Jesus and the older stories: ancient parallels and modern claims: study guide

Module 2: Ancient Parallels and Modern Claims about Jesus.

Rereading and highlighting feel like study but leave little in memory, while testing yourself builds it. Cover each answer, try to recall it, then check it, and come back on the days the tracker shows.

Review schedule: tick each box when you have done it

- [ ] First study and self-test (today)
- [ ] Review 1 (one day later)
- [ ] Review 2 (one week later)
- [ ] Review 3 (one month later)

Warm-up

1. From the Synoptic lesson: which Gospel do most scholars think was written first?
2. When do most scholars date the Gospel of Mark?
3. From the canon lesson: what is the difference between the date of a manuscript and the date of the text it preserves?

Key terms

The idea

- Parallel: A likeness between a story told about Jesus and a story or belief from another text or religion.

Why it matters: Why is a likeness alone not enough to show that one story borrowed from the other?

- Found in a source: In a surviving ancient source, such as a text or an inscription, that can be dated.

Why it matters: Why does the date of the source matter as much as what it says?

Two kinds of comparison

- Ancient parallel drawn by scholars: A likeness that a scholar reads in ancient texts, such as Pervo's reading of Elijah's ascension (2 Kings 2) as the most cogent model for Luke's account in Acts 1.

Why it matters: Why does a parallel from the Hebrew Bible raise a different question from a parallel with another religion?

- Modern claim of borrowing: A claim, often from a popular book, that a Gospel story copies an older story about a god or hero, such as the claim that Horus or Mithras was born of a virgin.

Why it matters: Why does such a claim need to be checked against an ancient source rather than a modern book?

The test

- Earliest dated source: The oldest surviving ancient text or object that tells the claimed story, with its date. Its date is the date of the source, not of the person it is about: Augustus was born before Christianity, but Suetonius told his birth portents about 115 CE.

Why it matters: Why must it be older than the Gospels for borrowing by the Gospels to be possible?

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- Evidence status: The site's five verdicts on a claim: Found before Christianity, Only a related idea, Scholars debate what it means, Found only in later sources, Not found in any source we checked.

Why it matters: Why is "Only a related idea" different from "Found before Christianity"?

- Shared setting: An idea common in the ancient world, such as healing gods or heroes taken up to the gods, that several traditions drew on.

Why it matters: How can a shared setting explain a likeness without one story copying another?

The cases

- Elijah and Elisha: Prophets of the Hebrew Bible whose stories include raising a widow's son (1 Kings 17), feeding a hundred with twenty loaves (2 Kings 4) and Elijah taken up into heaven (2 Kings 2).

Why it matters: How do Brown and Pervo use these stories?

- Romulus: The founder of Rome, who in Livy vanishes in a storm cloud, is hailed as a god, and is reported by Proculus Julius to have come down from heaven and appeared to him.

Why it matters: What do Ehrman and Méndez say the story shows?

- Roman cult of Mithras: A mystery cult of Mithras, a Persian deity (Ehrman and Méndez), with roots in the Persian Zoroastrian pantheon (Brown). Justin reports that its followers said Mithras was born from a rock.

Why it matters: Why does the date of Justin matter for claims that the Gospels borrowed from the cult?

Timeline

- 30 CE: Crucifixion of Jesus (Most scholars agree). Dated to about 30 CE. Ehrman and Méndez say no one knows for certain, but scholars agree it was around 30; Brown, and Carson and Moo, give 30 or 33, and Carson and Moo find 30 slightly preferable.
- 65 to 75 CE: Mark (Most scholars agree). Written between 65 and 75 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 90 CE: Luke (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 90 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 80 to 95 CE: Acts (Most scholars agree). Written between 80 and 95 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 90 to 100 CE: John (Most scholars agree). Written between 90 and 100 CE, the date most scholars give.
- 160 CE: Mithras (Petrogenesis). Reported by Justin Martyr about 160 CE: the followers of Mithras say he was born from a rock.
- 110 to 112 CE: Pliny the Younger, Epistles 10.96. Written between 110 and 112 CE: in 112, as Ehrman and Méndez date it, or about 110, as Brown dates it.
- 115 CE: Cornelius Tacitus, Annals 15.44. Written about 115 CE, as Ehrman and Méndez date it.
- 150 to 165 CE: Justin Martyr (Nearly all scholars agree). Dated between 150 and 165 CE, a date scholars broadly accept. The range runs from his Apologies to his death, about 165.
- 200 to 299 CE: Philostratus, Life of Apollonius of Tyana. Written in the third century CE.

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Explain it

In your own words: why can Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings and the portents of Augustus in Suetonius support different conclusions about stories in the Gospels?

Worked example: Elijah taken up, and Jesus's ascension

Four steps for checking a documented parallel against the earliest source.

1. State the comparison exactly: The comparison: Luke's account of Jesus taken up while his followers watch (Acts 1:9-11) is like Elijah taken up into heaven while Elisha watches (2 Kings 2:1-14).
2. Find the earliest dated source: 2 Kings, part of the Hebrew Bible, which Jews were already reading in Greek translation before Christianity (Ehrman and Méndez). Luke knew these stories: Luke 4:25-27 cites Elijah and Elisha.
3. Read what it says: A chariot of fire and horses of fire part Elijah from Elisha, and Elijah goes up into heaven in a whirlwind. In Acts 1:9 the disciples watch as Jesus is taken up and a cloud hides him.
4. Give a status and say what it shows: Found before Christianity. Pervo calls Elijah's ascension the most cogent parallel or model for Luke's account, within a wide range of ancient stories of a hero's departure. The likeness is read as Luke telling the story in the light of his own Scripture, not as borrowing from another religion.

Your turn: the Mithras meal

Did the Lord's Supper copy a Mithras meal? Steps one and two are filled in for you. Work out three and four yourself, then open the answer.

1. State the claim exactly: The claim: the cult of Mithras had a sacred meal of bread and a cup, and the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-25) copies it.
2. Find the earliest dated source: Justin Martyr, a Christian teacher in Rome, in his First Apology 66, a defense of Christianity addressed to the emperor and issued about 150 CE (Metzger).

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3. Read what it says: What does Justin report, how does he explain it, and how does its date compare with Mark?

4. Give a status and say what it shows: What status fits, and how sure can you be?

Common misconceptions

Use these steps on any claim that one thing was copied from another, in history or in the news. Find the earliest dated source, read what it actually says, and ask how scholars explain the likeness.

- A common claim is that Horus and Mithras were both born of a virgin, like Jesus. Neither claim is found in any ancient source the site checked. In Plutarch's Isis and Osiris, Isis conceives Harpocrates by Osiris after his death, and nowhere is she called a virgin. Justin reports that those who record the mysteries of Mithras say he was born from a rock, with no mother at all. Both claims have the status Not found in any source we checked.
- Some people assume that if an older story looks like a Gospel story, the Gospel must have copied it. A likeness, even in an older source, does not by itself show borrowing. Elijah's ascension, Livy's Romulus and the Asclepius cures are all rated Found before Christianity. Pervo reads the Elijah story as a model Luke took from his own Scripture, Ehrman and Méndez read Romulus as showing a common belief about people taken up to the heavens, and Asclepius was a god known for healing. Likeness can come from a shared Scripture or a shared world as well as from copying.
- Some think a source written after the Gospels shows that its story was invented later. A late source rules a text out as a model for the Gospels, but it does not show when a story began. Tacitus and Suetonius wrote in the early second century, so their accounts of Vespasian's healings cannot be a source of the Gospels (status: Found only in later sources). But the event they report is set when Vespasian became emperor, which Brown places in 69 CE, and Tacitus says people actually present still vouched for it.

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Self-test: the answer, then the reason

1. To test whether a Gospel story was borrowed from an older one, what does a historian need to find first?

A. How many modern books and videos repeat the claim

B. The earliest dated source that tells the older story

C. Any ancient story with a similar theme, from any period

Reason: Why does that come first?

A. A claim repeated in many places today is more likely to be old.

B. The older of two stories is always the more reliable one.

C. Borrowing can only run from an earlier source to a later one.

2. Philostratus wrote the Life of Apollonius of Tyana in the third century. What status does the site give the claim that the Gospel exorcisms copy Apollonius?

A. Found before Christianity, because Apollonius lived in the first century

B. Scholars debate what it means

C. Found only in later sources

Reason: What follows from the date?

A. Any borrowing would have to run from the Christian stories toward Philostratus, not the other way.

B. A source written down late shows that the story it tells was invented.

C. Since Apollonius lived in the first century, the stories about him are as old as he is.

3. Pervo calls Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2 the most cogent parallel or model for Luke's account in Acts 1. What kind of likeness does he describe?

A. Luke drawing on his own Scripture, the Elijah and Elisha stories

B. Luke copying a Roman story about an emperor

C. A likeness no ancient source supports

Reason: What status does the site give Elijah taken up into heaven?

A. Found only in later sources, because 2 Kings was written after the Gospels.

B. Found before Christianity: it is part of the Hebrew Bible, which Jews were reading in Greek before Christianity.

C. Scholars debate what it means, because scholars disagree about whether 2 Kings tells it.

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4. The site rates "Osiris died and rose again" as Only a related idea. Why not Found before Christianity?

A. No ancient source tells of his death

B. Isis is called a virgin in the sources

C. He is revived but becomes ruler of the dead, and does not return to the world of the living

Reason: Who describes him this way?

A. Brown, who says Isis revived him by magical rites and he became god of the underworld, and Plutarch, who calls him ruler and king of the dead

B. Only modern writers, not any ancient source

C. Suetonius, in his Lives of the Caesars

5. What does Justin report that those who record the mysteries of Mithras said about his birth?

A. He was born of a virgin mother, as Jesus is in Matthew

B. He was born from a rock

C. He was born to the goddess Isis, as Horus is

Reason: What status does that give the claim that Mithras was born of a virgin?

A. Found before Christianity, because the god's roots are in ancient Persia.

B. Found only in later sources, because Justin wrote after the Gospels.

C. Not found in any source we checked: no ancient source checked, early or late, gives him a virgin mother.

6. Tacitus and Suetonius, writing in the early second century, report that Vespasian restored a blind man's sight with his spittle. What status does the site give?

A. Found before Christianity

B. Found only in later sources

C. Not found in any source we checked

Reason: Why that status?

A. The status is about the event, and Vespasian lived before the Gospels were written.

B. The sources were written after the Gospels, though the event they report is set about when Mark was written.

C. Tacitus does not mention spittle.

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7. Which statement is a historical claim rather than a statement of belief?

A. All ancient stories of gods and heroes taken up to heaven are false.

B. The ascension of Jesus happened just as Acts describes it.

C. Livy, in his History of Rome, tells of Romulus taken up in a storm cloud and hailed as a god.

Reason: What makes it historical?

A. It can be checked against a surviving source.

B. Most people today accept it.

C. It is about an event that happened long ago.

8. On whether initiates of the mystery cults typically shared a meal commemorating the death of their god, what do Ehrman and Méndez write?

A. We do not know

B. Christians certainly copied such a meal

C. The cults certainly copied the Christian meal

Reason: Why do the dates not settle whether the Christian meal and the Mithras meal are connected?

A. The cult is older than Christianity, so the Christians must have met it first.

B. Justin's report comes after the Gospels, and little is known of what happened in the mystery rituals when Christianity began.

C. Justin wrote before the Gospels, so his report settles it.

Flashcards

Fold the page along the dashed line, or cover the right column, and say each answer before you look.

Question	Answer
What is a parallel?	A likeness between a story told about Jesus and a story or belief from another text or religion.
What are the two kinds of comparison in this lesson?	Parallels scholars draw from ancient texts, and modern claims of borrowing tested against the earliest dated source.
Name the five evidence statuses on Parallels in History.	Found before Christianity, Only a related idea, Scholars debate what it means, Found only in later sources, Not found in any source we checked.
When do most scholars date the Gospel of Mark?	65 to 75 CE.
What does Pervo call Elijah's ascension in 2 Kings 2?	The most cogent parallel or model for Luke's account of Jesus taken up in Acts 1.
Which story does Brown name as an echo in Mark's feeding of the five thousand?	Elisha's feeding of a hundred with twenty loaves (2 Kings 4:42-44).

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Question	Answer
What does Proculus Julius report in Livy 1.16?	That Romulus came down from heaven and appeared to him.
Who tells the portents at the birth of Augustus, and when?	Suetonius, Life of Augustus 94, about 115 CE (Ehrman and Méndez): after the Gospels.
What do Tacitus and Suetonius report Vespasian did at Alexandria?	Restored a blind man's sight with his spittle and healed a man's hand or leg, before a crowd.
What does Justin report about the birth of Mithras?	That his followers say he was born from a rock (about 160 CE).
Who gives the earliest written mention of the Mithras meal, and when?	The Christian writer Justin, First Apology 66, about 150 CE.
When was the Life of Apollonius of Tyana written?	In the third century, by Philostratus: after the Gospels.
Does Osiris return to the world of the living?	No. Isis revives him (Brown), and Plutarch calls him ruler and king of the dead.

Answers

Warm-up

1. Mark.
2. 65 to 75 CE.
3. A text can be much older than the surviving copy of it.

Why it matters

- Parallel: Two stories can be alike because both draw on a shared world, such as the expectation of healing gods, or on a shared Scripture, such as the Elijah stories. Borrowing also needs a source that is older and that actually tells the claimed story.
- Found in a source: Borrowing can only run from an earlier source to a later one, so a source written after the Gospels cannot be their model, however close the likeness.
- Ancient parallel drawn by scholars: The Gospel writers knew the Hebrew Bible and cite it (Luke 4:25-27 names Elijah and Elisha), so a likeness can show a writer telling Jesus's story in the light of his own Scripture, as Brown and Pervo read it.
- Modern claim of borrowing: A modern book can repeat a claim without an ancient source behind it. Only a surviving ancient source, with a date, can show what was told and when.
- Earliest dated source: A writer can only copy what already exists. If the oldest source that tells the story is later than the Gospels, the Gospels cannot have copied it, though borrowing could run the other way.
- Evidence status: Found before Christianity means an older source tells something like the claimed parallel itself; Only a related idea means older sources show only a related idea. Osiris is revived and becomes ruler of the dead, a related idea, but does not return to earthly life.

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- Shared setting: If many people expected healing gods to cure the sick, stories about Jesus and about Asclepius could both reflect that expectation without either copying the other.
- Elijah and Elisha: Brown hears Elisha's feeding in Mark's feeding of the five thousand and says the evangelists tell Jesus's raisings like those of Elijah and Elisha; Pervo says the Elijah and Elisha stories served as a source for the Jesus tradition, especially in Luke.
- Romulus: That in pagan tradition a person taken up to the heavens without dying was thought to have become a god; they place the belief about Romulus centuries before Julius Caesar.
- Roman cult of Mithras: Justin, the earliest writer to describe its meal and its story of the rock birth, wrote about 150 and 160 CE, after the Gospels, so his evidence cannot show the Gospels copied the cult.

Explain it

Elijah's ascension is part of the Hebrew Bible, older than Christianity and known to Luke, so it can be a model for Acts 1, as Pervo argues. The portents of Augustus are told by Suetonius about 115 CE, after the Gospels, so his account cannot be their source, even though Augustus himself lived earlier.

Your turn: the Mithras meal

3. Read what it says: Justin reports that bread and a cup of water were set out with set words when someone was initiated into the Mithras cult. He explains it as wicked devils imitating the Christian meal: his own view, as a Christian writer. He wrote about 150 CE, long after Mark (65 to 75 CE).
4. Give a status and say what it shows: Found only in later sources. The evidence comes after the Gospels, so it cannot show the Gospels borrowed. But 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, and Justin's explanation is his view, not a finding. The question of any influence stays open.

Self-test

1. Answer B, reason C. The date of the earliest source decides whether borrowing by the Gospels is possible at all. How often a claim is repeated today says nothing about its age, and a similar story from a later period cannot be a model. If the source is older, the next step is to read what it actually says.
2. Answer C, reason A. The status depends on the date of the earliest source, not on when its hero lived. Ehrman and Méndez call Apollonius a first-century holy man, but the account was written by his later, third-century follower, long after the Gospels (Mark 65 to 75 CE), so it cannot be their source. A late date does not show that a story was invented; it only rules the source out as a model for earlier texts.
3. Answer A, reason B. 2 Kings tells Elijah going up into heaven in a whirlwind while Elisha watches, and Luke knew the Elijah stories (Luke 4:25-27). Pervo says the Elijah and Elisha stories served as a source for the Jesus tradition, especially in Luke: a likeness within the Gospel writers' own Scripture.
4. Answer C, reason A. Osiris is killed and cut to pieces, and Isis revives him (Brown), so a related idea is there. But what the sources tell is a revival among the dead, not a return to earthly life, so the claimed parallel itself is not found in the sources.
5. Answer B, reason C. A birth from a rock is not a virgin birth: there is no mother. A status of Found only in later sources would mean that a later source tells the claimed story, and none does. The cult has Persian roots (Brown; Ehrman and Méndez), but no ancient source the site checked gives Mithras a virgin mother.

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6. Answer B, reason B. The status follows the date of the earliest surviving source, which here is later than the Gospels. The event itself is set when Vespasian became emperor (69 CE in Brown). The sources cannot be a model for the Gospels, but that does not show the story began later.
7. Answer C, reason A. Anyone can read Livy's History of Rome and see what it says. The other two are beliefs about what really happened, which people hold and explain in their own ways; a statement is not historical just because it is about the past.
8. Answer A, reason B. The earliest written mention of the Mithras meal is by the Christian writer Justin, about 150 CE, after Mark. That rules out the Gospels copying this evidence. Justin himself said wicked devils imitated the Christian meal, but that is his view, not a finding, and Ehrman and Méndez write that recent scholarship is less inclined to claim borrowing, in part because so little is known of the rituals.

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