup>53</sup> Similarly, based on English authority on early Christian history, the Oxford historian and theologian Dean Milman observed: “Christianity disdained that its God and its Redeemer should be less magnificently honored than the demons (gods) of Paganism. In the service it delighted to breathe, as it were, a sublimer sense into the common appellations of the Pagan worship, whether from the ordinary ceremonial or the more secret mysteries. The church became a temple; the table of the communion an altar, the celebration of the Eucharist, the appalling, or unbloody sacrifice. . .The incense, the garlands, the lamps, all were gradually adopted by zealous rivalry, or seized as the lawful spoils of vanquished Paganism and consecrated to the service of Christ” (*History of Christianity*, Vol. 3:312-13). If this depiction is referring to post-Constantine Christendom, we offer qualified agreement. However, if the claim is posited in the context of authorial explanation, this essay will seek to further analyze the position.

the Athenians on his Mars Hill as he attempted to make the “unknown god” known to them by quoting their own poets, both famous and obscure.

The accommodating language of early Christians should be considered as well. There are two basic forms of said language worth mentioning in our analysis; missionary motive with Paul as the exemplar, attempting to build bridges to those that possess a worldview with a radical disconnect from the Judeo-Christian religion (Acts 17; I Cor. 9:22), the second form is desire for general religious and social acceptance by the culture at large with Justin as the exemplar (Sawyer, Wallace, and Komoszewski, 2006:229).<sup>54</sup>

It goes without saying that specific religions have no patent on general language usage and basic descriptive categories; in this sense some legitimate, though limited, borrowing takes place among the various religions of the world, both ancient and modern. Some scholars have compared genres of poetry that draw from a common descriptive and etymological source and point out that this alone does not establish dependence or strong homogeneity (Porter and Bedard, 2006:89-90):

It is not surprising that many religions, in trying to understand the relationship between God and humanity, have used the images of father/parent-child, husband-wife, shepherd-sheep and farmer/seed-crop . . . [as well as of] light-darkness, life-death and

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<sup>54</sup> See also Richard Plantinga, “God So Loved the Word: Theological Reflections of Religious Plurality in the History of Christianity,” in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 108.

fertile-barren, that also seemed to speak to people's eternal longings. The common use of these images in different religions does not demand a direct dependence, but rather are simply the result of a common humanity reaching out to the divine (Ibid., 90).

One can possess a belief in the reality and utility of weak dependence without affirming a genetic relationship. However, if the words *dependence* or *accommodation* or *borrowing* are used in the stronger sense, this thesis will attempt to clarify and narrow the range of options with regard to the causation of the New Testament narratives. Many times strong homogeneity scholars will use terminology specific to Christianity and then apply that selected vocabulary to descriptions of pagan ideas and praxis, expressing surprise that the connections they have uncovered often result in "exaggerations and oversimplifications" (Nash, 2003:126). For example, sacred meals and sacred washings are part of the limited number of stock religious devotional forms common to many cultural faith expressions. In this instance, the respective meanings of these forms are far more crucial for comparative analysis than the individuated expressions of the forms themselves (Ibid.).

A ritual dip in water or a drowning, for example, is not a "baptism" if its purpose in the dogma of a particular religion is different from that in Christianity. According to the scholarly criteria the lack of a parallel *in the underlying idea* or "conceptual usage" renders questionable the use of this coincidental similarity as evidence for borrowing. This principle is clearly seen in works that use the term "Messiah" to refer to a pagan character like the Egyptian Horus. In its original usage "Messiah" is a distinctly Hebrew religious term, freighted with specific propositional content not amenable to, for example, Egyptian polytheism. If "Messiah" is diluted for the sake

of linkage to indicate a “unique individual who saves,” a firefighter could ostensibly be linked to Jesus of Nazareth. In this hypothetical example, Christian terminology is lifted out of context and manipulated to create a linguistic bridge between the Gospels and Egyptian socioreligious thought.<sup>55</sup> The biblical scholar Gordon Clark reminds the investigator that the New Testament was codified in the language of the pagan Greeks and that if a New Testament writer uses “common words” of the language to express himself, this does not constitute an automatic indictment of fraud (Clark, 1957:191-92).

Nicholas Perrin notes a distinctively Christian use of common socioreligious words and concepts like *light*, *darkness*, *life*, *death*, and *rebirth*—all of which are featured in the respective metaphysical lexicons of many world cultures, such that literary dependence cannot be determined by analyzing the terms themselves (2007:24). Perrin goes on to highlight the likelihood that the Judeo-Christian God, who desires to see all of humanity reunited with Himself, might use “archetypal patterns and universal images” (Ibid., 25).

Pertinent here also are overt historical instances of possible Christian borrowing from non-Christian neighbors with regard to orthopraxy. One controversial example is the alleged adoption of December 25 as a celebratory date for the birth of Jesus by ancient Christians. It is very difficult to evidence the claim that early Christians in the Roman Empire assimilated these

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<sup>55</sup> Since C.F. Dupuis, only non-scholars like Dorothy Murdock (*Christ in Egypt, The Horus-Jesus Connection*, 2008) have attempted to interpret the Jesus data with reference to the Horus narratives in particular. Others have attempted to include Horus and many other gods in the Egyptian pantheon in their bid to assign pagan ideational causation to the Jesus data (Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors*, 1883; Tom Harpur, *The Pagan Christ*, 2005). No professional academic has ever attempted to verify a link between the Jewish idea of “Messiah” and the Egyptian ideas concerning the divine.



pagan religious celebrations, though it is possible that this was the case. The Roman sun festival of Sol-Invictus or the ubiquitous celebration of the winter solstice could indeed have been the impetus for the liberated community of Christ wanting to provide an alternative opportunity for Christians in the Roman Empire to honor their God publicly.

In point of fact the theory of the adoption of December 25 from pagan commemoration is not found in the works of the early church Fathers, nor did Christian leaders co-relate pagan festival with the public recognition of Jesus' birth. Not until the twelfth century A.D. do we encounter the proposition that the gala surrounding the birth of Christ had been set deliberately at a time of non-Christian revelry, a comment first found in a marginal note in the document of the Syrian writer Dionysius Bar-Salibi (d. A.D. 1171); the note relates that in ancient times the Christmas holiday, commemorated on the sixth of January, was adjusted to the twenty-fifth of December to coincide with the date of the pagan vacation of the invincible sun (Talley, 1991:101-02).

Further, the first clear reference to a Sol-Invictus celebration found in the ancient Roman data comes from Julian the Apostate in approximately A.D. 362 (*The Works of Emperor Julian*, 357).

Since the Gospels provide no date for the birth of Jesus and most biblical scholars believe that the event occurred sometime in the spring (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromaties*, 1.21.146),<sup>56</sup> any proposed particular parallel featuring this date rings hollow. Other, less controversial examples

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<sup>56</sup> It is unlikely that shepherds would have been out in the fields at night with their sheep had it indeed been the end of December in Bethlehem.

of deliberate borrowing have to do with the use of holy water and of incense in worship, the use of wedding rings, or the dedication of places of worship to saints.<sup>57</sup>

There is also the issue of shared linguistic assets. Words such as *light, darkness, life, death, spirit, word, love, believing, water, bread, clean, birth*, and *children of God* can be found in nearly any religion. Although the basic vocabulary is as ubiquitous as religious practice per se, such terms frequently have very different referents and are laden with diverse meanings as one moves from one religious tradition to another. The fact that Horus was called the “Son of the Father” or the Iranian version of Mithras as the “light of the World” or the labeling of Krishna as a “Shepherd God” is simply not crucial. Each such case would need to be examined to see whether the underlying concepts in fact suggest “striking” parallels. For example, application of the title “light of the world” to the Persian deity Mithras can more plausibly be traced to a Jewish causal background than to a pagan, Persian one:

Jewish literature was generous with the title “light of the world,” applying it to Israel, Jerusalem, the patriarchs, the Messiah, God, famous rabbis and the law (cf. 1:4–5); but always it refers to something of ultimate significance. One of the most spectacular celebrations of the Feast of Tabernacles involved torches that lit up the city; this feast, along with Hanukkah (10:22), was thus known for splendid lighting. That Jesus offers his

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<sup>57</sup> A practice explicitly lifted from the non-Christian practice of pagan temples being given titles connected to the gods worshiped therein. This practice was adopted by Christians to highlight the triumph of Christianity in the Roman milieu.

light to the whole world, to all the nations, may suggest an allusion to Isaiah 42:6  
(Keener, 1993:285).

In the case of the appellation “Shepherd God,” not only was Jesus never called exactly this,<sup>58</sup> but “shepherd” had disparate underlying meanings when applied, respectively, to Krishna and to Jesus. Krishna *actually was portrayed as a shepherd/cow-herd* in some of the narratives, while Jesus, as far as we know, was a carpenter by trade. The term “Shepherd God” in his case (or whatever approximation for it might have been used) symbolically pointed to his Davidic lineage of messianic royalty—a substantial “underlying” conceptual difference (Ibid., 290; *Word Biblical Commentary*, 1989, John 10:1-42).

Religious terms and concepts like *god, divinity, savior, salvation, life, sin, impurity, afterlife, faith*, etc., also represent shared vocabulary spanning cultures. They are not “owned” by pre-Christian pagan religions, pre-Christian Judaism, or post-Constantine Christendom. Every culture and religion has had to clarify what exactly was being asserted when implementing shared vocabulary. Some generic religious language seems to have been, in fact, a shared sociolinguistic asset. As long as the one implementing the phraseology qualified its use to avoid the possibility of misleading neophytes, there seems to have been no reason to either condemn or consign those drawing on this elementary reservoir with plagiarism or illegitimacy.

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<sup>58</sup> Jesus is called the “good Shepherd” (John 10:11), the “great Shepherd” (Hebrews 13:20), and the “chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4)

Since we are dealing with the codification of an antecedent oral tradition, questions of expression also warrant brief comment. Even if there is limited interpretational latitude with regard to authorial locution, the possibility of the emotional reaction, or perlocution, being symmetrical in Christian and pagan narration on common themes is really a non-issue.

“Dependence” or “genetic relationship” is different from “influence” or “contribution” in terms of a matrix out of which particular vocabularies are delineated.<sup>59</sup> John Oswalt states,

Here we come to the vital philosophical distinction between “essence” and “accident.” When we analyze an object, we try to determine which of its characteristics are “essentials” and which are “accidentals.” If you remove an essential feature, the thing will cease to be itself; but if you remove an accidental, there will be no change in the object’s essential being. So with humanity, hair is an accidental, while self-consciousness is an essential (2009, introduction).

All of this is to point out that, while Christians certainly lifted terminology and used existing ideas in their expressions and explanations, no religion begins in a cultural vacuum. I will analyze in the forthcoming chapters the contention of strong genetic relationships between the character Jesus and characters described, respectively, in the Greco-Roman religious milieu whose similarities have garnered the attention of certain scholars. The two main qualifiers I wish to express are: (1) A mild form of cultural assimilation and shared vocabulary was common for early Christians (as was, indeed, to be expected of *any* religion in any period). The shared

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<sup>59</sup> One can define dependence in two basic ways—positing A is a *necessary* condition for B or positing that A is a *sufficient* condition for B.

vocabulary and forms were incidental, if not accidental; what was essential was the new way in which they demarcated the shared concepts and the basis on which they justified the new imputation of meaning. (2) Conscious adoption of pagan ideas by Christians was conspicuous in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.; however, that practice should not be uncritically read back in to the tradents<sup>60</sup> during the formative years of Christianity.

### **2.6.2 What Will Not Be Pursued**

I will not be foreclosing on the question of whether the Gospel narratives belong to the genre of mythology. Genre identification will not result from this analysis; the aim will be one of establishing a more reliable evaluative process for indirectly determining a possible stream of authorial causation.<sup>61</sup> Whether or not one believes that the Gospel accounts are myths or inspired history, the hope is that both parties can benefit from this analysis. I will refrain from a plenary sociocultural analysis or of consideration of the question of the penetration of these pagan traditions in the first-century Jewish Palestinian community, though I will tangentially comment on these issues. I will lay aside arguments for the alleged quality and quantity of the manuscript evidence that undergirds the Gospels, as well as the rest of the New Testament, and decline to highlight the Gospels' possible connection to history via archaeology and how this compares to the general absence of these features in mythic tales.

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<sup>60</sup> "Tradents" is a term for the individuals that were the first generation who were there with the teacher himself while he lived and taught. These were followers or disciples or students under a teacher in the ancient world that carried the widest and strongest conceptual capital from their teacher to be passed orally to others.

<sup>61</sup> This is not to say that there will not be genre implications derived from my investigation.

I will not attempt to demonstrate that historicalized fiction as a literary type was an atypical ancient authorial endeavor, nor will I debate whether the Jewish term “resurrection” significantly demarcates this particular concept from a pagan returning from death idea. I will only briefly discuss that the early Christian church was overtly anti-syncretistic and that the religion from which it was birthed, Judaism, was known for its general commitment to exclusivity and faith-based recalcitrance (Boyd and Eddy, 2007:91-132; Evans, 2006:112, 114).

In addition, I will refrain from presenting data connected with the scholar Gerhard Kittel, who affirmed the utter absence of cultic iconographic data associated with dying and rising motifs in first-century Palestine (1937:133-68). Neither will I take up the argument defended by scholars such as Julius Müller (1844:26), H. J. Holtzmann (1910:465), and the Roman historian A. N. Sherwin-White (1963:186-93), citing the lack of sufficient time and space with regard to this thesis for a core of historic facts about an individual to be overtaken by legendary accretion with regard to codification of the Gospel narratives.<sup>62</sup> Finally, I feel it prudent not to engage in an

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<sup>62</sup> Sherwin-White claims that even two generations represent too short a time frame to allow legend to replace a core of historical fact. Julius Müller put the anti-myth argument this way: “One cannot imagine how such a series of legends could arise in an historical age, obtain universal respect, and supplant the historical recollection of the true character [Jesus] . . . if eyewitnesses were still at hand who could be questioned respecting the truth of the recorded marvels. Hence, legendary fiction, as it likes not the clear present time but prefers the mysterious gloom of gray antiquity, is wont to seek a remoteness of age, along with that of space, and to remove its boldest and most rare and wonderful creations into a very remote and unknown land” (A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, Clarendon, 1963, 186-93). Julius Müller challenged his nineteenth-century contemporaries to produce a single example anywhere in history of an outstanding myth or influential legend arising around a historical figure and being generally believed within thirty years after that figure’s death. No one has ever answered him. (Heinrich Julius Müller, *The Theory of Myths in Its Application to the Gospel History Examined and Confuted*, London: John Chapman, 1844, 26). Holtzmann is referenced by Gresham Machen in his *History and Faith* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1916) p. 5, originally in *The Princeton Theological Review*, Vol. 13, 1915, 337-350, as admitting that “for the rapid apotheosis of Jesus as it appears in the epistles of Paul he was able to cite

ancillary sociocultural analysis of the impact of these Gospel stories in comparison to any other mythic product, in any era, as such an endeavor would itself require a dissertation-length investigation to execute adequately.

### **2.6.3 Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter has been to introduce the reader to the various attempts to establish and investigate the strong homogeneity thesis. I did not undertake an evaluation of the attempts to underwrite this thesis, as so many others have done so already. I did attempt, first, to respond to the claim that some prominent early Christian leaders (Tertullian, Justin) were committed to the strong homogeneity thesis. I then highlighted Celsus' use of the strong homogeneity idea in challenging the validity of Jesus' ministry and resurrection and cited Dupuis and Frazer as major earlier proponents of that position. I also considered the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (the History of Religions School) approach to investigation of the Jesus traditions and the use of strong homogeneity as a methodological control, though many of the presuppositions common to this era of scholarship have long been abandoned.

I ask the reader to take note of the researchers Metzger, Mettinger, and Alsup and their common claims about the lack of source data, as well as of the methodological shortcomings common in the works of those who find pagan comparisons to Jesus fruitful.

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no parallel in the religious history of the race" (in Holtzmann, *Protestantische Monatshefte*, iv, 1900, pp. 465ff., as well as in *Christliche Welt*, xxiv, 1910, column 153).

Our subsequent investigation will attempt to consider the critics' suggestions, relying on the common framework of evaluation used by respected academics for the purpose of making similar and accepted pairings of ancient data. I will proceed in the following chapter with Richard Carrier's proffered exemplar of strong homogeneity, Zalmoxis. Following that I will endeavor to exemplify the method I offer to address the strong homogeneity question, a method I will explicate and discuss in the penultimate chapter.



## Chapter Three

### Zalmoxis and Jesus

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

#### 3.1.2 Richard Carrier

#### 3.1.3 Carrier Examined

#### 3.1.4 Mircea Eliade and Later Interaction

#### 3.2.1 Herodotus' *Histories*

#### 3.2.2 Description of Zalmoxis

#### 3.2.3 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event

#### 3.2.4 Strabo's *Geographica*

#### 3.2.5 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event

#### 3.3.1 The Similarities

#### 3.3.2 The Differences

#### 3.3.3 Scholars' Position

#### 3.3.4 Conclusion

### Σάλμοξιν/Zalmoxis

#### 3.1.1 Introduction

Here I begin the analytic section of this thesis. I intend to utilize the proposed method in an attempt to provide what has been missing in other published comparisons, using the pagan exemplar of Zalmoxis in comparison to Jesus and focusing specifically on the death and return

events. The question I intend to answer is: What are the source data, parallels, and divergences between Zalmoxis and Jesus of Nazareth with regard to the topics of death and return? Further, I intend to lead the reader to evaluate, by way of my method, whether Zalmoxis was a likely candidate for authorial borrowing by the Jesus tradents. Thus, we now transition from an attenuated history of the strong homogeneity position in scholarship to an attempt to use my new approach to display the superiority of the proposed methodology over former evaluative attempts of this type. We will take a pagan religious figure offered by those who subscribe to strong homogeneity and run the comparison through the eight steps: (1) find a concrete example offered by scholars; (2) gather and present all of the relevant original source data; (3) narrow the focus, and then check for (4) competition, (5) chronology, (6) word and event similarity/difference, (7) number and quality of similarities, and (8) centrality of the event in question.

The Thracian deity Zalmoxis will be our first character to analyze in relation to Jesus' death and resurrection events. Little is known of Zalmoxis, though he is briefly mentioned in various ancient texts spanning millennia. There is some evidence that Zalmoxis might have been an actual historical figure in ancient times, one who was eventually deified and worshipped in various cities in Thrace.

### **3.1.2 Richard Carrier**

Richard Carrier is a North American scholar who holds a doctorate in Ancient History from Columbia University. Carrier is a self-proclaimed naturalist who is motivated by a desire to undermine Christian monotheism; a major contributor to "The Secular Web," one of the most

visited atheistic websites available; and a past participant in numerous debates over the validity and warrant of Christianity (Carrier 2001). Carrier has authored numerous books (*Proving History: Bayes' Theorem and the Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 2012; *Sense and Goodness without God*, 2005; *Not the Impossible Faith*, 2009; *Why I Am Not a Christian*, 2011; *Hitler Homer Bible Christ*, 2012; *The Christian Delusion*, 2010; and *The End of Christianity*, 2011), some of which specifically attack the texts and theology related to Jesus of Nazareth. Carrier asserts that the Jesus stories and subsequent Christian tradition were likely derived from an amalgam of predominantly Greco-Roman mythic and cultic ideas.<sup>63</sup> "Apart from fundamentalist Christians," Carrier has expansively asserted, "all experts agree the Jesus of the Bible is buried in myth and legend" (2012:9). He states elsewhere,

There is as far as I have seen nothing significant about Christianity that was novel: everything of importance had precedents in other religions, pagan or Jewish, and can easily be explained as a syncretic combining of numerous different ideas into one ("Osiris and Pagan Resurrection Myths: Assessing the Till-McFall Exchange," 2012).<sup>64</sup>

Carrier's position is nuanced with regard to this issue, so as to carefully circumvent the scholarly excesses common to this kind of comparative enterprise. Carrier goes out of his way to remind

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<sup>63</sup> He also entertains the idea of Jesus' nonexistence historically. This position motivated the University of North Carolina's New Testament skeptic Bart Ehrman to write a book emphatically denying this level of skepticism concerning Jesus (*Did Jesus Exist?* 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Richard Carrier, "Osiris and Pagan Resurrection Myths: Assessing the Till-McFall Exchange," [http://www.frontline-apologetics.com/Carrier\\_on\\_Osiris\\_.html](http://www.frontline-apologetics.com/Carrier_on_Osiris_.html) accessed April, 2012.

those who look to him for information that he does not endorse the hasty parallel constructions and presentations of his less adroit or amateur academic contemporaries publishing on the subject (Carrier, 2003). Following is a review of a debate concerning pagan influence and Christianity from Carrier's website:

*'New Testament writers borrow[ed] the resurrection concept from myths.'* That is an over simplification on two counts. On the one hand, whether Christians did get the idea from some particular religion or religions is not something we can likely ever know; rather, what is significant is that the idea was 'in the air' and thus not novel. A skeptic might ask why a God would enact a plan of salvation that assembles syncretically the ideas of false religions actively practiced at the time. Such a syncretic assembly is the hallmark of human invention, not divine plan. On the other hand, it is quite easy (and has happened again and again) for a religious movement to unconsciously adopt, and in the process mold and transform, a popular notion in the surrounding culture. Rather than conscious borrowing, the existence of potent ideas in the broader culture will affect what people expect, what they believe to be possible, and how they will interpret strange events or escape a psychological crisis. The first Christians may have had no idea of the influence of pagan ideas on their interpretation of the events surrounding and following the death of their beloved leader (Carrier, 2002).<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> The crucial issue is the strength and number of similarities vis-à-vis the differentiation in which a method is vital, as opposed to a bald assertion. Carrier goes on to posit that differences aren't enough to disprove, minimally, influence from one culture to another, that "differences carry little weight," and that "we cannot dismiss obvious similarities simply because there are differences," though, again, he offers no method for discerning the weight and importance of difference versus similarity. Numerous pages on Carrier's website contain lists of "interesting

The way in which Carrier has framed the point here makes it nearly impossible to rationally assess his position. Disabling an individual from checking a claim by placing the critical idea under the heading of “complexity,” labeling key ideas as being “in the air,” claiming “unconscious adoption,” or undertaking an effort to avoid “oversimplification” tends to insulate the claim from either scrutiny or verification. If the first Christians might not have been able to identify the true sources of conceptual inspiration, what hope do we have to do so in our era? Does a traumatized disciple unconsciously adopt a, say, *Promethean idea* in his redactive description or wholesale creation of Jesus’ “life”? If we should not directly compare this to the available Promethean accounts, then what is the point of the claim? Carrier’s position seems too vague to be of use as an explanatory construct for Gospel authorship or the salient features of the subsequent tradition. It is exceedingly difficult to accurately assign psychological motivations in the present, much less to unconscious motivations in the distant past.

Even if one happens to be correct with regard to motivation, avoidance of the genetic fallacy is the next analytic hurdle to overcome.<sup>66</sup> As far as syncretism being a “hallmark of human invention” is concerned, this claim misses the point. All religious traditions will have contact points—hence the adjectival appellation “religious.” The key is not simple novelty being a lone justifier for a possible divine source but rather the balance between novelty and similarity. Are

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similarities” between Jesus and pagan heroes/gods

([http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard\\_carrier/improbable/crucified.html#1.2](http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/richard_carrier/improbable/crucified.html#1.2)). Although he prudentially stops short of identifying these parallels ideas as having been directly lifted and incorporated by the Gospel writers, he presents no dissimilarities and offers little context for assessment; additionally, he explicates no methodology.

<sup>66</sup> Carrier does have a body of literature bypassing the authorial motivation arguments and critiquing the other independent rationale for Christianity.

there common features one would expect to have been shared between Christianity and pagan traditions? Are there distinctive features that are present in one tradition but absent in the other? How do we measure the strength of the similarities presented? How does dissimilarity affect the connection proposed? From whence are we deriving our information? Attempting to answer these questions must be an endeavor in which we participate in order to rationally adjudicate on the position offered here by Carrier. Carrier nevertheless provides examples of possible exemplars that could have contributed to this common stock of ancient religious ideas that renders the Christian narratives banal and mundane by comparison.

Concerning Zalmoxis in particular, Carrier comments,

The only pre-Christian man to be buried and resurrected and deified in his own lifetime, that I know of, is the Thracian god Zalmoxis (also called Salmoxis or Gebele'izis), who is described in the mid-5th-century B.C.E. by Herodotus (4.94-96), and also mentioned in Plato's *Charmides* (156d-158b) in the early-4th-century B.C.E. According to the hostile account of Greek informants, Zalmoxis buried himself alive, telling his followers he would be resurrected in three years, but he merely resided in a hidden dwelling all that time. His inevitable 'resurrection' led to his deification, and a religion surrounding him, which preached heavenly immortality for believers, persisted for centuries (Carrier, 2003).

Carrier has made it exceedingly clear that he in no way believes that the Gospel authors had Herodotus or Xenophon open at their side at the editing table. He is also not claiming that Zalmoxis serves as a lone inspiration for the later, primarily oral traditions of the Gospels. However, he is offering a basic example of the archetype or theme he has affirmed for

consideration, as well as highlighting what he perceives to be shared linking points between Zalmoxis and Jesus.

Carrier, elsewhere assuming theme and exemplar, concludes thusly:

So the idea of ‘physical resurrection’ was popular, and circulating everywhere.

Associating Jesus with this trend would have been a very easy mistake to make. Since religious trust was won in those days by the charisma of speakers and the audience’s subjective estimation of their sincerity, it would not be long before a charismatic man, who heard the embellished accounts, came into a position of power, inspiring complete faith from his congregation, who then sought to defend the story, and so began the transformation of the Christian idea of the resurrection from a spiritual concept to a physical one—naturally, calling themselves the “true church” and attacking all rivals, as has sadly so often happened in history (2006b).

Concerning the matrix into which early Christian missionary activity thrust itself, Carrier has this to say: “. . . for their chosen target audience: the disgruntled, anti-elitist masses, who were awash with stories of revived corpses and resurrected god-men appearing on earth.” (2006a).

### **3.1.3 Carrier Examined**

It is clear that Carrier takes an inductive approach to expressing his contention, as is to be expected from a professional historian. One can assemble a careful syllogism based on what Carrier has here asserted:

Premise #1: Scholars without theological commitments overwhelmingly assume that the Gospels belong in the genre of mythology.

Premise #2: The ancient world abounded in examples of dying and rising deities and sacred persons.

Premise #3: The strongest example of just such a character is Zalmoxis (as represented by Herodotus).

Premise #4: Ancient people were desperate and gullible enough to sometimes come to believe in the actuality of such legendary events.

Conclusion: A salient feature of the Jesus tradition is another instantiation of these ancient socioreligious patterns/phenomena that are not to be confused with historical data.

I want to challenge both the validity of this syllogism and the truth of particular premises within it (its soundness). Even if one grants premises one through four, the transition to the conclusion falls prey to the genetic fallacy, in that citing how an idea came to be believed or its possible origination does not deal with the reasons directly related to the contention or position itself.<sup>67</sup>

Describing how an idea originated or developed and mapping the psychological advance of a belief from nascent motivation to collective epistemic position bypasses crucial work in

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<sup>67</sup> When it comes to the question of the New Testament data, the issues would include (a) whether there are good arguments for a higher power / supernatural “being” or entity? (b) methodology for assigning warrant to historical claims; (c) text availability and trustworthiness; (d) alternative hypotheses to explain what is historically accepted; (d) scholarly consensus related to the issues; (e) genre assignment for the texts in question; and (f) comparison to ancillary ancient texts.



evaluation. This fallacy confuses plausibility with credibility; an idea I promote could be true even if my motivation is questionable or the development/transmission is in some way illegitimate. As C. S. Lewis famously notes, “One must first show *that* someone has gone wrong before you start explaining *why* they have gone wrong” (Lewis, 1970:272-73). To be fair, Carrier does attempt to interact with a number of ideas directly related to the truth of Christianity (historical, textual, theological, and philosophical) in many of his publications and writings. Additionally, genetic fallacy arguments tend to be open to reversal, as one could cite psychological motivation(s) and questionable ideological transmission to discount the counter position assumed by the interlocutor.<sup>68</sup>

Further, simply because narrated events are to some degree similar does not mean that one is a false, unhistorical “copy” of the other; this is true even if the similarity is in some ways rather strong. Two examples unrelated to the topic at hand are worth noting:

1. The remarkable similarity between the fictional ship named the “Titan” and the actual voyage vessel dubbed the “Titanic.” *The Wreck of the Titan* was a novella written by author Morgan Robertson in 1898 in which he described the largest cruise liner ever constructed that was billed to be “unsinkable” (Heyer, 1995); the fictional liner had too few lifeboats and capsized in the North Atlantic after departing from Newfoundland headed to America. Robertson described more than half of the passengers on his fictional “Titan” dying by drowning and/or freezing, and the event happening approximately four-hundred miles from the ship’s point of

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<sup>68</sup> With reference to Carrier specifically, one could cite numerous psychological motives for discarding the Gospel data, as well as reference an Enlightenment paradigm in conceptual development.

departure. Robertson's descriptions of the length—800 feet—and speed—22½ knots (Mowbray, 1912)—of his "Titan" are extraordinarily similar to the future specs of the Titanic, though Robertson authored this work years before the construction of the actual ship. Yet no one believes that the Titanic tragedy is a work of fiction or an event borrowed from the fiction lodged in the collective literary consciousness of some Europeans. Nor does anyone posit an "enormous ship sinking tragedy" archetype stretching back to Melville in an effort to explain the Titanic reports.

2. The striking similarities between American presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy.<sup>69</sup>

These two examples make clear that despite vivid and numerous descriptive parallels one can clearly establish the independence in both instances of each of the two entities being linked. It is important not to confuse analogy with genealogy.

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<sup>69</sup> Abraham Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846 and John F. Kennedy in 1946. Lincoln was elected President in 1860 and Kennedy in 1960. The names "Lincoln" and "Kennedy" each contains seven letters. Each president lost an immediate family member while living in the White House. Both were shot in the head on a Friday, and both were assassinated by a Southerner. Each was succeeded by a Southerner with the surname Johnson. Andrew Johnson, who succeeded Lincoln, was born in 1808 and Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded Kennedy, in 1908. Both assassins were known by all three of their names (first, middle, and last), in each instance comprised of 15 letters in total. Booth ran from the theater and was caught in a warehouse, while Oswald ran from a warehouse and was caught in a theater. John Wilkes Booth was born in 1839 and Lee Harvey Oswald in 1939. Booth and Oswald were both assassinated before their trials could take place (Lattimer 1980:11).

If one nonetheless grants this syllogism as valid, there is the issue of the soundness of the proffered premises. Premise number one is untrue, *most* scholars in the relevant fields of study do not assume the Gospel stories to be mythological in genre (Evans, 1993:3-36; Sanders, 1985:2; Lewis, 1947:117-20, 1967:154-55, 209; Keener, 2009:76, 587 n. 144; Hurtado, 2016; Burridge, 2004; Hemer, 1989:412; Aune, 1981:48, 1987:46-76; Ehrman, 2011:62-5, 1999:231; Perkins, 2007:2-11; Dunn, 2005:167-84; Talbert, 1977, 1993:714-15; Stanton, 1989:50-64, 1992:63-4; Schuler, 1982; Sherwin-White, 1963:191; Bornkamm, 1956:23, 185; Macquarrie, 1967:177-80; Grant, 1977:199-200; Oswalt, 2009; Byrskog, 2000; Bauckham, 2008a; Stulhmacher, 1991:26-52; Wright, 1992:65-72; Ytterbrink, 2004; Farmer, 1982:21; Pannenberg, 1968:91; Flusser, 2007:2; Harvey, 1982; Westminster Dictionary of NT Literature and Rhetoric 2003:204; Waltke, 2016:542-43). Even to take a scholar in a related field (Classics or Ancient History) and pose this question might result in a hasty plenary categorization response because of the supernatural elements present in the biblical texts. However, nuancing is imperative as one would sweep away most of the studied content of ancient history if one reshuffled their stratification to disinclude as historical any account that featured any supernatural description, belief or overture.

Premise #2 is also likely invalid. In Carrier's 2012 book *Proving History* he provides a four-step checklist for anyone engaging in serious historical research. These four suggestions are excellent and standard. In Carrier's fourth step he rightly highlights that one stands on the shoulders of other experts who have conducted a comparable level of analysis before, and their conclusions should guide one's eventual contribution to the field. The professional scholars who have done substantive antecedent academic work in the area of the ancient world have concurred with

strong consensus *against* the idea of a *common ancient dying and rising / returning / resurrecting being* constituting a ubiquitous “theme” or cross cultural “motif” (Bruce, 1968; Burkert, 1979, 1987; Fear, 1991; Smith, 1987; Mettinger, 2001; Anon., 1999; Muller, 1999; Powell, 2001; Ribichini, 1985; Wagner, 1965; Will, 1975).<sup>70</sup>

The theme or archetypal motif here presupposed is vital to the Gospel critique offered by Carrier, but his position on this score runs unmistakably counter to the professional consensus. This is not to say that scholarly consensus automatically confers warrant or that there are not a few scholars in the field who disagree,<sup>71</sup> but by his own expressed methodology this lack of agreement should be a significant negative, if not a defeater for his proposed connection between the Gospels and pagan religio-mythical literature. Carrier also seems undaunted by the fact that arguments that assume dying and rising themes of this type and press the same type of application are rare among professional classicists and historians.

Carrier also obscures his methodology for arriving at his conclusion by generalizing the death and resurrection motif into ubiquitous social cognition. The reader is provided no means of following his line of reasoning. For example, how much strength are we to assign to the Zalmoxis or Romulus tales with regard to contributing to this purported motif? What are we to do with collections of dissimilar data? What would it take to falsify his hypothesis? Which stages are

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<sup>70</sup> Bart Ehrman in his 2012 work *Did Jesus Exist?* (New York: Harper One, 2012) concurs with regard to the consensus challenge of the dying and rising theme/motif in the ancient world.

<sup>71</sup> Even T. N. D. Mettinger, an outstanding scholar of the ancient world who *disagrees* with the consensus against thematic recognition, clearly does not follow Carrier in application of this theme to provide an authorial explanation for the salient features of the Jesus accounts.

most crucial? Is there thematic ancient data that collectively challenges his preferred, presupposed schema?

Premise #3 will be analyzed in this chapter.

Premise #4 is true but falls prey to both the *ad hominem* and composition fallacies. To label the majority of people living in ancient times gullible is a classic example of what C. S. Lewis termed “chronological snobbery”—taking one’s own limited current perspective and vilifying someone else’s past limited perspective. It is tendentious and *ad hominem* to assume a lack of insight and cognitive capability based on relatively fewer discoveries on which to rely; in fact, one could make a case that some of humanity’s finest thinkers and scholars lived before the advent of the Industrial Revolution. Ignorance, misinformation, and lack of discernment in people can be found in any age. Just because some ancients and moderns are sometimes given to gullibility and ignorance does not require or even allow one to assume that all were so limited. Similarly, one is not logically compelled to assume that the tradents of the Jesus movement were paragons of this culturally deleterious noetic phenomenon. It is true that the author of the Gospel of Mark tends to paint an unflattering portrait of the disciples’ intuitive and investigative prowess, but this does not warrant the assertion that all of the disciples of Jesus were intellectually disabled, prone to gullibility, or locked in to superstitious modes of evaluation. Perhaps some of them were more like Lucian than the credulous ancient audience he boasts about manipulating (Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*).

### 3.1.4 Mircea Eliade on Later Interaction

The University of Chicago's Mircea Eliade, a respected professor of religious history, has done the most thorough and extensive work on Zalmoxis to date (Eliade, 1975, 1972) and has commented on a connection between Christianity and Zalmoxan devotion:

So we may think that the beliefs concerning Zalmoxis were absorbed, and radically transformed, by Christianity. It is difficult to conceive that a religious complex centered on the hope of obtaining immortality after the example—and through the mediation—of a god whose structure is mystagogic could have been ignored by the Christian missionaries. Every general aspect of Zalmoxan religion, combined with Pythagoreanism, encouraged a comparison between this religion and Christianity. Beliefs like asceticism and mystical erudition (astrology, healing, theurgy, etc.) encouraged a comparison with Christianity (1975:297).

For professor Eliade the general similarities among asceticism, astrology, healing, and theurgy encourage a link between devotion to Zalmoxis and the Christian tradition that eventually displaced it in Thrace. Eliade carefully and clearly qualifies his remarks here (*Ibid.*), though he does believe that these few shared ideas made Zalmoxan devotion more apt for eventual dissolution; he warns readers: "This does not mean as some Romanian authors maintain, that Zalmoxis had anticipated or prepared the way for Christianity" (*History of Religions, "Zalmoxis,"* 297, footnote 135). Notice here that Eliade is not positing a genetic relationship from Zalmoxis to Jesus, or the probable contribution of Zalmoxan ideas to nascent Christianity. Rather, Eliade is

calling attention to what he perceives to be significant similarities between a later Christian tradition and the indigenous Zalmoxan cult in Thrace.

Thus, Carrier posits a qualified thematic position and offers a possible example of particular borrowing at the inception of the Jesus accounts, with Zalmoxis as his antecedent primary exemplar. Eliade offers a conceptual cultic linkage between ideas associated with Zalmoxis and late-second-century Christianity. So Carrier and Eliade, though with different aims, are here in broad agreement that there is a significant relationship to be fruitfully examined between Jesus and Zalmoxis.

Non-Christian apotheosis interpretive grids employed to designate the resultant high Christology of ancient Christians to common evolutionary trends in pagan proclamation and devotion must bypass better explanatory schemas,<sup>72</sup> ignore chronological difficulties,<sup>73</sup> disregard demographics,<sup>74</sup> and avoid the manifold critical distinctives that remove the salient features of the Jesus accounts and development from the trajectory of the host culture(s). This chapter will provide additional, critical descriptive differentiation from within the primary Zalmoxis and Jesus narratives themselves, with the aim of aiding the reader in the evaluative process.

### **Sources featuring Zalmoxis**

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<sup>72</sup> Namely, second-temple Jewish interpretive schemas.

<sup>73</sup> Examples like extremely early Christ veneration and the lack of mystery religion proliferation in first-century Palestine could be offered.

<sup>74</sup> Against the thesis that first-century Galilee was teeming with Gentiles who provided a powerful pagan religious influence, see Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee*, SNTSMS, 118 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Zalmoxis was an ancient Thracian character who was eventually deified by those with whom he had contact. The primary and earliest source for the sparse details available for Zalmoxis is the Greek historian Herodotus of Halicarnassus (ca. 484 to 425 B.C.).<sup>75</sup> A later parallel account is given by the Greek geographer and philosopher Strabo (ca. 60 B.C. to A.D. 20), in which minor details are added to Herodotus' Zalmoxis account. Herodotus reports the religious practices of the defeated Thracian people and critically examines the collective Thracian perspective on immortality (Herodotus, *Histories*, 4.94.1). Though Herodotus waives the question of Zalmoxis' empirical presence on the historic landscape (4.94.2), he does comment on some of the reasons for Zalmoxis devotion among the people of the Getae.<sup>76</sup> The offerings of these two ancient historians comprise the sparse overall data we have on Zalmoxis.

Step two of my method is to present, in context, the closest degree to which we can approximate source data for the exemplar offered. Before I provide the actual data, a word about the authors and their works will provide enhanced comprehension of the data utilized.

### **3.2.1 Herodotus' *Histories***

Since there are only two major sources of Zalmoxian data, it will be profitable to provide a brief background of the broader works in which this data is found. Herodotus' *Histories* chronicles the

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<sup>75</sup> Halicarnassus is known today as a region of southwestern Turkey. There is an indirect, brief reference to Zalmoxis in Plato's dialogue titled *Charmides* 156d, written some thirty years after this Herodotus entry. In this work Socrates meets "one of the physicians of the Thracian king Zalmoxis, who are said to have been able to make one immortal." <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0176%3Atext%3DCharm.%3Asection%3D156d>, Accessed online May, 2013 from *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, Vol. 8 translated by W.R.M. Lamb (London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1955).

<sup>76</sup> That is, modern day northern Bulgaria and/or southern Romania.



various accounts related to the struggle between the encroaching Persian military force and the Greek military resistance. This is the only work Herodotus is known to have produced. His work is thematically diverse, containing commentary on politics, geography, religion, culture, and mythology.<sup>77</sup> Herodotus stated that he was aiming at producing a chronicle comprehensive in scope (μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα τε καὶ θωμαστά, τὰ μὲν Ἕλλησι τὰ δὲ βαρβάροισι ἀποδεχθέντα)—as overstated as it was ambitious. *Histories* is voluminous, but much crucial martial history of the conflict between Persia and its subjects and of other Greek wars was bypassed (Anon. 1999). Herodotus' investigations contain some inaccuracies, but he got much correct as well.

Reporting between the 480s and the 420s B.C., Herodotus framed the annexing Persians as individuals looking to enslave the world and, conversely, the Greeks as having been committed to freedom, intellect, and cultural advancement (6.106; 7.8).<sup>78</sup> Herodotus presented himself as one who had traveled extensively and was giving various descriptions of his encounters. His work was in the first person,<sup>79</sup> and he often intentionally informed the reader of his sources, as well as of his opinion concerning their veracity (1.5.3; 4.5.1; 4.5.3; 4.8.2; 4.11.1; 4.13.2; 4.16.1; 4.30.1; more specifically for our purposes, 4.95.2, 4.96.1-2, et al.).<sup>80</sup> Although Herodotus

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<sup>77</sup> Nine volumes survive for reference. The books were eventually given the names of muses for reference.

<sup>78</sup> Herodotus used the term “barbaros” (“barbarians”) approximately 200 times in books six through nine, 170 of those with reference to the Persian Xerxes and his advancing armies.

<sup>79</sup> There are four first-person pronouns in our brief section.

<sup>80</sup> I do not believe that this amounts to a third-person omniscient narrative indicator but rather that it is a simple case of Greek cultural exceptionalism. There are moments at which Herodotus seems to have hinted at this work being a collective undertaking (4.17.2).

admittedly did not take part in the events he was observing or describing in the narrative, his position of Greek cultural superiority is writ large in *Histories*.

Herodotus did discuss many myths but tended to relay them in a way considerably differentiated from the manner in which he reported local fauna, custom, or topography. The question of accuracy seems not to have plagued Herodotus, to the extent that some modern scholars have labeled him “father of lies” (Burn, 1972:10; Pipes, *Herodotus, Father of History, Father of Lies*, 2009:iv; Hartog, *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History*, 1988:xviii).<sup>81</sup> Already in the ancient world there seems to have been disdain for Herodotus’ work: Thucydides (ca. 465-395 B.C.) pejoratively refers to him as a “story-teller”<sup>82</sup>; Cicero (ca. 106-43 B.C.) calls him a purveyor of “numerous legends/fables” (*innumerabiles fabulae—De Legibus*, 1.5) yet also praises him; and in the second century A.D. Harpocration authored a work titled *On the Falsity of Herodotus’ History*. Plutarch’s (ca. A.D. 45-120) *De Herodoti Malignitate* is a lengthy polemic featuring a multitude of positions contra Herodotus.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> The most trenchant modern critic of Herodotus is the German scholar Detlev Fehling, who in his book *Herodotus and his ‘Sources’: Citation, Invention and Narrative Art* (Francis Cairns, 1989) argues that most of Herodotus’ investigations were either imaginary or copied. No other ancient historian accuses Herodotus of wholesale fabrication; see Alan Cameron and Charles Anthon, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*, Oxford University Press, 2004, 156.

<sup>82</sup> Thucydides’ works lack many of the entertaining authorial digressions that recur in Herodotus’ volumes (Robin Waterfield trans. and Carolyn Dewald, ed., *The Histories by Herodotus*, University of Oxford Press [1998], xviii.).

<sup>83</sup> Many scholars believe that this unpopular work by Plutarch is childish, brash, and unfair in its assessment of Herodotus (*The Ancient World*, vol. 25-26, Ares Press [1994], 191, 194). Other notable critics include Aristotle, Hecataeus, and Josephus. For commentary on the collection of critical ancient texts against Herodotus’ veracity, see Jessica Priestly, *Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 213-17. See also Alan Cameron and Charles Anthon, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 156.

Conversely, many details in Herodotus have been strongly corroborated, which positively underwrite his retaining the title “the father of history.” Despite his various errors, Herodotus is still generally placed in the triad of first-ranking ancient historians, alongside Thucydides and Xenophon (Marincola, 2001:59). Fordham University’s resource for ancient history concludes concerning the Herodotus veracity debate:

Perhaps it may be sufficient to remark that the defects in question certainly exist, and detract to some extent from the authority of the work, more especially of those parts of it which deal with remoter periods, and were taken by Herodotus on trust from his informants, but that they only slightly affect the portions which treat of later times and form the special subject of his history. In confirmation of this view, it may be noted that the authority of Herodotus for the circumstances of the great Persian war, and for all local and other details which come under his immediate notice, is accepted by even the most skeptical of modern historians, and forms the basis of their narratives (*Ancient History Sourcebook*, Fordham University).<sup>84</sup>

Herodotus does explicate his general investigative method in book II of *Histories*; his three controls were his own autopsy / first-hand experience (μέχρι μὲν τούτου ὄψις τε ἐμὴ καὶ γνώμη καὶ ἱστορίη ταῦτα λέγουσα ἐστί), oral tradition (τὸ δὲ ἀπὸ τοῦδε Αἰγυπτίου ἐρχομαι λόγους

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<sup>84</sup> See also *The Encyclopedia Britannica* 2014: “Herodotus’ work is not only an artistic masterpiece; for all his mistakes (and for all his fantasies and inaccuracies) he remains the leading source of original information not only for Greek history of the all-important period between 550 and 479 bc but also for much of that of western Asia and of Egypt at that time.” Accessed online March 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/263507/Herodotus/3173/Conclusion>.

ἐρέων κατὰ τὰ ἤκουον), and *doxa* (δοξα) or *gnome* (γνώμη)—reasoning (2.99.1). He does not follow this methodological pattern with his numerous battle descriptions, which are thin on tactics, overall detail, and topography (Marincola, *Greek Historians*, 2001:36).

The section of book IV (*Melpomene*) with the Zalmoxis data is contextually set in Herodotus' lengthy description of Scythia,<sup>85</sup> in which he comments extensively on Scythia's geography and sociology, as well as on its primary adversary in the Persian king Darius. The latter portion of book IV chronicles Darius' efforts to conquer the Scythians (4.83.1—4.205.1). Herodotus does warn the reader that much of his information concerning the Scythians comes from hearsay evidence (4.16), and he never makes the claim that he himself has been in Scythia or the Black Sea region.<sup>86</sup> It is in this context that Herodotus provides the following information crucial to our comparative undertaking.

The following lengthy quote is taken from Herodotus' *Histories* 4.94.1—4.96.2:

ἀθανατίζουσι δὲ τόνδε τὸν τρόπον: οὔτε ἀποθνήσκειν ἑωυτοὺς νομίζουσι ἰέναι τε τὸν ἀπολλύμενον παρὰ Σάλμοξιν δαίμονα: οἱ δὲ αὐτῶν τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον ὀνομάζουσι Γεβελείζιν: [2] διὰ πεντετηρίδος τε τὸν πάλω λαχόντα αἰεὶ σφέων αὐτῶν ἀποπέμπουσι ἄγγελον παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν, ἐντελλόμενοι τῶν ἂν ἐκάστοτε δέωνται, πέμπουσι δὲ ᾧδε: οἱ μὲν αὐτῶν ταχθέντες ἀκόντια τρία ἔχουσι, ἄλλοι δὲ διαλαβόντες τοῦ ἀποπεμπομένου παρὰ τὸν Σάλμοξιν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ τοὺς πόδας, ἀνακινήσαντες αὐτὸν μετέωρον ρίπτουσι

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<sup>85</sup> This is the ancient kingdom located to the north of and extending east from the Black Sea.

<sup>86</sup> In contrast to his repeated assertions of having actually visited Egypt and conducted personal interviews there, combined with firsthand observations (2.2-3; 2.12; 2.99; 2.123, et al.).

ἐς τὰς λόγχας. ἦν μὲν δὴ ἀποθάνη ἀναπαρεῖς, τοῖσι δὲ ἴλεος ὁ θεὸς δοκέει εἶναι: [3] ἦν δὲ μὴ ἀποθάνη, αἰτιῶνται αὐτὸν τὸν ἄγγελον, φάμενοί μιν ἄνδρα κακὸν εἶναι, αἰτιησάμενοι δὲ τοῦτον ἄλλον ἀποπέμπουσι: ἐντέλλονται δὲ ἔτι ζῶντι. [4] οὗτοι οἱ αὐτοὶ Θρηϊκὲς καὶ πρὸς βροντὴν τε καὶ ἀστραπὴν τοξεύοντες ἄνω πρὸς τὸν οὐρανὸν ἀπειλεύουσι τῷ θεῷ, οὐδένα ἄλλον θεὸν νομίζοντες εἶναι εἰ μὴ τὸν σφέτερον. ὡς δὲ ἐγὼ πυνθάνομαι τῶν τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον οἰκεόντων Ἑλλήνων καὶ Πόντων, τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον ἐόντα ἄνθρωπον δουλεῦσαι ἐν Σάμῳ, δουλεῦσαι δὲ Πυθαγόρῃ τῷ Μνησάρχῳ, [2] ἐνθεῦτεν δὲ αὐτὸν γενόμενον ἐλεύθερον χρήματα κτήσασθαι μεγάλα, κτησάμενον δὲ ἀπελθεῖν ἐς τὴν ἐσωτοῦ. ἅτε δὲ κακοβίων τε ἐόντων τῶν Θρηϊκῶν καὶ ὑπαφρονεστέρων, τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον ἐπιστάμενον δίαιτάν τε ἰάδα καὶ ἡθεα βαθύτερα ἢ κατὰ Θρηϊκῶν, οἷα Ἑλλήσι τε ὁμιλήσαντα καὶ Ἑλλήνων οὐ τῷ ἀσθενεστάτῳ σοφιστῇ Πυθαγόρῃ, [3] κατασκευάσασθαι ἀνδρεῶνα, ἐς τὸν πανδοκεύοντα τῶν ἀστῶν τοὺς πρώτους καὶ εὐωχέοντα ἀναδιδάσκειν ὡς οὔτε αὐτὸς οὔτε οἱ συμπόται αὐτοῦ οὔτε οἱ ἐκ τούτων αἰεὶ γινόμενοι ἀποθανέονται, ἀλλ' ἤξουσι ἐς χῶρον τοῦτον ἵνα αἰεὶ περιεόντες ἔξουσι τὰ πάντα ἀγαθὰ. [4] ἐν ᾧ δὲ ἐποίηε τὰ καταλεχθέντα καὶ ἔλεγε ταῦτα, ἐν τούτῳ κατάγειον οἴκημα ἐποιέετο. ὡς δὲ οἱ παντελέως εἶχε τὸ οἴκημα, ἐκ μὲν τῶν Θρηϊκῶν ἠφάνισθη, καταβάς δὲ κάτω ἐς τὸ κατάγειον οἴκημα διαιτᾶτο ἐπ' ἕτεα τρία: [5] οἱ δὲ μιν ἐπόθεόν τε καὶ ἐπένθεον ὡς τεθνεῶτα. τετάρτῳ δὲ ἔτει ἐφάνη τοῖσι Θρηϊξί, καὶ οὕτω πιθανὰ σφί **ἐγένετο** τὰ ἔλεγε ὁ Σάλμοξις. ταῦτα φασὶ μιν ποιῆσαι. ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτου καὶ τοῦ καταγαίου οἰκήματος οὔτε ἀπιστέω οὔτε ᾧ πιστεύω τι λήην, δοκέω δὲ πολλοῖσι ἕτεσι πρότερον τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον γενέσθαι Πυθαγόρῳ. [2] εἴτε δὲ ἐγένετό τις Σάλμοξις ἄνθρωπος, εἴτ' ἐστὶ δαίμων τις Γέτησι οὗτος ἐπιχώριος, χαίρετω. οὗτοι μὲν δὴ τρόπῳ

τοιούτω χρεώμενοι ὡς ἐχειρώθησαν ὑπὸ Περσέων, εἶποντο τῷ ἄλλῳ στρατῷ.

(Herodotus, *Historiae*, 1987)<sup>87</sup>

4.94.1: Their belief in their immortality is as follows: they believe that they do not die, but that one who perishes goes to the deity Salmoxis, or Gebeleizis, as some of them call him.

4.94.2: Once every five years they choose one of their people by lot and send him as a messenger to Salmoxis, with instructions to report their needs; and this is how they send him: three lances are held by designated men; others seize the messenger to Salmoxis by his hands and feet, and swing and toss him up on to the spear-points.

4.94.3: If he is killed by the toss, they believe that the god regards them with favor; but if he is not killed, they blame the messenger himself, considering him a bad man, and send another messenger in place of him. It is while the man still lives that they give him the message.

4.94.4: Furthermore, when there is thunder and lightning these same Thracians shoot arrows skyward as a threat to the god, believing in no other god but their own.

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<sup>87</sup> Herodotus of Halicarnassus, *Histories*, 4.94.1-4.96.2, in *Herodoti Historiae*, Vol. I, "Libros I-IV Continens," ed. by Haiim B. Rosen (B.G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1987), 403-405.

4.95.1 I understand from the Greeks who live beside the Hellespont and Pontus, that this Salmoxis was a man who was once a slave in Samos, his master being Pythagoras son of Mnesarchus;

4.95.2 then, after being freed and gaining great wealth, he returned to his own country. Now the Thracians were a poor and backward people, but this Salmoxis knew Ionian ways and a more advanced way of life than the Thracian; for he had consorted with Greeks, and moreover with one of the greatest Greek teachers, Pythagoras;

4.95.3 therefore he made a hall, where he entertained and fed the leaders among his countrymen, and taught them that neither he nor his guests nor any of their descendants would ever die, but that they would go to a place where they would live forever and have all good things.

4.95.4 While he was doing as I have said and teaching this doctrine, he was meanwhile making an underground chamber. When this was finished, he vanished from the sight of the Thracians, and went down into the underground chamber, where he lived for three years,

4.95.5 while the Thracians wished him back and mourned him for dead; then in the fourth year he appeared to the Thracians, and thus they came to believe what Salmoxis had told them. Such is the Greek story about him.

4.96.1 Now I neither disbelieve nor entirely believe the tale about Salmoxis and his underground chamber; but I think that he lived many years before Pythagoras;

4.96.2 and as to whether there was a man called Salmoxis or this is some deity native to the Getae, let the question be dismissed.

### 3.2.2 Description of Zalmoxis

This account by Herodotus is set within his broader description of Darius' conquests of the lands between the Aegean and the Black Seas. In the section here under consideration the narrative style is typically Herodotean first person, yet the sources are somewhat mixed. In this account Herodotus flows between what seems to be third-person reports from possible participants (4.94.1-4) and third-person reports from other Greeks, perhaps in contact with the Thracians (4.95.1-5). In either case he is the observer/reporter and not in any sense a participant.

Herodotus is an outsider reporting the religious rituals of the people of the Getae and attempting to explain the origin of Thracian devotion to a person named Zalmoxis (Salmoxis or Gebeleizis).<sup>88</sup> Herodotus singles out the inhabitants of Getae for exposition, both for their resistance to Darius and for their peculiar beliefs<sup>89</sup> and attempts to explain the belief in immortality. Within his descriptions the participants are anything but stock characters; they are rounded, as Herodotus routinely elucidates both virtue and vice, and this passage is no different.

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<sup>88</sup> Gebeleizis/Γεβελείζις, mentioned only here in all of extant literature; this name is not indirectly referenced secondhand, either (Eliade, *History*, 283-84).

<sup>89</sup> Herodotus frequently comments on cultic, honorific, and ceremonial activity; see 4.26.1-2; 4.62.3-4.71.2; 4.74.1-4.75.3.



That these particular Thracians believed in immortality is documented in the works of other ancient authors.<sup>90</sup> After describing other groups in the area that surrendered to Darius without fighting, he narrows his focus to a group of Thracians from a town called Getae who did resist (4.93.1).<sup>91</sup> He then offers a brief ritual description of human sacrifice, with reference to Zalmoxis as a deity (4.94.1-3). There is a consistent linking of human sacrifice with barbarity in ancient Greco-Roman literature (Rives, 1995:66-7). In point of fact, the Hebrew, Roman, and Greek cultures shared the common view that any culture that partook in human sacrifice was irrefutably “other”—at moral variance with the culture describing it—an activity indicating cultural inferiority to those reporting this practice (Ferguson, 1980:1151; see also Rives, 1995:73-4, 83). Thus, Herodotus did not likely intend this cultic information to be an endorsement of the Getaens’ moral or martial superiority.

It is in this initial description of the ritual/sacrificial practice that there is some possible confusion regarding “immortality” (ἀθανατίζουσι 4.94.1); the term cannot here mean what it traditionally does: resistance to / avoidance of empirical cessation of vital function. The Thracians would purportedly send a message to Zalmoxis by way of a human messenger, who would ostensibly deliver it only *if he died* (ἀποθάνη) as the result of being tossed upon spears

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<sup>90</sup> The emperor Julian relays that the people of the Getae believe that they do not die but are rather taken to Zalmoxis (*De Caes*, 327D).

<sup>91</sup> Herodotus closes this section as he opens it, reiterating that though the people of Getae resisted they were quickly subdued (4.97.1; cf. 4.93.1). Thracian skill in combat is well attested by foreigners acquainted with them. Virgil called Getae “the martial land of Rhesus” (*Georgics*, 4.462), and Ovid referred to the Getaen inhabitants as “savage Getae who do not fear the power of Rome” (*Epistulae ex Ponto*, 1.2.81-82). Dio Chrysostom labeled them “the most warlike of all barbarians” (*Discourse*, 36.4), while Lucian depicted them as invulnerable (*Icaromenippus* 16).

(4.94.3—ἀνακινήσαντες ἀνακινήσαντες αὐτὸν μετέωρον ρίπτουσι ἐς τὰς λόγχας, ἦν μὲν δὴ ἀποθάνη ἀναπαρεῖς, τοῖσι δὲ ἴλεος ὁ θεὸς δοκέει εἶναι). This declaration could plausibly have been an authorial device used by Herodotus to demonstrate the foolishness of the Thracians for believing that they could achieve “immortality” by killing one of their own to get a message to the deity Zalmoxis. Conversely, it could have been an exposition of a shared belief between Herodotus’ own people and the mysterious individuals of Getae, a conceptual bridge between the two disparate cultures. The idea of immortality being defined not as avoidance of death / biological cessation but rather as the everlasting nature of the soul in the afterlife has behind it a formidable Greek tradition (Robinson, 2015). If this, or something similar to it, is the notion, the sacrificial ritual was not incongruent; however, Zalmoxis’ teaching and return event in the narrative then become more challenging to interpret.

Herodotus goes on to inform the reader that the Thracians expressed their allegiance to Zalmoxis by firing an arrow into the sky, apparently to demonstrate their disdain for any rival god (4.94.4—ἀπειλέουσι τῷ θεῷ, οὐδένα ἄλλον θεὸν νομίζοντες εἶναι εἰ μὴ τὸν σφέτερον), the present storm being a phenomenological signal of the presence of an alternative deity.<sup>92</sup> This was likely not a reversal of the ubiquitous ancient belief in polytheism but perhaps a local, ritual-specific henotheism. Rituals in other cultures similar to the firing of arrows into a storm were always adversarial in intent (Eliade and Trask, 1972:283).

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<sup>92</sup> Some dispute this interpretation. Eliade maintains that this negativity was directed not toward rival gods but toward demons or negative forces of evil/darkness that threatened their provincial deity (*History*, 284), though this perception seems to be at odds with a straightforward take on the passage; οὐδένα ἄλλον θεὸν νομίζοντες εἶναι εἰ μὴ τὸν σφέτερον.

It is fair to say that Herodotus' tone was hostile here. Herodotus offered a direct deleterious description of these Thracians; in addition, there are indirect pejorative connotations within this passage suggesting his attitude toward them. He evidently felt the need to remind the reader that the people he was attempting to analyze were intellectual inferiors (ὑπάφρων/ὑπαφρονεστέρων—"somewhat stupid/foolish"; 4.95.2) and then offered a naturalistic interpretation of what the Thracians took to be a supernatural return of Zalmoxis (4.95.4-5).

Herodotus seems to have been framing his subsequent explanation about Zalmoxis' fame using mildly pejorative terms and crediting Zalmoxis' notoriety to superior cunning. He identified a report about Zalmoxis' early life as a slave to the famous Greek philosopher Pythagoras (ca. 570–495 B.C.) and credited superior Greek influence on Zalmoxis that seems to have been made possible—or at least enhanced the credibility of—Zalmoxis' manipulation of the Thracians. Herodotus included the subtle reminder that the very being the "poor and stupid" Thracians took to be a deity was in reality a former Greek slave (δουλεῦσαι 4.95.1). These particular literary decisions by Herodotus resonate with the theme and tone of Greek superiority woven throughout his *Histories*.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> There are some scattered references to Egyptian superiority that qualify this ethnocentrism in book two (2.4; 2.19-20; 2.35; 2.58; et al.).

### 3.2.3 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event (Herodotus)

Herodotus begins by telling the reader that once Zalmoxis was free he returned to his native territory and began entertaining and feeding (πανδοκεύοντα/εὐωχέοντα) the aristocracy of the Getae (4.95.3).

Zalmoxis is reported to have taught his fellow countrymen that their own lives and those of their descendants would in some sense be extended, positively bypassing death (4.95.3—βοῦτε οἱ ἐκ τούτων αἰεὶ γινόμενοι ἀποθανέονται). The traditional denotation of immortality, then, is here expressed by Zalmoxis via Herodotus, although the more common alternative definition of immaterial extension beyond the grave was possibly in view. The straightforward construction here is to avoid death and instead come into a new, blissful state of being (ἔξουσι τὰ πάντα ἀγαθὰ)—to avoid expiry. This is presented as arrival at a state of satisfaction and the enjoyment of wonderful things, placing this teaching by Zalmoxis in the category of eschatology in that it offers assurances of arrival and of satisfaction in a blissful habitat that transcends our space-time continuum.

It is conceivable that Pythagoras and, by extension, his followers—believed in the transmigration of the soul (Greek μετεμψύχωσις, euphemistically termed “reincarnation”).<sup>94</sup> This suggestion

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<sup>94</sup> Aulus Gellius reports that in one of Pythagoras' earlier lives he was an attractive courtesan (*Noctes Atticae*, 4.11). Xenophanes of Colophon asserted that Pythagoras could hear the voice of his dead friend in a dog's barking (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 8.36), and Heraclides Ponticus claimed that Pythagoras stated that he had experienced at least four previous lives that he could recall in great detail (Ibid., 8.3-4). Although these are all extremely late accounts, they might reach back to the authentic Pythagoras.

will remain speculative, however, as the Pythagoreans were known for their secrecy.<sup>95</sup> Still, this is a possible Pythagorean interpretation of immortality that might explain Herodotus' attempt to link these two figures. We will return to this below.

We are not told by Herodotus exactly how Zalmoxis came to be regarded as a teacher (ἀναδιδάσκειν) among his countrymen, other than that he had been influenced by Pythagoras. He conceivably procured political influence by way of his parties or banquets. Herodotus informs the reader that Zalmoxis went on to busy himself constructing an underground chamber (ἐν τούτῳ κατάγειον οἴκημα ἐποιέετο). It is likely that Herodotus was not culling information from his own investigation here but was rather relying on Greek informants from Pontus (4.95.1).<sup>96</sup> He reports Zalmoxis to have hidden himself (ἐκ μὲν τῶν Θρηίκων ἠφανίσθη) from his countrymen for three years (ἔτεα τρία). It is possible that Herodotus was conscientiously linking this occurrence to parallel events represented only in later data concerning Pythagoras.<sup>97</sup>

The text gives no indication of an actual death event being faced by Zalmoxis; he is clearly and simply presented as having been in hiding. Although Herodotus uses ἠφανίσθη (*haphanisthe*—“he made himself unseen” / “vanished”), he follows this with καταβάς δὲ κάτω ἐς τὸ κατάγειον

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<sup>95</sup> Porphry, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. 4.95.5.

<sup>97</sup> In a late, fragmentary Diogenes account we are told that Pythagoras retired into an underground hiding area and had his mother hold a letter he had memorized and then sealed. Tertullian indicates that Pythagoras remained in hiding for seven years, after which he returned and was able to recite the letter's contents without opening it, convincing all present that he had returned from Hades. This was first reported more than a millennium after Pythagoras had lived (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.41; Tertullian, *De Anima*, 28).

οἶκημα διαιτᾶτο ἐπ’ ἔτεα τρία. Herodotus was clear, then, that a living Zalmoxis “went down” (καταβὰς δὲ κάτω) into his prepared subterranean area (κατάγαιον οἶκημα). It is certainly logical to infer that this activity on Zalmoxis’ part was intended to trick his constituents into belief.

After this departure from public view, the Thracians mourned Zalmoxis as though he were dead, longing for his return (οἳ δὲ μιν ἐπόθειον τε καὶ ἐπένθειον ὡς τεθνεῶτα). Eliade calls this an “incomprehensible” suggestion proposed by Herodotus, in that the Thracians had no dead body to verify their presumption (Eliade and Trask, 1972:259). Then, in the fourth year, Zalmoxis is reported to have reappeared to them.<sup>98</sup>

ἐφάνη (*ephanae*)—“to appear”—is the Greek word here used by Herodotus for Zalmoxis’ re-emergence from the underground chamber. Herodotus leaves it to the reader to rationally surmise that this return by Zalmoxis from seclusion back to public life constituted a resurrection or return from the dead from the standpoint of the Zalmoxian faithful. There is no correction offered by Zalmoxis for those who had formerly mourned and erroneously thought him dead, nor is there extensive commentary about those to whom he reappeared. Herodotus simply states that this was the manner in which Zalmoxis persuaded (καὶ οὕτω πιθανά σφι ἐγένετο τὰ ἔλεγε ὁ Σάλμοξις) his ostensibly less astute Thracian followers to believe in his ideas concerning immortality.

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<sup>98</sup> Eliade also sees the ritual connection here, as the sacrificial messenger is sent every five years and Zalmoxis returns in the fourth, after three years have passed (284).

When one looks at the events narrated by Herodotus concerning this Thracian devotion, it seems evident that he wanted to cast doubt upon this particular immortality belief. Although he did initially compliment the people of Getae (Θρηίκων έόντες άνδρηιότατοι καί δικαιοτάτοι— “brave and just/noble/judicial”), he nonetheless did not hesitate to remind the reader that they were quickly defeated and subdued by Darius (4.93.1, αύτίκα έδουλώθησαν). His explanation of this Thracian belief begins with reference to a ritual of human sacrifice; while this is not surprising, given Herodotus’ evocative penchant, it nonetheless reflected poorly on the central Zalmoxan tenet of avoidance of death or a redefinition of afterlife.

Herodotus moves to an uncomplimentary, though possibly accurate, comment concerning the Thracians’ base economic and epistemic status (4.95.2) and from there describes how easily they were taken in by their passions and mistakenly led to believe in this doctrine.<sup>99</sup> He seemingly punctuates his disdain with a refusal to either decry or reinforce the narrative he has just delivered and closes out the section with a reaffirmation of the Getaen loss and subsequent servitude to Darius (4.97.1). Herodotus refers to the people Zalmoxis is said to have influenced as “leaders” who were “first among the townsfolk” (άστῶν τοὺς πρώτους); it is likely that he won over commoners as well, but this is not directly stated in the Herodotus account.

Strabo adds an aristocratic and common element to the collective identity of those who were initially influenced by Zalmoxis, adding detail about how they came to be so affected. However, it could be that the ritual description is a straightforward prelude for the Zalmoxis discussion.

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<sup>99</sup> Although no commentary is provided, this account could also have been included to explain how Zalmoxis had come to be regarded as a deity.

Perhaps the sacrifice event was something Herodotus had heard about or observed and that he now sought to explain.

The general lack of chronology, while common in ancient accounts, muddies interpretation here.

After the ritual description the logical shift is to *recall*: if the subsequent brief description of Zalmoxis' life events (slave, travel, homecoming, teaching, descent, reveal) was contemporaneous with the ritual Herodotus reports, the Getae sacrifice loses significance, as one could have, *in person*, given Zalmoxis any message they pleased. This speculation brings another dissonant possibility to the fore: if Zalmoxis was no longer directly or empirically available to the devout Thracians—perhaps he did indeed live long before Pythagoras, as Herodotus and others suggest—was he dead? If that was the case, how is one to interpret this against the backdrop of his central teaching of immortality?

Again, it is possible that “immortality” here refers to the common post-death, everlasting soul doctrine and that Herodotus was attempting to explain how these dim-witted Thracians had come to share this doctrine with his own cognitively advanced culture. If this is the case, the key contention is the beneficent and bountiful locale for those dead. This demarcates the belief enough to be worthy of comment by Herodotus, for although soul continuance was a general Greek notion, the idea that the afterlife environment would inevitably be positive was not.

This interpretation still admits difficulties: (1) The people of Getae were likely neither annihilationists nor atheists and, as such, were in no need of being convinced of immaterial



continuance / afterlife existence.<sup>100</sup> (2) The Pythagorean link would have been unnecessary, as the soul-continuance belief itself could have been the common bond or sufficient explanation to credit the shared belief. (3) Zalmoxis' descent and return events in the story make little sense unless we are supplied evidence of Zalmoxan afterlife / post-ascent commentary—which we are not; the description is too thin and too short for this extrapolation. (4) Neither the soul nor its symmetrical linguistic assets are present in this account of Herodotus.<sup>101</sup> (5) This interpretation makes little sense of the later Strabo elaboration.

Perhaps this particular immortality doctrine derived from Zalmoxis is supposed to be interpreted as a metempsychosis or reincarnation belief, though there is nothing in this text to lend itself to such an interpretation (Eliade and Trask, 1972:266). In point of fact there is no death, no other form that Zalmoxis even pretends to take, and no discussion of the soul or any hint of Zalmoxis undergoing any sort of change. Thus, the possibility of coupling this immortality teaching with any concept known of Pythagoras is frustrated. Only the most meager data could commend this metempsychosis interpretation via Herodotus' placing of Zalmoxis in contact with Pythagoras.

Herodotus seems to have been doubtful of or at least ambivalent about Zalmoxis' actual existence, as well as of the details he had been supplied and was now disseminating surrounding Zalmoxis' life (4.96.1-2). Herodotus ends this section disregarding the importance of Zalmoxis' authentic historic existence vis-à-vis local deity (εἴτ' ἐστὶ δαίμων τις Γέτησι οὗτος ἐπιχώριος),

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<sup>100</sup> Both the particular Getae religious practice here related and the Thracian commentary from others belie this notion.

<sup>101</sup> Words and phrases like *Hades*, *Zeus*, *rest*, *wander*, *Elysium Fields*, *Styx*, *Charon*, *family members*, *Olympus*, et al.

adding that if Zalmoxis did live it was likely before Pythagoras' time (4.96.1-2, δοκέω δὲ πολλοῖσι ἔτεσι πρότερον τὸν Σάλμοξιν τοῦτον γενέσθαι Πυθαγόρῳ).<sup>102</sup> This affirmation introduces the possibility of this text presenting data that was possibly more than a century old. While this was not a lengthy chronological gap for the ancient world, this idea, coupled with Herodotus' hesitation to reveal a conclusion regarding Zalmoxis' actual existence or to identify his nonlocal sources (4.95.1, 4.95.5), leads one to conclude that he was not utilizing tier one in his methodology.<sup>103</sup> That he was instead relying on tier two, a likely mix of foreign and local traditions, is clear. Herodotus' prevarication on Zalmoxis' identity and the authenticity of the events he had just reported indicates that his sources were likely not themselves eyewitnesses. Given that this is the earliest source for Zalmoxis, in tandem with the issues raised above, the conclusion that this text is not strong substantiation for the empirical, historic existence of a person named Zalmoxis is warranted. Conversely, Zalmoxis is mentioned in numerous sources post Herodotus, many of whom describe him initially as a human being, generally affirming him to have been a venerated former slave.<sup>104</sup> A deification process is possible, but this is not a conclusion derived directly from any of the texts in question.

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<sup>102</sup> The argument for an actual historic person named Zalmoxis who was a slave of Pythagoras and attempted to introduce Pythagorean politics into Dacia is taken up by Edward L. Minar in his work *Early Pythagorean Politics in Practice and Theory* (Baltimore, 1942), 6. Mircea Eliade found his arguments wanting (Eliade and Trask, *History of Religions* vol. 11, number 3 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972], 259).

<sup>103</sup> That is, his own experience or first-person perspective (autopsy). The lack of detail and the brevity of the Zalmoxis commentary also support this conjecture.

<sup>104</sup> The Pagan references include the following: Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica (Library of History)*, 1.94.2 - "among the people known as the Getae who represent themselves to be immortal Zalmoxis . . ."—as well as Porphyry, *Vita Pythagorae (Life of Pythagoras)*, 14-5—"14. Pythagoras had another youthful disciple from Thrace. Zalmoxis was so named because he had purportedly been born wrapped in a bear's skin—in Thracian called Zalmus.

The manner in which Herodotus juxtaposes the data has instigated a debate among scholars.

Herodotus was offering a euhemerist explanation for the Getiaen belief in question—this former

teacher / public figure / leader is now seen to be a deity residing in an esoteric afterlife

environment. Does this indicate that these particular Thracians were monotheistic? As we have

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Pythagoras loved him and instructed him in sublime speculations concerning sacred rites and the nature of the gods. Some say this youth was named Thales and that the barbarians worshipped him as Hercules. 15. Dionysiphanes says that he was a servant of Pythagoras, who fell into the hands of thieves, by whom he was branded. Then when Pythagoras was persecuted and banished (he followed him), binding up his forehead on account of the scars. Others say that the name Zamolxis signifies a stranger or foreigner.” Jordanes (*Jordanes, De origine actibusque Getarum [The Origin and Deeds of the Getae/Goths]*, 39) comments: “To return, then, to my subject. The aforesaid race of which I speak is known to have had Filimer as king while they remained in their first home in Scythia near Maeotis. In their second home, that is in the countries of Dacia, Thrace and Moesia, Zalmoxes reigned, whom many writers of annals mention as a man of remarkable learning in philosophy.” And Iamblichus remarks (*Iamblichus, De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum [On the Egyptian Mysteries]*, 30): “Nor need we specially admire those {above mentioned professional} legislators. Pythagoras had a slave by the name of Zamolxis, hailing from Thrace. After hearing Pythagoras’ discourses, and obtaining his freedom, he returned to the Getae, and there, as has already been mentioned at the beginning of this work, exhorted the citizens to fortitude, persuading them that the soul is immortal. So much so is this that even at present all the Galatians and Trallians, and many others of the Barbarians, persuade their children that the soul cannot be destroyed, but survives death, so that the latter is not to be feared, so that (ordinary) danger is to be met with a firm and manly mind. For instructing the Getae in these things, and for having written laws for them, Zamolxis was by them considered as the greatest of the gods.” Diogenes Laertius had this to say (*Diogenes Laertius, Vita Pythagorae [Life of Pythagoras]*, 4.93): “He had brothers, the eldest of whom was named Eunomus, the middle one Tyrrhenius, and a slave named Zamolxis, to whom the Getae sacrifice, believing him to be the same as Saturn, according to the account of Herodotus.” And Lucian of Samosata wrote (*Lucian of Samosata, Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα [True History]*, book 2): “To begin with, all the demi-gods, and the besiegers of Troy, with the exception of Ajax the Locrian; he, they said, was undergoing punishment in the place of the wicked. Of barbarians there were the two Cyruses, Anacharsis the Scythian, Zamolxis the Thracian, and the Latin Numa; and then Lycurgus the Spartan, Phocion and Tellus of Athens, and the Wise Men, but without Periander.” See also Lucian, *Zeus Tragoedus*, 42. Christian writers reference Zalmoxis as well. These include Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 4.94, where the reference is to human sacrifice; Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutatio Omnium Heresium (Refutation of All Heresies)*, 1.2.17 & 1.25.1—an interesting reference to the Celtic druids’ indebtedness to Zalmoxis for the transmission to them of Pythagorean mathematical principles; Origen, *Contra Celsus (Against Celsus)*, 2.55, 3.34, 3.54—Celsus compared Jesus’ resurrection to other reappearances in narrative history in an attempt to discredit the religion, with Origen defending the veracity of the Christian position; Eusebius of Caesarea, *De Laudibus Constantini (Praise for Constantine)*, 13.5—Zalmoxis is mentioned in the deploring of cultures that deify mere mortals; John Chrysostom, *De S. Babyla (Discourse on Blessed Babylas and Against the Greeks)*, 10—Chrysostom asserts that Zalmoxis’ exploits were fictional; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration*, 4.103—Gregory refers to Getaen human sacrifice, as well as to Zalmoxis’ firing arrows through a crowd; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Graecorum Affectionum Curatio (Cure of the Greek Maladies)*, 1.25—a quick reference to “Barbarian wise men” in which Zalmoxis is mentioned; Cyril of Alexandria in his response to Julian the Apostate, *Contra Julianum (Against Julian)*, 720 A5-B2 and 820 A-B—mentions Zalmoxis as a Pythagorean slave and notes the wide recognition of his uncommon barbarian wisdom. Of Cyril’s thirteen references to Zalmoxis there are seven clear references to his being a human being; two others are ambiguous, and the remaining four refer to him as a deity. Strabo and Plato also indicate that he was an actual human being.

seen above, there is a strong text tradition affirming the divine status of Zalmoxis alone, but in Herodotus' description of the sacrificial ritual customary pagan polytheism is affirmed.

Some have settled on a henotheistic or modified monotheistic interpretation of the religious commitments of the people of Getae (Treptow, 1992:7), while others have argued that Zalmoxis was a sky god or a deity related to the heavens or the stars and planets (Stoianovich, 1967:10).

This conclusion is derived from the arrow firing ritual reported by Herodotus, as well as from the later Strabo's remarks concerning Zalmoxis' perceived abilities.<sup>105</sup> Other scholars interpret Zalmoxis as having been a chthonic, infernal deity based on of his clear *descensus* (underground descent) and the connection of this event to the immortality doctrine (Eliade, 1972; Eliade and Trask, 1975:265).<sup>106</sup> Since there is such limited data in the passage under consideration, sufficient warrant for a conclusion is lacking. One way or another, the fealty to Zalmoxis evolved through the centuries, and there is no indication of common mythical or cultic motifs or connotations in the primary Zalmoxan texts. Whatever—or whoever—Zalmoxis was, he is neither associated with agricultural phenomena nor otherwise with sexual fertility, nor is he is overtly linked either to a creation event or to the planets, stars, sky, or earth.

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<sup>105</sup> See below.

<sup>106</sup> Eliade interprets this Zalmoxis data as signifying an initiatory ritual whereby the believer first descends and then ascends out of the chamber, representing allegiance to a belief in the positive continuation of the soul in its habitation beyond death. He affirms the supernatural *descensus* motif but repudiates the chthonic idea.

### 3.2.4 Strabo's *Geographica*

The mid-first-century B.C. writer/geographer/cartographer Strabo fills in some details supplementing Herodotus' Zalmoxis account. His massive work is titled *The Geography* or *Geographica* (Γεωγραφικά); all told, Strabo composed 17 books in which he offered commentary about physical geology and geography, as well as political sociology. Like Herodotus' work, his *Geography* is written from a first-person perspective, and there is a considerable amount of historic data in Strabo's work. Although he is not as widely read as Herodotus, most of Strabo's work is extant, and he provides useful insights into ancient culture. His commentary covers the territory from Britain (book IV) to Egypt (book XVII).

Strabo committed this extensive work to those who were noble and commended it as being given to concepts that were useful, memorable, and/or entertaining (1.22-23). He wanted to describe grand and crucial events and places and stressed his desire to deal with large, overriding issues—with wholes rather than with minutia (1.22-23). Unlike Herodotus, who frames his account by an approximate chronology of martial conflict among advanced civilizations, Strabo's *Geography* does not adhere to a thematic chronology, reading more like an encyclopedia than a narrative.

Detached, first-person description is Strabo's stylistic norm; as such, there is no climax. Neither is there discernable plot intensity or relaxation in this particular work. He does shift to third-person, as does Herodotus, when identifying a variety of his sources, but does not provide source assessment or commentary as often as Herodotus, though he does utilize this authorial device (7.3.4) variously in his work.

Successful, large cultures and the broad physical phenomena in which they lived and with which they interacted motivated Strabo's work. There is a bias for his Greek culture throughout *Geographica*, though this ethnocentrism is not as pronounced as it is in Herodotus. *Geography* was to be used either by those who would never visit or conversely, might one day arrive at one of the myriad places he describes.

Book VII of Strabo's tome is divided into seven chapters discussing north, east, and central Europe, respectively.<sup>107</sup> The first part of the book is devoted to cultural analysis and description of the inhabitants of Germania, with later sections discussing a variety of subjects related to the northeastern part of Europe. In chapter three of book VII Strabo embarks on a discussion about the Thracians of Getae, in which he quotes the thoughts of Menander of the Getae on marriage and the religious devotion of the Getaens (7.3.4). Relying on an unspecified source, Strabo goes on to comment exclusively about Zalmoxis and his exploits in Getae (7.3.5), after which he switches rather abruptly to a weighing of rival topographical descriptions (7.3.6).

The lengthy citation to follow comes from *Geographica* 7.3.5:

λέγεται γάρ τινα τῶν Γετῶν ὄνομα Ζάμολξιν δουλεῦσαι Πυθαγόρα καί τινα τῶν οὐρανίων παρ' ἐκείνου μαθεῖν, τὰ δὲ καὶ παρ' Αἰγυπτίων πλανηθέντα καὶ μέχρι δεῦρο: ἐπανελθόντα δ' εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν σπουδασθῆναι παρὰ τοῖς ἡγεμόσι καὶ τῷ ἔθνει προλέγοντα τὰς ἐπισημασίας, τελευτῶντα δὲ πεῖσαι τὸν βασιλέα κοινωνὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς

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<sup>107</sup> Chapters one and two deal with the people of Germania, while the remaining chapters, three through seven, focus on the geography and sociology of the land of the Balkans and the territory having access to the Black Sea.

αὐτὸν λαβεῖν ὡς τὰ παρὰ τῶν θεῶν ἐξαγγέλλειν ἱκανόν: καὶ κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν ἱερέα κατασταθῆναι τοῦ μάλιστα τιμωμένου παρ' αὐτοῖς θεοῦ, μετὰ ταῦτα δὲ καὶ θεὸν προσαγορευθῆναι, καὶ καταλαβόντα ἀντρῶδές τι χωρίον ἄβατον τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐνταῦθα διαιτᾶσθαι, σπάνιον ἐντυγχάνοντα τοῖς ἐκτὸς πλὴν τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ τῶν θεραπόντων: συμπράττειν δὲ τὸν βασιλέα ὀρῶντα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους προσέχοντας ἑαυτῷ πολὺ πλεόν ἢ πρότερον, ὡς ἐκφέροντι τὰ προστάγματα κατὰ συμβουλήν θεῶν. τουτὶ δὲ τὸ ἔθος διέτεινεν ἄχρι καὶ εἰς ἡμᾶς, αἰεὶ τινος εὕρισκομένου τοιούτου τὸ ἦθος, ὃς τῷ μὲν βασιλεῖ σύμβουλος ὑπῆρχε, παρὰ δὲ τοῖς Γέταις ὠνομάζετο θεός: καὶ τὸ ὄρος ὑπελήφθη ἱερόν, καὶ προσαγορεύουσιν οὕτως: ὄνομα δ' αὐτῷ Κωγαίονον ὀμώνυμον τῷ παραρρέοντι ποταμῷ. καὶ δὴ ὅτε Βυρεβίστας ἦρχε τῶν Γετῶν, ἐφ' ὃν ἤδη παρεσκευάσατο Καῖσαρ ὁ θεὸς στρατεύειν, Δεκαίνεος εἶχε ταύτην τὴν τιμὴν, καὶ πως τὸ τῶν ἐμψύχων ἀπέχεσθαι Πυθαγόρειον τοῦ Ζαμόλξιος ἔμεινε παραδοθέν.

In fact, it is said that a certain man of the Getae, Zamolxis by name, had been a slave to Pythagoras, and had learned some things about the heavenly bodies from him, as also certain other things from the Egyptians, for in his wanderings he had gone even as far as Egypt; and when he came on back to his home [land] he was eagerly courted by the rulers and the people of the tribe, because he could make predictions from the celestial signs; and at last he persuaded the king to take him as a partner in the government, on the ground that he was competent to report the will of the gods; and although at the outset he was only made a priest of the god who was most honored in their country, yet afterwards he was even addressed as god, and having taken possession of a certain cavernous place that was inaccessible to anyone else he spent his life there, only rarely

meeting with any people outside except the king and his own attendants; and the king cooperated with him, because he saw that the people paid much more attention to himself than before, in the belief that the decrees which he promulgated were in accordance with the counsel of the gods. This custom persisted even down to our own time, because some man of that character was always to be found, who, though in fact only a counsellor to the king, was called god among the Getae. And the people took up the notion that the mountain was sacred and they so call it, but its name is Cogaeonum, like that of the river which flows past it. So, too, at the time when Byrebistas, against whom already the Deified Caesar had prepared to make an expedition, was reigning over the Getae, the office in question was held by Decaeneus, and somehow or other the Pythagorean doctrine of abstention from eating any living thing still survived as taught by Zalmoxis.

### **3.2.5 Zalmoxis' Teaching and Event (Strabo)**

Strabo nowhere contradicts Herodotus and adds details to Herodotus' brief Zalmoxis account. There is no alternative title or name for Zalmoxis given here by Strabo, nor is there any reference to human ritual sacrifice. Strabo does not dispute the Pythagorean slave origin story for Zalmoxis; however, he adds that the primary teaching Zalmoxis received from Pythagoras was interpretation of the celestial bodies (τινα τῶν οὐρανίων παρ' ἐκείνου μαθεῖν). Strabo also reports Zalmoxis visiting Egypt and garnering insight there, as well as returning to Getae, where he was courted by the aristocracy, in particular in light of his ability to predict (προλέγοντα) events based on reading the sky. Strabo also claims that Zalmoxis endeavored to persuade the king of Getae to take him on in an advisory role; the king is reported to have complied, making



Zalmoxis a priest in the royal cult. Strabo attempts to explain the identity shift that occurred from the perspective of the people of Getae concerning Zalmoxis, who went from aiding in worship to eventually becoming an individual who was himself worshipped (τελευτῶντα δὲ πεῖσαι τὸν βασιλέα κοινωνὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς αὐτὸν λαβεῖν ὡς τὰ παρὰ τῶν θεῶν ἐξαγγέλλειν ἱκανόν: καὶ κατ' ἀρχὰς μὲν ἱερέα κατασταθῆναι τοῦ μάλιστα τιμωμένου παρ' αὐτοῖς θεοῦ).

Strabo was here concerned with explaining the deification of and ongoing devotion to Zalmoxis. It is important to remember that this account is exceedingly late, if Herodotus was correct about Zalmoxis having preceded Pythagoras (who lived in the sixth century B.C.). This relatively robust chronological distance between event and record would still have been the case, however, even if Zalmoxis happened to have been a contemporary of Herodotus. Strabo says that Zalmoxis “went away/withdrew” (χωρίον/ χωρέω), taking up secret residence in a cavernous structure (καὶ καταλαμβάντα ἀντρῶδες); he reports that only the king and his personal attendants knew of this or had any contact with Zalmoxis during this period of seclusion (σπάνιον ἐντυγχάνοντα τοῖς ἔκτος πλὴν τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ τῶν θεραπόντων).

Strabo provides the rationale for the king's compliance: Zalmoxis' notoriety was greater than that of the Getaen king, particularly in light of Zalmoxis' ability to discern and carry out the “will of the gods” (ὡς ἐκφέροντι τὰ προστάγματα κατὰ συμβουλήν θεῶν). Strabo comments on a tradition among the Getaens that had persisted for ages, relaying that there was a history behind the people gradually coming to deify the king's second rather than the king himself.

Strabo also incorporates an enigmatic expression suggesting that the people had come to believe that the mountain was sacred or holy (καὶ τὸ ὄρος ὑπελήφθη ἱερόν), a likely reference to

the cavern structure that Zalmoxis had prepared for himself. The statement closing out this particular description is one in which Strabo informs the reader that the Pythagorean vegetarian doctrine had held well after Zalmoxis' time (καί πως τὸ τῶν ἐμψύχων ἀπέχεσθαι Πυθαγόρειον τοῦ Ζαμόλξιος ἔμεινε παραδοθέν). There is no indication that Strabo was motivated to explain an immortality ideal among the Zalmoxan faithful in the Getae; consequently, he bypassed Herodotus' account of Zalmoxis' return among the Getaen citizens. Instead, Strabo alluded to a veneration of the mountain that had likely housed Zalmoxis during his three years of hiding.

There is no hint of criticism of the Getaens in this section of Strabo's work, nor is there a tacit hint at a possible collusion between the king and Zalmoxis; nothing underhanded is even suggested. There is no comment analogous to Herodotus' on ethical or martial qualities of the Getae vis-à-vis the neighboring Thracians, nor is there an indication of economic or cognitive disdain. We receive in Strabo a corroborative Zalmoxan account that is about 450 years removed from the earliest account available via Herodotus. If Strabo and Herodotus were correct about Zalmoxis having either been a contemporary of or of having lived prior to Pythagoras, this account is more than five hundred years after the life of the being in question. We glean details explaining Zalmoxis' rise to prominence upon returning home to Getae, learning that the king had been involved in his retreat from the public eye and that Zalmoxis had taught Pythagorean vegetarianism, along with immortality. This information will support our primary source for the activity of this deified Thracian hero.

### **3.3.1 The Similarities**

There are some commonalities between Jesus of Nazareth and Zalmoxis of Getae:

- (1) Both men were perceived as, minimally, more than human by their followers—Mark 1:1, 3:11, 4:41, 8:27–29, 9:2–10, 11:8–10, 13:26, 14:62, 15:38–39, 16:6–7; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:1–12, 6:67–69, 14:5–14, 20:26–28; Philippians 2:5–11; Colossians 1:15–20, 2:2–3, 9–10; 1 John 1:1–2, 5:20; Revelation 1:4–8, 12–18 (Bauckham, 2008a:23, 31, 207, 216–17, 235, 253; Ehrman, 2014; Meyer, 2002:157–58; Crossan, 1991:350–52; Habermas, 2003:10; Wenham and Blomberg, 1987:181–83; Evans, 2006; Pannenberg, 1968; Ludemann, 1995:103; Kee, 1990:62–3, 111; Hurtado, 2005:2, 5, 31–55, 69–70).
- (2) Both men spoke of the life to come (afterlife)—Matthew 19:29, 25:31–46; Mark 9:43–48, 10:29–30; Luke 16:19–31, 18:30, 20:27–40, 23:43; John 3:16, 36, 10:28, 11:25–26, 14:6, 17:2–3.<sup>108</sup>
- (3) Both were believed to confer immortality upon the individuals who displayed allegiance to them—Mark 13:13; Luke 20:24–36; John 1:12, 5:21, 14:6, 17:3; Romans 6:23, 10:9–10; Galatians 6:8; Ephesians 2:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; 2 Thessalonians 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 4:9–11 (Habermas, 2003; Andrews, 2014, ch. 3; Herron, 2000:90–3; Cullman, 1956:7–8; Badham and Badham, 1982:18–9, 23).
- (4) Both were influential teachers who had many followers—Matthew 13:34, 22:46; Mark 1:37–38, 45, 2:2, 3:7–10, 13–20, 4:1–2, 5:21, 6:1–2, 6b–7, 32–34, 54–55, 10:1; Luke 2:47, 4:14–15,

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<sup>108</sup> The apostle Paul uses one of two Greek words for “immortality”: *aphtharsia* (“not perishable,” “incorruptibility,” “immortality”) in Romans 2:7; 1 Corinthians 15:42, 50, 53–54; Ephesians 6:24; 2 Timothy 1:10, and *athanasia* (“no death,” “deathless,” “immortality”) in 1 Timothy 6:16.

31–37, 5:1, 17, 8:1-2, 40–44; John 6:60–71, 7:46, et al. (Bauckham, 2008b; Licona, 2010; Crossan, 1991, ch. 6; Bornkamm, 1960; Wright, 1992).

- (5) Both Jesus and Zalmoxis were believed by their followers to have died and then to have risen/returned from the dead—Matthew 27–28; Mark 15–16:9; Luke 23–24; John 19–20; 1 Corinthians 15 (Yamauchi, 1975:4-7; Ehrman, 1999:290; Fuller, 1965:142; Sanders, 1993:11, 14, 1996:17; Stuhlmacher, 1993:49; Marxsen, 1990:66; Funk, 1996:270; Grant, 1994:89, 96; Koester, 1982:84; Spong, 1987:68; Jackson, 1975:419-22; Robinson, 1977:124; Badham and Badham, 1982:24).

When studied in a more exacting fashion, one nevertheless finds that within each of these general similarities many divergent ideas emerge.

### **3.3.2 The Differences**

Differences include:

#### **(1) Deification**

Zalmoxis *came to be* considered deity, while there is little in the Gospels to commend the idea that Jesus adopted or attained his special and unique status. Even if one holds the belief that Jesus' followers conferred deity upon him long after he was gone as a developmental redaction (Ehrman, 2014; Moule, 1977), there are several other, more plausible speculations as to the background, motivation, and existential template that gave rise to this purported phenomenon concerning Jesus' identity other than those related to Zalmoxis. The University of North Carolina professor of New Testament Bart Ehrman posits antecedent Jewish beliefs,

specifically regarding angels, as the likely source for what he believes to have been a deification redaction applied to Jesus (Ehrman, 2014:44,61). The trajectory of contemporary Jesus research, from presupposition to conclusion, has emphasized the Jewish matrix in which Jesus operated.

According to Herodotus Zalmoxis engaged in an event that conferred deity status upon him, an event that was not in reality the supernatural occurrence it was perceived to be (*Histories* 4.95.4; *Geography* 7.3.5). There was no such event cited for Jesus by the tradents who framed the resurrection within an explanatory matrix of deceit and misunderstanding. Jesus' alleged special relationship to Yahweh in his Jewish tradition is also absent as a relational parallel for Zalmoxis, as there is no affirmation of a Thracian superior deity to which Zalmoxis was related, much less with which he identified.

When apotheosis or divinization occurred in pagan religious contexts, appropriation into an ever-expanding polytheistic matrix was the rule (Nock, 1933:13-26; Turcan, 2000; MacMullen, 1981; Stark, 2006:29-32). It was hardly ever the case that radical exclusivist positions and practices accompanied the new person or idol of veneration. For example, Roman emperor worship did not require renunciation of either the broader Roman pantheon or of specific non-Roman deities, as long as such veneration posed no threat to the perception of Roman cultural superiority and the implementation of Roman authority (Stark, 2006:81-8; Klauck, 2008:71-2).

Notice too a clear vector of long chronological development for the salient descriptions of cultic dedication to Zalmoxis. This developmental process seems to have been absent in the

unique, early Jewish-Christian converts' practice of worship of Jesus, which seems not to have been due to a bloated chronological process in conjunction with pagan neophyte influence on the nascent Christian movement (Hurtado, 2005:24-32; Hengel, 1983:30-47; Johnson, 2009:133-35; Moule, 1967:3, 13; Wright, 1996:30-4; Brown, 2009:62).

Denunciation on the social plane, along with persecution on the political plane by traditionally monotheistic Jews, constitutes yet another paradigmatic break from the various descriptions of Zalmoxis deification and subsequent cultic activity (Hurtado, 2005:31-58; Grant, 1987:9, 164; Grabbe, 2000:216-19; Johnson, 2009:133).

Herodotus also reports a conspicuous corporate expectation of Zalmoxis' immanent return, a shared emotion sustained throughout the three years Zalmoxis was purportedly in hiding (*Histories*, 4.95.5). In the case of Jesus first-century Jews would have had no general expectation of a recently murdered, cursed messianic pretender or, conversely, of the "true Messiah" of Israel returning individually from the grave (Jeremias, 1974:194, 2002:1-18; Wilckens, 1970: 131; Wright, 1996:81-118; Raphael, 2009:102-03; Brown, 2014:58-61). The Gospels seem to indicate a general lack of comprehension of a dying or rising deliverer of the Jews by those who experienced Jesus' ministry (Matthew 16:21-24; Mark 9:9-11; Luke 18:31-34, 24:25-27; John 11:11-16, 23-24, 13:7-19).

Two other distinctions are worthy of mention. Herodotus describes a developed sacrificial system of cultic veneration of Zalmoxis by the Thracians—indeed, one that included human sacrifice. The veneration of Jesus as co-receptient of worship and adoration as a monotheistic innovation seems to have appeared close to the event of Jesus' demise and alleged sightings

and clearly did not include any performance by Jesus followers that could have been identified as either Jewish or pagan sacrifice or interpretation of omens (Hurtado, 2016; Hurtado, 2005:20-9; Rainbow, 1987:228-86, 1991:78-91; France, 1982:17-36; Stark, 2006:87; Meeks, 2008:153, 160-61, 163). In other words, Jesus' deification lacked the background of the long developmental chronology associated with the reported Zalmoxis worship, as well as of the specific cultic activities (sacrifice, omens) linked to that development. Strabo, while omitting details similar to Herodotus' account of specific, developed activities of worship, avers to the weakest notion of deification—the idea that counselors to the Getaen monarchs were simply *referred to as* deities.

That deification and worship would have occurred among the devotees of Zalmoxis who were operating within a socioreligious matrix of flexible and accommodating polytheism, replete with degrees of fealty to multiple deities, should come as no occasion for surprise. However, the fact that deification with accompanying worship could not only have occurred, but flourished, among first-century monotheistic, ethno-exclusive Jews is utterly unique and begs for a plausible explanation. Examples of first-century Jewish opposition to the exalted status of Jesus abound and resist cultural synchronicity claims attributed to either Jewish Hellenization or later Greco-Roman evolutionary influences (Setzer, 1994:140-42, 178-82; Hare, 1967:17; Stanton, 1994:164-90, 237-46; Hultgren, 1976:97-104; Horbury, 1998:201-39; Wright, 1996:30-115; Brown, 2014:64-5). The particularly innovative expressions of Jesus deification and veneration by the early Jesus followers were not amenable to the influences of Hellenization assumed by strong homogeneity proponents because of their genesis within Jewish monotheism and their subsequent ubiquitous and overt rejection of polytheistic

practice as the movement matured and proliferated in the Gentile world (Hurtado, 1988:17-92, 2005:31-60, 75-78).

## (2) Immortality and the Hereafter

It is a logical inference that the Getaen people came to believe in a positive afterlife inevitability and post-death reunion with Zalmoxis *because* of the hiding and reappearance event Zalmoxis staged. The data is sparse, however, on the details of what constituted the essential epistemological commitment of his followers. Conversely, there was a rather elaborate theological antecedent, subsequent to Jesus' death and resurrection, instructing the faithful on the requirements of the attainment of positive afterlife, as well as explication of the mechanics of the transaction.<sup>109</sup> Applying the best possible interpretation to Herodotus' commentary and assuming it not to have been a polemic, it is true that both Jesus and Zalmoxis were believed to have been crucial in the conferred immortality scenario. It is also clear that both were offering not a simple post-mortem continuation of soul existence but "immortality" as a positive and flourishing afterlife experience in which there there could be some sort of connection with their followers. This seems most likely, as both Jewish and Greco-Roman religious worldviews already had notions of continued postmortem existence. Information from the ancient world detailing the particular Thracian perspective

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<sup>109</sup> Like Jewish covenant theology, Jewish Messiah expectation, harmatology, redemption, atonement, ethics, pneumatology, et al.



on afterlife is scant. However, there are a few sources worth investigating. In the words of Don Nardo,

The afterlife was known as Hades and was a grey world ruled by the Lord of the Dead, also known as Hades. Within this misty realm, however, were different planes of existence the dead could inhabit. If they had lived a good life and were remembered by the living they could enjoy the sunny pleasures of Elysium; if they were wicked then they fell into the darker pits of Tartarus while, if they were forgotten, they wandered eternally in the bleakness of the land of Hades (2004:115-16).

Generally, Greeks believed that after a person died that individual lived on in an insubstantial, shadowlike form, a banal existence of normative inactivity, shrouded in darkness (Wright, 2003:1-77). There was some notable variation in Greek views on immortality throughout the centuries. Homer and Hesiod painted a uniformly negative picture of postmortem existence (Durant, 1939:181). When, for example, Odysseus questions the spirit or “shade” of Achilles concerning his new abode, Achilles reports that he would rather be a lowly slave in the land of the living than an esteemed ruler there in the underworld (Homer, *Odyssey*, 11.486-493).

Burial, not cremation, was common practice throughout the eighth and seventh centuries B.C., and common, everyday utensils were buried with the cadaver, ostensibly for its afterlife activity; however, after this time period no items or weapons seem to have been buried in common practice (Storr, 1918:393).

In Herodotus' time, there was a general Greek ambivalence about afterlife. Present existential concerns were most pressing for them, and with no revealed data from the gods or sacred books to consult, the hereafter was not a topic of major concern. Dualism was a general ontological presupposition concerning human beings among the Greeks.

There was, however, a rival conception that powerfully impacted the advanced Greek community at the time. The doctrine of Orphism seems to have made inroads into Greek cogitation during this period (Storr, 1918:373-81). Orphism, in stark contrast to the general mode of Greek thought, was singularly focused on the possibility of acquiring a blissful and satisfying postmortem existence. Some sort of inchoate postmortem judgment is also a feature of Orphism and can be credited for the emergent scattered commentary on epitaphs as the years accrued (Ibid., 390).

Orphics viewed the body as a decaying prison house for the soul, a soul that was in exile from its original affiliation with the gods; as such, no bodily resurrection was considered possible in this rival system (Ibid., 381). General Greek thought and Orphism shared presuppositions of the soul being constituted in an immaterial fashion and the body being a diminishing shell worthy of disdain.

If one attempts to survey the sepulchral inscriptions of the Herodotean era, some tentative speculations emerge. Although induction of this type is difficult, it might aid in our investigation. Epitaphs from the middle-fifth century B.C. are virtually silent on afterlife; conversely, they often relate, sometimes in great detail, events connected to the person while they lived (Storr, 1918:394-95). Like most eulogies, when the sepulchral scrawls do

touch on the possibility of a negative afterlife experience, a tentative agnosticism is usually communicated. The view of a triumphant afterlife experience as expressed as Christianity developed is still unique,

With respect to this early Christian community during the 3rd century, we know primarily of the cemeteries and the epitaphs that attest the appearance of a Christian formulary, expressing, as in Jewish epigraphy, the hope of victory over death with a conviction entirely unknown to pagan texts (C. Pietri and M. Ghilardi 2014: 3:423).

Although he lived much later than Herodotus, Pomponius Mela was a first-century Roman geographer who briefly discussed afterlife positions common to particular non-Romans. According to Pomponius there were three main beliefs concerning the afterlife among the Thracians (*De situ orbis libri / The Geography*, 2.2.18): (1) The dead return to this life biologically (*alii [among the Thracians] redituras putant animas obeuntium*). It is unclear what form the deceased were purported to take upon their return to their former existential plane. (2) Although souls would not return to the realm of living humans, they would not be annihilated and would begin enjoying a joyous postmortem existence (*etsi non redeant, non extingue tamen, sed ad beatiora transire*). (3) The soul, like the body, would die or be annihilated, though this was not considered to be tragic in that it was deemed to be better to end than to continue eternally (*emori quidem, sed id melius esse quam vivere*).

Eliade denies that the first option should be interpreted as Pythagorean metempsychosis or reincarnation (Eliade, 1972:32) in that Zalmoxis did not “return” in another form (Long,

1948:8; Phillip, 1966:153), though he does concede that this may have been a possible belief for some Geteans. Although this notion appeared well beyond Herodotus' time and closer to Strabo's, the above brief Roman description is of value. The Homeric doctrine that immortality<sup>110</sup> was generally inaccessible to human beings did admit to rare exceptions,<sup>111</sup> and perhaps this interpretation of Herodotus' report concerning the Zalmoxan faithful could be fruitful.

The notion that the true believer could cheat biological death and be transported instead to an eternally blissful context is a possible interpretive option for the reader, though rendered improbable by the concomitant discussion of the ritual by Herodotus in which a "messenger" is sent to Zalmoxis *after being killed* (4.94.2); the man's soul goes to Zalmoxis in the immortal realm (Eliade, 1972:33). It is that likely the Thracians with whom Herodotus was concerned were motivated to favor the second possibility promulgated by Pomponius.

In later Greek culture cremation became the normative burial activity, with the custom of coinage placement over the eyes or lips of the deceased to cover the toll of Charon over the river Styx in the realm of Hades.<sup>112</sup> In typical style Lucian delivers the following pejorative

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<sup>110</sup> Immortality may in this context be defined as protection from the cessation of vital biological functions.

<sup>111</sup> Achilles and Menelaus were said to have been supernaturally translated to wonderful distant regions to spend eternity, without the specter of death separating body and soul.

<sup>112</sup> The underworld was said to have been surrounded by a series of rivers: The Acheron (river of woe), The Cocytus (river of lamentation), The Phlegethon (river of fire), The Styx (river of unbreakable oath by which the gods swore), and The Lethe (river of forgetfulness). Sometimes food would be placed beside the deceased on the pyre for Cerberus, the vicious three-headed dog of the underworld. Cerberus tended to block the way for any wishing to leave and for those undeserving of the more appealing plateaus available in the underworld.

assessment of various funereal activities, while adding an illuminating quick reference to some differences:

So far, all men are fools alike: but at this point national peculiarities make their appearance. The Greeks burn their dead, the Persians bury them; the Indian glazes the body, the Scythian eats it, the Egyptian embalms it. In Egypt, indeed, the corpse, duly dried, is actually placed at table,—I have seen it done; and it is quite a common thing for an Egyptian to relieve himself from pecuniary embarrassment by a timely visit to the pawnbroker, with his brother or father deceased. The childish futility of pyramids and mounds and columns, with their short-lived inscriptions, is obvious (*On Mourning*, 1.22).

These rituals were all equally foolish for Lucian, who even commented on the absurdity of the Greek coinage ritual (1.10-12). However, he did minimally affirm that *only the good* had anything to which to look forward after death, affirming that there was an impending judgment for those sins in this life that had imprinted stains on people's souls (1.7-9).

In an effort to get a handle on the Thracian afterlife position in order to contextualize Herodotus' unfortunately brief discussion concerning Zalmoxis and his countrymen, we have attempted to trace a line through the development of notions of immortality throughout the Greek period. We see that there were a number of common features shared between the Judeo-Christian and Greek worldviews. Ontic dualism was clearly accepted by both; the idea of an afterlife abode was held in common; and the notion of judgment and moral actions affecting this event were affirmed alike by Jew, Christian, Greek, and—likely—Thracian.

When we add the Herodotus data, we're left with an unambiguous avoidance of negative afterlife experience if one "meets Zalmoxis" in the hereafter.

Zalmoxis' authority on this subject was ostensibly proven to the Getaen faithful by his alleged return from death.<sup>113</sup> That the Getaen people, under the influence of Zalmoxis, were Orphic-leaning seems probable given the Herodotean report (de Laet, 1996:182-83).<sup>114</sup> But even if it could be established that they were not, they likely shared the broader notion of physical body disdain and, consequently, of "immortality" applying to non-body consciousness (soul) alone. It is at this point that some poignant distinctions emerge between the Judeo-Christian view of immortality and the likely Thracian conception.

The Greco-Roman pagan religious adherents found the idea of bodily resurrection challenging to accept (Acts 17:18; Achtemeier, Green & Thompson, 2001:260), as it was the *soul* or immaterial center of consciousness that was often thought to survive death. The dissolution of one's physical frame was regarded as inevitable (Anon., 2003:145). Hellenized ideas of how one would continue minus their physical components, subsequent to their demise, here constitutes a conceptual aperture between Christians and their pagan counterparts. Humans are often compared in the Bible to grass that withers (Psalms 90:5,6,

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<sup>113</sup> This is most likely a reference to Hades.

<sup>114</sup> This is because of the Herodotus report featuring the ritual data whereby the moral qualities of the messenger were mentioned, as well as the tenor of the Herodotean passage, which stands in stark contrast to the characteristic Hellenistic afterlife ambivalence of that era.

103:15,16; Isaiah 37:27, 40:6,7, 51:12; James 1:10; 1 Peter 1:24), clearly elucidating the transience of mortal physical life, in contrast to an eternal frame of reference.

However, in 1 Corinthians 15:50-53, 2 Corinthians 5:4, and Philippians 3:20 the apostle Paul speaks of transformation of human materiality into something better (ἀλλαγησόμεθα and ἐνδύσασθαι ἀφθαρσίαν and μετασχηματίσει) rather than of simple soul extension post-death, which was the common notion. The Jewish eschatological belief in corporate bodily resurrection for judgment (Craig, 2008:365; Ellis, 1966:273; Keener, 2009:338-39; Kreitzer, 1993:806, 811; Osborne, 2000:932-33; Charlesworth, 2006:154-55; Collins, 1997:97; Psalms of Solomon 3:12, 15:12; 1 Enoch 22:13, 61:5; 2 Maccabees 7:9-29; 2 Baruch 30:1; Jubilees 23:31), as well as their tradition of ancestral bone preservation, further reinforce this idea of eventual reunification of soul and glorified materiality in the afterlife (Goodenough, 1965, 1:164-77).<sup>115</sup> It is unlikely in the extreme that Zalmoxis preached the possibility of a *bodily* resurrection, either immanently or in the future and either individually or collectively. The key texts offer no indication of body identity reconstitution; neither do the general Greek assumptions of the period or Orphism. Given the predominant views of the period, no scholar interprets Herodotus' Zalmoxan data in this way. Further, his reappearance in Getae was likely not considered to have been "firstfruits" (1 Corinthians 15:23) of a general trajectory of material renascence for those who believed.

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<sup>115</sup> The obvious exception to this generalization were the Sadducees, who denied any resurrection, bodily or otherwise. The fact that this rabbinic sect also used ossuaries (Craig Evans, "Caiphas Ossuary," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, Intervarsity, 2000; See also William Horbury "Ossuaries," in *Palestinian Exploration Quarterly* 126, 1, 1994 32-48) would serve as a possible counterpoint here.

At various times in his teaching ministry Jesus does speak of the defeat of death and of eternal life being conferred based on specific assents to belief (Luke 20:36; John 5:25, 6:50, 8:51, 11:26), references to future life triumph rather than to mere empirical life extension through the abolishment of biological cessation. Both Testaments testify of moral qualities determining one's fate in the hereafter (Psalm 49:14; Daniel 12:2; John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Romans 2:7; Revelation 20:4, 13). Indeed, both Judaism and Christianity are predicated on this basic idea. In this a mild similarity may be noted between Judaism and Orphism, though one need not posit a genetic relationship in either direction.

But here again a stark difference emerges in context. Jesus' followers placed him in a Jewish sacrificial matrix generally foreign in paganism, with Jesus interpreted as a covenant ameliorator: Christ was to atone sacrificially for the shortcomings of human beings otherwise headed for inevitable post-life judgment (Hebrews 9:27).<sup>116</sup> While Zalmoxis, on the other hand, does seem to offer modest avoidance of a baleful post-death experience, that is all one can extrapolate, given the resources available to us.

Both Zalmoxis and Jesus offered an epistemic gateway to blissful post-existence through teaching discourse. For Christians, however, there is more than an acceptance that Jesus has won the struggle over death's empirical finality; there is rather a coming to terms with his

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<sup>116</sup> Jesus death is axiomatic for Christianity, not in terms only of the idea that he died but also of how he died, given the prophetic expectation. Whether one believes that the reported event constitutes prophetic fulfillment or is an example of dubious hyperbole does nothing to blunt the general point that the details of Jesus' passion and demise were critical to the traditions and thus to the early Christians to whom they delivered their message. One clearly cannot say this about Zalmoxis' public withdrawal.



unique claim of being the messianic covenant savior of all (Matthew 1:21; John 3:16; Acts 5:30-32; Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 1 Timothy 4:10). Another differentiation is that Jesus required more than Zalmoxis for the acquisition of blissful postmortem experience. Assent was not the sole criterion but rather a critical first step, authenticated by leading to subsequent verifiable, obedient action on the part of the believer (Matthew 19:17, 7:21, 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 8:21; John 15:10; Romans 1:5; 2 Corinthians 2:9; Ephesians 6:6).

We again see three distinctions emerging out of the more general similarities—distinctions that tend to cast doubt upon theories of dependence. The idea of bodily immortality, as well as the notion of covenant sacrificial propitiation, is unique to Judeo-Christianity (Johnson 1998:133, 135). We mention these here to remind the reader that even within what some might construe as strong connecting concepts between the Zalmoxis story and the Jesus narratives, there are manifest emergent differences upon inspection that should be presented to qualify the data being linked.

It is entirely possible that the early Christians took these common Hellenistic notions and simply cast them in a Jewish mold; however, it is *the degree of similarity* that tends to situate an individual in the direction of assent to genetic relationship or even to the milder claim of strong influence from one set of data to another. I lack the space to detail the multiplicity of divergences between the reported Zalmoxis and Jesus events that would, minimally, undermine a conclusion of dependence from the Zalmoxis reports to the Gospel data.

### (3) Teaching

Teaching was an activity in which both Jesus and Zalmoxis partook. Jesus was itinerant and gathered many disciples with concentric levels of relational intimacy. From inner-circle disciple to common follower, Jesus' constituency was largely rural, evidently consisting primarily of poor individuals situated in Palestine. Jesus taught reconciliation with God through repentance and was the signs-prophet of an eschatological inbreaking of the kingdom of God. Jesus identified himself as the fulfillment of Jewish prophetic tradition and taught that his death and return were integral parts of this process reaching its zenith (Wright, 1996:592-644).

Even if one believes that the texts emphasizing his immanent death and subsequent resurrection were imported illegitimately into the tradition later on, there is little to commend a strong relationship here with the Zalmoxis accounts. There is little to no detail provided of the content of Zalmoxis' teaching besides a vague affirmation of immortality and the mention of his acumen as an astrological interpreter. Taken together, even if the assumption of content manipulation is assumed, these facts seem to stress disparity rather than hint at homogeneity.

Jesus' miracles and teaching were what drew crowds to him (Smith, 1978:8-20; Kee, 1986; Sanders, 1993:157-73; Borg, 1987:57-75; Meyer, 2002:154-58; Crossan, 1991:303-52; Wenham and Blomberg, 1987:89-183). Jesus was generally either despised or ignored by the authorities of his day, whether Jewish or Roman, and there is nothing in the Zalmoxian accounts that resembles any of these features. At most one could say that Zalmoxis' ability

to read the astrological signs (*Geography* 7.3.5) and his arranged banquets (*Histories* 4.95.3) garnered him influence with both the aristocrat and, likely, the common man.

#### (4) Death and Resurrection

Concerning the death and resurrection accounts pertaining to these men (note again that Zalmoxis' death is nowhere mentioned) — the area of central similarity pressed by advocates of a strong homogeneity or even a genetic relationship between Jesus and figures of this type—a closer look is warranted. Given the manner in which Herodotus expresses this particular Zalmoxis event, a strong parallel to Jesus' reported resurrection is possible only if one adopts one of the naturalistic interpretations of Jesus' death and return that has been abandoned by scholars. The interpretation of which I speak is the once-popular "apparent death" interpretation postulated most powerfully by Heinrich Paulus and Frederick Schleiermacher (Schweitzer, 1971:49-53), euphemistically referred to as the "swoon theory." The suggestion was that Jesus only appeared to have died or that his followers mistakenly came to believe in his death, accounting for the belief that he had been "resurrected." Strauss dealt the deathblow to this theory in 1835, and it has been discarded by scholars for various reasons in the interim leading up to the contemporary period (Strauss, 1879:412; Schweitzer, 1971:54-6).<sup>117</sup> Ernst Renan also rejected the apparent death scenario (Renan,

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<sup>117</sup> Strauss' picture of a weak, emaciated, wounded Jesus stumbling back to his followers after escaping the tomb would hardly have inspired confidence in his followers that their master had "conquered death," and this event would hardly have served as a catalyst for their willingness to endure eventual social rejection, persecution, and martyrdom. The Roman executioners tended to be thorough, and even if the disciples were deceivers they lacked either the means or the clout for an elaborate public deception. No other group would have profited from duping the Romans in such a fashion, and escape from the tomb would have been unlikely; one version of this theory

1946:244-45), as have most scholars post Strauss (McNaugher, 1947:148; Smith, 1954:208; Miller, 1949:37-8)—so much so that it is hardly commented upon today. Only if one utilizes this grid while assessing the resurrection can one posit a strong parallel between Jesus and Zalmoxis on this score.

Both Herodotus and Strabo unambiguously affirm that Zalmoxis *did not, in fact, die*, even though many people came to believe that he had. Strabo adds Getaen aristocratic collusion to the deception. There is no similar affirmation in the Gospels or in the wider New Testament corpus concerning Jesus; in fact, the absolute opposite of aristocratic affinity is consistently portrayed in the Jesus accounts. The issue is that while there are numerous interpretive possibilities for Jesus' death and resurrection event, one seems led to employ a long discarded explanatory construct in order to establish a link between the Jesus and Zalmoxan events.

### **3.3.3 Scholars' Position**

Perhaps the most respected Zalmoxis scholar on the planet is Mircea Eliade, who affirms neither a general dying and rising archetype nor authorial imitation between the Gospel authors and the Zalmoxis reporters (Herodotus and Strabo). Eliade does, however, claim that various similarities between the Jesus tradition and the Zalmoxan tradition led to the abrupt dissolution of the

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requires the assumption that the disciples were liars and conspirators, a theory that makes little sense of the conversion of skeptics like James and Paul.

Zalmoxan cult under the Romans, “[s]o we may think that beliefs concerning Zalmoxis were absorbed, and radically transformed, by Christianity” (Eliade, 1972:297).

Although other scholars dispute this claim and instead point to the Roman political/military decimation of the Thracians as the explanation for the disappearance of Zalmoxan devotion (Treptow 1992:14, 18),<sup>118</sup> Eliade is careful to qualify his statements about parallels and to caution his readers, “This does not mean as some Romanian authors maintain, that Zalmoxis had anticipated or prepared the way for Christianity” (Ibid., footnote 135). Again in Eliade’s words, “It is true that initiates are believed to go to Zalmoxis after their death, but this does not mean that the god is the Sovereign of the Dead” (Ibid., 278). The historian Kurt Treptow disseminates no explicit link between Jesus and Zalmoxis, and standard academic reference works on mythology, if they include Zalmoxis at all, make no connection between him and Jesus (Anon., 1998:325; Graves, 1955:423; Harris and Platzner, 2005:328).

### **3.3.4 Conclusion**

Certainly both groups of people, the Christians and the followers of Zalmoxis, believed strongly that their teacher had died and had since returned, signaling, minimally, a call for attention. Both groups in the stories claimed to see a flesh and blood person whom they assumed had returned from expiry. We have affirmed the points of contact being “teacher,” “conferral of afterlife positivity by way of assent,” “affirmation of deification,” and a “perceived death and

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<sup>118</sup> Treptow states that Zalmoxis devotion had developed into a religion appealing to males, specifically males who were or had been connected to the military elite among the Thracians, much like the Roman development of the Mithras mystery religion in the second century.

return-like event.” These parallels are interesting and can be studied with profit regarding these two figures.

Once one launches into a more detailed analysis, however, differentiations emerge from within these identified commonalities, some of which come into focus when one scrutinizes the similarities present in the two narratives. Additionally, these general similarities are flanked by disparity on multiple planes—sociological, theological, narrative, and existential—too numerous to list. The biographers of the Jesus event do not indicate doubt concerning the account they have given, they do not allude to trickery, there is no tradition of sacrificing the faithful to establish communication with an unavailable Messiah, and no other teacher is given credit for producing a person like Jesus. In addition, the Jesus biographers were not as chronologically distant from the events in question, nor did they represent an alternative culture. We have seen that though there is a superficial connection between certain features of the Zalmoxis and the Jesus stories, the differences are striking and numerous. This analysis leads us away from a strong homogeneity probability and should instead give pause to those who would infer authorial mimicry or even a more modest archetype affiliation based on the purported contact points between Jesus and Zalmoxis.

The chart below summarizes the method results between Jesus and Zalmoxis and their respective disappearance and return events in the primary source data.

## Death/Departure & Return/Resurrection (Jesus and Zalmoxis)

Category	Competition	Chronology	Word & Event Similarities	Number & Quality of Contacts	Centrality
<b>Zalmoxis (Disappearance &amp; Return)</b>	<p><b>Positive</b></p> <p>The various Zalmoxis reports are largely consistent concerning departure and return.</p>	<p><b>Positive</b></p> <p>The Zalmoxis data is clearly antecedent to the Jesus data.</p>	<p><b>Negative</b></p> <p>The Zalmoxis data contains some general similarities but yields much disparate information in comparison to Jesus of Nazareth.</p>	<p><b>Negative-</b></p> <p>There are five basic connections and dozens of rudimentary, as well as complex, differences present within the connections and contextually conspicuous divergences.</p>	<p><b>Mixed Positive &amp; Negative</b></p> <p>The departure and return event for Zalmoxis is the central event in his reported life, as it is in the Jesus data, though it represents a deception in the case of Zalmoxis.</p>

## **Chapter Four**

### **Romulus and Jesus**

#### **4.1.1 Introduction**

#### **4.1.2 Richard Miller**

#### **4.1.3 Richard Carrier**

#### **4.2.1 The Death and Return of Romulus**

#### **4.2.2 Cicero**

#### **4.2.3 Dionysius of Halicarnassus**

#### **4.2.4 Ovid**

#### **4.2.5 Livy**

#### **4.2.6 Plutarch**

#### **4.2.7 Cassius Dio**

#### **4.3.1 Evaluation**

#### **4.3.2 Similarities (Death)**

#### **4.3.3 Differences (Death)**

#### **4.3.4 Similarities (Appearance)**

#### **4.3.5 Differences (Appearance)**

#### **4.4.1 Scholars' Position**

#### **4.4.2 Conclusion**



## **Romulus—Ῥωμύλος**

### **4.1.1 Introduction**

The aim of the present chapter is to take another major example offered by one or more of the professional scholars who hold to the strong homogeneity thesis. The following figure is purported to have numerous and compelling similarities to Jesus that could produce a conclusion of strong homogeneity. After providing examples of this character being offered by the scholars, I will present the original source data of the pertinent stories in question. I will then utilize my proposed method to analyze this particular character in comparison to Jesus to see whether the data yields a significant conclusion. This chapter is intended as an example of how my method is to be utilized in contradistinction to the presentation given by the strong homogeneity scholars. The chapter is intended to undergird the contention that my method is procedurally superior to the ones offered by those other professionals who have formerly attempted comparisons of this type.

Romulus was the twin brother of Remus, twins said to have been sired by the Roman god Mars and a human maiden (Cotrell, 1996:78-9). After having been abandoned to die of exposure, the infants were sustained by a she-wolf until found by shepherds who raised the boys (Ibid., 78; Cicero, 2.2-11). This particular myth has been linked to the etiology of the Roman Empire, with the exploits of these twins serving as an account of the derivation of one of the world's most successful civilizations. Remus is reported to have been eventually slain by his brother, Romulus,

who continued on to reign over his kingdom (Plutarch, 10.1; Dionysus Halicarnassus, 2.56).<sup>119</sup> It is not known whether Romulus was an actual, historic individual. The second-century lawyer and Christian convert Tertullian mentions him in comparison to Jesus, specifying the ascension event (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9–10). Tertullian differentiated between Romulus “ascension” and Jesus’ ascension by affirming better evidence for the Christ event because Jesus’ followers were willing to be persecuted for these kinds of details<sup>120</sup> (*Apology*, 21).

#### 4.1.2 Richard Miller

There are those who submit that the Romulus legend as a story was lifted by the Gospel writers and applied to Jesus of Nazareth. Claremont University scholar of religion, Richard Miller, submits that the salient features of the story of the death and return of Romulus do indeed constitute a collection of striking parallels to what we find in the Gospels with regard to Jesus (Miller, 2010:758-62).<sup>121</sup> Miller organizes the content of the writings analyzed below relating to the exploits of Romulus into a twenty-point parallel presentation. In what follows I will present Miller’s purported parallels; since many of these are beyond my research parameters, full interaction with these additional proposed links do not belong in the main body of my work.

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<sup>119</sup> Plutarch claims that Romulus was 53 years of age (“in the fifty-fourth year of his age”) when he “vanished” in 717 B.C.; this gives the twins a birth date in the year 771 B.C. and places Romulus’ age at the founding of Rome at 18 (Plutarch, *Romulus*). Dionysius of Halicarnassus states that Romulus began his reign at 18, ruled for 37 years, and died at 55 years old (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.56).

<sup>120</sup> Many have claimed that the terminus of Romulus’ life on this earth was an event in which he ascended to the gods under cover of a dark storm or clouds. This was not, however, a post-resurrection, post-return ascension or an assumption to a positive afterlife abode.

<sup>121</sup> The reader can weigh these for credibility in the subsequent passage presentation. Miller’s list is also reproduced on John Loftus’ atheist website <http://debunkingchristianity.blogspot.com/2012/01/romulus-and-jesus-compared.html>.

However, I will offer some brief commentary in the footnotes that critiques each point. Miller's parallels are as follows:

TABLE 1

THE TRANSLATIONS OF ROMULUS AND JESUS COMPARED

Mimetic Signal with References

**1 Missing body.**

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.56.2-6; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.3-5 / Matthew 28:11-14; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:3; John 20:2-10

**2 Prodigies.**

Livy 1.16.1; Ovid, *Metam.* 14.816-17; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.56.2-6; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.6-7 / Matthew 27:51-54; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45

**3 Darkness over the land.**

Ovid, *Metam.* 14.816-22; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.56.2-6; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.6-7 / Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44

**4 Mountaintop speech.**

Ovid, *Metam.* 14.820-24 / Matthew 28:18-20

**5 Great commission.**

Livy 1.16.7; Ovid, *Metam.* 14.811, 815; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.475-511; Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.63.4 / Matthew 28:18-20<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> In the accounts that actually include some details concerning the appearance of Romulus to Julius Proculus, the message is that Romans were to be proud and ever ready for battle and that Romulus was to be worshipped forevermore—or, alternatively, that he was to be identified as Quirinius and was going to be with the gods. The

## 6 Ascension.

Livy 1.16.6; Ovid, *Metam.* 14.820-24; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.56.2-6; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27.7 / Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9<sup>123</sup>

## 7 Son of god.

Livy 1.16.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.2 / Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39; John 20:31<sup>124</sup>

## 8 Meeting on the road.

Ovid, *Fasti* 2.475-511; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.63.3-4 / Luke 24:13-35; Acts 9:3-19

## 9 Eyewitness testimony.

Cicero, *Pub.* 2.10; Livy 1.16.1-8; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.475-511; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 2.63.3-4; Plutarch, *Rom.* 27-28 / Luke 24:35; 1 Corinthians 15:3-11<sup>125</sup>

## 10 Taken away in a cloud.

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“Great Commission” given by Jesus to his followers and featured in Matthew 28:18–20, reads: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” The differences in content, tone, and admonition are conspicuous.

<sup>123</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus was suspicious of this claim and went on to describe the sighting and interaction claimed by Julius Proculus as an armored Romulus departing the city (*Rom. Ant.* 2.63). This parallel is also interesting in that it conflates accounts of Romulus’ ascension to heaven with Jesus’ ascension account by Luke in Acts, yet later there are parallels featured that attempt to connect the same Romulan account with Jesus’ death by crucifixion and his earthly resurrection (parallels 11, 14, 16, 18, 19).

<sup>124</sup> The Dionysian account is critical of those who believe that Romulus was sired and subsequently assumed to heaven by his father, Mars (2.56.2-6). Earlier in *Roman Antiquities* Dionysius distances himself from the common assumption that Romulus was born of a divine human union (2.43.3). Livy is neutral on the divinity of Romulus, though he reports that many in attendance reckoned this way.

<sup>125</sup> This juxtaposes Julius Proculus alone, oddly paralleled with a multiplicity of identified and unidentified alleged eyewitness accounts reported in the Gospel data.

Livy 1.16.1; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. rom. 2.56.2-6 / Acts 1:9<sup>126</sup>

### **11 Dubious alternative accounts.**

Livy 1.16.4-5; Plutarch, Rom. 27.5-6, 8; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. rom. 2.56.2-6; 2.63.3 /

Matthew 28:11-14<sup>127</sup>

### **12 Immortal/heavenly body.**

Livy 1.16.8; Ovid, Metam. 14.818-28; Plutarch, Rom. 28.6-8 / 1 Corinthians 15:35-50; 1 Peter

3:18<sup>128</sup>

### **13 Outside of the city.**

Livy 1.16.1; Plutarch, Rom. 27.6 / John 19:17

### **14 The people flee (*populifugia*).**

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. rom. 2.56.5; Plutarch, Rom. 27.7 / Matthew (26:56); 28:8; Mark

(14:50); 16:8<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> This particular couplet mixes Jesus' earthly resurrection with his subsequent ascension. This is further complicated by the fact that the disappearance of Romulus obscured by dark storm clouds is supposed to parallel Jesus' death or initial departure from this plane of existence. Miller conflates the cloud, obscuring Romulus' fate with the darkness reported at Jesus' crucifixion in Mark 15. The accounts vary, with Dio Cassius and Cicero calling the event a solar eclipse and Plutarch and Dionysus of Halicarnassus referring to it as a rain cloud / storm, with the later Plutarch adding to the picture an attendant whirlwind that enveloped Romulus.

<sup>127</sup> This particular parallel is interesting, as most of the ancient authors who include the naturalistic alternative—the murder of Romulus—seem to endorse it as authentic. This is precisely the opposite case when it comes to the reported naturalistic theft rendition offered by the high priests elucidated in Matthew 28:11–14.

<sup>128</sup> First Peter 3 and 1 Corinthians 15 do not propose the immateriality of the risen Jesus or a “heavenly” body.

<sup>129</sup> Dionysius' naturalistic account of Romulus' murder by the new Roman citizens includes the fleeing of Romans, which obviously fails to include nearly every other parallel offered in Miller's proposed list. The Plutarch reference has the citizens running in fear of the storm that was forming. Matthew 26:56 and Mark 14:50 describe the disciples fleeing at Jesus' arrest at Gethsemane, and Matthew 28:8 and Mark 16:8 relate the account of the women running to tell the disciples that Jesus' tomb was empty. Reducing this parallel to anyone's moving quickly at any time loosely related to the continuum of events in question in no way constitutes a strong parallel.

## 15 Deification.

Livy 1.16.3; Cicero, Resp. 2.10.20b; Ovid, Fasti 2.475-511; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. Rom. 2.56.5-6; Plutarch, Rom. 27.7, 28.3 / Matthew 27:54; Romans 1:4<sup>130</sup>

## 16 Belief, homage, and rejoicing.

Ovid, Fasti 2.475-511; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ant. rom. 2.63.3-4; Plutarch, Rom. 27.8 / Matthew 28:9, 17; Luke 24:41, 52; John 20:27

## 17 Bright and shining appearance.

Plutarch, Rom. 28.1-2; Ovid, Fasti 2.475-511 / Matthew 17:2; Mark 9:3; Luke 9:29; Acts 9:3; Revelation 1:16<sup>131</sup>

## 18 Frightened subjects.

Ovid, Fasti 2.475-511; Livy 1.16.2; Plutarch, Rom. 28.2 / Matthew 28:5, 10; Mark 16:8; Luke

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<sup>130</sup> This is another questionable parallel. Dionysius, Cicero, Plutarch, and Livy were all to varying degrees suspicious of Romulus' purported deification. Dionysius of Halicarnassus did not claim deification in this passage but rather was critical of those who thought that Mars was involved in Romulus' alleged ascension. The reader is directed to their descriptions, featured below. There is little evidence that Jesus was deified upon the event of his resurrection; the Matthew passage cited is a response by the bewildered Roman guard at the tomb, who exclaims "Surely, this man *was* the Son of God," not ". . . has *now become* the Son of God." Matthew's Gospel also records a number of events in which Jesus receives worship from various individuals—clearly blasphemous in Judaism—well before his death and resurrection (Matthew 2:11; 14:33); Jesus also forgives sin in Matthew prior to the resurrection, which was another prerogative reserved for Yahweh alone (Matthew 9:1–8). These verses point to deity identification, not to resurrection event apotheosis. Matthew also intimates preexistence (Matthew 1:23; 3:3; 17:1–8). The Romans passage cited (1:4) has Paul affirming Jesus' sonship to God the Father prior to the statement concerning the resurrection. Paul also makes a distinction identifying Jesus' earthly instantiation. The verb is translated variously by different translation committees; both "appointed" and "declared" (ορίσω/ορίσθηεντος) are technically correct (*Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, third ed., by Frederick William Danker, 723). Even if "appointed" is given more weight, one must take this along with other Pauline affirmations of Christ's preincarnate deity and identification of Jesus with God: 2 Corinthians 4:4; Galatians 4:4–5; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:15–17; 2:9.

<sup>131</sup> The first three references are to the transfiguration of Jesus prior to his death, the Acts passage describes bright light as a feature of the ascended Jesus appearing to Paul on the Damascus road, and the last passage is John's eschatological description of the return of the Son to earth in triumph.

24:37-38<sup>132</sup>

### **19 All in sorrow over loss.**

Livy 1.16.2; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.475-511; Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.2; Luke 24:18-24

### **20 Inspired message of translation**

Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.3 / Acts 1:4-8; 2:1-4<sup>133</sup>

Here in Richard Miller we have a credentialed scholar who offers a clear, multiply-attested strong homogeneity target to analyze and evaluate (Miller, 2010:756-76). Miller is a champion of the strong homogeneity thesis authoring an entire work defending this position in the prestigious Routledge Studies in Religion series (Miller, 2015). Before we run the pertinent parallels through the rubric, I will offer Carrier's brief positioning of Romulus as a parallel precursor to Jesus.

#### **4.1.3 Richard Carrier**

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<sup>132</sup> The Romulus accounts from Plutarch picture Proculus frightened at the vision of Romulus, the Livy account is unclear, and Ovid's rendition features a surprised but not fearful Proculus. Proculus' emotional state is not reported in the accounts by Cassius Dio, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, or Cicero. The Matthew and Markan accounts highlight the women and their fear at the sighting of an angel, as well as of the risen Jesus, while the Luke features the disciples' dismay at the initial appearance of the risen Jesus, whom they assumed to have been a ghost (24:37). This would be a common response to an appearance of one thought to be dead or to any encounter connected to a paranormal or supernatural event.

<sup>133</sup> This proposed parallel is also unclear. Both Jesus and Romulus did have communication concomitant to their appearances, but how this is "inspired" in both accounts and pertaining to "translation" is left unexplained.

Carrier also presses the Romulus-Jesus connection, particularly with regard to Romulus' post-death appearance to the Senator Proculus and Paul's Emmaus road encounter with the ascended Jesus in Luke 24:13–35. Following is Carrier's short list of notable Romulan parallels:

Another God who submitted to being murdered in order to triumph was the well-revered Roman national deity Romulus, whose death and resurrection was celebrated in annual public ceremonies in Rome since before Christian times (Plutarch, *Romulus* 27-28 & the pre-Christian author Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 1.16.2-7, written c. 15 B.C.; cf. also Cicero, *Laws* 1.3, *Republic* 2.10, c. 40 B.C.; Ovid, *Fasti* 2.491-512, c. 10 A.D.; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.63.3, c. 10 B.C.; Tertullian, *Apology* 21, c. 200 A.D.)

**Though again a very different story**, the Romulan tale shared with Christ's at least the following elements: both were incarnated gods (Romulus descended from heaven to become human and die); both became incarnate in order to establish a kingdom on earth (for Romulus, the Roman Empire; for Christ, the Kingdom of God, i.e. the Church); there was a supernatural darkness at both their deaths (Mark 15:33, etc.); both were killed by a conspiracy of the ruling powers (Christ, by the Jewish and Roman authorities; Romulus, by the first Roman senate); both corpses vanished when sought for (i.e. Christ's tomb is found empty—no one sees him rise); both appear after their resurrection to a close follower on an important road (Proculus on the road to Alba Longa; Cleopas on the road to Emmaus—both roads 14 miles long, the one leading *to* Rome, the other *from* Jerusalem); both connected their resurrections with moral teachings (Romulus instructs Proculus to tell the Romans they will achieve a great empire if they are virtuous); both 'appeared' around the break of dawn; both ascended to heaven (e.g. Luke 24:50-55, Acts



1:9-11); both were hailed 'God, Son of God, King, and Father'; and in the public Roman ceremony, the names were recited in public of those who fled in fear when the body of Romulus vanished, just as we 'know' the names of those who fled in fear when the body of Jesus vanished (Mark 16:8), and in both cases the story went that these people kept their silence for a long time and *only later* proclaimed Romulus a risen god (just as the women 'told no one' and the Christians waited fifty days before proclaiming their 'discovery' to the public: Acts 1:3, 2:1-11) (2009).

Carrier was using a different metric here with Romulus than he had done with Zalmoxis; the connection he proposed between Zalmoxis and Jesus was one of epistemology. Carrier attempted to forge a link between the Jesus stories and the credulity of ancient people related to the success of a religion-based hoax: Zalmoxis' possible, though not assured, historic presence, as well as developmental deification. Carrier's Romulus offering, in contrast, is one of literary/historic linkage, wherein he presents a multiplicity of similar narrative details.

Notice that both Miller and Carrier utilize two of my criteria in their presentation, one of which is explicit and the other tacit. Both scholars seem to have been aware of chronology, and both limited themselves to ancient literature that ostensibly predated Jesus' life. Both scholars clearly emphasized word and event similarity. Their respective emphases were based squarely on perceived similarities or correlations intended to be read as clues to the Gospel origination and remarkable cultural attractiveness. Unfortunately, both bypassed differences and descriptive discontinuities that render suspect any linkage based on this lone criterion.

Both were attempting to compile an extensive list of similarities, aiming for a conclusion of strong homogeneity, if not a claim of blatant theft of concepts, here by the New Testament authors. Neither Carrier nor Miller ever provides a structured method or explains his controlling presuppositions. Context, along with any other traditional evaluative metrics, is also absent. This is the pattern<sup>134</sup> that has unfortunately been followed by many who have published and were trying to promote the strong homogeneity position.

As the second step in the method we now transition, as I did with Zalmoxis, to the ancient primary sources on Romulus' death and return.<sup>135</sup> I do this to provide the reader context and comparison among the various Romulus accounts against the Jesus data via the five-step rubric.

#### **4.2.1 The Death and Return of Romulus**

According to the legend Romulus mysteriously vanished in a storm or whirlwind, either during or shortly after presenting a public sacrifice at or near the Quirinal Hill (Evans, 1992). The Roman Senate had apparently tired of Romulus' rule. Some accounts have Senate members plotting against his life, while others have various Senate members actually taking his life and consequently have Rome placed under their stewardship.

#### **4.2.2 Cicero**

The famous Roman orator and lawyer Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 B.C.) wrote a series of Roman political dialogues between 54 and 51 B.C. *De Re Publica (The Republic / On the*

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<sup>134</sup> That is, the exercise of basic commonalities listed with no method provided.

<sup>135</sup> The first step is to find a contemporary, credentialed academic who provides an actual comparative exemplar to examine in relation to Jesus.

*Commonwealth*) was written in Socratic style, with the man of wisdom a character named Scipio Africanus Minor. In choosing this method of writing Cicero wisely avoided specifically naming his political adversaries. *De Re Publica* is composed of six books, to all of which we have access. All of the dialogues are set at Scipio's estate over three consecutive days, with each day described in two discreet books. Each book is prefaced by an introduction from Cicero, who commented briefly through the dialogical format on Romulus' demise. Cicero includes no postmortem appearance:

[17] Ac Romulus cum septem et triginta regnavisset annos et haec egregia duo firmamenta rei publicae peperisset, auspicia et senatum, tantum est consecutus, ut, cum subito sole obscurato non **conparuisset**, deorum in numero conlocatus putaretur; quam opinionem nemo umquam mortalis adsequi potuit sine eximia virtutis gloria (Cicero, *De Re Publica* 2.17).<sup>136</sup>

After Romulus had thus reigned thirty-seven years, and established these two great supports of government, the hierarchy and the senate, having disappeared in a sudden eclipse of the sun, he was thought worthy of being added to the number of the Gods—an honor which no mortal man ever was able to attain to but by a glorious pre-eminence of virtue (Ibid.).<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *De Republica*, 2.17.

<sup>137</sup> Cicero noted the unique nature of this claim and went on to disdain those who were prone to hastily deify mortal men and mix history with fable: "And this circumstance was the more to be admired in the case of Romulus because most of the great men that have been deified were so exalted to celestial dignities by the people, in periods very little enlightened, when fiction was easy and ignorance went hand-in-hand with credulity. But with

### 4.2.3 Dionysius of Halicarnassus

Dionysius of Halicarnassus (ca. 60–5 B.C.), an ancient historian, teacher of rhetoric, and lover of Rome, wrote *Roman Antiquities* (Ρωμαϊκὴ Ἀρχαιολογία), a researched history of Rome from its origin up to the Punic Wars. In it he sought to explain the Roman way to the Greeks of the period; however, Dionysius also stated that his objects in writing history were to please lovers of noble deeds and to repay the benefits he had enjoyed in Rome (*Antiquities*, 1.1-3.5). Of his 20 works only 11 have survived for inspection. Dionysius analyzed the context and literary style of the authors about whom he wrote. He discussed Romulus and Remus, the fabled founders of Rome, quite extensively. Dionysius was exceedingly suspicious of the ascension and deification story in his rendition:

[2] οἱ μὲν οὖν μυθωδέστερα τὰ περὶ αὐτοῦ ποιοῦντες ἐκκλησιάζοντά φασιν αὐτὸν ἐπὶ στρατοπέδου ζόφου κατασκήψαντος ἐξ αἰθρίας καὶ χειμῶνος μεγάλου καταρραγέντος ἀφανῆ γενέσθαι καὶ πεπιστεύκασιν ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς Ἄρεος τὸν ἄνδρα ἀνηρπάσθαι: [3] οἱ δὲ τὰ πιθανώτερα γράφοντες πρὸς τῶν ἰδίων πολιτῶν λέγουσιν αὐτὸν ἀποθανεῖν. αἰτίαν δὲ τῆς ἀναιρέσεως αὐτοῦ φέρουσι τὴν τε ἄφεσιν τῶν ὁμήρων, οὓς παρὰ Οὐιεντανῶν ἔλαβεν, ἄνευ κοινῆς γνώμης γενομένην παρὰ τὸ εἰωθός, καὶ τὸ μηκέτι τὸν αὐτὸν προσφέρεσθαι τρόπον τοῖς ἀρχαιοτάτοις πολίταις καὶ τοῖς προσγράφοις, ἀλλὰ τοὺς μὲν

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respect to Romulus we know that he lived less than six centuries ago, at a time when science and literature were already advanced, and had got rid of many of the ancient errors that had prevailed among less civilized peoples. For if, as we consider proved by the Grecian annals, Rome was founded in the seventh Olympiad, the life of Romulus was contemporary with that period in which Greece already abounded in poets and musicians—an age when fables, except those concerning ancient matters, received little credit” (*De Re Publica*, 2.18-20).

έν τιμῇ πλείονι ἄγειν, τῶν δ' ἐπεισαθθέντων ὑπερορᾶν, τό τε ὡμόν αὐτοῦ τὸ περὶ τὰς τιμωρίας τῶν ἐξαμαρτανόντων καὶ αὐθάδες, Ῥωμαίων γάρ τινος ἐπὶ ληστεία τῶν πλησιοχώρων κατηγορηθέντας οὔτε ἀφανεῖς ἄνδρας οὔτε ὀλίγους ἐκέλευσεν ὤσαι κατὰ τοῦ κρημοῦ τὴν δίκην αὐτὸς μόνος δικάσασ' μάλιστα δὲ ὅτι βαρὺς ἤδη καὶ αὐθάδης εἶναι ἐδόκει καὶ τὴν ἀρχὴν οὐκέτι βασιλικῶς ἀλλὰ τυραννικώτερον ἐξάγειν. [4] διὰ ταύτας δὴ λέγουσι τὰς αἰτίας συστάντας ἐπ' αὐτῷ τοὺς πατρικίους βουλευῆσαι τὸν φόνον, πρᾶξαι δὲ τὸ ἔργον ἐν τῷ βουλευτηρίῳ καὶ διελόντας τὸ σῶμα κατὰ μέρη χάριν τοῦ μὴ φανῆναι τὸν νεκρὸν ἐξελεθεῖν κρύπτοντας ὑπὸ ταῖς περιβολαῖς ὅσον ἕκαστος εἶχεν αὐτοῦ [5] μέρος καὶ μετὰ τοῦτο γῆ κρύψαι κατὰ τὸ ἀφανές. οἱ δ' ἐκκλησιάζοντα μὲν αὐτόν φασιν ὑπὸ τῶν νεοπολιτῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀναιρεθῆναι, ἐπιχειρῆσαι δ' αὐτοὺς [p. 235] τῷ φόνῳ καθ' ὃν χρόνον δηλαδὴ καὶ τὸ σκότος ἐγένετο διασκεδασθέντος ἐκ τῆς ἐκκλησίας τοῦ δήμου καὶ μονωθέντος τῆς φυλακῆς τοῦ ἡγεμόνος. διὰ τοῦτο γοῦν φασὶ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐν ἧ τὸ πάθος ἐγένετο τῆς τροπῆς τοῦ πλήθους ἐπώνυμον εἶναι καὶ μέχρι τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς χρόνων ὄχλου φυγὴν καλεῖσθαι. [6] ἔοικε δ' οὐ μικρὰν ἀφορμὴν παρέχειν τοῖς θεοποιοῦσι τὰ θνητὰ καὶ εἰς οὐρανὸν ἀναβιβάζουσι τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐπιφανῶν τὰ συμβάντα ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ περὶ τὴν σύγκρισιν τοῦ ἀνδρὸς ἐκείνου καὶ τὴν διάκρισιν. ἐν τε γὰρ τῷ βιασμῷ τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ εἶθ' ὑπ' ἀνθρώπων τινὸς εἶθ' ὑπὸ θεοῦ γενομένῳ τὸν ἥλιον ἐκλιπεῖν φασὶν ὅλον καὶ σκότος παντελῶς ὥσπερ ἐν νυκτὶ τὴν γῆν κατασχεῖν ἐν τε τῇ τελευτῇ αὐτοῦ ταυτό συμβῆναι λέγουσι πάθος (Ῥωμαϊκὴ Ἀρχαιολογία *Roman Antiquities*, 2.56.2-6).

[2] These are the memorable wars which Romulus waged. His failure to subdue any more of the neighboring nations seems to have been due to his sudden death, which happened

while he was still in the vigor of his age for warlike achievements. There are many different stories concerning it. Those who give a rather fabulous account of his life say that while he was haranguing his men in the camp, sudden darkness rushed down and out of a clear sky and a violent storm burst, after which he was nowhere to be seen; and these writers believe that he was caught up into heaven by his father, Mars. But those who write the more plausible accounts say that he was killed by his own people; and the reason they allege for his murder is that he released, without common consent, contrary to custom, the hostages he had taken from the Veientes, and that he no longer comported himself in the same manner toward the original citizens and toward those who were enrolled later, but showed great honor to the former and slighted the latter, and also because of this great cruelty in the punishment of delinquents, but chiefly because he now seemed to be harsh and arbitrary and to be exercising his power more like a tyrant than a king. For these reasons, they say, the patricians formed a conspiracy against him and resolved to slay him; and having carried out the deed in the senate-house, they divided his body into several pieces, that it might not be seen, and then came out, each one hiding his part of the body under his robes, and afterwards burying it in secret. Others say that while haranguing the people he was slain by the new citizens of Rome, and that they undertook the murder at the time when the rain and darkness occurred, the assembly of the people then being dispersed and their chief left without his guard (Ibid.).

Also from Dionysius concerning the appearance reports:

[3] . . . Ῥωμαίων εἴτε κατὰ δαίμονος πρόνοιαν εἴτ' ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς ἀνθρωπίνης ἐγένετο, παρελθὼν τις εἰς τὴν ἀγορὰν Ἰούλιος ὄνομα τῶν ἀπ' Ἀσκανίου γεωργικὸς ἀνὴρ καὶ τὸν βίον ἀνεπίληπτος, οἷος μηδὲν ἂν ψεύσασθαι κέρδους ἔνεκα οἰκείου, ἔφη παραγιγνόμενος ἐξ ἀγροῦ Ῥωμύλον **ιδεῖν** ἀπιόντα ἐκ τῆς πόλεως ἔχοντα τὰ ὄπλα, καὶ ἐπειδὴ ἐγγὺς ἐγένετο ἀκοῦσαι ταῦτα αὐτοῦ λέγοντος: [4] Ἀγγέλλε Ῥωμαίοις Ἰούλιε τὰ παρ' ἐμοῦ, ὅτι με ὁ λαχὼν ὅτ' ἐγενόμην δαίμων εἰς θεοὺς ἄγεται τὸν θνητὸν ἐκπληρώσαντα αἰῶνα: εἰμὶ δὲ Κυρῖνος. (Ibid., 2.63.3-4)

For while the Romans were in doubt as to whether divine providence or human treachery had been the cause of the disappearance, a certain man, named Julius (Proculus) descended from Ascanius, who was husbandman and of such a blameless life that he would never have told an untruth for his private advantage, arrived in the Forum and said that, as he was coming in from the country, he saw Romulus and departing from the city fully armed and that, as he drew near to him, he heard him say these words: "Julius, announce to the Romans from me, that the genius to whom I was allotted at my birth is conducting me to the gods, now that I have finished my mortal life, and that I am Quirinius" (Ibid.).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus offers the earliest detailed report of Romulus' end, clearly relating the event and the conspiracy assumption and providing a third possibility to the traditional binary options of senatorial conspiracy versus divine assumption: the explanation that a mob of nameless new citizens somehow murdered Romulus. We will see his overt affirmation of competing accounts exemplified in the passages from the various authors featured below.

Dionysius clearly did his best to render a grounded history of Rome in his work, referencing a multiplicity of sources and conspicuously delineating between what was likely authentic and what was clearly legendary or mythic (2.19.4-20, 2.68.69).

The reader should note that this earliest detailed account of Romulus seems highly suspicious of the deification and divine assumption event and favors a conspiratorial homicide explanation.

Dionysius considered the Senate murder scenario the most believable (ὅσα μὲν οὖν ὑπὸ Ῥωμύλου—a greater / more certain truth about Romulus) and spent the most time of any ancient historian explaining why he saw this to be so—chiefly the perception of Romulus’ devolution into a harsh ruling entity. Interestingly, Dionysius includes a third explanation of the disgruntled and abused new Roman citizens, as opposed to the conspiratorial government officials, killing Romulus in the storm. Finally, from Dionysius’ appearance report we learn that the eyewitness was perceived to have been virtuous; we are given as well as a basic message of new identification for Romulus (Quirinius) and a communication about his next destination.<sup>138</sup>

Of the six ancient non-Christian sources that mention the story of Romulus’ appearance to Proculus (Plutarch, *Rom.* 28.1-3; Ovid, *Fasti*, 2, 499ff.; Florus, *Epitome of the Histories of Titus Livy, History of Rome*, 1.16ff.; Lactantius, 1.15.29-33; Dio Cassius, 5.12, 56.46; Aurelius Victor, *De viris illustr.*, 2.13), only Ovid mentions that the witness, Proculus, was returning from Alba Longa. But there are no indicators of Proculus’ location on his journey when Romulus appeared.

#### 4.2.4 Ovid

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<sup>138</sup> There is also the indirect reference to his divine parentage in the Roman god Mars.



The Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.–A.D. 14) in his most famous tale, *The Metamorphoses*, relates roughly 250 myths in 15 books. He disseminates his history of mythology in poetic form, chronicling events from the creation of the earth to the deification of Julius Caesar. Ovid mixes literary genres in his poetical prose, causing scholars to not only refrain from a hard genre assignment for *Metamorphoses* but also to assume that this admixture was Ovid’s literary aim. The entire work is unique in that it runs so clearly counter to ancient polytheistic metaphysical thought. Ovid continuously elevates human beings at the expense of the honor and nobility of the Greco-Roman gods, presenting the deities as unintelligent and objects of ridicule. Ovid relays the Olympian perspective on the fate of Romulus, omitting the subsequent appearance noted by himself and other authors elsewhere:

Occiderat Tatius, populisque aequata duobus, 805

Romule, iura dabas: posita cum casside Mavors

talibus adfatur divumque hominumque parentem:

‘tempus adest, genitor, quoniam fundamine magno

res Romana valet nec praeside pendet ab uno,

praemia, (sunt promissa mihi dignoque nepoti) 810

solvere et ablatum terris inponere caelo.

tu mihi concilio quondam praesente deorum

(nam memoro memorique animo pia verba notavi)

“unus erit, quem tu tolles in caerula caeli”

dixisti: rata sit verborum summa tuorum!’ 815

adnuit omnipotens et nubibus aera caecis

occuluit tonitruque et fulgure terruit orbem.  
quae sibi promissae sensit rata signa rapinae,  
innixusque hastae pressos temone cruento  
inpavidus conscendit equos Gradivus et ictu           820  
verberis increpuit pronusque per aera lapsus  
constitit in summo nemorosi colle Palati  
reddentemque suo iam regia iura Quiriti  
abstulit Iliaden: corpus mortale per auras  
dilapsum tenues, ceu lata plumbea funda           825  
missa solet medio glans intabescere caelo;  
pulchra subit facies et pulvinaribus altis  
dignior, est qualis trabeati forma Quirini.

Tatius died, and you, Romulus, gave orders equally to both peoples. Mars, removing his helmet, addressed the father of gods and men in these words: "The time has come, lord, to grant the reward (that you promised to me and your deserving grandson), since the Roman state is strong, on firm foundations, and does not depend on a single champion: free his spirit, and raising him from earth set him in the heavens. You once said to me, in person, at a council of the gods (since I am mindful of the gracious words I noted in my retentive mind), 'There will be one who you will raise to azure heaven.' Let your words be ratified in full!"

Omnipotent Jupiter nodded, and, veiling the sky with dark clouds, he terrified men on earth with thunder and lightning. Mars knew this as a sign that ratified the promised ascension, and leaning on his spear, he vaulted, fearlessly, into his chariot, the horses straining at the blood-wet pole, and cracked the loud whip. Dropping headlong through the air, he landed on the summit of the wooded Palatine. There he caught up Romulus, son of Ilia, as he was dealing royal justice to his people. The king's mortal body dissolved in the clear atmosphere, like the lead bullet, that often melts in mid-air, hurled by the broad thong of a catapult. Now he has beauty of form, and he is Quirinus, clothed in ceremonial robes, such a form as is worthier of the sacred high seats of the gods" (*Metamorphoses* Book 14, lines 805-828).<sup>139</sup>

Ovid again comments on Romulus' end and appearance in one of his poems, *Fasti*:

est locus, antiqui Caprae dixere paludem:

forte tuis illic, Romule, iura dabas.

sol fugit, et removent subeuntia nubila caelum,

et gravis effusus decidit imber aquis.

hinc tonat, hinc missis abrumpitur ignibus aether: 495

fit fuga, rex patriis astra petebat equis.

luctus erat, falsaeque patres in crimine caedis,

haesissetque animis forsitan illa fides;

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<sup>139</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* Book 14, lines 805-828, translated by A. S. Kline.

sed Proculus Longa veniebat Iulius Alba,  
     lunaque fulgebat, nec facis usus erat,           500  
 cum subito motu saepes tremuere sinistrae:  
     rettulit ille gradus, horrueruntque comae.  
 pulcher et humano maior trabeaque decorus  
     Romulus in media visus adesse via  
 et dixisse simul 'prohibe lugere Quirites,           505  
     nec violent lacrimis numina nostra suis:  
 tura ferant placentque novum pia turba Quirinum,  
     et patrias artes militiamque colant.'  
 iussit et in tenues oculis evanuit auras;  
     convocat hic populos iussaque verba refert.           510  
 templa deo fiunt: collis quoque dictus ab illo est,  
     et referunt certi sacra paterna dies (Ibid., 2.491-512).

There's a place the ancients called the She-goat's Marsh: You chanced to be judging the people there, Romulus. The sun vanished, and rising clouds obscured the sky, And a heavy shower of torrential rain fell. Then it thundered. Then the sky was split by lightning: All fled, and the king rose to the stars behind his father's horses. There was mourning, senators were falsely charged with murder, And perhaps that belief might have stuck in people's minds, But Julius Proculus was travelling from Alba Longa, With the moon shining, and having no need of a torch, When suddenly the hedge to his left moved and shook: So that he drew back a step, his hair bristling. It seemed to him that

Romulus, handsome, more than human, And finely dressed, stood there, in the centre of the road, Saying: "Prevent the Quirites from mourning me, And profaning my divinity by their tears: Let the pious crowds bring incense and propitiate The new god Quirinus, and cultivate their father's art of war." So he commanded and vanished into thin air: Proculus gathered the people and reported the command. Temples were built for the god, the hill named for him, And on certain days the ancestral rites are re-enacted (*Fasti* 2.491-512).

Ovid can legitimately be called a contemporary of the Gospel traditions, given the time in which he lived, but it is more precise to say that his work was likely a precursor to the Jesus stories. *Fasti* (*Book of Days*) comprises a six-book Latin poem most scholars think Ovid had published ca. A.D. 10. It was written as an interview with the Roman gods in which they explain the festivals and worship practices. Scholars have identified in it numerous errors, both in orthopraxy and in orthodoxy, and refer to it as unreliable (Newlands, 1995:2). Never intended as a history like those of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, or Plutarch, the unique genre used by Ovid allows for a wide margin of literary freedom.

As expected, Ovid begins with an Olympian discussion between Jupiter and Mars concerning Romulus in *Metamorphosis* and concludes that account with Romulus being translated to Olympus with his divine father under cover of a thunderstorm at the time of the Roman procession. In *Fasti* Ovid provides the eyewitness account from Proculus with no explanation as to the discrepancy between his account and Romulus' purported passive ascent with Mars in

*Metamorphosis*.<sup>140</sup> Ovid clearly repudiates the Senate conspiracy theory so favored by Dionysius in his earlier rendering of the tale, as well as by many other ancient authors. Given that the theme of *Metamorphosis* is expressed in its title (meaning “change”), the apotheosis of Romulus was certainly Ovid’s aim here, with an ancillary transformative expression with his name and the various new ways to honor his memory post-mortem.

#### 4.2.5 Livy

The Roman historian Titus Livius Patavinus (59 B.C. to A.D. 17), known as “Livy,” wrote an ambitious and exemplary history of his country. Covering a period from the founding of Rome ca. 770 B.C. to his own lifetime, when Rome was ruled by Augustus, Livy attempted to chronicle the rise of the nation. Livy was educated in philosophy and rhetoric, and scholars presume that he had no military experience based on some overt descriptive errors concerning the Roman army in his works (Champion 2015, 196). Livy was cited by many subsequent authors and was generally held in high esteem by scholars of the ancient world. In Livy’s first book he repeats the salient details of the death or disappearance but adds the return element:

[2] Romana pubes sedato tandem pauore postquam ex tam turbido die serena et tranquilla lux rediit, ubi uacuam sedem regiam uidit, etsi satis credebat patribus qui proximi steterant sublimem raptum procella, tamen uelut orbitatis metu icta maestum aliquamdiu silentium obtinuit. [3] deinde a paucis initio facto, deum deo natum, regem parentemque urbis Romanae saluere uniuersi Romulum iubent; pacem precibus

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<sup>140</sup> Perhaps bilocation or a divine visit after arriving instantaneously at Olympus with Mars.

exposcunt, uti uolens propitius suam semper sospitet progeniem. [4] fuisse credo tum quoque aliquos qui discerptum regem patrum manibus taciti arguerent; manauit enim haec quoque sed perobscura fama; illam alteram admiratio uiri et pauor praesens nobilitauit. [5] et consilio etiam unius hominis addita rei dicitur fides. namque Proculus Iulius, sollicita ciuitate desiderio regis et infensa patribus, grauis, ut traditur, quamuis magnae rei auctor in contionem prodit. [6] 'Romulus' inquit, 'Quirites, parens urbis huius, prima hodierna luce caelo repente delapsus se mihi obuium dedit. cum perfusus horrore uenerabundusque adstissem petens precibus ut contra intueri fas esset, [7] "abi, nuntia" inquit "Romanis, caelestes ita uelle ut mea Roma caput orbis terrarum sit; proinde rem militarem colant sciantque et ita posteris tradant nullas opes humanas armis Romanis resistere posse. [8] 'haec' inquit 'locutus sublimis abiit.'" mirum quantum illi uiro nuntianti haec fidei fuerit, quamque desiderium Romuli apud plebem exercitumque facta fide immortalitatis lenitum sit (*Ab Urbe Condita—The History of Rome*, 1.16.1-8).

A violent thunder storm suddenly arose and enveloped the king in so dense a cloud that he was quite invisible to the assembly. From that hour Romulus was no longer seen on earth. [2] When the fears of the Roman youth were allayed by the return of bright, calm sun-shine after such fearful weather, they saw that the royal seat was vacant. Whilst they fully believed the assertion of the Senators, who had been standing close to him, that he had been snatched away to heaven by a whirlwind, still, like men suddenly bereaved, fear and grief kept them for some time speechless. [3] At length, after a few had taken the initiative, the whole of those present hailed Romulus as "a god, the son of a god, the King and Father of the City of Rome." They put up supplications for his grace and favour,

and prayed that he would be propitious to his children and save and protect them. [4] I believe, however, that even then there were some who secretly hinted that he had been torn limb from limb by the senators, a tradition to this effect, though certainly a very dim one, has filtered down to us. [5] The other, which I follow, has been the prevailing one, due, no doubt, to the admiration felt for the man and the apprehensions excited by his disappearance. This generally accepted belief was strengthened by one man's clever device. The tradition runs that Proculus Julius, a man whose authority had weight in matters of even the gravest importance, seeing how deeply the community felt the loss of the king, and how incensed they were against the senators, came forward into the assembly and said: "Quirites! [6] at break of dawn, today, the Father of this City suddenly descended from heaven and appeared to me. [7] Whilst, thrilled with awe, I stood rapt before him in deepest reverence, praying that I might be pardoned for gazing upon him, 'Go,' said he, 'tell the Romans that it is the will of heaven that my Rome should be the head of all the world. Let them henceforth cultivate the arts of war, and let them know assuredly, and hand down the knowledge to posterity, that no human might can withstand the arms of Rome.'" [8] It is marvelous what credit was given to this man's story, and how the grief of the people and the army was soothed by the belief which had been created in the immortality of Romulus (Ibid.).

Livy clearly embellished in his accounts; both ancient and modern authors affirm this, though he did also recount much that was solidly historical (Miles, 1995:67, 135-36; Ogilvie, 2015; Usher, 1997:10, 12; Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology vol. 2, 2015:791-92). Livy's account of Romulus' demise includes the requisite storm and then the disappearance, followed by the



Proculus sighting/message. Livy recounts the prevailing opinion to have been one of divine assumption to Olympus under the guise of a dense storm cloud. There is no discussion of Mars or Jupiter or dissemination of Ovidian details of the chariot on which Mars rode when he landed to claim Romulus. There is no death here affirmed, though Livy relays the suspicion of Senate homicide collusion. Livy goes further, describing why he and others leaned in the direction of the divine assumption version (admiration) and calling Proculus' announcement a "clever device" (*illam alteram admiratio viri et pavor praesens nobilitavit*) given to calm the confused and bellicose Roman commoners who found themselves sans their beloved king.

Livy tells the reader why he preferred the majority report—for the same reasons the crowd did: their high regard for Romulus and their fear of the circumstances surrounding his disappearance. It is instructive to notice that none of the New Testament witnesses offer similar reasons for their belief in Jesus' return. Livy seems to have believed that the reports of Romulus' murder by the Senate were suspect; however, with regard to the competing tradition to which he adhered, once again, he credited Proculus' claim as having been useful in calming the wrath of the Romans toward the Senate members, prefacing his rendering of Proculus' address to the grieving Romans.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Since the Florus text is based on Livy and postdates the Gospels, it will be only briefly featured here; "16: After making these arrangements, Romulus was suddenly borne away from human sight while he was holding an assembly near the lake of the She-goat. Some think he was torn to pieces by the Senate because of his excessive harshness; but a storm which arose and an eclipse of the sun created the impression that he had been deified. This belief was strengthened when Julius Proculus declared that Romulus had appeared to him in a form more majestic than he had possessed in his lifetime, and also commanded that they should regard him as a deity, and declared that his name in heaven was Quirinus, and that it was the will of the gods that Rome should rule over the world" (Lucius Annaeus Florus, *The Epitome of the Roman Empire*, 1.16). Notice here too the affirmation of a dual

#### 4.2.6 Plutarch

The Greek essayist and biographer Plutarch (A.D. 46-120) wrote a number of biographies under the series title “Parallel Lives” (Βίοι Παράλληλοι, or “Plutarch’s Lives”) ca. A.D. 75. This series included 23 pairs of stories of notable men, in each case one Greek and one Roman,<sup>142</sup> provided to inspire the reader and reflect the nobility of the cultures they represented. Many scholars believe that these biographies must have taken Plutarch a long time to compile, especially given the abundance of citations he provides (Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology, vol. 3, 2015:430; Copleston, 1975:453-54). In the opening lines of Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander the Great* he specified that his literary aim was not primarily historical but that he wanted to extol the ethical qualities of the men about whom he wrote (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 1.1-3). One of his chosen subjects was the first king and founder of Rome—Romulus. Plutarch also chose to write about one of the early notable kings of Rome, Numa. In both his Numa biography and his Romulus biography Plutarch relates the conclusion of the Romulus tale:

ἑβδομον ἑνιαυτὸν ἢ Ῥώμη καὶ τριακοστὸν ἤδη Ῥωμύλου βασιλεύοντος ὤκεῖτο: πέμπτη δὲ ἰσταμένου μηνός, ἦν νῦν ἡμέραν νώνας Καπρατίνας καλοῦσι, θυσίαν τινὰ δημοτελεῖν πρὸ τῆς πόλεως ὁ Ῥωμύλος ἔθυε περὶ τὸ καλούμενον Αἰγὸς ἔλος, καὶ παρῆν ἢ τε βουλή καὶ τοῦ δήμου τὸ πλεῖστον. [2] ἐξαίφνης δὲ μεγάλης περὶ τὸν ἀέρα τροπῆς γενομένης καὶ νέφους ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἐρείσαντος ἄμα πνεύματι καὶ ζάλη, τὸν μὲν ἄλλον ὄμιλον

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explanation, with the stronger tradition transmitted, albeit with suspicion, as Florus remarks that the eclipse and storm likely “created the impression of deification.”

<sup>142</sup> With four singular, or unpaired, biographies included in the corpus as well.

ἐκπλαγέντα συνέβη φυγεῖν καὶ σκεδασθῆναι, τὸν δὲ Ῥωμύλον ἀφανῆ γενέσθαι, καὶ μήτε αὐτὸν ἔτι μήτε σῶμα τεθνηκότος εὐρεθῆναι, χαλεπὴν δὲ τιν' ὑπόνοιαν ἄψασθαι τῶν πατρικίων, καὶ ῥυῆναι λόγον ἐν τῷ δήμῳ κατ' αὐτῶν ὡς πάλαι βαρυνόμενοι τὸ βασιλεύεσθαι καὶ μεταστῆσαι τὸ κράτος εἰς αὐτοὺς θέλοντες ἀνέλοιεν τὸν βασιλέα, καὶ γὰρ ἐδόκει τραχύτερον ἤδη προσφέρεσθαι καὶ μοναρχικώτερον αὐτοῖς. [3] ἀλλὰ ταύτην μὲν τὴν ὑποψίαν ἐθεράπευον εἰς θεῶν τιμὰς ἀνάγοντες ὡς οὐ τεθνηκότα τὸν Ῥωμύλον, ἀλλὰ κρείττονος ὄντα μοίρας: καὶ Πρόκλος, ἀνὴρ ἐπιφανής, διωμόσατο Ῥωμύλον ἰδεῖν εἰς οὐρανὸν σὺν τοῖς ὅπλοις ἀναφερόμενον, καὶ φωνῆς ἀκοῦσαι κελεύοντος αὐτὸν ὀνομάζεσθαι Κυρῖνον (*Numa*, 2.1-2.3).

It was the thirty-seventh year, counted from the foundation of Rome, when Romulus, then reigning, did, on the fifth day of the month of July, called the Caprotine Nones, offer a public sacrifice at the Goat's Marsh, in presence of the senate and people of Rome. Suddenly the sky was darkened, a thick cloud of storm and rain settled on the earth; the common people fled in affright, and were dispersed; and in this whirlwind Romulus disappeared, his body being never found either living or dead. A foul suspicion presently attached to the patricians, and rumours were current among the people as if that they, weary of kingly government, and exasperated of late by the imperious deportment of Romulus towards them, had plotted against his life and made him away, that so they might assume the authority and government into their own hands. This suspicion they sought to turn aside by decreeing divine honours to Romulus, as to one not dead but **translated to a higher condition**. And Proculus, a man of note, took oath that he saw

Romulus caught up into heaven in his arms and vestments, and heard him, as he ascended, cry out that they should hereafter style him by the name of Quirinus (Ibid.).

[3] ὅθεν εἰς ὑποψίαν καὶ διαβολὴν ἐνέπεσε παραλόγως ἀφανισθέντος αὐτοῦ μετ' ὀλίγον χρόνον. ἠφανίσθη δὲ νύλαις Ἰουλίαις ὡς νῦν ὀνομάζουσιν, ὡς δὲ τότε, Κυντιλίαις, οὐδὲν εἰπεῖν βέβαιον οὐδ' ὀμολογούμενον πυθέσθαι περὶ τῆς τελευτῆς ἀπολιπών, ἀλλ' ἢ τὸν χρόνον, ὡς προεῖρηται. δρᾶται γὰρ ἔτι νῦν ὅμοια τῷ τότε πάθει πολλὰ κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν ἐκείνην. [4] οὐ δεῖ δὲ θαυμάζειν τὴν ἀσάφειαν, ὅπου Σκηπίωνος Ἀφρικανοῦ μετὰ δεῖπνον οἴκοι τελευτήσαντος οὐκ ἔσχε πίστιν οὐδ' ἔλεγχον ὁ τρόπος τῆς τελευτῆς, ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν αὐτομάτως ὄντα φύσει νοσώδη καμῖν λέγουσιν, οἱ δ' αὐτὸν ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ φαρμάκοις ἀποθανεῖν, οἱ δὲ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς τὴν ἀναπνοὴν ἀπολαβεῖν αὐτοῦ νύκτωρ παρεϊπεσόντας. [5] καίτοι Σκηπίων ἔκειτο νεκρὸς ἐμφανῆς ἰδεῖν πᾶσι, καὶ τὸ σῶμα παρεῖχε πᾶσιν ὀρώμενον ὑποψίαν τινὰ τοῦ πάθους καὶ κατανόησιν: Ῥωμύλου δ' ἄφνω μεταλλάξαντος οὔτε μέρος ὤφθη σώματος οὔτε λείψανον ἐσθῆτος. ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν εἵκαζον ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τοὺς βουλευτὰς ἐπαναστάντας αὐτῷ καὶ διαφθείραντας, νείμαντας τὸ σῶμα καὶ μέρος ἕκαστον ἐνθέμενον εἰς τὸν κόλπον ἐξενεγκεῖν: [6] ἕτεροι δ' οἴονται μήτ' ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ τοῦ Ἡφαίστου μήτε μόνων τῶν βουλευτῶν παρόντων γενέσθαι τὸν ἀφανισμόν, ἀλλὰ τυχεῖν μὲν ἔξω περὶ τὸ καλούμενον αἰγὸς [ἢ ζορκὸς] ἔλος ἐκκλησίαν ἄγοντα τὸν Ῥωμύλον, ἄφνω δὲ θαυμαστὰ καὶ κρείττονα λόγου περὶ τὸν ἀέρα πάθη γενέσθαι καὶ μεταβολὰς ἀπίστους: τοῦ μὲν γὰρ ἡλίου τὸ φῶς ἐκλιπεῖν, νύκτα δὲ κατασχεῖν οὐ πραεῖαν οὐδ' ἡσυχον, ἀλλὰ βροντὰς τε δεινὰς καὶ πνοὰς ἀνέμων ζάλην ἐλαυνόντων πανταχόθεν ἔχουσαν: [7] ἐν δὲ τούτῳ τὸν μὲν πολὺν ὄχλον σκεδασθέντα φυγεῖν, τοὺς δὲ δυνατοὺς συστραφεῖν μετ' ἀλλήλων: ἐπεὶ δ' ἔληξεν ἡ ταραχὴ καὶ τὸ

φῶς ἐξέλαμψε, καὶ τῶν πολλῶν εἰς ταῦτό πάλιν συνερχομένων ζήτησις ἦν τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ πόθος, οὐκ ἔαν τοὺς δυνατοὺς ἐξετάζειν οὐδὲ πολυπραγμονεῖν, ἀλλὰ τιμᾶν παρακελεύεσθαι πᾶσι καὶ σέβεσθαι Ῥωμύλον, ὡς ἀνηρπασμένον εἰς θεοὺς καὶ θεὸν εὐμενῆ γενησόμενον αὐτοῖς ἐκ χρηστοῦ βασιλέως (*Romulus*, 27.3-7).

[3] Wherefore suspicion and calumny fell upon that body when he disappeared unaccountably a short time after. He disappeared on the Nones of July, as they now call the month, then Quintilis, leaving no certain account nor even any generally accepted tradition of his death, aside from the date of it, which I have just given. For on that day many ceremonies are still performed which bear a likeness to what then came to pass.

[4] Nor need we wonder at this uncertainty, since although Scipio Africanus died at home after dinner, there is no convincing proof of the manner of his end, but some say that he passed away naturally, being of a sickly habit, some that he died of poison administered by his own hand, and some that his enemies broke into his house at night and smothered him. [5] And yet Scipio's dead body lay exposed for all to see, and all who beheld it formed therefrom some suspicion and conjecture of what had happened to it; whereas Romulus disappeared suddenly, and no portion of his body or fragment of his clothing remained to be seen. [6] But some conjectured that the senators, convened in the temple of Vulcan, fell upon him and slew him, then cut his body in pieces, put each a portion into the folds of his robe, and so carried it away. [7] during which the multitude dispersed and fled, but the nobles gathered closely together; and when the storm had ceased, and the sun shone out, and the multitude, now gathered together again in the same place as before, anxiously sought for their king, the nobles would not suffer them

to inquire into his disappearance nor busy themselves about it, but exhorted them all to honour and revere Romulus, since he had been caught up into heaven, and was to be a benevolent god for them instead of a good king (Ibid.).

Also from Plutarch,

οὕτως οὖν<sup>1</sup> ἄνδρα τῶν πατρικίων γένει πρῶτον ἦθει τε δοκιμώτατον αὐτῷ τε Ῥωμύλῳ πιστὸν καὶ συνήθη, τῶν ἀπ' Ἄλβης ἐποίκων, Ἰούλιον Πρόκλον, εἰς ἀγορὰν παρελθόντα<sup>2</sup> καὶ τῶν ἀγιωτάτων ἔνορκον ἱερῶν ἀψάμενον εἰπεῖν ἐν πᾶσιν, ὡς ὁδὸν αὐτῷ βαδίζοντι Ῥωμύλος ἐξ ἐναντίας προσιῶν φανείη, καλὸς μὲν ὀφθῆναι καὶ μέγας ὡς οὐποτε πρόσθεν, ὄπλοις δὲ λαμπροῖς καὶ φλέγουσι κεκοσμημένος. [2] αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν ἐκπλαγεὶς πρὸς τὴν ὄψιν ὧ βασιλεῦ,' φάναι, 'τί δὴ παθὼν ἢ διανοηθεὶς, ἡμᾶς μὲν ἐν αἰτίαις πεποίηκας ἀδίκους καὶ πονηραῖς, πᾶσαν δὲ τὴν πόλιν ὀρφανὴν ἐν μυρίῳ πένθει προλέλοιπας;' ἐκεῖνον δ' ἀποκρίνασθαι: 'θεοῖς ἔδοξεν ὧ Πρόκλε τοσοῦτον ἡμᾶς γενέσθαι μετ' ἀνθρώπων χρόνον, ἐκεῖθεν ὄντας,<sup>1</sup> καὶ πόλιν ἐπ' ἀρχῇ καὶ δόξῃ μεγίστη κτίσαντας, αὐθις οἰκεῖν οὐρανόν. ἀλλὰ χαῖρε καὶ φράζε Ῥωμαίοις, ὅτι σωφροσύνην μετ' ἀνδρείας ἀσκοῦντες ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἀνθρωπίνης ἀφίξονται δυνάμεως. ἐγὼ δ' ὑμῖν εὐμενῆς ἔσομαι δαίμων Κυρῖνος.' (Ibid., 28.1-2)

At this pass, then, it is said that one of the patricians, a man of noblest birth, and of the most reputable character, a trusted and intimate friend also of Romulus himself, and one of the colonists from Alba, Julius Proculus by name, went into the forum and solemnly swore by the most sacred emblems before all the people that, as he was travelling on the road, he had seen Romulus coming to meet him, fair and stately to the eye as never

before, and arrayed in bright and shining armour. [2] He himself, then, affrighted at the sight, had said: "O King, what possessed thee, or what purpose hadst thou, that thou hast left us patricians a prey to unjust and wicked accusations, and the whole city sorrowing without end at the loss of its father?" Whereupon Romulus had replied: "It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, from whom I came, that I should be with mankind only a short time, and that after founding a city destined to be the greatest on earth for empire and glory, I should dwell again in heaven. So farewell, and tell the Romans that if they practise self-restraint, and add to it valour, they will reach the utmost heights of human power. And I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus." (Ibid.)<sup>143</sup>

Plutarch was either contemporaneous with the Gospel tradents' transcription events (Matthew/Luke) or lived sometime later (Paul, 1 Corinthians 15), so there is reason to question whether he could have influenced anything about the Jesus tradition. Plutarch's account includes all of the features of the earlier ones, with some additional details. He makes no comment akin to Livy's on his personal position or motivational leanings concerning Romulus' death and postmortem state; however, he does unmistakably express the benefit this account provided for the group of senators who were at the time under intense suspicion by the Roman constituency. Like others, Plutarch presents the colonist from Alba Longa (Proculus) who swore to having seen Romulus, post-disappearance, as one whose reputation was sterling, a man free

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<sup>143</sup> Plutarch continues in 28.3: "These things seemed to the Romans worthy of belief, from the character of the man who related them, and from the oath which he had taken; moreover, some influence from heaven also, akin to inspiration, laid hold upon their emotions, for no man contradicted Proculus, but all put aside suspicion and calumny and prayed to Quirinus, and honoured him as a god."

from corruption. Plutarch includes no discussion of Mars or the gods, though he does allude to a clear split between those who believed the theory of a naturalistic, patrician-planned murder and those who believed that Romulus had been translated to the abode of the gods.

#### **4.2.7 Cassius Dio**

We will quickly pass over and dismiss the report of the Roman consul and historian Lucius Cassius Dio Cocceianus (*Dio Cassius or Cassius Dio*, A.D. 150-235), as his account is both fragmentary and far too late to have been influential to the Gospel tradents. Cassius Dio does affirm that Romulus had fallen out of favor with both the people and the Senate and clearly relates the murder of Romulus by the Senate members and Proculus' claim to have witnessed a vision of Romulus (Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Historiae Romanae, Roman History*, 1.5.). Proculus, an elder and a respected Roman senator, took an oath that he had seen Romulus caught up into heaven in his weapons and vestments and had heard him, as he ascended, cry out that the people should thereafter refer to him as "Quirinus."

Cassius Dio offers a thoroughly naturalistic interpretation here, not relating any assumption/ascension or apotheosis for Romulus—an interesting omission when one comprehends the chronological distance of his account from the alleged event. Given that nearly a millennium had passed since the purported event, the accumulation of legendary details *should* have been maximized in this account, but Cassius Dio gives the opposite—a truncated, unadorned story with no supernatural inclusions.



### 4.3.1 Evaluation

There are numerous reports concerning Romulus from ancient times. Our earliest extensive report of the finale of Romulus' sojourn on earth comes from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who was extremely skeptical of the Romulus disappearance and deification accounts. Ovid, whose account is the most sensational, was unmistakably recounting myths in his works, and Cicero was notably brief, adding nothing to the accounts of Dionysius or Ovid. Livy seems to have been a believer in the divine assumption position but was minimally skeptical about Proculus' claim of a Romulus sighting. Plutarch was likely too late to have influenced the Gospel transmitters; both he and Livy seem to have held to the theory that the founder of their beloved country was divine and that he was translated and appeared to Proculus, though both give us ample reason to doubt their position on this score. Cassius Dio's is the latest account; he alone of the authors merged the Senate murder with the reappearance and offered no reference to deification or assumption; it is worth noting in this regard that Cassius' rendition was penned two hundred years after Jesus. Finally, there is nothing in any of the accounts that would lead one to believe that the writer was passing along an eyewitness or firsthand report. In contrast, the New Testament data contains numerous indicators of firsthand reporting (Luke 1:1-4; John 15:26-27, 19:35, 21:24; Acts 1:21-22, 10:39-41; 1 John 1:1-4; see Bauckham, 2008a:65-70, Taylor, 1935:41-3, 170; Byrskog, 2000:173-81).

With respect to our first criterion consideration, we see, directly from the sources themselves at various points, that there are clearly competing narratives regarding this event, with many of the ancient authors either leaning toward the naturalistic regicide tradition or at least suspicious of the stronger appearance and deification tradition (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, Plutarch,

and Livy). This decreases the probability of a genetic match for the Jesus account, as there is no competing naturalistic tradition or general tradent suspicion communicated in the primary transmission of the Jesus demise and return events.<sup>144</sup> The fact that many of these ancient accounts of Romulus include alternate versions of the story makes a legitimate literary connection very difficult to credibly establish.

If there was no conspiracy and murder by the Senators, then this was an apotheosis event and not a “resurrection,” since death is a sine qua non of any claim to resurrection. If one opts for the naturalistic death/murder version, as do many of the ancients, then, *ceteris paribus*, one must drop the divine / son of God / heaven ascent parallels. This is the scandal of the cross—that a “conqueror” would die in such a gruesome fashion, tortured and murdered by his enemies, was inconceivable to the pagan mind. Alternatively, if one opts for the divine assumption / Mars abduction scenario to explain Romulus’ mysterious disappearance, one cannot cite as a viable parallel the “violent death / murder at the hands of Romans” or darkness as indicative of pathos/mourning. Public witness of the torture and death of Jesus does not match either of the competing Romulus demise interpretations.

The majority report is extraordinarily vague on the possibilities of bodily mutilation, homicide, and concealment, though the earliest account (Dionysius) reports just this version of events. Even if one accepts this learned speculation as to Romulus’ end, it bears no resemblance to the stark details given in the Passion narratives or to the reported interment of Jesus. In any

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<sup>144</sup> Although there was a report of a post-fact polemic offered by the Jewish authorities to account for the empty tomb report (Matthew 28:11–15).

multiplicity of accounts there will be both legitimate, minor variations and consistent data contact, yet when the accounts render particular events in radically dissimilar ways that cannot be reasonably accounted for by way of thematic emphasis or genre convention, the possibility for establishing parallel construction is considerably weakened.

Chronological manuscript considerations with regard to the Romulus parallel yield a generally positive possibility for proponents of the strong homogeneity position, as most of the narratives concerning the Romulus event under analysis predate both the events of the Jesus story and its subsequent inscription by interested parties.<sup>145</sup> It is worth noting that even the earliest accounts to which we have access concerning this Romulus event (Dionysius and Cicero) are still more than six centuries from the alleged event historically; that is to say, the report is still chronologically distant from the historic era in which the event was supposed to take place.

#### **4.3.2 Similarities (Death)**

- 1) Both Jesus and Romulus were executed publicly by Romans (Matthew 27:11–56; Mark 15:1–41; Luke 23:1–49; John 19:1–37).
- 2) At the time of both Romulus' and Jesus' demise, there was a report of localized darkness (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44–45).
- 3) Both Jesus and Romulus were beloved leaders (Matthew 5:1, 7:28, 8:1, 14:13; Mark 3:7, 10:1; Luke 8:42, 11:29, 14:25, 23:27; John 7:12, 31).

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<sup>145</sup> Cassius Dio and Plutarch postdate the Gospel accounts, while Ovid, Livy, and Dionysius predate them.

### 4.3.3 Differences (Death)

As far as the criterion of word or event similarity is concerned, there seem to be three relevant matches: (1) the storm and darkness (σκοτος) that attended both Romulus' departure and Jesus' death in the Gospels, as well as, broadly, (2) the public nature of the departure or demise and (3) the general identity of those responsible for their respective earthly ends. The causation of the darkness in the Synoptics is not commented upon,<sup>146</sup> and specificity is lacking in all of the accounts of the darkness in the Romulan tales—with some reporting a deity-instigated whirlwind (Ovid); others relating a severe thunderstorm (Ovid, Livy, Dionysius, Plutarch); Cicero claiming that there was an eclipse; and the latest account in the group affirming both a thunderstorm and an eclipse. The darkness in the Romulus accounts serves as an explanation for those ancient authors purporting regicide, with the murder itself, either by the new Romans or by the senators (Dionysius) being obscured by this occurrence. Darkness serves neither of these purposes in the Gospels. Alternatively, the Romulan darkness reports could also be applied to support the divine assumption event story. Interestingly, one of the oldest Romulan accounts (Dionysius), as well as the latest we have mentioned (Cassius Dio) report Romulus being dismembered by the patricians in the Senate-house *prior to the storm* and the public fervor over Romulus' disappearance.

As far as the demise event having been witnessed/attended by many individuals is concerned,<sup>147</sup> the dissimilarities are numerous. The crowd that was attending the Jesus event was expecting

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<sup>146</sup> This fact has led to speculations of both eclipses and storms.

<sup>147</sup> Of both high and low position in the socioeconomic strata.

the execution of a condemned man. Not so with Romulus, who was either commiserating with his soldiers or offering a sacrifice to one of his gods in the presence of loyal subjects as a royal aristocrat. Jesus was tried, beaten, and crucified as an alleged insurrectionist, while the Roman king Romulus was either stabbed and dismembered or did not die at all. Livy and Dionysus report that the large crowd dispersed when the cloud/darkness enveloped Romulus, only to return when the darkness dissipated. The darkness at the Jesus event was not reported to instill fear or to initiate retreat for the crucifixion onlookers; it is simply offered as a description by the Gospel tradents. Romulus was either translated to the realm of the gods without dying or was killed, either during the public disappearance event by his senators or during the storm/darkness by some disaffected subjects.

Jesus was not, in any sense, a Roman politico, and there is no evidence of a Roman power play resulting in his demise, as in the case of Romulus. There was no controversy concerning his death, nor was his execution viewed as a mysterious or secretive event. In point of fact, the death of Jesus is generally accepted as a particularly well attested piece of ancient data (Crossan, 1991:145; Paget, 2001:136; Meier, 2006:125-37; Evans and Chilton, 1998:455-57; Köstenberger and Kellum, 2009:104-08, 110; Boyd and Eddy, 2007:127; Dunn, 2003:339; Ehrman, 2008:136; Blomberg, 2009:211-14).<sup>148</sup> Neither is there evidence of any higher-ranking Roman politicians having been involved in the actual execution of Jesus. Again, one of the oldest Roman

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<sup>148</sup> Dunn is worth quoting on this score, stating as he does that the crucifixion and baptism are the “two facts in the life of Jesus [that] command almost universal assent” and that they “rank so high on the ‘almost impossible to doubt or deny’ scale of historical facts” that they are often the starting points for the study of the historical Jesus (339).

accounts reviewed (Dionysius) claims the naturalistic murder scenario as “the more plausible account” rather than treating the event as an assumption and apotheosis.

When someone attempts to press the “missing body” parallel between these figures, they can do so only by ignoring key chronological divergence. The missing body of Romulus was affirmed *regarding his death* or cessation of earthly activity, while the missing body of Jesus had to do with the post-death and interment corpse. This missing corpse of Romulus led to speculation concerning his divinity (avoidance of death altogether), as well as to the alternative tale concerning senatorial conspiracy (concealed regicide). There was no question about Jesus’ death report, as there were numerous witnesses and corporate body burial (Wright, 2009:22; Robinson, 1973:131). Some have gone so far as to refer to Jesus’ death as one of the most certain events from the ancient world (Crossan, 1994).<sup>149</sup> However, on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover celebration Jesus’ body was missing from the tomb.

With regard to the suggested link that both Jesus and Romulus were “leaders,” the differences are conspicuous. Romulus was hailed as the founder and king of the Roman Empire, while Jesus was a signs-working itinerant evangelist from an obscure town in Palestine. Romulus was considered Rome’s greatest leader, while Jesus had no political power or prestige. Jesus’ popularity was derived from his healings and exorcisms, while Romulus’ notoriety stemmed

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<sup>149</sup> It should be noted that Crossan is not a Christian scholar. Crossan also counters critical consensus and disputes the authenticity of the burial tradition, instead speculating that wild dogs devoured the corpse of Jesus.

from his paternity and successful regal rule. The scope of their respective influence, as well as the events that secured it, are also radically divergent.

I will leave it to the reader to decide on the basis of what has been presented whether there is sufficiently strong similarity to assign authorial mimicry on the part of the Gospel authors. To aid in this determination, however, I offer a brief summation of the details covered in this chapter thus far to ensure that the salient points are fresh in the reader's mind. The word/event similarity for the public nature of the events is unambiguous in both narratives, as is the attendant darkness. There seems, however, to be no further substantive connection between the disappearance of or, alternatively, the murder of Romulus by the senators/Romans and the description of the death of Jesus of Nazareth by Rome.<sup>150</sup> The differences certainly outweigh the minimal, general similarities, and the minimal matches that have been posited are neither detailed nor complex.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Pace Carrier (referring to his parallel claim earlier rendered above), there seems to be no indication in the relevant literature to justify the description of "willful submission to be murdered" on the part of Romulus, unless one reads this into Plutarch's account (*Romulus* 28.1-2, above). Jesus' body was handled, prepared, and interred before it was no longer available for these functions, as opposed to that of Romulus, whose slain corpse was never viewed or recovered, leading to speculation of the murderers concealing his body parts in their robes, post dismemberment. Carrier's parallel—" . . . both connected their resurrections to moral teachings"—is altogether too vague to be of use. The titles "God, Son of God, King, and Father" are ubiquitous honorific titles, though Jesus is never referred to as "Father." Knowing the names of those who fled seems utterly inconsequential, unless this detail is used to mask the indirect point here proffered of flight after the Roman king's "vanishing"; those who fled following the mysterious suspected homicide of a revered public figure during a storm and the women who reportedly fled when Jesus' tomb was found to be empty are more dissimilar than alike. Any commonalities with respect to the time period of waiting to make a public proclamation are to be bracketed by Jesus' command to his disciples to wait in Jerusalem before making their declaration, as well as by the sheer number of those attesting to appearances of Jesus (versus one witness for Romulus) and the attendant signs and wonders (Acts 2).

<sup>151</sup> More similarities of a vague nature could be produced: e.g., both Jesus and Romulus were (in Romulus' case purported to have been) executed by Romans, both were (again, in Romulus' case, assumed to have been)

The charts below summarize the method results culled from the analysis of the disappearance/death and return events of Jesus and Romulus from the primary source data.

## Death (Jesus and Romulus)

<i>Category</i>	Competition	Chronology	Word & Event Similarities	Number & Quality of Contacts	Centrality
<b>Romulus (Death/Disappearance)</b>	<b>Negative -</b> The various Romulus reports are inconsistent concerning departure (regicide versus divine assumption).	<b>Positive -</b> The Romulus data is clearly antecedent to the Jesus data.	<b>Mixed/Positive &amp; Negative -</b> The Romulus data contains few general similarities but yields much disparate information in comparison to the data regarding Jesus of Nazareth.	<b>Negative -</b> There are three basic connections but dozens of rudimentary, as well as complex, differences present within the connections and contextually conspicuous divergences.	<b>Negative -</b> The departure event for Romulus is not the central event in his reported life, as it is in the Jesus narrative.

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betrayed, both were loved by some yet hated by others in authority, and both were of high reputation. Again, the reader is encouraged to weigh these against the abundant differentiation between these events.



#### 4.3.4 Similarities (Appearance)

- 1) Both men were reportedly seen by a person or persons after their demise.
- 2) Both men gave a message at the time they appeared following their demise.

#### 4.3.5 Differences (Appearance)

The Romulus appearance event reported could variously be linked to the Gospels in that there is a sole, named eyewitness of whom it is claimed that he encountered Romulus post death.

Although many of the ancient authors reporting this Proculus interaction are skeptical of the claim, it does warrant close examination, given the analytical task at hand. The Proculus interaction with a bright, armored image of Romulus has been reported by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, and Ovid, all of whose works likely predate the dissemination of the Gospel data. This yields a positive possibility of influence with regard to the criterion of “chronology.” However, there is only one reported witness in a private event, and a clear motivation to fabricate may be attributed to this witness,<sup>152</sup> though this individual is reported to have had a sterling reputation.

There is a theological disconnect, given the polytheistic causal explanation posited in some of the accounts. At no point was *ἐγείρω* (rise/rising/risen) or any of its cognates used; neither was *ἀνάστασις* (resurrection/rising to life), nor *resurgo* from the Latin sources, nor any of the words used by Matthew, Mark, or Paul imputing theological significance to the earliest resurrection

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<sup>152</sup> This motivation is elaborated upon by Livy, Cassius Dio, Plutarch, and Dionysus of Halicarnassus.

affirmations.<sup>153</sup> Livy combines “*delabor*” (descend) with “*pareo*” (appear), and Livy uses “*manes*” (shade or insubstantial ghost) in reference to the reported Romulus sighting; these words are foreign to the New Testament resurrection narratives. Additionally, εἶδον (see) was paired with γίνομαι (come into a new state of being) by Dionysus, and ἐπιφαίνω (epiphany, a fitting/proper manifestation) and εἶδον (see) are used by Plutarch in conjunction with ἰδεῖν εἰς οὐρανὸν (see going into heaven).

There are simply no additional pieces of evidence to scrutinize. Romulus is said to have appeared to one individual, albeit a man of purportedly impeccable character who claimed to have interacted with a vanished/murdered, apparitional, newly deified king.<sup>154</sup>

Both Jesus and Romulus engaged in conversation with the individuals to whom they appeared. Again, at this basic level there is a general match. There is, however, clear dissimilarity in both the message and the appearance motifs in the accounts. Romulus appears to Proculus as a triumphant warrior in bright, burning armored regalia and gives a political message to be delivered to all of his subjects concerning Roman dominance and victory. Neither Jesus’ appearances nor the content of his articulations in any way conform to the experience of Proculus in the case of Romulus. Richard Carrier makes much of the Proculus accounts in his writings, linking the Romulan appearance to Proculus with the Jesus encounter on the Emmaus road related in Luke 24:13–33 (Carrier, 2002).

Jesus returns to proclaim his triumph over death and to vindicate his former claims of being the long-awaited Jewish Messiah; his command to his followers was to proclaim his victory to the

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<sup>153</sup> Matthew 20:28, 26:27–29; Mark 10:45; Romans 3:22–30, 5:5–11, 8:11; Galatians 3:14–24; Ephesians 1:7–14; Philippians 3:9; Colossians 2:12; et al.

<sup>154</sup> Again, this reported sighting is paired with the disappearance / assumption to Olympus explanation, not to the homicide explanation.

world. There is nothing, however, in Jesus' postmortem communication that endorses martial dominance or political procedure. The resurrected Jesus, unlike Romulus to Proculus, was reported as not only claiming himself to be material (Luke 24:36–43) but offering proof of his corporeality (Luke 24:30; John 20:19–20, 26–27, 21:13–14). Finally, Jesus was said to have appeared to many of his followers in various contexts rather than to a lone individual with a clear, reported motive to fabricate.

It is also true that some report a Romulus that is deified and subsequently worshipped as “Quirinus” after his death (Plutarch, Ovid, Dionysius). Alternatively, Jesus is worshipped and prayed to prior to his death and resurrection. In the Gospel narratives Jesus also seems, prior to his death and return, to assume prerogatives and rights hitherto vouchsafed only to Yahweh (accepts worship, Matthew 14:33, 15:25–26; Mark 5:6–7; affirms himself to be the final judge of all of humanity, Matthew 25:31–33; John 5:27–30; and is the One who grants forgiveness of sins, Mark 2:5–12; Luke 7:48; see Hurtado, 2005; Bauckham, 2008b).

Finishing with the criterion most difficult to ascertain—the centrality of this particular event in the overall narrative concerning Romulus—will be our final concern. This disappearance or murder and sighting event, while fantastical in the story, remain secondary to Romulus' military exploits in establishing the foundation of Roman civilization. Even Romulus' and his brother Remus' supernatural lupine development—in which the twins cheat death by exposure—seems to be one of the most enduring aspects of the Romulus mythos.

## Return/Resurrection (Jesus and Romulus)

<i>Category</i>	Competition	Chronology	Word & Event Similarities	Number & Quality of Contacts	Centrality
<b>Romulus</b> <i>(Appearance/Return)</i>	<b>Mixed/Positive &amp; Negative</b> The earliest detailed account (Dionysius) and others lean toward regicide, while others prefer Romulus' assumption and appearance to Proculus.	<b>Positive</b> The Romulus data concerning assumption and the report of appearance are clearly antecedent to the Jesus data.	<b>Mixed/Positive &amp; Negative</b> The Romulus data contains very few general similarities but yields much divergent information in comparison to the account of Jesus of Nazareth; disparate words and events are clearly expressed.	<b>Negative</b> There are two basic connections and dozens of rudimentary, as well as complex, differences present within the listings of connections and contextually conspicuous divergences.	<b>Negative</b> The glorification or postmortem message of Romulus is not the central event in his reported life story.

### 4.4.1 Scholars' Position

Standard academic reference works on mythology fail to connect Jesus and Romulus (Anon., 1996:78-79; Anon., 2013:80<sup>155</sup>; Anon., 2005:312-13; Beard, 2012b:174-75; Anon., 2005:210, 351-

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<sup>155</sup> This reference work actually parallels Jesus to Odin in Norse mythology ("Yggdrasil" p. 252), so it is invalid to claim that strong parallel assertions are beyond the scope of general reference works of this sort. Others works make linking claims of a similar nature to other mythic figures (see Harris, Stephen and Gloria Platzner. *Classical*

357; Anon., 1998:271; Graves, 1955:301; Anon., 2009:839-40; Anon., 2002:323-37; Cavendish, 1980:140; Anon., 2010:429-30; Rose, 1958; Gods and mortals in Classical mythology dictionary, 1985:303-04; Hansen, 1941:159, 163; Garcia, 2009; Anon., 2016 Encyclopedia Britannica; Lindemans, 1997; Callahan 2014, ch. 13).<sup>156</sup> Dr. Jacob Abbott's *Romulus Makers of History*, an entire book dedicated to the subject, posits absolutely no connection between Romulus and Jesus,<sup>157</sup> and Dr. Andrea Carandini neither makes mention in her work on the history of Rome of the Proculus appearance nor indicates a connection between Jesus and Romulus (Carandini, 2011:32-40). If there is a link between Jesus of Nazareth and Romulus the warrior/founder/king of Rome, the brightest professional scholars on the planet have largely failed to identify and report it.

#### **4.4.2 Conclusion**

The strong homogeneity proponent seems to be working with five general similarities here between Jesus and Romulus, as per the criteria. The strength of the five derived parallels will vary, depending on the parallel being discussed. The eyewitness parallel is an important one that pertains to both of the events in question. The public aspect of the Romulus story also generates alternatives for these ancient authors to comment upon and weigh. Thus, one of the five adduced general parallels (public death/disappearance, darkness, beloved leader, postmortem

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*Mythology; Images and Insights Fourth Edition*. 2004, 255, 274), though this is not the case with Romulus. Ironically, Odin and Dionysus are much more difficult mythic figures to link to Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>156</sup> In fact, most of these reference works fail to mention the reports of the postmortem sighting at all.

<sup>157</sup> Abbot leans toward the naturalistic Senate conspiracy explanation as most likely, with the patricians throwing Romulus' murdered body into a nearby lake (257-258).

eyewitness sighting and communication) is tied to another, negative result of the rubric—the presence of competing naturalistic accounts of Romulus’ demise. The darkness is vital in the Romulus narrative only insofar as it provides a viable explanation behind the confused speculation concerning his disappearance in some accounts. The darkness is in no way central to the accounts of Jesus’ death presented in the Gospels or in subsequent Christian theology, nor does it obscure the facts regarding Jesus’ execution.

The relative strengths of these three features will inevitably be evaluated by the reader, but given the overall results one can see why most scholars bypass linking Jesus to Romulus. The competition category is split because there is an overarching composite that is easy to discern between accounts; however, the primary source reporters in Romulus’ case are divided over whether his departure was based on an apotheosis or a secretive murder, with some openly preferring the naturalistic explanation (Dionysius, Plutarch). The reporters of Jesus’ resurrection occurrences have no such split among themselves and no such naturalistic explanatory leaning.<sup>158</sup> Finally, none of the Romulus contributors could claim to have been eyewitnesses of Romulus’ death and return event, as they were all separated from the story by centuries and clearly admit to reviewing and passing on an old tradition.

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<sup>158</sup> Although doubt for some to whom Jesus appeared is chronicled by Matthew (28:17).

## **Chapter Five**

### **Method Construction and Consensus Sampling**

#### **5.1 Common Fallacies in a Project of This Nature**

#### **5.2 Method Proposed**

##### **5.2.1 Proposed Method Utilized in Chapters Three and Four—Step One**

##### **5.2.2 Step Two**

##### **5.2.3 Step Three**

#### **5.3 Step Four—The Application of Proposed Rubric/Controls**

##### **5.3.1 Walter Burkert**

##### **5.3.2 Martin Litchfield West**

##### **5.3.3 Jaan Puhvel**

##### **5.3.4 Charles Penglase**

##### **5.3.5 Summary of the Method Proposed**

#### **5.4 Scholarly Consensus**

##### **5.4.1 Consensus Samples**

##### **5.4.2 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Lack of Conclusive Parallel Source Data**

##### **5.4.3 Reversal of Strong Homogeneity Based on the Sociocultural Power of Nascent**

##### **Christianity**

##### **5.4.4 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Ancient Jewish Socioreligious Context**

##### **5.4.5 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Cumulative Critique**

##### **5.4.6 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Genre Disqualifications**

## **Introduction**

The aim of this penultimate chapter is binary. First, I will explain how I constructed my proposed method that was utilized in chapters three and four. I will attempt to provide the salient reasons I made the choices I did in both method construction and subsequent application. The secondary aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of clear examples representing a spectrum of scholars who arrive at conclusions that directly or indirectly match the ones garnered from the comparative application of my method with regard to Jesus and the pagan characters considered in chapters three and four. The reader should be able to discern whether my method produces results (chapters three and four) in general harmony with the majority of scholars in the field or whether it is a radical departure from their collective position. Finally, I want to show how certain features of my proposed analytic method might address particular deficiencies pointed out by professional critics of the strong homogeneity thesis.

I have endeavored to model a way to construct parallel assessments in the future. The question of direct or indirect authorial mimicry is an important one with regard to Gospel analysis. Although this particular type of analysis bypasses the question of “To what genre do the Gospels belong?” it provides an indirect way to either support or undermine the genre to which these New Testament narratives are claimed to belong. Most pertinently, an investigation akin to the one undertaken in the former chapters can move one in the direction of answering the question of what causation scenario can account for the existential power and sociocultural longevity of this New Testament narrative.



From the *Religionsgeschichtelichte* to a handful of professional contemporary scholars, the answer has been that of the Gospel writers' conscious or unconscious adoption and subsequent adaptation of pagan motifs and themes, sometimes instantiated in religious deities and/or divinized heroes. Jesus is under that paradigm framed as a generic example of the common, cross-cultural human endeavor to create a character to be revered that/who is at the same time both earthly and heavenly, natural and supernatural (Price, 2000:250-60; Campbell, 1972; Raglan, 1990; Frazer, 1894; Bieler, 1976; Carrier, 2002, 2006; Harpur, 2004:10, 51, 85; Pfliederer, 1910, 1.5-1.22-5, 2.115-116, 2.125; Bousset, 1913:66, 111, 119-49).

I will begin, below, by designating the most common logical fallacies committed by proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis who offer arguments in support of that position. Some of these general logical mistakes were present and identified earlier in this work (chapters three and four), while others are conspicuous in the various publications by strong homogeneity proponents (Graves, 1875:115, 130; Dujardin, 1938:29-75; Callahan, 2002:3-15; Kuhn, 1970:115, 204). The alpha benefit of utilizing my method is to circumvent such fallacies and obtain a clear correspondence between the data in question, thereby acquiring an evidenced and warranted conclusion. I will go on to explain how I constructed the controls for my comparative method and from that point discuss my attempt to build an analytic method that addresses the issues raised by academic critics of strong homogeneity (chapter two) and that qualifies my own subjective biases.

## 5.1 Common Fallacies in a Project of This Nature

A handful of logical fallacies are prevalent among those who espouse strong homogeneity arguments, such as;

- (1) The *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy—the assumption that simply because some thing, event, or idea precedes another that particular antecedent must therefore be causal for the thing, event, or idea to which it is being compared. The error in thinking is that A preceded B and therefore must have caused B. Put another way, correlation is not necessarily causation.
- (2) Another is the *genetic fallacy*, the assumption that if one can explain the origin of an idea, that explanation refutes that idea. Expressed another way, it is the pitfall of confusing credibility with plausibility and thereby bypassing the independent reasons for believing the claim in question.<sup>159</sup>
- (3) There is also the fallacy of *hasty generalization*—of irresponsibly connecting data without accounting for vital counter-data. This type of parallel argument can also
- (4) Another fallacy common to symmetry construction is to *beg the question*; in the case of the Gospels this would look like beginning with a crucial presupposition dismissing their historical veracity without the requisite argumentation and then arguing to establish pagan parallel accounts and, unsurprisingly, on that basis to dismiss their historical credibility.

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<sup>159</sup> This usually involves attempting to discredit an idea by explaining the psychological motivations for its inception and retention without dealing with the reasons for the idea itself. To be sure, the source or origin of an idea is important, but this is a cheap and illegitimate way to win an argument—one that is often employed by politicians in public venues.

- (5) Avoidance of the fallacy of *false analogy* is unequivocally central, as analogy is minimally needed to establish genetic or causal relationships.
- (6) The most obvious fallacy that threatens to undermine the entire matching process, *in any situation*, is that of failing to heed the *law of the undistributed middle*. Simply put, just because two entities have one or even multiple characteristics(s) in common does not thereby mean that they have everything in common and thus are to be considered identical—in our case, a genre / literary identity relationship. I have ears, an elephant has ears, and yet I am not an elephant. If I fail to “distribute” or consider or enumerate all of the other critical differences between the two entities under analysis, I will surely make an invalid connection and consequently be placed with the pachyderms in the zoo. The baseline procedure of those who support the strong homogeneity idea has always been to find parallel items, events, or ideas and then to extrapolate generic and genetic relationships between the formerly disparate datum. A failure in analytic diligence and care concerning this crucial issue inevitably causes analytical failure with *any* parallel proposal.

Which raises a crucial question: Just what does constitute a sufficient amount of evidence to make a parallel claim plausible? Isn't this practice hopelessly subjective?

## **5.2 Method Proposed**

In an endeavor to overcome the fallacies mentioned above and to address the particular analytic vulnerabilities highlighted by critics of the strong homogeneity thesis, I am offering a new rubric for consideration. It is my hope that my method can be profitably employed to compare Jesus to *any* purportedly parallel character at *any* time, as long as the proposed parallel character came

before Jesus chronologically. Perhaps this is too ambitious. In what follows I will explain the steps and rationale of what was utilized in the antecedent chapters to compare Jesus to both Zalmoxis (chapter three) and Romulus (chapter four), respectively.

### **5.2.1 Proposed Method Utilized in Chapters Three and Four—Step One**

My first suggestion was to locate actual ancient examples of pagan personages alleged to match Jesus' New Testament profile (chapter three, Zalmoxis; chapter four, Romulus). It is irresponsible and unscholarly to present the ideas one is attempting to use as a causal explanation as subconscious intellectual phenomena carried by the *Zeitgeist* of the day without providing substantive source context. For one thing, the general intellectual, moral, and/or cultural climate of a particular era is extremely difficult to determine without a multiplicity of corroboration from trusted sources. Further, concrete examples give those investigating a claim a means by which to assess it.

If one is free to cull ideas from *every* ancient culture or *any* source to make a parallel case, it is nearly impossible to *fail* to match *any* idea or person to a canvass so broad. The responsible researcher wants to avoid stacking the deck, and one way to regulate tendentious coupling is to proffer real examples for evaluation by those individuals one is attempting to convince. To this end I have considered two of the major examples (Zalmoxis and Romulus) offered by contemporary scholars committed to the strong homogeneity thesis, such as Richard Carrier (2003, 2012:9) and Robert Price (2000:75-96).<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Although they both offer qualifications particular to their own ways of describing the homogeneity in question. Both men can be quite skeptical of those authors who agree with them but are less careful in their own

### 5.2.2 Step Two

Next, I attempted to procure and analyze all of the original source data related to each chosen ancient pagan character with regard to the question of similarity (chapters three and four). I attempted to present source data as close to the original event as possible from within our modern milieu. I included in each instance more than a word or phrase or sentence—that is to say, I presented the context as far as I deemed it relevant to the comparative enterprise at hand. In addition, wherever possible I included multiple ancient sources for evaluating the data in order to both highlight similarity and present contrast.

The inclusion of multiple sources of commentary with regard to the proposed matching figure helped inform one particular pillar of my proposed method that falls under the heading “competition.” The “competition” methodological category/criterion was culled indirectly from a number of scholars who consistently evaluate ancient data in their chosen vocation for connections (see below). This criterion simply evaluates whether the particular ancient sources expressing the ideas or activity of the pagan character generally support or are at odds with one another. The question the competition category attempts to assess is: Is there a coalescing of the narrative strands under analysis, or is there clear contradiction between/among the accounts?

The reason I chose to include this particular analytic criterion is that it is, like the others, a control to prevent one from making an illegitimate or irresponsible match. For example, if one is

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deliberations concerning the idea of the New Testament authors borrowing heavily from outside their Jewish community when crafting the Jesus story.

allowed to pick and choose from consistently divergent accounts of a hero or deity and then to append them all to the salient ideas and activities of Jesus, a match is more likely to be made in a tendentious and unfair manner. An excellent example is parallels being presented between Jesus and the Egyptian god Horus. The ancient literature related to Horus is voluminous and highly divergent in many details (Griffith, 1996:118, 1961:12; Meltzer, 2003:164-68; Short, 1985:vii, 39; Watterson, 1985:82-3; Wilkinson, 2003:202), and if someone were to run a word search covering era after era of ancient Egyptian data to mine a link between Horus and Jesus, they would be unlikely *not* to find ideas and actions that seem to correspond. The competition criterion points out numerous, strongly conflicting accounts in both activity and idea for the pagan character offered as a match for Jesus. This information provides a qualifier to help the individual evaluating the proposed parallel not to miss crucial details that would affect the plausibility of the preferred link.<sup>161</sup>

So far, I have explained the initial steps of choosing a strong exemplar and mining the ancient world for source data. These first two steps are important for at least three reasons: (1) Including literary examples removes the idea from the abstract realm of discourse and allows the proposed thesis to be analyzed—although it doesn't close the case, so to speak, it does provide an essential step. Most proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis frequently attempt to offer a point of reference but fail to include source context. (2) Offering the best possible

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<sup>161</sup> With regard to the competition category, I limited myself to the earlier and best attested data and made no attempt to weigh the divergent tales against one another to conclude which best captured or represented Zalmoxis or Romulus.

sources for the exemplars<sup>162</sup>, with context, aids the reader in understanding the ideas and events that are being proposed, in this case to link the pagan character under consideration to Jesus of Nazareth. (3) Many professional academics who have encountered this resurgent question over the last century have strenuously objected to the links offered by strong homogeneity proponents. The scholars who dispute the strong homogeneity position point out that familiarity with original source documentation renders this thesis untenable (Metzger, 1968:4; Nash, 2003:126-27; Smith, 1987:2535-40; Porter and Bedard, 2006:89-90; Gasque, 2004). Presentation of pagan personages, along with oldest possible sources with responsible translation, is crucial. This is why these first two steps are so strongly related to the controls I will offer here for similar future claims.

### 5.2.3 Step Three

Next, I confined myself largely to death and resurrection or return, since these combined events are the most pivotal in the narratives concerning Jesus. I strayed a bit beyond this parameter when I felt it would be possible—and when I deemed it helpful—to do so (chapter three, Zalmoxis) without eclipsing the main event of death and *return*. Even the tangential discussion of immortality and the ancient vocation of teacher tied back to the central event reported of Zalmoxis' return to the Getaen people. The analysis was more focused with regard to the

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<sup>162</sup> By “best possible sources,” I follow the traditional evaluative methodologies utilized in ancient research. The narratives closest to the alleged time frame of the event they are reporting, the narratives with the widest amount of copies to stimulate comparison, the narratives with the authors that are respected for possessing the greatest pedigree of accuracy and correspondence, the narratives that look to be primary in their reporting rather than secondary adaptations and amalgams, *et al.*

Romulus and Jesus parallel I analyzed in chapter four. Again, had I attempted to analyze every *possible* connection between Jesus and each of these ancient figures with the same level of investigative scrutiny, the project would quickly have become unmanageable.

I am aware that keeping the research focused opened me up to the accusation of stacking the deck toward a favorable conclusion, in that I might have bypassed other narrative parallels that could have bolstered the strong homogeneity case. In response, I would remind the reader that I am offering this as a model that can effectively be applied in the future to other proposed parallel events and characteristics. This is not an attempt to build an impregnable wall around Jesus of Nazareth in order to neutralize a particular brand of scrutiny. In response to this type of pejorative interpretation, let me offer this as an initial step in the evaluation process. One can work backward from the demise and return events and use the method to assess whether other narrative links, if available, might indeed worthy of attention.<sup>163</sup>

### **5.3 Step Four—The Application of Proposed Rubric/Controls**

Finally, in an effort to qualify my own biases I offered the analytic categories of **chronology, competition, word and event similarity, number and quality of contacts, and centrality.**<sup>164</sup> I used these controls to evaluate and weigh the similarities and differences between the Jesus descriptions and the primary source narratives concerning Zalmoxis (chapter three) and Romulus (chapter four), respectively. I culled some of these methodological criteria from respected

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<sup>163</sup> For instance, Jesus' birth accounts, discreet miracles, particular life events, relationships, interactions, et al.

<sup>164</sup> Chronology, word & event similarity, number and quality of contacts were taken from the four professionals in the field discussed below, I added; centrality, original sourcing, and exemplar choice.



scholars (Burkert, 1992; Puhval, 1987; Penglase, 1994; and West, 1977; see below) in the relevant fields who, to my knowledge, do not share my worldview commitments. These internationally renowned scholars all exhibit excellence in the process of attempting to link disparate ancient texts to one another by way of content similarity.

Most of the members of this group are understood to be leaders in the field of mythology and ancient culture (West, 2002 Kenyon Prize, British Academy, 2000 Balzan Prize; Burkert, 1989 Gifford Lectureship, 1990 Balzan Prize, 2003 Sigmund Freud Prize; Puhvel, Guggenheim Fellowship for the Humanities). Members of this particular group of scholars have all authored multiple publications from respected academic presses and hold teaching posts at some of the most prestigious academic institutions on the planet. Again, scholarly consensus does not automatically confer truth or warrant, but it is considered an esteemed method for evaluating a hypothesis for possible credibility.<sup>165</sup> These gentlemen provided the majority of the categories for my rubric. I have utilized their work to supplement my own lack of exhaustive expertise in the field of comparative mythology.

Perhaps the most formidable challenge in this project has been the establishment of criteria. A rubric is axiomatic to any analytical project. Without it I would have been faced with the philosophically arduous task of attempting to *prove a negative*—to verify that *no* ancient accounts substantially parallel the Gospel narrative. Since I am not in possession of every ancient writing and admittedly lack awareness of all ancient events, I have settled for a more discreet

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<sup>165</sup> Peer review is still seen as useful by those in the hard sciences, though in the introduction of this analysis I joined the challenge to a former consensus among German scholars concerning Jesus.

aim: attempting to run two common mythic parallel proposals through this rubric to determine whether it is a warranted conclusion in either case that the Jewish authors lifted these features from the ancient pagan example offered (Zalmoxis or Romulus, respectively). T. N. D. Mettinger references three scholars (2001:27, 31, 44) who will be integral to our proposed rubric. A total of four noted scholars were utilized in the controls.<sup>166</sup>

### 5.3.1 Walter Burkert

Walter Burkert, long known to be an expert in the field of ancient near eastern religion and culture, is an emeritus professor of Classics at the University of Zurich. He has been one of many professional scholars attempting to connect ancient stories with an antecedent tale that might serve as an explication of its origin. Burkert is extremely careful to avoid drawing a misleading or spurious parallel in the scholars' pursuit of discovery and dissemination. He describes the necessity of bypassing superficial similarities and instead focusing on "complex structures" that link the data (Burkert, 1992:88). Burkert provides a few examples of complex structures to discover when attempting to link the data:

Instead of individual motifs, therefore, we must focus on more *complex structures*, where sheer coincidence is less likely: a system of deities and a basic cosmological idea,

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<sup>166</sup> There is also the possibility of my method yielding a positive result for the strong homogeneity position and that additional cumulative evidence would be needed to strengthen the conviction. Even if one establishes a strong likelihood of a causal link on the death and resurrection/return criteria perhaps other possible links could be assessed for further verification or caution. See the Qualifications section below for a more detailed treatment of the contingencies of this type of research project.

the narrative structure of a whole scene, decrees of the gods about mankind, or a very special configuration of attack and defense (1992:88).

Burkert emphasizes that one must avoid ubiquitous language and grand thematic similarities when attempting to draw connection between, say, *The Odyssey* and the *Gilgamesh Epic*. These few individuated motif similarities are all *too common* to carry a responsible parallel hypothesis. Conversely, Burkert tells us that if words tend to be seen nowhere else in the mythic or religious matrix of the character in question, special attention should be given to these linguistic anomalies so long as they are not connected to some common stock of shared mythical, existential, or religious themes. These words should be further mined for specific conceptual or underlying use in the employment of this language between the proposed parallels in question.<sup>167</sup> Burkert makes clear that even a number of links that are complex and numerous might not carry the whole burden of proof for borrowing. I echo this qualifier.

### 5.3.2 Martin Litchfield West

Although one must take great care with the two sides of the data, Martin Litchfield West, an internationally recognized Oxford scholar in classical antiquity and philology, points out that one must look for “striking similarities” in an ancient data genetic coupling project (1977:viii).

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<sup>167</sup> Burkert cites the single-mention “Tethys,” as spouse or concubine of Oceanus in Homer, as a translation of “Tiamat” as wife of Apsu in Enuma Elish. To this point the mention of “Tethys” appears to be utterly unique in all of mythology and ancient lore. Burkert then posits that because of this special case and its other clear commonalities to an earlier, similar tale, this feature is best explained as a narrative “holdover”/parallel from borrowed narrative structure (*The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age*, Boston: Harvard, 1992), 92.

Further, the striking connections must be assessed against the presence of strong dissimilarities (1977:viii).

West rightly points out that there does not need to be one hundred percent correspondence or some sort of airtight identity relationship in order to make a parallel case (1977:viii).

Surprisingly, he carries this further by suggesting that the similarities can sometimes be outnumbered by the differences but that a formidable homogeneity relationship can nonetheless be carefully determined (1977:viii-ix). However, the similarities must be strong—have a particularly high degree of correspondence—and there must be a multiplicity of these robust common features. To demonstrate his point and prevent the word “striking” from becoming hopelessly subjectivized, West provides an example of Semitic idiom expressed in the Greek myth text, completely unexplainable apart from borrowing (Ibid.).

### **5.3.3 Jaan Puhvel**

The Johns Hopkins University scholar Jaan Puhvel follows these professional scholars in his comparative process concerning myth. Puhvel echoes West and, like him, believes that the parallels proposed must be numerous and share an extraordinary proximate locus of meaning (Puhvel, 1987:29).<sup>168</sup> In other words, many connections must be deduced, and then each parallel must be dissected and placed in context in order to evaluate whether the words used carry a similar linguistic function (Ibid., 29-30).

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<sup>168</sup> Puhvel recounts the parallel scenes of “Typhon” in the sea (Nonnos) and “Ullikummi” (Hittite myth), in which numerous physical details and spatial arrangements are designated in like terms, in similar narrative context, and in parallel sequence.

### 5.3.4 Charles Penglase

The ancient near eastern myth specialist Charles Penglase gives us some criteria to consider for the rubric, prefaced by yet another warning with regard to this undertaking:

[“]Difficult[“] and [“]hazardous[“] are words which describe the study of Mesopotamian influence in Greek myths, and **an appropriate method is essential**. To establish influence, or at least the likelihood of influence, there are two main steps. First it is necessary to establish the historical possibility of influence, and then the parallels between the myths of the areas must fulfill a *sufficiently rigorous set of relevant criteria* (1994:4).

For Penglase, chronology is king (1994:4). This feature also had primacy in our rubric. Notice too his emphasis on explication and application of a rigorous methodology. I find that all four of these careful scholars shackle themselves to criteria in order to avoid the copious potential mistakes attendant with the type of project outlined above—the point being that the evidence has to be quite strong for a proposal of this type. Penglase goes on to provide a few further suggestions:

It is all too easy to run eagerly after superficial parallels which cannot really be sustained under a closer scrutiny. Accordingly, the parallels must have *similar ideas underlying them* and, second, any suggestion of influence requires that the parallels be *numerous, complex and detailed, with a similar conceptual usage* and, ideally, that they should point

to a specific myth or group of related myths in Mesopotamia. Finally, the parallels and their similar underlying ideas *must involve central features in the material* to be compared. Only then, it would seem, may any claim stronger than one of mere coincidence be worthy of serious consideration (Ibid.).

Penglase is extremely helpful here. He echoes both West and Burkert in his insistence that the parallel features be plentiful, and he concurs with Burkert that they must be complex and specific, as opposed to ubiquitous and general. All of the scholars here mentioned are conscious of danger equivocation in their projects. Penglase also points out that there should be a common concept or usage underlying the proposed linguistic, event, or ritual parallel. In addition, he wants to avoid possible peripheral connections and focuses instead on axiomatic features of the narratives under analysis. In his book Penglase includes geographic considerations in the transmission of ideas within a predominantly oral culture—a particular methodological feature we will not be implementing in our analysis (Ibid., 215).

### **3.3.5 Summary of the Method Proposed**

My proposed rubric followed these scholars when analyzing Zalmoxis (chapter three) and Romulus (chapter four), and my method consciously combined the methodologies of Burkert, West, Puhvel, and Penglase. These scholars have been seen as successful in their careful establishment of historical causation and development, and I have tried to utilize them to analyze the particular claims of scholars with reference to the possible pagan pedigree of the Gospel narratives.

Chronological considerations seem to be the logical initial point of contact, as one cannot draw from another without an antecedent and a subsequent that has ostensibly adopted the features in question. The reason none of the aforementioned scholars except for Penglase mentioned chronological considerations in their description of controls is simply that in all of their (Puhvel, Burkert, West) investigations and analyses there was little question as to which story came first in the history of the traditions they were comparing.

I went on to look for “numerous” or quantifiable similarities within the dying and rising accounts in question, along with key dissimilarities (chapters three and four). It is crucial to understand that differences alone do not suffice to deny a possible link between accounts. The differences must be weighed and set over against the presence of “complex, striking and numerous” similarities between the stories under analysis. Additional ancillary alleged narrative similarities were discussed, where relevant, in the footnotes.

I then looked for complex or intricate compound points rather than general ubiquitous features with which to compare (chapters three and four). Just what are complex points? Examples considered in this investigation include background system of deities, narrative structure, spatial arrangement in the narratives, presuppositional frameworks, general event similarity, and character/personage descriptive matches. A multiplicity of interrelationships was sought. The point here is to disdain superficial similarities that have a type of surface connection, focusing instead on any specific interrelationships with similar underlying meaning.

Following this I looked for “striking” or qualitative descriptive similarities with specific word and conceptual usage to link the accounts (chapters three and four). The criterion here is that the

later narrative features would have been difficult to account for apart from borrowing in that their uniqueness set them apart from the common, expected descriptions.<sup>169</sup> Detailed similarities with a close proximity in conceptual usage/definition, as well as uniqueness, were targets in our aim of assessing “striking” or “impressive” narrative commonalities.

From this point I attempted to determine whether the events provided in the accounts were central or peripheral features in the narrative under analysis (chapters three and four). This is the most difficult evaluation criterion of our rubric and, as such, could only be tentatively analyzed with regard to the proposed pagan exemplars.<sup>170</sup> We already know that there is no other event more pivotal to Christianity than the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, so the question was whether the analyzed pagan revivifications or returns comprised the hub or the axis of the respective narratives—whether they were tangential or axiomatic in the accounts analyzed.

My final control for the rubric was the simple approximation of whether there were multiple disparate pagan parallel accounts in question (chapters three and four). This category was discussed earlier under the title “competition.” One cannot simply pick and choose across a wide spectrum of chronological and narrative divergence and expect to establish a tight genetic

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<sup>169</sup> Details that are *completely unexpected*, to the point of being unexplainable apart from borrowing, are strong evidence for borrowing. Details that appear to be irrelevant to the new context but have clear function in the former context are considered *prima facie* evidence for borrowing. An example would be a similar mythic or religious event that had a deep, clear contextual similarity in either what was attempted or what was accomplished. One might, for example, encounter a word with a clear usage in the old context appended oddly to the new.

<sup>170</sup> We are separated from these authors and followers by millennia.



relationship. Just as a scholar of ancient literature cannot include Charles Manson and Syung Yung Moon under the heading of “twentieth-century self-proclaimed messiahs” in his determination of genetic relationship concerning Jesus, disparity and divergence in accounts must be laid bare.

Consequently, my methodological categories for analysis and evaluation of a proposed genetic link in chapter three, comparing Jesus to Zalmoxis, and in chapter four, comparing Jesus to Romulus, were as follows:

### **Chronology**

Number and quality of contact points—specific/detailed/complex/non-superficial features

Strength of word or event similarity

Centrality of the death and return event

Competition among pagan accounts

I weighed these with regard to two figures offered from Richard Carrier and others and found these scholars’ strong homogeneity conclusion wanting (chapters three and four).

While Zalmoxis did share some generic similarities with Jesus, in that both were teachers, both had committed followers,<sup>171</sup> both spoke of / taught about afterlife, and both were considered to have obtained insight into the afterlife by visiting the realm of the dead (chapter three), I tried to show that the *differences* were the more striking features of the narratives. Upon closer scrutiny

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<sup>171</sup> Jesus seems to have carried influence across a wider geographic area—Palestine initially, and then major centers in Roman Empire — in comparison to Zalmoxis’ influence, which appears to have been confined to one city (Getae) in modern southern Romania.

crucial differences emerged even within the common features, so that event similarity was not only minimal but failed to establish underlying structural connection (chapter three). There was a minimal amount of conceptual commonality and little to no word similarity (chapter three).

Although the Zalmoxis accounts preceded the dissemination of the Jesus tradition (chronological influence possible), the accounts are sparse and separated by hundreds of years (Herodotus and Strabo). In point of fact, Herodotus, as a primary source account, seems to have been unconvinced by the Getaens of Zalmoxis' status as deity (chapter three). A striking dissimilarity is that Zalmoxis is never reported to have died, while Jesus is clearly crucified in the New Testament (Crossan, 1991:145; Paget, 2001:136; Green, 2001: 88-90; Meier, 2006:125-37; Evans and Chilton, 1998:455-57; Köstenberger and Kellum, 2009:104-08, 110; Boyd and Eddy, 2007:127; Dunn, 2003:339; Ehrman, 2008:136; Blomberg, 2009:211-14).

The “centrality” and “competition” categories revealed positive possibilities for the proposed Zalmoxis—Jesus match, though I determined it to be unlikely that these were sufficient to overcome the weight of distinction (chapter three). There was a plethora of other narrative divergences, both strong and weak, regarding Jesus and Zalmoxis, many of which were too obvious to enumerate. The key question is whether the differences remove this figure from legitimate candidacy for possible borrowing by the Gospel authors or, more generically, whether Zalmoxis is a strong exemplar of a dying and rising ancient fictional literary category. Finally, I tried to show that Zalmoxis-specific scholars, as well as ancient history scholars in general, fail to conclude that Zalmoxis was a prototype for Jesus of Nazareth or even a “dying and rising” *typos* (chapter three).

Romulus was also an interesting candidate. There are numerous accounts of his death and subsequent sighting, some of which fulfill the chronological criterion (chapter four). There was competition over which account to believe: naturalistic regicide or supernatural disappearance, consistently related to Romulan return and deification. I pointed out a number of dissimilar features, even *within* the context of the general similarities. Word and event matches were largely negative in both the death and the appearance reports, and the Romulus data lacked detailed or complex underlying parallels with the biblical Synoptic reports. Rather than dovetail with the Jesus narratives, the Romulus accounts are far more strikingly divergent. This story of Romulus' demise is arguably not central to the Romulus legend; his own and his twin's epic development and his founding and ruling of Rome not only eclipse this end event but, in some ways, underlie attempts to explain and interpret it (chapter four).<sup>172</sup>

It is the responsibility of each reader to determine whether the common features attain the status of warranted conclusion with regard to possible pagan duplication by the Jewish Gospel authors or not, as well as whether the strong homogeneity conclusion is a plausible way of interpreting the genesis of the central events in the Gospel content. As West reminds us, "I am well aware that some of the parallels are more compelling than others. Readers must decide for themselves what weight they attach to each" (West, 1997:viii).

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<sup>172</sup> Romulus' disappearance or abduction by the gods and subsequent deification typify a generic Roman approach to beloved leaders, even if the particular leader had fallen out of favor. See Allen Brent, *The Imperial Cult and the Development of Church Order: Concepts and Images of Authority in Paganism and Early Christianity before the Age of Cyprian* (Brill, 1999), 9-13; see also Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2002), 32-52.

It goes without saying that no proposed pagan parallel needs to perfectly meet *all* of these criteria to be considered a match to the Gospel data; that requirement would be too stringent and would illegitimately stack the analytical deck in favor of the uniqueness of the Gospels, as over against the homogeneity position. But to be responsible in our scholarship we must insist that the proposed parallel, in order to be affirmed, must meet a majority of the alternate criteria if it is judged a poor fit in any one specified category. My position here is well within the orbit of the scholarly community that makes these kinds of assessments and evaluations. These are the controls that constrained my semiotic investigation.

In what follows I will attempt to show that my method resulted in conclusions (chapters three and four) that match an extensive consensus of professional scholarship with regard to this specific strong homogeneity challenge to the veracity and origin of the Jesus accounts.

#### **5.4 Scholarly Consensus**

I want to offer two possible explanations for why this homogeneity thesis with regard to pagan narratives and the New Testament Gospels is not strongly represented by the scholarly community (Ehrman, 2012, chs. 6, 7; Mettinger, 2001:36-37).<sup>173</sup> Some would argue that this is

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<sup>173</sup> In the words of Ehrman in *Did Jesus Exist?* (2012), “At a reputable university, of course, professors cannot teach simply anything. They need to be academically responsible and reflect the views of scholarship. That is probably why there are no mythicists—at least to my knowledge—teaching religious studies at accredited universities or colleges in North America or Europe. It is not that mythicists are lacking in hard-fought views and opinions or that they fail to mount arguments to back them up. It is that their views are not widely seen as academically respectable by members of the academy. That alone clearly does not make the mythicists wrong. It simply makes them marginal” (chapter 6). And, “Even though most mythicists do not appear to know it, the onetime commonly held view that dying-rising gods were widespread in pagan antiquity has fallen on hard times among scholars” (chapter 7).

because the majority of those studying the New Testament are hopelessly biased in its favor and, thus, have a tendentious and unfair resistance to giving this idea a fair assessment (Carrier, 2005:145-51; Price, 2005:11). But this argument can cut in both directions, as those with a negative predilection against uniqueness and historic verisimilitude of the New Testament could also give too much credence to the strong homogeneity thesis. Everyone brings personal leanings to their analysis, as Albert Schweitzer both reminded us and proved in his *Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung (The Quest of the Historical Jesus)*.

The first reason the strong homogeneity thesis is not favored by scholars in the relevant fields is that when the divergent themes, activities, and details are presented the homogeneity idea is hobbled. The discordant data reveals profound difficulties in maintaining the category match, and the thesis becomes crowded with qualification after qualification offered by proponents. Lord Ockham warns us of perspectives of this sort. Consequently, when proponents offer the idea for consideration and reflection they often remain somewhat vague in their description and/or simply disclose the parallel elements without consideration of context and without identification and presentation of the disparate features. Placing such an overt priority on similarity with regard to the parallel features inverts a crucial primacy in cognition and evaluation. By way of illustration, the fact that hydrofluoric acid and apple juice are both liquids is hardly the most crucial fact to ascertain concerning these two things. Differences matter, and there are numerous ways in which one can come to erroneous conclusions when divergent

details are bypassed or unavailable to the one tasked with coupling concepts or items. A scholar who disregards differentiation is no scholar at all.

The second reason is that when one begins searching for ideas that match the salient features of the Jesus narratives from before the first century A.D., one finds the available data to be sparse. As one moves backward chronologically the data becomes more and more attenuated for the majority of the pagan divinized, miracle-working humans offered to be a possible match for Jesus<sup>174</sup> (Blackburn, 1991:24-59; Kahl, 1994:236; Twelftree, 1991:247-48; Mettinger, 2001:4,7,215). Conversely, the match number and quality become more conspicuous after the Jesus story has circulated in Palestine and then throughout the Roman Empire, i.e., in the second through fifth centuries A.D. (Bowersock, 1994:119,139).

This is in part because of the lack of manuscript availability and the fragmentary nature of what has been excavated or culled indirectly from other extant sources (Barrett, 1987:120-21; Metzger, 1968:4,7-8; Anderson, 1977:22). Yet the fact remains that the majority of pertinent pagan parallel evidence, at least with regard to death and return, is poorly positioned chronologically (J. Smith, 1987: 2535-40; Mettinger, 2001: 220-22; Pannenberg, 1968:91; Ehrman, 2012, ch. 7; Hengel, 1976:27). These general facts create an unfavorable climate for scholarly consideration.

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<sup>174</sup> This is not exclusively the case with regard to Zalmoxis and Romulus but applies as well to the vast majority of pagan characters assumed to be examples of strong homogeneity when linked to Jesus.

That fact that differences between the Gospels and the accounts of pagan deities/heroes are either ignored by those espousing a connection or never offered to those who are inquiring is likely the alpha handicap for the strong homogeneity thesis. One can clearly overlay differences, but they *must be presented and weighed* or a distorted conclusion becomes much more likely. Perhaps one can never perfectly balance similarities and differences; however, I am submitting that something more than either silence or a mere mention that “there are discrepancies” should be required. This is especially crucial when one is submitting this idea for scholarly approval. Blurring crucial distinctions makes rational deliberation exceedingly difficult, if not impossible.

My position is that those who employ some version of the strong homogeneity thesis typically utilize a faulty method or bypass methodological constraints altogether (chapter two). What I have offered here is, I believe, a superior method. Minimally, proponents of strong homogeneity should be more careful and detailed in the construction of their case. As I have made clear, they have not in my opinion made their case with Zalmoxis or Romulus. Nor do I think that Dennis MacDonald has made his case with the panoply of Homeric characters he enlists to draw a connection between them and Jesus, but that is a critique for another time.

#### **5.4.1 Consensus Samples**

Following is a sampling of the major academic opponents of the strong homogeneity thesis highlighted from the current scholarly consensus. The purpose of this penultimate section is to provide robust examples of the verdict of pertinent scholars following their evaluation of the strong homogeneity thesis as a possible control for interpreting the Gospel data in the New

Testament. This abbreviated list is by no means intended to be exhaustive; rather, it attempts to connect the salient conclusions of the aforementioned chapters to the broad consensus of scholars over the last half century.

#### **5.4.2 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Lack of Conclusive Parallel Source Data**

The Yale comparative religion professor Jonathan Zittel Smith believes that there is no dying and rising / resurrection theme or major archetype in the literature antecedent to the A.D. era:

[I]t has become increasingly commonplace to assume that the category of Mediterranean “dying and rising” gods has been exploded . . . It is now held that the majority of the gods so denoted appear to have died but not returned; there is death but no rebirth or resurrection (Smith, 1988:100-01).<sup>175</sup>

Jonathan Zittel Smith has been referred to as the one of the greatest living scholars of comparative religion in our modern era (Ehrman, 2014). Not only is he *not* a Christian, but he has spoken quite negatively of that religious tradition over the years. For a scholar of his caliber to completely denounce this motif or categorical presupposition so crucial to proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis is univocally negative for their case. Smith, in both his doctoral dissertation and his encyclopedia article submission (1988:100-05; 1987:2535-539), engages and

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<sup>175</sup> Smith, Jonathan Zittel, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Jordan Lectures 1988, London), 100-101. Mettinger concurs but challenges Smith on specific examples (*Riddle*, 4, 7).



attempts to refute some of the most popular alleged parallel precursors to Jesus being offered by scholars at that time.<sup>176</sup>

Smith not only found the individuated cultic connections between Jesus and the pagan deities to be tenuous but also believed proposed links of this type to be the result of substandard research and scholarship (Ibid., 2535, 2539). If this strong homogeneity proposal were as substantiated, verisimilitudinous, and hence devastating to the Christian worldview as some have claimed, certainly someone of the caliber and bent of J. Z. Smith would have adopted and utilized this critique. It does no one any good to cast aspersions or to assign nefarious motivations of envy to explain Smith's repudiation of the many varieties of the strong homogeneity position (Price, 2000:77-8). Handling academic disagreement in such a fashion is unconvincing at best and tendentious at worst.

This is certainly not to suggest that there are no discreet ancient narratives that feature an overt death and return event of some sort for deities and heroes.<sup>177</sup> But even with this admission, the late New Testament scholar Martin Hengel would have stated categorically that the claim that Jesus' arrest, death, and resurrection could be patterned after these types of stories is extremely

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<sup>176</sup> That is, the late twentieth century. Some of the deities offered by some authors as characters from which the gospel writers allegedly borrowed included; Marduk, Baal, Osiris, Adonis, Attis, Tammuz, *et al.* Smith engages all of them and finds the links between these figures and Jesus evidentially and conceptually weak with scores of radically different features.

<sup>177</sup> Although not without their reasoned, credentialed detractors, one could cite Ba'al, Romulus, Orpheus and Eurydice, and Tammuz/Damuzi.

implausible (Hengel, 1977:5-7, 11). The late twentieth-century mythology scholar Mircea Eliade also directly decried the strong homogeneity thesis (Eliade [cited by Snyder, 1995:194]).

Barry Blackburn, a professor of New Testament Studies at Atlanta Christian College, is a practicing Christian scholar and, as such, stands at the opposite end of the theological spectrum from Jonathan Z. Smith. Blackburn's PhD dissertation at the University of Aberdeen on the miracles of Jesus became a 330 plus-page book in 1991; in it he directly compares Jesus to all of the miracle workers and seers in the centuries both antecedent and subsequent, as well as to his first-century contemporaries. The book, which leaves little to the imagination, is titled *Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Traditions: A Critique of the Theios Aner Concept as an Interpretive Background of the Miracle Traditions Used by Mark* (Blackburn, 1991). Blackburn repudiates the miracle-working God-man or divine man *typos* altogether and sees far more diversity among the wonder-working Jewish and Greek characters than he does connection between them. Says Blackburn,

But while it would be foolish to suggest that these traditions remained immune from the processes of change and development which time and other factors bring, it would also be unsound to assume with confidence that Hellenistic ideas concerning miracle workers and miracle-working have decisively shaped the Markan material in question (Blackburn, 1991:266).

In Blackburn's opinion, his lengthy analysis spelled the end of θεῖος ἀνὴρ ("divine/god man") as a profitable and prudent analytic category. Blackburn also authored a chapter in Blomberg and Wenham's massive volume on miracles in the Gospel Perspectives (vol. 6) series. In that chapter,

he referred to parallels of the Frazerian stripe as “not always congruous” (Ibid., 91). Blackburn believes that a far more profitable matrix in which to analyze the miracles of Jesus is Palestinian second-temple Judaism.<sup>178</sup>

Transitioning to yet another perspectival pole, the late Columbia University scholar of the ancient world Morton S. Smith was certainly no Christian. Smith was Harvard educated and took part in the discussion concerning similar ideas and personas from ancient paganism and the question of their influence on the New Testament. Like Jonathan Smith, he wrote a scathing review of many of the parallels offered by those committed to the strong homogeneity thesis (Smith analyzed the cases for Baal, Hercules, Marduk, and Marqart) (1998:257-313).<sup>179</sup>

#### **5.4.3 Reversal of Strong Homogeneity Based on the Sociocultural Power of Nascent**

##### **Christianity**

Interestingly, a handful of respected professional scholars actually *reverse* the strong homogeneity thesis and argue for pagan religious and mythological *borrowing from Christianity* post first century rather than vice-versa (Bowersock, 1994:103,119,139; Metzger, 1968; Eliade [cited in Snyder, 1994:195]). It is worth noting that Bowersock is an emeritus professor at Harvard University, Metzger was one of Princeton’s best-known scholars of the twentieth

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<sup>178</sup> Blackburn most often offers comparisons of parallels between Jesus and the Old Testament figures (*Theios Aner and the Markan Miracle Tradition* 100-107). Blackburn follows a distinguished group of scholars who have rejected *theios aner* as a false category, See Brady *Jesus Christ* 135-137, Hengel *Jews Greeks and Barbarians* 78, Hengel *The Son of God* 31, Betz “The Concept of the So-Called ‘Divine Man’ in Mark’s Christology,” Kee “Mark’s Gospel in Recent Research” 360, Lane, “Theios Aner Christology and the Gospel of Mark” 144-61, Holladay *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism* 18, Tiede *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* 30, 59, 240-247.

<sup>179</sup> See also H. M. Barstad, *Religious Polemics of Amos* (Leiden: Brill, 1984).

century, and Eliade was a highly decorated professor of mythology and religion at the University of Chicago. Although Bowersock and Eliade were not Christians and Metzger was, all three held the position diametrically opposite that of strong homogeneity. This consensus alone does not disprove the homogeneity position, of course, nor is that what I am arguing, but it does place a more substantive burden than has been shouldered by those given to that thesis.

#### **5.4.4 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Ancient Jewish Socioreligious Context**

It seems unlikely to many scholars that first-century Hellenistic, let alone Palestinian Jews, would have been receptive to the proclamation of Jesus as the “divine man.” Robert Gundry, a Westmont professor of New Testament Studies and *koine* Greek, points out that it is erroneous to think that “as the tradition concerning Jesus moved out into the wider Hellenistic world, aretalogists spun miracle stories around him in order to portray him as a miracle-working divine man” (1974:108). The distinguished professor of New Testament studies at Wycliff College Richard Longenecker comments, “It is becoming increasingly evident today that in the scientific study of the New Testament, the Jewish backgrounds rather than the Grecian parallels offer the soundest basis of approach” (Longenecker, 1970:24). Although the Harvard New Testament scholar Helmut Koester believes that the resurrection account is likely a mythological construct, it is in his opinion best understood as a myth born from *Jewish* antecedent sources (Robinson and Koester, 1971:224-27).<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Koester also affirms the historic reality of Jesus’ life, death, burial, and visions, as witnessed by his followers (Koester, *Trajectories* 223-225).

New Testament scholars routinely point to the fact that the current historic phase of Jesus scholarship is firmly committed to interpreting Jesus through the lens of first-century Judaism and of Jesus' particular Jewish socioreligious antecedents (Evans, 1993:15-6, 2006:112, 114; Sanders, 1985:2; Borg, 1987:15; Vermes, 1973:69, 79; Bray, 1996:476-90; Brown, 1986:55-76; Blomberg, 2012:205; Witherington, 1995:42-4). N. T. Wright's voluminous work underscores this particular point, and he also repudiates the strong homogeneity thesis (Wright, 1996:80-1, 146-206). Clearly, the current approach in Jesus studies is to remain self-consciously within the interpretive matrix of ancient Judaism rather than looking to Greco-Roman paganism or antecedent ancient near eastern rivals to Judaism (Evans, 1995:5, 233; Wenham and Blomberg, 1986:196). In the words of G. F. Downing,

Our oldest traditions about Jesus clearly stem from Jewish Palestine in the early first century. The names of people and places belong there as do most if not all the customs and institutions taken for granted, along with details of the topography and climate, as well as many apparent allusions to other strands of contemporary history. In these accounts the only other literature: for illustration, for support and for interpretation is contained almost entirely in the Jewish candidate writings (the "Old Testament," itself by now virtually finalized). This source is supplemented on a very few occasions by more recent compositions: but they are still clearly Jewish. No proof of any important direct literary dependence on non-Jewish sources has emerged from to centuries of close study (1988:v).

#### 5.4.5 Rejection of Strong Homogeneity Based on Cumulative Critique

Bart D. Ehrman is currently the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Ehrman's 2012 book *Did Jesus Exist?* is an extended critical interaction with Robert Price, Richard Carrier, and a few others referred to as "Jesus mythicists." Ehrman is no friend of Christianity; he is, in fact, a self-identified agnostic. In point of fact, it is probably fair to refer to Ehrman as the best-known New Testament critic on the planet. His books critiquing Christianity and the New Testament routinely sell well, and he has been featured in the media on everything from television documentaries to comedic talk shows. Ehrman stresses differences that are all but ignored by Price when connecting Old Testament people and events directly to Jesus (2012, ch. 6). At various points Ehrman considers the case of antecedent or subsequent parallels, which he claims to be interesting,<sup>181</sup> after which he comments,

My view is that even though one can draw a number of interesting parallels between the stories of someone like Apollonius and Jesus (there are lots of similarities but also scores of differences), mythicists typically go way too far in emphasizing these parallels, even making them up in order to press their point. These exaggerations do not serve their purposes well (Ibid.).

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<sup>181</sup> Ehrman goes so far as to describe how he enjoys surprising his Christian undergrads by opening his intro classes with a description of Apollonius of Tyana in vague terms that lead them to believe he is referring to Jesus of Nazareth (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* chapter 6).

He goes on to excoriate the author Kersey Graves (*The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors*) for sensationalism and, more pertinently, for failing to provide any sources for the “fantastical” parallels he presents. Ehrman also warns his readers that many Jesus mythicists follow this same authorial pattern: presenting lists of vague parallels without offering method, original sourcing, contextual considerations, or explanation of discrepancies (Ibid.). Ehrman continues later in the chapter by pointing out the unacceptable habit by many of the “Jesus-mythers” of exaggerating similarities and ignoring the major and numerous differences, claiming that the parallels offered are neither “close” nor “precise” (Ibid.).<sup>182</sup>

Ehrman also believes that the Jewish notion of resurrection distinguishes this idea from pagan resuscitation and return:

The idea of Jesus’ resurrection did not derive from pagan notions of a god simply being reanimated. It derived from Jewish notions of resurrection as an eschatological event in which God would reassert his control over this world. Jesus had conquered the evil power of death, and soon his victory would become visible in the resurrection of all the faithful (2012, ch. 7).

In the same chapter Ehrman follows other scholars by pointing out the lack of archaeological, literary, or epigraphic data supporting the notion of the widespread worship and socioreligious

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<sup>182</sup> “In many instances, for example, the alleged parallels between the stories of Jesus and those of pagan gods or divine men are not actually close.” And “Modern critical historians have noted these parallels, which are nowhere near as numerous as the mythicists have typically contended” (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* ch. 6).

influence of the gods and heroes offered as potential genealogical Jesus templates (Ibid., 7). It seems clear that Professor Ehrman finds the strong homogeneity case to be spectacularly weak.

Even if one would revive some version of the Frazerian postulation of the available data powerful enough to yield a “dying and rising” archetype or motif, there would still be much work to be done to justify the claim of borrowing or strong dependence by the Gospel authors.

On the other end of the theological spectrum, one finds a tandem of professors who have dedicated almost a decade to this question of strong homogeneity and the Gospels. These scholars, like Ehrman, employ a cumulative case approach to address this quandary. Gregory Boyd and Paul Eddy are both Christian professors at Bethel University. Boyd holds a doctorate from Princeton in New Testament Studies and Eddy from Marquette in Theological Studies. In addition, both of these men took part in a debate with Robert Price over the question of Jesus in the Gospels and myth/legend/parallels. Together they produced a 450 plus-page response to people who share Robert Price’s conviction of strong homogeneity (Boyd and Eddy, 2007), in which they observe, “As soon as we become critical of reading parallels into the evidence, we discover that the differences between Christianity and the Mystery religions are far more pronounced than any similarities” (Ibid., 142). Following actual inspection of the data, these authors find that the “differences are far too significant” to conclude in favor of substantive synchronicity (Ibid., 145).

#### **5.4.6 Repudiation of Strong Homogeneity Based on Genre Disqualifications**



The Lightfoot Emeritus professor of Divinity at the University of Durham James D. G. Dunn concurs with the majority position against strong homogeneity and emphasizes the clearly historical context of the Gospels and Acts:

Even if the same sort of mythical language has been used to describe the 'Christ event' and Christian experience and hope of salvation in the NT, the point to be noted is that by its reference to Jesus the Hellenistic, unhistorical myth has been broken and destroyed as a myth in that sense (1977:294).

Listen, again, this time to Trygve Mettinger at the conclusion of his own examination of this question, in which he attempts to marginally support a type of Frazerian motif/category position:

The dying and rising gods were closely related to the seasonal cycle. Their death and return were seen as reflected in the changes of plant life. The death and resurrection of Jesus is a one-time event, not repeated, and unrelated to seasonal changes. . . There is, as far as I am aware, no *prima facie* evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world. While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions. The riddle remains (2001, 221, emphasis his).<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Mettinger's commentary here that belief in Jesus' resurrection may be profitably studied against the background of *Jewish* resurrection beliefs rather than pagan mythology is in keeping with the general contemporary consensus that has been discussed. Mettinger believes, albeit tentatively, that he has shown that a number of deities in the ancient near east would justify a marginal category of dying and rising gods (*Riddle* 217) and, further,

Mettinger himself believes that myths of dying and rising did exist, at least in the cases of Baal, Tammuz/Dumuzi, and Melqart, but he recognizes that such symbols are quite unlike the early Christian belief in Jesus' resurrection.<sup>184</sup> His above categorical denunciation of the positions offered by Price, Carrier, and MacDonald, coupled with his agreement with their minority position of “dying and returning” thematic existence in the antecedent eras, should be highlighted. To my knowledge the credentialed proponents of the strong homogeneity thesis have not challenged Mettinger on this crucial break from their collective position. So Mettinger posits a tentative “yes” for a dying and rising motif or theme against the majority of scholars but an emphatic “no” with regard to any of these parallels being substantively genealogical in relation to the Jesus tradition of the first century A.D.

## 5.5 Close

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that it would be illegitimate to attempt to place these gods in a narrow taxonomy as they are all “very different” (218). Additionally, “the gods [that] die and rise have close ties to the seasonal cycle [of] plant life. The summer drought is the time when their death may be mourned ritually. The time after the winter rains and flooding may provide the occasion for the celebration of the return” (219). Mettinger does come to the following clear conclusions concerning distinctions in the Jesus accounts: “for the first Christians, the resurrection was a one time, historical event that took place at one specific point in the Earth’s typography. The empty tomb was seen as a historical datum” (221). Second, the dying and rising gods were closely connected to the seasonal cycle with their death and return reflected in the changing plant life, this in clear contradistinction to the death and resurrection of Jesus as “a one-time event, not repeated, and unrelated seasonal changes” (*Riddle* 221). “The death of Jesus is presented in the sources as vicarious suffering, as an act of atonement for sins. The myth of Dumuzi has an arrangement with bilocation and substitution, but there is no evidence for the death of the dying and rising gods as vicarious suffering for sins” (221). J. S. Burnett has found Mettinger’s careful conclusion “plausible but at best tenuous” (Burnett, *Riddle* 5). See also Mettinger, “The ‘Dying and Rising God’: A Survey of Research from Frazer to the Present Day” (373-86). Bart Ehrman also praises Mettinger’s scholarship but critiques him heavily and also believes that he fails to make his broad Frazerian case (Ehrman, *Did Jesus Exist?* ch. 7).

<sup>184</sup> Mettinger believes that the case for Baal’s death and return as a major ancient near-eastern god is the strongest of all of the possibilities he offers.

J. Smith, Bowersock, Eliade, Metzger, Longenecker, Gundry, Evans, Wenham, Hengel, Wright, Burkert, Blackburn, Ehrman, Koester, M. Smith, Boyd, Eddy, Dunn, and Mettinger—these are well known and respected scholars from nearly all possible philosophical and theological trajectories. Note that all of them agree that the strong homogeneity thesis is likely invalid and that it provides an unprofitable means of scrutinizing or interpreting the Jesus tradition. Again, consensus does not guarantee credibility or truth, though it is a good barometer for the manner in which one could analyze and assess any particular proposal or idea.

I want to reiterate that my thesis is not intended to simply underwrite the majority repudiation of strong homogeneity. I have presented the above to provide the reader with a sampling of the myriad reasons for its rejection and to elaborate on how these men prefigured, generally, my current particular conclusion. I want to commend my model to others as a possible method for evaluating actual data exemplifying the strong homogeneity thesis. The model I have constructed is intended to make it difficult to commit some of the common errors in attempting to link ostensibly diverse information. I intentionally relied on the steps provided by professionals who not only do this very thing successfully but who do not share my worldview. I tried to come to terms with the current consensus of scholars working in the relevant fields.

In addition, I openly stated my philosophical/theological commitments, though these were not discreetly included in my rubric. It is entirely possible that other examples might obtain concerning Jesus, and it is my hope that my method can be used with facility and success even by those who believe the salient points in the Gospel narratives to indeed be mythic or legendary. The main idea is to avoid vague, remote, and superficial connections. At the end of

the day everyone will come to their own conclusion with regard to this question. My aim is to aid the reader in ensuring that their particular conclusion is more academic and evidenced in nature, rather than more prejudicial and subjective. In the final section, I will offer a possible way to falsify my particular conclusions regarding Romulus or Zalmoxis or another possible match for Jesus from the pagan world.

## **Conclusion**

### **Chapter Six**

#### **6.1 Qualifications**

#### **6.2 Possible Falsification**

#### **6.3 Research Questions and Answers**

#### **6.0 Conclusion**

My aim was to offer a method that provides a more secure rational conclusion for those searching for confirmation or rejection of authorial imitation between the primary Jesus data and that regarding pagan personages that might share similarities or resemblances to the salient details of the Gospel's presentation of the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. I desired to offer a brief background regarding this particular way of assigning a genre for the Gospels and attempted to lay out and then run the method, using the best possible pagan examples offered by strong homogeneity scholars with, minimally, a PhD in a relevant field.

#### **6.1 Qualifications**

I want to state categorically that my proposed method is not intended to be the only way to assess the validity of the strong homogeneity thesis. Not only are there other ways to evaluate this question, but I concede that some of the alternate investigative steps might yield fruitful results. One could, for example, attempt to assess whether the archaeological and textual data reveal a strong social presence of these competing worship traditions in first-century Palestine.

Or one could attempt to evaluate the likelihood of first-century Hebrews to have assimilated and mimicked the religious and social mores of their host culture (Boyd and Eddy, 2007; Sanders, 1985, Charlesworth, 1988, Dunn, 2003) or the distinction and overlap between two ancient genres, such as biography (*bios*), myth (*mythos*) or novel (Burrige, 1992; Talbert, 1977; Aune, 1981; Keener, 2009). One could compare and contrast what kinds of literary forms would be seen as historic and which would be determined to be entertainment or a digression away from historic reporting, or one could attempt to assess what evidential support is offered for the stories given, or to estimate the trustworthiness of the individual from whom the story was disseminated. One could attempt to establish a common pagan category—say, “the dying and rising god” or “ancient tragic hero”—going on to enumerate general features and to append the Jesus accounts to the chosen category (Frazer, 1998/1894; Campbell, 1972; Rank, Raglan & Dundes, 1990).

I am well aware that one could get stalled on even one of these methodological steps if their approach was more comprehensive. For example, steps two and four could result in an exceedingly long process if one is attempting to extract from extant text or even indirect text reference back to the supposed ancient author. For the sake of time and space I simply assumed that the text could be traced back to the general era of the author to whom it is traditionally ascribed. For example, an enormous amount of work could be undertaken in an attempt to show that the traditional *Histories* do or do not likely belong to an historic figure named Herodotus, along with the effect of that conclusion on the chronological consideration.

I also recognize that my approach, as it applies to the subject matter at hand, may be construed as too formal or as an effort to stack the analytical deck in favor of an inevitable conclusion hostile to the idea of strong pagan homogeneity with the Gospels. To this I would respond by pointing out that I am following esteemed, seasoned professionals in the field who (to add an additional layer of control) lack my worldview commitment. One can hardly be faulted for standing on the shoulders of others who do this with excellence as a vocation. Further, if a criterion can be too strict, can it not also be too informal and lenient? At what point does the criterion become overly exacting if these ancient authors indeed drew liberally from one another in matters such as these? It seems clear that the greater evaluative danger lies in deducing parallels from disparate data by offering only vague and casual links. Differences should be presented along with linking data so that one can come to a sufficiently informed decision about any proposed parallel.

Finally, I am not presenting these controls as criteria to ensure apodictic certainty; history does not work that way. Rather, I am fully aware that even a complete methodological match does not automatically make that match authentic, any more than the lack of a direct data match whatsoever completely precludes the possibility of one author having lifted concepts from another. One is free to disregard this entire method or remove discreet steps; it is offered merely as a suggested rubric. Just as it is incumbent on me not to include steps that ensure my own predisposed outcome, it is important that one not remove steps simply to ensure a desired homogeneity outcome. This is why I have attempted to follow those who have seen continued, critically reviewed success in making or decrying connections like the ones we have considered.

The point of the nine steps is to give the one to whom the strong homogeneity thesis is presented a fair view of the parallel in question so that a responsible and informed decision can be made. This, as opposed to obfuscation and indoctrination, is, after all, the aim of education. This method in no way insulates individuals from coming to an incorrect or unwarranted conclusion with regard to matching the narratives under consideration, but it does make ubiquitous errors less likely. I would also stress that one should attempt to add, minimally, an equal emphasis on differences, if present, between the two narratives, not only for the sake of honesty but also because differences seem to be more crucial than similarities in any parallel considerations. Vague terminology, disregarding common cultural definitions, and opaque event descriptions tend to increase the likelihood of an erroneous connection being made.

I choose here not to offer a definitive answer to the question of Gospel genre; however, the implications of our methodological investigation do weight certain genre proposals more heavily than others. I want to point out here that there are other ways in which one could argue in support of the contention that the Gospels are to be classed as mythology. I have taken one approach based on authorial causation and comparison. I also attempted to make clear that this is a difficult argument to assess, as it has few singular, credentialed champions and the methodology used by its prominent proponents is either never expressed or appears to be absent altogether.

I also openly admit that any one of these ancient figures could have heavily influenced the Gospel creators endeavoring to express Jesus' life and mission, and that even a negative methodological verdict does not necessitate the absolute impossibility of significant



synchronicity. Perhaps someone might complain that there are other narrative features that might fare better with my rubric if one moves beyond demise/death and return; this is a clear possibility, though I would argue that one must keep the research parameters manageable—I am fully aware that this opens me up to the charge of stacking the deck or bypassing alternative similarities. Perhaps a future project could focus on other salient Gospel narrative features and run them through the method.

## **6.2 Possible Falsification**

This is not to say, either, that another historic or mythic figure could not succeed in the crucial linking effort and thus cause the community of scholars to reassess and recalibrate the analytic givens with regard to the New Testament in general and to Jesus specifically. The question is *how*? How could my own position be reversed via my proposed method?

For, say, Romulus to have succeeded as a match, all of my criteria would have needed to yield positive results. That is to say, the proposed narrative portion of the Romulan tale would first have needed to be established as antecedent to the first century A.D. The section would have had to include no strongly competitive stories or interpretations of the event under analysis, as presented by the ancient authors. It would be extremely important for there to have been a significant number of common words and events with strong correlation to the Jesus accounts. There would have needed to be similar use of words, similar interpretation and meaning of the events, similar “underlying structures that are unexplainable apart from borrowing,” close sequencing, spatial similarities, and a proximate background of theological assumption. Because difference carries more weight than similarity for categorization in any taxonomic endeavor, the

differences, when weighed against the number and quality of linking data points, would have had to be less than convincing in terms of negating a positive outcome. Finally, it would have been incumbent upon me to require that this Romulus event carry the same kind of narrative weight that the Jesus death and return event does for his community of followers (centrality).

If the requirement of a methodological sweep seems too strict, I would simply remind the reader that this is the same sort of sweep required and suggested by professionals who do not share my philosophical commitments. Additionally, I would have been obliged to allow room for nuance and adjustment of the verdict rendered by my model based on various ancillary issues that could have affected the conclusion of authorial imitation or mimicry. These would have included issues such as; how likely borrowing would have been, given the history of the groups in question; scholarly consensus concerning the proposed link by those committed to professional study of the character from whom the Gospels allegedly borrowed; how this degree of literary and conceptual borrowing would have affected other ancient data and its various category assignments; and what evidential considerations (textual/iconographic/epigraphic) might have affected the connection proposed. If the borrowing or influence had in fact taken place to the degree which it is asserted, analytic scrutiny should have yielded results favorable to the strong homogeneity thesis. Paul's consistent repudiation of religious syncretism, most pointedly of the Greek variety, as seen in Acts 28, would need to have factored in to the analysis as well.

Would this have worked in reverse? I do not think so. One could not, in my opinion, credibly ask for the full negative slate of my criteria in order to discount the strong homogeneity possibility.

Imagine verifying only the chronology category match and none of the others; would that produce a plausible match? Of course not. The characters formally analyzed with my proposed method in this work (Zalmoxis and Romulus) both had matches and non-matches in the various categories under consideration.

It is worth noting that none of the professional literary analysts (Burkert, Puhval, Penglase, West) I used to construct my method has seen any connection between Jesus and the alpha characters from the world of mythology. They have certainly discerned no connection between Jesus and Zalmoxis or Romulus . . . or, for that matter, Hector or Odysseus.<sup>185</sup> Walter Burkert goes further in commenting about the assumption of Christianity's genesis having been in imitation of Roman pagan Mystery religions that

[i]t is tempting to assume that the central idea of all initiations should be death and resurrection, so that extinction and salvation are anticipated in the ritual, and real death becomes a repetition of secondary importance; but the pagan evidence for resurrection symbolism is unconvincing at best (1987:23).

### **6.3 Research Questions and Answers**

The strong homogeneity thesis is the idea that the Gospels are best understood as creative Jewish amalgams culled from non-Jewish and non-Christian sources.

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<sup>185</sup> This last part of the sentence is in reference to Dennis MacDonald's proposed template for authorial mimicry in his last book *Mythologizing Jesus* (2015).

I attempted to show the history of what I have dubbed in chapter two the strong homogeneity position. I strove to chronicle how, starting in the late eighteenth century and gaining cognitive momentum and then waning in the late twentieth century, the strong homogeneity thesis might be returning as a live scholarly option.

Saving my method explication for the concluding chapters, I attempted to show in chapters three and four how two particularly strong homogeneity exemplars (Zalmoxis and Romulus) from Richard Carrier, Richard Miller, and Robert Price could be profitably analyzed using my comparative method. After having been run through my schema, the exemplars these scholars have offered failed to warrant a likely status of authorial Gospel tradent borrowing or influence. My method for chapters three, four, and five was as follows:

- 1) Determine a viable candidate, drawing from suggestions from credentialed scholars
- 2) Present original source data expressing the similarity/similarities in context (death and return)
- 3) Present any divergent or strongly contrasting accounts (if available)
- 4) Determine whether the specific source data is likely from an era antecedent to the Gospel data
- 5) List and enumerate any specific word and general event matches from the pagan to the Gospel data
- 6) Attempt to mine the aforementioned matches for conceptual similarity, underlying synchronicity (words—vocabulary specifics / events—spatial details, goals and outcomes, background system of deities, audience, temporal frame, and situational details)

- 7) Attempt to mine the aforementioned matches for conceptual dissimilarity, underlying non-synchronicity (words—vocabulary specifics / events—spatial details, goals and outcomes, background system of deities, audience, temporal frame, and situational details)
- 8) Attempt to determine the centrality of the discreet event(s) in the overall narrative
- 9) Survey the professional scholars who have either spent a considerable amount of time analyzing the proposed exemplar or have been respected enough to be featured in reference materials and then present whether or not they share the strong homogeneity conviction offered by the non-specialist scholar(s)

In a rather ambitious chapter (five) I tried to explain how I constructed my method and why I chose the constraints I utilized. I presented original source data in context, as the professionals do when undertaking a similar analysis. I used the stated analytic constraints given by particular respected, professional scholars (Burkert, West, Puhvel, Penglase) who have been recognized for excellence in the field of comparative ancient literature but who do not share my worldview commitments. I also argued for the priority of differentiation in the analysis, as this is logically axiomatic and part of our common, everyday comparative outlook, as well as an emphasis shared by the professionals from whom I borrowed for my aggregate methodology.

The conclusion of chapter five was intended to bookend chapter two, which claimed that this particular critical position of strong homogeneity has generally held the status of a minority position in the scholarly world. The denouement of chapter five was also intended to highlight how the current approaches by those laboring to substantiate the strong homogeneity position have largely failed, as exemplified across a wide spectrum of current professional scholars in the

relevant fields. My intention was also to underwrite the modern scholars' wide concurrence with the results produced by my comparative method in this work.

This brings us to the meta-question: How can one properly evaluate the claim of authorial mimicry of pagan literature with regard to the Gospels? My answer is by employing the method I have offered, and my reasons are as follows:

- 1) My method takes into account and attempts to qualify possible biases by using constraints from those uncommitted to my religiophilosophical tradition and not requiring plenary matching.
- 2) The method I have here proposed offers original sources and crucial context to ensure that relevant disparity is incorporated into the evaluative process.
- 3) My method tends to avoid many of the logical fallacies that plague analyses of this type, including genetic, undistributed middle, hasty generalization, false cause, *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* ("before and therefore caused by" argument), or confusing correlation with causation.
- 4) In order to be successful in this endeavor, my process utilizes methodological points from seasoned professionals who are routinely evaluated by their peers.
- 5) The method I have here offered is versatile and could be applied to a variety of different ideas and texts being similarly assessed for a genetic influence.
- 6) Finally, my method produces results that match the past and current majority consensus of relevant scholars across diverse philosophical commitments.

For these and other, related reasons I believe the method I have here presented and utilized is superior to what has hitherto been used to evaluate the question of strong homogeneity between the Gospel data and ancient pagan religiomythical literature.

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