

# **“Resurrection in Pauline Literature: Did Paul Incorporate Greco-Roman Apotheosis Mythologies?”**

Mike Spaulding

Modern scholarship has increasingly insisted that Paul borrowed heavily from Hellenized Greco-Roman sources for the formulation of his teaching concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This paper will argue that the evidence does not support a belief that Paul developed his resurrection teaching based on Greco-Roman mythologies. Part one will discuss apotheosis in Greco-Roman culture. Part two will discuss Paul’s theology of Christ’s resurrection. Part three will consider potential and alleged relationships between the two subjects.

## **APOTHEOSIS IN GRECO-ROMAN CULTURE**

By the time of the New Testament era the Mediterranean world was awash in agnosticism. Artisans such as Euripides and Aristophanes aided this journey from faith in the gods to skepticism and then to outright cynicism through their sarcastic depictions of the gods in plays and skits.<sup>1</sup> Seneca contributed his own biting commentary aimed at the dismantling of the gods and goddesses mystique.<sup>2</sup>

Paul’s apologetic evangelism to the Epicureans and Stoics of Athens recorded in Acts 17 and his confrontation with the worshippers of Artemis recorded in Acts 19 reveal remnants of a previous age of veneration of the gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology but should not be confused with evidence of a robust allegiance to the same. Instead it can be

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1978), 61.

<sup>2</sup>Lucius Annaeus Seneca, “The Satire of Seneca on the Apotheosis of Claudius,” (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1902). Available at <http://www.archive.org/details/satireofsenecaon00senerich> Accessed April 2, 2009.

demonstrated by both epigraphy and archaeology as Horseley has done so adeptly,<sup>3</sup> that “the cult of Caesar was not simply one new religion among many in the Roman world. Already by Paul's time it had become the dominant cult in a large part of the Empire, certainly in the parts where Paul was active, and was the means whereby the Romans managed to control and govern such huge areas as came under their sway. Who needs armies when they have worship?”<sup>4</sup>

This pronounced cultic worship can be seen in the least as a veneer covering a deeper skepticism toward the gods in the pagan New Testament world. This rich history of Greek and Roman mythology can be useful however in understanding the rise and development of Christianity. Garrison for example suggests that “early Christianity firmly rejected Graeco-Roman traditions about the gods”<sup>5</sup> while at the same time utilized Greek poetry and even philosophy, albeit cautiously in order to further the gospel. One such area of interest to the modern day Christian is apotheosis mythology.

Apotheosis, from the Greek *αποθεώω*, “*apothēōō*” “to deify,”<sup>6</sup> is the term used to signify the veneration of man to god or *divus* status. The apotheosis of individuals was often supported by the sighting of a streaking comet or falling star which was said to be the departed soul of the hero transcending the heavens. Suetonius noted that after the death of Julius Caesar, “a comet appeared about an hour before sunset and shone for seven days

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<sup>3</sup>Richard A. Horseley, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997).

<sup>4</sup>N.T. Wright, “Paul’s Gospel and Caesar’s Empire,” Center of Theological Inquiry. Available at <http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/wright.htm> Accessed March 24, 2009.

<sup>5</sup>Roman Garrison, *The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 1.

<sup>6</sup>Available at <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/274736> Accessed January 21, 2009.

running. This was held to be Caesar's soul, elevated to heaven; hence the star, now placed above the forehead of his divine image.”<sup>7</sup>

These new gods did not replace the old gods but merely took their place alongside the existing gods as a new branch of gods within the Olympian pantheon.<sup>8</sup> Initially this was an honor reserved for the deceased but eventually evolved into the Roman emperor cult and worship of emperors as living gods within the Roman Empire of New Testament times. As such, the deification of select Roman emperors became part of the normal religious experience of Roman citizens.<sup>9</sup>

Ferguson points out that Rome developed their propensity for apotheosis from Greece through the Egyptian Ptolemaic Kings.<sup>10</sup> While he begins with Alexander the Great others have forcefully suggested that the practice of apotheosis took root within the Greek hero cults as early as 620 B.C.<sup>11</sup> Versnel reminds readers that the Romans likely developed their triumph and Jupiter imagery not long after this.<sup>12</sup>

In the hero cult ritual, animal sacrifice was performed at the gravesite of a deceased hero as a means to insure continued protection from and influence for good by the departed.

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<sup>7</sup>Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), 1.88. Cited in Gary R. Habermas, “Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions,” *Religious Studies* 25, no. 2 (June 1989): 167-169.

<sup>8</sup>Panayotis Pachis, “Manufacturing Religion: The Case of Demetra Karapophoros in Ephesos” *Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting*, November 21-25, 2008. Papers dealt with the subject: Redescribing Graeco-Roman Antiquity. Available at <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/redescribing/Panayotits.pdf> Accessed January 21, 2009.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph. L. Kreitzer, “Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor,” *Biblical Archaeologist*. 53 (December 1990): 211-217. Kreitzer suggests that deification was nearly automatic for all emperors unless they had contentious relations with the Senate in which case apotheosis was unlikely to be granted.

<sup>10</sup>Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 205-209. The author’s third chapter is a wonderful treatment of the history of veneration from both a religious and political perspective.

<sup>11</sup>Peter G. Bolt, “The Empty Tomb of a Hero?” *Tyndale Bulletin* 47.1 (May 1996): 27. Bolt sites E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Truber, 1925) ch. 4; and L.R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921) in support of this assertion.

<sup>12</sup>H.S. Versnel, “Red (herring?): Comments on a New Theory Concerning the Origin of the Triumph,” *Numen*, 53, no. 3 (2006): 290-326.

Later, Philip II of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great declared himself a god and during one of his many marriage ceremonies had a statue of himself carried among the images of the Greek gods during the processional.<sup>13</sup>

This was a foreshadowing of the emerging practice of kings and emperors minting coins and commissioning statues of their own images inscribed with declarations of divinity. Indeed the Greek practice of such has been traced to the reign of Alexander the Great.<sup>14</sup> Rome eventually adopted the same practice as evidenced by minted coins inscribed with *Caesar Parens Patriae* (Caesar, Father of the Nation) and by a statue erected in honor of Julius Caesar's military conquest of the Greek city of Pharsalus in 46 B.C. that bore the inscription *Theos Epiphanes* (God Made Manifest).<sup>15</sup> Kim believes that "Gaius Julius Caesar, the founder of the Julian dynasty, is thought to have initiated, though posthumously, the custom of imperial deification."<sup>16</sup> It can be argued from Cicero's account in his second *Philippic* that Gaius received the honor of deification before his death and if true, would mark the true beginning of Roman apotheosis.<sup>17</sup> Caesar's great-nephew, adopted son, and successor Augustus, likewise saw the power of the myth of divinity. After negotiating with the Senate for his predecessor's divine honor and commemorating it by hosting games, young Augustus, not more than 28 years old at the time,<sup>18</sup> declared himself a direct descendent of Venus. The Roman Senate was delighted to honor Venus and built the Ara

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<sup>13</sup>Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 20. Cited at <http://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/274736>

<sup>14</sup>Kreitzer, 212.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>16</sup>T.H. Kim, "The Anarthrous  $\nu\iota\omicron\varsigma$   $\theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$  in Mark 15:39 and the Roman Imperial Cult," *Biblica* 79 (1998): 222-241.

<sup>17</sup>M. T. Cicero, *Cicero – Philippics* (trans. W. C. A. KER) (vol. 15; Cambridge 1926) 172. Cited in Kim, 228. In his second Philippic, Cicero refers to Antony as the "priest" (*flamen*) to divine Julius (*divo Iulio*). Scholars believe this was written approximately 44 B.C. which was before Julius' death.

<sup>18</sup>Ovid Illustrated: The Reception of Ovid's Metamorphoses in Image and Text from *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Garth tr., Amsterdam, 1732). Explication of the X. Fable. [ XV.x Death and Apotheosis of Julius Caesar ] Available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/latin/ovid/banier.html> Accessed March 15, 2009.

Pacis Augustae in 13 A.D. in commemoration. The multiple friezes tell the narrative of the Julian family and their divine ancestry.<sup>19</sup>

Spawforth notes that as early as 54 A.D. the cities of the so-called Achaean League, of which Corinth was chief, petitioned Rome for tax exempt status in order to host emperor worship games.<sup>20</sup> Finney appears to agree that the imperial cult at Corinth had made enormous inroads by this time and suggests that Paul made it a point to address this situation with the believers there: “underlying Paul’s salutation, and thereafter at numerous and key points in the letter, there is a clearly articulated attempt to undermine the focus of the imperial cult in Corinth.”<sup>21</sup>

Some have argued that Christianity borrowed heavily from Greco-Roman ideas and mythology concerning apotheosis given the cultural saturation of such at the time of the birth of the church and the ministry of the apostles. Did Paul in fact borrow ideas foreign to Judaism and his understanding of the teachings of Christ to build his doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? We must investigate his theology on the subject to derive an answer to that question.

## **PAUL’S THEOLOGY OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST**

Paul’s theology of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ supports the unifying premise of the New Testament canon, namely that these events “fundamentally altered the reality of the cosmos, whether or not human beings actually recognize that such a cataclysmic change

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<sup>19</sup>Gail E. Armstrong, “Sacrificial Iconography: Creating History, Making Myth, and Negotiating Ideology on the Ara Pacis,” *Society of Biblical Literature 2007 Annual Meeting*. The theme of the annual meeting was “Mythmaking, Fictionalizing, Entextualizing: Creative Moments in Graeco-Roman Religious Reality.” Available at <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/redescribing/Armstrong.pdf> Accessed February 15, 2009.

<sup>20</sup>Anthony J.S. Spawforth, “The Achaean Federal Cult Part 1: Pseudo-Julian, Letters 198,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 46, no. 1 (1995), 151.

<sup>21</sup>Mark T. Finney, “Christ Crucified and the Inversion of Roman Imperial Ideology in 1 Corinthians,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35, (2005): 20-33.

has occurred”<sup>22</sup> or not. The proclamation, “He is not here, for He has risen just as He said,”<sup>23</sup> is the central focus of Gospel and Epistle. Evidence to support this is obvious from the primary focus of the New Testament texts. The Gospel accounts present the crucifixion and resurrection as the climactic event in the life of Christ and as the impetus for the birth of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles or as some refer to it The Acts of the “Holy Spirit,” detail how the assurance provided by the Holy Spirit as to the veracity of the resurrection of Christ emboldened the apostles and disciples to carry the message of Christ resurrected to the “uttermost parts.” The epistles show much evidence that the resurrection and all its implications was first and foremost on the minds of the authors. Revelation of course, presents the resurrected Christ as both bridegroom and Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and as such provides the basis for hope and perseverance until the King comes again.

O’Day<sup>24</sup> argues that in spite of the central focus of the New Testament on the resurrection there is a diversity of form and function with one underlying, unifying theme – God is the focus as the one “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.”<sup>25</sup> This diversity of form and function in turn reveals three themes found within Paul’s Gospel preaching of the resurrection. Paul’s writing reveals first, that because God’s character is on display through the resurrection, Christians have a sure foundation for faith. Second, Paul’s Gospel preaching of the resurrection reveals the character of the body of Christ and provides an assurance of hope for the same resurrection. Third, Paul melds together the first and

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<sup>22</sup>Michael Barram, “Colossians 3:1-17,” *Interpretation* 59 (April 2005):188-190.

<sup>23</sup>Matthew 28:6. Unless otherwise stated all Scripture citations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995).

<sup>24</sup>Gail R. O’Day, “The Variety of Functions of the Proclamation of the Resurrection: A Survey of Epistolary Literature,” *Homiletic*, 28 (Winter 2003): 1-6.

<sup>25</sup>Romans 4:17.

second functions to define an ethical foundation for the believer and this subsequently becomes the foundation of love within and without the community.

Pauline literature demonstrates the validity of these functions in numerous places. Consider for instance the apostle's epistle to the Romans. In 4:16-25 Paul draws attention to the faith of Abraham and the character of God that compelled Abraham to trust Him. Because Abraham fully believed that God was able to do all that he promised in spite of the deadness of Sarah's womb, the patriarch pressed on in faith. It was this faith on the part of the patriarch, faith in the face of the deadness of life in Sarah's womb that inspired Paul to write that Abraham's faith was reckoned as righteousness, and not only his but also ours and all who believe in God who raised Jesus. In presenting Abraham along side of the resurrection Paul deftly demonstrates that his theology sees God as life-giver to the patriarchs, Israel, Christians, and even Jesus Christ. In this passage Paul clearly demonstrates Jesus as the object of the resurrection and God as the life-giver. Therefore the Christian faith is grounded in the character of God as life-giver and He rightly receives the praise and glory of His children.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Paul demonstrates a second function of the Gospel proclamation of resurrection - it shapes the character of God's people. The context of life for the Corinthians Paul labors to point out is the death and resurrection of Christ. Paul states in verses 1-4 that he was faithful to deliver the message of the Gospel – Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection – and it is in those truths that the Corinthian's faith rested. Here Paul is forcefully making the point that it is in the resurrection of Christ that Christianity finds identity. It is the understanding that Christians persevere in this hope with an eye to the future that shapes the believer and gives meaning to living in the present.

In Philippians 2 Paul demonstrates a third characteristic of his theology, namely that the Gospel preaching of the resurrection builds upon God's character and the hope of the believer to shape individual and community ethics. After giving a list of exhortations that call all believers's to demonstrate love, Paul gives the reason – this was the same attitude demonstrated by the incarnated Christ who willingly emptied Himself and suffered humility and death as a demonstration of the love His disciples were to show. Thus love forms the basis for the new life in Christ and is the change agent of behavior used by the Holy Spirit. This is the ethics of the resurrection which is in stark contrast to the ethics of the world that Paul characterizes as doing things out of selfish and empty conceit. This high Christology is in fact antithetical to the prevailing emperor worship cults of the time.

Roetzel believes Paul's resurrection theology is rooted primarily in his Pharisaism and Jewish apocalypticism.<sup>26</sup> His argument is sound in that he calls attention to the fact that from the time of the Maccabean revolt and into the first century, a staunch belief in the resurrection was inherent in Jewish apocalypticism. Likewise, Harrison sees in Paul's resurrection theology, especially as conveyed to the Thessalonians, a distinct Jewish apocalyptic flavor.<sup>27</sup> Contrasting Roetzel and Harrison is Bultmann who believed that the Hellenistic church tutored Paul and refined his theology.<sup>28</sup>

The question of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is of supreme importance for Christianity.<sup>29</sup> It has been rightly stated again and again that Christianity stands or falls on

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<sup>26</sup>Calvin J. Roetzel, "As Dying, and Behold We Live": Death and Resurrection in Paul's Theology, *Interpretation*, 46 (January 1992): 5-18.

<sup>27</sup>J. R. Harrison, "Paul and the Imperial Gospel at Thessaloniki," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 25 (Spring 2002):71-96.

<sup>28</sup>See especially Rudolph Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 63. Cited in Roetzel, 6.

<sup>29</sup>Many beneficial books are in print concerning the topic of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. One that provides clear answers in layman's terms is, Norman L. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1992).

the truth of the resurrection. Without the resurrection of Christ there is no salvation. Paul taught that if Jesus Christ was not raised then faith is useless, Christians are still under the bondage of their sins, and the apostles are false witnesses by proclaiming an event that did not happen. Therefore, the critics who suggest that the resurrection theology of Paul is nothing more than “seed-picking” among the pagan resurrection myths must be answered.

### **DID THE PAGAN CONCEPT OF APOTHEOSIS INFLUENCE PAUL?**

The issue for a good many critics of Christianity as a whole and of the New Testament specifically rests upon the belief that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is myth built upon the prevailing beliefs of the apotheosis of men of honor and importance. Liberal scholars are confident in their assertions that Paul transitioned from a purely Jewish theology of a literal, physical, bodily resurrection to a clear Hellenized view influenced largely by Alexandrian Platonism,<sup>30</sup> due no doubt in large part to the teaching of the immortality of the soul.

Did Paul find an ally in the Roman emperor cults and their practice of apotheosis of the emperors in his efforts to deify Jesus Christ? Are criticisms suggesting that Christianity borrowed pagan myth concerning the deity of Jesus Christ weighty enough to cast doubt upon the testimony of the New Testament concerning Christ as the God-man? Did Paul’s theology of resurrection undergo development as some have suggested? These are questions that deserve attention.

Scholarship has demonstrated and acknowledged that the concept of apotheosis, of man becoming divine, has deep roots in Near Eastern cultures long before the Roman conquest of that area. Drane points out that the Greeks were certainly not the first to hold some type of

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<sup>30</sup>Otto Pfliegerer, *Das Urchristentum, seine Schriften und Lehren in geschichtlichem Zusammenhang* (Berlin: Reimer, 1887). Cited in Ben F. Meyer, “Did Paul's View of the Resurrection of the Dead Undergo Development?” *Ex Auditu*. 5 (1989): 57-76.

belief in resurrection of the dead.<sup>31</sup> The Babylonian Tammuz and Ishtar were mirrored by Osiris and Isis in Egypt and Baal and Anat in Canaan. It does not follow however that Paul's thinking on the subject of the resurrection of the dead was borrowed from or influenced by pagan apotheosis. A doctrine of the resurrection was prevalent within the Talmudic Judaism of Paul's time. Indeed, those Jews who denied the resurrection were thought to be excluded from the promise of resurrection.<sup>32</sup> It is not tenable therefore to assert that Paul had to borrow the concept of resurrection to support his teaching on the subject.

Plevnik insists that Paul's resurrection theology did not change and did not incorporate outside elements.<sup>33</sup> He addresses three issues commonly raised by critics from 1 Thessalonians 4 concerning the resurrection. First, did Paul teach the resurrection of the dead to the Thessalonians during his first encounter with them? Second, does Paul show a change of perspective concerning the resurrection teaching between 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians? Finally, what can be learned from the distinctive translation-assumption motif in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18? Plevnik suggests that indeed the Thessalonians were informed of the "life with Christ" related to the *parousia*. Logically, those who had died in Christ would need to be raised again to life if they were to precede those already living when Christ returned. This emphasis on translation-assumption adequately addresses the issue of the grieving Thessalonians. Plevnik demonstrates that the cause of grief among the Thessalonians was not due to the lack of previous teaching concerning the resurrection but was due rather to a misunderstanding of their sharing in the *parousia* through their translation-assumption. Additionally, the nine "you know" statements in 1 Thessalonians

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<sup>31</sup>J.W. Drane, "Some Ideas of Resurrection in the New Testament Period," *Tyndale Bulletin* 24 (1973): 99-110.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 101. Drane cites the tractate *Sanhedrin* 90a.

<sup>33</sup>Joseph Plevnik, "The Taking Up of the Faithful and the Resurrection of the Dead in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 46 (April 1984): 274-283.

provide strong support to the belief that Paul did in fact teach the believers about many things concerning the resurrection including the parousia of Christ and what it meant for them.<sup>34</sup>

Another difficulty for critics of Christianity that has not been satisfactorily answered to date is this: how can the Roman myth of apotheosis which involves man becoming god be squared with Christianity which involves exactly the opposite, God becoming man? The difference in these two positions cannot be underestimated or marginalized by those seeking to make a connection between the two. The incarnational nature of Jesus Christ as the God-man is a very powerful theme within the Christian faith.

Werblowsky makes the same point in reference to the incarnation when he states it is “unheard of and almost outrageous, unprecedented, unrepeated and unrepeatabe . . .”<sup>35</sup>

Werblowsky rightly describes the Christian doctrine of the incarnation as the single most important difference between Christianity and pagan myths of apotheosis. The barrier between God and man was transcended not by man becoming god but by God becoming man. Again, the importance of this distinction appears lost on critics of Christianity. It is not convincing to make an appeal to the similarity of the Roman apotheosis myths and the Christian incarnation doctrine on the basis that both deal with the relationship between humanity and divinity.

While it must be admitted that Paul demonstrates a polemical style toward the imperial cult of emperor worship, most notably in 1 Thessalonians, this does not mean that he borrowed ideas and resurrection themes in order to develop his doctrine of the resurrection of Christ. Speaking out against the authorities of power both politically and spiritually is a feature of many of the New Testament writers. That some see in Paul’s writings clear

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<sup>34</sup>See 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:1, 2, 5, 11; 3:3-4; 4:2; 5:2; cf. 2 Thessalonians 2.5.

<sup>35</sup>R. J. Werblowsky, “Some Reflections On Two-way Traffic: Incarnation/Avatara and Apotheosis,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. 14 (December 1987): 279-285.

references to the “presence of an aggressive imperial eschatology and the widespread circulation of Augustan apotheosis traditions” supports the point being made in this paper, namely that “Paul injected heavily loaded Roman political terms into his presentation of Christ,” and thus “transformed their ideological content to his theological and social advantage, and thereby overturned the absolutist claims of the imperial cult.”<sup>36</sup> Speaking to the culture using themes and beliefs they regard as true is always an effective method of persuasion when sharing the Gospel. Appeals to the probability of the gospel writers as well as Paul incorporating Greco-Roman ideas concerning apotheosis on this basis are misplaced and appear to be a priori assumptions.

Some have raised the issue that the manner of Christ’s death provides proof that He was not the Son of God as Christianity claims. Celsus for example argued that Christ’s agony in the garden conclusively demonstrated His inability to be divine as no God would or could experience pain or find themselves at the mercy of mere mortals.<sup>37</sup>

Other critics have attempted to equate the resurrection of Christ with the Greco-Roman practice of hero cult worship and even hero translation based on the empty tomb.<sup>38</sup> Supporters of the empty tomb motif have suggested that either a translation is apparent or most likely the empty tomb was a cenotaph, linking it to hero cult worship.<sup>39</sup> The weakness of such an assertion is obvious in that a cenotaph presumes first of all that someone has died

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<sup>36</sup>Harrison, 71.

<sup>37</sup>Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.9.23.24 [GCS Koetschau II/1 135,4-8; 152,11-14; 153,7-10; trans. Chadwick]. Cited in Heike Omerzu, “Challenging Belief in the Divinity of Jesus as Window Onto the Making of a God,” *Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting November 21-25, 2008*. Available at <http://post.queensu.ca/~rsa/> Accessed March 30, 2009.

<sup>38</sup>Neill Quinn Hamilton, “Resurrection Tradition and the Composition of Mark,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 84 (December 1965): 415-421.

<sup>39</sup>Prominent in the “translation” hypothesis was Elias Bickermann. His work entitled “Das leere Grab” appeared in *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 23, in 1924 and was used by N.Q. Hamilton in his work cited above to support that author’s contention that the empty tomb narrative in Mark was borrowed from the Greco-Roman tradition of hero translation.

and secondly that there is in fact a body somewhere. The Greeks and Romans were unaccustomed to leaving fallen comrades on the battlefield. Burial was seen as proper and respectful and superstition regarded it as absolutely necessary to avoid offending the spirits of deceased mortals as well as the gods. When expediency called for leaving the dead behind a memorial was established elsewhere in their honor. Rightly understood this memorial or cenotaph was an empty tomb. Thus empty tombs do not in themselves support a theory of translation nor were all empty tombs erected for heroes. Beyond this, translation almost always represented the avoidance of death by the one translated. Enoch and Elijah come to mind immediately in the Judeo-Christian tradition while in the Greco-Roman mythologies Ganymede, Herakles, Empedocles, Romulus, Semiramis, Aristeas, Euthymos, and Appollonius all escaped death by being translated and in this act were not immortalized as heroes but instead were thought to have become gods and thus undergone the process of apotheosis.<sup>40</sup> Given the veneration of relics and especially bones and other artifacts connected to heroes and the cult of hero worship prevalent in the time of Christ, it is easy to imagine the early church worshipping at the tomb of Christ if they believed that it contained His body.<sup>41</sup> That they did not is strong evidence they understood the tomb was empty because He had risen.<sup>42</sup>

The Apostle Paul's presentation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is on solid ground. Bibliographically, internally, and externally the evidence is strong in support of Paul's teaching as having been informed by Judaism while at the same time decidedly and distinctively what came to be defined as Christian. Habermas supports this contention and

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<sup>40</sup>Bolt, 34.

<sup>41</sup> Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 93-94

<sup>42</sup>William Lane Craig, "Dale Allison on Jesus's Empty Tomb, His Postmortem Appearances, and the Origin of the Disciples' Belief in His Resurrection," *Philosophia Christi* 10 (2): 293-302.

provides a list of eleven historical facts concerning the resurrection that is agreed upon by all scholars regardless of their stance concerning Christianity.<sup>43</sup> Among the generally accepted historically verifiable facts of note are: that Jesus Christ actually died due to crucifixion, that He was buried afterwards, that His death caused the disciples to experience great despair, that the disciples experienced renewed hope and joy as they witnessed what they believed to be the risen Jesus, that these experiences with the risen Jesus turned the disciples from timid to bold proclaimers of the resurrection, that this message of the resurrection of Jesus was proclaimed openly in the city of Jerusalem, and as a result of this bold preaching the church was born.

In a more recent essay, Habermas refines the discussion even further and insists that the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ cannot be disputed by scholars. He lists two undisputable facts concerning the resurrection that lie within the historical-natural realm. The first is that Jesus Christ was crucified and died as a result. The second is that after He was buried in a tomb His disciples believed that he appeared to them on multiple occasions and that these appearances changed their lives forever. By arguing these two points alone it is possible to shift the discussion concerning the resurrection to the “home turf” of critics by eliminating the metaphysical and philosophical realms, as they are not entertained. Debating the supernatural or metaphysical implications of the resurrection on philosophical terms is outside the realm of historical review. This perspective recognizes a very important distinction between the task of the historian and historical investigation on the one hand and the individual philosophical and/or theological perspectives one might bring to the discussion on the other. History rightly concerns itself with time and space events.

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<sup>43</sup>Gary R. Habermas, “Jesus' Resurrection and Contemporary Criticism: An Apologetic,” *Criswell Theological Review*. 4 (Fall 1989): 159-174.

Arguing the historicity of an event from a metaphysical viewpoint is confusing separate issues. Thus, “whether this event (the resurrection) was a *miracle* or whether God *raised Jesus from the dead* are distinct philosophical questions and must be treated differently from historical questions.”<sup>44</sup>

Of course this is exactly where the Greco-Roman apotheosis mythological argument breaks down - when attempting to make a connection to Pauline teaching concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Apotheosis depended entirely on the involvement of the gods and operated in the metaphysical and philosophical realms. Translation of the emperors and heroes occurred without observation or witness and therefore could only be credited to the work of the gods. There is no historical evidence of post-death appearances of the emperors. While apotheosis was claimed for many there is no natural, historical, physical evidence to support those claims. Additionally, locating the bodies of the emperors would have been easy enough. Shrines, monuments, and mausoleums dotted the landscape of Rome for centuries. But those marbled edifices to the reign of the emperors held them bound forever, in spite of the public declaration of their rise to *divus*.

In conclusion at least two points emerge from this analysis. First, the fact that Paul critiques the emperor worship cults in sometimes pointed and other times veiled language in many of his letters does not mean he adapted their mythology to develop his resurrection teaching. Second and perhaps more powerful, is the observation that Paul’s well defined Christology demonstrates a clear dichotomy of source, thought, and intent. Pauline literature

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<sup>44</sup>Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister, *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 288. Habermas’s essay is entitled *The Resurrection of Jesus and Recent Agnosticism*. He states that Christians can argue for the validity of the resurrection from two points in a historical context. The first is that Jesus died and the second is that human witnesses saw Him afterward.

when it does touch on emperor worship proclaims Jesus Christ as Lord and Caesar as a pretender. It is appropriate to remind readers of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19:

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.

The necessity of this reminder is centered on the fact that the teaching of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to the Gospel proclamation. It is not irrelevant to personal and individual faith as some would state.<sup>45</sup> The resurrection of Jesus Christ is what makes personal faith possible and true. In Pinnock's words the resurrection event is based on historical verifiable fact and therefore, "Faith does not claw the air. It lays hold upon saving verities planted in the fabric of history."<sup>46</sup> Paul certainly understood that truth and this in large part may have been responsible for his unflinching consistency concerning the historicity of his resurrection teaching and his refusal to adopt pagan mythologies into his proclamation.

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<sup>45</sup>Michael A. Williams, "Since Christ Has Been Raised From the Dead," *Presbyterian*. 33 (Fall 2007): 65-71. Williams mentions J. Dominic Crossan whom he believes has turned the resurrection of Christ into a metaphor for how people should live – a psychological benchmark but not an actual event that happened to Christ.

<sup>46</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, "On the Third Day," *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 153. Cited in *Christianity for the Tough Minded*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1982), 251.

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