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THE CONCEPT OF IMMORTALS IN MEDITERRANEAN ANTIQUITY

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THE concept of divinity in non-Christian antiquity near the beginning of our era was complex.¹ It was possible to speak of the two extremes, gods and men, and to mean by the former the eternal like Zeus/Jupiter in contrast to mere mortals.² In this case, divinity was far removed from humanity. It was also possible, however, to speak of certain men as divine. There were two separate categories of divinity into which such men might fall that are of special interest to us in this article. On the one hand, certain men were believed in their historical existence to have displayed the divine presence in some special way and were hence regarded as *theioi andres*.³ Opinions have differed over exactly what constituted the divine presence.⁴ Whereas some circles looked for it in a man's physical beauty or in his prophetic utterances and miraculous feats,⁵ others saw it manifest in extraordinary virtue and rationality.⁶ There were also divergent views about the origin or source of the divine presence. Some looked to a supernatural conception, others to the conscious cultivation of virtue by a

¹M. Smith, "Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretologies, Divine Men, the Gospels and Jesus," *JBL* 90 (1971) 181-84. My paper is limited to conceptions of divinity near the beginning of our era. It focuses on the concept of the immortals because this is the concern of ancient writers like Diodorus of Sicily. It brings in the *theios anēr* concept as an auxiliary concern because of its importance in current discussions in NT study (e.g., P. J. Achtemeier, "Gospel Miracle Traditions and the Divine Man," *Int* 26 [1972] 174-97).

²E.g., Lucian, *Zeus Catechized* (LCL, 2. 67). The treatise, *On How Many Heads One Should Praise a God*, by a second-century rhetorician, Alexander, begins with a reference to the philosophic view that god is unbegotten and not susceptible of destruction. Cf. A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (London: Oxford, 1933) 231.

³H. Windisch, *Paulus und Christus* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1934); L. Bieler, *ΘΕΙΟΣ ΑΝΗΡ* (2 vols.; Vienna: O. Höfels, 1935-36).

⁴D. L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (SBL Dissertation Series, 1; Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972).

⁵E.g., Plato, *Meno*, 99 B-D; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse*, 33.4; Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 12-13; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, 7.38; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.9.

⁶E.g., Cicero, *About the Ends of Goods and Evils*, 1.5,14; *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.21,48; Lucretius, 5.8-10, 25-50; 1.729-34; Seneca, *On Providence*, 6.6; *Epistle*, 73.14-16; 31.11; 41.1; Plutarch, *On the Fortunes of Alexander*, 331A; Epictetus, 1.9,22-26; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse*, 69.1; Josephus, *Ant.*, 3.7,7 §180.

man born as other men normally are.⁷ At times these varying views, both of what constituted the divine presence and of the source of such divinity, merged into a synthetic portrayal of the *theios anēr*.⁸ If a mortal possessed in an unusual way that which was believed to constitute a sign of divine presence, however conceived, he was regarded as a divine man. On the other hand, a more select group of men were believed at the end of their careers to have been taken up into heaven, to have attained immortality, and to have received a status⁹ like that of the eternal gods. Such figures were designated immortals.¹⁰ The latter category of divinity is the primary concern of this paper.

1. *The Immortals*

The concept of immortals must be understood within the context of a distinction between two types of divine beings, the eternal and the immortal. This typology is mentioned at least as early as Herodotus (*Hist.*, 2.43, 145-46) who says that Heracles and Dionysos were gods that had a beginning to their existence and had not existed eternally. Herodotus' distinction between those deities that are eternal and those that are immortal but have had a beginning was recognized and commented on by Plutarch near the end of the first or the beginning of the second century C.E.¹¹ It was, in fact, a widespread idea by the beginning of our

⁷Dio Chrysostom, (*Discourse*, 4.18-23) has Diogenes tell Alexander of the two criteria by which a man was regarded as divine, i.e., as a son of Zeus: (1) being conceived supernaturally; (2) being self-controlled and noble. Diogenes then says: "If, however, you are cowardly and love luxury and have a servile nature, then you are in no way related to the gods . . ." (cf. also 69.1). This constitutes Dio's critique of (1) in the name of (2). For another statement of the second criterion, see Lucian, *Demonax*, 7.63. For the first criterion, see Lucretius, 1.729-33, who says of Empedocles: "He seems hardly to be born of mortal stock." The same thing could be said of certain rabbis. See *b. Nid.* 13a; also J. Neusner, *History of the Jews in Babylonia* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 3. 107. According to S. J. Case (*Experience with the Supernatural in Early Christian Times* [New York: Century, 1929] 129) another, less common, explanation of a divine man's distinctiveness was reincarnation (e.g., Pindar, *Tbrenoi*, fr. 113; Vergil, *Aeneid*, 6.756-76). Justin seems to be aware of and involved in the debates over what constitutes the true *theios anēr* (*1 Apology*, 22), when he says: "Even if he [Jesus] were only a man by common generation, he is, because of his wisdom, worthy to be called Son of God."

⁸Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras* is a good example. Cf. Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, 26.8-27.1; also D. L. Tiede, *Charismatic Figure*, 59.

⁹That is, he is not only immortal but also rules. Cf. Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, 1996-97, who speaks of Heracles now reigning in power.

¹⁰The terminology is complex. The lines between demigods, heroes, and immortals are blurred. This is true both for the classical period and the Hellenistic age. In this paper I use "immortals" of those humans who became deities by virtue of their ascent to heaven at the end of their lives, "demigods" only of those individuals who had a supernatural parentage. Not all demigods became immortals. I avoid the term "hero" in any technical sense since heroes constituted a group larger than those who became immortals. On the problem, see E. Rohde, *Psyche* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1925) 117-32, 141 n. 23; A. D. Nock, "The Cult of Heroes," *HTR* 37 (1944) 141-74.

¹¹"On the Malice of Herodotus," 13 (*Moralia*, LCL 11).

era. Two historians of the late first century B.C.E. reflect the belief. The *Roman Antiquities* of Dionysius of Halicarnassus (7.72,13) refers to demigods such as Heracles and Asclepius who are said to have ascended to heaven and to have obtained the same honors as the gods. In Diodorus of Sicily the typology is clearly articulated and applied to his narrative's contents. Diodorus says:

As regards the gods . . . men of ancient times have handed down to later generations two different conceptions: certain of the gods, they say, are eternal and imperishable. . . . But the other gods, we are told, were terrestrial beings who attained to immortal honor and fame because of their benefactions to mankind, such as Heracles, Dionysos, Aristaeus and the others who were like them. (*Libr. of Hist.*, 61)

In another context (1.13) he comments:

And besides these there are other gods, they say, who were terrestrial, having once been mortals, but who, by reason of their sagacity and the good services which they rendered to all men, attained immortality, some of them having even been kings in Egypt.

About the same time, the concept is developed elaborately in Philo's *Embassy to Gaius*, 77-114. Plutarch puts it concisely when he says that Apollo is not

among those deities who were changed from mortals into immortals, like Heracles and Dionysos, whose virtues enabled them to cast off mortality and suffering; but he is one of those deities who are unbegotten and eternal, if we may judge by what the most ancient and wisest men have said on such matters. ("Pleopidas," 16)

This typology retained its force at least into the third century C.E., where it is integral to part of Origen's polemic against Celsus (*Against Celsus*, 3.22). Mediterranean antiquity drew a distinction between two kinds of deities: eternal beings like Zeus/Jupiter and immortals like Heracles and Dionysos.

The distinguishing marks of the immortals were: (1) the deity had originally been mortal; and (2) at the end of his career there occurred a transformation or ascension so that he obtained the same honors as the eternal. Since the second characteristic is crucial, whenever Mediterranean peoples spoke about the immortals, constant in their description was the explicit or implicit idea that "he was taken up into heaven." Some evidence of this ascent is usually given. Either his ascent to heaven was witnessed¹² or there was no trace of his physical remains.¹³ That the absence of the hero's physical remains points properly to an ascent to heaven is known because of (a) predictions/oracles during the

¹² In general, see Justin, *1 Apol.* 21; for Augustus, see Suetonius, *Augustus*, 100; Dio Cassius, 56.46; for Claudius, see Seneca, *Pumpkinification of Claudius*; for Alexander the Great, see Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*; for Peregrinus, see Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus*, 39-40.

¹³ For Heracles, see Diodorus of Sicily, 4.38,4-5; for Aristaeus, see Diodorus, 4.81-82; for Romulus, see Plutarch, "Romulus," 27; for Aeneas, see Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.64,4-5; for Empedocles, see Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.67-68; for Apollonius, see Philostratus, *Life*, 8.30.

hero's life that he would be taken up;¹⁴ (b) a heavenly announcement at the end of his earthly career stating or implying that he had been taken up;¹⁵ and (c) appearances of the hero to friends or disciples confirming his new status.¹⁶ In addition, another feature frequently present in the description of the immortals is a reference to the man's being begotten by a god of a human mother (the usual procedure), or his being the child of a goddess and a human father.¹⁷ Almost always, both the unusual circumstances concerning his birth and those relating to his passing are present. Occasionally, for whatever reason, if the reference to a supernatural begetting is missing,¹⁸ the ascent into heaven is constant. When one spoke of an immortal in the Greco-Roman world, therefore, he meant a mortal who had become a god, and this was usually expressed in terms of an extraordinary birth (one of his parents was a deity) and an ascension into heaven (witnessed to by such circumstances as there being no remains of his body to be found).

Originally, the concept belonged to accounts of legendary or mythical figures of the distant past. Egyptian, Greek, and Roman examples are readily available. (1) *Egyptian*: Diodorus tells us, immediately after a reference to the typology of eternal and immortals (*Libr. of Hist.*, 1.13), that Osiris belongs to the second category (1. 20, 23). Osiris was a king of Egypt, he says, who by reason of the magnitude of his benefactions received the gift of immortality with honor equal to that offered to the gods of heaven, the eternal. Moreover, we are told of one tradition which claimed that this Osiris was the offspring of a human daughter and Zeus. (2) *Greek*: Diodorus (*Libr. of Hist.*, 4.1,5) turns to the demigods of the Greeks and presents traditions about such figures as Dionysos, Heracles, Aristaeus, and Asclepios: (a) Dionysos was the son of Zeus and Semele, daughter of Cadmus, founder of Thebes. He became, however, one of the demigods to be accepted among the Olympians.¹⁹ (b) Heracles was the second of the demigods deemed worthy of the name Olympian by Zeus (*Libr. of Hist.*, 4.15,1). He was the son of Zeus and Alcmena, a daughter of Perseus (4.9,1). Zeus determined that after his performing the twelve labors, Heracles was to be given immortality (4.9,5). When at his death men

¹⁴ So for Heracles (Diodorus, 4.10,7); Peregrinus (Lucian, *The Passing*, 27); Alexander the Great (Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*, 3.24, 30).

¹⁵ So for Empedocles (D. Laertius, *Lives*, 8.67-68); Apollonius (Philostratus, *Life*, 8.30); Peregrinus (Lucian, *Passing*, 39).

¹⁶ So for Romulus (Cicero, *Republic*, 2.10; *Laws*, 1.1,3; Plutarch, "Romulus," 28; Tertullian, *Apology*, 21); Apollonius (Philostratus, *Life*, 8.31).

¹⁷ (a) Those with a deity for a father: Heracles (Diodorus, 4.9,1); Asclepios (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 3.22; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2:600-10); Dionysos (Diodorus, 4.2,1-4); Castor and Pollux (*Homeric Hymns*, 32; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.109); Romulus (Plutarch, "Romulus," 2). (b) Those with a deity for a mother: Aeneas (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14.588).

¹⁸ E.g., in the case of Empedocles in Diogenes Laertius' account (but Lucretius, [1.729-33] apparently knows of a supernatural birth) and of Peregrinus (Lucian, *Passing*).

¹⁹ *Libr. of Hist.*, 4.2,1; see also Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3.259-73.

looked for his bones and found not a single one, they assumed, in accordance with the oracle about his future, that he had passed from among men into the company of the gods (4.38, 4-5). Afterwards he was honored with sacrifices both as a hero and as a god (4.39,1; 5.76). Hera adopted him as her son (4.39,2). (c) Aristaeus was the son of Apollo and the woman Cyrene. After dwelling in the region of Mount Haemus, he was never seen again by men. Assuming that he had been taken into heaven, they made him the recipient of immortal honors (4.81-82). (d) Asclepius was believed to have been the son of Apollo and of either Koronis or Arsinoe.²⁰ By the request of Apollo, Zeus placed Asclepius among the stars.²¹ (3) *Romans*: (a) Aeneas was believed to have been the son of Venus.²² According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, he was thought to have been translated to the gods, when, after a certain battle, his body was nowhere to be found. Hence the Latins built a shrine to him with the inscription: "To the father and god of this place . . ." ²³ (b) It was about Romulus that the Roman traditions clustered in a special way. They claimed he was the son of Mars and a virgin, either Ilia or Rhea Silvia.²⁴ His great achievements led to the belief that, when he disappeared during a sudden darkening of the sun amidst a descending cloud, he had been added to the number of the gods.²⁵ This was witnessed to by the fact that no portion of his body or fragment of his clothing remained to be seen.²⁶ The belief was reinforced by the claim of one of his friends, Julius Proculus, that Romulus appeared to him on the road and announced that he was to be worshipped as the god Quirinus.²⁷

The concept of the immortals also made inroads into certain circles of *Judaism* and attached itself to the figure of Moses.²⁸ Although there is a per-

²⁰ *Libr. of Hist.*, 4.71,1; cf. also *Homeric Hymn to Asclepius*; Pindar, *Third Pythian Ode*; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2.600-55; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 3.22; Pausanias, 2.26,4-5 (6); 3.26,4.

²¹ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 3.22,57.

²² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14.588.

²³ *Roman Antiquities*, 1.64,4-5.

²⁴ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.77,2; Cicero, *Republic*, 1.41; 2.2; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 14.805-28; 15.862-63; Plutarch, "Romulus," 2; Lucius Annaeus Florus, 1.1.

²⁵ Cicero, *Republic*, 2.10; 6.21; Livy, 1.16; Plutarch, "Romulus," 27; L. A. Florus, 1.1.

²⁶ Plutarch, "Romulus," 27; Cicero, *Laws*, 1.1,3; Livy, 1.16; L. A. Florus, 1.1.

²⁷ Plutarch, "Romulus," 28. From the way Plutarch speaks in hostility, it is clear that the tradition assumed that Romulus had ascended *bodily* into heaven.

²⁸ It helps our perspective if we note the view of Moses put forward by the Hellenistic Jewish apologist Artapanus. He says of Moses: (1) He was the teacher of Orpheus (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, 9.27,4). Since Orpheus is said to have transferred the birthplace of Osiris to Thebes (Diodorus of Sicily, 1.23), Artapanus' claim makes Moses responsible, indirectly at least, for both Greek culture and the shape of an Egyptian cult. (2) He was called Musaeus by the Greeks (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, 9.27,3). Since Musaeus was equivalent to the Egyptian Hermes-Thoth, this claim is tantamount to making Moses into one of the gods of Egypt (see B. Colless, "Divine Education," *Numen* 17 [1970] 120). (3) He was regarded by the Egyptian priests as worthy of being honored as a

sistent rabbinic tradition that Moses did not die but ascended to heaven,²⁹ the native home for the view of Moses' bodily rapture was probably Hellenistic Judaism.³⁰ Philo knew traditions that understood Deut 34:6 to mean that Moses was translated.³¹ His account of the end of Moses' career in his *Life of Moses* (2.288) reads like a description of an immortal's ascent to heaven.³²

Afterwards the time came when he had to make his pilgrimage from earth to heaven, and to leave this mortal life for immortality, summoned thither by the Father who resolved his twofold nature of soul and body into a single unity, transforming his whole being into mind, pure as the sunlight.³³

Philo, however, protects against such an interpretation by including a reference to Moses' death and burial (2. 291).³⁴

In Josephus' *Antiquities* the account of Moses' end seems reminiscent of the "passing" of the two founders of the Roman race, Aeneas and Romulus.³⁵ We are told that a cloud suddenly descended upon him and that he disappeared in a ravine (*Ant.* 4.8,48 §326). This, of course, echoes the usual "death/ascension" aspect of the mythology of the immortals. Josephus apparently tried to protect against such implications of this tradition because he immediately adds: "But he has written of himself in the sacred books that he died, for fear lest they should venture to say that by reason of his surpassing virtue he had gone back to the Deity" (*ibid.*).³⁶ This reading of Josephus is reinforced by his comment in *Ant.* 3.5,7 §96 that when Moses was forty days on the mountain receiving the law, some said: "He had been taken back to the divinity."³⁷

god. Indeed, he was called Hermes (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, 9.27,6). Hellenistic Jews who went this far would have had no problems with a portrayal of Moses as an immortal.

²⁹ W. A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 209-11; L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959), 6.161; J. Jeremias, "Möysēs," *TDNT* 4. 854-55.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 854.

³¹ *Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, 3.8-10. Cf. W. A. Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 124; L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6. 142.

³² See H. Chadwick, "St. Paul and Philo of Alexandria," *BJRL* 48 (1966) 301.

³³ LCL, 2. 288.

³⁴ L. Ginzberg (*Legends*, 6.152 n. 904) thinks that, when T. Moses (1.15) and Ps.-Philo (*Bib. Ant.*, 19-20d) stress that Moses was buried in a public place, it is to combat the view that he did not die but was translated to heaven.

³⁵ "Introduction to the *Antiquities*," LCL 4. ix.

³⁶ That Josephus is here taking issue with the speculation that Moses was translated, see L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6. 152, 161; J. Jeremias, "Möysēs," *TDNT*, 4. 854-55; E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark* (Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 182.

³⁷ R. H. Charles (*APOT*, 2. 408) interprets Josephus differently. From the existing Greek fragments he reconstructs a Jewish document, the *Assumption of Moses*, which is different from the so-called Latin *Assumption* (actually the "Testament of Moses"). It is apparently the former document on which Clement of Alexandria depended in telling us that when Moses was taken up to heaven, Joshua and Caleb saw Moses double: one Moses with the angels, the other on the mountains being buried in their ravines (*Stromateis* 6.15). See J. D. Purvis, "Samaritan Traditions on the Death of Moses," *Studies on the Testament of Moses* (ed. G. W. E. Nickelsburg, Jr.; SBL LXX and Cognate

Josephus, therefore, knew of a Jewish tradition of the end of Moses' career that spoke of his passing in the same terms as those employed for the legendary heroes of other Mediterranean peoples. At the same time that he included the tradition shaped in this way, he explicitly rejected the interpretation of it in terms of the mythology of the immortals. Though Philo and Josephus responded negatively to the position, certain Jewish circles did portray Moses in categories taken from the Mediterranean concept of the immortals.³⁸

Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Jewish evidence points to the belief in the existence of a certain category of deity, the immortals, alongside the eternal. These mythical and legendary figures were all benefactors of mankind: good kings, healers, strong men who used their might to conquer powers hostile to other men, those who introduced certain skills or goods into civilization, and great teachers. Their extraordinary lives were usually explained by their unusual parentage,³⁹ their present status as divinities by their ascent to heaven.

Since this pattern had become a convention in talking about so many benefactors of mankind of the distant past, it eventually attached itself to individuals of the not-too-distant past, mainly of two types: rulers and philosophers.⁴⁰ Among the rulers it was especially Alexander the Great and Augustus who were so treated; among the philosophers Empedocles, Apollonius of Tyana, and Peregrinus. In attaching itself to clearly historical personages, the mythology affected the literary genres of history and biography. To this matter of the influence of the concept in non-Christian antiquity we now turn.

2. *The Concept of Immortals in History, Biography, and Satire*

The motif was attached in the first place to rulers from the not-too-distant past. Alexander the Great is treated in this way both in history and in biography. Though there is a real question about the genre of Arrian's *Anabasis Alexandri*, it most likely should be regarded as a fusion of both genres, history and

Studies, 4; Missoula, MT: SBL, 1973) 113-14. Charles says that Josephus was aware of these claims and reacted against them (*APOT*, 2. 409). If this were, however, the view of Moses' end that Josephus knew, his response is meaningless. To say that Moses died would not protect against such a double vision of his end. That Moses died and was buried would protect only against a bodily assumption into heaven.

³⁸ This explains the claim of Celsus that Moses attained to divine honors (Origen, *Against Celsus*, 1.21).

³⁹ Since miraculous-birth traditions could belong to the tradition of a divine man as well as to the mythology of the immortals, reference to the supernatural conception of Moses does not in and of itself establish belief in Moses as an immortal. See D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Athlone, 1956) 5-7; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1964) 81-82, for the supernatural conception of Moses in the Passover Haggadah. The reference to Moses' beauty in Josephus (*Ant.*, 2.9,5 §224) points to his use of a *theios-anēr* tradition of Moses' birth. Contra W. D. Davies, *Setting*, 82.

⁴⁰ Eventually reduced to ridiculous extremes, the mythology of the immortals was even applied to the relatives of emperors, e.g., Julia Drusilla, sister of Caligula (Seneca, *Pumpkinification of Claudius*, 1).

biography.⁴¹ Arrian's treatment of Alexander in the second century C.E. is rationalistic and avoids the romantic elements in his career. Reflecting his distaste for such beliefs, Arrian attempted to expose the reality of the situation. He says:

One writer has not even shrunk from the statement that Alexander, perceiving that he could not survive, went to throw himself into the Euphrates, so that he might disappear from the world and leave behind the tradition more credible to posterity *that his birth was of the gods and that to the gods he passed*; but Roxane his wife saw that he was going out, and when she prevented him he cried aloud that she then grudged him everlasting fame as having been truly born a god (*Anab. Alex.* 7.27 [my italics])

This tells us both that such a concept existed in tradition attached to Alexander and that Arrian discounted it. Nevertheless, he is forced to conclude: "And so not even I can suppose that a man quite beyond all other men was born without some divine influence" (*ibid.*, 7.30).⁴²

In the romantic biography of Pseudo-Callisthenes the motif is clear and sharp: Olympias was made pregnant by a god, Ammon of Egypt. Philip was convinced that her pregnancy was socially acceptable, even though he was away from home, because he was told in a dream that it was due to a god. At the end of the narrative, in connection with the death of Alexander, we hear that there was darkness, that a star and an eagle were seen falling from heaven, that a statue of Zeus was shaken, and that the star and eagle were seen going back to heaven carrying a brilliant star. Such a description of Alexander's ascent to heaven was regarded as the answer to his prayer to Zeus: "And if it be thy will, receive me too in heaven, as the third mortal."⁴³ By the beginning of our era, therefore, the mythology of the immortals with its themes of miraculous conception and ascent to heaven had become attached to the figure of Alexander the Great in both Greco-Roman history and biography.⁴⁴

The mythology of the immortals also attaches itself to Augustus in historical and biographical writings of the empire. In Dio Cassius' *Roman History* the normal chain of social and political events in Rome's history is broken both at the birth and at the death of Augustus by the inclusion of the myth. In 45:1, in the narrative about his birth, we read of the belief that he was engendered by Apollo. The narrative of his death in 56:46 tells of Augustus' being declared immortal, with attending priests and sacred rites. Tradition also had it that Numerius Atticus, a senator and ex-praetor, swore that he had seen Augustus

⁴¹ Cf. E. I. McQueen, "Quintus Curtius Rufus," in *Latin Biography* (ed. T. A. Dorey; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967) 20.

⁴² This may very well mean that he was willing to regard Alexander as a divine man but not as an immortal. See below.

⁴³ *Alexander Romance*, 3.30. That is, Alexander asks to join the Olympians as Heracles and Dionysos did.

⁴⁴ A quite different treatment of Alexander's divinity can be found in Quintus Curtius Rufus (10.10,9-13).

ascending to heaven after the manner of Romulus and Proculus. It is clear, from the way that both birth and ascension themes are related, that Dio was hostile to them. That he included them, nevertheless, testifies to their prevalence in the Augustus-tradition.⁴⁵

This mythology also colors the Alexandrian-type biography of Augustus composed by Suetonius. As he tells it, Atia came to the temple of Apollo and fell asleep. A serpent glided up to her and went away. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born (*Vita Aug.* 94.4). He was, therefore, regarded as the son of Apollo. Suetonius also relates the tradition about the ex-praetor, who took an oath that he had seen the form of the emperor on its way up to heaven (*ibid.*). Thus Augustus, as well as Alexander the Great, was depicted in histories and biographies in terms of the concept of the immortals.

The same mythology was also used to describe philosophers from the not-too-distant past. The Pythagorean philosopher Empedocles (484-424 B.C.E.) is depicted by Diogenes Laertius both as a teacher and as a worker of miracles like the later Apollonius of Tyana. Though there is no account of divine parentage for him, Diogenes Laertius relates a tradition about his death, taken from ancient sources, which shows that in some circles he was thought of as an immortal. According to Heraclides of Pontus, says Diogenes, after an evening meal or party with his friends, Empedocles disappeared and was nowhere to be found. One of the company claimed to have heard a voice from heaven calling the philosopher during the night. Hence it was believed that he was taken up into heaven and was now a god (*Lives*, 8.68). That Diogenes then cites other explanations of Empedocles' passing which attempt to discredit the first one shows the controversy-context within which lives of philosophers circulated in antiquity (*ibid.*, 69-70). Some circles, doubtless Pythagorean, placed Empedocles among the immortals.

In Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* the mythology of the immortals is found complete. The birth-traditions relate that Apollonius' mother had a vision just before she gave birth to the child, in which a god of Egypt told her she would give birth to himself (1.4). Later the people call Apollonius a "son of Zeus" (1.6). The versions of his passing are diverse, but one clearly comes from such a mentality. The story goes that Apollonius entered the temple of Athene, whereupon a chorus of maidens was heard singing from within: "Hasten thou from earth, hasten thou to heaven, hasten;" in other words: "Do thou go upwards from earth" (8.30). Afterwards his remains could not be found. Then he is said to have appeared to a fervent disciple and through him taught men further, even though he had already passed from this earth (8.31).

When the mythology of the immortals entered into the description of the careers of clearly historical rulers and philosophers in the histories and biographies of the Greco-Roman world, it did so to speak about the significance of

⁴⁵ Even when Augustus is not spoken of in "birth/ascension" mythology, he is idealized to the extreme. See e.g., Nicolaus of Damascus' *Life of Augustus*, where Augustus is flawless.

the individual thus depicted. It is hardly accidental that this concept was used of just those personages—rulers and philosophers—who in antiquity were often associated with communities of their creation, which constituted a cult for the divine figure.⁴⁶ The knowledge and use of the motif apparently became so widespread and so loosely applied that it became the object of satire.

Satirical treatments of the myth can be found in Seneca and Lucian. In the *Pumpkinification of Claudius*, Seneca vents his feelings about the ridiculous extremes to which the whole process had been carried. That Julia Drusilla, sister of Emperor Gaius Caligula, was deified at her death in 38 C.E. at Gaius' insistence was scandalous to Seneca (§1). There was even Livius Geminius to swear before the Senate that he had seen her going up to heaven. Then there was Claudius. In a heavenly debate over whether to grant Claudius the status of deity, Seneca has one heavenly speaker complain: "Once . . . it was a great thing to become a god; now you have made it a . . . farce. . . . I propose that from this day forward the godhead be given to none of those who eat the fruits of the earth, or whom mother-earth doth nourish" (§9). The same type of complaint is also voiced by Lucian.

In the *Parliament of the Gods* (esp. §7-10, 14), Lucian has Momus complain to Zeus about the large number of gods that have been allowed into heaven, like Dionysos, Asclepios, and Heracles.⁴⁷ Lucian's satire is most telling in the *Passing of Peregrinus*. Here he tells the story of Peregrinus who, after his rejection by Christians for his transgressions, took up philosophy and fell to abusing everyone, especially the emperor. When one would no longer pay attention to him he proceeded to burn himself on a pyre at a festival, imitating Heracles. Before he died in the fire, however, he manufactured myths and repeated certain oracles that he was to become a guardian spirit, apparently coveting altars and expecting to be imaged in gold. He also appointed ambassadors from among his comrades to be sent out with the good tidings. Lucian claims to have been there at the spectacle, which took place outside the city. On his way back, he says that in jest he told some people a wild story.

When the pyre was kindled and Proteus flung himself bodily in, a great earthquake first took place, accompanied by a bellowing of the ground, and then a vulture, flying out of the midst of the flames, went off to Heaven, saying, in human speech, with a loud voice: "I am through with the earth; *to Olympus I fare.*" (*Passing*, 39 [my italics])⁴⁸

⁴⁶ On the founders of cities as objects of religious devotion, see Pausanias, 10.4.10. Cf. C. B. Wells, "The Hellenistic Orient," *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (ed. R. C. Dentan; New Haven: Yale University, 1955) 157.

⁴⁷ For a similar argument, see Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.12; *Clementine Recognitions*, 10.24-25; *Clementine Homilies*, 6.22.

⁴⁸ The reference to Olympus indicates that Peregrinus was yet another mortal accepted by the Olympians.

When he got back to the city, Lucian relates, he met a grey-haired man with a dignified air who was telling that he had just beheld Proteus in white raiment walking about cheerfully in the Portico of the Seven Voices. The old man also claimed to have seen the vulture flying up out of the pyre (*ibid.*, 40). Lucian closes, expressing his fears that honors will be heaped upon Peregrinus partly because of his joke. Though the divine-parentage theme is missing, the description of Peregrinus' death indicates that Lucian is poking fun at the widespread tendency to class individuals of the immediate historical past among the immortals. Only that which has been carried to excess can be the object of this type of ridicule.

What is constitutive for the status of an immortal? The protagonist is first of all a mortal—though perhaps so extraordinary as to be regarded in some sense as divine during his lifetime, but mortal nonetheless.⁴⁹ At the end of his career, by the decree or act of some eternal, he is taken up into heaven, becomes immortal, and takes his place in the pantheon of gods.⁵⁰

3. *The Relation of the Immortals to Theioi Andres*

With a sharpened awareness of what was constitutive for the mythology of the immortals in antiquity, we may now ask about its relation to the conception of divine men near the beginning of our era. On the one hand, it is important to reiterate that we are dealing with two different ideas.⁵¹ Not every *theios anēr* was believed to have become an immortal. Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*, for example, describes Pythagoras as a divine man but not as an immortal.

⁴⁹ The miraculous-birth traditions, when present, speak of the special character of the demigod during his lifetime. At the same time, he remains mortal.

⁵⁰ This is not the same thing as one finds in Judaism in the ascensions of Enoch and Elijah. These men are taken up to heaven, but they do not become deities. (a) The closest Elijah comes to being treated as an immortal is in the *Acts of Pilate* 15.1. There is a reference to 2 Kgs 2:16-18, but the reading is distinct: "And they persuaded Elisha and he went with them. And they searched for him three days and did not find him, and they knew that he had been taken up" (*New Testament Apocrypha* [ed. W. Schneemelcher; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963], 1. 464). Likewise, in the *Acts of Pilate*, the Jews search for Jesus and do not find him; the implication is: he is taken up. Still Elijah does not join the gods. (b) The closest Enoch comes to being treated as an immortal is in 2 *Enoch*: (1) His ascent to heaven is in the company of the angel (36:2) or angels (55:1) of God. (2) He is taken up amidst darkness, so that those standing and talking with him do not understand what has happened until they receive a heavenly message (67:1-3). (3) When they understand that Enoch has been taken up, the people erect an altar and offer sacrifice "before the Lord's face" (68:5-7). Though the debt to the mythology of immortals is undeniable, still Enoch remains a man and does not become a god.

⁵¹ H. D. Betz (*Lukian von Samosata und das Neue Testament* [Berlin: Akademie, 1961]) seems to be unaware of the distinction. He treats the two concepts as though they were one. See also his article, "Jesus as Divine Man," *Jesus and the Historian* (ed. F. T. Trotter; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968); cf. H. J. Rose, "Herakles and the Gospels," *HTR* 31 (1938) 126.

There were, furthermore, attempts in some circles to keep the two conceptions separate: (1) Josephus in the *Antiquities* could use the one and repress the other. This is clearly seen in his treatment of Moses.⁵² He could refer to Moses as *theion andra* (*Ant.* 3.7,7 §180), attempting to demonstrate Moses' surpassing virtue. This conception of divinity was serviceable for the Judaism of Josephus; the myth of the immortals, as our earlier discussion has shown, was not. (2) Philo, in addition to the categories "eternals/immortals,"⁵³ knew of the concept *theios anēr*. He says (*On the Virtues*, 177) that absolute sinlessness belongs to God alone, or possibly to a divine man (θείου ἀνδρός). In his *Life of Moses* (1.158), he says that Moses was named a god (θεός) and a king of the whole nation. In himself and in his life, he displayed a godlike work (θεοειδὲς ἔργον) for all to see, a model for those willing to copy it. When Philo comes to the end of Moses' career, however, as we have already seen, he refuses to allow an interpretation of it as the ascent of an immortal. Thus both Josephus and Philo find suitable that variety of the *theios anēr* in which divine presence is understood in terms of virtue, though neither approves of the mythology of the immortals. They deliberately keep the two conceptions separate.

On the other hand, it was inevitable that these two originally different conceptions of divinity would sometimes merge, the one complementing the other. There were certainly similarities between them. Accounts of both *theioi andres* and immortals, for example, sometimes appealed to a supernatural parentage as an explanation of the extraordinary life of the protagonist.⁵⁴ The actual basis for the complementary association of these two notions of divinity, however, lay in the understanding of the nature of the earthly career of the hero in the mythology of immortals. The lives of those who became immortals were virtuous.⁵⁵ They were benefactors of men; as Diodorus puts it, terrestrial beings who attained to immortal honor and fame "because of their benefactions to mankind . . ." (*Libr. of Hist.*, 6.1). Elsewhere he says that "by reason of their sagacity and the good services which they rendered to all men" they attained immortality (*ibid.*, 1.13). Dio Chrysostom (*Discourse*, 2.78) says that Zeus honored Heracles "because of his virtue." Elsewhere he makes the same point about all of the demigods (69.1). Here is an explicit point of contact with the idea of *theios anēr* in most of its forms.⁵⁶ Whenever the two conceptions of divinity did merge, the result was a picture of some mortal, who in his

⁵² Josephus also speaks of (1) Solomon as having a godlike understanding (ὡς θείων ἔχοντι διάνοιαν, *Ant.* 8.2,1 §34); (2) Isaiah as *theios* (*Ant.* 10.2,1 §35); (3) Daniel as esteemed for his divine power (θειότητος, *Ant.* 10.11,7 §268).

⁵³ His *Embassy to Gaius* (77-114) is one of the clearest statements in antiquity of the typology of eternals and immortals.

⁵⁴ E.g., Plato is a divine man born of a woman and Apollo (Plutarch, *Symposiacs*, 8.1,2; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, 3.45).

⁵⁵ Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.14; Plutarch, "Pleopidas," 16; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourse*, 31.16.

⁵⁶ Pseudo-Lucian (*Cynic*, 13) says of Theseus that he was the best man of his day.

historical existence functioned as a *theios anēr*, who was a benefactor of men, and who then at the end of his life was taken up into heaven, attaining the status of an immortal.

An example of the result of such a merger of the two conceptions of divinity is found in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. The *Life* depicts Apollonius as a *theios anēr* (e.g., 1.2; 2.17, 40; 5.24; 7.21, 38; 8.5, 7), whose divinity is manifest primarily in his wisdom and virtue (1.2; 7.7, [ii], [iii], [iv]; 8.7, [71]).⁵⁷ Thereby Philostratus protects the philosopher from the charge of having been a magician, as was claimed by Euphrates during his lifetime and by Moeragenes after his death.⁵⁸

Philostratus' major source, the memoirs of Damis, ends at 8.28. He tells us that the memoirs did not deal with the manner in which Apollonius died, "if he did actually die" (8.29 [my italics]).⁵⁹ His caution in speaking about the end of Apollonius' career is necessitated by the fact that Philostratus adds material from another source which depicts the saint's end in terms of an immortal (8.30). This account is followed by the statement. "No one ventured to dispute that he was immortal" (*ἀθάνατος*). Then comes an account of an appearance to a disciple in which further teaching is given. The result of the addition of this material to Philostratus' revision of Damis' memoirs is a portrayal of Apollonius as a wise and virtuous *theios anēr* during his earthly career and as an immortal at his end. A merger has taken place here between two originally distinct views of divinity.

A less perfect synthesis of the two conceptions is found in Diogenes Laertius' treatment of the life of Empedocles. One tradition of Empedocles' end used by Diogenes, as we have already noted, portrayed it as the passing of an immortal, though he also included others that tended to discredit the first (8.67-68). It is also true that the career of Empedocles is cast, in part at least, in terms of a divine man. In 8.62 (cf. also 8.66), Empedocles says: "I go about among you an immortal god (*θεὸς ἄμβροτος*), no more a mortal" (*οὐκέτι θνητός*). He says this as people look to him for wisdom, oracles, and healing. That this line was understood in antiquity near the time of Diogenes Laertius to be the claim of a *theios anēr* is clear from its use in Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius*. In 1.1-2, Philostratus' intent is to portray Apollonius as a divine man of the same type as Pythagoras, Empedocles, and Plato.⁶⁰ In this context the line from Empedocles, also found in Diogenes Laertius, is cited. In the latter's life of Empedocles, the two conceptions of divinity, the *theios anēr* and the immortal, exist side by side. Both were required for some people in antiquity to speak adequately of this philosopher.

A final example of such a synthesis is from Pseudo-Lucian (*Cynic* 13), where Heracles is called a divine man (*θεῖον ἄνδρα*) and is said rightly to be

⁵⁷ See D. L. Tiede, *Charismatic Figure*, passim.

⁵⁸ See F. C. Conybeare, LCL, 1. viii.

⁵⁹ Cf. H. C. Kee, "Aretalogy and Gospel," *JBL* 92 (1973) 410.

⁶⁰ See also 8.7, [4].

considered a god (*θεόν*). Only a failure to recognize the original difference between the conception of a divine man and of an immortal could cloud the distinction here.⁶¹ The statement which follows about Heracles leaving the realm of men (*ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀπῆλθεν*) makes it certain that for him to be considered a god means that he is believed to have become immortal. Here again the two views of divinity merge.

4. *The Immortals and Early Christianity*

Having clarified a basic pattern in the understanding of divinity in the Mediterranean world near the beginning of our era, we must now explore its twofold relationship to early Christian thought.

On the one hand, certain early Christians regarded the immortals as demonic imitations of Christ. Justin Martyr offers evidence for this position. He was not only aware of the traditions about the immortals but also of the remarkable similarities between such figures and Jesus Christ. Indeed, he uses these resemblances for his apologetic ends. The Christians' assertions about Jesus Christ, he argues, propose nothing new or different from that which pagans say about the immortals, e.g., Asclepios, Heracles, Dionysos, and the Dioscuri (*1 Apol.*, 21). If Christians assert that Christ was born of a virgin, that he was crucified, died, arose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, this is nothing new or different from what pagans say about the so-called sons of Jupiter and certain emperors.⁶² Granting these similarities between the Christians' savior and the pagans' immortals, why should Christian belief seem incredible to pagans?

Justin's Logos-christology did not utilize the mythology of the immortals as its central conceptual tool. It was imperative, therefore, for him to explain the similarities between Jesus and the immortals of pagan tradition. He did this by claiming that the devil counterfeited Christian realities in the fictions circulated among the pagans (*Dial. with Trypho*, 69-70; *1 Apol.*, 54). These pagan myths were first related through the instigation of evil demons "who strive for nothing else than to alienate men from God their creator and from Christ . . ." (*1 Apol.*, 58). The demons did not grasp clearly the meaning of what they heard said by the prophets. Like erring men, they mimicked what was said of Christ. So, for example, when the pagans say that Dionysos was born of Jupiter's union with Semele and that after he died, he arose again and ascended into heaven, this is due to the devil's having imitated the prophecy of Jacob in Gen 49:10-11 (*Dial. with Trypho*, 69; cf. 52-54; *1 Apol.*, 54). Or

⁶¹ This is not the same distinction as that of Cleanthes who believed that there were two Heracles, one a god, the other a hero. See W. L. Knox, "The Divine Hero Christology in the New Testament," *HTR* 41 (1948) 235 n. 14.

⁶² *1 Apol.*, 21; *Dial. with Trypho*, 69. Theophilus of Antioch (*To Autolytus*, 1.13) uses the same technique. He says of those who deride the Christian belief in the resurrection: ". . . you actually believe that Heracles, who burned himself up, is alive and that Asclepios, struck by lightning, was raised" (*ἐγγήθηται*).

when Asclepius is presented in pagan lore as raising the dead to life and curing all diseases, this is a devilish imitation of the prophecy in Isa 35:1-7 (*Dial. with Trypho*, 69). It is only a short distance from this conviction that Jesus is the true reality of which the immortals are only demonic imitations to an explicit employment of the pattern as a conceptual tool in christology.

So, on the other hand, there are indications that some early Christians did think about Christ in terms of the mythology of the immortals.

(1) Recent research has described the christology of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity in terms of four constitutive elements:⁶³ (a) From the moment of his resurrection/exaltation/ascension Jesus became Lord, Christ, Son of God and now actively reigns in heaven (Acts 2:36; 13:33; Rom 1:3-4). Of the four elements, this is primary. (b) By means of traditions about his virginal conception, Jesus' earthly sonship is expressed in terms of the modified Hellenistic Jewish concept of the divine man.⁶⁴ (c) Nevertheless, Jesus is qualified for the messianic office not by mere physical descent, but by his virtuous treatment of the sick and suffering (e.g., Mark 10:46-52). (d) There is on occasion an undeveloped concept of an inactive preexistence of the Son (cf. Mark 12:6).

Any Mediterranean person who was confronted by such a christological pattern would immediately grasp its intent. Jesus, one would assume, is being portrayed as an immortal.⁶⁵ Jesus' ascent into the heavens, like that of other immortals, is constitutive for his new status. Thereby he begins a new type of existence different from that of mortal men. Jesus' historical career radiates virtue and is beneficial to men. This uniqueness can only be explained by a supernatural conception.⁶⁶ Only the presence on occasion in Hellenistic Jewish-Christian christology of a concept of inactive preexistence presents a problem. The solution is found in the Romulus tradition where the same type of preexistence is presupposed.

Julius Proculus, in Plutarch's narrative, claims to have seen Romulus after the king's departure. Romulus, he reported, said to him:

⁶³ See R. H. Fuller, *The Foundations of New Testament Christology* (New York: Scribner, 1965) 184-97. For our purposes it is not necessary to resolve the debate over whether Hellenistic Jewish Christianity is an appropriate designation for the circles from which exaltation Christology came. Cf. I. H. Marshall, "Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments," *NTS* 19 (1972-73) 271-88.

⁶⁴ According to F. Hahn (*The Titles of Jesus in Christology* [London: Lutterworth, 1969] 289-90) Hellenistic Judaism took the specifically pagan edge off the *theios anēr* concept by (1) seeing miracles as owing to the Spirit, and (2) averting all thought of deification.

⁶⁵ W. L. Knox (*HTR* 41 [1948] 229-30) rightly thinks that Rom 1:3-4 reflects such a pattern.

⁶⁶ The pagan way of thinking did not necessarily involve moral grossness. Plutarch (*Numa*, 4; *Symposiacs*, 8.1,3) followed the Egyptians in thinking that one must not suppose that the act was accomplished through the god in person having intercourse with a mortal woman. The act was accomplished through the agency of a "spirit of god" (*pneuma theou*).

It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, *from whom I came* (ἐκεῖθεν ὄντας), that I should be with mankind only a short time, and that after founding a city destined to be the greatest on earth for empire and glory, *I should dwell again in heaven* (αὐθις οἰκεῖν οὐρανόν). . . . And I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus.⁶⁷ (My italics)

These words appear in the context of Romulus' becoming an immortal. Here is the same type of preexistence that one finds in Hellenistic Jewish-Christian christology. A Mediterranean listener who heard Jesus depicted in this way would find it difficult to avoid understanding him in terms of the mythology of the immortals. Furthermore, it is likely that those who formulated this christological pattern perceived him in this way also.

Though the constitutive elements in Hellenistic Jewish-Christian christology and in the Mediterranean mythology of the immortals are the same, the pattern, when applied to Jesus, would be different in at least two significant ways.⁶⁸ First, the Christian pattern would also speak of a parousia of Christ (1 Thes 1:9-10). This would be an inheritance from an earlier Christian tradition. Second, the context for the Christian pattern would be the exclusive claim, "There is one Lord" (1 Cor 8:6). Nevertheless, the general picture of exaltation to heaven/virtuous life/supernatural conception of the mythology of the immortals would be the beachhead in some circles on which the Christian proclamation of Jesus would make its first inroads. The christology of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity seems clearly indebted to the concept of the immortals.

(2) Since some early Christians did conceptualize Jesus in terms drawn from the mythology of the immortals, it seems inevitable that in such circles the Jesus-traditions would be affected by this mentality. Without making a judgment about their ultimate origins, one must note that certain materials have a natural *Sitz im Leben* in this christological context. In a cult celebrating Jesus as Lord/Christ/Son of God from his exaltation, an ascension-story would be a predictable form with a clear-cut function. In some circles, the ascent of an immortal was believed to have been witnessed.⁶⁹ In other circles where the

⁶⁷ "Romulus," 28.2-3; see also Cicero, *Republic*, 1.41, citing Ennius. Phil 2:6-11, among the christological hymns, may reflect this pattern.

⁶⁸ R. H. Fuller (*Foundations*, 197, 248) is incorrect when he claims that Hellenistic Jewish Christianity had not yet raised the ontic question of the divinity of the exalted. (1) A supernatural conception would be interpreted ontically in Mediterranean antiquity. This is the significance of the term "demigods" (ἡμιθεοί), i.e., half gods. Cf. Luke 1:35. (2) The Christian resurrection/exaltation tradition would convey ontic change. The tradition in Rom 6:9 states precisely what was understood to have happened to the immortals. Cf. Philo, *Life of Moses*, 2.288; Plutarch, "Romulus," 28.6-8. Against Fuller, it seems that the mythology of immortals offered one way for some early Christians to deal with the ontic problem of their belief in one God and at the same time belief in Jesus as Lord. The one God was conceived as *the* eternal; Jesus as *the* immortal.

⁶⁹ The presence of the two heavenly figures at Jesus' ascent in Acts 1:9-11 and in the Gospel of Peter 9:34-10:42 is similar to the descent of Heracles and Dionysos to take Alexander back to heaven with them (cf. Pseudo-Callisthenes, *Alexander Romance*).

ascent of the immortal was inferred, an empty-tomb tradition⁷⁰ and stories of appearances⁷¹ would function appropriately.

(3) More significant is the influence that the mythology of the immortals had on certain of the gospels taken as wholes. This influence is seen at its fullest in Luke-Acts. Here we find a supernatural conception (Luke 1:35), followed by a virtuous life. According to Acts 2:36 (cf. also 13:33), it is by virtue of his exaltation that Jesus becomes Lord/Christ/Son of God. Luke gives a synthetic portrayal of his becoming Lord. On the one hand, his passing from mortal to immortal is attested by the absence of Jesus' physical remains (Luke 24:1-11 [12]), reinforced both by appearances to friends and disciples in which further instruction is given (Luke 24:13-49; Acts 1:1-5) and by predictions made during his life (Luke 9:22; 18:32-33 — to which specific reference is made in 24:6-8). On the other hand, Jesus' ascent amidst a cloud is witnessed by the Galileans (Acts 1:9-11). There is no way a Mediterranean person could have missed this as a portrayal of Jesus in the mythology of the immortals. That Luke-Acts is so influenced is noteworthy because it is in this gospel that the parallels between Jesus and the ancient philosophers are the greatest.⁷² If the converts in Luke's church came from the Greco-Roman world where philosophers were sometimes described as divine men who became immortals, then the Lucan picture of Jesus is intelligible.

The impact of this mentality is also evident in Matthew. Here again we meet a supernatural conception followed by a virtuous life. According to 28:18, it is because he has passed from mortal to immortal that Jesus now has a new status as Lord. The evidence of his ascent into the heavens consists of the absence of his physical remains together with the now familiar *duo*: appearances in which instruction is given (28:9-10; 28:16-20) and predictions during Jesus' earthly career (16:21; 17:22-23; 20:18-19). Again, the way a Hellenistic person would have interpreted this portrayal is virtually certain. That Matthew is so influenced by the mythology of the immortals is significant because it is in this gospel that the parallels between Jesus and Moses are most pronounced.

⁷⁰ E. Bickerman ("Das leere Grab," *ZNW* 23 [1924] 281-92), N. Q. Hamilton ("Resurrection Tradition and the Composition of Mark," *JBL* 84 [1965] 415-21), T. J. Weeden (*Mark — Traditions in Conflict* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971] 106-8) have all argued that the empty-tomb story is a translation narrative. If the empty-tomb story was a translation tale, then we may ask whether Paul's omission of reference to the empty tomb might be linked with his preference for another christological pattern?

⁷¹ A. Ehrhardt ("The Disciples of Emmaus," *NTS* 10 [1963-64] 187-201) regards Luke 24:13-35 as similar to the Romulus tradition (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.63,3). This is reinforced by the fact that Plutarch's description of Romulus' appearance ("Romulus," 28) conforms in essentials to the form of resurrection-appearances elaborated by C. H. Dodd, "The Appearances of the Risen Christ: An Essay in Form-criticism of the Gospels," *Studies in the Gospels: Essays in Memory of R. H. Lightfoot* (ed. D. E. Nineham; Oxford: Blackwell, 1955) 9-35.

⁷² See C. H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), ch. 6.

Though the resemblances between the evangelist's description of Jesus and Josephus's depiction of Moses are striking, the differences between them are at the points of divine parentage and the hero's being an object of worship at the end of his career. These are just the points that some Jews made in going beyond Josephus to describe Moses as an immortal. If the Christian converts in Matthew's church came from such circles as these, then the First Gospel's portrayal of Jesus is meaningful.

In Mark there are no narratives dealing with a supernatural conception. This is not decisive, for Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Empedocles* contained no such account yet ended with an ascent-tradition. His remains were nowhere to be found. This is precisely what we find in Mark. There is an empty-tomb story which has, of late, properly been recognized as an ascent-tradition. Connected with it are the predictable corollaries: predictions during Jesus' lifetime (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-33) and a reference to an appearance (16:7).⁷³ A Hellenistic reader would have understood the gospel in much the same terms that he would have interpreted Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Empedocles*. Here is a *theios anēr*, about whom the claim is made that he became an immortal at the end of his career.

It would seem, therefore, that the early Christians were aware of the Mediterranean concept of the immortals and utilized it in one way or another in their proclamation of Jesus. During the first one hundred and twenty five years of Christian history this mythology functioned initially as a significant christological category and then as an apologetic tool.

⁷³ So, most recently, R. H. Stein, "A Short Note on Mark 14:28 and 16:7," *NTS* 20 (1973-74) 445-52.