

Jesus Versus Hercules

Last week we discussed the recent upsurge in attributing a mythological understanding to the Bible. This is a heresy being popularized in seminaries as well as from pulpits within churches of Christ. We pointed out that sociologists have broadened the definition of “myth” in such a way as to refer to anything from figurative language to any obviously false notion. We highlighted that the Bible is purposeful in distancing itself from myths, which are unanimously condemned as falsehoods (1Tim. 1:3-7; 4:6-10; 2Tim. 4:1-5; Titus 1:10-16; 2Pet. 1:16-21). Furthermore, we discussed how the Bible does use figurative language, often mocking pagan myths and deities. Today we will discuss one particular Greek mythical hero that many claim is the true origin of beliefs in Jesus & the story in the Bible. Today, Hercules & Jesus go toe-to-toe.

I. We Know About Jesus, But Who Was Hercules?

A. Heracles (aka *Alkaios*) the Greek Hero-God

1. Possibly based on a historical figure or figures, but in no way definitive. Odysseus is thought by some to originate from the same historical figure. Eusebius quotes Clement as suggesting Heracles as a king of Argos in the 13th century BC. Others like Herodotus suggest other possibilities.
2. Over time, the alleged historical figure dwindled & a mythical hero took over. New stories, journeys, and feats raised him to the level of godhood. A mighty individual would become son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene, mighty Hercules deliverer of his people, victor over death, and deified man. He became the god of strength and of heroes.

B. Hercules the Roman

1. As so often occurred, the Romans carried over many elements of Greek mythology and developed them with their own culture and spin. The Greek Heracles became the Roman Hercules. Instead of being descended from Zeus, he was now descended from Jupiter.
2. As with the Greek elements in the mythology, Hercules was given god status and was known for his supernatural strength and journeys.

C. Many later developments in the mythology of this figure combined different elements from each and even innovated or invented new elements. This is especially reflected in Renaissance artwork and writing and is attested to by variations in even the canonical 12 Labors of Hercules.

D. Attributing one’s lineage to Hercules in an effort to elevate one over others became popular, as is common with myths. This appeal is attested early in the royal house of Macedonia (Philip, Alexander the Great, etc.) and all the way into the 1600s by Henry the IV of France who was given the title of “Gallic Hercules.”

II. Similarities between Hercules and Jesus – Based on “How ‘Bout Hercules? Early Christians, Ancient Myths, and the Proclamation of Christ” in *Bible Study Magazine*, May-June 2020, pp. 13-16 citing New Testament scholar Abraham Malherbe (cf. Prov. 18:17)

A. Origin, Birth, and Infancy

1. Both were reported to have been born of virgins w/ earthly fathers who resisted having intercourse w/ their respective mothers to ensure the boys’ divinity. Both had divine origin.

2. Both escaped attempts on their lives during infancy.
- B. Ministry and Accomplishments
1. Both received divine commissions at the beginning of their public activities.
 2. Both overcame temptation from supernatural sources, left their families to travel, and instructed their followers to pray.
- C. Character
1. Both humbled themselves, endured public slander, served the people they were intended to rule.
 2. Both also desired not to abandon their followers as orphans.
- D. Death and Resurrection
1. Both were betrayed by loved ones who went on to hang themselves due to remorse for what they had done.
 2. Natural phenomena accompanied both of their deaths.
 3. As the men were dying they comforted their earthly mothers and committed their spirits to their heavenly fathers.
 4. Both punctuated their lives with "It is finished" & after their deaths both harrowed hell and conquered the grave before reappearing to comfort grieving women & ascending in the clouds to be enthroned with God.
- E. Notoriety
1. Both were called "son of God" (or "son of god"). Names taken "in vain."
 2. Both were also viewed as saviors, champions, hero-gods, avengers, bringers of justice and righteousness to the cosmos and purge it from evil.
 3. Both were also referred to as "the Word" and humanity's constant helper.

III. MAJOR Differences between Hercules and Jesus

- A. The mythology of Hercules developed over vast amounts of time. As such, many components w/in the mythology are contradictory & writers & artists pick & choose which characteristics they want to represent him. In contrast, the facts of Jesus occurred & were reported in real time & are grounded in the biblical accounts themselves.
- B. The myths related to Hercules occur in timeless and obscure locations and are reported as second and thirdhand stories. The facts of Jesus occur in real places in the open and are reported by firsthand witnesses.
1. *"The Pagan stories are all about someone dying and rising, either every year, or else nobody knows where and nobody knows when. The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately."* (C.S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" in *The Weight of Glory, and Other Essays* (NY: Macmillan, 1980, 128f).
 2. *"The earliest Christians didn't just hear about Jesus in a made-up myth or threadbare wives' tale. With their own eyes they had seen the resurrected Christ."* (Based on the BSM article cited above; cf. Luke 1:1-4; 1Cor. 15:3-8; 2Pet. 1:16-21; 1Jn. 1:1-4)
- C. Major family differences:

1. The father of Hercules was capricious, intemperate, lacking self-control, and the product of someone else (i.e. Chronos). The Father of Jesus is extolled as holy, pure, undefiled, benevolent. He is timeless and is not begotten.
 2. Hercules had numerous brothers and sisters by his divine father; Jesus was the only begotten of His divine Father (Jn. 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1Jn. 4:9).
 3. Hercules was abandoned by his mother in an effort to spare him from the wrath of Hera, then Athena tricked Hera into taking care of Hercules, Hercules bit her while nursing and she rejected him, her milk creating the Milky Way. No such mythical elements are found in the accounts of Jesus.
 4. Hercules had countless children and was a philanderer. Jesus had no children and clearly was no philanderer (Isa. 53:8).
- D. Hercules was tested by feats of strength (e.g. the 12 Labors), whereas Jesus was tested by means of temptation (Matt. 4; Luke 4; Heb. 2:17; 4:15).
- E. Hercules died outside of his control; Jesus died w/in His control (Jn. 10:17f). *“There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world. While studied with profit against the background of Jewish resurrection belief, the faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religions.”* (Mettinger, *Riddle of Resurrection*, 221)
- F. Women were limited and/or prohibited in worshipping Hercules (cf. Macrobius, Aulus Gellius, Propertius); Jesus is open for worship from all (Gal. 3:28).
- G. Hercules was a drunk, polygamist, cheater, bisexual, capricious, and vengeful. He also murdered his wife and children in a fit of madness. Jesus was perfect, blameless, and without fault (1Pet. 1:19; 2:22).

IV. Crafting an Apologetic: Providing Explanation for the Similarities

- A. Pagans stole ideas from the accounts of Jesus & attributed them to Hercules.
1. Such an explanation was offered very early by Justin Martyr, a Christian apologist (First Apology, 21)
 2. Around 330-363 AD, Julian the Apostate sought to make paganism great again by recrafting Hercules in the image of Christ as a counterweight to Constantine’s Christian reforms. Two examples of this include: 1) Giving Hercules the ability to walk on water; and 2) Hercules placed as partner with Zeus and Athena in a divine triad meant to mimic the Holy Trinity.
 3. Many stories & figures today use a similar approach. For example, Superman was sent by his father to a small town to serve and protect it. His earthly parents are Martha and Jonathan rather than Mary and Joseph. Both try at times to hide their identity, fight for truth and justice with miraculous powers against the forces of evil, and both die and are resurrected.
 4. Consider also that the forecasted prophecies that specify certain attributes of Jesus predate most all of the Herculean myths. These myths could just as easily have borrowed from the OT Messianic prophecies.
- B. Basic coincidence and/or “Parallelomania”.

1. On the surface the aforementioned commonalities seem overwhelmingly comparable. However, upon closer examination they are in actuality very common and simple connections (Prov. 18:17).
2. The connections whitewash innumerable conspicuous differences b/w the two, even specifically connected to the alleged correspondences.
3. *"...the search for parallels is prone toward subjectivism, as a number of scholars have shown. One tends to read into accounts the commonalities one is looking for...one can read parallels into just about anything if parallels is what one is looking for."* (Boyd and Eddy, *Jesus Legend*, 141)

C. Intentional Selectivity Based on Audience

1. Just as John selected only a limited number of signs to relate his inspired Gospel (20:30f; 21:25), so too other biblical writers & extrabiblical commentators made use of a selection of events in Jesus' life that would register with their audience.
2. Given a pagan audience who believed in and prized mythological heroes and events, evangelists tried to establish common ground based on these preconceptions. Paul used this tactic by quoting from philosophers to appeal to certain demographics (Acts 17; Titus 1). Extrabiblical authors were sometimes very explicit in making these sorts of connections, but they would clarify the difference between myth and fact (e.g. Justin Martyr, Roman catacombs on the *Via Latina*). Such appeal does not give validity to these myths or sources or call into question the historical happenings for Jesus. They are analogous to speaking of Jesus as a greater Moses (Heb. 3:1-6) or Paul speaking of a Second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21; 1Cor. 15:20-28).
3. Two cautions about this usage:
 - a. The inspired writers had the HS as a guide & safeguard in how to use these exactly as they needed to be used. Uninspired people don't.
 - b. This can become a slippery slope...many evangelists have used this approach in polytheistic and pantheistic cultures and have caused much confusion & false belief, most notably the mere acceptance of Jesus into a pantheon rather than as the one true Lord.

D. Jesus is a historical figure, rooted in time, whose birth, teaching, death, burial, and resurrection are verifiable by Christian and non-Christian sources. Hercules doesn't come close to measuring up. Hercules is a myth; Jesus is a reality.

Though some argue that Jesus and the biblical account is a "true myth" (e.g. J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis), we should resist connecting the account of Christ or the Bible itself to such terminology. While scholars like to make this connection, the Bible resists this connection outright. Be vigilant about what or who you let into your mind; take every thought captive for Christ (2Cor. 10:5); resist being taken captive by philosophy and empty deception (Col. 2:8); and beware the presentation of Satan's minister with veils of light (2Cor. 11:13-15).