

Jesus, Paul, and Pagan Imposters:
Narrative Imitation in the Roman Empire

“Apollonius of Tyana lived about the time of Jesus Christ. His life (that of the former) is related in so fabulous a manner by his disciples, that we are at a loss to discover whether he was a sage, an impostor, or a fanatic.” With this wicked footnote, Edward Gibbon inserted himself into a polemic that had been running for more than a millennium and a half. Since at least the age of Diocletian, following the rabidly anti-Christian official Hierocles, critics of Christianity had noted the similarities between Apollonius and Christ. The modern scholarly literature has largely followed the terms of discussion suggested by Hierocles and asked whether Philostratus’ *Vita Apollonii* was modeled on the gospels or otherwise meant to mimic, undermine, or outdo the biographies of Christ (Jones 2006; Uytfanghe 2009). The consensus on this point, behind the weight of Eduard Meyer, has been largely negative – Philostratus was unaware of or indifferent towards Christ (Meyer 1917). But perhaps the modern discussion has been duped by Hierocles, and it is not in fact the gospels to which we should look for parallels with the *Vita Apollonii*.

The more appropriate comparisons are to be drawn between the *Vita Apollonii* and the *Acts of the Apostles*, both canonical and apocryphal. This paper will outline some revealing similarities that show the *Vita Apollonii* and Acts to have inhabited the same generic space under the Roman Empire. Both Paul and Apollonius were traveling, miracle-working, philosophical/religious evangelists; both were brought into highly stylized confrontations with Roman authority. Both the Acts and the *Vita Apollonii* are biographies that draw on the conventions and narrative techniques of the Greek romance,

and the judicial set-pieces allow us privileged access to the political meaning of these narratives. This paper will argue that the *Vita Apollonii* and the Acts reveal not so much direct influence, borrowing, or imitation, but rather that they drew on the same stock of narrative raw material in Roman imperial culture. By examining how Christian and Hellenic authors deployed this raw material in their narratives, moreover, we can better appreciate the political dynamics of narrative literature, a theme which has become a central preoccupation among scholars of Greek fiction under Roman rule (Swain 1996).

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