

POPULAR MYTHOLOGY IN THE EARLY EMPIRE AND THE MULTIPLICITY OF JESUS TRADITIONS

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the implications for our evaluation of traditions about Jesus of the dynamics of mythmaking (or *mythopoesis*) in the early Roman Empire. When the popular cultural contexts within which stories about Jesus were first told or retold are taken into account, it becomes apparent that they are likely to be characterized by far more creativity, improvisation, idiosyncrasy, and inconsistency than has hitherto been assumed by most New Testament scholars. Far from being careful and cautious in their handling of such traditions, the earliest Christians appear to have been largely indiscriminate or partisan in their judgments and, for the most part, show little concern about questions of historicity that so preoccupy current scholarship. This does not render any attempt to study the historical Jesus impossible, but it does demand a high level of historical agnosticism on many matters that is rarely conceded by current authors.

The period between the origins of traditions about Jesus and the composition of written texts referring to him has been poorly conceived in much New Testament scholarship. Most scholars have tended to underestimate or pass over the potential for mythmaking in the initial years of movements that made claims, of one kind or another, about the figure of Jesus. It is usually argued that such activity is only evident in later traditions about Jesus, and largely restricted to noncanonical sources, visible in such details as, for example, the speaking cross of the *Gospel of Peter* or the petulant miracles of the childhood Jesus in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. Where present in the canonical accounts, it is usually thought to be largely confined to either the beginning or the end of narratives about Jesus' life—the points at which, for example, the synoptic Gospels most obviously and significantly diverge and con-

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flict (one needs only compare the birth narratives of Luke and Matthew).¹ Invention within the main body of traditions about Jesus is often presumed to be limited to imaginative embellishments of a discernible historical tradition transmitted by his first followers—accretions that can be removed through the application of appropriate criteria (though there is, of course, much dispute as to what these criteria might be).² There are two common assumptions that lead most scholars to have faith in the notion of a recoverable, underlying core that contains authentic data about the historical Jesus that is not fundamentally indistinguishable and inseparable from myth:

- i) First, it is assumed that the central traditions about Jesus originated with, and were somehow determined by, the teachings and actions of the historical Jesus himself.
- ii) Second, it is assumed that core traditions were transmitted and controlled by communities of believers in Jesus that either corporately or through the ongoing authority given to eyewitnesses guarded against significant innovation.

As we shall see, both these assumptions are questionable. In fact, the license and creativity of those that relayed stories about Jesus is likely to have been so great that the association between many traditions and specific historical events that may have been their original genesis is largely unrecoverable.

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Definition of “Popular”

It is important to begin with some brief remarks about the use of the term *popular* in the context of this essay. By using this term I want to draw attention to the understandings and experiences of myth that were prevalent in the early empire and to note that these do not neces-

sarily equate with ideas and concerns of the literary elite that tend to dominate our interpretations. I use the term *popular* here, as I have elsewhere in studies of method in the analysis of the church at Corinth,³ early Christian attitudes towards magic and healing,⁴ malignant illness,⁵ the imperial cult,⁶ and economics,⁷ to draw attention to practices and beliefs that appear to be widespread and common in the empire but are generally neglected by those whom I believe do not take time to establish a plausible context of interpretation; those who eschew the difficult questions about not just the *presence* but also the *prevalence* of practices and beliefs when establishing the “background” of early Christianity. In short, I am keen that we recognize what E. P. Thompson has called (albeit in a different context) “the enormous condescension of posterity”⁸ that has left most people in history without a history, something that has adversely affected our understanding of the context with which the earliest Christians lived. I am not alone in this desire to take the popular cultures of the early empire seriously,⁹ but it still remains an underdeveloped perspective.

I must emphasize that in using the word *popular* I do not necessarily assume a homogeneity amongst the non-elite of the early empire (as though the non-elite of the empire were a lumpen, undifferentiated mass without ethnic, religious, gendered, economic, or other differences, many of which were important to them and should be to us). Nor do I rule out the possibility that there are areas where popular cultures and elite cultures intersect and overlap. For example, Aesop’s *Fables* are often taken as evidence, par excellence, of popular culture in the Roman empire,¹⁰ but we know that they were also the subject of expensive art in the empire too (Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*, 1.3) and attracted the attention of the highly educated—indeed, according to one tradition Socrates spent the last night of his life versifying some of these fables (Plato, *Phaedo*, 61b).

Indeed, in the area of mythology, traditions could be in some sense shared across most population groups. This is perhaps most obvious with literary traditions. Homer’s poems were, for example, the formative and most widely known texts in the empire. Their cultural significance is visible in numerous ways. For example, the Borystheneans on the Black Sea, originally Greek colonists,¹¹ allegedly continued to know

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them by heart although they lost the ability to speak Greek (Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes*, 36.9). They were sufficiently prominent that the poems were even the subject of discussion in rabbinic literature.¹² Heraclitus, a first-century commentator on Homer, could say:

From the earliest age, children beginning their studies are nursed on Homer's teaching. One might say that while we were still in swathing bands we sucked from his epics as from fresh milk. He assists the beginner and later the adult in his print. In no stage of life, from boyhood to old age, do we ever cease to drink from him. (*Quaestiones Homericæ*, 1.5–6)¹³

Such a picture was not limited to the educated and wealthy but is confirmed in a wide range of literary and material remains that tell us of the enduring and popular reception of Homer amongst all classes within the empire.¹⁴ Knowledge of his work is evident everywhere, including in material of a peculiarly popular provenance, such as amulets¹⁵ and do-it-yourself oracles.¹⁶ There is also evidence that literary mythologies or recastings of traditional myth that were of a more recent origin, by the likes of Ovid and Virgil, could similarly be rapidly and enthusiastically embraced by the wider populace.¹⁷

Nonetheless, the term *popular* should remind us that our concern does not begin and end with literature of this kind if we want to understand myth and mythopoesis in the early empire. We need to cast our net rather more widely. It is important to examine literary remains that tell us both directly and indirectly about popular conceptions of myth. The works of Strabo, Pausanias, or Julius Hyginus should attract most attention, as they give us our most detailed knowledge about local myths, but there is much also to learn from ideas about gods and heroes implicit, for example, in other forms of writing, such as the popular slave biography, the *Vita Aesopi*; the book of dream interpretations produced by Artemidorus; or paradoxographical literature (a popular genre that recounted marvels, see Aulus Gellius, *Noctae Atticae*, 9.4.9ff).¹⁸ Even graffiti can, on occasion, tell us something.¹⁹ It is also vital to take account of the material culture of the empire. The archaeological record of the eastern Mediterranean should remind us that people inhabited a world full of myths. As Rüpke for example, has noted, this

is visible in the decorations of temples—from the cult statues or their miniatures, figure ensembles on temple pediments, the contents of the friezes that decorated the entablature that ran along the outside of a temple, the acroteria (terracotta decorations on the four corners of the roof of a temple, and on the gable ends) that often depicted mythological scenes or the attributes of gods, and the antefixes (roof tiles often decorated with the faces of gods).²⁰ In addition we should add formal paintings that depicted scenes from myths also adorned temples and other public spaces and were regularly commented upon, for example, by Pausanias (e.g., *Periegesis*, 1.3; 1.15) but have left little trace today, although the wall paintings of houses in Pompeii, especially the House of the Tragic Poet, may give us some intimations of their character.²¹ Such visual representations were clearly very influential on the ways that stories were known and interpreted (“poets and painters make equal contribution to our knowledge of the deeds and the looks of heroes,” Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*, 1.1). Indeed, we should also not overlook private or semipublic material culture too, from paintings (on plaster, boards, or canvas), to the plethora of domestic artifacts, the precious “small things” that Deetz has reminded us are so central to the ways that past people constructed their lives and allow us to get an insight into the character and content of ideas that were significant and widespread: we can learn much, for example, from the mythical iconography evident or evoked in such things as cooking utensils, brick stamps, oil lamps, figurines, vase paintings, coins, bath tokens, jewelry, amulets, and grave markers.²²

Of course, it is not always easy to make sense of some of this data and to gauge how typical or representative it might be. The renderings of myth are also sometimes perplexing. For example, what should we make of the scrap of a second century CE Homer hypothesis found at Oxyrhynchus that omits any reference to the activity of the gods?²³ Many of the visual representations of myths or artifacts associated with them are not just hard for us to interpret but appear to have left the ancient viewer confused or undecided too (e.g., Pausanias, *Periegesis*, 5.18.6–7; see also *Periegesis*, 1.35.7–8).²⁴

A number of key modes of transmission of popular mythology are also now largely unrecoverable. Songs and oral traditions about the

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gods and heroes, which were probably the main ways that myths were transmitted, are largely lost to us, with occasional exceptions recoverable from the pages of Strabo or Pausanias.²⁵ We hear only indirectly about the visual representations of myths that accompanied festivals (e.g. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 11) or public games (what Coleman refers to as the “fatal charades” that are familiar from some martyrdom accounts where Christians and others were dressed up as gods and made to enact a famous mythical scenes.²⁶ We know virtually nothing about the most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the first-century Roman Empire, the mime (see Cicero, *Pro Rabirio Postumo*, 35; Athenaeus *Deipnosophistai*, 1.20d; Philo, *In Flaccum*, 34, 38, 72; 75),²⁷ even though these functioned to give popular form to myth, both ancient and modern (the mimes were not silent but accompanied by songs and dialogue; see Lucian, *De Saltatione* 29–30, 63, 68). Mime artists were capable of rapidly forging new myths, when events required it that could provoke powerful, even violent, reactions in their audience (not least through their roles at funerals) (see *Cassius Dio*, 56.29.1).²⁸

However, problems of evidence and interpretation aside, the attempt to focus upon popular mythology is one worth undertaking. Nonetheless, we should note that negative judgments on the value of the cognate, though distinct, business of studying popular religion in the empire might make our subject matter somewhat contentious. Peter Brown dismissed the notion of popular religion in his influential *The Cult of the Saints*, describing it as a two-tier approach derived from the prejudices of commentators.²⁹ Elsner is quite right to note that

there is much that was right about Brown’s position, especially his criticism of the lazy thinking that blamed anything a scholar disapproved of on the vulgar habits of the masses. But one of the problems of the abandonment of two tiers is that the whole of popular religion becomes merely that which is sanctioned and tolerated by the elite, liable to change through a “slow but sure pressure from on top.”³⁰

The revisiting of popular religion in the early Roman Empire is long overdue, although important work, such as Frankfurter’s seminal study of religion in Roman Egypt³¹ is indicative of what can be gained by such a focus, alerting us to the ways in which worshipers sustained, innovated,

and appropriated meanings through their own rituals and interpretations unsanctioned by elite and priestly classes intent on trying to control the forms of practice and tradition that should predominate.

Definitions of Myth

It is also important, at this stage, to define what is meant in this essay by *myth*. Definitions of myth are numerous³² but few bear much resemblance to the meaning of the Greek term *mythos* that will be the focus of this essay. Although the meaning of this word changed over time, it can be usefully thought of as referring to a story, or more precisely, a popular story of a god or hero.³³ As Dowden notes, by the first century BCE it seems to have been common to think of myths as including matters that were neither true nor probable (*Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 1.13).³⁴ Wiseman remarks, “Such a story may be (in our terms) historical, pseudo-historical or totally fictitious, but if it matters enough to be retold, it can count as a myth.”³⁵

This conception of myth might, to some seem rather anemic. As Fritz Graf has noted, an enormous semantic gap has arisen between what was meant by *mythos* (or the Latin *fabula*) and modern meanings of myth as a consequence of processes begun in eighteenth century.³⁶ Most definitions today assume that myth can be described rather more precisely and are predicated on the notion that the term should be limited to hoary old tales about a time long before or apart from the world of the teller, involving nonhuman beings and extraordinary events. Myths are assumed to be bearers or generators of significant meanings about, for example, society, morality, psychology, ontology, cosmology, history, or ritual life. “They are more than stories that lack empirical validation; they serve as symbolic statements about the meaning and purpose of life in this world.”³⁷

The question of the definition of myth has been even more confused by the unhelpful distinction between *myth* and *legend* so ingrained in the thinking of New Testament scholars (largely, as a result of the ongoing legacy of form criticism, and notably Martin Dibelius and Rudolph Bultmann).³⁸ As Graf says, such attempts at categorization are “irrelevant at best, misleading at worst: it is a matter of our own cate-

gories and there is no scholarly consensus as to what these categories mean.”³⁹ It has also been complicated by fact that many of those studying the historical Jesus have preferred, in the last few decades, to use the terms *narrative* or *story* in preference to *myth*, because these words are less emotionally charged and allow critics to sidestep questions of historicity implicit in the latter.⁴⁰

Although I think that Mack is quite right to complain that contemporary scholarship concerned with Christian origins has suffered as a consequence of its failure to engage with what he terms “modern myth theory,”⁴¹ and outputs of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Seminar on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins demonstrate what can be gained by attending to just such approaches,⁴² for the purposes of this essay, a narrower, rather more prosaic understanding of myth as *a story about a popular figure that includes material that is neither true nor probable* will be used without any theoretical assumptions about the function or meaning of such material.

THE CHARACTER OF MYTH IN THE EARLY ROMAN EMPIRE

So, having explored what we mean by popular mythology in the early empire, we need now to say something of its fundamental character before briefly elucidating some of its central features. Gould’s remarks are particularly apposite:

The...absence of finality is characteristic of Greek myth. Greek myth is open-ended; a traditional story can be re-told, told with new meanings, new incidents, new persons, even with a formal reversal of old meaning... The improvisatory character of Greek myths is not just a literary fact... It is not bound to forms hardened and stiffened by canonical authority, but mobile, fluent and free to respond to a changing experience of the world.⁴³

Of course, what Gould says here refers predominately to Greek myth, and some might feel that it is therefore of little consequence for understanding the way myth could be conceived in other cultural con-

texts, primarily in the eastern Mediterranean, in which we know the earliest Christians lived. However, a tendency towards mythmaking was an inextricable characteristic of popular Hellenism (still a valid concept, though one requiring substantial critical reflection),⁴⁴ and Hellenism was a dynamic, component part, in some manner, of all cultures within the eastern empire (indeed, in many ways, it was constituted by these cultures, taking different forms in different locations, through processes of fusion and hybridization). While in no way wishing to downplay the differences between, for example, Roman and Greek cultures and religion, differences that preoccupied writers such as Plutarch in his *Questiones Romanae* and *Questiones Graecae*, we should not assume, for example, that Romans and those influenced by Roman culture did not approach myth in the same way and have the same capacity for mythmaking. As Wiseman has shown, the notion that the Romans did not have their own myths is really a legacy of Romanticism and does not reflect the evidence: “The Romans were not a people without myths. They too had stories to tell about their gods, their forefathers and the achievements of their city.”⁴⁵ We need to rid ourselves of some age-old prejudices about Roman culture that continue to shape interpretations today; Kurt Latte’s description of the Romans as “an unspeculative and unimaginative people” who simply borrowed and left undeveloped the myths of the Greeks is not accurate as we can see from a cursory examination of, for example, Ovid’s *Fasti*, the poem about the Roman sacred calendar.⁴⁶ Elsewhere in the empire, Frankfurter’s work on Roman Egypt shows just such mythic dynamism as characteristic of religion there,⁴⁷ and we can see something similar in the cult of Magna Mater (Cybele) that continued to develop in Phrygia and throughout the empire, amongst the Anatolian diaspora and others in Greece and Rome long after the formal importation of the Goddess into Rome in 204 BCE.⁴⁸

Nor should it be thought that Jews were somehow exceptions, uninfluenced by the prevailing cultural forces that shaped the lives of others in the region, and with which they had lived for centuries.⁴⁹ As has been recently argued, we need a revised analytical paradigm for understanding the relationship between Hellenism and Judaism, and Alexander might well be right that this should now be “always in favour of similarity rather than dissimilarity.”⁵⁰ One only needs to look at the

tendencies in traditions about such key first-century figures as Yohanan ben Zakkai⁵¹ or the unhistorical and fantastical narratives that found their way into the Talmud⁵² or Philo's *De Vita Mosis* to see that myth-making was as common among Jews as anyone else in the early empire (and such an attitude to myth is not in any way dependent upon syncretism or Jewish involvement in religious practices of Hellenism).

So, having established the open-ended nature of mythmaking in the early empire, let us now make a few further remarks about its character before returning to the question of the early Christian traditions about Jesus.

The Fecundity of Myth

Myth in the early empire was *not* conservative. Pausanias at times despaired because of its constant mutations. He complained, "Those who like to listen to the miraculous are themselves apt to add to the marvel, and so they ruin truth by mixing it with falsehood." He did not restrict this practice to those who recounted tales about the past, noting that even events in own day "have been generally discredited because of the lies built up on a foundation of fact" (*Periegesis*, 8.2.6–7).

Even when knowledge of written, canonical versions of a myth became widespread, as was the case with Virgil and Homer, further mythmaking could continue apace, often involving the deliberate rewriting and reordering of the written accounts. Tertullian's complaints about how heretics used Christian scripture contains a passing reference to just such widespread practices:

In profane writings also an example comes ready to hand of a similar facility. You see in our own day, composed out of Virgil, a story of a wholly different character, the subject-matter being arranged according to the verse, and the verse according to the subject-matter. In short, Hosidius Geta has most completely pilfered his tragedy of Medea from Virgil. A near relative of my own, among some leisure productions of his pen, has composed out of the same poet The Table of Cebes. On the same principle, those poetasters are commonly called Homerocentones, "collectors of Homeric odds and ends," who stitch into one piece, patchwork fashion, works of their own from the

lines of Homer, out of many scraps put together from this passage and from that (in miscellaneous confusion). Now, unquestionably, the Divine Scriptures are more fruitful in resources of all kinds for this sort of facility. Nor do I risk contradiction in saying that the very Scriptures were even arranged by the will of God in such a manner as to furnish materials for heretics, inasmuch as I read that “there must be heresies,” [1 Corinthians 11:19] which there cannot be without the Scriptures. (*De Praescriptione*, 39.)

Written material and the oral traditions could be combined in a myriad of new configurations to create yet further myths. This, for example, is evident from the remarks of Philo, who, begins his *De Vita Mosis* with the following words:

I shall proceed to narrate the events which befell him, having learnt them both from those sacred scriptures which he has left as marvelous memorials of his wisdom, and having also heard many things from the elders of my nation, for I have continually connected together what I have heard with what I have read, and in this way I look upon it that I am acquainted with the history of his life more accurately than other people. (*De Vita Mosis*, 1.1.4)

From what we can tell, specifically oral renderings of myth within the empire appear to have been a particularly creative undertaking, characterized by improvisation. With the possible exception of some distinctive groups, such as the Pythagoreans, “verbatim transmission of memorized traditions does not appear to apply to the vast majority of oral traditions in the Greco-Roman world.”⁵³

The Pluriform Nature of Myth

It is perhaps unsurprising that mythmaking does not appear to have been overburdened with a concern for coherence and consistency. For most people there were no significant problems caused by the persistence of multiple versions of the same myth, even when they flatly contradicted one another, and no particular reason to choose between them.

Even Pausanias, for example, is often content merely to recount dif-

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ferent versions of a story without indicating which he considers the more plausible (e.g., Oedipus in *Periegesis* 1.28.6). Artemidorus similarly advises that one should not seek to distinguish between contradictory versions of a tradition (although he considers nonmiraculous accounts are more likely to be accurate) (*Oneirocritica* 4.47; see also Plutarch, *Vitae parallelae*, 2.3–6). Even the existence of the tomb of Zeus in Crete and the local tradition that the king of the gods was in fact dead, does not seem to have bothered most people in the empire until it became part of the arsenal of arguments used by Christian apologists against paganism (see Athenagoras, *Apologia*, 30; Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 3.43; *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, 5.23, 6.21).

As Pausanias complained, for most of those who lived within the Roman Empire, the kinds of myths they believed did not need to be coherent or require rational scrutiny: “Most people tell and believe untruths, including whatever they picked up as children from tragedies and oratorios” (*Periegesis*, 1.3.3). Although there were educated students of myth, such as Plutarch, who tried “to purify the mythic, making it yield to reason” (*Vita Thesei*, 1.5), to remove the wheat from the chaff, standing in a rational tradition of criticism of classical myth that went back at least as far as Hecataeus of Miletus in the sixth century BCE (Pausanias, *Periegesis*, 3.25.5), they were conscious that neither they nor those who tried to overcome such problems through the alternative strategy of allegorization⁵⁴ represented the prevailing attitude within the popular cultures of the empire. Others were content to allow a profusion of alternative versions of myths to stand, without judging between them.

The inconsistencies in myth were, of course, something of which nonpagan critics could make much. Josephus, for example, ridiculed the claims of Greeks about the accuracy of their knowledge of their past history, noting the incongruities in their myths—something that he ascribed, in part, to the oral nature of the earliest accounts (notably in relation to Homer; *Contra Apionem*, 1.2–3). He contrasted them unfavorably with the antiquity and accuracy of the Jewish written canon (*Contra Apionem*, 1.37–43), although we also know from adverse comments of Philo that other educated Jews saw similar problems with the biblical texts that they too treated as myths ripe for criticism (*De Abrahamo*, 33.178–34; see also *De Confusione linguarum*, 2.2–4, 9).⁵⁵

The Limited Knowledge of Myth

This incoherence came about, in part, because most people were not expected to know the myths in any particular detail. With some exceptions, paganism of the early empire was not a textual religion, and what texts did contain some kind of authority—notably the Sibylline Oracles (or rather, what could be reconstructed of them after a devastating fire of 83 BCE)—did not seem to have contained much in the way of myth and could only be consulted by a few specialists. Although the contents of myth did form part of most people’s education, both formal and informal, at an early age, “only those who had attended school knew the fine points.... The essence of a myth is not that everyone knows it but that it is supposed to be known and is worthy of being known by all.”⁵⁶ Literary evidence indicates just such partial and somewhat confused knowledge on the part of many in the early empire. Petronius, for example, portrays the freedman Trimalchio self-consciously and inaccurately referencing Homer (*Satyricon*, 39.3–4, 48.7, 52.1–2). Interestingly, as Noy has suggested, those who were enslaved were often prevented from having anything but the most limited knowledge of the cults of their homeland, something that may well have hastened the creation of alternative renderings of myth and tolerance of diversity in myth in the empire.⁵⁷

Various Modalities of Belief and Myth

The nature of belief in myths varied. As Veyne notes “modalities of belief are related to the ways in which truth is possessed”⁵⁸ and there was no formal expectation of belief in the literal “truth” of myth as the religions of the Greeks and Romans were, within limits, religions of orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. However, when we ask:

Did the Greeks believe in their mythology? The answer is difficult, for “believe” means so many things. Not everyone believed that Minor, after his death, continued being a judge in Hell, or that Theseus fought the Minotaur, and they knew that poets “lie.” However, their way of not believing the things is disturbing to us. For in the minds of the Greeks, Theseus had, nonetheless, existed. It was neces-

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sary only to “purify Myth by Reason” and refine the biography of Heracles’ companion to its historic nugget.⁵⁹

One of the perhaps surprising cultural assumptions that seems to emerge from examining mythology in antiquity is the paradox that “there were people who did not believe in the existence of the gods, but never did anyone doubt the existence of the heroes.”⁶⁰ Indeed, “during the period... from the fifth century B.C. to the fourth century A. D., absolutely no one, Christians included, ever expressed the slightest doubt concerning the historicity of Aeneas, Romulus, Theseus, Heracles, Achilles, or even Dionysus; rather, everyone asserted this historicity.”⁶¹ Euhemerism, the belief that the gods were really humans about whom legends had grown, did not function to undermine the subjects of myth, but rather to give people a reason to believe in them.

The Informal Transmission of Myth and the Process of Mythmaking

There were a number of ways in which myth could be learned and relearned throughout a person’s life in the empire. Although it is hard to know, as Aune has noted,⁶² exactly what narratives accompanied many festivals or were expressed in hymns as we have so little information about the liturgical life of paganism in the early empire, nonetheless *aretalogoi*, professional tellers of the activities of gods and heroes, seem to have functioned around temples⁶³ and were possibly employed in richer households (e.g. Suetonius, *Octavius*, 78.2). Freelance, professional recounters of myths seem to have been common and plied their wares, alongside jugglers and musicians, in crowds (Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes*, 20.9–10). Those visiting famous religious sites seem to have been plagued by guides keen to interpret the stories evidenced in the paintings, sculptures, or inscriptions, or to provide local traditions, for a small fee, even if, much as today, such information was not easy to believe—as we can see in remarks by Lucian (*Amores*, 8), Pausanias (*Periegesis*, 1.19.2; 1.31.5; 2.9.7) and Plutarch (*De Pythiae oraculis*, 395a).⁶⁴ As Horsfall has reminded us in his recent study of the culture of the Roman plebs, most of the inhabitants of the empire acquired their culture without formal schooling, through the theater, or buskers or other leisure pursuits.⁶⁵

Although education in the content and criticism of myth, particularly as found in Homer, would form part of any formal education⁶⁶—indeed, Homer was at the core of primary education throughout the empire⁶⁷—one recurring feature of descriptions of myth in antiquity is that most initially learned myths in a domestic context, from the women directly involved in their early upbringing. Women in antiquity were, perhaps unsurprisingly, “a fundamental instrument of the transmission of a culture.”⁶⁸ As Philostratus the Elder remarked to an inquisitive ten year old:

That Theseus treated Ariadne unjustly...when he abandoned her while asleep on the island of Dia, you must have heard from your nurse; for these women are skilled in telling such tales and they weep over them whenever they will. (*Imagines*, 1.14)

The extent of information transmitted in this manner clearly varied. Veyne, for example, questions whether children were taught the great mythic cycles early in their lives, querying whether they had to wait until they were “under the grammarian’s authority to learn the great legends?”⁶⁹—assuming they were sufficiently privileged to gain a formal education of that kind. However, from what we can determine, the telling of myths, or parts of them, by these women, educating and entertaining their charges, involved improvisation and innovation. Philostratus the Younger, for example, recalls how his nurse “entertained me with these tales, which she accompanied with a pretty song; some them even used to make her cry” (*Heroicus*, 136–37).

There were no particular controls on how a myth was presented within this context and our data emphasizes that the retellings often focused upon events of a miraculous nature (indeed, for some elite males, reflecting their own notions about rationality and gender, belief in the miraculous was a peculiarly female characteristic—Polybius, *Historiae*, 12. 24. 5). In the words of Tacitus, young children were exposed to “idle tales and gross absurdities” (*Dialogus de oratoribus*, 29)—though most treated these “absurdities” as fact, as Sextus Empiricus complained (*Pyrrhonian Outlines*, 1.147; see also Aretmidorus, *Oneirocritica*, 4.47).

Despite the evidence of the prominence of women as transmitters of myth within a domestic context, this has largely been ignored in

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studies of oral tradition in the Roman Empire.⁷⁰ Although this has merited mention by some,⁷¹ it has also been passed over in major contributions of New Testament scholars on the role of the oral tradition in the origins of Christianity, and is not discussed in works such as those by Gerhardsson, Kelber, Dunn, and Bauckham.⁷² This neglect is perhaps all the more surprising given a possible clue of the importance of this process within the churches in the words addressed to “Timothy” by “Paul”: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you” (2 Tim 1:5).

EVIDENCE OF CONCERN WITH MYTH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Having now sketched something of the place and character of popular myth within the early empire, let us now turn to its significance for our evaluation of the early traditions about Jesus.

First, it is clear that the production of myth, the spinning of stories about Jesus, was a concern in some early communities. In a number of places in the New Testament, the authors are keen to distinguish themselves from those whom they complained purveyed myths about Jesus. For example in 2 Peter: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pt 1:16). Although this passage probably implies that the author believed that the “cleverly devised myths” were being proclaimed by others, as for example, Kelly maintains,⁷³ it is also possible, as Neyrey has argued, that the author is actually defending himself from others who judged that the traditions that the author himself proclaimed were myths.⁷⁴

In 1 Timothy we find a clear warning that members of the church should avoid myths (with the obvious implication that myths were, in fact, something that appealed to many early believers):

I urge you, as I did when I was on my way to Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach any dif-

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ferent doctrine, and not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations. (1 Tim 1:3–4)

And, perhaps unsurprisingly, given our previous discussion, the author of this epistle makes a direct association of dangerous myths with women: “Have nothing to do with profane myths and old wives’ tales” (1 Tim 4:7).

Indeed, the process of mythmaking in Christian churches seemed, to the author of 2 Timothy, unavoidable:

For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. (2 Tim 4:3–4)

It is important to note here that the myths in question need not be, as is often assumed, the complex, cosmological and etiological myths associated with most forms of Gnosticism—if we accept, for a moment, the analytical value of the term *Gnosticism*, first coined in the seventeenth century.⁷⁵ Myths of this kind are classically represented by the myth found in the *Apocryphon of John* and Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.29 (and which seems to be present in rudimentary form in traditions about such early Gnostic groups as the Simonians; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23). Such an interpretation of the meaning of *mythos* in the pastoral epistles owes itself, to a great extent, to the use of the word *gnosis* by the author of 1 Timothy when describing the content of the “profane chatter” of which he so strongly disapproved (1 Tim 6:20). But *gnosis* is a common, nontechnical Greek term, and it seems far more likely that the knowledge consisted of myths about Jesus and others, probably biblical characters (indeed, this would better explain the association of such myths specifically with Jews in Titus 1:14).

It is also important to note that the term *myth* here is clearly pejoratively contrasted with the “truth” of the traditions that the respective authors claim to have received (2 Tim 4:4; Titus 1:14; 2 Pt 3:16) and to pass on (1 Tim 6:20, 2 Tim 1:12, 14). However the traditions about Jesus that were sanctioned and promoted by the author of an epistle such as 1 Timothy would have looked suspiciously like myth to most inhabi-

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tants of the empire. No specific dominical traditions about Jesus are appealed to in the letter, and the kerygmatic summary of his life by the author sounds suspiciously mythic according to our initial definition:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.
(1 Tim 3:16)

So, it appears from the evidence of the pastoral and Petrine epistles, the early Christians were indeed concerned with mythmaking, both sanctioned and unsanctioned, within their communities.

FROM MONOGENESIS TO POLYGENESIS, FROM ARBORIFORMS TO RHIZOMES

However, the significance of mythmaking for evaluating the earliest traditions about Jesus is particularly apparent when it is married to a more plausible model of the origins of Christianity than that which currently is in the ascendant. The dominant model remains a rather conservative one that reflects, more or less, the pattern presented in the two earliest histories of the church—Luke–Acts and Eusebius’s *Historia Ecclesiae*—in which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are taken as the originating and determinative events that explain what follows. Such a model allows little room for the creation and proliferation of different traditions about Jesus and their consequences, as it assumes an ongoing coherence and consistency in the development of the faith, with the Jerusalem church functioning, in the early years, as arbiters of tradition and authority among all those who propagated a message about Jesus. Such a model presupposes monogenesis.

This model has, of course, had its critics. Although there have been dissenting voices for centuries, some of whom, such as the seventeenth-century deist Henry Stubbe, deserve to be somewhat better known, following Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (first published in 1934) scholars have been especially aware of the diversity of forms of earliest Christianity, and alternative versions of the faith

that subsequently lost out to “orthodoxy” may well have been the first, dominant, and indeed the only form of Christianity in many areas. Particularly since Helmut Koester pushed Bauer’s historical schema back into the apostolic age,⁷⁶ it has been common to talk, even in quite conservative circles, about the diversity of theological perspectives in the New Testament, as evidenced by, for example, James Dunn’s *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*.⁷⁷

However, in recent years, the argument for diversity has been pushed yet further. Some, such as Crossan and Mack⁷⁸ have suggested multiple, distinct forms of the Christian movement from the earliest period, which had little or no common ground other than a reverence for Jesus, which only gradually merged and assimilated with one another.⁷⁹ For example, it is often noted that Q and the Gospel of Thomas seem to have little interest in the death of Jesus, mentioning it at best only obliquely (Q 14:27; GThom 55),⁸⁰ and preferring, instead, to focus upon Jesus as a teacher of wisdom. Yet the death of Jesus is a key datum in other forms of early Christianity (e.g. Rom 10:9, 1 Cor 2:1–2, etc.), some of which, such as that propagated by Paul, conversely show a similar level of indifference to the sayings traditions of Jesus that Q so cherishes. It is hard to see how the life and death of one particular historical figure could account for such diversity of both tradition and interpretation, and so Price can even say, with some justification, having surveyed the variety of Jesuses evident in the earliest forms of Christianity, that “it is an open question whether a historical Jesus had anything to do with any of these Jesuses, much less the Jesuses of the Gospels.”⁸¹

There are, however, good reasons to have reservations about the grounds on which such radical diversity is argued by some. It is unwise, for example, to assume that each text making mention of Jesus was written by and for a community with a distinct understanding of the figure of Jesus. Such texts may be indicative of separate communities but are hardly conclusive proof of them. They often assume knowledge of traditions external to the text that may well be shared with other forms of the faith (for example, the brief reference to John the Baptist in logion 46 and James the Just in logion 12 of the Gospel of Thomas assumes the readership knows much more about these figures than is evident from the text). The existence of some of the texts on which

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models of radical diversity are dependent is also far from as assured as some scholars presume. For example, it is often forgotten that Q is a *hypothetical* construct and there are good grounds for doubting its validity⁸² and serious questions are now raised other the authenticity of *Secret Gospel of Mark*.⁸³

Nonetheless, it seems far more reasonable to envisage the origins of Christianity as polygenic rather than monogenic. Indeed, the canonical New Testament itself, on closer inspection, seems to indicate as much. For example, Apollos, a key figure in the early propagation of faith in Christ in the eastern Mediterranean, who was equal to both Paul and Peter in the eyes of the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 1:12; 3:4–6, 22; 4:6) and who operated independently of both (1 Cor 16:12), appears to have become a committed advocate of Jesus in Alexandria (Acts 18:24). Whatever version of the new religion he obtained there, and we have absolutely no idea who first took ideas about Jesus to Alexandria, it is clear that for the author of Acts of the Apostles it was inadequate (“he only knew the baptism of John”; Acts 18:25) and it was necessary for him to have the “Way of God” (a shorthand for the particular understanding of Christianity approved by the author) explained to him more accurately by Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:26). Although we know little about Apollos, he is representative of this fundamental diversity present at the outset and his story illustrates the mutual ignorance of different forms of Christianity. Similarly, Acts also tells us of a group of “disciples” in Ephesus who again seem to know only about John’s baptism (Acts 19:1–7) and to be ignorant of the role of the holy spirit in the new faith—something so aberrant in the eyes of the author of Luke–Acts that, unlike Apollos, it required their rebaptism.

The notion that earliest Christianity, from the outset, took numerous forms is something that seems not to have caused any particular concern among the orthodox apologists themselves. Origen, for example, refuted Celsus’s accusation that as Christianity had attracted more and more followers, the self-interest of its leaders led to divisions, by saying that even when the apostles were preaching and eyewitnesses were alive “from the very beginning, when, as Celsus imagines, believers were few in number, there were certain doctrines interpreted in different ways” (Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 3.10ff).

Indeed, unlike many modern scholars, who are reluctant to posit really significant theological diversity in the earliest period and as a consequence deny the influence of Gnosticism in understanding the development of Christianity until the second century, early Christian writers had no difficulty in seeing it present in the initial decades of the religion's existence, as we can see in what they tell us of, for example, the formative roles of Simon Magus (Justin, *Apologia*, 1.26; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 1.23.1–4; *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, 2.22–26; Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 21.2.5; *Acts of Peter*, 31–32; Hippolytus, *Refutationes*, 6.9.4–18.7; see Acts 8:9–24) and Cerinthus (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.3.4).

There is a great deal that we do not know about the emergence of Christianity in this early period, and which we shall never know. However, it seems that the polygenic character of early Christianity allowed individuals and groups to innovate quite dramatically with little recourse to anyone else. Acts, for example, tells of some followers from Cyprus and Cyrene making the crucial step of converting Gentiles in Antioch to what had previously been a Jewish sect. They did this, apparently, without consulting followers of Jesus elsewhere (11:20) nor even informing them (11:22), something that indicates that the Jerusalem church did not function as arbiters of tradition and authority among all those who propagated faith in Jesus in the empire, despite its ideological significance in early Christian historiography.⁸⁴ Such developments are unsurprising given the preeminence of direct religious experience that not only legitimated but also provided the content of the faith of many early Christians. Paul, for example, could famously claim that his Gospel was not of human origin “for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:12). However, it is clear that he was not alone in claiming direct revelations from Jesus about the true character of the faith that was to be proclaimed. John of Patmos, for example, could publish letters to the seven churches in Asia purporting to be from the exalted Jesus decades after the latter's death (Rev 2–3) and that castigated other Christian leaders and groups (Rev 2:14–15, 20–25).

The inability of much scholarship to conceptualize the multiplicity, fluidity, and heterogeneity of forms of earliest Christianity is partly accounted for by the influence of predominant metaphors that

have been used to describe the movement. Too often accounts speak in terms of roots, trunks, and branches, yet, as Wright puts it: “Arborescent metaphors go hand-in-hand with hierarchical structure, extreme stratification, and linear thinking”⁸⁵—notions that seem to do violence to the data that we possess. It might be more helpful to utilize a metaphor made popular by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and to think of early Christianity as fundamentally rhizomorphic (a rhizome is a horizontal stem of a plant, normally subterranean, that often sends out roots and shoots from nodes, which can themselves break off and survive independently, beginning yet further networks).⁸⁶ Although it is pushing the evidence too far to say that early Christian groups “at first had nothing to do with each other,”⁸⁷ such a metaphor allows for the possibility of only distant or tenuous relationships between some of the groups that emerged and the coexistence of complementary and competing conceptualizations of their origins. When such a polygenic model of the origins of Christianity is taken seriously, the likelihood of endemic mythmaking amongst the first believers becomes all the more plausible.

THE MYTH OF CONTROL IN THE CREATION AND PRESERVATION OF ORAL TRADITIONS ABOUT JESUS

It could be objected that my analysis does not take seriously the evidence that Christian communities, collectively or as a consequence of the ongoing presence of credible eyewitnesses, controlled and delimited the traditions so that innovations of a fundamental kind were impossible. In models presented by, for example Bailey, Bauckham, Boman, Byrskog, Dunn, Gerhardsson, and Kelber,⁸⁸ Christian communities, or individuals of standing within communities, exerted some authority over the transmission of oral material. Such scholars argue that we should speak of “preservation” or “survival” of the Jesus tradition, albeit in rather different ways.

So, for example, Gerhardsson thinks in terms of the handing on of a tradition that was formally memorized, and was initially explicitly

taught by a teacher to his disciples before finding its way into the Gospels, whereas Bauckham argues that

the period between the “historical” Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths.⁸⁹

Dunn speaks of “oral traditioning,” imagining, for example, that when a Christian wished to hear again a particular story in the life of Jesus,

a senior disciple would tell again the appropriate story or teaching in whatever variant words and detail he or she judged appropriate for the occasion, with sufficient corporate memory ready to protest if one of the key elements was missed out or varied too much.⁹⁰

However, such models seem improbable. Nowhere can we find any explicit statements about communities or representatives of communities making collective judgments on oral traditions in this or any other manner in early Christian sources. From what we know about how early Christians went about sifting the wheat from the chaff when judging the traditions about Jesus, it seems that this was not a collective activity nor one that particular concerned communities, but rather an initiative of particular individuals within the churches. This is evident from the preface to Luke’s Gospel (Lk 1:3) and in what we know of Papias’s collection of the traditions that went into the now lost *Expositions of Oracles of the Lord* (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 3.39). Indeed, Papias’s account is all the more telling as he contrasts his attempts to discover authentic traditions with the undiscerning “multitude” who “take pleasure in those that speak much” (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 3.39.3) and yet Papias himself not only seems extremely haphazard in his approach, questioning those who just happened to be visiting to his church (Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae*, 3.39.4) but, for all his protestations, he appears to have been as drawn to sensational *paradoxa* (marvelous tales; 3.39.8f) as anyone else, and his judgments about the veracity of

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traditions were disturbing to later Christians. Eusebius complains that the collection of oral traditions that Papias compiled in the five books of *Expositions of Oracles of the Lord* contained “strange parables and teachings of the Savior, and some other more mythical things” (*Historia Ecclesiae*, 3.39.11). Indeed, it is clear from the Gospel of John that traditions about Jesus were legion and most early Christians had no difficulty with this: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). The author makes it clear that he has selected only a few traditions for inclusion in his Gospel, but the criteria for selection are expressly theological. He does not show any concern about the authenticity of the much larger body of traditions he does not include:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name (John 20:30–31).

John nowhere shows any evidence of either doubting other traditions nor some collective process in authenticating the material he includes. Indeed, John’s apparent indiscriminate attitude towards traditions about Jesus appears to share much with the popular genre of paradoxography, which was characterized by “acceptance without question of any available information; the problem of the truth or credibility of the phenomena or facts, which were presented, was simply not raised.”⁹¹

Nor can it be contended that our knowledge of the apparently conservative manner in which the early Christians handled written sources about Jesus, evident from examining the relationships between the synoptic Gospels, should lead us to question such widespread credulity on the part of most early Christians when faced with traditions about Jesus (approximately 89 percent of Mark is preserved verbatim or near verbatim in Matthew, and 72 percent in Luke).⁹² Whatever tendencies may be evident in the handling of *written* sources by early Christian authors is irrelevant for assessing the oral traditions that may lie behind them with which this paper is concerned. Indeed, there is nothing particularly conservative about the way in which early Christian writers made use of

textual sources. Matthew's use of Mark is, for example, characterized by the widespread abbreviation, addition, omission, conflation, elaboration, and reordering of material, and displays a degree of license indistinguishable from that apparent the way that Greek, Roman, and Jewish writers of the time made use of their written sources.⁹³

CONCLUSION

When properly conceived, it is apparent that myth and mythmaking were dynamic components of popular cultures of the early Roman Empire and, as we can see from the complaints of the pastoral and Petrine epistles, were a characteristic of early Christian communities. In the light of this, any evaluation of traditions about Jesus must take seriously the likelihood that they could have had little or no direct connection with the historical Jesus himself. Leaving aside the birth and resurrection narratives, all traditions about the earthly Jesus, not just those that might strike the modern reader as overtly *mythic*, such as the baptismal miracle (Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22), the temptations (Mt 4:1–11; Mk 1:13; Lk 4:1–13), and the transfiguration (Mt 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36), were potentially the product of or affected by mythmaking, and should be treated with caution.

Indeed, this mythmaking need not have even originated solely with followers of Jesus. For example, the healing narratives, which are present in the earliest Jesus traditions⁹⁴ are likely to have been attractive to those who were not part of any particular Jesus movement but sought out healing and may well have originated with them.⁹⁵ Figures such as the seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13–20) or the unnamed exorcist (Mk 9:38), who exorcised in the name of Jesus, are evidence of the circulation of traditions about Jesus among those unconnected with any followers of Jesus and such people might also have developed further traditions.

In the earliest period it is also quite possible that some myths about the figure of Jesus continued to be preserved and developed by those who had left the churches, or perhaps believed that the churches had left them. For example, on seeing the risen Jesus, Matthew's Gospel notes that some of his followers worshipped him but it also adds "but

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some doubted” (Mt 28:17). Elsewhere in the Gospels *doubt* seems to be mentioned in order to be resolved, whether in the famous example of Thomas in John (20: 24–29), the appearance of the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13–27) or to the disciples in Jerusalem (Lk 24:36–49). However, in this incident there is no such resolution and the implication is that among those Jews who did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus (Mt 28: 15) were followers of Jesus.

I would like to conclude by noting that I do believe that it is historically probable that some material within canonical and noncanonical sources might well bear some relation to the sayings and parables taught by a first-century Jew, and reflect the reputation he acquired in his lifetime as an effective healer and exorcist.⁹⁶ I have elsewhere argued that it is likely that this figure met his death on a Roman cross.⁹⁷ However, if anything much can be determined with relative certainty about the historical Jesus from the records we possess, it can only be data of a very general kind, akin to the most abbreviated of the skeletal of the lists of Sanders.⁹⁸ The capacity for, and character of, popular mythopoesis within the early empire, and the concomitant lack of concern and mechanisms for the control and transmission of traditions about Jesus among his multifarious followers in the decades following his death, despite the optimistic claims of the likes of Gerhardsson, Dunn, and Bauckham, makes such a conclusion unavoidable.

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- 9:20 “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her!
How often I wanted to gather your children together,
as a hen gathers her nestlings under «her» wings,
and you were not willing!
9:21 Look, your house is forsaken!” 13:34 13:35

9. The closest verses probably are 13:2 and 9–10 [17:24 and 17:34, 35]).

10. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.168.

11. Some scholars would propose that embarrassing too would have been the charge that Jesus cast out demons by Beelzebul (8:23 [11:15]), but one can easily imagine that the author created it in a polemic against “this evil generation.”

12. Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1.171.

13. *Ibid.*, 1.172.

14. According to Paul, “the kingdom of God [is present] not in word but in power” (1 Cor 4:20).

15. In Gal 5:19–21, Paul lists vices and ends the list with the statement, “those who commit such acts will not inherit the kingdom of God.” See also 1 Cor 6:9–10 and 15:50.

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