

The Resurrection Fact

Responding to Modern Critics

EDITED BY

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AND

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The Resurrection Fact: Responding to Modern Critics

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Myth and Resurrection

C. J. Armstrong and Andrew R. DeLoach

I believe that legends and myths are largely made of 'truth,' and indeed present aspects of it that can only be received in this mode.

—J. R. R. Tolkien¹

These are the myths: and he who has no sympathy with myths has no sympathy with men.

—G. K. Chesterton²

Introduction

The religious landscape of the West at the beginning of our twenty-first century appears to be as pluralistic as its counterpart at the time of Christ. A backdrop of divine activity saturated everyday existence in the Roman-dominated Mediterranean, a backdrop populated by the gods that Rome, over its many years of inhabiting and

¹J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed., Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 147.

²G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2008), 109.

eventually entirely ruling the area, had discovered, invented, inherited, borrowed, adopted, coopted, or otherwise known of. These were divinities that were celebrated formally at family ceremonies and ceremonies of state. They were prayed to and offered gifts of devotion in temples, shrines, and household *lararia*. They were also depicted in sculpture, painting, poetry, drama, and other forms of art. The Greek Olympians in Roman togas, the indigenous gods of Etruria and Latium, divinities of Judea and Egypt and Persia, ancestors, heroes, and the genius of the emperor were accepted as cultural forces by devotees and skeptics alike—even as philosophical religions such as Stoicism and Epicureanism engaged questions of life and death, the existence of the afterlife, and the nature, number, and relative concern of gods. All these had their place in not so much a common pantheon as a common cultural presence in the pluralistic first-century empire.

But despite the number of deities the first-century Mediterranean could boast, none share in common with the story of Christ a resurrection of the body. Religions predating and contemporary with Christianity may indeed correspond in various other ways with the Christ we know from the first-century New Testament documents, but bodily resurrection is unique to Christ. This truth proves an essential difference between the ancient religions and Christianity, one we do well to heed, particularly in light of at least two assumptions that tend to cast doubt on the claims of Christianity. The first is the perceived difficulty in saying anything certain about antiquity in general (and the New Testament in particular); after all, it is argued, these things happened long ago, and therefore conclusions ought to be considered suspect when based on fragmentary evidence, oral tradition, and other artifacts of belief and practice. The second assumption lionizes “science” but patronizes religion as a moral system at best or mythology (by which a critic would mean magic or falsehood) at worst. It is of course the current fashion to consider all such ancient story as religious myth or mythological religion, either of which insufficiently measures up to the modern, rational way of understanding the world. The first assumption leads the uncritical observer to take first-century Christianity, Judaism, mystery religions like the Orphic mysteries or Mithraism, Zoroastrianism, and what came to be known in the later Christian era as traditional pagan religion (the public worship of the major gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon); categorize them under one

heading; and declare it “ancient religion”—no wonder then that there are so many “parallels” between, for example, the mythology of Christ and the mythology of Osiris, another divine being who (according to the Egyptians) underwent a death and an underworld journey. The second assumption pits science against religion and science against myth in an epistemological *agon* that neither religion nor myth can hope to win if the goal is to validate a way of seeing the world as it really is from a human point of view, in a way that can be tested, proved empirically, and is consonant furthermore with what have come to be imposed by the purveyors of this modern, rationalist world view as acceptable limitations of humanistic inquiry.

It is not our intention simply to bemoan the fact that our four most recent centuries of human history have moved the agenda for understanding the cosmos and our place in it from one in which religious experience and vocabulary were at the center to one in which they are at the extreme margin. Nor can we hope to satisfy every skeptic or conspiracy theorist in regard to the distinctions among ancient religions and the significance of Christianity’s unique claim from its very origins. But we do hope to inform the conversation on both counts by a focus on the uniqueness of the resurrection in Christianity. This claim of resurrection among ancient religions is not only the central event in Christianity but also the heart of a robust *apologia* that is entirely comfortable with the relationship between Christianity and myth and with using the idiom of myth in apologetic discourse. Indeed, numerous Christian thinkers—C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, and others—have engaged extensively in this task both as lovers of myth (and mythmaking) and as firm believers in the factual nature of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. For each of them was well aware of early criticism of myth as well as the modernist criticisms in their own day, and they engaged with those critics as devout Christians who believed that the Gospel story is the paramount myth that entered history as fact. Tolkien, for example, believed that myth is made up of truth and that aspects of truth could only come through myth.³ In fact, he argued that

³Tolkien, *Letters*, 147; see also J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (London:

in Jesus's incarnation and resurrection, we encounter myth that has entered history: "Here God tells—indeed, enacts—a tale with all the beauty and wonder and symbolic power of myth, and yet a tale that is actually true."⁴ Lewis agreed, calling myth a "*preparatio evangelica*, a divine hinting in poetic and ritual form at the same central truth which was later focused and (so to speak) historicized in the Incarnation."⁵ That it is true is a happy ending that brings overwhelming joy; Tolkien called this *eucatastrophe*, concluding that the resurrection was the greatest eucatastrophe possible.⁶

Not surprisingly, Christianity is today no less a target of criticism based on its alleged parallels with ancient religion and myth. But following Lewis and Tolkien against their critics and with equal confidence, our response to the current crop of critics rests on proclaiming that in Christ's resurrection, *myth entered into history as fact*. That fact dispels the kind of slipshod assumptions and uncritical falsehoods promulgated by pop history and propaganda pieces such as the 2007 film *Zeitgeist: The Movie*, which asserts that Jesus Christ and countless other figures of ancient religion are explicable primarily as astrologically parallel phenomena. Similarly, exponents of conspiracy culture are themselves guilty of the same revisionist history they purport to expose, as in the series of books that includes Dan Brown's 2003 *The Da Vinci Code*. Pop history, alternative knowledge, or plain conspiracy theory are (at least overtly) not given a great deal of credibility by self-identifying skeptics such as Michael Shermer, author and founding publisher of *Skeptic Magazine*. Science, it is claimed, debunks these falsehoods. But while the published tenets of the skeptical stance include rational and critical thought over and against belief in pseudoscience, for the (what seems to us) laudable purpose of "making the world a safer and saner place," nevertheless

George Allen and Unwin, 1983), where he explains: "History often resembles 'Myth,' because they are both ultimately of the same stuff" (127).

⁴Philip Zaleski and Carol Zaleski, *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 188–89.

⁵C. S. Lewis, "Religion without Dogma?," in *God in the Dock*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), 132.

⁶Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 156.

all that passes for “religion” likewise is eliminated from discussion as myth (i.e., magic or falsehood) instead of science. A (perhaps justifiable) fear of oppression by social systems like organized religion, particularly conservative American Evangelical Christianity, drives these pop history and conspiracy theorists; witness the titles on the suggested reading list for skeptics (catalogued on Shermer’s blog): Robin Morgan’s 2006 *Fighting Words: A Toolkit for Combating the Religious Right* and Sean Fairclough’s 2012 *Attack of the Theocrats! How the Religious Right Harms Us All—And What We Can Do about It*. The list continues with material for the college syllabus and for younger budding “junior skeptics” as well. This kind of “mythbusting” in our own pluralistic context may be the major distinction between first- and twenty-first century pluralism—we have a different sort of atheist than any that Hellenistic imperial Rome could produce, different too than we produced in the last century, and we have them in droves.

From the beginning, the term “myth” is a major point of contention. We have noted what critics mean when they say “myth”—generally magic or falsehood. But the stuff of ancient religion, the narratives that form the content of belief and practice, is also denoted by the word myth in what is more than a subtle distinction from its pejorative usage. Much of what we call myth in ancient narrative has nothing to do with magic; furthermore, to call a story patently false because of its age or its content is as academically naïve as accepting one as true because of perceived cultural authority or identification with a political party or religious dogma. On the other hand, myth and mythology also denote a branch of rational humanistic inquiry in the modern academy, a focus of serious study for anthropologists, sociologists, classicists, and scholars of religion, culture, and literature.

We seek to define “myth” more specifically to aid further conversation with skeptics of many stripes and thereby reclaim for myth a definition that both honors its ancient usage and that also might become more useful in our modern parlance than just a dirty word under which to subsume falsehood, pseudoscience, and uncritical assumption. Our examination, which cannot be exhaustive, therefore considers a few myths that have been “paralleled” with Christ. We attempt to summarize a few of these ancient stories themselves

and the religions contemporary with early Christianity that held them as a matter of belief. We conclude that myth remains the inevitable idiom for engaging the unique historical event of Christ's resurrection, not only (as may be assumed) in its ancient milieu but also as a natural human practice of handing down the story even to our own time.

What We Mean by "Myth"

We have inherited ways of talking about myth from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that assumed that myth was generally a way that the ancients explained natural phenomena in the world. The term *aetiology*—myth as an explanation of causes—may be a helpful designation for that presumed method. This notion was taken to be the "primitive" antecedent to science, the modern "rational" way to explain the world. The result of the assumed primitivism of mythology as literal explanation was to place science wholly above, and consider it wholly other than, myth. This assumption still emerges today in certain forms. One result is the prevailing synonymous usage of the vocabulary "myth" with "falsehood." Indeed, if science is shown to explain the workings of the world in contradistinction to a myth's attempt literally to assign a cause to something incompatible with that science, it is easy to understand why a skeptic would throw his lot in with science and consider a myth insufficient or false. This assumption has given birth to an accepted way of talking about myth as if it means a false conviction.

More recent critical approaches to myth question the assumption that compares myth and science as incompatible and myth as a "primitive" antecedent to science. Even the ancients themselves were critical of their own received myths; the Socratic school declaimed stories about gods involved in salacious crimes like rape, and later philosophers allegorized these stories both to mitigate the dilemma and to use them for their own didactic purposes. Allegorizing is one means of reconciling myth and science today as well. Our recent history has produced proponents of scientific "readings" of flood narratives, for example (including the Noahic flood). Intelligent design talk by self-identified creationists purports at least on some level to legitimize scientifically what cultures have described with mythic

language, including the origin of the universe. This is an attempt to equal a playing field between biblical accounts and scientific dogma (which is accused by fundamentalists of following its own “myths”).

We contend to the contrary that we do myth a disservice when we reduce it either to a false conviction, however sincerely held, or on the other hand to an allegorizing reconciliation with what humans can know and how we explain the world from science—whether modern or ancient science and natural philosophy. Myth is neither imaginary fabrication nor bare allegory. As Chesterton quipped, Father Christmas is not an allegory of snow, but something that infuses deeper meaning into the world of snow “so that snow itself seems to warm.”⁷ We have been so bent on using the word “myth” as a means of explaining the world that when a reasonable challenge to that world view comes along, it’s either baby out with the bath-water or figure out how best to reconcile them. The problem lies in limiting “myth” to this aetiological definition. Myth is indeed about story, but it is more than its possible origin and function as explanation of cause. Myth is the story that is so significant to a people that it brings about narrative, art, and other means of telling the story (mythopoesis) of the event(s) at the center of the myth. We are therefore on surer ground when talking about myth when we accept the idea that myth points to a conviction of a people, but that conviction need not be false. Myths indeed are usually retold without recourse to authority (empirical evidence, historical fact) besides tradition, though historical facts may have engendered the tradition (cf. the Solon and Croesus story of Herodotus 1). This is one of the ways that myth differs from history, in that myth often depends on tradition or oral transmission, not on written record; written (or artistic) record is more a result, rather than the cause, of a people’s conviction of the significance of myth.

And the means of transmission—which of course makes the myths no less true—is bound up in the momentous subject of the story. In myth, we are confronted with the transcendent; we approach—or are approached by—the frontier of the eternal. Myth explains and adorns seemingly ordinary stories with a numinous

⁷Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 104–5.

quality, and it is therefore a defiance of the concrete time of the everyday. Yet it is a means by which eternity—and our nostalgia for it—is embodied (incarnated!) in ordinary time. Thus Eliade describes myths as hierophanies, “breakthroughs of the sacred into the World,” traces of the divine in real time.⁸ Likewise does Tolkien praise mythic poetry that “glimpses the cosmic.” For Christian thinkers like Tolkien, Lewis, Charles Williams, and others, myth points to a higher and purer world, and mythopoesis is “a pathway to this higher world and a way of describing . . . its felt presence.”⁹

And yet myth is necessarily abstract. As Owen Barfield described it, myth is “the ghost of concrete meaning.”¹⁰ The myths were not merely the frivolous creations of ancient storytellers but were the expression of their spiritual perceptions and a communication of reality as they conceived it. What we now receive in the myths is true metaphor, but metaphor nonetheless. Faërie, “the Perilous Realm” of the eternal, cannot be “caught in a net of words.”¹¹ Attempts to explain are always inadequate; the more one endeavors to define myth, the further one draws from a satisfying reality.¹² Thus myth is impervious to rational (and rationalist) analysis, particularly of the kind of quasi-scholarly literary criticism practiced by contemporary critics of Christianity that attempts to debunk myth as either confused history at best or euhemeristic religious lies at worst. For myth is extraliterary; it is “a particular kind of story which has value in itself—a value independent of its embodiment in any literary work.”¹³ Divine truth, ultimate reality, the fulfillment of humankind’s deepest yearnings—these are not the legitimate objects of scientific examination, and they cannot (as Tolkien

⁸Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 6.

⁹Zaleski and Zaleski, *The Fellowship*, 11.

¹⁰Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning* (Oxford: Barfield Press, 2010), 84.

¹¹J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” 114.

¹²Clyde S. Kilby, foreword to *Christian Mythmakers*, by Rolland Hein (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), x.

¹³C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 41.

hinted) be precisely defined or described, though we can readily perceive them. In his typical wit, Chesterton explained it thus: “I knew the magic bean stalk before I had tasted beans.”¹⁴ But myth conveys more than arbitrary morals or entertainment. What Chesterton was describing—and what countless many have experienced—is an encounter with Elfland, Faërie, the transcendent. In myth, “we come nearest to experiencing as a concrete what can otherwise be understood only as an abstraction.”¹⁵ Myth is important, necessary, to this extraliterary and extrarational encounter, because “reality is so much larger than rationality.”¹⁶

Here the critic balks. The myth-hater (“Misomythos,” as Tolkien called a then-agnostic Lewis and those like him) claims that because myth is not rational, it must be imaginary, and it is therefore unscientific and necessarily false. But this is precisely the problem, as Lewis well understood: if one begins by knowing on some other ground that Christianity is false, then the parallels to pagan myths will only confirm this falsity; but when the veracity of the Christian claim is the very issue under investigation, then the argument from correlation clearly begs the question.¹⁷ When the critic insists on looking at the myths as specimens in a lab, all hope is lost of understanding meaning—much less apprehending truth—in them. But this is the favored objection: that the Christian story cannot be true because it so obviously borrowed from the ancient myths (themselves obviously fabricated for one purpose or another), with which it shares several key features. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, for example, points to the numerous parallels of the “dying god” in the history of ancient

¹⁴G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 46. Elsewhere, Chesterton expands on this idea: “Therefore do we all in fact feel that pagan or primitive myths are infinitely suggestive, so long as we are wise enough not to inquire what they suggest. Therefore we all feel what is meant by Prometheus stealing fire from heaven, until some prig of a pessimist or progressive person explains what it means. Therefore we all know the meaning of Jack and the Beanstalk, until we are told.” Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 111.

¹⁵C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *God in the Dock*, 66.

¹⁶Kilby, *Christian Mythmakers*, x.

¹⁷Lewis, “Religion without Dogma?,” 132. It also commits the “false cause fallacy,” confusing correlation for causation.

religions. The myths of Adonis and Osiris, for instance, are meant to signify natural growth.¹⁸ These intentionally imagined gods, who died and “returned” to renew the world, are symbols of the grain that dies and falls into the earth and rises with each new harvest. The myths, then, apply this natural process to the life of humanity: each of us must die to live again.

As an atheist, Lewis believed the Gospel narratives were myths of this kind, telling of the natural cycle of birth, death, and renewal. After all, Jesus says that the wheat must die to bear fruit, and after he breaks the bread he calls his body, he dies and rises to new life. Isn't he just one more dying harvest god offering his life for the world? But Lewis came eventually to doubt this idea:

[W]hy was it that the only case of the “dying God” which might conceivably have been historical occurred among a people . . . who had not got any trace of this nature religion, and indeed seemed to know nothing about it? Why is it among *them* the thing suddenly appears to happen? . . . The principal actor, humanly speaking, hardly seems to know of the repercussions His words (and sufferings) would have in any pagan mind. Well that is almost inexplicable, except on one hypothesis. How if the corn king is not mentioned in that Book, because He is here of whom the corn king was an image? How if the representation is absent because here, at least, the thing represented is present? If the shadows are absent because the thing of which they were shadows is here?¹⁹

What troubled Lewis, and ought rightly to trouble the anthropological critics of Christianity, is the fact that it *happened*—God in Christ actually “dived down” into nature, was present here with humanity, and among them died and rose to life again. The anthropological criticism based on parallels flagrantly ignores the facticity of this narrative and avers that for Christianity to be true, every

¹⁸To the naturalist critic, this is *all* they are meant to signify. To Philomythos (myth-lover), this is plainly reductionistic: “The naturalist is right when he connects the myth with the phenomena of nature, but wrong if he deduces it solely from these.” Barfield, *Poetic Diction*, 84.

¹⁹C. S. Lewis, “The Grand Miracle,” in *God in the Dock*, 83–84.

other religion in the world must be 100 percent false. This is the only way that Christianity could avoid all coincidence with other religions and myths.²⁰ The universal human desire to tell stories undeniably makes many of them sound similar, but despite this, they may to some degree be both original and true. But to seize on similarities between ancient religion and Christianity and claim that fabrication is the *sine qua non* precludes all mythmaking—indeed all narrative. But this is neither rational nor realistic, for the parallels—regardless of how closely they do coincide—argue neither for nor against the truth of Christianity. And if the parallels say nothing for or against its truth, we ought to reverse the conclusion of modern science: rather than the parallels necessitating that the stories must all be false, we are justified in viewing the parallels as indicating that the myths all touch on some truth (inexplicable though it may seem) and that Christianity lands squarely on and completes it. For Lewis, “who first approached Christianity from a delighted interest in, and reverence for, the best pagan imagination, who loved Balder before Christ and Plato before St. Augustine,” acknowledging the historical truth of the Christian narrative did not require that he (and we) confess that of a thousand religions in the world, 999 are “pure nonsense and the thousandth (fortunately) true”; rather, it “depended on recognizing Christianity as the completion, the actualization, the entelechy, of something that had never been wholly absent from the mind of man.”²¹

Moreover, the critic misunderstands the myths as myth, as literature. Some are cultic while others have no relation to religion at all. Some are concerned with heroes and others harvest. Notwithstanding this, many of the myths seem to be meant largely for entertainment rather than explanation, and just as many have no connection to nature whatever. But the critic misses this entirely by reducing all myth to narrative falsehood. What must be remembered is that myth

²⁰C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 127.

²¹Lewis, “Religion without Dogma?” 132. Likewise, Chesterton’s awareness of the myths preceded his belief in their truth; see Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*: “I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts” (47).

is not a work of empirical observation and systematized results. It is a work of the creative intellect and imagination, and while it in no way follows that myth must necessarily be false (for imagination does not mean imaginary, as Chesterton insisted), myth is nonetheless a work of the *poetical* aspect of human action and thus requires the critic check his presuppositions and understand it as such.²²

We may point out the terrible irony in the criticism of Christianity as an unoriginal copy by contemporary critics, who are themselves parroting Gerald Massey, James Frazer, and Joseph Campbell. It would be just as easy to apply the argument about parallels to their critical scholarship of the history of religions and turn it into what Chesterton called “a vulgar monomania of plagiarism.”²³ But we need not go this far, for while we may acknowledge their learning, they make clear for us that their judgment of myth, literature, and the Christian narrative is not equally deserving of respect. Lewis speaks here for us: “[W]hatever these men may be as [scholars], I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading. . . . If he tells me that something in a Gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read. . . . I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.”²⁴ And while it is no indication of the merit of their criticisms, we find further irony in certain contemporary attempts at explicitly secular myth and fantasy that borrow on divine capital—like Phillip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy (from which came the 2007 film *The Golden Compass*), which relies not on classical pagan myth but on Christianity, and particularly

²²In this regard, Chesterton explains that myth “needs a poet to make it. It needs a poet to criticize it. . . . But for some reason I have never heard explained, it is only the minority of unpoetical people who are allowed to write critical studies of these popular poems. We do not submit a sonnet to a mathematician or a song to a calculating boy; but we do indulge the equally fantastic idea that folk-lore can be treated as a science.” Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, 101.

²³*Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴C. S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” in *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 154–55.

Milton's *Paradise Lost*—to create an intentionally anti-Christian allegory. The result of the superficial and cynical de-mythologizing process is to strip the myths of their wonder and value. In Tolkien's poem "Mythopoeia," he warns of the danger of taking everything in life for face value (as the "rationalist" does):

You look at trees and label them just so,
 (for trees are "trees," and growing is "to grow");
 you walk the earth and tread with solemn pace
 one of the many minor globes of Space:
 a star's a star, some matter in a ball
 compelled to courses mathematical
 amid the regimented, cold, inane,
 where destined atoms are each moment slain.²⁵

This is the indifferent and insipid world offered by the materialist critics of Christianity. But true, ultimate reality is that which pulls at the deepest yearnings of the human heart, which presses us beyond mere living into *being*. This reality is the antithesis of the trivial and soulless world of the materialist skeptic who wishes to be good and happy without the sacred and eternal.

A graduate professor of classics who self-identified as a "very lapsed Catholic" once told me (C. J.) that she was no longer a Christian because she could no longer "believe in the myth." As a scholar very well entrenched in the academic study of mythology, she was no doubt aware of the possible slippage of the term "myth" when she made this statement, but I have to believe she meant more than simply "magic" or "falsehood," not least because she did not say "I don't believe in myths." This was a different response than the facile, skeptical stance that defuses dialogue regarding ancient events and their narrative tradition by suspiciously considering them either as the product of an irremediably backward world view just waiting for science to show us the light, or even worse, as impossible to get at with any degree of objective accuracy and so not worth the effort.

²⁵J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf: Including the Poem Mythopoeia* (London: George Allen and Unwin Hyman, 1964), 97.

In other words, skeptical dismissal of ancient event and story is arrogant at best and willingly, blissfully ignorant at worst. It is one thing “not to believe in the myth.” It is another thing to ignore myths completely, or even treat them uncritically as indistinguishable.

So also with reducing the proclamation of Christ’s resurrection to simply one of many equally false ancient dying-and-rising-god myths. Not only is the resurrection event recorded in the New Testament an event distinct from other historical events in the ancient world, but the way the story of it is told (and rites associated with its import) is quite distinct from the ways in which the ancient Greco-Roman myths were told. The criticism assumes *a priori* that the people among whom the Christian proclamation arose were either entirely ignorant, or immediately misunderstanding, of the events surrounding Christ’s death and resurrection. Apparently the followers of Jesus could not possibly have recognized his actions, teachings, or purpose—much less the correspondence of certain of his actions to the ancient myths, for it *is* there—and yet our modern critics have managed to divine and debunk all of it. Here again we concur with Lewis: “The idea that any man or writer should be opaque to those who lived in the same culture, spoke the same language, shared the same habitual imagery and unconscious assumptions, and yet be transparent to those who have none of those advantages, is in my opinion posterous.”²⁶

The vocabulary of mythopoeia refers to the way we rehearse, repeat, represent, and deliver the story of an event of great import for a people. Christianity claims that the people in question is universal; indeed Luke reports that the resurrection of Christ both has meaning beyond an empty grave and demands a response:

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them,

²⁶C. S. Lewis, “Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism,” 158.

saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized. (Acts 2:37–41)

Luke’s “those who received his word” implies furthermore that there were people in the crowd who did not receive his word. This does not mean there were people in the crowd at Pentecost who just didn’t believe in myths, meaning souls too rational to be tricked by miracle stories, magic, or slick rhetoric. We do not see argument against the resurrection event here. Rather, we see only some who receive it—that is, believe it to their salvation (accepting not only the fact of Peter’s current events review but also the consequences he lays out in the proclamation of Joel’s prophecy fulfilled)—and others who do not. Rejection of the story may involve simply demurrals regarding its meaning or its intended beneficiaries. But this bit of documentary evidence does not leave us with a sense that there is disbelief in the fact of the event itself. For Lewis, and for us today, the word is received thus: “Here is the very thing you like in poetry and the romances, only this time it’s true.”²⁷

Christianity and the Romans

One further distinction to consider between the pluralism of the first century AD and our own is the notion of religions in competition. Roman religious practice was not so much a matter of choice among alternatives as it was a religious life of many dimensions. There was little for the religious participant to be anxious about in moving from celebration of state cult to family worship to mystery-club devotion to philosophical rumination, as the tolerant cultural context of polytheism was the general rule for the religions in question rather than claims of exclusivity or prohibitions against idolatry. It is helpful therefore to consider the particularly Roman lens through which Christianity was perceived with a brief survey of the religious backdrop of the Roman world.

²⁷Walter Hooper, ed., *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis, Volume II* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 5.

The broad strokes of belief in the existence of the divine and the need to pray to and propitiate gods through offering and ritual sacrifice were as common to religion in Rome as they were throughout the Hellenistic world and the ancient Near East, a point basically held in common with Judaism and Christianity. Roman civic religion boasted several colleges of priests devoted to their many gods, and the office of these priests was to ensure the public good. Hence the priesthods, managed at the top of the Roman state's hierarchy by one chief priest (*pontifex maximus*), were public in nature (priestly offices were in fact public magistracies). Peoples' prayers to gods were supplemented with a tangible offering (a *votum*) dedicated to a deity's temple. More substantial offerings included animal sacrifice—the larger and more public the need, the larger, more public, and more official the offering—to the gods whose cultivation reinforced their patronage of the state. A Roman's participation in ceremonies of the state's major patron gods also reinforced the community's allegiance to the state, as much as the later sacrifice of a bit of incense and prayer to the genius of the emperor would confirm an individual's identity as a citizen loyal to the empire.

Roman civic religion took as given that people, and indeed the entire state, were under obligation to the gods. This relationship of obligation, reflected in the worship practice of sacrifice, reveals a *do ut des* way of cultivating their religion: I give (to you gods) in order that you (gods) may give to me (i.e., as individual or community). The important role of the human agent or agents doing the giving on the front end of that contract is reflected in the need to perform sacrifices perfectly, according to procedure known by the various priesthods to honor their particular gods at their particular shrines and temples. Imperfect sacrifices needed to be repeated with new victims until ceremonies were completed without flaw; to do otherwise was to risk the disastrous outcomes of such ill-omened, deficient ceremony.

Jewish cult of course also included priesthood and sacrifice of victims, localized at the Jerusalem temple until its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD. But the Roman perception of Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism is not colored so much by Jewish sacrificial practice as by the other Jewish distinctives Rome found hard to swallow. As a Jewish sect, Christianity shared in common its insistence on

monotheism. Limiting worshipers to cultivation of one deity exclusively amid so many options—and under threat of punishment for idolatry—not to mention Sabbath worship centered locally in the synagogue, ritual purity including dietary regulation, and devotion to the Torah were, frankly, odd to the Romans. Odd as these elements were to rank polytheists, the very nature of polytheism demands broad toleration, and Romans were in fact generally quite tolerant of exclusive religious groups such as Judaism and Christianity. Up to a point, that is. Conformity to municipal peace was the *sine qua non* of the *pax Romana*, conformity established and enforced by its peacemakers, the Roman military presence in every municipality, ready to put down riots violently, up to and including systematic persecution of troublemakers. Perceived oddity probably did not help mitigate the stigma attached to these groups, attracting the focus of a Nero who scapegoated the Jews and Christians in 64 AD as the arsonists in Rome's conflagration.²⁸ But the Jewish state was later obliterated by Roman armies not because of its insistence on monotheism but because of the Jewish revolts of the first and second centuries AD. So also, Christians were not systematically persecuted under Nero, Decius, or Diocletian because of their proclamation of and insistence on Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead but because of their perceived nonallegiance to the well-ordered state²⁹ and as a response to riots.³⁰

Early martyrs of Christianity were, not surprisingly, remembered by fellow Christians as local heroes, having died a death worthy of emulation. Indeed, becoming (or remembering) a Christian martyr was at the same time a remembrance of Christ's sacrificial death. Early Christian writing casts death in a light quite different than that promoted by their pagan contemporaries, however, who saw death as an evil to be avoided or mitigated by a hopeful afterlife.³¹ "What

²⁸Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44.

²⁹Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.96–97.

³⁰Suetonius, *Claudius* 25; cf. Acts 18:1–18.

³¹The general attitude toward death and pessimism regarding the afterlife, which Rome inherited from archaic and classical Greece, is summarized and

was different” in ordinary Christian funeral practice from that of their non-Christian neighbors,

was the centrality of the resurrection of Christ as the witness, the exemplar, of personal and physical resurrection for each Christian. Resurrection was . . . *part* of the Jewish inheritance, but it was enunciated now as *the* central indisputable proposition of the new faith. It was enunciated so strongly that (much to the amazement of the Roman authorities) large numbers of Christians came forward to claim their resurrectional rights, as it were, by offering to die, and to do so in the most public and painful of ways.³²

Correspondence to pagan remembrance of a hero’s death ends here, then, at remembrance. Certainly in Greece and during the Roman period, minor deities as well as patron demigod heroes were cultivated in worship that focused on the memory of eponymous founders of cities and family lines, or those who had shown great service to a locale through good work, service in war, or martyrdom. These localized cults are traceable as antecedents of the later cult to the dead and deified emperors of Rome. The Greeks could point to big names (Heracles, for example) as enjoying some kind of blessed afterlife on Olympus or the Isles of the Blessed, and the Romans considered emperors whose honors surpassed other living mortals to have been catasterized (turned into stars or constellations and therefore having an afterlife existence in the heavens). On a smaller scale, local heroes received ritual attention at their graves, more in the Greek world than in the later Roman one. The later popularity of mystery cult in Rome may be related to this more ancient Greek phenomenon.

In our normal usage, we employ the word “mystery” generally to refer to riddles or secrets that are obscure, difficult to understand, or hidden from view, hence the genre of modern “mystery” fiction

convincingly established by N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 32–45.

³²Jon Davies, *Death, Burial, and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1999), 199–200.

that includes detective stories like Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books or thrillers by Agatha Christie. And indeed when we talk about the so-called "mystery religions" of the ancient world, we are on ground that, well trod as it is, nevertheless is yet riddled with much that is unknown—we can only hope that further generations of scholars will shed more light on a field that at present is rather more dark than other aspects of ancient society. When we use the term "mystery" to categorize these religions, however, scholars are not referring to their own ignorance or the obscurity of the subject, but rather to what the ancients considered a club, the inner workings of which were exclusively the experience of the initiated (the Greek verb *myein* means to shut or close; a *mystēs* was an initiate, plural *mystai*; hence the activities of the club come to be known as *mysteria*).

Mystery religions were popular among many (though not all) ancients, as they offered worshiper-club-members a more intimate association with a society of fellow thinkers than what was provided in the ritual ceremonies of state. Not all were of Eastern origin, like the devotion to Mithras (probably Persian in origin) or Isis (Egyptian); the Greek cult of Demeter at Eleusis originating in at least the seventh century BC, though possibly older, still existed through the duration of the Roman Empire as well. The diversity of origin and variety of practice among these religions to a great extent defies identifying them together beyond the common attributes of initiation for membership (and therefore secrecy regarding their inner workings) and their position as voluntary practices vis-à-vis other facets of religious life in ancient Rome. Nevertheless, studies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries conjectured that Christianity was viewed by the Romans (sometimes with suspicion) as a mystery cult because of elements it shared in common with other known cults, including the rite of initiation (holy baptism) and what came to be known in Christian parlance as the *mysteria* (sacraments, particularly the Lord's Supper).³³ While we are on surer ground in chalking up Roman suspicion of Christianity to Christian demurrals of allegiance to the

³³Selected bibliography is included in Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 134–35 (nn. 13–14); he is right to caution that "the constant use of Christianity as a reference system when dealing with the so-called mystery religions leads to distortions as

emperor due to the prohibition against idolatry, linking Christianity with mystery religions still entices scholars and skeptics alike with the possibility of discovering correspondence with them beyond initiation and secrecy. The death and underworld journey of the god Osiris can be thought, for example, to compare with the death of Christ. The focus on the agricultural cycle of Persephone / Kore in the Eleusinian cult could similarly compare with resonances of death and life in the myths of other mysteries, as well as the death and life motif in the Christian story.

In addition to the possible mythic correspondence between Christianity and the mystery religions (i.e., comparing the stories upon which the cults derive their reason to be), one major social factor also invites comparison—namely, the ordinariness of the worshipers involved. Initiates of these religions cultivated worship in expectation of personal blessings from their patron deity, including individual deliverance from anticipated dangers and sorrows of the afterlife, a reflection of (in the case of devotion to Isis and Osiris, for example) earlier practice that was more limited to the ruling class. In ancient Egypt, for example, only pharaohs and their ilk could expect pyramids and grave goods replete with spell-scrolls to help them map out their underworld experience and succeed in their death journey. But the development of mystery cults promised delivery of these blessings to the average citizen, soldier, or even slave. Christianity also arguably succeeded on the score of its egalitarian and universal proclamation, reflected in such texts as Paul's conclusion regarding the good of initiation into the body of Christ:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:25–29)

well as partial clarification, obscuring the often radical differences between the two" (3).

The social parallel might suggest further correspondence, and indeed we make no claim that the average practitioners of these religions met the distinctions between cults with anything like critical observation of their competing philosophical or theological claims. These distinctions nevertheless existed, forming the basis of early Christian apologetic (cf. Acts 17:18ff; 1 Peter 3:13–17; 2 Peter 1:16–21). The need to be aware of these distinctions is no less demanding today, as many frankly find it easier to fudge the details of ancient belief into one amalgam and assume Christianity's debt to the substance of early cultic belief. So what did they believe? We limit ourselves to a brief survey of the cults we hear brought up from time to time as "parallels to" or "corresponding with" Christianity, through what little evidence they offer us, in order to get some sense of their content and present some distinguishing characteristics. Our survey does not pretend to be exhaustive; suggestions for further reading follow at the end of our study.

Isis and Osiris

Writing in the early second century AD, Plutarch's *Moralia* includes a philosophical essay known as *Isis and Osiris*. The latter part of that century attests to the popularity of the Hellenized Egyptian cult within Rome in the entertaining novel *Metamorphoses* (also known as the *Golden Ass*) by Apuleius. Together, these ancient *testimonia* present a picture of cultic practice and an edited history of the story at the center of the religion.

Central to the story of Isis is the dismemberment of the god Osiris by his brother Set (whom Plutarch calls Typhon), his scattered burial, and the reintegration of his dismembered parts into one body by Isis.³⁴ Plutarch's allegorical observations relate the dismembering and reintegration of Osiris and the eventual revenge of his son Horus over the evil Typhon to metaphysical processes of reason creating order out of disorder.³⁵ We are most interested in the substance of the myth that deals with death and afterlife, for which the

³⁴Plutarch, "*Isis and Osiris*," in *Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 18, 54.

³⁵*Ibid. passim*, cf. 54–55.

story of Isis and Osiris offers a unique picture in the ancient world.³⁶ Osiris, reintegrated and revived by Isis, becomes (according to the Egyptians, the lord of the underworld) the deity with whom the dead hoped to identify in order to experience some kind of living experience while dead (instead of oblivion—that is, a second death), a translation from one form of living (mortal, with others on this side of death) to another (the “new day,” as reflected in the spell scrolls known as the Egyptian “books of the dead”). The uniquely Egyptian practice of mummification reflects belief in the Egyptian afterlife experience (which is also unique to the ancient world), but it was not one in which Egyptians expected their dead to come back to a bodily life in this mortal world. The upshot of the myth’s pertinence to the anxiety of life and death is not that it offers a believer a way to beat death or come back to life; rather it presents a model for how to live once one has died. Employing the term “resurrection” to this myth in the context of the Hellenistic Roman world is seriously problematic, therefore, as it confuses a uniquely Egyptian concept of the afterlife with bodily resurrection, about which Paul and the New Testament authors wrote many decades *before* Plutarch’s writings.

Mithras

As often as we hear that Christian talk about resurrection has its source in the dying and rising gods of Egypt, we hear the claim that Mithraism was a major contender for the dominant Western religion of late antiquity.³⁷ Apologetic engagement with this claim is relatively simple, as the burden of proof falls on the one making the claim, which at best is based on interpreting the limited (mostly iconographic) extant evidence. A myth must have existed consistent with what is represented carved in stone in *mithraea*, the caves or other spaces adapted for communal eating and celebration of Mithras’s mysteries. More than four hundred ancient sites witness

³⁶Here we simply suggest that the myth is central to the mysteries, whether or not a worshiper is consciously aware of the death-life motif.

³⁷Burkert dismisses the claim: “Most scholars today agree there never was a chance for that, since Mithraism was not even a religion in the full sense of the word” (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, 3).

Mithras devotion. The central image of Mithras iconography represents the hero slaying a bull; others depict him wearing a Phrygian cap, birthed from a rock, seeking and subduing the bull, and feasting on the bull.

But the picture of Mithraism at present is a puzzle missing too many pieces to call it clear. The process of making connections between uncertain Mithraic origins and assumed practices and what can be surmised from Mithras iconography results at best in tenuous, provisional conclusions regarding the myth.³⁸

In the absence of anything like a literary narrative or synopsis of Mithraic theology, it is nearly impossible to say anything with certainty about the mythical origins or purpose of the cult. Furthermore, we may point out that if the narrative were to include robust references to dying and rising or even a central point about the agricultural cycle, even then we would be hard-pressed to observe clear correspondence to the iconography to which we are limited at present, so connections with Christianity are at best abject conjecture and at worst completely misplaced.

The Suffering Gods: Persephone, Orpheus, Dionysus

Students of Greco-Roman mythology generally stand more confidently on the well-known stories of the gods known from the classical West than on those from Egypt or Persia. Persephone, Orpheus, and Dionysus all make their appearances in plays, hymns, epics, and other songs extant from the Greek and Roman world. We are therefore in a position to say more about the myths from which their cults derived, even where little is known about the actual mystery religions themselves.

The most thorough treatment of the Persephone myth is the archaic Greek *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*; a Latin-speaking Roman audience could also enjoy Ovid's treatment of the myth in Book Five of his *Metamorphoses*. The hymn recounts how Persephone, daughter of Zeus and Demeter, was abducted by Hades and taken to the

³⁸Marvin W. Meyer, ed. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook of Sacred Texts*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999. [By arrangement; originally NY: HarperCollins, 1987]), 201.

underworld. Demeter, goddess of agriculture and fertility, frantically searches for her daughter, during which time the world suffers famine. When Persephone's whereabouts are finally discovered, Zeus brokers a deal: Persephone will spend a portion of the year above with her mother and the other portion below as the consort of Hades. Among other interpretations, the myth is read as an obvious *action* for the cycle of the seasons and agriculture, seedtime, and harvest.

Orpheus, a demigod hero associated especially with song, is especially famous as the bereft lover of Eurydice, the nymph who died on their wedding day, as Ovid recounts in Book Ten of his *Metamorphoses*. Orpheus descends to the underworld, where his magical song convinces the lords of the dead to allow Eurydice to return to the land of the living on the condition that Orpheus not look at Eurydice until they have reached the farther shore separating the world of the dead from his own. This condition Orpheus fails to observe, and he is twice bereft. His lamentation leads him to eschew all association with women, driving mad the Thracian maenads who tear him limb from limb (Dionysiac *sparagmos*), though his head still sings. Besides this primary story of Orpheus's mythology, ancient Orphic sources also include theogonic and philosophical hymns attributed to him, which form the basis of the mystery rites of the Orphic cult of Dionysus.

Dionysus was celebrated in the Greek world as the god of seeing things that were not actually there and was therefore associated with ecstatic experience, drama, and wine. Greek drama is replete with narrative about Dionysus's birth and powers. Conceived of the union between Zeus and the Theban Semele, who was killed after demanding Zeus's theophany, Dionysus's embryo was saved by Zeus, who gave birth to the new god from his own thigh and entrusted his upbringing to nymphs. Dionysus is consistently portrayed as young and accompanied by a retinue of ecstatic worshipers who enjoy his wine and the wilder aspects of nature (as opposed to civilization). The Orphic hymns honor the circumstances of Dionysus's birth and rebirth, the central event relevant to the mysteries of Dionysus.

The myths at the center of these dying gods' stories no doubt influenced both the beliefs and the religious practices of their cult members. But the myths of a god's demise and afterlife do not directly correspond to a worshiper's individual hopes for a

blessed afterlife, much less offer hope in a resurrection comparable to that proclaimed by Christians at their funeral rites or in the New Testament documents. Egyptian afterlife was the life lived while dead; the most explicit texts in this regard from the Greco-Roman cults are the Orphic hymns, which point rather to the ecstatic experience sought by worshipers in the here and now of Dionysiac cultic rite rather than a hope of experiencing a second birth like Dionysus had. The bleak afterlife of Hades established by ancient authority still resounds in the Orphic hymns as worshipers sing to Hermes *psychopompus*, who will lead their shades to the realm of the dead, as well as bring their ecstatic rites in honor of Dionysus to a proper close. The Roman philosophical conceit of passing through death to something not to be feared, or to nothing at all, or to a more rarefied form of soul existence that leaves the burdensome body behind, owes more to Plato's demurral of mythology and teaching of metempsychosis than any idea about a bodily resurrection. Indeed it would be surprising to find someone in the world of the Roman Empire who interpreted any myth literally, much less expected something like a bodily resurrection as a result of that reading.

The myths nevertheless did exist and influence the religious life of the Roman world during the nascent stage of Christianity. What might we conclude from this brief review of the basic myths? We anticipate the inquirer or the critic thus:

Question: Isn't it true that Christianity was seen by the Romans as just another quirky mystery cult?

Answer: No. A discerning Roman might well consider the Christian cult as similar to other cults to the extent that its requisite initiation and sacramental exclusivity resembled certain aspects of other religions, but the variety of cults that make up the religious backdrop of Roman cultural experience is not limited to just the "mystery" subset. Moreover, its connection to Judaism textually and culturally meant *Christianity was seen as quite distinct from mystery religions* in that it was exclusively monotheistic and not tolerant of idolatry.

Question: Isn't it true that all mystery cults baited believers with a better afterlife?

Answer: No. While in general the prevailing belief about death in the ancient world was not one that was optimistic, and while various

philosophical schools and cults of the Roman Empire promoted doctrines that mitigated the fear associated with mortality, not every mystery was focused primarily on death and the afterlife, in spite of what connections we may want to make based on our interpretation of the myths from which they developed.³⁹ More to the point, the mysteries were opportunities for ecstatic religious experience in the here and now, for the worshiper living on this side of mortality. Identification with any particular cult did not necessarily go beyond the one initiating encounter (e.g., the Eleusinian rite) to affect a sense of identity in everyday life or grant extra confidence in a life after death.

Question: Isn't it true that all mystery cults simply rehashed old ground with myths centered on agriculture?

Answer: No. It was once the fashion to attempt to discover as many parallels as possible to archetypal myths, and Frazer's *Golden Bough*, published in subsequent editions through the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, brought the agricultural death-life cycle to the foreground as the *ur*-myth of all ancient religion. This kind of parallelomania spins an attractive story, as it suggests not only a common source for many ancient religions (fertility cult) but also a natural progression or evolution from religion to the scientific thinking of Frazer's own day. But the devil in the details is that agricultural concerns do not appear at the center of all myths. Mithras devotion, for example, may have in fact nothing to do with agriculture at all (not to mention the afterlife), or at most tangentially (we are limited to considering iconographical representation of wheat sprouting from the bull's tail), and any alimentary focus in Dionysus worship seems to have been more about eating meat (raw, *homophagia*) than about the harvest cycle.

Question: Isn't it true that all mystery cults believed in resurrection, one more point in favor of thinking that Christianity owes a debt to these religions?

³⁹The assumption that all mystery cults primarily engaged an anxiety about death and the afterlife has been challenged successfully by Burkert (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, ch. 1), and more recently Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 22–23.

Answer: No, and no. For those religions that did teach something like a blessed afterlife, resurrection may be approximated as reincarnation / metempsychosis (a la the teaching of Pythagoras or Plato's myth of Er, *Republic* 10), a spiritual "resurrection" meaning a better existence after death (though not a bodily one) or a dead kind of life (the teaching about death and its journey particular to the tradition coming from Egypt). In all these cases, there is not taught a bodily resurrection in which people are reanimated, revived, to live in the here and now as Jesus is said to have done and as the dead in Christ are promised to be. What little evidence there is that associates mysteries with Christianity does not point to influence or debt in the direction of Christian borrowings from the myths or practice of these cults.

Conclusion: Myth and Christianity

On the cusp of his conversion, Lewis wrote to his childhood friend, Arthur Greeves, admitting (which Tolkien and Hugo Dyson had recently helped him see) that he had always liked the idea of the dying-and-rising god provided he didn't meet it in the Gospels. He then confessed: "Now the story of Christ is simply a true myth: a myth working on us in the same way as the others. But with this tremendous difference that *it really happened*."⁴⁰ For Christians of every age, the fact that God in Christ entered into humanity, into our history, is at once our central claim and apologetic. And yet it is myth—*true* myth. We have in this brief examination considered several ancient myths that popular opinion assumes correspond to Christianity in more significant ways than they actually do; our analysis has attempted to point out certain elements that distinguish them from the story of Christ. In the end, the parallels neither confirm nor deny the fact that it is true myth and therefore ought not to trouble us. "The old myth of the Dying God, *without ceasing to be myth*, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination

⁴⁰Hoopfer, *Letters*, 1:976–77. Later, in "Myth Became Fact," Lewis exhorted: "To be truly Christian we must both assent to the historical fact and also receive the myth (fact though it has become) with the same imaginative embrace which we accord to all myths" (67).

to the earth of history. It *happens*—at a particular date, in a particular place, followed by definable historical consequences. We pass from a Balder or an Osiris, dying nobody knows when or where, to a historical Person crucified (it is all in order) *under Pontius Pilate*. By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth.⁴¹ As Lewis (with our creeds) recognizes, Christianity rests on solid historical bedrock. Therefore we need not be put off by claims of parallels with pagan myths: “[T]hey *ought* to be there—it would be a stumbling block if they weren’t.”⁴²

But Christianity does not rest only on cold, hard facts like the objectively verifiable claim of Christ suffering under Pontius Pilate. Its life is the union of the transcendent and the mundane, which is indeed parallel to the mythological backdrop of the ancient Greco-Roman world and common also to human experience of every time and place. Christians need not shy away from “myth” language; indeed such stories cannot be told without the language of mythology. Of course, the doctrines we derive from this true myth are not the myth itself, but “translations into our concepts and ideas of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.”⁴³ This point, with the aid of Lewis and other Christian lovers of myth, is what we have here attempted to demonstrate: what we may call the “inevitability of myth,” the fact that myth is the necessary idiom for dealing with the central claim of Christianity. There is no sense that those who rejected Peter’s Pentecost plea were disinterested in stories, narratives, or myths. Nor ought we to be. The story of Christ cannot make sense apart from the context of the stories of the Greeks and the Romans and all others who have left us their myths. For myth is the grammar of incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. And every Christian ought gladly to take the name of *philomythos*—lover of myth—without fear of losing the

⁴¹Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” 66–67. Lewis reminds us also that “what became Fact was a Myth, that it carries with it into the world of Fact all the properties of a myth. God is more than a god, not less; Christ is more than Balder, not less.”

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Hooper, *Letters*, 1:977.

historic fact of the Gospel. The resurrection is the eucatastrophe, the overwhelmingly joyous happy ending of the Christian myth-become-fact, in which everything sad has come untrue.

Recommended Reading

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- Zaleski, Philip and Carol Zaleski. *The Fellowship: The Literary Lives of the Inklings*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015.

Suggestions for reading in the kind of "new" mythopoeia discussed in this chapter (leaving out Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* and Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the Space Trilogy):

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