Jesus and the older stories: ancient parallels and modern claims: student handout

Module 2: Ancient Parallels and Modern Claims about Jesus.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: Scholars compare the Gospels with older stories, and some writers say the story of Jesus was borrowed from them. What do the ancient parallels show, and how can a historian test a claim of borrowing against the earliest dated sources?

Begin with each document's source note. With your partner, fill in the organizer: for each parallel, what is the earliest source, when was it written, what does it actually say, and how do the scholars cited explain the likeness? The documents quote ancient texts in public-domain translations and summarize the evidence as ExtantBible presents it.

Document A: The five statuses, and Elijah and Elisha

Source: The Parallels in History page: its five statuses and its records for Elijah and Elisha, citing Brown (1997), Ehrman and Méndez (2024) and Pervo (2009); 1 Kings 17 and Luke 7 as the Berean Standard Bible prints them (public domain); the Gospels' dates from their timeline entries, which follow Brown.

Primary source: 1 Kings 17:22-23 and Luke 7:15 in the Berean Standard Bible (public domain), with a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of how the scholarly works cited compare the Elijah and Elisha stories with the Gospels and Acts.

Status	What it means
Found before Christianity	An ancient source written before Christianity tells something like this.
Only a related idea	Ancient sources show a related idea, but not the claimed parallel itself.
Scholars debate what it means	Old sources exist, but scholars disagree about whether they say this.
Found only in later sources	The earliest source that tells it was written after the Gospels.
Not found in any source we checked	Ancient sources about the figure exist, but none ExtantBible checked makes this claim.

“And the LORD listened to the voice of Elijah, and the child’s life returned to him, and he lived. Then Elijah took the child, brought him down from the upper room into the house, and gave him to his mother.”

1 Kings 17:22-23, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): Elijah raises the widow's son at Zarephath.

“And the dead man sat up and began to speak! Then Jesus gave him back to his mother.”

Luke 7:15, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): the widow's son at Nain.

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- The line to test against: the site's timeline dates the Gospel of Mark to 65 to 75 CE and the Gospel of John to 90 to 100 CE. The Elijah and Elisha stories are part of the Hebrew Bible, which Jews were already reading in Greek before Christianity (Ehrman and Méndez); Luke 4:25-27 itself cites them.
- Brown says the evangelists tell Jesus's raisings, the widow's son at Nain among them, as resuscitations like those of Elijah and Elisha. Status for Elijah raising a widow's son: Found before Christianity.
- In 2 Kings 4:42-44 Elisha has twenty barley loaves set before a hundred men, who eat and leave some over. Brown names this as an Old Testament echo in Mark's feeding of the five thousand. Status: Found before Christianity.
- In 2 Kings 2 Elijah goes up into heaven in a whirlwind, watched by Elisha. Pervo calls this the most cogent parallel or model for Luke's account of Jesus taken up in Acts 1, and says the Elijah and Elisha stories served as a source for the Jesus tradition, especially in Luke. Status: Found before Christianity.

On ExtantBible: Parallels in History: Elijah, taken up into heaven

Document B: Roman stories: Romulus and Augustus

Source: The Parallels in History records for Romulus and Augustus, citing Livy (Roberts's translation, 1912), Plutarch's Life of Romulus (Perrin's translation, 1914), Suetonius (Rolfe's translation, 1914), Ehrman and Méndez (2024) and Pervo (2009); Livy quoted in Roberts's public-domain translation, and Acts 1 as shown on ExtantBible (Berean Standard Bible, public domain).

Primary source: Livy, History of Rome 1.16, in a public-domain translation (Roberts, 1912), with Acts 1:9 in the Berean Standard Bible; and a summary by ExtantBible of Suetonius's Life of Augustus 94, written about 115 CE.

“A violent thunder storm suddenly arose and enveloped the king in so dense a cloud that he was quite invisible to the assembly. From that hour Romulus was no longer seen on earth. [...] At length, after a few had taken the initiative, the whole of those present hailed Romulus as “a god, the son of a god, the King and Father of the City of Rome.””

Livy, History of Rome 1.16, trans. Rev. Canon Roberts (1912).

“After He had said this, they watched as He was taken up, and a cloud hid Him from their sight.”

Acts 1:9, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): the ascension, which the record sets beside the story of Romulus.

- Livy also reports a second tradition: some secretly hinted that the senators had torn Romulus limb from limb. He says he follows the prevailing account. Later in the same chapter Proculus Julius tells the people that "the Father of this City suddenly descended from heaven and appeared to me". Plutarch, writing about a century later, tells the same story and doubts it.
- Ehrman and Méndez give Romulus as the pagan example of a man taken up to the heavens without dying and worshiped as a god, a belief they place centuries before Julius Caesar; Pervo compares Luke's ascension with stories of heroes taken up, including Roman emperors. Status for Romulus taken up, and for his appearance to Proculus: Found before Christianity.

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- Suetonius collects portents around the birth of Augustus: a portent that "nature was pregnant with a king for the Roman people", and his mother's dream of a serpent, after which Augustus was regarded as the son of Apollo. Ehrman and Méndez note that Augustus was hailed as son of the divinized Caesar, and that ancient lives of religious figures told of miraculous signs at a hero's birth.
- Augustus was born before Christianity, but the earliest source that tells these portents is Suetonius, writing about 115 CE (Ehrman and Méndez). Status: Found only in later sources. No work cited here compares these portents with the birth stories in Matthew and Luke.

On ExtantBible: Parallels in History: Romulus, appears to a follower

Document C: Healers: Asclepius, Vespasian and Apollonius

Source: The Parallels in History records for Asclepius, Vespasian and Apollonius of Tyana, citing Pausanias (Jones and Ormerod's translation, 1918), Tacitus (Church and Brodribb's translation), Suetonius (Rolfe's translation), Ehrman and Méndez (2024), Pervo (2009) and Brown (1997); Tacitus quoted in Church and Brodribb's public-domain translation, and Mark 8 as shown on ExtantBible (Berean Standard Bible, public domain).

Primary source: Tacitus, Histories 4.81, written in the early second century, in a public-domain translation (Church and Brodribb), with Mark 8:23 in the Berean Standard Bible; and summaries by ExtantBible of Pausanias on Epidaurus and of Philostratus's third-century Life of Apollonius.

“He begged Vespasian that he would deign to moisten his cheeks and eye-balls with his spittle. [...] The hand was instantly restored to its use, and the light of day again shone upon the blind. Persons actually present attest both facts, even now when nothing is to be gained by falsehood.”

Tacitus, Histories 4.81, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb.

“So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village. Then He spit on the man’s eyes and placed His hands on him. “Can you see anything?” He asked.”

Mark 8:23, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): the healing the record sets beside Vespasian.

- Inscriptions set up at the sanctuary of the healing god Asclepius at Epidaurus record cures of the sick who came to the god; Pausanias saw six such slabs, with the names of those healed, their diseases and the means of cure. Ehrman and Méndez describe Asclepius as a god known for healing. Status: Found before Christianity.
- Tacitus and Suetonius report that at Alexandria the new emperor Vespasian, at the urging of the god Serapis, restored a blind man's sight with his spittle and healed a man's hand (in Suetonius, a lame leg) before a crowd. Both wrote after the Gospels. Status: Found only in later sources. The event is set when Vespasian became emperor, which Brown places in 69 CE, about when Mark was written.
- Ehrman and Méndez name Vespasian, with Apollonius of Tyana, among figures credited with miracles, and argue that a historian who grants Jesus's miracles must in principle grant theirs.
- Ehrman and Méndez call Apollonius a first-century holy man, but his Life was written by his later, third-century follower Philostratus; Pervo compares one of its exorcisms (4.20) with Acts 16:16-18. Status: Found only in later sources. Any borrowing would have to run from the Christian stories toward Philostratus.

On ExtantBible: Parallels in History: Vespasian, restores a blind man's sight

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Document D: Modern claims checked: Horus, Mithras and Attis

Source: The Parallels in History records for Horus, Mithras and Attis, citing Plutarch's Isis and Osiris (Babbitt's translation, 1936), Justin and Tertullian (Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1885), Pausanias (1918), Metzger (1987), Brown (1997) and Ehrman and Méndez (2024); Justin quoted in the public-domain translation of 1885, and Mark 14 as shown on ExtantBible (Berean Standard Bible, public domain).

Primary source: Justin Martyr, First Apology 66, issued about 150 CE, in a public-domain translation (Ante-Nicene Fathers, 1885), with Mark 14 in the Berean Standard Bible; and summaries by ExtantBible of Plutarch's Isis and Osiris and of Pausanias on Attis.

"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, spoke a blessing and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take it; this is My body." Then He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it."

Mark 14:22-23, Berean Standard Bible (public domain): the Last Supper, which the record sets beside the Mithras meal.

"Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithras, commanding the same thing to be done. For, that bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantations in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated, you either know or can learn."

Justin Martyr, First Apology 66, just after his account of the Last Supper, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885).

- Horus, born of a virgin: in Plutarch's Isis and Osiris (Plutarch lived 46 to 120 CE, Ehrman and Méndez), Isis conceives a child, Harpocrates, by Osiris after his death, and nowhere is she called a virgin. The site's record traces the claim to a book of 1836. Status: Not found in any source we checked.
- Mithras, born of a virgin: Justin, writing about 160 CE (Metzger), reports that those who record the mysteries of Mithras say he was born from a rock. No ancient source checked gives him a virgin mother. Status: Not found in any source we checked.
- The Mithras meal: Justin gives the earliest written mention, about 150 CE, and Tertullian adds that Mithras celebrates an offering of bread. Status: Found only in later sources. Ehrman and Méndez write that we do not know whether initiates of the mystery cults typically shared a meal commemorating the death of their god.
- Attis, died and rose again: Pausanias tells that Attis castrated himself and that Zeus granted that his body should neither rot nor decay; he says nothing of a return to life. Status: Found only in later sources.

On ExtantBible: Parallels in History: Mithras, born of a virgin

Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	What does Pervo say about Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2 and Luke's account in Acts 1, and why is the story older than Christianity?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
2.	Which Old Testament story does Brown name as an echo in Mark's feeding of the five thousand?	
3.	What two accounts of the end of Romulus does Livy give, which does he follow, and what does Proculus Julius report?	
4.	Augustus was born before Christianity. Why does the site rate the portents at his birth Found only in later sources?	
5.	What do Tacitus and Suetonius report about Vespasian, and when did they write?	
6.	Name one claim found before Christianity, and say how the works cited here describe it.	
7.	What do the ancient sources checked say about the birth of Horus and of Mithras?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
8.	Justin reports the Mithras rite and also explains it. Which part is evidence of what was done, and which is his own view?	
9.	Why cannot the Life of Apollonius be the source of the Gospel stories of casting out demons?	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, answer the central question. Describe at least one parallel a scholar draws from an ancient text and how the scholar explains it, test at least two modern claims by document letter with the date of the earliest source for each, and include at least one point that limits a claim of borrowing and one that limits a claim of no borrowing.

Homework: Students who need more time finish the second paragraph (the point that cuts the other way, and what it can and cannot show) at home, using the handout and the organizer.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Sourcing and dating: Names the earliest source for each claim with the date the documents give, and places it before or after the Gospels.	
	Close reading: Compares what the source actually says with the claim as stated, names the differences (a birth from a rock, a revival among the dead), and separates what a writer reports from his own explanation (Justin's devils, Livy's two traditions).	
	Two kinds of comparison: Explains how a scholar reads a documented parallel (Pervo on Elijah, Brown on Elisha) and how a modern claim of borrowing is tested, without treating every likeness as borrowing.	
	Fair in both directions: Explains that an older likeness does not by itself show borrowing, and that a late or missing source limits what can be concluded rather than settling the question.	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes readings to the scholars who hold them ("Pervo calls it the most cogent model"), uses the site's statuses, and keeps historical claims apart from statements of belief.	

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