

## Parallels—Stories of Greek and Jewish Heroes

### Lecture 4

**For the writers of the gospel, Jesus is more alive and life-giving now than he was when he was walking in the hills of Galilee. This is utterly unique in ancient literature.**

**A**mong ancient narratives concerning heroes, the Gospels are distinctive on a number of counts. They are unique in creating narratives about a figure of the past from the perspective of the resurrection experience: The hero is more alive than ever! They are distinctive for the way in which memories concerning the hero are handed down in religious communities in contexts of worship. The canonical Gospels, in particular, are remarkable for the intensity and extensiveness of engagement with the symbols of Torah. The canonical Gospels, again, are unusual—though not unique—for their focus on the suffering and death of their hero.

Nevertheless, the Gospels show signs of their cultural matrix, and much in them would have been immediately intelligible to ancient readers because of parallels in other literature. To some extent, this is a matter of the kinds of specific materials they contain. The forms of Jesus's speech found in the Gospels resemble forms found in other ancient literature. The short sayings of sages (aphorisms) and controversies are found in both Jewish and Greco-Roman sages; parables are found in Rabbinic literature; longer discourses are found in the diatribes of the popular philosophers. Likewise, there are parallels in ancient literature to the short stories told about Jesus, especially those relating the healing of the sick and the exorcism of demons.

There are even "life-after-death" stories that relate the ascension of heroes to the divine realm. To some extent, also, this is a matter of longer narratives that pay special attention to the heroism of ancient figures. In the Greek world, tales of the demigods and heroes are found in the great epics (Herakles, Odysseus). In Judaism, the Bible contains heroic stories concerning ancient leaders of the people (Judith, Esther).

Hellenistic literature, in particular, developed the genre of biography, with many devoted to military or philosophical heroes. Among such lives are those concerning Alexander the Great and Pythagoras, as well as Plutarch's collection of *Parallel Lives*. In Hellenistic Judaism as well, we find the biographical form applied to the patriarchs and Moses (Philo, Josephus). Of particular interest is the encomiastic treatment of the Maccabean martyrs (see 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees).



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Pythagoras, a philosopher whose biography may have provided a model for the Gospels.

The most remarkable parallel to the Christian Gospels is Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Apollonius was a 1<sup>st</sup>-century Pythagorean philosopher whom we know about from other sources. Around the year 218 C.E., the emperor Caracalla's mother, Julia Domna, commissioned Philostratus to publish an encomiastic life—some suggest in deliberate response to the Christian accounts of Jesus. In any case, the *Life* is remarkable for its “Gospel-like” rendering of a philosopher's life, but with these critical differences: Apollonius is never allowed to appear cowardly or at a loss for words, and there is certainly no “passion account” associated with this “divine man.” ■

### Essential Reading

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, translated by F. C. Conybeare (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912); excerpts can be found in D. R. Cartlidge and D. L. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) pp. 205–242.

### Supplementary Reading

R. A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (SNTMS 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

### Questions to Consider

1. How do the Greco-Roman and Jewish parallels to the Christian Gospels throw light on what is common and distinctive about them?
2. What does the development of biography—and the choice of subjects to which it is devoted—suggest about a culture?