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Our item this time will be of rather a different order than past copycat thesis essays. Our critic this time is Richard Carrier of the Secular Web. His subject is not a major figure like Mithra or Dionysus, but an obscure figure called Zalmoxis. And finally, Carrier does not argue so much for a direct borrowing thesis (though he does suggest that "the Zalmoxis story may have been heard by Jesus or a colleague and inspired the idea of a similar plan" for Jesus) as for what we may call a "social parallel" in which Zalmoxis is regarded as the founder of the "first known divine-man resurrection religion" and offers a *historical* (rather than strictly ideological or theological) parallel to what Carrier theorizes may have happened with Jesus.

It is beyond our scope here to deal with the historical issue of the resurrection; for now, we will simply ask the question of whether Carrier is correct in citing the Zalmoxis account as providing a viable historical parallel to which the Christian account may possibly be compared.

The earliest source on this matter is the Greek historian Herodotus. Here is his account of the matter (*Persian Wars* 4.94-6):

*The belief of the Getae in respect of immortality is the following. They think that they do not really die, but that when they depart this life they go to Zalmoxis, who is called also Gebeleizis by some among them. To this god every five years they send a messenger, who is chosen by lot out of the whole nation, and charged to bear him their several requests. Their mode of sending him is this. A number of them stand in order, each holding in his hand three darts; others take the man who is to be sent to Zalmoxis, and swinging him by his hands and feet, toss him into the air so that he falls upon the points of the weapons. If he is pierced and dies, they think that the god is propitious to them; but if not, they lay the fault on the messenger, who (they say) is a*

wicked man: and so they choose another to send away. The messages are given while the man is still alive. This same people, when it lightens and thunders, aim their arrows at the sky, uttering threats against the god; and they do not believe that there is any god but their own.

I am told by the Greeks who dwell on the shores of the Hellespont and the Pontus, that this Zalmoxis was in reality a man, that he lived at Samos, and while there was the slave of Pythagoras son of Mnesarchus. After obtaining his freedom he grew rich, and leaving Samos, returned to his own country. The Thracians at that time lived in a wretched way, and were a poor ignorant race; Zalmoxis, therefore, who by his commerce with the Greeks, and especially with one who was by no means their most contemptible philosopher, Pythagoras to wit, was acquainted with the Ionic mode of life and with manners more refined than those current among his countrymen, had a chamber built, in which from time to time he received and feasted all the principal Thracians, using the occasion to teach them that neither he, nor they, his boon companions, nor any of their posterity would ever perish, but that they would all go to a place where they would live for aye in the enjoyment of every conceivable good. While he was acting in this way, and holding this kind of discourse, he was constructing an apartment underground, into which, when it was completed, he withdrew, vanishing suddenly from the eyes of the Thracians, who greatly regretted his loss, and mourned over him as one dead. He meanwhile abode in his secret chamber three full years, after which he came forth from his concealment, and showed himself once more to his countrymen, who were thus brought to believe in the truth of what he had taught them. Such is the account of the Greeks.

I for my part neither put entire faith in this story of Zalmoxis and his underground chamber, nor do I altogether discredit it: but I believe Zalmoxis to have lived long before the time of Pythagoras. Whether there was ever really a man of the name, or whether Zalmoxis is nothing but a native god of the Getae, I now bid him farewell. As for the Getae themselves, the people who observe the practices described above, they were now reduced by the Persians, and accompanied the army of Darius.

What Carrier says directly on this subject amounts to very little:

1. Carrier tells us in one essay that Herodotus "told of a Thracian religion that began with the physical resurrection of a man called Zalmoxis, who then started a cult in which it was taught that believers went to heaven when they died."

I find in this description two instances of illegitimate terminological usage by Carrier.

First, nothing described in Herodotus leads us to accept what is believed by the Thracians to have happened to Zalmoxis as a "physical resurrection." They believe that he has died, yes, but there is no indication that they believed, as the Jews did concerning resurrection, that his original body was physically revived or reconstituted. Indeed we are not told what mechanism they believed in.

Second, Carrier uses the word "heaven" -- Judeo-Christian terminology -- to describe Herodotus' "place where they would live for aye in the enjoyment of every conceivable good." This is not an accurate representation of the Christian doctrine of heaven. It does correspond perhaps with popular (incorrect) perceptions of heaven in Christendom, but not with the historical and Biblical doctrine -- except in a very vague and generalized way that is meaningless, for one of necessity thinks we either have an afterlife or not, and if so, must think to be either pleasurable or not.

It is not clear what Carrier hopes to accomplish with this description. However, if his intent was to draw some sort of parallel, it must be considered a failure.

2. Carrier says elsewhere:

*So the idea of "physical resurrection" was popular, and circulating everywhere. Associating Jesus with this trend would have been a very easy mistake to make. Since religious trust was won in those days by the charisma of speakers and the audience's subjective estimation of their sincerity, it would not be long before a charismatic man, who heard the embellished accounts, came into a position of power, inspiring complete faith from his congregation, who then sought to defend the story, and so began the transformation of the Christian idea of the resurrection from a spiritual concept to a physical one--naturally, calling themselves the "true church" and attacking all rivals, as has sadly so often happened in history.*

This statement is quite vague and generalized, and one may well ask whether Carrier thinks that failure of sense to charisma is only a phenomenon of "those days" -- and in any case, the explanation seems to presuppose that what the charismatic has to offer is necessarily false. If so, it is a form of the genetic fallacy.



But in general, Carrier here (and elsewhere) incorrectly promulgates the idea of a "spiritual resurrection," which is an oxymoron. No such concept existed either in Judaism or in the New Testament.



3. Finally, we are told: "...Herodotus feels happy to give a natural explanation in trickery, even though he could not really have had any more proof than we do in the case of Jesus..."

Carrier's comment involves a number of gross oversimplifications. The comparison to the story of Jesus is absurdly out of proportion.

Carrier provides no source material on Zalmoxis, other than Herodotus, and there actually is little available, other than Mircea Eliade's *Zalmoxis the Vanishing God* (1972), from which the following quotes are provided. What little we have, however, tells us that:

- The Zalmoxis account presupposes a very clever and educated person bamboozling ignorant persons (and indeed, very ignorant -- the disciples saw the death of Jesus, and it is testified to in secular accounts; Eliade finds the account "incomprehensible" on this point, for the Thracians assumed Zalmoxis was dead, without ever seeing his body! -- 23).



This bears resemblance to some theories proposed by doubters, who suppose Jesus to have been a charlatan (or an "honest deceiver" out to give hope to the masses); but this runs thereafter into the difficulties entailed by the trilemma, and the great difference between seeing a body that had once been clearly dead (or at least very badly injured!) after a gruesome execution, and thinking it raised, and a mere disappearance.



This makes a parallel to Zalmoxis rather questionable. As it is a parallel to, say, the Branch Davidian cult is far more suggestive.



- There are a host of social factors unmatched here. The "Zalmoxians" were not under the cloud of being part of a religion that was a minority and regarded as a superstition by the powers in charge. There was nothing to test "faith" in Zalmoxis or to force critical re-examination and consideration. 

In this regard, it becomes clear that Zalmoxianism, if it indeed had the origins ascribed to it, shows little evidence of having continued to emphasize Zalmoxis' putative "resurrection". Strabo's later report has Zalmoxis learning not only from Pythagoras, but also from the Egyptians, and gives him an ability to "report the will of the gods" [58] which impresses his king so much that he became a priest, and was then regarded as a god. 

As such, Strabo tells us, he went to live in a cavern, seeing few people other than the king and his servants. This laid the ground for a sort of prophetic officer who lived in this cavern.

Eliade tells us, "[w]e do not know to what extent the initiatory and eschatological structure of Zalmoxis' 'mystery' as it can be in Strabo's day." [61] She supposes that it did survive, among some hermits and strict religious folk. But this leads to our next point: "...all that we know about Zalmoxis and the religion of the Dacians we owe entirely to the accounts and commentaries of foreign writers." [67] There are not even arguable works by disciples of the faith as with Christianity.

My conclusion, such as one can be drawn from such meagre evidence, is as follows: Carrier's parallel to Zalmoxis is simplistic and vastly overstated. That he makes a point of this figure at all suggests to me a pointed lack of discipline and confidence in his primary thesis. 

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And now an update. An alert reader pointed me to some commentary on this piece by Carrier, which contains some rather peevish comments to begin and end, to wit:

*I see no need anymore to respond to Holding. His method is typically polemical, childish and disrespectful, he rarely comprehends anything I or any opponent says or means, and he has a nasty tendency to make wild, unsubstantiated claims about antiquity, and then, when he is called on it,*

*deletes or alters his essays without notice, and modifies them to suit research he conducted only after his lack of research was pointed out.*

I hear the sound of elephants trumpeting thunderously, indeed, but very little in the way of specifics. (I have at times altered essays "without notice" for the sake of convenience, but I hardly see why this is an issue; no such changes have involved substantive information. All that said, as of this writing/editing in April 2009, Carrier himself has "found a reason" to respond to me: Money.) He has been paid to write rebuttals to me since he made the above comment, which suggests that it isn't quite the matter of principle he would have use believe it is.) 

*In this case, his argument against me is simply bizarre. He says that a story about a man who died and came back to life and founded a religion wherein believers went to eternal paradise has no parallel with Christianity. That is to engage in some pathetic special pleading, and I think it is patently absurd to any reasonable observer.*

This seems to allude to point 1 above. It's hard to tell, since it only marginally matches what I actually said. I did not use the words "no parallel" -- I indicated that there was inadequate data for the first, the supposed "resurrection" (since it is not said what process Zalmoxis used to allegedly come back to life -- if we are allowed to use a broad classification, "died and came back to life," then that could describe everything from the vegetable-deity Osiris to the guy who came back from advanced life support), and that the second, at best, was too vague to be useful to Carrier's case, and at worst is based on a misconception of the Christian doctrine of heaven. 

Herodotus' description sounds much closer to the heaven experienced by male Islamic martyrs, or perhaps something a Bacchan would dream of, but at any rate is so general that it is useless for his case of a social parallel, indeed pointless. As noted, it just as well reflects an understandable variation on the theme of afterlife, a logical extension whether such an afterlife exists or not.

I can add to this that there does not seem to be any indication in Herodotus or elsewhere that believing in Zalmoxis' "resurrection" was somehow tied to going to this place of bliss, which makes the idea of a parallel even more pointless.

*But even with regard to details he is beating a straw man. That the Jews had a*

*particular take on resurrection is wholly irrelevant to my use of the material regarding Zalmoxis--for such a Jewish view would actually inform a Jew's reading of that story in Herodotus (and any well educated Jew would be likely to have read it), and a Jew could certainly syncretize any borrowing of ideas from it in just such a fashion.*

If this is the case, then Carrier's entire argument is again pointless and a mere exercise in skeptical creativity. I can just as readily see Acharya S arguing that the story of Osiris and other "dyin' and risin'" gods "informed" the Jewish reading of those stories as they manufactured a resurrection from it. It is the same as arguing:

1. "This is where they copied the Jesus story from!"
2. "But, uh, it has all these differences."
3. "Of course it does! They syncretized the details based on their own culture!"

The question never answered, but which I would like to see answered, is: "How would the reports look different if the resurrection of Jesus *actually did happen*?" Indeed, why not cut out the middleman and say that the idea was syncretized from Daniel or Ezekiel, or from one of the Jewish intertestamental works? It seems much easier, since the Jews already believed in "heaven," to argue for a theft from that direction. Isn't an appeal to Zalmoxis rather superfluous?

*Moreover, it would not be possible for Greek observers to invent the trickery story unless they believed the resurrection was physical, and thus any reader of Herodotus would see this as having been understood as a physical resurrection wholly regardless of what the Thracians might really have thought.*

This is still Carrier misusing terms. Again, there is no indication of a reconstituted body here -- no indication at all that Zalmoxis came back with a body driven and directed by a spiritual nature; there is no "glorified body" that we are told of, no details at all.

Perhaps it was a resurrection in the Jewish sense (but then, we would also like corresponding data showing that this type of resurrection was a Thracian paradigm); more likely this was perceived as a revivification, similar to the raising of Lazarus, or perhaps (since they did not actually see his dead body) it was perceived of in terms of a translation. Again, the bottom line is, there is insufficient data.

*The point is that here we have a story that is clearly of a physical resurrection, with eternal paradise for believing it, as understood by Herodotus and his informants, a story that existed and would have been read by many Jews of Jesus's day. But all this is so obvious I should not have to argue it. A plain reading of my work would make it all clear--to anyone except Holding, apparently.*

Again, I see no indication of a cause-effect relationship "for believing" in Zalmoxis' "resurrection". I do see that his return was thought to *verify* his teaching of eternal paradise (Why? Because he told them he had been there?), but the indication is that this paradise is there regardless of what Zalmoxis was on about. Where is the cause-effect relationship stressed?

*Likewise with his attempt to argue that getting to live in an eternal paradise "isn't really" what Christians meant by heaven and so there is no parallel [sic]. This is bizarre as well. For example, he claims "heaven" is a Judeo-Christian word. Oh dear. Here we have a typical case of a man completely ignorant of the language and culture he is discussing sticking his foot in his mouth...*

I do not say that "heaven" is a Judeo-Christian word; I say that Carrier is using *Judeo-Christian terminology*; and I do not use the words (despite the quotes) "isn't really"; I say that the terms used, drawn from Herodotus, are not an *accurate representation* of the Christian doctrine of heaven except perhaps in a popular sense.

None of this has anything to do with the Greek origins of the word "heaven" but with the modern use (and in Carrier's case, abuse) of the term.

First of all, Herodotus actually doesn't say -- unless someone isn't translating well -- that this "place" of paradise is in any way associated with the skies or "heaven" -- it is a "place": where? Underground? Saturn? Kolob? It might well have been skybound, but we aren't told.

Second, Carrier uses the word "heaven" by itself whereas Herodotus refers to a "place" and gives a description. Carrier knows well enough that in using the descriptive phrase "believers went to heaven when they died" he is invoking terms and phraseology in popular use in Christian churches. It is no more than a subtle and illicit attempt to evoke a parallel by collapsing terms down to a lowest common denominator.

In closing, Carrier repeats his first charges, and accuses me of "obsessing on details wholly irrelevant to my comparison..." The details are in the devil: they show that there *is no comparison*, other than by illicit collapsing of terminology and by unsubstantiated speculation. Carrier's parallel remains simplistic and vastly overstated.

