

*Greco-Roman Epic Literature as a Background For Understanding The Gospels Portrayal Of
Jesus' Post Mortem Apparitions And His Status As The Son Of God And Messiah.*

Introduction:

It is usually espoused, and indeed it is axiomatic, that devoid of background information of a given story one cannot fully attain the fullness of a story. Over time after the contribution of Herman Gunkel to the backgrounds of the old testament in the 19th century and dead sea scrolls discovered in the midst of the 20th century there has been a tendency by exegesis to focus more on the semitic and oriental context rather than in the classical one. Some of the events crossing the super natural in the *New Testament*, especially in regards to the resurrection of Christ, were written through a cultural lens that reflected Greco Roman conceptions. In the literature that came from the ancient Hellenes and Romans one can find much background for the narratives in the *New Testament* such as those of *post mortem* apparitions of Jesus as well as his divine title, including the very meaning of the *euangelion*. From now on, I will go through several texts: *Odyssey, Illiad, Aeneid, Eclogues, Symposium* and *Nicomachean Ethics.*, in order to examine different supernatural stories, maintaining a focus on ghosts instead of miracles or other supernatural events and afterwards I will examine what was divinely believed of Caesar *Octavian* and its links to the portrayal of Jesus by the *New Testament*, for we will see that the evangelists appropriated terms that belonged only to *Octavian* and were given to Jesus only.

Before examining Classical ghost stories, we must investigate the categories of spirits that were believed to exist in the ancient Greco Roman world. According to Ogden ghosts can be categorized in four groups, even though of course he will leave out a variety of ghosts,

these are the ones classified by Ogden: *Aôroi*, the ones who perished at a young age; *Biaiothanatoi*, the ones who had a violent death for example warriors or executed criminals; *Agamoi*, the ones who died before marriage and hence were *bitte*; and finally *Ataphoi* those who did not receive a proper burial and could not rest because of it.. All of them haunted the places where they died. ¹ If one had to include Jesus' *post mortem* among these classifications it surely be *Biaiothanatoi* for he was considered a criminal and died of a violent death. Having explained these classifications, I will not research the specific dead criminals who appeared again because they are not relevant *per se* due to the fact that their story isn't wide spread amongst people. I will examine the famous causes rather than look for examples of *Biaiothanatoi*.

On gender, Kerr criticizes the idea of giving adjectives of female *daimonoi* since both male and female ghosts originated as dead people.² Moreover she quotes *Papyri Graecae Magicae* IV 296-466 where a spell is written for making a woman to fall in love with a man, what it is interesting is that the invocation addressing ghosts and ask them for help says "whoever you!are, whether male or female". ³ It seems clear to me that if there would be any important distinction between female ghosts and male ghosts, in this situation where a romantic spell is desired, those distinctions would show up.

Ancient Greek ghost's apparitions and its parallels with Jesus *post mortem* pericopes:

Prior to engaging with the ghost stories, I will show a couple of examples where we can see parallels between Greek ethics and the *New Testament's* ethics concerning what was worthy to die for and for which reasons. A common ethical background was present.

Only those in love are prepared to die for one another ⁴

This is the proof of love, that he laid down his life for us, and we too ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

(Plato's Symposium 179B)

(1 John 3:16) ⁵

It is true also of the good person that he does a great deal for his friends and his country, and will die for them if he must ⁶

No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends

(Aristotle Nicomachean Ethics IX 1169a)

(John 15:13)

In this case we see the proof of truly loving is giving one's life for another. . Hengel points out that *New Testament* got these conceptions from the ancient Greek literature.⁷ This

¹ Ogden, D., 2002. *Magic, witchcraft, and ghosts in the Greek and Roman worlds*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, p.146.

² Kerr, Deborah. 2018. *"Gods, Ghosts And Newlyweds: Exploring The Uses Of The Threshold In Greek And Roman Superstition And Folklore."*. Ph.D, University of Birmingham, p. 58

³ Kerr, Deborah, pp.92-93

⁴ Howatson, M. and Sheffield, F., tr. 2008. *Plato, the Symposium*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, p.10.

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the New Testament are from the New Jerusalem Bible

⁶ Crisp, R., tr. 2000. *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.176.

⁷ Hengel, M., 1981. *The atonement*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp.9-13.

means that the *New Testament* authors were educated people who could read and write, had values and an ethical code shaped by the great authors read and esteemed in that time. If the gospel authors had values shaped by the Greek classical authors how much more would their writing be shaped by a Greek cultural background at the time to narrate the most important thing of their lives, i.e the resurrection of their Lord.

Regarding actual ghost stories, it must be noticed that in general ghosts in ancient Greek thought could consume sacrifices but could not be touched or grabbed, the example of

Odysseus' mother is fitting one.⁸ Let us compare that pericope with the apparitions of Jesus risen in John and Luke.

I see the ghost of my long-lost mother here before me...she cannot bear to look me in the eyes — her own son —or speak a word to me... 'One rule there is,' the famous seer explained, ...Any one of the ghosts you let approach the blood will speak the truth to you. Anyone you refuse will turn and fade away...my mother approached and drank the dark, clouding blood. She knew me at once and wailed out in grief and her words came winging toward me,...And I, my mind in turmoil, how I longed to embrace my mother's spirit, dead as she was! Three times I rushed toward her...three times she fluttered through my fingers...Mother —why not wait for me? How I long to hold you...My noble mother answered me at once...this is just the way of mortals when we die...Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together.⁹

(Odyssey XI 142-158/212-222)

As she said this she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not realise that it was Jesus...Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?...Jesus said to her, 'Do not cling to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father...

(John 20:14-17)

They were still talking about all this when he himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!..In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost...Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have...they were dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?..And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes

(Luke 24:36-43)

The first thing that can be noticed is that Odysseus' mother does not speak nor looks at him and she is in need to drink blood in order to be able to communicate, while in the Gospel of John, Jesus is the one initiating the conversation without needing anything. Secondly, Odysseus' story, the ghost is in sorrow as *Odysseus* was as well, meanwhile in the evangelical story, Jesus was not in sorrow or anything *similar*; *Mary is the only one in sorrow and this would create a parallel where Mary and Odysseus* feel more or less likewise, but the supposed ghost Jesus is not behaving like *Odysseus'* mother. It could very well be the intention of the gospel author to make sure that at the encounter with the allegedly dead one, he was not in pain or sorrow but only the person beholding him. Thirdly, Odysseus tries to grab her mother but she vanishes, while the woman can touch Jesus, the verb used is ἅπτομαι which denotes physical contact. Brant states that the verb *Haptou* suggests that she has

flung her arms around him.¹⁰ Keener suggests the translation “Stop holding on to me”, the persisting clinging would denote the emotionality of the encounter, and remarks the physicality of the encounter.¹¹ Finally as Prince notices there is a parallel expression in the text of the *Odyssey* and the gospel of Luke (flesh and bones) used for opposite reasons, Odysseus’ mother does not have flesh and bone because that is the nature of ghosts and Jesus on the other hand employs the very same words to show that because he has flesh and bones he is not a ghost.¹²

⁸ Burkert, W., 1985. *Greek religion*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp.194-196.

⁹ Fagles, R., tr. 1997. *The Odyssey*. New York: Penguin Books, pp.254-256.

¹⁰ Brant, Jo-Ann A. 2011. *John*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, pp. 270-271

¹¹ Keener, Craig S. 2012. *The Gospel Of John*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, pp.1193-1994

¹² Prince, D., 2007. The ‘Ghost’ of Jesus: Luke 24 in Light of Ancient Narratives of Post-Mortem Apparitions. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 29(3), pp.287-301

Also in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, the very nature of the ghosts is being non tangible.

This is apparent in the story of Achilles being visited by the ghost of Patroclus and Aeneas seeing the ghost of Creusa.

“Throw our arms around each other, just for a moment take some joy in the tears that numb the heart!” In the same breath he stretched his loving arms but could not seize him, no, the ghost slipped underground like a wisp of smoke ... with a high thin cry. And Achilles..... cried in desolation, "Ah god! So even in Death's strong house there is something left, a ghost, a phantom-true, but no real breath of life.”¹³

(*Iliad* XXIII 96-104)

“She deserted me, fading away on the winds without substance. Three times I tried to encircle her neck with my arms as I stood there, Three times, alas, all in vain. For the image eluded my grasping Hands, like a

"And suddenly, coming to meet them, was Jesus. 'Greetings,' he said. And the women came up to him and, clasping his feet, they did him homage."

(Matthew 28:9)

slight puff of air, as a dream flutters off
from a dreamer.”¹⁴

(*Aeneid* II 791-794)

¹³ Fagles, R. and Knox, B., tr. 1991. *The Iliad*. London: Penguin Books, pp.562-563.

¹⁴ V Ahl, F., tr. 2008. *Aeneid*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.53

Once again we can see the difference between the Ghosts vanishing when they are going to be touched and Jesus being able to be grabbed. Clearly the Gospel authors are letting their audience know that Jesus was not simply a ghost. Prince however, points out that in History Heroes were palpable. She gives different examples such as Herodotus’ story about Astrobacus’ ghost having intercourse with the mother of Demartus king of Sparta (*Hist* 6.69) or the account of Pausanias about the ghost of the hero of Temesa being beaten in a boxing match by Euthymus (*Descr.* 6.6.7-11).¹⁵

And indeed it appeared that the garlands had come from the hero-temple which stands by our court gates - the temple of him they call Astrabacus - and the soothsayers, moreover, declared that the apparition was that very person. And now, my son, I have told thee all thou wouldst fain know. Either thou art the son of that hero - either thou mayest call Astrabacus sire; or else Ariston was thy father.

(*Hist* 6.69)¹⁶

On his return to Italy Euthymus fought against the Hero, the story about whom is as follows. Odysseus, so they say, in his wanderings after the capture of Troy was carried down by gales to various cities of Italy and Sicily, and among them he came with his ships to Temesa. Here one of his sailors got drunk and violated a maiden, for which offence he was stoned to death by the natives...But the ghost of the stoned man never ceased killing without distinction the people of Temesa, attacking both old and young, until, when the inhabitants had resolved to flee from Italy for good, the Pythian priestess forbade them to leave Temesa, and ordered them to propitiate the Hero, setting him a sanctuary apart and building a temple, and to give him every year as wife the fairest maiden in Temesa. So they performed the commands of the god and suffered no more terrors from the ghost. But Euthymus happened to come to Temesa just at the time when the ghost was being propitiated in the usual way.....Euthymus with his armour on awaited the onslaught of the ghost....He won the fight, and the Hero was driven out of the land and disappeared, sinking into the depth of the sea

(Descr. 6.6.7-11)¹⁷

First, the palpability of ghosts became a trend in literature but it was not the traditional conception regarding history but for the *New Testament's* authors who are writing an epic about Jesus they would have been interested in epic, specially for the narration of supernatural actions or occurrences. The Gospel writers chose to follow the epic tradition when describing the *post mortem* apparition of Jesus. On the other hand I also want to call attention to the figure of Patroclus who, as was discussed above, was a hero and was not palpable, contrary to Prince's. It could be that the *New Testament* authors were conscious about tangible ghosts being only or mostly those of heroes in History, and they wanted to make clear that Jesus was a hero. This second way of synthesis, I think, is less likely due to the statement found in Luke where Jesus says “ Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones” (Lk 24:39). At least for the Gospel author, it is clear that the nature of ghosts that he had in mind were of those that were intangible.

It is also important that the risen Jesus never appeared at night, the majority of ghosts appeared at night, Felton explains night was associated with darkness and darkness was

¹⁵ Prince, D.

¹⁶ Rawlinson, George., tr. 2013. *The Histories Herodotous*. Moscow, Idaho: Roman Roads Media,p.396

¹⁷ Jones, W. H. S., tr. 1988. *Pausanias Description Of Greece*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

associated with death hence why ghosts were thought to appear at night, night was the time for terrors and mysteries; he also references Plato (*Rep* II 381e) who speaks about his dislike for mothers telling children about ghosts roaming at night..¹⁸ Jesus appearing only in daylight could be yet another literary convention proving that he was not a ghost. This common belief

that ghosts only at night, probably, behind the Gospel account of the apostles thinking Jesus was a ghost when he walked on water. The pericope in the Gospel of Mark makes it clear that it was the fourth watch of the night:

"He could see that they were hard pressed in their rowing, for the wind was against them; and about the fourth watch of the night he came towards them, walking on the sea. He was going to pass them by, but when they saw him walking on the sea they thought it was a ghost and cried out;"

(Mark 6:48-49)

Another particularity of ghosts is that they often bear wounds that caused their death, here we could only talk about the ones who died of violent death hence why the wounds. That sounds logical, but wounds had another important meaning.

In the *Aeneid* we can read the story of Sychaeus a Phoenician landlord who married the virgin Dido who was given to Sychaeus by her father after having consulted the wedding omens. After having a brawl with his brother in law, he ended up killing Sychaeus. Pygmalion hid what he had done. But when the ghost of Sychaeus appeared to his wife in her dreams, he bore a visible wound that provided evidence of his actual death as we will see. (*Aeneid* I 341-355).

¹⁸ Felton, D., 1999. *Haunted Greece and Rome*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp.6-7.

wound that provided evidence of his actual death as we will see. (*Aeneid* I 341-355).

On the other hand we have Odysseus, albeit not a ghost, when he returned to his father's home, wanted to see if the old man would recognize him. He could not, so Odysseus

revealed him who he was. His father, however, doubted him, so Odysseus in order to prove who he was showed his scar (*Odyssey* XXIV 216-333).

“in her dreams, the true form of her unburied husband approached her, Raising before her a face that was wasted with terrible pallor, Baring the truth of the brutal crime at the altar, the daggered Breast...”¹⁹

(*Aeneid* I 353-356)

“Father —I am your son —myself, the man you’re seeking...“You —you’re truly my son, Odysseus, home at last? Give me a sign, some proof —I Must be sure.”...This scar first,” quick to the mark, his son said, “look at this — the wound I took from the boar’s white tusk...”²⁰

(*Odyssey* XXIV 324/ 331-335)

"They were still talking about all this when he himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!' .In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, 'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts stirring in your hearts? See by my hands and my feet that it is I myself "Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.'

(Luke 24:39) New Jerusalem Bible

"Thomas, called the Twin, who was one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples said to him, 'We have seen the Lord,' but he answered, 'Unless I can see the holes that the nails made in his hands and can put my finger into the holes they made...I refuse to believe.'" "Eight days later..."Jesus came..."Then he spoke to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; look, here are my hands..'"

(John 20:24-27) New Jerusalem Bible

Examining these texts the *Aeneid* that says about the ghost “baring the truth of

¹⁹ Ahl, F,p. 14

²⁰ Fagles, R. and Knox, B.,p. 478

In the cases of both Sychaeus and Jesus the evidence that identifies them are their wounds. When the *Aeneid* describes the ghost of Sychaeus as “baring the truth of the brutal crime.” The wounds of his assassination proves that he was Killed, Jesus’ wounds prove that he was the same one that got crucified. The two things Thomas asks for, to see Jesus' wounds

and to touch him, do double duty. On One hand the wounds serve as to identify him, and on the other hand the palpability.

In the case of Odysseus, who is alive, we notice that his scar serves as the first evidence to prove himself to be who he claims. Macdonald tell us that the identification of someone by his or her scars it is found elsewhere as well in Greek literature, he gives the example of Orestes being recognized by Electra due to his scar along his brown in the narrative of Euripides (*Electra* 573-74); Macdonald also writes about Oedipus that what forced him to recognize his parricide and having married his mother were the scars of the wounds he bore on his ankles that he had since he was a child (*Sophocles Oedipus Tyrannus* 993-98). Finally, Macdonald says that for Aristotle the scar of Odysseus was one of the most successful signs used for recognition in ancient literature Poetics I6(I 454b-55a).²¹ When we compare it to the narrative of the gospel of John, if we pay attention we see Jesus saying two things: “Put your finger here; look, here are my hands” and again I see these two actions to be taken separately. Putting the finger in his wounds, actual touching, was to prove that he was not a ghost, yet looking at his hands was a method of verification.

As a conclusion for this section dealing with ghosts in the Greco Roman literature and its impact on the *new testament* and Jesus *post mortem* apparitions, we must look at the very use of it which is done in different ways. In the first place, the gospel authors use the epic

²¹Macdonald, D., 2010. *Homeric epics and the gospel of mark*. London: Yale University Press, p.116.

background of their audience to make the point that Jesus was not a ghost by creating totally different characteristics in the apparitions of Jesus. He appears during daylight, he can be touched while the opposite was norm in Greco Roman , furthermore Jesus retaining his wounds would appeal to the notion on how to recognize somebody whether dead or alive that

the ancients had. So we can say, that there is use of Greco Roman literature in the passages of Jesus' resurrection by the gospel authors in two ways: for one there is a contrasting method, where Jesus is the opposite of a ghost, for the other the marks of the wounds serving to verify the identity of a person work in the same way.

The divine Caesar Octavian and Jesus

The prophecy of Christ's virginal birth as Christians read it comes from the book of Isaiah as reported by the Gospel of Matthew. The fourth Eclogue of Virgil, however, provides an interesting comparison.

Now is come the last age of Cumaean song;
the great line of the centuries begins anew.
Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn
returns; now a new generation descends
from heaven on high. Only do you, pure
Lucina, smile on the birth of the child,
under whom the iron brood shall at last
cease and a golden race spring up
throughout the world! Your own Apollo
now is king! And in your consulship, Pollio,
yes, yours, shall this glorious age begin, and
the mighty months commence their march;
under your sway any lingering traces of our
guilt shall become void and release the earth
from its continual dread. He shall have the
gift of divine life, shall see heroes mingled
with gods, and shall himself be seen by
them, and shall rule the world to which his
father's prowess brought peace. But for you,
child, the earth untilled will pour forth its
first pretty gifts, gadding ivy with foxglove
everywhere, and the Egyptian bean blended
with the laughing briar; unbidden it will
pour forth for you a cradle of smiling
flowers. Unbidden, the goats will bring
home their udders swollen with milk, and
the cattle will not fear huge lions. The

And the Lord spoke further to Achaz,
saying, Ask for yourself a sign of the Lord
your God, in depth or in height. But Achaz
said, I will not ask, nor will I put the Lord to
the test. Then he said: "Hear now, O house
of Daud! Is it a small thing for you to
provoke a fight with mortals? How then do
you provoke a fight with the Lord?
Therefore the Lord himself will give you a
sign. Look, the virgin shall be with child
and bear a son, and you shall name him
Emmanuel. He shall eat butter and honey;
before he knows or prefers evil things, he
shall choose what is good. For before the
child knows good or bad, he defies evil to
choose what is good, and the land that you
fear from before the two kings will be
abandoned. But God will bring on you and
on your people and on your ancestral house
such days as have not yet come since the
day that he took Ephraim away from
Ioudas—the king of the Assyrians." And it
shall be on that day that the Lord will
whistle for the flies that rule part of the river
of Egypt and for the bee that is in the
country of the Assyrians. And they will all
come and rest in the ravines of the country

serpent, too, will perish, and perish will the plant that hides its poison; Assyrian spice will spring up on every soil. But as soon as you can read of the glories of heroes and your father's deeds, and can know what valour is, slowly will the plains yellow with the waving corn, on wild brambles the purple grape will hang, and the stubborn oak distil dewy honey."²²

(Eclogue IV 1-26)

and in the clefts of the rocks and into the caves and into every crevice and on every tree. On that day the Lord will shave with the great and drunken razor—which is beyond the river of the king of the Assyrians—the head and the hair of the feet, and he will cut off the beard. And it shall be on that day that a person will nourish a young cow of the cattle and two sheep, and it shall be, because of the abundance of milk that they give, everyone that is left on the land will eat butter and honey. And it shall be on that day that every place where there used to be a thousand vines, worth a thousand shekels, will become barren ground and thorn. With dart and arrow they will enter there, for all the land will be barren ground and thorn, and every hill being plowed will be plowed, and fear will not come there, for it will be turned from the barren ground and thorn to a place where a sheep can feed and an ox can tread.²³

Isaiah 7:10-23

There are many striking parallels: apparently a virgin is going to give birth to a son that will introduce a new age of peace in the world where the struggles and fatigues of men

²² Fairclough, H., tr. 1999. *Eclogues ; Georgics ; Aeneid, I-VI*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp.49-51.

²³ N.E.T.S, A New English Translations of the Septuagint regarding war, no more Assyrian enemies or of any kind, and agriculture will be solved. Who are those sons that promised in both texts? There have been many attempts to explain who is the son in Isaiah, Ratzinger tell us that it could be a proto messianic idea created before the exile of Israel, that it could be the son of Ahaz or maybe a son of the prophet Isaih or perhaps a symbolic figure for Zion. But he concludes saying that it remains a mystery.²⁴ Regarding the son prophesied in the *Eclogues*, Lewis states that Virgil is making a connection between Octavian and Apollos, he continues by sayin Octavian stopped using the title *Gaius* (joy) for the title *Divi Filius* (son of God).²⁵ Elliot and Reasoner argue that Virgil is writing about the

short period of peace that was present between Octavian and Antony and celebrating the advent of *Gaius Asinius Pollio* who became consul in 40 B.C.E. They continue saying that the child to be expected could be one that Virgil thought would be born from the short relationship between Antony and Cleopatra; they also assert that whomever would that son have been, Romans and Christians alike made it their own prophecy, they conclude stating that this son could be of a symbolic nature or personification of a new age.²⁶ Clausen like Elliot and Reasoner says that the period of peace alludes brief period of peace between Octavian and Anthony, the so called e Pact of Brundisium but he explicitly says that it was obvious in that time who would be the boy for Virgil's audience and that is an expected child to be born from the marriage of Antony with Octavian's sister, Octavia.²⁷ Maybe it is fair to conclude as Ratzinger does as well after examining the fourth *Eclogue* saying that like Isaiah's text it remains a mystery.²⁸

²⁴ Ratzinger, J., Whitmore, P., 2012. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*. New York: Image, p.49

²⁵ Lewis, R., 2018. *Paul's 'spirit of adoption' in its roman imperial context*. New York: T & T Clark, pp.49-50.

²⁶ Elliott, N. and Reasoner, M., 2011. *Documents and images for the study of Paul*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, p.109.

²⁷ Clausen, W., 2003. *A commentary on Virgil, Eclogues*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.121.

²⁸ Ratzinger, J., Whitmore, P., pp.54-55

We do not know how the parallels between the text of Isaiah and the text of Virgil came to be. But we can be sure that Christians, at least, in the long run saw Virgil as a prophet of Christianity as Stauffer tell us, giving as the example of the fourth Eclogue being used as a hymn in an address to the assembly of saints by a contemporary of Constantine.²⁹ This was shared by many church fathers for example Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* XVIII 23; *Epistolae ad Romanos inchoata expositio* 1 3) or Lactantius (*Divinae Institutiones* VII.24). But what about the *New Testament* authors? Were they familiar with this text? I do not think we can have a definitive answer but I hold that they did know about it in one way or the other

due to the parallelism of divine titles given to Jesus, and even the very notion of the *euangelion* (good news), denoting a familiarity with the Imperial cult.

Let us start with the concept of the concept of *euangelion*, Bryan explains that after Julius Caesar was killed in 29 B.C.E, chaos reigned throughout the empire until Augustus took the power and restored stability for the empire. Then the body of the Greek citizen of Asia replied to a letter to the proconsul asking them to honor the emperor's birthday.³⁰ This what they replied:

“Caesar has realized the hopes of our ancestors . . . not only has he surpassed earlier benefactors of humanity, but he leaves no hope to those of the future that they might surpass him. The god's [birthday] was for the world the beginning of the good news [euangelion] that he brought”.³¹

Now we can affirm that *New testament* authors were using an already known term that served as qualifier for the Emperor's birth. It should be noted that is also spoken about the beginning of good news for the world, this has clearly an eschatological and messianic, meaning that the great time of peace is being fulfilled by the advent of a man, connotation. I argue that the people who wrote this text were familiar even if indirectly with the prophecies of

²⁹ Stauffer, E., 2008. *Christ and the Caesars*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, p.274.

³⁰ Bryan, C., 2005. *Render to Caesar*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.82.

³¹ Bryan, C., In Wilhelm Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum* (Hildesheim: George Olms Verlag, 1970 [Leipzig: Hirzel, 1903–5]), 2.458

Virgil. This brings me to connect the dots with the *New Testament* authors who had to be familiar with the term and its origins in order to have used it in their writings. One example that is very convenient is found in the gospel of Mark.

"The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God"... "After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the gospel from God saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.'"

(Mark: 1:1;14)

It is very important to see the choice of words by the author “beginning of the gospel” same sentence used in the letter of the Greek citizens of Asia, and “The time is fulfilled” so the age of peace has arrived and denotes the eschatological, meaning the expectation of the age to come is being unleashed, component of the very affirmation. This could be an indication that between the *euangelion* (good news) as understood by the Romans and the gospel as understood by the authors of the *New Testament* is real and also it could therefore mean that the gospel writers knew not only about the roman *euangelion* but also were familiar with the fourth *Eclogue*.

Another particularity about the terms used in the *New Testament* is the title Son of God applied to Jesus. Hengel affirms that there is no background to be found in the hellenistic due to the nature of the concept “Son of God” in the Hellene literature. Zeus produced countless sons and many people in that time followed the stoics who said that all men were by nature the son of Zeus because they bare his seed in them by virtue of their reason.³²

As I previously said early on in this article, it was Octavian who dropped the tile

³² Hengel, M., 1976. *The son of God*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, pp.23-24.

Gaius (joy) and started using *Divi Filius* (son of God). The Greek translation of this latter title it came to be *υἱός θεοῦ* (son of God), coins were minted in Thessalonica in 27 B.C, and on the one side appeared the image Julius and as a legend the word *θεός* (god) and on the other side the one of Octavian, thus appearing to say that Octavian was the son of god.³³

Moreover, Octavian received the title of *Augustus* (worthy of honor) and in Greek *Σεβαστός*

.³⁴ The gospels present a couple episodes in which we can see that in order to understand it we need the context of what I previously explained. Let us see the evangelicals passages:

.And they sent their disciples to him, together with some Herodians, to say, 'Master, we know that you are an honest man and teach the way of God in all honesty, and that you are not afraid of anyone, because human rank means nothing to you. Give us your opinion, then. Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?' .But Jesus was aware of their malice and replied, 'You hypocrites! Why are you putting me to the test? Show me the money you pay the tax with.' They handed him a denarius and he said, 'Whose portrait is this? Whose title?' .They replied, 'Caesar's.' Then he said to them, 'Very well, pay Caesar what belongs to Caesar -- and God what belongs to God.'"

(Matthew 22:15-21)

".They all said, 'So you are the Son of God then?' He answered, 'It is you who say I am.' .Then they said, 'Why do we need any evidence? We have heard it for ourselves from his own lips.'"

(Luke 22:70-71)

We see what is happening in these pericopes, in Matthew, Jesus is denying the divinity of Caesar by asking those who ask him about whose face bears the coin, as I said the coin had the Image of Caesar with the inscription "god". By saying give unto God what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar to Caesar, we see a clear distinction between Caesar and God hence Caesar is not God. In Luke, Jesus is more than clear saying that he is the son of God and hence denying Octavian's title. I could say in some

³³ Kim, S., 2008. *Christ and Caesar*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., p.5.

³⁴ Stauffer, E.,p.208

seem like the answer of Jesus is not really a Yes, but as Joel Green says, it was an ironic way to say Yes. He did the same before Pilate when asked if he was the king of the jews (Lk 23:3), in both cases the ones who ask the question, grasping Jesus' identity correctly, are not willing to recognize it, hence the ironic answer of Jesus.³⁵

As a conclusion for this second and last section, I realize that without the Roman background one cannot truly understand the gospels. For one we see that there is an eschatological belief in the Roman religion similar to that of those Jews who would become Christian later. The fourth *Eclogue* is the parallel messianic prophecy to the text of Isaiah 7, including the coming of age of world peace and a messiah, in the Roman set of beliefs. For the most part, the majority of people who read the gospel have in mind the Jewish basis for the messianic age and the messiah, yet it results of extreme importance to know about the Roman one. Furthermore, we see that the very term *euangelion* (good news) also known as gospel has already a meaning within the Roman imperial cult, the term is not something used by the evangelist as new. This term being attached to the Emperor, who happens to be considered the son of God and to come as the ruler who will bring peace and a new age, makes a clear parallel with Jesus and how the gospel writers saw him. It is a fact that one has to be familiar with Roman religious context in order to see what I conclude that the gospels authors are doing: They are using all these notions and concepts to make Jesus and his gospel as an antithesis to the Roman emperor and his propaganda. The Roman emperor and the cult of him becomes a silent antagonistic character, that whereas it will not be explicit for modern readers of the gospel, it certainly was for those who could read Greek at that time.

³⁵ Green, J., 1997. *The gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, p.801.

Final conclusion:

Having concluded the two sections in this work, I see the relevance of studying classics. In the case of those who give importance, whether religiously or just in literary sense, to the gospels it becomes extremely helpful to understand the classics background and context. It also shows how the Greco Roman literature was read by the primitive Christians, sometimes agreeing and having a lot in common as it is the case with Plato and Aristotle, other times using the great works of past in order to construct their narrative as it is the case, specifically, with the *Odyssey*. And yet in some cases to regard it as prophetic, surely in the long run as it happens with Virgil. Still the narratives about the Roman imperial cult are used in order to create an antithesis.

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