

Resurrection Claims in Non-Christian Religions – Part 1¹

by Gary R. Habermas

Introduction

While Christian beliefs are presumably much more widely known, especially in the Western world, some adherents to the major non-Christian religions also make claims that some of their historical rabbis, prophets, gurus or “messiahs” rose from the dead. Judging from the relevant religious literature, it appears that such non-Christian claims are often ignored, perhaps because there is little awareness of them. Even if the existence of such beliefs is recognized, almost never is there any in-depth answer to the question of whether such claims could possibly be grounded in supernatural events of history.

This essay is an examination of several sample resurrection-claims in non-Christian religions from ancient to modern times. The primary emphasis will be placed on whether these claims can themselves be said to be historically based on supernatural occurrences. To pursue this goal, historical and other critical criteria will be applied to these religious beliefs. Lastly, a few comments will be addressed to the issue of whether these resurrection claims provide any apologetic basis for non-Christian belief systems.

1. Non-Christian Claims of Apotheosis and Resurrection

As part of a dialogue between atheists and theists,² Robert Price has recently charged that not enough attention has been paid to non-Christian religious phenomena. In particular, Price points to reports of post-death phenomena found in other belief systems, citing cases where ancient heroes were said to have experienced apotheosis (which consists of being taken to heaven and divinized) or where they supposedly appeared to their followers after death, usually to comfort them.³

Such claims are by no means rare, especially since the emergence of the History of Religions school in the late nineteenth century, which often focused attention on ancient mythology and on the mystery religions, in particular.⁴ But both because this phenomenon has been thoroughly discussed in the last one hundred years and especially because it is rather difficult to assess data concerning mythological persons in historical terms, we will focus our attention on claims involving actual persons.⁵ Even Price considers the mythological hypothesis to be “untenable”.⁶ For

such reasons, little will be said in this essay concerning non-historical (or chiefly mythical) persons who were reportedly apotheosized or raised from the dead.⁷ In each of these cases we find numerous problems such as a decided lack of historical data, reports that are far too late or stories about mythical personages who never lived.

Rather, our attention will be placed on the comparatively fewer number of claims that historical persons were either apotheosized or raised from the dead. Examples in the former category include Julius Caesar, Augustus Caesar, Apollonius of Tyana and Antinous. Examples of the latter (resurrection) include Rabbi Judah, Kabir, Sabbatai Sevi, Lahiri Mahasaya and Sri Yukteswar.

Apotheosis appears to be most common in the ancient world, whereby historical persons were said to have been snatched up to heaven and divinized. In Roman times, this process was frequently portrayed by the sighting of a comet or star in the sky which was believed to be the departed soul of the hero. For example, Suetonius reports that after the death of Julius Caesar,

... a comet appeared about an hour before sunset and shone for seven days running. This was held to be Caesar's soul, elevated to heaven; hence the star, now placed above the forehead of his divine image.⁸

Interestingly, comets were said to signal the deaths of Emperors Claudius and Vespasian.⁹ During the cremation of Augustus Caesar, Suetonius also relates that "an ex-praetor actually swore that he had seen Augustus' spirit soaring up to Heaven through the flames".¹⁰ Another instance concerns Antinous, the favorite slave of Emperor Hadrian. When Antinous died, Hadrian accepted the teaching that a certain star was created from the soul of his slave. Hadrian built a city at the site of Antinous' death and erected several statues in his honor around the Roman empire.¹¹ One ancient statue of Antinous proclaimed that he was glorified in heaven and that he was actually Osiris.¹²

A last and perhaps the major example of apotheosis concerns Apollonius of Tyana, a first-century Neo-Pythagorean philosopher who was reputed to have exhibited numerous special powers, including the working of miracles. Apollonius' long life was reported in great detail by his major biographer, Philostratus, who concludes his account by claiming that Apollonius disappeared from a temple and was thus probably transported to heaven and divinized. We are also told that he later appeared in a dream to a young man in order to convince him of the truth of immortality.¹³

With regard to historical persons for whom a resurrection is claimed, five such cases will be briefly mentioned. Rabbi Judah I was a major Jewish teacher who was instrumental in completing the compilation of the Mishnah about A.D. 200. It is reported in the Gemaras that, after his death in A.D. 220, "He used to come home again at twilight every Sabbath Eve". On one such occasion, a neighbor came to the Rabbi's door but was turned away by his maid. When Rabbi Judah heard of this incident, he stopped coming back to his home so that he did not upstage other righteous persons who did not return to their homes after death.¹⁴

Kabir was a religious teacher of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries who attempted to combine certain facets of both the Hindu and Moslem religions. After his death, usually placed at 1518, it was reported that Kabir's followers were arguing over whether to cremate his body according to Hindu customs or to bury his body in keeping with Moslem habits. To stop the controversy, Kabir himself is said to have appeared to his followers and directed them to draw back the cloth placed over his body. When this was done, flowers were found instead of the body of Kabir. The Hindus burned half of these flowers while the Moslems buried the other half.¹⁵

Sabbatai Sevi was a seventeenth-century Jewish teacher who proclaimed that he was the Messiah, a claim which was further voiced by a prophetic figure named Nathan, a Jewish contemporary. After Sabbatai's death in 1676, it was reported that his brother Elijah went to the tomb only to find a dragon guarding the entrance. Upon being allowed to pass, Elijah discovered no body, but found that the cave was full of light. It was also reported that Sabbatai did not actually die, but only appeared to do so, a teaching which gained wide acceptance among his followers. Nathan agreed that Sabbatai had not died, and stated that he would soon show himself.¹⁶

A nineteenth-century Hindu guru named Lahiri Mahasaya died in 1895 and was cremated after reportedly telling his followers that he would rise again. Afterwards it was said that he appeared to three followers, each individually. These meetings were said to have been rather brief, occurring in three different cities at about the same time. It was also said that Mahasaya's body appeared to be transfigured.¹⁷

Lastly, another Hindu guru named Sri Yukteswar died and was buried in 1936. One of his chief disciples, Paramahansa Yogananda, tells us that one week after seeing a vision of the Hindu avatar Krishna and more than three months after his master's death, he witnessed a flesh and blood appearance of the dead Yukteswar while he was meditating. He reports that he touched his teacher's body and then had a two-hour conversation with him, chiefly about the nature of the afterlife. Yogananda also relates an incident which occurred about three months earlier, where an elderly woman also reported seeing Yukteswar after his death.¹⁸

If such cases of apotheosis and resurrection are thus reported in a straightforward manner without the aid of critical investigation (as they too often are) some might get the idea that claims of post-death phenomena are common and some might even say that such events actually do occur regularly. Some researchers, like Price, seem to encourage skepticism concerning all such data in light of the various parallels.¹⁹ Others, like Yogananda, conclude that there have been numerous spiritual masters in the world religions who have been raised. Interestingly, Yogananda illustrates this statement by referring to the resurrection of Jesus.²⁰

To be continued...

Notes

1 Taken with permission from www.garyhabermas.org. Originally published in *Religious Studies* v25.n2 (June 1989): pp167(9). Cambridge University Press.

2 "Christianity Challenges the University: An International Conference of Theists and Atheists", which took place in Dallas, Texas on 7-10 February 1985.

- 3 Robert Price, "Is There a Place for Historical Criticism?" especially pp. 2-3, 14-25.
- 4 For an example, see Otto Pfliegerer, *The Early Christian Conception of Christ: Its Significance and Value in the History of Religion* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1905).
- 5 Even Pfliegerer, for instance, is critical of his own work (ibid. pp. 153-9) and agrees that such mythology cannot account for the earliest Christian origins (ibid. pp. 157-8).
- 6 Price, pp. 19-20.
- 7 Examples of such would include stories that Romulus was taken to heaven and glorified, later appearing to Julius Proculus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.805-51; *Fasti* 2.481-509). Conflicting reports are given by Livy, who states that Romulus either disappeared in a storm, later being declared a god or that he was killed by senators (*The History of Rome* 1.16). (Interestingly enough and similar to problems pointed out below, Ovid and Livy wrote about 700 years after Romulus was supposed to have lived. This large gap is in addition to questions pertaining to the likelihood that Romulus even existed at all.) Hercules, a hero of Greek mythology, is said to have burned to death on a funeral pyre, afterwards-being taken to heaven and glorified by Jupiter. See Thomas Bullfinch, *Mythology* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 1959), pp. 122-3. But Rouse reports the conflicting tale that Hercules died after putting on an enchanted robe, after which his soul went to heaven. See W. H. D. Rouse, *Gods, Heroes and Men of Ancient Greece* (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 70. Aeneas, a hero of Homer's *Iliad* and the chief character in Virgil's *Aeneid*, is said to have settled near the Tiber River later in life. Having disappeared after a battle, it was reported that he joined the gods (Price, pp. 28-9). Aristaeus is said to have entered a fuller's shop, where he died. When his relatives arrived, he was nowhere to be found. So it was assumed that he had been taken to heaven. He was then supposed to have reappeared seven years later, disappeared, and reappeared yet again, 340 years later (Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.26). Origen provides numerous criticisms of these stories (*Against Celsus* 3.27-9). Lastly, Asclepius was a physician who was said to have healed through the use of medicines and ointments. He was killed by Jupiter (Zeus) but revived again and placed either among the stars (Rouse, p. 87) or among the gods (Bullfinch, p. 106). For accounts of the mystery (or vegetation) "gods" see Pfliegerer, especially pp. 91-100.
- 8 Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1957), 1.88.
- 9 Ibid. v.46 and x.23, respectively.
- 10 Ibid. II.100.
- 11 Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 69.11.2. See David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels* (Cleveland: William Collins, 1980), p. 199.
- 12 Ibid. p. 198.
- 13 Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, translated by F. C. Conybeare, two volumes, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), especially vm.3i.
- 14 Israel W. Slotki, editor, *The Babylonian Talmud* (Seder Nashim, Kethuboth), translated by S. Daiches (n.p.: The Rebecca Bennett Publications Inc., 1959), Vol. III, XII.103A.
- 15 James Hastings, editor, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, s.v. "Kabir, Kabirpanthis", pp. 632-4.
- 16 See especially Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 917-29.
- 17 Paramhansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi* (Los Angeles: Self-Realization Fellowship, 1956), PP- 348-50.
- 18 Ibid. pp. 413-33.
- 19 Price, especially pp. 14-25, 28-30.
- 20 Yogananda, p. 313; cf. p. 349.

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