

PHILOSTRATUS'S APOLLONIUS:  
A CASE STUDY IN APOLOGETICS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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## ABSTRACT

Andrew Mark Hagstrom: Philostratus's Apollonius: A Case Study in Apologetics in the Roman Empire

Under the direction of Zlatko Pleše

My argument is that Philostratus drew on the Christian gospels and acts to construct a narrative in which Apollonius both resembled and transcended Jesus and the Apostles. In the first chapter, I review earlier scholarship on this question from the time of Eusebius of Caesarea to the present. In the second chapter, I explore the context in which Philostratus wrote the *VA*, focusing on the Severan dynasty, the Second Sophistic, and the struggle for cultural supremacy between Pagans and Christians. In the third chapter, I turn to the text of the *VA* and the Christian gospels and acts. I point out specific literary parallels, maintaining that some cannot be explained by shared genre. I also suggest that the association of the Egyptian god Proteus with both Philostratus's Apollonius and Jesus/Christians is further evidence for regarding *VA* as a polemical response to the Christians. In my concluding chapter, I tie the several strands of my argument together to show how they collectively support my thesis.

To my mother, Tami Hagstrom, my greatest encouragement and inspiration (1961-2016)

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## CHAPTER 1

### APOLLONIUS AND JESUS IN SCHOLARSHIP

#### Introduction

Born of a virgin, he was hailed as the son, and incarnation, of a god. In his youth, he was precocious and celebrated for his wisdom. He traveled widely, accompanied by a small band of disciples and spreading a gospel that touted spiritual enlightenment. He healed the sick, cast out demons, and even raised the dead. Near the end of his life, his enemies brought malicious charges against him, and he was compelled to face trials before Roman authorities. Some say that, not long afterwards, he died, but others that he ascended directly to heaven. Even after his departure from the earth, he reappeared to his disciples to assure them of his immortality.

His name was Apollonius of Tyana, an itinerant Pythagorean philosopher of the first century CE. But I might just as well have been describing another first-century holy man, Jesus of Nazareth. Apollonius was born at Tyana in Cappadocia around the same time as Jesus and died not long after the Emperor Domitian's own death (96 CE). The details of Apollonius' life are related in Flavius Philostratus' massive eight-book semi-biography, *The Life of Apollonius*, hereafter referred to as *VA* (from the Latin, *Vita Apollonii*). Its Greek title is τὰ ἐξ τὸν Τυανέα Ἀπολλώνιον, *The Stories of Apollonius of Tyana*, or alternately, *In Honor of Apollonius of Tyana*. Flavius Philostratus of Athens (170-245 CE) was a sophist in the court of the Severan emperors who wrote *VA* at the behest of Septimius Severus's Syrian wife, Julia Domna.

The similarities between Apollonius and Jesus have occasioned countless debates through the years over the relationship between Christian literary tradition and *VA* through the years. Two schools of thought can be traced in the handling of this question. According to one, Philostratus drew upon the Christian Gospels in an attempt to rival them. I will call this school the “Gospel Dependency School.” According to the other school, Philostratus and the early writers of Christian gospel narratives drew upon common genres and cultural motifs, but Christian literary tradition had no real impact on *VA*. In the words of Klauck, “Even if Philostratus knew of the existence of Christianity, there is no evidence that he was interested in it; the related traits can be explained on the basis of narrative laws typical of the literary genre, the general mood of the period, and the general belief in miraculous powers.”<sup>1</sup> I will call this school the “Common-Culture School” because it presumes that shared culture is responsible for the correspondence between *VA* and the gospels.

In this opening chapter, I will review how these two schools of thought have arisen and evolved over the years down to the present time, state my own position, and then present my plans for the other two chapters of this thesis.

### **Apollonius and Jesus: Early Disputes**

The rise of the dispute over the relationship between Apollonius and Jesus was precipitated by the publication of an anti-Christian tract called the *Lover of Truth* (*Philalēthēs*) early in the fourth century CE. The author was Sossianus Hierocles, a provincial governor under the Emperor Diocletian in charge of the “Great Persecution” in 303. Within his tract, he had made “a

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 171.

formal contrast and comparison [*syncrisis*] of Apollonius with our savior” in order to show the superiority of Apollonius (*Hier* 1.2). This work was modelled on a work of a similar title, *The True Doctrine*, a second-century anti-Christian tract written by Celsus.<sup>2</sup> It was published in 302/303 CE, just before or during the persecution of Diocletian.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, it can be viewed as an intellectual attack against Christianity that complemented a real physical persecution; it was written at a time when Christianity was particularly vulnerable.

In *The Lover of Truth*, Hierocles had praised Apollonius as a wise man and a wondrous miracle-worker who “performed his miracles through some divine, ineffable wisdom, not by the tricks of sorcery” (*Hier.* 2.1-2.2).<sup>4</sup> Jesus had also performed miracles, but “Apollonius did the like or even greater” (*Div. Inst.* 5.3.7). For instance, while Apollonius was able to escape from the courtroom when he was on trial before Domitian, Jesus was arrested and crucified (*Div. Inst.* 5.3.9-10). Further, Jesus was a breaker of the law who led a band of robbers when he was rejected by the Jews (*Div. Inst.* 5.3.4).

Hierocles also lambasted the Christians for their inflated view of Jesus, pointing out “our careful and sober judgment [in contrast to] the gullibility of the Christians. We do not think a man who performed such deeds to be a god, but only a man pleasing to the gods; while they are led by a few illusions to declare Jesus a god” (*Hier* 2.2). Moreover, the sources for the life of Apollonius were more reliable and level-headed than the authors of the gospels: “While the

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<sup>2</sup> We might also ask whether Hierocles’ *Lover of Truth* has any association with Lucian’s *Lover of Lies*, which is an attack on superstitious beliefs.

<sup>3</sup> T. D Barnes, “Sossianus Hierocles and the Antecedents of the ‘Great Persecution,’” *Harv. Stud. Class. Philol.* 80 (1976): 242–45.

<sup>4</sup> The substance of *Philalēthēs* can be reconstructed from the responses to it by the Christian intellectuals and apologists, Eusebius of Caesarea (*Against Hierocles*) and Lactantius (*Divine Institutes*).

deeds of Jesus have been exaggerated by Peter, Paul, and people of their stripe – liars, yokels, sorcerers – the deeds of Apollonius have been recorded by Maximus of Aegae, Damis the philosopher who studied with him, and Philostratus of Athens. All of these reached a very high level of culture and honored truth” (2.2). Consequently, Hierocles “puts our own inspired evangelists second to Philostratus” (*Hier.* 17; cf. *Div. Inst.* 5.2.17-5.3.3).

Soon after Hierocles published his pamphlet, Eusebius, the bishop of Caesarea (c. 260-c. 339 CE), penned *Against Hierocles* in response to Hierocles’ assessment of Apollonius and Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Employing many of the same arguments as Eusebius, Lactantius (c. 250-c. 325 CE), a teacher of rhetoric in Nicomedia, also refuted Hierocles more briefly in a section of his massive volume called *Divine Institutes*.<sup>6</sup> In response to Hierocles’ abasement of Jesus, Eusebius and Lactantius point out that Jesus accomplished much greater feats than Apollonius. He “saved the whole world by his own godliness and virtue,” having been foretold by the Jewish prophets, and even long after his death has converted many to his cause, including true followers who are willing to die for him (*Hier.* 4.1-4.2; cf. *Div. Inst.* 3.18-21). In contrast, Apollonius is little more than a philosopher or a magician who performed his miracles with the help of demons (*Hier.* 5-7, 35; *Div. Inst.* 3.15). To answer Hierocles’ charge about the gullibility of Jesus’ biographers, Eusebius turns to *VA*, the main source for Apollonius’ life, working through it methodically, book by book (4.3-44). He attempts to show that while Philostratus and the other writers of the life of Apollonius may have “reached a very high level of culture,” they “had no regard for the truth” (4.3).

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *Reply to Hierocles*, ed. Christopher P. Jones, trans. Christopher P. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 458 (Cambridge, MA; London, Eng.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 149–50.

<sup>6</sup> Lactantius claimed to have heard Hierocles present his work publicly in Nicomedia (*Div. Inst.* 5.4.1).

Eusebius points out several problems in the narrative of *VA*. First, Philostratus is inconsistent in his portrayal of Apollonius: He claims at the outset that Apollonius is the divine incarnation of the god Proteus; he ascribes to him the gift of prophecy and the knowledge of all languages, and has him ascend bodily into heaven (8). But he subsequently portrays him as very human and fallible. He is not naturally endowed with knowledge but must go to school and learn to speak good Attic Greek; from the Arabs, he learns to speak the language of animals; and from Pythagoras, he learns how to speak with the gods (9-11). While in India, he must enlist an interpreter to help him speak with the Indian king. Apollonius ignorantly thinks that in a previous life, he was the captain of an Egyptian merchant ship (20). He asks the Brahmins if they know anything of liquid gold, of people who live underground, and of exotic animals (22). And it is only after returning from India to Greece that Apollonius is able to begin performing miracles, as if he learned them from the Indians (26). If he were truly a god, why would Apollonius be so ignorant and lacking in innate abilities?

Secondly, Philostratus repeatedly denies that Apollonius is a sorcerer, but his own words belie him. For instance, Apollonius consorts with and reveres the Brahmins as “teachers” and “gods,” who were themselves sorcerers (31). While in prison, he magically frees himself from his chains; and at the conclusion of the trial, he disappears from the courtroom (*Hier.* 39). Moreover, many of Apollonius’ own contemporaries believed him to be a sorcerer (44.2). If Apollonius did, in fact, perform miracles, as Philostratus says, “it clearly follows that Apollonius performed each of them with the assistance of a demon” (35).

Third, far from being trustworthy, Philostratus recounts many incredulous wonders that Apollonius encounters in his travels. When Philostratus is describing Apollonius’ trip to the Brahmins, for instance, he describes a woman who is completely white from her head to her

waist, but is black over the rest of her body; monkeys who harvest pepper; and huge dragons. He describes jars containing winds and rains which the Brahmans distributed to the people of the land as they wished (18). He has an elm tree speak to Apollonius when he is visiting the Gymnosophists in Egypt (34). And he relates various other wonders that can hardly be believed. Yet, “Hierocles, a man appointed to the highest court with general powers, after extensive investigation finds all this to be true and credible, and in his eyes we are condemned for the utmost ‘superficiality and gullibility’” (20).

Both Eusebius and Lactantius, in short, are contesting any real equivalency between Jesus and Apollonius or between the gospel writers and Philostratus. But they nowhere suggest that Philostratus (or any other biographer) was modelling his portrayal after the Christians’ portrayal of Jesus. In fact, Eusebius seems to flatly deny this point when he notes in his preface that no enemy of Christianity before Hierocles had drawn a comparison between Jesus and Apollonius: “only he, among all those who have ever written against us, has produced a formal contrast and comparison of Apollonius with our savior” (1.2). On the other hand, the fact that Hierocles is pitting Apollonius against Jesus and is drawing on biographies of Apollonius to refute the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus might suggest that such an idea may not have been far from the Philostratus’ mind.

After the publication of Hierocles’ pamphlet, Apollonius became a figure for pagans to rally around and for Christians to deride. Pagans took up the standard of Hierocles and Philostratus, praising Apollonius as a wise man with divine qualities. In the fourth century, a prominent pagan intellectual named Nicomachus Flavianus produced the first Latin translation of Philostratus’ *VA*. Dzielska sees the interest of Romans such as Nichomachus in the life of Apollonius as evidence that the “Roman members of the opposition [to the advances of Christianity], like the Greeks in

Hierocles' time, needed somebody who could 'compete' with Christ. That is why," she continues, "Nichomachus Flavianus ... resolved to popularize the figure of a pagan thaumaturge and a prophet of the old religions among Roman citizens."<sup>7</sup> Christians, on the other hand, generally took up the standard of Eusebius and Lactantius and continued to regard Apollonius as a sorcerer, magician, and swindler.<sup>8</sup> But one Christian bishop of the fifth century, Sidonius Apollinaris, admired Apollonius enough to produce a translation of *VA* based on that of Nichomachus. Gradually, however, interest in Apollonius dwindled, and Philostratus's *opus* would have to wait until the Renaissance for any real attention.

### **The Beginnings of the "Gospel Dependency" School**

The Venetian publisher and typographer Aldus Manutius published the *editio princeps* of *VA* in 1501-1502. While he deemed it worthy of publication, he was keenly aware of its potential spiritual and theological danger. In the same volume, he included the reply of Eusebius to Hierocles "so that the antidote may accompany the poison." The two works are still sometimes published together today. Aldus started off a flurry of discussion and debate about Apollonius that has persisted up through the present. The earliest scholars who studied *VA*, living as they did in the shadow of the Catholic Church, held Apollonius in contempt as a holy man. They accused him of being in cahoots with the devil and with deceiving his followers through magic. But those who were comfortable being enemies of the Church regarded Apollonius as their ally.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 171–72.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Dzielska, *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History*, trans. Piotr Pienowski, *Problemi E Recherche Di Storia Antica* 10 (Rome: L'erma di Bretschneider, 1986), 162–65.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 173–205.

In 1754, Huetius, a French bishop, wrote a treatise called *Demonstratio Evangelica*, in which he attacked the fifth century bishop Sidonius Apollinaris for being an admirer and defender of Apollonius. More significantly, Huetius was the first to argue outright that Philostratus drew upon the gospels to construct his narrative and to make Apollonius a more competitive figure vis-à-vis the growing influence of Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

In the second half of the seventeenth century, English Deists began to react to Christian scholars' treatment of *VA*. Charles Blount, in 1680, was the first to publish an edition of *VA* that rebuffed the Church's treatment of Apollonius. In the introduction and commentary, he treats the miracles of Christ and Apollonius as equally significant. His interpretation received massive censure, which may, in part, have pushed him to suicide in 1693.<sup>11</sup>

In 1809, the Irish clergyman Edward Berwick published the first complete English translation of the *Life of Apollonius*, allegedly to counter Edward Gibbon's insinuation in *Decline and Fall* that Jesus and Apollonius were both imposters and magicians. If Gibbon had access to an English translation of *VA*, suggests Berwick, he would not have made this reprehensible mistake.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Berwick's translation made *VA* available to a generation of English scholars. One of these was a young Oxford fellow and newly minted Anglican priest named John Henry Newman (1801-90).

### **John Henry Newman**

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 198–203.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 204–5.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 205–6.



In 1826, Newman would give more definite shape to the controversy over the relationship between Apollonius and Jesus, between *VA* and the Gospels. Shortly after his ordination as a priest, he wrote an essay critiquing Apollonius of Tyana and his miracles in the *Encyclopaedia metropolitana* (1826). This essay was followed up in the same year by an article on “The Miracles of Scripture,” which belabors the same points about the miracles of Apollonius in relation to those of Scripture.<sup>13</sup>

Newman’s assault on *VA* is rooted in the same concerns as Eusebius. Like Eusebius, he sees Apollonius as a threat to the validity of Christianity and has an apologetic interest in divesting stories about Apollonius of any credibility or prestige. So he laments “the rhetorical colouring of the whole composition, so contrary to the sobriety of truth.”<sup>14</sup> He dismisses it as “unworthy of serious attention.”<sup>15</sup> And he scorns its authorial agenda, written as it was “at the instance of his patroness Julia Domna, wife of the Emperor Severus, a princess celebrated for her zeal in the cause of Heathen Philosophy.”<sup>16</sup>

But he also takes up the new line of argument introduced by bishop Huetius – the notion that Philostratus drew upon the Christian gospels: “Though [*VA*] is not a professed imitation of the Gospels, it contains quite enough to show that it was written with a view of rivalling the sacred narrative; and accordingly, in the following age, it was made use of in a direct attack upon

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<sup>13</sup> Jaś Elsner, “Beyond Compare: Pagan Saint and Christian God in Late Antiquity,” *Crit. Inq.* 35, no. 3 (2009): 659–69.

<sup>14</sup> John Henry Newman, “The Apollonius of Tyana,” in *Historical Sketches*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), 329.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:328.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:305.

Christianity by Hierocles, Prefect of Bithynia . . . to whom a reply was made by Eusebius of Caesarea.”<sup>17</sup> Newman charges *VA* with being an imitation of Scripture on two grounds. First, he observes shared stylistic and structural features in both narratives:

The favour in which Apollonius from a child was held by gods and men; his conversations when a youth in the Temple of Aesculapius; his determination in spite of danger to go up to Rome; the cowardice of his disciples in deserting him; the charge brought against him of disaffection to Caesar; the Minister’s acknowledging, on his private examination, that he was more than man; the ignominious treatment of him by Domitian on his second appearance at Rome; his imprisonment with criminals; his vanishing from Court and sudden reappearance to his mourning disciples at Puteoli; these, **with other particulars of a similar cast, evidence a history modelled after the narrative of the Evangelists.** Expressions, moreover, and descriptions occur, clearly imitated from the sacred volume.<sup>18</sup>

But secondly, the miracles of Apollonius appear to be based on those of Jesus. For instance, Apollonius’ raising of a girl from the dead has clear parallels to Jesus’ raising of Jairus’s daughter (Mark 5:21-24, 35-43). This miracle “will be seen,” Newman says, “to be an attempt, and an elaborate, pretentious attempt, to outdo certain narratives in the Gospels.”<sup>19</sup>

The Apollonian miracles are historically suspect and more liable to have been fabricated because they were written down by “an author writing one hundred years after the death of the person panegyriized, and far distant from the places in which most of the miracles were wrought.”<sup>20</sup> On a literary level, Newman sees the miracles as non-essential additions to the narrative. The only miracle that Newman regards as necessary to the narrative is Apollonius’s disappearance from the courtroom in Rome after successfully defending himself before the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 1:306.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 1:328–29.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 1:321.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:330.

Emperor Domitian. The other miracles are “of easy omission without any detriment to its entirety.”<sup>21</sup> The miracles in Christian literature, on the other hand, cannot be so easily omitted. As Newman writes in his 1826 essay on “The Miracles of Scripture,” “[t]he miraculous events . . . of the Gospels and Acts, though of course they may be rejected together with the rest of the narrative, can be rejected in no other way; since they form its substance and ground-work.”<sup>22</sup>

Newman, the newly ordained Anglican priest, was clearly driven by apologetic motives in his attack on Apollonius and his biographer. After converting to Catholicism in 1845, he reissued both of his 1826 essays, demonstrating his continued commitment to his argument throughout his life.<sup>23</sup> He was declared a venerable in 1991 by Pope John Paul II, so that, by a supreme irony, the persistent opponent of Apollonius’s presumptuous divinity, or sainthood, became himself a candidate for sainthood.<sup>24</sup>

### **F. C. Baur**

Newman and his predecessors had examined the question of the gospels’ relationship to *VA* through the lens of faith. But German theologian and historian F.C. Baur (1792-1860) tried to take a more strictly historical approach to the question. Baur taught New Testament and history theology at the University of Tübingen. Under his leadership from 1826 until his death in 1860, the Tübingen School emphasized the historical context of early Christian texts, drawing, in

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1:315.

<sup>22</sup> John Henry Newman, *Two Essays on Biblical and Ecclesiastical Miracles* (London ; New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 36.

<sup>23</sup> This too in spite of the fact that he made repeated jabs against Catholicism in these essays.

<sup>24</sup> Elsner, “Beyond Compare: Pagan Saint and Christian God in Late Antiquity,” 660.

particular, on the philosophy of G.F.W. Hegel.<sup>25</sup> Baur emphasized the place of “tendency” (*Tendenz*) in early Christian literature. Each writing had a tendency, or agenda, motivated by a school or party (for instance, Petrine or Pauline), but not by attention to the actual history of individuals.

In 1832, just five years after Newman’s publications, Baur produced a monograph entitled *Apollonius von Tyana und Christus: Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte der ersten Jahrhunderte nach Christus*. In the space of 227 pages, he systematically examines the evidence for a relationship between Apollonius and Christ, between Philostratus and the writers of the gospels. He begins by giving an overview of the dispute over Apollonius’ legacy, from Hierocles and Eusebius down to Bishop Huetius. Then he proceeds to compare and contrast Philostratus’ portrayal of Apollonius (as a prophet, wonder-worker, reformer, and teacher) to the gospels’ portrayal of Jesus. Both Philostratus and Jesus, he notes, have a miraculous birth, cast out demons, raise the dead, have devoted followers, are fearless in the face of death. He finds several of these parallels particularly compelling. For instance, Philostratus’ account of Apollonius casting out demons must be derived from the Christian Gospels because Greek and Roman literature have no such parallels.<sup>26</sup> Again, Philostratus calls the followers of Apollonius “Apollonians,” but we have no knowledge now of a sect of Apollonians; so Philostratus must be following the example of the followers of Christ, who call themselves “Christians.”<sup>27</sup> His

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<sup>25</sup> The work of Baur and the Tübingen School, in turn, was a forerunner to “The History of Religions School” (*die religionsgeschichte schule*), which tried to place the Christian movement in the context with the development of other religions and to trace parallels between them.

<sup>26</sup> F.C. Baur, *Apollonius von Tyana Und Christus* (Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1966), 139.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 148, note. Baur’s arguments were accepted and improved upon by others, such as Muller, Phillimore, and Hempel.

conclusion is that *VA* betrays a striking agenda or tendency (*Tendenz*): namely, Philostratus drew on the gospels in an attempt to make Apollonius a “Christ-image” (*Christusbild*) as a rival to Christ. Essentially, then, he comes to the same conclusion as Newman and Huetius, but his systematic and philosophical approach is largely divorced from apologetic concerns.

### The “Common-Culture” School

With Baur, the “Gospel-Dependency” School, as I have called it, had reached its summit, but its popularity began to decline at the end of the nineteenth century. For it came under heavy criticism from a number of scholars, including C.L. Nielsen, J. Gottsching, and Basil Gildersleeve.<sup>28</sup>

Gildersleeve adopts Newman’s scorn for Apollonius as a pagan Christ without supposing that Philostratus consciously imitated the Gospels. After daring his readers to “compare for themselves the pagan’s Christ of fiction with the Christian Christ of the Gospel, who is the Christ of history,” he provides scorching critique of *VA*.<sup>29</sup> Following in the footsteps of Eusebius and Newman, he ridicules its depiction of Apollonius, its fabulous geography and imagery, and its fairy-tale quality. He finds Apollonius to be shallow, haughty, and rude in comparison to Christ, “the Friend of publicans and sinners.”<sup>30</sup> Unlike Newman, however, Gildersleeve doubted that *VA* was influenced by, or modelled after, the Christian gospels or acts. As he puts it, “In our judgment, a deliberate biographical antagonism to Christianity on the part of Philostratus is more

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<sup>28</sup> Nielsen, *Apollonius fra Tyana og Filostrats Beskrivelse af hans Levnet*, 1879; Gottsching, *Apollonius von Tyana*, 1889; and Gildersleeve, “Apollonius of Tyana,” 1890.

<sup>29</sup> Basil L. Gildersleeve, “Apollonios of Tyana,” in *Essays and Studies* (Baltimore: Murray, 1890), 256.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

than doubtful.”<sup>31</sup> He finds that the differences between Jesus and Apollonius outweigh any similarities between them. Further, he finds the “lack of any allusion to Christ or the Christian religion” in *VA* striking.<sup>32</sup> “How, then,” he asks, “shall we suppose that Philostratus could have imitated the loftier exemplar of Christ? To have had such a model and to have produced such a copy is a heavier charge than we should like to bring against the ingenious author of such a romance.”<sup>33</sup>

In 1941, Friedrich Solmsen succinctly stated the position of the new scholarship on *VA*, which is generally upheld by scholars today:

Der Gedanke, dass P. in Rivalität zu den Evangelien schreibt und Apollonios gegen Christus auf den Thron erheben will, gehört nun wohl der Vergangenheit an . . . Vieles was früher als “Bezugnahme” auf Christliches gedeutet wurde, wird man jetzt aus der gemeinsamen Atmosphäre des Wunderglaubens und aus der Typik der Wunderzählungerklären.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the alleged references to Christian literary tradition in *VA* were now ascribed to a common culture that embraced wonder-narratives and a belief in miracles. This position has been accepted and expanded on by more recent research.

In *Die Traditionen über Apollonius von Tyana und das Neue Testament* (1970), Gerd Petzke aims “to make accessible the interesting religious-historical material of the *VA* for the New Testament scholar” (“das religions-geschichtlich interessante Material der *VA* für den Neutestamentler zugänglich zu machen”).<sup>35</sup> Using a form-critical approach, he draws out from the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Solmsen, “Philostratos,” *RE* 20 (1941): 145.

<sup>35</sup> Gerd Petzke, *Die Traditionen Über Apollonius of Tyana Und Das Neue Testament*, SCHNT 1 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1970), 230.

Christian gospels and acts and from *VA* various literary types for comparison: summaries, travel narratives and itineraries, dialogues and speeches, miracles, and similitudes. Petzke concludes that while the traditions concerning Apollonius and Jesus are similar, they are ultimately separate and unrelated.

Erkki Koskenniemi, in turn, develops a more nuanced view about the relationship between *VA* and early Christian traditions, as demonstrated in *Apollonios von Tyana in der neutestamentlichen Exegese* (1994). After comparing early Christian accounts of Jesus with those found in *VA*, he concludes that there is no direct relationship between *VA* and the NT. Any similarities between them may be explained by the indirect influence of the NT on the *VA* through the lens of popular culture. The Christian stories had already impacted popular story-telling, and it was through this filter that it influenced Philostratus' tale about Apollonius. The story-telling culture that Philostratus drew upon was particularly influenced by the apocryphal Gospels and Acts of the second and third centuries CE. As he observes, "[T]he traditions on Apollonius reflect not the religious environment of the period in which the NT was written but that of the apocryphal Gospels and Acts. My studies demonstrate that Apollonius and the work of Philostratus, for reasons of chronology, have little, if anything whatsoever, to do with critical research on the NT." Because Apollonius is characteristically a third century creation, reflecting third century themes and values, *VA* is essentially irrelevant for an exegesis of the NT.

Koskenniemi is only willing to concede influence from the canonical Christian Gospel traditions in the case of the girl that Apollonius raised from the dead, which has striking similarities to the narrative of Jesus raising a girl from the dead in the gospels of Mark and

Luke.<sup>36</sup> His sentiments have been echoed by other contemporary scholars. Bowie observes, “A Christian reader can of course see many similarities with the Gospels, but these are not so close as to require the supposition that Philostratus knew of and drew upon them.”<sup>37</sup> And Anderson remarks that the Gospels and *VA* were parallel but unrelated:

The most celebrated aspect of Apollonius from late antiquity onwards has been the resemblance between the *Life* and the Christian Gospel narratives. This can no longer be taken to indicate that Philostratus depended on Christian sources. In the canonical Gospels, to say nothing of apocryphal material, the pattern of incident is very near to what is likely to interest a sophist anyway: we are often dealing with popular and sophisticated versions of the same type of incident. Analogues in the canonic Gospels and Acts can often be set beside others from Pythagorean tradition, so that Christian and pagan patterns of hagiography are seen to run side by side.<sup>38</sup>

### **Resurgence of the “Gospel Dependency” School**

While scholarship on *VA* and the Gospels has taken a definite turn towards a viewpoint that denies any relationship between them, the issue has not yet been finally settled. More recent scholars have shown that a compelling case can still be made for the Gospel dependence view of *VA*. In his survey of the prose literature of the Severan era, Tim Whitmarsh suggests that a conflict between Christians and Pagan culture is apparent in the *VA*: “I am inclined to believe that we can see ... in Philostratus’ promotion of Apollonius as a pagan holy man, a confrontation

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<sup>36</sup> Erkki Koskeniemi, *Apollonios von Tyana in Der Neutestamentlichen Exegese*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 61 (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1994), 193–206.

<sup>37</sup> Ewen Bowie, “Philostratus: Writer of Fiction,” in *Greek Fiction: The Greek Novel in Context*, ed. J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 193.

<sup>38</sup> Graham Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.* (London ; Dover, N.H.: Croom Helm, 1986), 144.



with the emergent challenge of Christian-centered intellectual literature, even if that threat is only dimly recognized.”<sup>39</sup>

Swain similarly argues that *VA* can be read as a Hellenistic apology aimed particularly at the threat that Christianity posed.<sup>40</sup> By the end of the third century, many of the educated class were Christian, and pagan culture in the Greek East was being seriously threatened. Many believed that the intellectual climate had declined in the Hellenistic period, having reached a high point in the classical age of Greece.<sup>41</sup> Philostratus’ biography of Apollonius was commissioned for Julia Domna, the wife of the Severan dynasty’s founder, who appears “as a paragon of Hellenist virtue.”<sup>42</sup> Philostratus felt compelled to reassert the values of Hellenistic culture in his biography of Apollonius, which presented an ideal Greek holy man who does many of the same things that Jesus did in the Christian Gospels. Swain thinks it reasonable to ask, “Why should Philostratus not have launched a new genre of pagan hagiography with an eye on the Gospels?”<sup>43</sup> Why indeed?

## Conclusion

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<sup>39</sup> Tim Whitmarsh, “Prose Literature and the Severan Dynasty,” in *Severan Culture*, edited by Simon Swain, Stephen Harrison, Jaś Elsner. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 51.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Swain, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 157–96.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

The tradition of scholarship about Apollonius and Jesus is a long and winding stream stretching from the controversy between Eusebius and Hierocles in the fourth century up to the present. We have traced two tributaries: what I have called “the Gospel-Dependency School” and “the Common-Culture School.” The Gospel-Dependency School has grown stagnant and unpopular in recent years, but I still find many of its arguments persuasive and do not believe they should be so disdainfully thrown aside.

I will argue here that some of the resemblance between *VA* and the gospels is undoubtedly due to shared genres. But the more striking parallels are more reasonably attributed to Philostratus’ dependence on the gospel stories of Jesus. Philostratus, I will contend, saw the growing influence of Christianity as a threat to Hellenistic culture and put forth Apollonius (a real historical figure though greatly distorted by Philostratus) as a challenger to the Christ of the gospels. But in contrast to the Gospel Dependency School, I will also suggest that *VA* may have been influenced by input from other Christian literature, particularly the apocryphal Gospels and the Christian Acts (Apocryphal and Canonical). I do not think (aside from Koskenniemi) that sufficient attention has been given to the possible influence of other Christian literature on Philostratus in any of the studies on this subject. My argument, briefly stated, is that Philostratus drew on the Christian gospels and acts to construct a narrative in which Apollonius both resembled and transcended Jesus and the Apostles.

I will be approaching the question of the relationship between *VA* and early Christian literary tradition from two perspectives: historical and literary. The second chapter will examine the historical context in which Philostratus wrote *VA*, while the third chapter will draw out the thematic and verbal connections between *VA* and early Christian narratives of Jesus and the

apostles. Building on the tradition of scholarship that I have traced thus far, I will attempt to shed some new light on Philostratus's construction of Apollonius.

## CHAPTER 2

### PHILOSTRATUS AND HIS WORLD

#### Introduction

Flavius Philostratus lived in a period where three phenomena dominated the cultural landscape: the Severan Dynasty, the Second Sophistic, and a “culture war” between Pagans and Christians. The confluence of these phenomena must have had a powerful influence on Philostratus’s thought and literature. The *Zeitgeist* carries individuals along with it, forming their behavior and perspectives, and Philostratus was no exception. I will argue in this chapter that, given the strong historical forces acting on the author of *VA*, it is entirely plausible that he intended his work as a polemical narrative against the Christians.

#### Flavius Philostratus: A Biographical Overview

The sum of our knowledge on the life of Flavius Philostratus is woefully sparse.<sup>44</sup> We get but a glimpse of him in the Byzantine encyclopedia known as the *Suda*, and in a handful of inscriptions. One of three Philostrati described by the *Suda*,<sup>45</sup> he was allegedly born on the island

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<sup>44</sup> “Flavius” is his Roman nomen, while “Philostratus” is his Greek cognomen.

<sup>45</sup> The *Suda*’s entries on the Philostrati has been the cause of persistent perplexity, and some scholars (notably, Bowersock) have abandoned any hope of disentangling them. The entries name three Philostrati:

- 1) Philostratus I, son of Verus
- 2) Philostratus II, son of Philostratus-son-of-Verus

of Lemnos in the northeast Aegean (sometime in the 170's perhaps) and died in the reign of Philip the Arab (244-9).<sup>46</sup> The *Suda* relates that he practiced as a sophist in Athens (coming to be known as "Philostratus of Athens") and later in Rome. We know of at least three of his rhetorical teachers (*VS* 602, 605-606, 617). The ascription of his *Lives of the Sophists* renders his name as "Flavius Philostratus," indicating that he had a Roman cognomen. His wife was apparently from a senatorial family, and at least one of his sons would become a senator. During the reign of Septimius Severus, he gained admission to the imperial court through the mediation of one of his teachers, Antipater of Hierapolis, and joined the literary circle of Severus's Syrian wife, Julia Domna.<sup>47</sup> After moving to Rome, Philostratus probably maintained his ties with Athens. An inscription lists a Philostratus as a hoplite general during the reign of Septimius Severus.<sup>48</sup> This office was second in rank to that of archon and "entailed supervision of the grain supply, markets

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3) Philostratus, son of Nervianus, great-nephew and son-in-law of Philostratus II. Philostratus II is our (Severan) Philostratus; the first is his father, and the third is his son-in-law. All three Philostrati, it appears, were sophist and authors. The entries contain at least one error: they claim that our (Severan) Philostratus's father lived in the time of Nero, a historical impossibility. Aside from the three Philostrati in the *Suda*, we know of two Philostrati who each wrote a book of *Imagines* that are extant today – a Philostratus the Elder and a Philostratus the Younger. Conventionally, scholars have identified Philostratus the Elder with our (Severan) Philostratus and added a fourth Philostratus to account for the second *Imagines*. For a more in-depth discussion of this intriguing problem, see Appendix 1 of Graham Anderson, *Philostratus: Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 3; Malcolm Heath, trans., "Philostratus," *Suda Online*, March 23, 1999, <http://www.stoa.org/sol-entries/phi/421>.

<sup>47</sup> Antipater was Greek secretary to Severus, wrote his biography, and tutored his sons Caracalla and Geta (*VS* 607).

<sup>48</sup> *IG* II<sup>2</sup> 1803, with the restoration by J. S. Traill, "Greek Inscriptions Honoring Prytaneis," *Hesperia* 40 (1971): 324.

and shipping, among a number of civic and religious duties.”<sup>49</sup> After the assassination of Caracalla and Julia Domna’s suicide in 217, we almost lose track of Philostratus. He continued writing of course and maintained favorable relations with the imperial court; his *Lives of the Sophists* in fact is dedicated to one of the Gordians. But we know little more about his life. In nuce, Philostratus emerges from the shadows of history as a literary man educated in the Greek East at the end of the second century who was active in Imperial circles in times of increasing uncertainty and turmoil.<sup>50</sup>

Several works are attributed to Philostratus in the *Suda*, including a *Life of Apollonius*, *Lives of the Sophists*, *On Heroes* (or *Heroicus*), *Erotic Epistles*, and *Imagines*. The first three are still extant today; we also have an *Imagines* by a “Philostratus the Elder” who may be our (Severan) Philostratus.<sup>51</sup> The *Life of Apollonius* is Philostratus’s longest work – in fact, the longest biography that survives from antiquity. He probably began to write it before the suicide of Julia Domna in 217, since she commissioned it.<sup>52</sup> And he must have completed it after 217, since she is referred to in the past tense; but before he wrote *Lives of the Sophists* (as late as 238 CE), since *VA* is mentioned in that work (*VS* 570).<sup>53</sup> A date in the 220’s (cf. Kemezis) is likely

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<sup>49</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 5-6.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>51</sup> The *Imagines* that are extant today (one by a “Philostratus the Elder” and one by his grandson, a “Philostratus the Younger”) are collections of short poetic descriptions of myth-themed paintings. Flavius Philostratus is usually identified with Philostratus the Elder. See note above.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 5.

<sup>53</sup> The date of publication for *VS* is determined as a range of dates. The *terminus post quem* is given by the latest event referred to in the book, which is the inauguration of Nicagoras of Athens as Sacred Herald of the Eleusinian Mysteries, around 230 CE. The *terminus ante quem* is given by the dedication of the work, which is addressed to Antonius Gordianus. This Antonius Gordianus could be Gordian I or his son, Gordian II (some have also suggested Gordian III).

because 1) the past-tense references to Julia do not give the impression that she has been dead very long,<sup>54</sup> 2) Philostratus would have been in his sixties or seventies in the 230s and would not likely have written both *VA* and *VS* (his two longest works) in such a late stage of his career, and 3) a very early date in the range (between 217 and 219) is ruled out by the unpropitious religious climate in the reign of Elagabalus (218-222 CE) for such a work as *VS*.<sup>55</sup>

### **Philostratus and the Severan Dynasty**

The Severan rule, spanning almost fifty years from the end of the second century through the beginning of the third, followed a period (from the death of Domitian in 96 CE to the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 CE) that Edward Gibbon famously called “the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous.”<sup>56</sup> This period was known for the peace and stability of the Roman Empire under “five good emperors” (Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines). Following the assassination of Marcus Aurelius’s son Commodus in 192 CE, the Severans rose to power. The Severan period (193-235)

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Both died in 283 CE in a civil war against Maximinus. Therefore, *VS* must have been written after 230 CE but before the death of the Gordians in 238 CE (cf. Kemezis, *Greek Narratives*, 294-295).

<sup>54</sup> “The notebooks containing the memoirs of Damis were unknown until a member of his family brought them to the attention of the empress Julia: “Since I was a member of her salon (for she admired and encouraged all rhetorical discourse), she set me to transcribe these works of Damis . . .” καὶ προσήκων τις τῷ Δάμιδι τὰς δέλτους τῶν ὑπομνημάτων τούτων οὐπω γινωσκομένης ἐς γνῶσιν ἤγαγεν Ἰουλίᾳ τῇ Βασιλίδι. μετέχοντι δὲ μοι τοῦ περὶ αὐτὴν κύκλου, καὶ γὰρ τοὺς ῥητορικοὺς πάντας λόγους ἐπὶ ἡνέκει καὶ ἡσπάζετο, μεταγράψαι τε προσέταξε τὰς διατριβὰς ταύτας.

<sup>55</sup> Adam Kemezis, *Greek Narratives of the Roman Empire under the Severans : Cassius Dio, Philostratus and Herodian* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 297.

<sup>56</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, 6 vols (Everyman’s Library, 2010), 90.

felt the rumblings (the internal crisis and rapid succession of power from 217 to 221) that presaged the disastrous crisis of the Third Century. It was in this environment that Philostratus lived and produced his *Life of Apollonius*. We will therefore spend some time considering what kind of religious policies the Severan dynasty encouraged and how they regarded the holy man from Tyana.

### *Septimius Severus (reigned 193-211)*

Septimius Severus set the tone for his successors. Born in the Roman province of Africa in 145 CE, he advanced through the *cursus honorum* to become emperor in 193 CE. Conscious of his outsider status (he was not Italian or connected with a royal family), he attempted to acquire legitimacy by adopting Marcus Aurelius as his father and so artificially grafting himself into the Antonine line of emperors (Cass. Dio 76.7.4).

A philhellene who embraced Greek literature, Septimius Severus was a patron of rhetoric, law, and history (most notably, promoting the work of the historian Cassius Dio) (Cass. Dio 73.23.1; 79.10.1-2; Herodian 2.15.5). But he was also a soldier who travelled and campaigned in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria, Palestine, Arabia, as well as Britain (Cass. Dio 76.13.1). He is even said to have visited Tyana, the home of Apollonius (Cass. Dio 76.15.7). Philostratus may have accompanied Severus on many of his travels; he claims, at least, to “have crossed most of the present world” and to have seen the Celtic region and the western ocean (*VA* 5.2, 8.31).

Septimius Severus may have set a tone of interest in foreign religions that was characteristic of the Severan Dynasty. He was a devotee of the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis. As Tertullian testifies in a letter to Scapula, proconsul of Africa, that Severus was “mindful of the Christians” (*Christianorum memor*), employed a Christian as his personal physician, and saved



some Christians of high rank from a mob (*Ad Scapulam* 4.5-6). But his ultimate relationship to Christianity is unclear. Eusebius relates that he was a persecutor of Christians (*HA Sev.* 6.1.1), and according to *Historia Augusta*, when he was in Palestine, he “forbade conversion to Judaism under heavy penalties and enacted a similar law in regard to the Christians” (17.1).

### *Julia Domna*

After the death of his first wife, Paccia Marciana, Septimius Severus married Julia Domna, who belonged to a priestly dynastic family of Hellenized Syrians from Emesa. The first imperial wife to come from the Greek East, she continued to revere the Emesene sun-god Elagabal and even promoted his cult in other parts of the Empire.<sup>57</sup> She was also active in supporting sophists, philosophers, and mathematicians. Philostratus refers to her as “the philosophic Julia” (*VS* 622), and Cassius Dio relates that she “began to study philosophy and passed her days in company with sophists” in order to find relief from the stress of public life (Cass. Dio 76.15.6-7). Philostratus says that mathematicians and philosophers surrounded her (*VS* 622).

Philostratus was himself a respected member of the circle (κύκλος) around Julia Domna, “for she admired and encouraged all rhetorical discourse” (*VA* 1.3.1). The precise nature of this circle, or salon, has been debated. According to Bowersock, “That Julia had a circle of philosophers and sophists cannot be denied, but apart from Philostratus and Philiscus its membership is unknown.”<sup>58</sup> Whitmarsh, on the other hand, suggests that “circle” is figurative: “There was no identifiable body of people known as ‘the circle’; rather, Philostratus is vaunting

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Birley, *Septimius Severus : The African Emperor* (London: Routledge, 1999), 71-72. “Elagabal” means “god (El) of the mountain (*gabal*).

<sup>58</sup> Glen Warren Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Clarendon P., 1969), 108.

his exceptional intimacy with Julia.”<sup>59</sup> Whatever the case, it seems clear that Philostratus and Julia did have a close professional relationship and that she was one of his greatest patrons.

It was Julia Domna, according to Philostratus, who commissioned him to write the biography of Apollonius. Philostratus does not explain Julia’s motivation, but we can speculate that her connection to the east likely had something to do with it. Born and raised in Syria, she might have heard of the holy man from the neighboring province of Cappadocia. A biography about Apollonius would be a tribute to her eastern heritage. Might she also have been concerned with the growing influence of the Christians and wanted to publish a “pagan” biography to rival that of Jesus? This alternative is possible as well, but we, unfortunately, do not know anything of Julia’s relationship with the Christians from the literary sources.

Philostratus presumably stayed by Julia until her own death by starvation in 217 after the murder of her only remaining son, Caracalla, who reigned from 198 to 217 (Cass. Dio 78.23-24).

#### *Caracalla (reigned 198-217)*

Under Caracalla, Philostratus’ teacher Antipater fell from favor (*VS* 607), but Philostratus seems to have stayed on good terms with the emperor. His apparent first-hand accounts of the court of Caracalla in *VS* suggests that he was within the “circle” of the emperor (*VS* 626).<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Whitmarsh, “Prose Literature and the Severan Dynasty,” 33.

<sup>60</sup> Whitmarsh does not think this conclusive evidence that Philostratus was a courtier of Caracalla. *Ibid.*, 34–35.

Like his mother, Caracalla held Apollonius in high regard, praising him as a “sorcerer and magician,” and even going so far as to build a shrine (*herōon*) to the holy man.<sup>61</sup> This fact may say something about his mother’s regard for Apollonius. Was she also a religious devotee of Apollonius? If not a religious devotee, she must have inculcated great respect for Apollonius in her son.

The emperor also showed high regard for Achilles, and paid his respects at his tomb (Hdn. 4.8.4-5; cf. Cass. Dio 78.16.7). In fact, Caracalla may have made a concerted effort to revive hero cults.<sup>62</sup> Caracalla’s regard for heroes may explain why Philostratus wrote *Heroicus* around this time.<sup>63</sup> This book is a dialogue between a Phoenician merchant and a vine-grower from the Chersonnese who tends the vineyard and gardens around the tomb of the Protesilaus, the first Greek to die in the Trojan War (Homer *Il.* 2.6955-710). The vine-grower claims that Protesilaus helps him in his work, tells him stories about the Trojan War, and teaches him philosophy (*Her.* 2.6-5.5). *Heroicus* might well have been intended as a response to Caracalla’s policies in the same way that *VA* was a response to Julia’s

Caracalla does not appear to have supported Christianity, but he had a sympathy for foreign mystery cults. He reportedly “brought the cult of Isis to Rome and built magnificent temples to this goddess everywhere” (*HA Carac.* 9.10).

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<sup>61</sup> τοῖς δὲ μάγοις καὶ γόησιν οὕτως ἔχαιρεν ὥς καὶ Ἀπολλώνιον τὸν Καππαδόκην τὸν ἐπὶ τοῦ Δομιτιανοῦ ἀνθήσαντα ἐπαινεῖν καὶ τιμᾶν, ὅστις καὶ γόης καὶ μάγος ἀκριβῆς ἐγένετο, καὶ ἡρώων αὐτῷ κατασκευάσαι (Cass. Dio 78.18.4; also cf. *Life of Apollonius* 8.31.3).

<sup>62</sup> Whitmarsh, “Prose Literature and the Severan Dynasty,” 36.

<sup>63</sup> The authorship of this work has been disputed, but the modern consensus holds that Philostratus is the most likely author.

*Elagabalus (reigned 218-222)*

Succeeded by Macrinus, he only survived a year before Elagabalus (reigned 218-222) ascended to the throne. Elagabalus was a Syrian, the son of Julia Soaemias (the niece of Julia Domna) and Sextus Varius Marcellus, but he claimed to be the illegitimate son of Caracalla (Cass. Dio 80.2.2). He was called Elagabalus after the god, Elagabal, whom he had served as hereditary high priest at Emesa before his succession. After the worship of Elagabal was brought to Rome, he came to be equated with *Invictus Sol*, the Unconquered Sun (*HA Elag.* 1.5).

While Elagabalus preferred his own cult and endeavored to impose it universally, he also had a certain tolerance for other religions. But in his mind, all other cults were subservient to his own: “In fact, he asserted that all gods were merely the servants of his god” (*HA Elag.* 7.4). He built a temple to Elagabalus on the slopes of the Palatine Hill to house the holy stone of the Emesa temple, a black conical shaped meteorite. Thither he transferred all the sacred symbols of Rome: the emblem of the Great Mother, the fire of Vesta, the Palladium, etc. – allegedly so that “no god might be worshipped at Rome save only Elagabalus” (*HA Elag.* 3.4-5). He also mandated that “the religions of the Jews and the Samaritans and the rites of the Christians must also be transferred to this place, in order that the priesthood of Elagabalus might include the mysteries of every form of worship” (Herodian, *Roman History* 5.3; *HA Elag.* 3.5).

Philostratus describes Elagabalus as a “tyrant [who] by every sort of wanton wickedness . . . disgraced the Roman Empire” in *VS* (625). He was condemned by posterity for his sexual deviance and open contempt for Roman customs, and for his association with magicians (*HA Elag.* 5.1-6.9, 8.1-2). Perhaps, it was for this reason, that Philostratus was so concerned to distance Apollonius from charges of being a magician.

After ruling four years, Elagabalus was assassinated and succeeded by his cousin,

Severus Alexander (reigned 222-235), the last ruling emperor of the Severan Dynasty. Named after Alexander the Great, he was said to have been born in a temple dedicated to Alexander the Great on the anniversary of his death (*HA Sev. Alex.* 5, 13). It was probably during his reign that Philostratus completed *VA*. Severus Alexander's mother was Julia Mamaea, another niece of Julia Domna.

*Severus Alexander (reigned 222-235)*

Of the Severan rulers, Severus Alexander may be counted as the most sympathetic to Christianity. According to Eusebius, "The house of Alexander [Severus] consist[ed] of many believers" (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.28.1). He was said to have "respected the privileges of the Jews and allowed the Christians to exist unmolested" (*HA Sev. Alex.* 22).<sup>64</sup> He did not, however, simply tolerate Christianity but appears, in some fashion, to have been a devotee himself. In the early morning hours, he went to worship in the "sanctuary of his Lares," where he kept among "statues of the deified emperors" also the statues "of certain holy souls, among them Apollonius, and, according to a contemporary writer, Christ, Abraham, Orpheus, and others of this same character."<sup>65</sup> Edward Gibbon writes of Severus Alexander: "[T]he philosophic devotion of that emperor was marked by a singular but injudicious regard for the Christian religion. In his domestic chapel he placed the statues of Abraham, of Orpheus, of Apollonius, and of Christ, as

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<sup>64</sup> It should be noted that *HA* is generally unreliable, and one cannot simply accept its evidence at face value. But at least one scholar (J. A. Crook, *Consilium Principis*) has acknowledged that *HA*'s account of Severus Alexander may be more reliable than others have supposed.

<sup>65</sup> . . . matutinis horis in larario suo, in quo et divos principes sed optimos electos et animas sanctiores, in quis Apollonium et, quantum scriptor suorum temporum dicit, Christum, Abraham et Orpheum et huiuscemodi ceteros habebat ac maiorum effigies, rem divinam faciebat (*Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander* 29.2).

an honour justly due to those respectable sages who had instructed mankind in the various modes of addressing their homage to the supreme and universal Deity.”<sup>66</sup> It is said that Severus Alexander also “wished to build a temple to Christ and give him a place among the gods” but was dissuaded from doing so by Roman diviners who told him that if he built such a temple, “all men would become Christians and the other temples would of necessity be abandoned” (*HA Sev. Alex.* 43:6-7).

Severus Alexander’s mother, Julia Mamaea, must have been, at least, partly responsible for his congeniality towards Christians. She is said to have met with the great Alexandrian theologian, Origen. Having heard of him because of his fame, she was “very eager both to be honored with a sight of the man and to make trial of his skill in divine things so greatly extolled.” On this account, “while staying at Alexandria, she sent for him by a military escort. He stayed with her some time, exhibiting innumerable matters calculated to promote the glory of the Lord” (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.21.3-4). Given the apparent close association of Julia Mamaea with influential Christians and her respect for them, we cannot be surprised at her son’s sympathy towards them.

In 235, the emperor and his mother were assassinated by the Roman army after he tried to bribe an invading barbarian army to surrender. Thus ended the Severan Dynasty. In the following years, the Roman Empire would face a period of great instability that saw the rapid succession of short-lived emperors – a period that historians commonly refer to as the “Crisis of the Third Century.” The middle of the third century also saw the decline of the Second Sophistic, a great

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<sup>66</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2, 6 vols. (Everyman’s Library, 2010), 49.

cultural and literary movement that looked to the Greek past for inspiration.<sup>67</sup> We now backtrack to consider Philostratus' place in the context of this influential phenomenon.

### **Philostratus and the Second Sophistic**

The “second sophistic” is a problematic term that has been defined in a number of different ways. For the purpose of this study, we will use it to refer to the revival of classical Greek culture throughout the Greek-speaking parts (and some Latin-speaking parts as well) of the Roman Empire in the first three centuries CE. Reaching its apex in the second and third centuries CE, in the time of Hadrian and the Antonines, the movement was distinguished by its emphasis on rhetorical education, the aesthetics of mimesis (artistic imitation of classical predecessors), and the regular use of a highly literate classical Greek (or Latin).<sup>68</sup>

Philostratus, a practicing sophist himself, invented the term “second sophistic,” but he used it in a more confined sense to describe a form of display oratory. In his *Lives of the Sophists*, he traced two periods in the development of oratory: the “ancient sophistic” and the “second sophistic.” The ancient sophistic was practiced by Gorgias and Critias (and others), who littered their speeches with abstract philosophical themes, such as courage, justice, the nature of

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<sup>67</sup> Swain traces the Second Sophistic from 50 to 250 CE. He notes that that there is a “perceptible break” at 250 because of the increasing turmoil in the Roman Empire thereafter: the “middle and later decades of the third century were a time of political, military, and economic instability for the Roman empire” (*Hellenism and Empire* 7). Whitmarsh observes that “the overwhelming weight of numbers implies that this phenomenon [the Second Sophistic] reached its peak of popularity in the second and third centuries CE (Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* 5).

<sup>68</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 8; Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 43–58; Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–13; Tim Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–5.

the gods and the universe; Philostratus calls this form of discourse “philosophic rhetoric.” The second sophistic, he maintains, was founded in Athens by Aeschines of the fourth century BCE (the rival of Demosthenes) and dealt with historical themes and figures, such as tyrants and princes, the rich and the poor (*VS* 480-481, 507).

The kind of oratory that was cultivated in the second sophistic was “display,” or epideictic oratory, as opposed to *dikanic* (judicial) or *symboleutic* (deliberative) oratory. Orators of the second sophistic delivered speeches not to persuade a jury or to deliberate on a law, but rather to amuse and entertain.<sup>69</sup> They were not so much concerned with truth and analytical argument as with style and with outward appearance, and so there was an ongoing tension between “sophists” and “philosophers.”<sup>70</sup> Sophistic speeches were called *meletai*, or “declamations”; that is, speeches given in the persona of, or addressed to, someone famous in myth or the historical past. They can be divided into *suasoriae* (persuasive speeches) and *controversiae* (fictitious law-court speeches). We find many examples of *meletai* in Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists* and in the writings of Aelius Aristides.<sup>71</sup>

Philostratus insists on calling the movement the “second sophistic” rather than the “new sophistic” because he believes he can trace it back as far as Aeschines in classical Athens. And yet, Philostratus acknowledges that after Aeschines, the second sophistic movement languished

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<sup>69</sup> Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic*, 3–5; Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 8; Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 43–58; Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250*, 1–13. Tim Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–5.

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 10; Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 11.

<sup>71</sup> Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic*, 20–21.



until it was rekindled by Nicetes of Smyrna in the reign of Nero. Only three sophists are mentioned for the intervening period, and they are summarily passed over (*VS* 511-512). The second sophistic, then, was a movement that rightfully belonged not to the ancient past, but rather to the period of the high Roman empire; in this respect, it was new.<sup>72</sup>

Looking back to the Athens of the fifth century, before the coming of Rome and the loss of Greek freedom, sophists wrote and delivered speeches in the Attic Greek of the classical Athenian authors.<sup>73</sup> They were concerned to replicate the purity of Attic Greek in their writings. The common (*koinē*) Greek that had arisen in the Hellenistic period was regarded as a corruption of refined Attic Greek. Since language was the primary means of distinguishing Greek from non-Greek, the cultural elite of the second sophistic believed it to be of utmost important to preserve the best kind of Greek (i.e. Attic Greek) in all its purity. Those who were educated and spoke good Greek called themselves “the educated” or “the cultured” (*hoi pepaideumenoi*).<sup>74</sup>

While Philostratus used “second sophistic” to describe a type of oratory that went back to classical Athens, the term can also be conceived in a broader fashion as designating a movement that touted the conservation and celebration of classical Greek culture. In this broader sense, it did not simply denote adherence to a standard of “Greekness” in oratory, but also in education, literature, and philosophy.<sup>75</sup> It embodied a feeling that Greek culture was superior to all other cultures. In the *Lives of the Famous Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius argues against those who

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<sup>72</sup> Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 9.

<sup>73</sup> Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 16; Swain, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” 160–161.

<sup>74</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250*, 17–64.

<sup>75</sup> Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic*, 3–22.

ascribe the origin of philosophy to the barbarians, maintaining that from the Greeks “not only all philosophy, but even the whole human race in reality originated” (1.3).

It is important to note that “Greekness” was not primarily or exclusively derived from ethnic background or local affiliation. Since the days of Alexander the Great, much of the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East had been “Hellenized,” a process whereby people of many different ethnicities adopted Greek language and customs. The writers of the Second Sophistic included not only pure ethnic Greeks like Herodes Atticus, but also non-ethnic Greeks, such as Favorinus (from Gaul), Nicetas of Smyrna, Lucian of Samosata, Aelius Aristides (from Mysia), and Dio Chrysostom (from Bithynia). “Greekness,” in this respect, transcended ethnic boundaries. One need not be born a Greek; one could be made a Greek by embracing Greek traditions and values and speaking the Greek language. In this spirit, Philostratus can have Damis, a Syrian, declare that his master Apollonius has “made a Greek out of me” (3.43). Moreover, a letter attributed to Apollonius and possibly fabricated by Philostratus (*Epp. Apoll.* 71) makes it clear that Greekness is not derived from one’s ancestors, but rather from “a distinct bearing and appearance” as well as “distinct customs, laws, a language, and a way of life, Greeks also have.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Robert J. Penella, *The Letters of Apollonius of Tyana: A Critical Text with Prolegomena, Translation, and Commentary* (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1979). We have two sources for Apollonius’ letters: a separately transmitted collection and the *VA* itself. The separately transmitted collection contains 100 letters. Fourteen of these letters appear fully quoted in the *VA*. Two others (*Epp. Apoll.* 63 and 71) are alluded to in the course of Philostratus’ narrative. Philostratus names the letters as one his sources for the composition of the *VA*, describing them in this way: “These he wrote to kings, sophists, philosophers, Eleans, Delphians, Indians, and Egyptians, on the subject of gods, about customs, morals, and laws, setting upright whatever had been overturned among such people” (1.2). According to Philostratus (*VA* 8.19-20), a collection of Apollonius’ letters had been offered as a gift to the Emperor Hadrian along with a book of Pythagorean *sententiae*. With regard to the authenticity of the letters, we might observe that some of the letters are historically plausible and reliable, while others are not (e.g. those written to emperors). We might attribute these spurious letters to Philostratus or an earlier inventor.

As a practicing sophist from a family of sophists, Philostratus was a strict adherent to the agenda of the second sophistic. The ideals of the movement are clearly reflected in his work, especially in *VA*. Apollonius is an ideal Greek. In describing his education, Philostratus lets us know that Apollonius' "Greek was of the Attic kind and his accent unaffected by the region [i.e. Cappadocia]" (1.7; cf. 1.17, 2.29.1). Apollonius is portrayed as a conserver and conveyor of Greek culture in his travels all over the world. He repeatedly praises the Greeks over the barbarians and goes about restoring Greek customs in the cities that he visits. On visiting Antioch, he is shocked to find a sanctuary of Apollo that is manned by "semi-barbarous (ἡμιβαρβάρους) and uncultured folk" (1.16.2) and prays that they will be turned into trees like Daphne. He assumes that "to a wise man Greece is everywhere" (1.35.2). While he is in India, Apollonius visits monuments that have been erected in honor of Alexander the Great (2.20.2; 2.42-43). Philostratus praises Nero for the "uncharacteristic wisdom" whereby he "had set Greece free, so that the cities went back to their Doric and Attic ways, and there was prosperity everywhere, together with concord in the cities, a situation not enjoyed even by ancient Greece" (5.41.1). When Vespasian deprives the Greeks of their, Apollonius sends him three letters that sharply censure his policy (5.41). Finally, Apollonius defends the Greek gods before the Gymnosophists of Egypt (6.19).

The world of Philostratus, in terms of spirit and culture, was Greek, but in terms of politics and administration, it was Roman.<sup>77</sup> Sophists played an important role in Roman imperial propaganda. They served as emissaries of their cities to Rome, and often were able to effectively gain the respect of the emperor and to intercede for those they represented.

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<sup>77</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250*, 380.

Philostratus relates many of these encounters between sophist and emperor. Sophists also served as counsellors to the emperors and occupied official posts in the court at Rome. Many of them became *ab epistulis Graecis* (secretaries that facilitated the Greek correspondence of the emperor), or teachers, or even consuls (e.g. Herodes Atticus).<sup>78</sup> Philostratus's teacher Antipater of Hierapolis was *ab epistulis Graecis* under Septimius Severus and teacher of rhetoric to the two princes, Caracalla and Geta. Philostratus himself was also active in the court of the Severans and was especially close to Julia Domna, but beyond this, we know little about his career in the imperial court. He does not seem to have served as an *ab epistulis* or a teacher of rhetoric but nonetheless had some influence at court.<sup>79</sup>

While sophists could be efficient and enthusiastic executives and communicators for the emperor, their regard for Roman culture is open to question. According to Anderson and Bowersock, there was no real tension between Greek and Roman culture: one might identify as Greek and not feel any hostility to "Roman-ness." Indeed, Roman culture was in many ways tied and indebted to Greek culture. Roman emperors like Nero and Hadrian openly embraced Greek culture; Marcus Aurelius was a disciple of Stoic philosophy and wrote his *Meditations* not in Latin, but in Greek. So, as Bowersock puts it, "It was possible for a proud Greek to be a Roman without any loss of national pride or abnegation of cultural tradition."<sup>80</sup> But according to Bowie and Swain, the second sophistic was a revival of Greek identity, pushing back against Roman

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<sup>78</sup> Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 43–58.

<sup>79</sup> Anderson, *Philostratus, Biography and Belles Lettres in the Third Century A.D.*, 3–8.

<sup>80</sup> Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, 16; also cf. Anderson, *Philostratus*, 8.

occupation. It was a way for Greeks or those with Greek sympathies to express their discontent with Roman culture and politics.<sup>81</sup>

We can see some semblance of the tension that Bowie and Swain speak of in Philostratus' portrayal of Apollonius. In book four (*VA* 4.5), while Apollonius is visiting the Ionians, he reads an invitation from them in which they asked him to join a religious festival of theirs. Noticing that several names signed to the invitation are not Greek but distinctly Roman (namely, "Lucullus" and "Fabricius"), he sends a letter (*Epp. Apoll.* 71, mentioned above) to their assembly rebuking them for this travesty. Whether it is in fact Apollonius' letter or one fabricated by Philostratus has not been verified. In the letter, Apollonius defines what it means to be Greek (see above), and he laments that the Ionians have taken Roman names, thereby renouncing these characteristic traits of Greeks, "[f]or previously you bore the names of heroes, sea fighters, and lawgivers, but now you have the names of the Luculli, the Fabricii, and the prosperous Lucanii." So we must keep in mind that Philostratus was concerned to preserve the identity and heritage of Greeks not only by distinguishing them from barbarians, but also distinguishing them from Romans. His prominent place in the circles of the Roman elite and his imperial patronage did not prevent him from portraying an Apollonius that could be openly dismissive, if not openly hostile, to Roman customs and culture.

In sum, Philostratus was deeply influenced by the thought world of the second sophistic. His concern for the preservation of Greek language and culture and his suspicion toward "barbarian" culture was candidly expressed in his writings.

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<sup>81</sup> Ewen Bowie, "The Geography of the Second Sophistic: Cultural Variations," in *Paideia: The World of the Second Sophistic*, ed. Barbara E. Borg (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50-250*.

### **Philostratus and Growing Tension between Pagans and Christians**

The budding Christian movement was perceived to be one of the greatest threats to the “Greek” culture and ideals celebrated in the Second Sophistic.<sup>82</sup> When Philostratus wrote his biography of Apollonius, Christianity was gaining in influence and numbers.<sup>83</sup> The third century was a period of tremendous growth for the movement, seeing it increase in population from about 200,000 to perhaps six million, or ten percent of the Roman Empire’s population. Stark estimated that the burgeoning religion was on average growing at an average rate of forty percent per decade, an assessment that aligns well with the historical data.<sup>84</sup> Christians received converts from every segment of society – rich and poor alike – though its “center of gravity” probably lay with the poor free classes.<sup>85</sup> By the end of the third century, observes Swain, “significant numbers of the educated were Christian, and the distinctive features of pagan culture in the Greek East were under serious threat.”<sup>86</sup> The Latin apologist Tertullian’s (160-240 CE) could boast (though he

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<sup>82</sup> See Swain, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” 158.

<sup>83</sup> While I am using the term “Christianity,” I recognize that it is not a monolith and that it was tremendously diverse in the first few centuries of its existence. I might more accurately say “Christianities,” but I will use “Christianity” for the sake of simplicity.

<sup>84</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 7; Keith Hopkins, “Christian Number and Its Implications,” *J. Early Christ. Stud.* 6.2 (1998): 198.

<sup>85</sup> Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 312. This, of course, makes sense since most people in the Roman Empire were not well off. There was no middle class.

<sup>86</sup> Swain, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” 158.

greatly exaggerated no doubt) that, “[w]e are but of yesterday, and we have filled everything you have – cities, islands, forts, towns . . . All we have left to you is the temple” (*Apol.* 37.4).

As Christianity grew in number and spread, its holy books spread with it. The earliest gospels (or lives of Jesus) had been written by the end of the first century CE. By the end of the second century, these gospels were circulating widely and being read by intellectuals. Celsus, the second-century Platonist philosopher, philhellene, and vigorous critic of Christianity (*True Doctrine*), observes that, “[m]ore and more the myths put about by these Christians are better known than the doctrines of the philosophers. Who has not heard the fable of Jesus’ birth from a virgin or the stories of his crucifixion and resurrection?”<sup>87</sup>

Jesus, the central figure behind Christian writings, was a first century Palestinian Jew. He was born a Jew, quoted Jewish scripture, and had Jewish followers. The apostle Paul, who produced the earliest “Christian” writings, was a Pharisaic Jew who regarded Jesus as the Jewish messiah and the son of God. On the other hand, the earliest gospels are written in Greek, and Paul himself, being a “Hellenized” Jew, spoke and wrote fluently in koine Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Roman Empire. He often expressed himself with Greek philosophical terms (e.g. *pneuma*) and allegedly quoted Greek authors in his conversations with the Athenians (cf. Acts 17:16-34). The prologue of the Gospel of John also betrays the influence of Greek philosophy (i.e. *logos* theology).

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<sup>87</sup> See Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press), 54. For more resources on Celsus, see Michael Frede, “Origen’s Treatise against Celsus,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131–55; Eugene V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus*, Society of Biblical Literature, Dissertation Series. (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982); Robert Wilken, “Celsus: A Conservative Intellectual,” in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 94–125.

But for Celsus, the second-century Platonist, Christianity's Greek traits did not redeem it from its recent and barbaric origins. Celsus had read the Christian gospels for himself and even, arguably, some of Paul's letters (*Cels.* 1.9); and he was not impressed by what he found. He dismissed Jesus as a magician who had learned his art in Egypt, and the son of a poor woman and a Roman soldier named Panthera (1.29, 32, 38). Jesus led an undistinguished life, convincing no one of his divinity; died a shameful death; and his "resurrection" was the hallucination of a hysterical female (2.38-39; 2.55). Along the lines of a modern textual critic, Celsus even notes inconsistencies in the Gospel narratives: how many angels (one or two) were present at the tomb when Jesus rose from the dead (5.52)? And again, how do we know that a heavenly voice spoke to Jesus after his baptism? (1.41).

The third century Porphyry (c. 232 – 305 CE) who belonged to a neo-Platonist school in Rome, made much the same argument as Celsus in his massive fifteen-book *Kata Christianon* ("Against the Christians"). We have lost most of this work, but we do possess a few fragments. Porphyry was one of Christianity's most learned critics. He had studied the writings of the Christians (both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian gospels). Our knowledge of *Against the Christians* comes from refutations of it penned by Eusebius, Apollinarius, and Macarius Magnus (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century CE). If we are to trust the testimony of Magnus' *Apocriticus*, Porphyry (much like Hierocles) argued that the gospel writers were "fiction writers" who wrote contradictory accounts, or "fairy tales," about Jesus. They give different accounts of Jesus' passion (*Apocrit.* 2.23, 2.26.1). Porphyry questioned the credibility of Jesus' miracles and ridiculed his character. For instance, Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane over his impending death is "not worthy of a son of God, nor even of a wise man who hates death" (*Apocrit.* 3.2.1). At his trial, Jesus did nothing to prove that he was "wise or divine." Porphyry compares the trial of Jesus with that of



Apollonius, who, he opines, acted more in the role of a divine man in his trial before Domitian. Jesus “only manages to be whipped and spit on and crowned with briars – unlike Apollonius who talked back to the Emperor Domitian, vanished from the palace and soon was to be seen by many in the city of Dicearchia, now called Puteoli” (*Apocrit.* 3.1.1). As for the core tenet of Christianity, the idea that Jesus was raised from the dead and can raise others from the dead – Porphyry finds “this silly teaching makes me light-headed” (*Apocrit.* 4.24).

According to Celsus, the Christian movement was fundamentally flawed because it was a new religion that contradicted ancient Truth. It did not possess the true ancient doctrine (*logos*) “which has existed from the beginning [and] has always been maintained by the wisest nations and cities and wise men,” including the Egyptians, Assyrians, Indians, and the Greeks (*Cels.* 1.14). Christians had only a warped version of the true doctrine that had come down to them through the Jews. Originally Egyptians, the Jews had rebelled against their countrymen under Moses and developed new-fangled ideas; for instance, they deceived themselves into thinking that there was only one God (*Cels.* 1.21-24, 3.5).<sup>88</sup> The Christians, in turn, rebelled against the Jews and distorted the true doctrine still further. Now they are rebelling against the traditional practices of the Roman empire (*Cels.* 7.62, 8.2, 8.63). As a result, many Christian doctrines have no resemblance to true doctrine (e.g. the trinity, and the shameful death of a god), while others

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<sup>88</sup> The tension between “Greek” culture and Jewish culture went back as far as the Maccabean revolt, when Jews rebelled the harsh measures imposed on them by the Hellenistic ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. Josephus (first century CE) had argued for the superiority of Jewish culture over Greek culture in *Against Apion*, where he declared that Moses was the original lawgiver from which all others had borrowed. The Greek lawgivers, on the other hand, were “of yesterday” (*Ap.* 2.154). Moreover, early Greek philosophers were dependent on Mosaic ethics and theology, including Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Plato, and the Stoics (*Ap.* 2.169).

had been expressed better and earlier by ancient peoples, particularly the Greeks (e.g. the virtue of humility) (91).

Celsus regarded the Christians as a profoundly anti-social group of people that “wall[ed] themselves off and break away from the rest of mankind,” refusing to participate in public service or sacrifice to the gods (*Cels.* 8.). Not only were they anti-social, but they were also deluded fools who came from the lowest rungs of society: uneducated men, women, slaves, and children. Christians did not call intelligent or pious people to their religion out of fear that their ignorance would be revealed (*Cels.* 1.12, 62; 3.50, 55).

Lucian of Samosata (c. 120-180 CE), an accomplished satirist of the second sophistic, echoes Celsus in his *Passing of Peregrinus* (after 165 CE). In this short piece, he gives a rollicking account of the life of Cynic philosopher Peregrinus of Parium (also known as Proteus), who had cremated himself on a pyre at the Olympic games of 165.<sup>89</sup> A dissolute young man, Peregrinus, was accused of parricide and forced into exile. At this point, he encountered “the remarkable wisdom of the Christians, by getting to know their priests and scribes in Palestine” (11). Preying on the gullibility of his new-found friends, Peregrinus was “honoured . . . as a god” and lavished with power and wealth (11). “[I]f any quack or trickster, who can press his advantage, comes among them (explains Lucian), he can acquire great wealth in a short time by imposing on simple-minded people” (13).

Like Celsus, Lucian also derides the doctrine of the Christians and points out its conflict with Greek religion: “The poor fools have persuaded themselves above all that they are immortal and will live forever, from which it follows that they despise death and many of them willingly undergo imprisonment” (13). Indeed, the Christians’ “first lawgiver taught them that they are all

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<sup>89</sup> Philostratus also knows of Peregrinus; see *Lives of the Sophists*, 563-564.

brothers of one another, when once they have sinned by denying the Greek gods, and by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living according to his law” (13).

The famed physician Galen of Pergamum (129-199 CE), in one of his medical treatises, gives us some of the most intriguing evidence of intellectual disdain for Christians among the pagan elite. Galen was born in the east, but he came to Rome as a young man to practice medicine. The emperor Marcus Aurelius was so impressed by his skills that he employed him as a private physician for his son Commodus. When he came to Rome, Christians had been active in the city for over a hundred years. Most of the Christian thinkers of the second century had spent time in Rome, including the Valentinus, Marcion, Hegessipus, and Justin Martyr.<sup>90</sup> Galen could not help but take notice of the Christians, and he mentioned to them throughout his medical treatises, but always in a negative light. He regarded the Christians as a stubborn and obstinate people who blindly followed their beliefs: “For one might more easily teach novelties to the followers of Moses and Christ than to the physicians and philosophers who cling fast to their schools” (*De pulsuum differentiis* 3.3). While he dignified them with the name of a “philosophic school,” he did not think them to be a respectable philosophic school: when a physician appeals to commonly held beliefs rather than to demonstrated facts, writes Galen, it is “as if one had come into the school of Moses and Christ and heard talk of undemonstrated laws” (*De pulsuum differentiis* 2.4).

Christians responded to the attacks on their doctrines, character, and intellectual credibility by attempting to demonstrate that their religion was prior to and superior to Greek culture. In his eight-book response to Celsus (*Contra Celsum*), the learned Alexandrian Christian

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<sup>90</sup> Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 71.

Origen (with whom Severus Alexander's mother was said to have conversed) asserts the antiquity and venerability of the Jewish scripture. Celsus, he asserted, had "failed to comprehend the fact that it is the writings of Moses, which are not only far older than Heraclitus and Pherecydes but even earlier than Homer" (*Cels.* 6.43). One of the earliest philosophers, Pythagoras, had "brought his philosophy to the Greeks from the Jews" (*Cels.* 1.15).

Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) in his *First Apology* argued that the Jewish prophets had the greatest access to true doctrine (logos) and passed it down to the Greeks.<sup>91</sup> The prophets are "more ancient than all the Greek authors, and everything the philosophers and poets said in speaking about the immortality of the soul, or retribution after death, or speculation on celestial matters, or other similar doctrines" (*1 Apology* 44). The prophet Moses, who had written the creation account found in Genesis, Plato borrowed his ideas about creation in *Timaeus* from account of creation in Genesis (59-60). Christ himself is the Logos incarnate.

Justin's pupil, Tatian (120-180 CE), carried on the same arguments as his master. "Our philosophy," he says in his bitter polemic against the "Greeks", "is older than the systems of the Greeks" (*Address to the Greeks* 31). Not only that, but Moses, "the founder of all barbarian wisdom," is 400 years older than Trojan war (39), and Christian doctrine is more ancient "than the invention of letters" (31). In addition to pointing out the recent origin of the Greeks, Tatian also demonstrates a marked contempt for the very things that the writers of the second sophistic held in such high esteem: "And what avails the Attic style, the sorites of philosophers, the plausibilities of syllogism . . .?" (27).

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<sup>91</sup> Noting the diametrically opposed portrayals of logos in Celsus and Justin, Carl Andresen has argued that Celsus wrote his treatise in response to Justin. Carl Andresen, *Logos Und Nomos: Die Polemik Des Kelsos Wider Das Christentum* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1955).

In *Stromateis*, or “Miscellanies,” Clement of Alexandria (150-c. 215 CE) continues the polemical tradition. Non-Greeks, he argues, invented most of the arts of civilization, including the alphabet, medicine, divination, and philosophy (1.16). The first “Greek” philosophers were non-Greek by birth, such as Pythagoras, Orpheus, and Thales (1.15.66.1). In short, “philosophy reached a climax long ago among non-Greeks as something precious, and shone brightly through the peoples and later reached the Greeks” (1.15.71.3). The Greeks only received a sliver of the true philosophy, but it nonetheless has pointed the way to Christ, just as the Law of the Hebrews has done for the Jews (1.5, 17, 19).

Latin Apologist Tertullian seconds the Greek Christian apologists in his address to the “magistrates of the Roman Empire” (1.1). He is speaking to the Romans as inheritors of Greek tradition. The first prophet Moses, Tertullian maintains, “lived about three hundred years before your most ancient man Danaus had crossed the Argos” (*Apology* 19.1). Moses is even older than the god Saturn, who was really a man (19.1). “So,” Tertullian concludes in his address to the magistrates of the Roman Empire, “your very gods, temples, oracles, rituals and all – the book of a single prophet . . . beats them all, with centuries to spare (19.2).

But not all Christians emphasized the antiquity of Christianity in order to establish their identity. In fact, the author of the Epistle to Diognetus (late second century CE) goes so far as to designate Christians a “new race” (καῖνον τοῦτο γένος), “neither giving credence to those thought to be gods by the Greeks nor keeping the superstition of the Jews” (1). The Christians are unlike the Greeks because they do not worship lifeless idols and thereby dishonor their gods (2). Nor are they like the Jews because they do not sacrifice and observe the many stipulations of their Law (3-4). The Christians live in this world as “resident aliens,” but they “are no different

from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs . . . They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each” (5.1-5).

The hostile discourse between Christians and Pagans was not only played out in literature and thought but also in the public domain of the Roman Empire. Because of their secretivity, antisocial behavior, and their refusal to sacrifice to the gods of the Roman Empire, Christians were singled out for persecution. Natural disasters and plagues were blamed on their disregard for the gods, as Tertullian testifies: “If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn’t move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: ‘The Christians to the lion!’” (*Apology* 40.2).

At first, Christians were persecuted sporadically. Nero (reigned 54-68 CE) had been the first emperor to take notice of the Christians, “a people hated for their perversions,” blaming them for a destructive fire in Rome and putting them to death in a cruel manner (Tacitus, *Annales* 15.44). Trajan (reigned 98-117 CE) advised his governor in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger, to execute the Christians if they refused to offer incense and wine to the statue of the emperor (Pliny, *Epp.* 10.96-97). And under Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180), Christians in Lyons and Viennes were mistreated and put to death (*Letters of Lyons and Viennes*).

For the next eighty years (up until the beginning of the Decian persecution in 249 CE) we have no accounts of the emperor’s involvement in persecutions of the Christians. The Severan emperors, being of eastern extraction and tolerant of eastern cults, were on good or neutral terms with the Christians. Alexander Severus may himself have been a devotee of Christ. Persecutions against Christians was non-existent. Yet, the intellectual discourse between pagans and Christians was still ongoing - a discourse that pitted dangerous “non-Greek” Christians against civilized and safe “Greek” pagans. Such was the environment in which Philostratus lived.

Philostratus did not ever mention the Christians directly in his writings or engage in a head-on debate with them as some of his contemporaries were known to do. But he was undoubtedly a proponent of Greek religion and philosophy who must have scorned the barbarisms of Christianity. In *Heroicus*, he recounts what amounts to a conversion story of a “barbarian”: a Greek vinedresser convinces a Phoenician merchant to believe in the Greek hero Protesilaus and to sacrifice to him. In fact, the dialogue closes with the Phoenician’s statement of belief, *peithomai soi* (“I trust you” or “I believe you” (58.6).

Philostratus, however, was most enraptured not by the cult of Protesilaus, but by the religious-philosophical system of Pythagoras. In the first century BCE, the ancient Pythagoreanism, which dated back to the sixth century BCE, was experiencing a revival and emerging in a new form known as “Neopythagoreanism.” Among this system’s central components was a belief in the transmigration of the soul and in the mathematical foundation of the cosmos; the cultivation of a strict vegetarianism; and a general concern to live in accordance with the will of the gods.<sup>92</sup> Pythagoras was an appealing figure to Philostratus and other writers of the second sophistic for several reasons. First, he could claim semi-divine parentage and, along with it, the status of a “divine” or “god-like” man (Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras* 162; Porphyry, *Pythagoras* 2). But secondly, he was one of the oldest Greek sages (sixth century BCE) and a predecessor of Plato (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 987a-b), who was himself a role model of Attic vocabulary and style. Therefore, according to Swain, Apollonius the Pythagorean

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<sup>92</sup> See Gábor Betegh, “Pythagoreans, Orphism and Greek Religion,” in *A History of Pythagoreanism*, ed. Carl A. Huffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 149-166; M. Laura Gemelli Marciano, “The Pythagorean Way of Life and Pythagorean Ethics,” in *A History of Pythagoreanism*, ed. Carl A. Huffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014): 131-148; and *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1987).

was a perfect vehicle for the promotion of Greek culture: “Pythagorean living [gave] Apollonius irreproachable credentials for his own serious role as a champion of a Hellenism which Philostratus was keen to claim as a universal solution.”<sup>93</sup>

In light of the importance of Pythagoras for the cause of Greek culture, it is interesting that he is so prominent a figure in debates between pagans and Christians over the validity of their traditions. Origen notes that Celsus, in listing “ancient and wise men who were of service to their contemporaries and to posterity by their writings, he rejects Moses from the list of wise men,” but he includes Pythagoras among others (*Cels.* 1.16). In *Refutation of All Heresies*, Hippolytus (170-235 CE) contends that Pythagoras stole his ideas from non-Greeks such as Zoroaster (1.2.12) and the Egyptians. Aside from Pythagoras, he concedes that Greeks were the originators of philosophy. But philosophy for him is not a good thing, since he believes Christian heresies to be derived from it. And according to Clement of Alexandria, Pythagoras learned much of his philosophy from foreigners (*Stromateis* 1.15 ff), and Plato’s Laws were derived from the laws of Moses (1.25, 2.18). In short, it seems that Pythagoras was a key figure in the discourse between pagans and Christians over their respective heritages. It would not be surprising, then, if Philostratus latched on to a devout Pythagorean (Apollonius) to promote “Greekness” in response to Christians who were downplaying the importance of Pythagoras and asserting the priority and superiority of their own traditions to Pythagoreanism, and Greek traditions in general.

## Conclusion

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<sup>93</sup> Swain, “Defending Hellenism: Philostratus, In Honour of Apollonius,” 169.



If Philostratus is such a stalwart defender of traditional Greek religion (and, in particular, Pythagoreanism), why does he not ever mention the Christians or condemn their doctrines like his peers? Perhaps, because his patrons, the Severan emperors, were sympathetic to Christianity. Imagine, then, his situation: a native of Greece, actively invested in the second sophistic movement, with a role in a Roman court friendly towards Christianity – a religion that posed a challenge and a threat to Greek culture. Julia Domna petitions her courtier to write a biography of a first century holy named Apollonius who, like her, is from the eastern part of the world. Might not Philostratus have seen an opportunity to strike his own subtle blow in the cause of Greek religious tradition (in particular, Pythagoreanism)? Might he not have seen this as his chance to present a rival to Jesus – a rival who was patently Greek and whose deeds surpassed those of the Galilean. In the following chapter, this conclusion will come to appear more inevitable.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THE *LIFE OF APOLLONIUS* AND EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE**

##### **Introduction**

One of the main arguments of the “common culture” school was that the similarities between the Christian gospels and VA can be assigned to shared genre. This argument has some validity. In the first part of this chapter, I will suggest that the shared genres of biography and novel could explain the general similarities between VA and the Christian gospels and acts. But the more striking parallels between the two traditions, as I will demonstrate, are better explained by literary dependency.

##### **The Structure of the *Life of Apollonius***

*VA* is an account in eight books that claims to recount the story of Apollonius’ life, a Pythagorean philosopher who lived in the first century CE. The narrative begins at 1.4 after a brief introduction, in which Philostratus names Apollonius’ philosophical predecessors and gives his sources for the biography. Philostratus relies heavily on the recollections of “Damis,” supposedly a disciple of Apollonius who wrote down everything Apollonius said and did while he was with him.

Book one begins with a brief introduction that compares Apollonius to Pythagoras and discusses Philostratus’ reasons for writing the life of Apollonius and his sources. This section

leads into an account of Apollonius' early life: of his wondrous birth at Tyana, his precociousness as a young student, his service at the temple of Asclepius, his piety and virtue, his habits and style of speech, and his first journeys. He decides to travel because "a young man ought to travel and be off to foreign parts" and because he wants to learn the ways of the Magi in Babylon (1.18). It should be noted that the bulk of *VA* (about seventy percent) consists of the travels of Apollonius and dialogues he has in the course of them.<sup>94</sup> He travels first to Syria, where he meets Damis (who becomes his fellow traveler and almost constant companion throughout his life) and then to Babylon, where he encounters King Vardanes and the Magi. Book Two narrates his journey to India and his visit to King Phraotes. The third book describes Apollonius' meeting with the wise men, or Brahmins, of India, and his encounter with another Indian king named Iarchas. Having concluded his travels in the East, he sails back westward to Cyprus.

Book Four recounts Apollonius's travels in Asia Minor, from Ephesus (where he foretells a plague and drives it out), to Smyrna and Pergamum; as well as his visits to Greece, from Athens to Delphi, Olympia, Sparta, and other places, where he advises the people on their religious and cultural rituals. Next he travels to the island of Crete, and then to Rome, where Nero is ruling. Only a handful of his disciples follow him to Rome because Nero is hostile to philosophers, but Apollonius ends up having little trouble with the political authorities. While in Rome, he lives in the sanctuaries of the gods and gives lectures on religion. He also raises a young girl from the dead. When Nero issues a general edict forbidding anyone to teach philosophy, Apollonius "turned his thoughts towards the western part of the world" (4.47).

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<sup>94</sup> Richard Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Dove Booksellers, 2004), 163.

Book Five describes Apollonius's journeys in Spain, Sicily, Greece, and Egypt. While Apollonius is in Alexandria, he has an interview with the future emperor Vespasian, and Apollonius predicts his rise to power. Book six recounts Apollonius' visit to the Gymnosophists, or "Naked Ones," in Ethiopia, with whom he has extended conversations. He also travels further into Ethiopia, where he subdues a satyr that is terrorizing a town. Apollonius then makes his way to Tarsus to see Titus, who had recently been declared emperor, and gives him advice about ruling. Apollonius visits various other places as well, though these travels are not covered in depth. The book ends with several stories of Apollonius that illustrate his wisdom and divine power.

Book Seven describes the accusations that Apollonius faces during the reign of Domitian and his imprisonment in Rome. Apollonius does not flee, but calmly faces his accusers. In prison, he lectures the inmates on philosophy. Book eight tells of Apollonius' trial before Domitian in Rome (from which he escapes a free man) and his subsequent journey to Greece, where he lectures on religion and philosophy and predicts the death of Domitian. In one of his last earthly acts, he sends Damis to Rome with a letter to the new emperor Nerva with advice about ruling. At this point, Damis' account terminates. Philostratus then relates reports about Apollonius' "death," his possible ascension to heaven, and his post-death appearance in a vision to a disciple.

### **The Genre of the *Life of Apollonius***

#### *The Life of Apollonius as Biography*

In many respects, *VA* resembles an ancient Greek-Roman biography (βίος or *Vita*). Greco-Roman biography had its origins in the fourth century BCE with the Socratic portraits of Plato and Xenophon.<sup>95</sup> But from there, the genre took off and was further developed by many others: Isocrates (*Evagoras*), Xenophon (*Agesilaus*), Philo (*Moses*), Tacitus (*Agricola*), Plutarch (*Lives*), Lucian (*Demonax*), etc. From observation of several “biographies,” Richard Burrige was able to isolate a set of characteristics that are common to ancient Greco-Roman biographies. He categorizes these features under the following headings: subject (i.e. the main subject of the work), opening features (such as title, opening words), external features (such as length and structure), and internal features (such as setting and topics). Late Greco-Roman biographies are focused on one person who actually existed. They often contain the subject’s name and the word *bios* or *vita* in the title. While covering the main events in the subject’s life, they may choose to emphasize one period over the others. Written in prose narrative, their length is anywhere from 3,000 to 25,000 words (in the original language). They often mention the sources they use in the preface. And they follow a chronological structure, tracing the life of the subject: his birth, boyhood and education, great deeds, virtues, and death.<sup>96</sup>

*VA* fits many of these specifications. Like other biographies, it focuses on one figure, Apollonius of Tyana, whose existence is historically attested (see Cassius Dio). While it does not have *bios* in the title, Philostratus does at one point state, “[M]y object is . . . to recount the life (*bios*) of Apollonius for those who are ignorant of it” (5.39). Further, like other biographies, *VA* mentions the sources for the account of Apollonius’ life in the preface. Like other biographies, it

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<sup>95</sup> Tomas Hägg and Philip Rousseau, “Biography and Panegyric,” in *Greek Biography and Panegyric in Late Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>96</sup> Burrige, *What Are the Gospels?*, 150–84.

lays out the subject's life according to a basic chronological sequence, touching on Apollonius' ancestry, the circumstances of his birth, his boyhood and education, his great deeds, his virtues, and ending with his death and its consequences. And like other biographies, it chooses to emphasize a small period of the individual's life at the expense of other parts. Over a quarter of the work is taken up with Apollonius' imprisonment, trial, and death. Similarly, a tenth of Tacitus' *Agricola* and over a sixth of Plutarch's *Cato Minor* concerns the deaths of their subjects. And topical material (e.g. his discourses with kings and philosophers) is fitted into a chronological framework.<sup>97</sup>

Ancient biographies were not like modern biographies with regard to standards of truth. The Greco-Roman literary elite were primarily trained in rhetoric, which conventionally placed a higher premium on plausibility than truth. In their study of rhetoric, students would be required to engage in exercises called *prosōpoiia* or *ēthopoiia* – that is, “character representation.” In these exercises, they would write a plausible speech or discourse for a famous historical or mythical characters in a given situation.<sup>98</sup> As a highly educated Greek sophist, Philostratus must have been engaging in the same kind of rhetorical elaboration in *VA*.

### *The Life of Apollonius as a Novel*

In other respects, *VA* looks less like a biography and more like a novel. For one, its title is not typical of a biography. Many biographies have the word βίος or *Vita* in the title. But the title

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 124–84.

<sup>98</sup> David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 31.

given to Philostratus' work is τὰ ἐξ τὸν Τυανέα Ἀπολλώνιον (*The Things Pertaining to Apollonius of Tyana*, or *The Stories about Apollonius of Tyana*). This title is a novelistic formulation, much like the title of several novels we know from antiquity: e.g. Achilles Tatius's *The Adventures of Leucippe and Cleitophon* (τὰ περὶ κατὰ Λευκίππην καὶ Κλειτοφῶντα), or the anonymous novel, *The Wonders Beyond Thule* (τὰ ὑπὲρ Θούλην ἄπιστα). Its exhaustive length of eight books and 82,000 words is also unparalleled for a biography. Such a length is more characteristic of a novel or of a longer philosophical work such as Plato's *Republic* (89,358 words).<sup>99</sup> The novels of Achilles Tatius and Chariton, and several others are about the same length. Another feature that *VA* shares with the ancient novel is the exotic settings and the "vast extent and variety of the hero's travels."<sup>100</sup> Apollonius' travels are almost constant and wide-ranging. His travels consume about seventy percent of the narrative.<sup>101</sup> In the course of his or her travels, the hero of a novel often encounters pirates. Pirates also appear in *VA*, though they are given a second-hand role and have no role in the development of the plot: Apollonius tells Iarchas how, in his previous incarnation as the captain of a merchant ship, he had evaded pirates (3.24). A fourth feature that *VA* shares with novels is the motif of the hero being persecuted by a villain: in this case, Domitian. In *The Wonders Beyond Thule*, for instance, the evil wizard Paapis pursues two siblings throughout the world in order to cast a spell on them. Fifth, *VA* shared with the novel the *topos* of *eros*, romantic love. But unlike novels, romantic love in *VA* is portrayed only in a negative light. So as a youth, Apollonius renounces sex and marriage (1.13.3). He rejects the advances of a depraved Roman governor (1.12); drives out a demon that has a fallen

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<sup>99</sup> Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 165.

<sup>100</sup> Bowie, "Philostratus: Writer of Fiction," 189.

<sup>101</sup> Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?*, 163.

in love with and possessed a young boy (3.28); and unmasks and neutralizes an *empousa*, or vampire, who has enticed a man into marriage (4.25).<sup>102</sup>

A further characteristic feature of a novel that *VA* incorporates is “the elaborate construction of convincing ‘testimony’”: in this case, the journals of Damis.<sup>103</sup> In describing how these journals came into his hands, Philostratus writes, “The notebooks containing the memoirs of Damis were unknown until a member of his family brought them to the attention of the empress Julia. Since I was a member of her salon . . . she set me to transcribe these works of Damis and to take care over their style” (1.3). The elaborate description of the discovery and transmission of a source is a common novelistic *topos*. For instance, the main source for *The Wonders Beyond Thule* (τὰ ὑπὲρ Θούλην ἄπιστα) of Antonius Diogenes was allegedly found written on cypress-wood tablets, buried with one of the characters, later discovered by Alexander the Great at the sack of Tyre in 332 BCE, and transcribed by one Balagrus in a letter to his wife (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 166).

There has been much debate over the significance of Damis. Was he a historical figure, who really travelled with Apollonius and left notebooks behind containing his observations? As we saw earlier, Hierocles, the fourth-century defender of Apollonius, touted Damis as a real person and a legitimate source (*Hier.* 2.2). Meyer was the first to suggest that Damis was a literary invention of Philostratus, and this assessment has been seconded by Bowie and others.<sup>104</sup> Bowie

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<sup>102</sup> Ewen Lyall Bowie, “Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality,” in *Aufstieg Und Niedergang Der Römischen Welt*, vol. 16, Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der Beueren Forschung 2 (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 1665; Bowie, “Philostratus: Writer of Fiction.”

<sup>103</sup> Bowie, “Philostratus: Writer of Fiction,” 189.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 195; Edouard Meyer, “Apollonius von Tyana Und Die Biographie Des Philostratos,” *Hermes* 52 (1917): 371–424.



suggests that Philostratus may have invented Damis as a tribute to Flavius Damianus, a late second century sophist living in Ephesus, who was lauded in his *Lives of the Sophists*.<sup>105</sup> Some have argued that Philostratus could not have insulted his patron, Julia Domna, and so he must have received a book from her that was allegedly the memoir of Damis. But according to Bowie, “No abuse of Julia Domna’s name is involved if the technique and its implications were as patent to every Greek reader as is suggested by consideration of the motif’s ramifications in novelistic productions.”<sup>106</sup> Considering the novelistic feel of *VA*, it is, then, not unwarranted to suppose that Damis was made up by Philostratus and was a vehicle for his own inventions.

*VA* has the features of both a biography and a novel. It shares the historical core and the structure of a biography, but it has the title, length, and some of the motifs of a novel. *VA* is what Bowie calls a “literary hybrid, something *sui generis* that resists reduction to other genres.”<sup>107</sup> This fact should not surprise, considering that experimenting with literary form was a hallmark of the Greek literature of the Second Sophistic.<sup>108</sup>

### *Authorial Intention*

Another important aspect of genre is authorial intention. Biographies and novels were written for different reasons. Biographies could be used to praise a famous historical figure, to portray moral

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<sup>105</sup> Bowie, “Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality,” 16:1670.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:1663.

<sup>107</sup> Bowie, “Philostratus: Writer of Fiction,” 194.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

character, to inform, to entertain, to teach, and to polemicize.<sup>109</sup> Novels were written most likely as fantasies to allow people to escape from “the routine security of urbanized reality.”<sup>110</sup>

Philostratus undoubtedly intended *VA* to entertain and to allow the reader to escape from his/her present reality with his accounts of Apollonius’ journeys and of the exotica he encounters. But his explicit aims for writing *VA*, given in the introductory material of his work, are to inform and to polemicize. He claims that he wants “to remedy the general ignorance and to give an accurate account of the Master, observing the chronology of his words and acts, and the special character of the wisdom by which he came close to being thought possessed and inspired” (1.2.3). The greatest misconception about Apollonius, in Philostratus’ eyes, is that he is a “magician” (*magos*) or “sorcerer” (*goēs*): “[P]eople do not know him [sc. Apollonius] for the genuine wisdom which he practiced philosophically and sincerely . . . [S]ome think him a sorcerer (μάγον) and misrepresent him as a philosophic imposter, but in this they are wrong” (VA 1.2.1). Those who regarded Apollonius as a magician and a sorcerer included Moeragenes who had written “four books about Apollonius and yet was greatly ignorant of the Master” (1.3.2; cf. *Alex.* 5; *Cels.* 6.41; Cass. Dio, 78.18.4). Throughout the narrative, the charges against Apollonius that label him as a sorcerer (*magos*) or magician (*goēs*) arise repeatedly, and again and again they are refuted.<sup>111</sup> “Magicians,” says Philostratus definitively, “are in my opinion the greatest scoundrels on earth [who] profess to alter fate . . . Apollonius, however, followed the warnings of the Fates . . . and his clairvoyance was due not to magic but to divine revelation”

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<sup>109</sup> BurrIDGE, *What Are the Gospels?*, 180–83.

<sup>110</sup> J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman, eds., *Greek Fiction : The Greek Novel in Context* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

<sup>111</sup> See also 7.39 and 8.7.

(5.12). During his trial before Domitian, Apollonius defends himself from charges that he is a magician. He points out that if he were a magician, he would not be able to be confined (7.34). So, as stated, Philostratus' main intentions are to convey correct knowledge about Apollonius (i.e. to show that he is a wise man) and to discredit a fundamental misperception about him (i.e. that he is a magician).

Philostratus does not want Apollonius to be viewed as a magician because it would detract from his divine nature. If his power came from the art of magic rather than from a god or from his own divine nature, then he would be little more than a clever human. But Philostratus wants to promote an exalted view of Apollonius. He is not an ordinary human, but a divinely inspired human or a god himself. Philostratus is not shy about hinting at Apollonius' exalted status in the account he gives of his miraculous birth and his ascension into heaven at the end of his life.

It is notable that Philostratus says nothing about a desire to discredit Christian narratives about Jesus or to provide an alternative narrative about a pagan holy man. But we would hardly expect him to do this if it were his intention. For one, he may have considered Jesus too far inferior to Apollonius to even mention him. But secondly, his patrons, the Severan emperors, appear to have been uncharacteristically sympathetic to Jesus and the Christians.<sup>112</sup> Both of these are reasonable explanations for why Philostratus would not have mentioned Jesus.

## **Overview and Genre of the Christian Gospels and Acts**

### *Canonical Gospels*

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<sup>112</sup> See discussion in chapter two.

The genre of the canonical Gospels may best be described as a sub-genre of *bioi*. They do not, it is true, have titles that mark them as *bioi*. They are usually entitled εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ (name of author) or some variant thereof. But in many other ways, they do exemplify ancient biographies. Like biographies, they are focused on one person who actually existed: Jesus of Nazareth. They draw upon various sources, and Luke mentions his sources in his preface. The narratives of all the Gospels are chronological. They trace the main events in Jesus' life, including his birth (only Matthew and Luke), his boyhood (only Luke, though very selectively), his baptism, his ministry, his great deeds, his trial and death, and its aftermath. Like other biographies, and like *VA*, they devote a disproportionate amount of material to the end of their subject. Matthew and Luke devote fifteen percent of the text to Jesus' Last Supper, Trial, Passion, and Resurrection; Mark devotes about nineteen percent, and John about thirty-three percent. These numbers are comparable to the twenty-six percent of text that Philostratus devotes to Apollonius' end-of-life events. Into this basic chronological structure, the gospels insert material that is arranged topically: namely, the teachings and parables of Jesus. This insertion of topical material into a chronological framework is especially common in biographies of philosophers or teachers, such as Philo's *Life of Moses* or *VA*. Matthew (18,305 words), Mark (11,242 words), Luke (19,428 words), and John (15,416 words) are prose narratives that fit into the category of "medium length" biographies.<sup>113</sup>

The main aims of the canonical Gospel writers appear to have been informative/didactic and apologetic: namely, to teach people about Jesus and his teachings and to defend him from any misperceptions. Like Philostratus, the Gospel writers were concerned to defend Jesus from charges of magic. In Mark, Jesus is accused of being possessed by a demon because of his power

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<sup>113</sup> BurrIDGE, *What Are the Gospels?*, 185–232.

to cast out demons; he defends himself by pointing out the contradictions inherent in such a claim: “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (3:20-30). In Matthew and Luke, Jesus resists the temptation to jump off the temple and fly and to transform stones into bread (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).<sup>114</sup>

### *Apocryphal Gospels*

By “apocryphal writings,” we mean writings that did not become part of the accepted canon of the Old or New Testaments, but are in some way still related to Old or New Testament writings. They were written after the canonical Gospels, and in many respects fill in details that were thought to be lacking in the canonical Gospels. Many of these gospels only loosely conform to the genre of biography, or not at all. They would be better described as “partial biographies,” describing one aspect of Jesus’ life, such as his birth or childhood, or death. We are, of course, only interested in the apocryphal gospels that were written and circulating before or during the time that Philostratus wrote *VA*. In particular, we will make reference to the *Protevangelium of James* (relating to Jesus’ birth).

The *Protevangelium of James* is the earliest apocryphal infancy narratives that we have. It is usually dated to the second half of the second century CE. While some have suggested that the canonical Gospels are actually dependent on it, this notion has not found general acceptance. The central focus of *Protevangelium* is Jesus’ mother Mary: her birth, childhood, marriage, and the conception and birth of Jesus.<sup>115</sup> Some of the emphases of *Protevangelium* may be explained

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<sup>114</sup> Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, 56.

<sup>115</sup> Elliott and James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 47–51; Schneemelchier, 421-425.

by apologetic motivations. The second-century philosopher Celsus had depicted Jesus' mother as a poor peasant who had to spin for a living and had given birth out of wedlock. But the Mary of *Protevangelium* is wealthy and of royal blood; remains a virgin from the conception of Jesus to his birth; and spins not to make a living, but to make a curtain for the temple of God.<sup>116</sup> This gospel, I will argue, may have influenced Philostratus's birth narrative of Apollonius.

## Overview and Genre of the Christian Acts

### *Canonical Acts*

The canonical Acts recount the travels and deeds of Jesus' apostles, those who had been "sent out" (ἀποστέλλω) by him to carry the message of his life and ministry. There is one canonical Acts, which is actually the second volume of the Gospel of Luke, written by the same author. The canonical Acts picks up where Luke leaves off and recounts what happened after the resurrection of Jesus, and focuses specifically on the ministry and travels of the apostle Paul. The genre of Acts has been extensively debated. It has been variously compared to a history, a biography, and a novel.<sup>117</sup> Its resemblance to novels is particularly notable. Like the heroes of novels, Paul engages in extensive travels in exotic locales. As Pervo observes, "Paul covers much of the territory over which the leading figures of Greek novels wander, and his life, too, is marked by intrigue, captivity and narrow escapes from death, including deliverance from

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<sup>116</sup> Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, eds., *The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21.

<sup>117</sup> Alan Bale, *Genre and Narrative Coherence in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, UK ; New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 48–69.

shipwreck.”<sup>118</sup> Further, as in novels, Paul, and the other apostles depicted, experience many trials and often come into conflict with political authorities. Where Acts most differs from novels is its lack of the theme of *eros*. Romantic love has no place in Acts, not even negatively. Also unlike a novel, Acts concerns real people and real places described in realistic terms.<sup>119</sup>

### *Apocryphal Acts*

There are five major apocryphal acts, dating from the period c. 150-250 CE: those of Paul (*APL*), Peter (*APtr*), John (*AJn*), Andrew (*AA*), and Thomas (*AThom*). None of them except *AThom* is complete. *AThom* was written in Syriac, while the others are derived from Greek originals. These writings exhibit a variety in structure, style, literary quality, and perspective. Each of the Acts revolves around an apostle who travels to his apportioned part of the globe to engage in ministry and who usually ends his life as a martyr. The apostle performs many wonders, healing the sick and raising the dead. In the Acts of Peter, Peter engages in a battle for supremacy with the magician Simon and displays the superior power of God. The apostle stirs up trouble wherever he goes. Often he breaks up marriages after converting one member of the couple. He also comes into conflict with authorities, such as the Roman Emperor Nero, undergoing trials, imprisonment, and, often, death. The heyday of the Greco-Roman novels coincides with that of the Apocryphal Acts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the apocryphal

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<sup>118</sup> Richard I. Pervo, “Early Christian Fiction,” in *Narrative and Fiction in Ancient Christianity*, ed. J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 240.

<sup>119</sup> Loveday Alexander, *Acts in Its Ancient Literary Context: A Classicist Looks at the Acts of the Apostles* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), 153–63.

acts also include many of the traditional themes of the novel: namely, the travel motif, the conflict between a hero and villain, and *eros* (though it is portrayed negatively, as in VA).<sup>120</sup>

## **Philostratus' Sources**

### *Knowledge of Generic Expectations*

It should now be apparent that VA has traditional elements of both ancient biographies and novels. It is further apparent that Christian literature approximates these genres in the Gospels and the Acts. Therefore, VA might be expected to share certain elements with Christian literature on the basis of these shared genres. With the Christian Gospels, VA shares many of the characteristics of an ancient biography: they are focused on one person, whose existence is historically attested; they lay out the life of this person chronologically, with topical matter inserted therein; and they devote a disproportionate amount of the material to the trial and death of the subject. With the Christian Acts, VA shares many of the characteristics of an ancient novel: they are both very large works; they give accounts of extensive travel to exotic locales; and they center on a protagonist who undergoes many trials and faces many enemies.

### *Reported Sources*

In the introductory section of the book (1.1-1.3), Philostratus reports that he collected “materials from the many cities that were devoted to [Apollonius], from the shrines that he set right when

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<sup>120</sup> Richard I. Pervo, “Early Christian Fiction,” in *Narrative and Fiction in Ancient Christianity*, ed. J. R. Morgan and Richard Stoneman (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 239–54; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, “Second and Third Century Acts of Apostles,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (Louisville, Kentucky: James Clarke and Co., 1992), 75–86.



their rules had fallen into neglect, from other people's reports about him, and from his own letters" (1.2.3). He also drew upon the "notebooks" or "scrapbooks" (δέλτους τῶν ὑπομνημάτων) of Damis, one of Apollonius' disciples and travel companions. Damis had allegedly written down "not only [Apollonius'] journeys, on which he claims to have been his companion, but also his sayings, speeches, and predictions" (1.3.1). He had written these things down because "he wished nothing about Apollonius to go unknown, but even his asides and random remarks to be recorded" (1.19.3). The notebooks of Damis, claims Philostratus, had come into the hands of the empress Julia Domna, who in turn had passed it on to Philostratus for the purpose of providing him with material on Apollonius.

Further, Philostratus claims to be drawing on Maximus of Aegeae, who had given an account of Apollonius' deeds in Aegeae. Fourth, Philostratus claims to be using "the will written by Apollonius himself, which gives an idea of how inspired he was in his philosophy" (1.3.2). Philostratus also mentions Moiragenes' "four books about Apollonius," which he did not use because they were "greatly ignorant about the Master" (1.3.2). Moiragenes, it appears, represented Apollonius as a sorcerer (*goēs*) and a charlatan who deceived other philosophers (*Cels.* 6.41).

### *Unreported Sources*

While Philostratus clearly uses a number of sources, he does not refer to several of them directly, probably because he sees no need to or because he realizes that educated readers would easily recognize his allusions. For instance, it is likely that he drew upon traditions about Pythagoras. Apollonius' life very closely follows that of Pythagoras as we have come to understand it from the lives of Pythagoras written by Porphyry (233-305 CE) and Iamblichus (250-325 CE). In the

opening of *VA*, Philostratus comments on the resemblance of Pythagoras and Apollonius. “The practices of Apollonius,” he remarks, “were very much like this [i.e. the behavior of Pythagoras] . . .” (*VA* 2). As a youth, Apollonius dedicated himself to the philosophy of Pythagoras and affirmed it throughout his life (*VA* 1.7.3, 1.32.2). Like Pythagoras, Apollonius had a divine birth, travelled to the East to acquire knowledge. Like Pythagoras, he believed in the transmigration of souls and believed he had been someone else in a previous life. Both had the ability to heal the sick and to predict earthquakes. Both wore linen clothing and kept a strict diet, refusing to touch meat and refusing to sacrifice the flesh of animals to the gods. Both emphasized temperance and self-control.

As an enthusiastic supporter of the second sophistic movement, Philostratus drew heavily on classical sources. He may have used Herodotus for his account of Apollonius’ extensive travels (cf. account of lion in Egypt that turns out to be Amasis, *VA* 5.42; Her. 1.172). One part of the narrative in *VA* seems to be drawn directly from a scene in the *Phaedrus*. Apollonius has gone a short way outside of Rome to meet his friend Demetrius, and “as they sat under a plane tree, the cicadas were singing away, softly accompanied by the breeze, and looking up at them Demetrius said, ‘You blessed, truly wise creatures, it seems the Muses taught you a song not subject to lawsuits or accusations’” (*VA* 7.11.1). Similarly, in *Phaedrus*, Socrates walks with his friend outside Athens, and Socrates remarks, “‘By Hera, it is a charming resting place. For this plane tree is very spreading and lofty . . . [H]ow lovely and perfectly charming the breeziness of the place is! And it resounds with the shrill summer music of the chorus of cicadas’” (*Phaedrus* 230 B-C). Apollonius’ behavior in prison mimics that of Socrates (see, in particular, *VA* 7.36.2; *Phaedo* 60B). And Plato’s *Apology* may have been a model for the court scene where Apollonius defends himself before Domitian. Apollonius even refers to Socrates during the proceedings of

the trial, suggesting that he is modelling his own conduct after the Athenian philosopher (*VA* 8.2.2, 8.7.1).

### *Christian Sources*

It is unlikely that Philostratus was ignorant of Christian literature. After all, his younger contemporary Porphyry, who also went to Rome to further his career, had read the gospels and was a staunch critic of them (see chapter two). And the second-century Platonist philosopher Celsus had said, “More and more the myths put about by these Christians are better known than the doctrines of the philosophers. Who has not heard the fable of Jesus’ birth from a virgin or the stories of his crucifixion and resurrection?” (*Cels.* 54). Clearly, pagan intellectuals were reading Christian literature.

Suppose, then, that Philostratus knew of Christian literature and was using the gospels and acts to construct his narrative. He would obviously not mention them *as sources for his narrative* if his purpose were to show that Apollonius is superior to Jesus as depicted in Christian literature; that would undermine his argument. But he might at least refer to Christian literature *as sources for Jesus’ life* and make it clear that he will be relating the life of a man who far surpasses Jesus as he is depicted in Christian literature. After all, he mentions Moiragenes’ biography for the purpose of showing that he will be contesting Moiragenes’ portrayal of Apollonius. Why does he not also at least mention Christian literature? The most likely explanation is that the Severan court would not have taken kindly to a direct assault on Jesus. And so he was forced to take a subtler approach in his polemic. He would have hoped that his readers would unconsciously draw the connection between Apollonius and Jesus and realize for themselves the superiority of the former.

## Narrative Parallels between *VA* and Early Christian Literature

The notion that Philostratus used Christian sources is supported by a number of striking parallels between *VA* and the early Christian gospels and acts. If we found only a few parallels, we might dismiss them as accidental or unintentional, but when we see a series of them, we should be more inclined to entertain the likelihood of literary dependence (as Baur noted).<sup>121</sup>

### *Birth*

The first significant point of contact between *VA* and early Christian literary tradition is the birth narrative of Apollonius. Philostratus conveys two accounts of his birth. According to one, Apollonius is “the son of Zeus” (1.6). According to the other, he is the Egyptian god Proteus. When Apollonius’ mother is pregnant with him, she has a vision of Proteus, who tells her that she will give birth to a reincarnation of himself, Proteus (1.4). Having received divine instruction in a dream, she goes to a meadow, where she falls asleep and promptly gives birth after being startled awake by a flock of swans. Just as Apollonius is born, a lightning bolt “which seemed just about to strike the earth, hung poised in the air and then disappeared upwards,” seemingly testifying to his divine origin (*VA* 1.5).

In the canonical gospels, Jesus also has a wondrous birth and is portrayed as the “Son of God.” The Lukan narrative has perhaps the greatest resemblance to the Apollonian birth account. An angel announces Jesus’ birth directly to his mother Mary. The angel tells her that she will call her son “Jesus” and that “He will be great, and will be called the **Son of the Most High**” (1:32, emphasis added). “How will this happen?” Mary asks. The angel replies, “The Holy Spirit will

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<sup>121</sup> Baur, *Apollonius von Tyana Und Christus*, 141.

come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God” (1:35). In Matthew, the angel appears to Mary’s husband Joseph, informing him that “the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (1:20-21). So Jesus, like Apollonius, is portrayed as the Son of God, born of a virgin, and his birth is announced by a heavenly messenger.

Matthew and Luke do not provide details about the birth itself other than saying it happened. But the fantastic second-century *Protevangelium of James* gives an account of Jesus’ birth that resonates with some of the particulars of Philostratus’s account. For instance, there are no swans in this account, but there are birds: before Mary gives birth, Joseph looks up “at the vault of heaven, and sees it standing still and *the birds of the heaven* motionless” (18.2). Again, there is no lightning *per se*, but a cloud and bright light are harbingers of Jesus’ divine birth:

They stood at the entrance of the cave, and a *bright cloud* overshadowed it [where Mary is lying] . . . Right away the cloud began to depart from the cave, and a *great light* appeared within, so that their eyes could not bear it. Soon that *light began to depart*, until an infant could be seen. It came and took hold of the breast of Mary, its mother (19.2).<sup>122</sup>

So there are some clear points of contact between the birth narratives of Jesus and Apollonius: both are portrayed as incarnations of god, whose births are announced by a divine being and accompanied by miraculous phenomena.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> This translation is taken from Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše, eds., *The Other Gospels: Accounts of Jesus from Outside the New Testament* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>123</sup> If we were to only consider the resemblance of Jesus’ birth to Apollonius’s birth, we might find it difficult to prove that Philostratus’s biography was dependent on Christian narratives. Indeed, the claim that a great man was the son of god or could trace his ancestry back to divine ancestors was extraordinarily common. In his account of Pythagoras’s life, Iamblichus reports a claim that the philosopher was the son of Apollo and that while away from home on business, his father had been informed of his son’s divine origin through an oracle (*Life of Pythagoras* 2).

## Boyhood

Both Apollonius and Jesus are precocious as boys and manifest wisdom beyond their years.

When he began to attend school, Apollonius “showed a retentive memory and a power of application” (1.7.1). He “was like those young eagles with wings still undeveloped that fly beside their parents . . . [W]hen they are able to soar they rise higher than their parents” (1.7.3).

As a youth, he chose to live in the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing, and people came from miles around to be healed by Asclepius “with Apollonius as his witness” (1.8.2).

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The birth of Alexander the Great is even more incredible. On the night before her marriage, Alexander’s mother Olympias had a vision in which “there was a peal of thunder, and . . . a thunder-bolt fell upon her womb” (Plutarch, *Alexander*, 2.2). On another occasion, a serpent was found in bed with Olympias while she was sleeping (2.4). Alexander’s father learned from the oracle at Delphi that the god Zeus-Ammon had slept with his wife in the form of a serpent (3.1).

The birth of Emperor Augustus, according to Suetonius (121 CE), was portended by a lightning bolt that struck Velitrae, the city where Augustus was later born. Also before his birth, Augustus’s mother Atia “dreamed that her womb was carried up to the stars and spread out over all the earth and sky.” Meanwhile, his father “Octavius . . . dreamed that the radiance of the sun rose from Atia’s womb” Subsequently, the god Apollo reportedly slept with Atia in the form of a snake, and Augustus was born ten months afterwards (*Lives of the Caesars* 2.94.2, 4).

Diogenes Laertius (third century CE) suggests that Plato himself was also a son of Apollo. After having a vision of Apollo, Plato’s father Ariston stayed away from his wife Perictione (or Amphictione); shortly thereafter, Perictione conceived and gave birth to Plato (*Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* 3.2).

There seems to have been no little controversy between pagans and Christians over the divine birth of Jesus. Origen is aware that the account of a divine birth is not unique. He notes that Celsus has dismissed the story of Jesus’ divine birth as a fictional story influenced by the Greek myths of Danae and Melanippe and Auge and Antiope. In his rebuttal, Origen calls the story of Plato’s divine birth a “myth”; the Greeks “invent[ed] such a tale about a man because they regarded him as having superior wisdom and power . . . and as having received the original composition of his body from better and more divine seed” (*Cels.* 1.37).

Clearly, the story of Apollonius’s birth is not unique and does not possess a special parallel with the gospel birth accounts. Birth accounts of famous men often involved visions and dreams, claims that a god had impregnated the mother, and lightning strikes. We are not, however, positing a connection between the gospels and *VA* on the basis of this, or any other parallel, *alone* but on the basis of a string of *series* of parallels in the sequence of a narrative.

The Gospel of Luke is the only canonical gospel that gives us any information about the boyhood of Jesus, but it resonates with the account of Apollonius' boyhood. Jesus is also precocious and wise beyond his years. The author of Luke relates how Jesus "grew and became strong with wisdom" (2:40) and "increased in wisdom and in years" (2:52). And Jesus also had a fondness for the temple, as we would expect since it is, after all, the house of God, and Jesus was God/God's son. At the tender age of twelve, Jesus was "found . . . in the temple [in Jerusalem], sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (2:46-47). When Jesus' parents expressed their anxiety over their son, who had been missing, he answered, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know what I must be in my Father's house?" (2:49).<sup>124</sup>

### *Good News and Mission*

Both Apollonius and Jesus are mission-driven people, and they set out to bring their "good news" to the world. When Apollonius goes to visit the Persian king and the Magi, the king's guardsmen recognize that Apollonius "is a miracle that some god has brought here," and "they run to spread the good news (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι) everywhere that there was a Master standing at the king's door who was wise, a Greek, and an excellent adviser (1.28.3). Apollonius' mission to

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<sup>124</sup> Again, in ancient biographies of great men, it was not uncommon to show how they excelled in their studies or how they gave proof of wisdom beyond their years at an early age. Pythagoras too "though he was but still a youth . . . was honored and even revered by elderly men, attracting the attention of all who saw and heard him speak, creating the most profound impression" (Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras* 2). While Alexander the Great "was still a boy," he was known for his self-restraint and for "asking no childish or trivial questions" (Plutarch, *Alexander* 4.4, 5.1). So again, the fact that both Jesus and Apollonius were recognized for their wisdom and piety from an early age is not a unique parallel.

the world, in the context of this passage, is to spread the “good news” of Pythagorean philosophy.<sup>125</sup>

“Good news” is also a central focus of Jesus’ ministry. But the good news of the Gospels is not Greek culture; it is rather the life and work of Jesus, a Jewish prophet. Mark’s opening line is “The beginning of the good news (εὐαγγέλιον) of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Jesus claimed to be the “Messiah,” whose coming had long been promised in the Jewish Holy Scriptures. His coming too is heralded by the *magoi* who follow a star to find him and are present at his birth (Matthew 2).

While Jesus took his message throughout Palestine, Apollonius’s mission was to the whole world. In this regard, Apollonius’ world-wide mission corresponds more with the mission of the Christian apostle Paul to the Greco-Roman world. The apostle Paul had travelled through Asia Minor and wrote letters to its cities in order to correct misperceptions, deal with controversies, or to announce his visit. But Apollonius had also travelled through Asia Minor, where he had received embassies from various cities, asking him for advice on various religious matters, and “[o]n all these matters he set them right, either by writing letters or by promising a visit” (4.1.2). At one point, Apollonius even seems to echo Paul’s speech on Mars Hill in Athens, when he says, “It is more modest to speak well of every god, especially at Athens where there are altars set up to unknown divinities” (6.3.5; cf. Acts 17:23).

During his world-mission, Apollonius is guided by divine signs. For instance, while he is in Greece and pondering setting sail for Rome, “a very tall and venerable woman” appears to him in a dream advising him to sail to Crete (4.34.1). Paul too receives guidance about his travels

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<sup>125</sup> David Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, eds., *Documents for the Study of the Gospels*, Rev. and enl. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 223.



and mission in a dream: “During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news (εὐαγγελίσασθαι) to them” (Acts 16:9-10)

The apostle Paul, as we know, was from Tarsus in Asia Minor (Acts 9:11). It is therefore striking (though maybe only a historical coincidence) that Apollonius too lived and studied there at some point during his youth (1.7.1). But he had a low opinion of the Tarsians, regarding them as “corrupt and hostile to philosophy . . . exceptionally given to luxury, all of them frivolous and insulting” (1.7.1). Apollonius’ lecherous suitor is holding court in Tarsus when he hears of how good looking Apollonius is and runs off to see him (1.12.1). Nonetheless, Apollonius seems to have been respected by the Tarsians. When he visited Tarsus later as an adult, the inhabitants “were so won over by the Master as to consider him the founder and the mainstay of the city” (VA 6.34.1). Is Philostratus pitting Apollonius against Jesus’ greatest apostle? Is he trying to smear Tarsus because Paul came from there? And by making him the “founder and mainstay of the city,” is he trying to have Apollonius supersede Paul? It is a question certainly worth asking.<sup>126</sup>

### *Teachings*

As a proponent of Pythagorean philosophy, Apollonius touts the immortality of the soul and the transience of the material world. In his post-ascension appearance to a young student, he assures

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<sup>126</sup> “Good news” (εὐαγγέλιον) was a common designation for a ruler’s message or decree to the people in his domain (e.g. Antigonos I), but it was rare to ascribe it to a common citizen such as Apollonius or Jesus. The fact that Philostratus follows the example of the gospels and acts in making an obscure wandering teacher the propagator of “good news” must be more than coincidence.

him that “[i]mmortal is the soul . . . When the body wastes, the soul starts like a racehorse from the gate (8.31.3). Similarly, Jesus tells his disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). Further, both Jesus and Apollonius admonish rich young men. In Apollonius’ case, the young man is proud of his house and brags about them. Apollonius tells him, “In my opinion, you do not own the house, the house owns you” (5.22.2). Similarly, in the Canonical Gospels, Jesus admonishes a rich man to go and sell all of his possessions so that he might “have treasure in heaven” (Mk. 10:21).

Apollonius’ teachings on sex and marriage are also similar to those of Jesus and the apostles. Apollonius is said to have followed the example of Pythagoras’ in renouncing any participation in sex and marriage (1.13.3). Jesus too is portrayed as living a single life, at least in the canonical gospels, and he suggested that it was a good thing for men not to marry if they were able (Matt. 19:10-12). Paul echoes this sentiment in his epistles (1 Cor. 7). And chastity is praised repeatedly in the apocryphal Acts, where the apostles often disrupt marriages by convincing women to live chastely and to deny sex to their husbands.

### *Miracles*

*Casting out demons.* While he is lecturing in Athens, Apollonius is interrupted and mocked by a demon-possessed boy. Apollonius rebukes him, saying, “It is not you that are committing this outrage, but the demon who controls you without your knowledge” (4.20.1). Then Apollonius firmly addresses the demon itself, speaking to it “as an angry householder does to a slave who is wily, craft, shameless, and so on, and told it to give a proof of its departure” (4.20.2). The demon replies that it would knock a statue over as proof of its departure from the boy. Shortly thereafter, the statue falls, and the boy’s demeanor changes.

Baur has pointed out the resemblance of this story to Jesus' casting out of the Gerasene demoniacs (Mt. 8:28 f., Mark 5:1 f., Luke 8:26).<sup>127</sup> When Jesus comes to the land of the Gerasenes (or Gadarenes), he encounters a man possessed by a host of demons (Legion). Speaking directly to the demons, Jesus orders them to enter a herd of swine, upon which the animals rush down into the sea and are drowned. In both cases (that of Apollonius and Jesus), the demons are sternly addressed, and they give some physical proof of their departure from the possessed man.

But there is an even closer parallel in the Acts of Peter. Peter confronts a demon-possessed man while he is speaking to a crowd. Peter addresses the demon, saying, "Demon, whoever you are, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ depart from this young man without hurting him. Show yourself to all present" (11). The young man promptly runs forward and knocks a large marble statue of Caesar to pieces (11). So we see the same sequence of events in both narratives: holy man encounters a seemingly insane boy, recognizes that a demon is in him, and commands the demon to leave, proving its departure by knocking over a statue.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Baur, *Apollonius von Tyana Und Christus*, 140. Welche auffallende Ähnlichkeit hat insbesondere die Erzählung von dem Dämon, der dem drohenden Worte des Apollonius weichend den corcyräischen Jüngling verliess, mit der Erzählung von den beiden besessenen Geregesenern.

<sup>128</sup> We find several precedents for casting out demons in Greco-Roman literature, though none that come as close as the Acts of Peter to approximating Apollonius's exorcism. Celsus is aware that Jesus casts out demons but dismisses this ability as being nothing more than the typical ploy of Egyptian sorcerers "who for a few obols make known their sacred lore in the middle of the market-place and drive daemons out of men and blow away diseases and invoke the souls of heroes" (*Cels.* 1.68). In Plutarch's "Decline of the Oracles," Cleombrotus refers to the strange rituals that are performed "for the averting of evil spirits" (*daimones*) (417C). In the *Lover of Lies*, Lucian refers to a "Syrian from Palestine" who expels demons from sick men after asking the demon how it came into the body. The demon replies "in Greek or its native language, saying how and when it came into the man. Then, laying an oath on the demon, or if it doesn't obey, threatening it, he drives it out. In fact," says the narrator, "I actually saw one emerging, black and smoke-coloured" (16). Here, just as in *VA*, the exorcist addresses the demon firmly and drives it

*Healing of the sick.* Apollonius, Jesus, and the apostles are healers. They have the ability to heal the sick. As a youth, Apollonius lives in the temple of Asclepius, the god of healing. When a young man comes to the temple to seek healing from the god. Asclepius appears to the youth and tells him, “If you talk with Apollonius, you will get relief” (1.9.1). Apollonius tells him to modify his diet, and he is soon restored to health. In Pergamum, similarly, he goes to the temple of Asclepius, “where he made suggestions to the god’s supplicants about all they could do in order to get auspicious dreams, and he cured many of them” (4.11.1). While in Tarsus, he heals a boy and a dog of rabies by having the dog lick the boy’s wound and then swim across a river (6.43).

Apollonius’ healing of the sick, then, seems to have a naturalistic element to it. He uses material elements as touchstones for his healing. Jesus tends to be more of a supernatural healer. He makes the lame walk again, heals leprosy and hemorrhages, and makes the blind see directly by his divine power. But Jesus also resorts to more naturalistic means along the lines of Apollonius. For instance, he heals a blind man by putting mud or saliva on his eyes (Mk 8:22-26, Jn. 9:1-12).<sup>129</sup> Jesus’ apostles follow suit in performing healing miracles. The canonical and apocryphal acts are chock full of healing stories of the same kind that we find in the gospel accounts.<sup>130</sup>

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out, upon which a token of its expulsion is given. But, again, neither of these instances as closely parallels Apollonius’s exorcism as the Acts of Peter.

<sup>129</sup> In Lucian’s *Lover of Lies*, a satirical work in which a group of intellectuals take turns regaling each other with tales of supernatural events, one of them tells the story of a “Hyperborean wizard” who heals a man bitten by a poisonous snake and on the point of dying. The wizard is able to heal the man with a spell and the fragment of a tombstone (11).

<sup>130</sup> In the Greco-Roman world, healing was a power commonly ascribed to gods (principally, Asclepius) and heroes (Hercules), who were able to cure all kinds of ailments: blindness,

*Raising of the dead.* One of the most remarkable miracles of Apollonius, and one that has surprising congruity with a miracle in the New Testament, is the raising of a girl from the dead. In *VA*, a girl had died on the day of her wedding. At her funeral, Apollonius approaches the bier on which she is placed and says, “Put the bier down, for I will end your crying over the girl” (ἐγὼ γὰρ ὑμᾶς τῶν ἐπὶ τῇ κόρῃ δακρύων παύσω). He also asks her name. Then, he “after merely touching her and saying something secretly, woke the bride from her apparent death. The girl spoke, and went back to her father’s house like Alcestis revived by Heracles” (4.45).<sup>131</sup>

Jesus performs almost the same miracle in the Gospel of Mark (5:21-43; cf. Luke 7:11-17).<sup>132</sup> Jairus, a leader in the synagogue, comes to Jesus, telling him, “My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live” (Mark 5:22-23). While they are on the way to Jairus’s house, some people come and announce that his daughter has died. Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe,” and enters the house (5:36). Echoing the words of Apollonius, Jesus asks, “Why do you make a commotion and weep?” (τί θορυβεῖσθε καὶ κλαίετε). “The child is not dead but only sleeping” (5:39). He then takes the girl’s hand and, like Apollonius, touches the girl and says something to her: “‘Talitha cum,’ which means, ‘Little girl, get up!’” (5:41). And she got up. “At this they were overcome with amazement” (5:42).

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epilepsy, paralysis. But it was not common to hear of a wandering philosopher performing healings. In this regard, then, Apollonius more closely approximates Jesus and the apostles.

<sup>131</sup> See Euripides, *Alcestis*, 1008-1152.

<sup>132</sup> Baur, *Apollonius von Tyana Und Christus*, 140.

This particular narrative parallel has received a lot of attention from scholars. Koskenniemi, as we have seen, was of the “common culture school,” believing that the similarities between *VA* and Christian literature can be explained on the basis of shared culture and shared genres. But he is willing to make an exception for gospel dependency in this case because of the amazing correspondence between the two narratives.<sup>133</sup>

The raising of the dead is a power also ascribed to the apostles in the canonical and apocryphal acts. Peter raises the woman Tabitha from the dead by merely telling her to “get up” (Acts 9:36-42). In the Acts of Peter, the eponymous hero revives the dead son of widow who is brought in on a bier simply by saying, “Young man, arise and walk” (27). And Paul raises the boy Eutychus from the dead after he fell from a great height by taking him in his arms (Acts 20:7-12).<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Koskenniemi, *Apollonios von Tyana in Der Neutestamentlichen Exegese*, 193–206.

<sup>134</sup> Apollonius’s raising of the girl from the dead offers probably the most unique parallel between *VA* and early Christian literature. It is difficult to find any closer precedent for this episode of bodily resurrection in Greek or Roman literature of the period. Curiously, Philostratus compares the miracle to the raising of Alcestis from the dead by Heracles; but in fact, there is little resemblance in the narrative structure aside from the fact that a woman is restored to her husband or husband-to-be. Heracles does not raise the dead woman by a command, but must physically go to the underworld to retrieve her soul. Every other instance of bodily resurrection that Philostratus could have possibly used for a model in earlier literature does not quite approximate his account of resurrection. In each case, the dead is raised for only a brief period or to serve a particular purpose (such as giving advice or acting as an assistant). The Thessalian witch Erictho in first-century Lucan’s *Pharsalia* (6.654-827) brings back to life a dead soldier so that he can give a prophecy. In second-century Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* (2.28–9, 1.12–17), Zatchlas, an Egyptian sorcerer, uses some herbs to resurrect the dead body of a murdered husband “as it was before his death,” but it is only a temporary resurrection; after testifying against his wife, the man will become a corpse again. The wizard in the second-century Lucian’s *Lover of Lies* allegedly has the ability to restore “mouldy corpses to life” (13); but no actual account is given of a bodily resurrection. And in the Greek Magical Papyri from Roman Egypt, we find magical spells (dated to fourth century CE, though original context may have been second century CE) that are aimed at the invocation of the dead and the reanimation of dead bodies to serve as the magician’s assistants (*paredroi*). (See Elena Pachoumi, “Resurrection of

*Power of disappearing/instant transportation.* Apollonius has the ability to disappear and instantly transport himself from one place to another, no matter how distant. During his trial before Domitian, he disappears from the courtroom and appears to Damis not long afterwards (8.5.4, 8.10). Wanting to help the Ephesians, who are dealing with a plague, he instantly transports himself to Ephesus: “Thinking he should not delay the journey, and merely saying, ‘Let us go,’ he was in Ephesus, imitating, I suppose, Pythagoras’s famous act of being in Thurii and in Metapontum simultaneously” (4.10.1).

Of course, Philostratus might simply be using the life of Pythagoras as a model here. But we should observe that after his resurrection, Jesus has similar powers. He appears and vanishes at will and spontaneously appears to the disciples even behind locked doors. But the most direct example of instant transportation is found in the Acts of the Apostles. After Philip, one of the disciples, baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch, he is instantly transported to another location: “the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more . . . But Philip found himself at Azotus” (Acts 8:40).

### *Disciples*

Apollonius’ disciples are called ὁμῖληταί, and, at the beginning of his mission, are seven in number (1.18), but they grow to as many as thirty-four (4.37.2). Jesus’ disciples has twelve disciples, and they are called μαθηταί. Damis is Apollonius’ closest disciple, comparable to Peter or John the Beloved Disciple in the Gospels. Like Jesus, Apollonius is demanding of his

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the Body in the Greek Magical Papyri,” *Numen* 58 (2011): 729–40). The closest parallel to Apollonius’s raising of the dead girl, then, is found in the gospels or the apocryphal acts.

disciples. And his disciples are not always willing to follow where he leads. He hopes that they will accompany him in his journey to the East, but he is disappointed when they choose not to join: “I was testing you (βάσανον ἐποιοούμενον),” he says, “to see if you had the same strength as I do. But since you are weak (μαλακῶς), I wish you health and love of knowledge, but I must go where wisdom and my guardian spirit lead me” (*VA* 1.18). When Apollonius goes to Rome under Nero, only eight of his thirty-four disciples choose to follow him (4.37.2).

This episode reminds us of similar occurrences in the Gospels when Jesus rebukes or tests his disciples. When Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane with his disciples, he asks them to stay awake with him. But they keep falling asleep, so he is upset with them and says, “Could you not keep awake one hour? Keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial (πειρασμόν); the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (ἀσθενής)” (Mk. 14:37-38). Shortly afterwards, Jesus is arrested and taken away to be tried and executed. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus predicts that his followers, even his most resolute follower Peter, will desert him. Peter denies him three times (Mk 14:26-31).

### *Trial and Accusations*

Nero is the first civil authority with whom Apollonius clashes.<sup>135</sup> While he is approaching Rome, Apollonius is met by a friend who advises him strongly not to enter Rome since Nero does not like philosophers and throws them in prison. Nonetheless, Apollonius decides to enter the city.

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<sup>135</sup> The Tyanean calls Nero a “beast” (θηρίον) (4.38.3). Ironically, Nero is also cryptically referred to as the “the beast” (θήριον) in the Christian apocalyptic writing of *Revelation* (Chapter 13). Nero is not explicitly mentioned in *Revelation*, but scholars are quite certain that it refers to Nero since it ascribes to the beast the number of 666. When the Greek title of Nero, Νέρων Καίσαρ, is transliterated into Hebrew and the numerical values of the letters are added up, they equal 666.



One of the consuls questions him about his clothing, philosophy, and religious practices, but finds nothing wrong with his answers and lets him go about his business. Later, the Prefect of the Praetorian Guard brings charges of impiety against Apollonius for some statements that he has made. Apollonius is brought to court, but the charges that have been written down on a paper are miraculously erased. He is then taken aside and questioned privately, but the Prefect “decided that [his] words were supernatural and superhuman, and as if reluctant to fight a god he said, ‘Go where you like, for you are too powerful to be ruled by me’” (4.44.4). Thereafter, Apollonius has little trouble with the political authorities in Rome and only decides to leave when Nero passes an edict banning the teaching of philosophy in Rome.

Apollonius clashes more forcefully with the emperor Domitian several years later. Through “his miraculous foresight,” he predicts that he will be arrested (7.10.1). He is accused of making predictions about the future of the empire (7.9, 7.20.1), of sacrificing a boy in order to see into the future and to help Nerva in a coup (7.11.3, 7.20.1, 8.5.2), of wearing strange clothes and having odd habits (7.11.3, 7.20.1), and of letting people bow to him and bestow on him the honors of a god (7.11.3, 7.20.1). Apollonius’s defense is the following. He can predict the future because of his “rather light diet.” He never sacrificed a boy; in fact, he hates any kind of blood sacrifice. He wears linen clothing because he does not want to harm animals. He does not cut his hair because the head is the source of perception (7.32.3, 8.5.1, 8.7.14-50). The last charge is of particular interest. He says that he considers himself a god insofar as he is good and insofar as mankind has a kinship with the god (8.5.1, 8.7.20). He does not tell people that he is a god or

demand sacrifice (8.7.19).<sup>136</sup> After giving his defense and being absolved of all charges, Apollonius disappears from the courtroom. This is the last trial he faces in his earthly life.

Jesus also clashes with political authorities for many of the same reasons. In all the Gospels that relate his trial and death, he faces accusations by Jewish authorities and trial under the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate. Like Apollonius, he predicts his betrayal, arrest, death, and even the denial of Peter (Mk. 14:18-21=Mt. 26:21-24=Lk. 22:21-23). The main accusation against him is blasphemy for calling himself the “Messiah,” the “Son of God,” and the “King of the Jews” (Mk. 15:2; Mt. 27:11-12, 22; Lk. 23:2; Jn. 18:33). Jesus does not deny the claim. In the Canonical Gospels, Jesus is sent to Pontius Pilate after being arraigned before the Jewish authorities. Pilate questions Jesus and receives little in the way of answers. “Are you the King of the Jews?” asks Pilate. “You say so,” Jesus replies (Mk. 15:1-5=Mt. 27:11=Lk. 23:3). In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus makes no further replies to the charges. Jesus says a little more in John. To Pilate’s question, he replies, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (Jn. 18:37).

Like Apollonius, then, Jesus is accused of regarding himself as a divine or semi-divine being: the “Son of God” or the “Messiah,” a figure supposedly foretold in Jewish Scripture. In Mark and John, Jesus directly owns the title in his trial proceedings. When asked in Mark, “Are

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<sup>136</sup> So does Apollonius really think he is a god? That he is Proteus? Throughout the narrative, Philostratus hints at Apollonius’ divinity. In his preface, he vows to tell how Apollonius came to be considered “possessed (δαίμωνιος) and inspired (θεῖος)” (1.2.3). He relates a birth narrative of Philostratus in which he is the god Proteus incarnate. Damis worships Apollonius as a “supernatural being” (δαίμων, 1.19.2). The Brahmins tell Apollonius that “ordinary people would regard him as a god (θεός), in life as well as in death” (3.50.1). Domitian, on first seeing Apollonius, takes him to be a demon (δαίμων, 7.32.1). But if Apollonius is a god, why does he pray to the sun? (7.10.1, 7.31.1, 8.13.2, etc.). Or attribute his ability to tell the future to a light diet? Or claim that he was a ship’s captain in a previous life? Perhaps, these are simply narrative discrepancies, or perhaps Philostratus wanted to leave the question of Apollonius’ divinity open.

you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” he responds, “I am” (Mk. 14:62). And in John, he alleges that his “kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). But his usual answer is, “You say that I am,” or some equivalent. Jesus does not directly identify himself with a god or God anywhere in the Synoptic Gospels, though we might say it is implied: such as at his baptism, transfiguration, or resurrection. But in the Gospel of John, he is more explicit. At one point, he says, “Before Abraham was, I am,” directly associating himself with the Jewish God Yahweh (Jn. 8:58).

Like Apollonius, Jesus is also subject to misperceptions about his identity. He is, for instance, mistaken as a someone who is possessed by a demon: “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons (δαίμονια) he casts out demons” (Mk. 3:22). Jesus denies this claim, using the analogy of a house divided against itself.

But there are two major differences between the trials of Jesus and Apollonius: First, Apollonius speaks at some length in his own defense before Domitian, but he also records a very prolix speech that Apollonius had planned to deliver at the trial (8.6-8.7). Jesus, on the other hand, says almost nothing at his trial (Mark 15:1-5, Matt. 27:11-14, Luke 23:1-12). Secondly, Apollonius escapes from his own trial, spontaneously disappearing from the courtroom after he has been proven innocent (*VA* 8.5.4). Jesus, on the other hand, is condemned as a criminal and crucified. Porphyry, incidentally, compared Apollonius to Jesus on just these two points: “For what reason did Christ, when brought before the High Priest and the governor, not utter anything worthy of a wise man, something able to instruct the judge and those present and improve them, but allowed [himself] to be struck with a reed, spat upon, and crowned with thorns? Why did he not do as Apollonius, who, after speaking freely to the Emperor Domitian, disappeared from the imperial court . . . ? (*Apocrit.* 3.1). Perhaps, then, Philostratus chose to emphasize the verbosity of

Apollonius's reply to the charges in order to demonstrate his superior speaking abilities vis-a-vis Jesus; and had Apollonius disappear from the courtroom to demonstrate his superior powers of escape.<sup>137</sup>

### *Death and Resurrection/Ascension*

For an account of Apollonius' death ("if he did die"), Philostratus relies on "many versions, though none given by Damis," since he was not present (8.29). At his death, Apollonius was an old man: "[S]ome say it was eighty, some over ninety, and some that he passed a hundred, youthful and sound in all his body" (8.29). By one account, Apollonius died in Ephesus in the care of two maid servants. By another, he entered a sanctuary of Athena in Lindos and vanished. But the account that Philostratus spends the most time recounting is the following. While staying in Crete, Apollonius pays a nocturnal visit to the sanctuary of Dictynna. The guards of the sanctuary catch him and bind him, but around midnight, he frees himself and runs into the sanctuary. The doors of the sanctuary open of themselves to let him in and close behind him. Then behind the closed doors the guards hear the sounds of maidens proclaiming, "Proceed from earth! Proceed to heaven! Proceed!" (8.30).

After Apollonius's miraculous departure from humanity, "his transfiguration(μεταβολή) caused amazement and nobody ventured to deny that he was immortal" (8.31). But one young

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<sup>137</sup> See Frede, 144-145: "We do not know whether Philostratus wrote the *Life* to present Apollonius as a much more attractive alternative to Jesus. But whatever his intentions, he goes out of his way to describe Apollonius, when asked to account for himself in front of the notoriously tyrannical Domitian, as facing the emperor down in no uncertain terms and as miraculously extracting himself from prison and escaping unjust punishment."

man who did not accept the “true doctrine” (ἀληθὴς λόγος)<sup>138</sup> came to Tyana to be convinced of the immortality of the soul, telling his companions, “I, my friends, have continually prayed to Apollonius for nine months now to reveal the doctrine of the soul. But he is so truly dead that he has not even appeared as I asked, or persuaded me of his immortality” (8.31.1). Four days later, while he is sitting with his friends, he claims to see Apollonius in broad daylight and to hear him discoursing about the immortality of the soul: “Immortal is the soul, and is not yours / But Providence’s . . . The soul starts like a racehorse from the gate, and nimbly leaping mingles with light air” (8.31.2-3). No one can see Apollonius but him, and yet he is convinced by the vision that the Tyanean is alive and the soul immortal.

Jesus also ascends to heaven and appears to his disciples after he has “departed from humanity.” Only one gospel (Luke) gives an account of Jesus’ ascension in heaven, stating simply that he “withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven” (Lk. 24:51). But all the canonical gospel (and the Gospel of Peter), except Mark, relate that Jesus appears to his disciples after his death. The fullest post-resurrection narratives are given in Luke and John. Just as Apollonius appears to the young man in order to convince him that his soul is immortal, Jesus reappears in order to convince his disciples that he is alive. In Luke, Jesus first appears to a few of his disciples who do not recognize him until they are having dinner with him. After he blesses the bread and breaks it, they recognize him, but he immediately vanishes from sight. Later, Jesus appears to more disciples. They are afraid and think Jesus is a ghost. But Jesus tells them to “[t]ouch me and see (ψηλαφήσατε με καὶ ἴδετε); for a ghost (πνεῦμα) does not have flesh and

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<sup>138</sup> Philostratus’s use of the phrase ἀληθὴς λόγος may be an argument for his knowledge of Celsus’s polemic against Christianity, which goes by the same name.

bones as you see that I have” (Lk. 24:39). In the Gospel of John, Thomas will not believe that he has seen the living Jesus until he put his fingers in his wounds (Jn. 20:25).

But the post-resurrection narratives of Jesus have less in common with the appearance of Apollonius to the young man than with another episode in Apollonius’s life – his appearance of to Damis shortly after his trial before Domitian. Damis and his friend Demetrius feared that Apollonius had been sentenced to death and that they would never see him again. But all of a sudden, Apollonius appears to them, saying, “‘You will ... or rather you already have.’ ‘Alive?’ asked Demetrius. ‘But if dead we have never stopped weeping for you.’ Stretching out his hand, Apollonius said, ‘Take hold of me (λαβοῦ μου), and if I elude you, I am a ghost (εἰδωλόν) come back from Persephone’s domain . . . But if I remain when grasped, persuade Damis too that I am alive and have not lost my body’” (*VA* 8.12.1). Then, “[u]nable to disbelieve any longer, they stood up, hugged the Master, welcomed him, and questioned him about his defense” (8.12.2). We might say that this element in the story is “displaced,” since, if Philostratus were following one of the gospel narratives, he would have included this event after Apollonius’s “departure from humanity.” But the “fleshly” emphasis of the canonical gospel narratives may have been too much for Philostratus, so that he decided to use the post-resurrection appearance motif in another part of his story.

An interesting point of contrast between *VA* and the gospel accounts is that Apollonius (according to one account at least) never dies; but he ascends directly to heaven. Celsus had criticized Jesus for not being able to save himself from death: “[H]e was not helped by his

Father, nor was he able to help himself” (*Cels.* 54). But Apollonius *is* able to save himself – from prosecution and, ultimately, from death.<sup>139</sup>

### *Salvation of Mankind*

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<sup>139</sup> Resurrection and ascension (or “apotheosis”) narratives of great men were not unknown in Greco-Roman literature. Roman emperors, especially, were the subject of these narratives. Ovid (first century BCE) relates that Romulus, the legendary founder of Rome, “flew to the stars on his father’s (Mars’) horses” (*Fast.* 2.496). “His mortal body,” Ovid explains in *Metamorphoses*, “became thin, dissolving in the air . . . Suddenly, he had a beautiful form more worthy of the high couches [of the gods]” (*Metam.* 14.824-828). Shortly thereafter, a senator named Proculus Julius returning to Rome by night encountered Romulus in the middle of the road; he appeared “beautiful and more than human and [was] clothed in a sacred robe” (*Fast.* 2.503). The divinized king then spoke to the senator, commanding him to “stop the [Romans] from their mourning; do not let them violate my divinity [*numina*] with their tears” (*Fast.* 499-506).

Livy (1.16) gives an alternate account of the same episode:

For, when the citizens were disturbed by the loss of the king and were hostile toward the senators, Julius Proculus, as it is told, a man of repute-at least he was the author of this important thing- addressed the assembly. “Romulus, O Quirites,” he said, “the father of this city, at the first light of this day, descended from the sky and clearly showed himself to me. While I was awed with holy fright, I stood reverently before him, asking in prayer that I might look at him without sin. ‘Go,’ he said, ‘announce to the Romans that heaven wishes that my Rome shall be the capital of the earth; therefore, they shall cultivate the military; they shall know and teach their descendants that no human might can resist Roman arms.’ He said this, and went up on high.” It is a great marvel what credence was generated by the man’s tale, and how the loss of Romulus, for which the common people and the army grieved, was assuaged by the belief in his immortality.

Kings and emperors are not the only ones who were thought to turn into gods. In 130 CE, the Emperor Hadrian established a cult to his beloved slave, Antinous, and claimed that he had seen his star in the heavens (Cass. Dio 69.11.2). Further, Herakles was reportedly apotheosized after a lightning bolt struck him; since not one bone of his bones was found, it was “supposed that Herakles . . . had crossed over from human circumstances to that of the gods” (Dio. Sic., *Library of History* 4.38.5).

None of these sources, however, resonate as strongly with the *VA* accounts of resurrection/ascension as the gospels, in which three unique elements are combined: Jesus’ ascension, his assurance to a doubting disciple that he is no ghost, and the proof of immortality. *VA* has the same combination of elements, though in a different order. But we do not find this confluence of traits in the other main resurrection/ascension narratives of which we are aware. The best explanation for the resemblance in the narratives, then, is gospel dependency.

In VA, the Indian King Iarchas praises Apollonius for his foreknowledge, saying, “Those who love prophecy, my virtuous Apollonius, become divine under its influence, and act for the salvation of mankind” (σωτηρίαν ἀνθρώπων, 3.42.1). Salvation, of course, is also a theme repeated in Christian writings, where Jesus is hailed as the bringer of salvation to Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus tells Zacchaeus, “Today salvation (σωτηρία) has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save (σῶσαι) the lost” (Lk. 19:9-10). In Acts, Paul quotes an injunction of Jesus: “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (Acts 13:47). The salvation that Jesus brings, incidentally, is also a prominent theme in Paul’s letters: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation (σωτηρία) to everyone who has faith” (Rom. 1:16).

Salvation was a concept closely tied with divinity and kingship in the Greco-Roman world. In Philostratus’s time, gods, emperors, and great men were often called “saviors” and “benefactors.”<sup>140</sup> Indeed, in VA, Apollonius is not the only conduit of salvation to the rest of the world. The Emperor Vespasian is also interested in acting “in everything with all honor and for the salvation of mankind (σωτηρίαν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, 5.32.1). So, it is plausible that Philostratus is merely appropriating an idea that was common-place in his culture. But it is also plausible that Philostratus is consciously contesting a Christian notion of salvation. He may have known that in “Christian” circles, Jesus was the sole savior, and that no other god or ruler could be recognized as such. The canonical Acts emphasizes that salvation comes only through one person, Jesus, and cannot be effected by, say, a Roman emperor: “There is salvation (σωτηρία) in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved

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<sup>140</sup> Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 250–330.



(σωθῆναι)” (Acts 4:12). For this reason, Philostratus may have chosen to stress that Apollonius was not the “only” savior – Vespasian is also a savior in his narrative.

But a key passage about salvation in *VA* occurs in the final book, where Apollonius declares, “I would do anything to save human beings (ὕπὲρ σωτηρίας τῶν ἀνθρώπων) but never sacrificed for their sake, nor would I ever do so” (8.7.30). These words are taken from a speech that Apollonius had supposedly written and planned on delivering to Domitian in court. He is defending himself from the charge that he performed a human sacrifice in order to gain insight from the gods. It is relevant to ask here whether Philostratus is referring to and subtly condemning the Christian notion that Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice for the salvation of humanity, a notion explicit in Mark 10:45 (“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”) and in Mark 14:24 (“He said to them, ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many [ὕπὲρ πολλῶν].’”). In effect, Apollonius may be saying that he would never engage in a sacrifice of himself, as Jesus was said to have performed when he was put to death on the cross.

### **Proteus, Apollonius, and Jesus**

An important mediating link in the literary relationship of Jesus and Apollonius is the figure of Proteus. At the beginning of the narrative, Philostratus portrays Apollonius as the incarnation of the god Proteus. It is curious that of all the gods with whom Apollonius could have been identified, Philostratus chose this one, but the aptness of the comparison will become clear. We know of Proteus from Homer’s *Odyssey*, where he is depicted as an Egyptian sea god, the son of Poseidon, who has the ability to change his shape at will. Homer refers to him as “a certain unerring old man of the sea (γέρον ἄλιος), immortal Proteus of Egypt (Πρωτεύς Αἰγύπτιος), who knows the depth of every sea and is the servant of Poseidon” (*Od.* 4.384-386). Proteus’s

daughter, Eidothea, tells Menelaus that he must consult Proteus in order to sail home successfully from Troy. But Proteus will not divulge information to just anyone; Menelaus and his companions must lie in wait to catch him. Disguising themselves as seals, they pin the god down while he is sleeping. He changes alternately into a lion, a snake, a leopard, a wild boar, running water, and a tree (*Od.* 4.455-461). But at last Proteus is subdued, and Menelaus is able to extract the necessary information from him about his voyage.

Philostratus explains his reasons for comparing Apollonius with Proteus after recounting the god's birth annunciation to Apollonius's mother:

Now for those who know the poets, why should I describe how wise Proteus was, how shifting (ποικίλος), multiform (ἄλλοτε ἄλλος), and impossible to catch (κρείττων τοῦ ἀλῶναι), and how he seemed to have all knowledge and foreknowledge? But the reader must bear Proteus in mind, especially when the course of my story shows that my hero had the greater prescience of the two, and rose above many difficult and baffling situations just when he was cornered (VA 1.4).

In other words, Philostratus is comparing Apollonius to Proteus for two reasons. First, Apollonius has foreknowledge, even to a greater extent than Proteus. By his “miraculous foresight” which he attributes to his “light diet” (7.10.1), he predicts a plague in Ephesus (4.4), his own arrest by Domitian (7.10.1), and the death of Domitian (8.26.1). Secondly, like Proteus, Apollonius is able to escape from difficult situations and even to change the nature of his body. For instance, he claims to be “a person no one can imprison” (4.44.4). When imprisoned by Domitian, he proves that his imprisonment is voluntary by showing that he can free himself from the fetter on his leg (7.38.2). Unlike Proteus, he cannot turn into different elements. When Domitian challenges him to “turn into water, or some animal or tree,” Apollonius replies, “I would not turn into such things . . . even if I could” (7.34). But he can escape from difficult situations. During his trial before Domitian, Apollonius disappears from the courtroom after

saying, “[S]end someone to seize my body, because you cannot seize my soul, or rather, you can never even seize my body” (8.5.3). By this act, he made it “clear that he could never be caught against his will” (8.5.4). His last and greatest escape is from death itself. He does not die but ascends directly to heaven.

Apollonius is not the only one compared to Proteus in the literature of this time. Lucian uses Proteus as a central theme in his satire of Peregrinus of Parium, also known as Proteus. The satirist thinks “Proteus” a fitting name for Peregrinus because “[a]fter turning himself into all things for the sake of notoriety and adopting umpteen changes of shape, he has at long last turned into fire” (*Passing of Peregrinus* 1). In the narrative that follows, his point is proven: Peregrinus is a pervert-turned-parricide, who becomes a Christian and then Cynic, finally burning himself on a pyre at the Olympic games of 165 CE. Like Proteus, he is also regarded as a “seer” (28); he himself predicts that he will “become a guardian spirit” after death (27).

Jesus himself is never directly compared to Proteus in early Christian literature, but he is endowed with the same abilities to tell the future and to shape-shift. In the canonical gospels, Jesus foretells his betrayal, arrest, and death, and demonstrates an ability to escape difficult circumstances. While he does not evade his trial or death, he shows that he can avoid the consequences of his death by rising from the dead. Afterwards, he appears to his disciples sporadically and spontaneously, even behind closed doors. Like Proteus, he is “slippery” and elusive.

Jesus’ ability to shape-shift is remarkably demonstrated in the *Apocryphal Acts of John*. Throughout the narrative, he cannot seem to retain one form but is constantly changing his appearance. When the narrator (John) first meets Jesus, he appears as a child, while to his brother James he appears as an adult (88). Another time, Jesus appears to John to be “bald-headed but

with a thick and flowing beard,” while to James he appears “as a youth whose beard was just starting” (89). Sometimes, when John touches Jesus, he meets “a material and solid body,” but at other times, “the substance [is] immaterial and bodiless” (93). Jesus himself says, “What I am now seen to be, that I am not” (96). Whether he was crucified and suffered is even an open question: “You hear that I suffered,” says Jesus, “yet I suffered not; that I suffered not, yet I did suffer; that I was pierced, yet was I not wounded . . .” (101). In view of his shifting appearances, John calls Jesus “many-faced” (πολυπρόσωπον, 91). Like Proteus, Jesus has many “faces;” he is difficult to pin down.

In sum, Proteus is *identified* with Apollonius in *VA*, *compared* to a one-time Christian in the *Passing of Peregrinus*, and possibly *associated* with Jesus in the Gospels and the Acts of John. The similarities between Proteus, Apollonius, and Jesus may only be happenstance, but it is plausible that Philostratus identified Apollonius with Proteus because he was *aware* that a connection was being made between Jesus and Proteus in Christian literature and/or oral traditions. Believing that Proteus had some significance for the Christians, and feeling threatened by the Christian appropriation of a Greek icon, he decided to steal it back. But rather than merely *associating* his hero with Proteus, he *identified* him with the god. Moreover, he made Apollonius a new and improved Proteus. While the original one is caught by Menelaus, his is “impossible to catch.”<sup>141</sup> In this respect, Philostratus’s “Proteus” is, at the same time, better than Jesus, who, after all, was caught, was put on trial, was put to death.

## Conclusion

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<sup>141</sup> Michael Paschalis, “Apollonius of Tyana as Proteus: Theios Aner or Master of Deceit,” in *Holy Men and Charlatans in the Ancient Novel*, ed. Stelios Panayotakis, Gareth Schmeling, and Michael Paschalis (Eelde, the Netherlands, 2015), 133–50.

Having explored the literary connections between Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* and early Christian literature, particularly the Christian Gospels and Acts, we may conclude that overarching formal and thematic similarities between the two literary traditions are due to shared understandings of genre (i.e. the biography and the novel). But others are better explained by direct knowledge of Christian stories, particularly in the Gospels and Acts (both canonical and apocryphal). Philostratus had not simply heard Christian stories by word of mouth but likely had read Christian literature, like Celsus and Porphyry. The elements in the story of Apollonius resemble elements in the stories of Jesus and the apostles in some remarkable ways. And they are often "improved" in VA: Apollonius is more verbose at his trial, escapes from punishment, and does not really die. So to assume a polemical relationship between VA and some early Christian texts is a reasonable deduction.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The question of the relationship between Jesus and Apollonius has been debated and wrestled with since the fourth century CE, when Eusebius and Hierocles crossed their pens and wits, and has echoed down through the centuries within the walls of the church and the halls of academia. Scholars have come down on different sides of the question, but in general they have moved towards a perspective that dismisses any possible knowledge of Christian literature by Philostratus or any possible dependence of the *VA* on Christian literature. This study has been an attempt to challenge this position and to move scholarship in the other direction.

I have suggested here that Philostratus constructed his biography using (among other sources) the Christian gospels and acts, in order to present Apollonius as a rival to Jesus and the Christian apostles. This is not only a plausible conclusion, but a likely conclusion, if we consider Philostratus's historical and cultural context on top of the striking literary parallels between *VA* and the Christian literature.

Philostratus was unavoidably influenced by three dynamic forces at play in his time: the favorable attitude of the Severan dynasty towards Christianity, the revival of an interest in Greek culture and literature, and a struggle between “non-Greek” Christians and “Greek” pagans for cultural supremacy. He himself was a “Greek” in the traditional sense – not only ethnically but culturally - embracing “Greek” language, religion, and philosophy (particularly, Pythagoreanism). He must have aligned with others, such as Celsus and Lucian and Porphyry, on

his stance towards the “anti-Greek” Christianity. But he refrained from expressing his opposition to it openly perhaps because the Roman administration he was serving had a certain degree of sympathy for Christians. When Julia Domna commissioned him to write a biography of Apollonius, he must have seen this as an opportunity, however, to strike a blow against Christianity. And so a plan formed: He would construct the biography in such a way that Apollonius would at the same time resemble and transcend the portrayal of Jesus and the apostles in Christian literature.

All the internal indications within VA have led me to believe that this is exactly what he did. The general similarity between VA and the Christian gospels and acts may be attributed to the generic conventions of “biography” and “novel” imposed upon them. But upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the similarities cannot be explained solely on the basis of shared generic conventions. Some of the deeds ascribed to Apollonius resonate so strongly with stories of Jesus and the apostles that literary dependence is an entirely logical conclusion. The raising of the girl from the dead is a particularly strong point of resonance between the gospels and VA, since it has no solid precedent outside of these two literary traditions. At the same time, Apollonius transcends Jesus in interesting ways: he gives a riveting defense at his trial, disappears from the courtroom, and ascends to heaven without first dying.

In a word, there is very good reason to believe that VA is a polemical narrative written against the Christians and that it draws material from the early Christian gospels and acts. Such a conclusion is justified based on historical and literary analysis. If this study has convinced the reader on this point, it has succeeded. But it will also have been a success if it has persuaded the reader to appreciate the uniqueness of VA as a piece of literature and the unique circumstances under which it was composed. We have only begun to scratch the surface in our interpretive

endeavors and to hint at the complex network of meaning that underlies Philostratus's fascinating work.



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