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PAULINE WORSHIP AS SEEN BY PAGANS

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In *Jesus the Magician*¹ I argued that the earliest pagan reports of persecutions of Christians—those in Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the younger²—indicate that the persecutors believed the Christians were practicing magic. Here I want to explain their belief by reviewing the earliest evidence for Christian congregational practices and indicating how these practices would have been understood by the ancient Christians' neighbors. This does not imply that there were not other grounds for the persecutors' belief. Magic seems to have figured in the charges for which Jesus was condemned;³ it certainly was prominent in the propaganda against his cult that was spread by rival Jewish groups.⁴ Such propaganda doubtless shaped the expectations with which many outsiders viewed early Christianity, and people are apt to see what they expect to see. Nevertheless, Pliny's famous letter shows that Roman authorities sometimes tried to get beyond rumor to the facts. Accordingly we should ask what the facts would have looked like to men of the Greco-Roman world in the late first and early second centuries, a world in which magic was practiced on all levels of society and almost universally believed to be effective. As "the facts" we may take, with some reservations, the evidence about Christian congregations to be found in Paul's relatively unquestioned letters—Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, or Philippians, and Philemon.

¹Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978) 50ff. and the notes on p. 180.

² Suetonius *Nero* 16.2; Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.3–8; Pliny *Letters* 10.96.

³ *Jesus the Magician*, 41.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 54–60.

At or near the beginning of membership in a Christian cell-group stood baptism. Paul in Romans 6:3–11 appeals to what he hopes will be taken as the common Christian understanding of the rite:

Don't you know that such of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him, by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead. . . we too may live a new (kind of) life. For if we were planted with him in the image of his death, then we shall also (live in the image) of his resurrection. . . Thus you, too, consider yourselves dead to sin, but living, in Christ Jesus, to God.⁵

Such rites, beginning with an imitation death and ending with resurrection by receipt of a divine spirit, to a new life, are familiar in magical material. One, for instance, directs the initiate to lie down on a roof naked and wrap himself up "like a mummy" before saying a prayer in which he describes himself as a soldier of his god, killed by the gods of this world (cf. 2 Cor 6:7; 10:4; 1 Cor 2:8) and asks the god he serves (Typhon) to raise him from the dead. In response to his prayer, as a sign of his communion with the god, a bird will descend on him. At this sign he should arise, clothe himself in white (as raised from the dead), sacrifice incense, and pray, saying, "I have been united with thy holy form, I have been empowered by thy holy name, I have received the effluence of thy goodness, Lord, God of gods," etc. "Having done these things," the text concludes, "go down (from the roof) having attained a nature equal to the god's."⁶ A similar ritual of imitation death, union with the god, and resurrection to "a new, superhuman life" has been reconstructed by H. Lewy from the *Chaldaean Oracles*,⁷ and the same pattern seems to have been followed in

⁵This argument seems to have been originally designed as a proof for the resurrection, perhaps in connection with the dispute reflected in 1 Corinthians 15. However, as the context shows, Paul is here reusing it as an argument to prove that the Christian life *here and now* is of a different sort than before baptism, and that the change of nature should be reflected in a new morality.

⁶*Papyri graecae magicae* (henceforth *PGM*), ed. K. Preisendanz. (2d ed., ed. A. Henrichs; Leipzig, 1973–74) 2 vols., cited by papyrus number (in this collection) and line. Here 4.154–220ff. Salvation by union with a god's form appears in 2 Cor 3:18, cf. Phil 2:6. There are numerous other NT parallels, see *Jesus the Magician*, 193, first note to p 104. For parallels to Paul's equation of "being in" Christ and "having" Christ or the spirit, see R. Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen* (3d ed., 1927; reprint ed., Darmstadt 1956) 73.

⁷H. Lewy, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy* (Cairo, 1956) 204–13; (recently reedited by M. Tardieu).

some Isiac and Mithraic initiations.⁸ Both the Egyptian and the Mithraic parallels may be reflected by the engravings of ancient magical gems.⁹

Paul referred more briefly to the same notions of baptism in Gal 3:27 ("Those of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ") and 1 Cor 12:13 ("We have all been baptized by one spirit into one body"); they are the background of his remarks on the subject in 1 Cor 1:13–7 (explaining his insistence that nobody was baptized "into" *his* name), and are echoed by Col 2:12 ("being buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him").¹⁰ His question, "What will those do who are baptized on behalf of the dead?" (i.e., if the dead are not raised, what will be the sense of the baptism? 1 Cor 15:29) shows another magical notion—that ceremonies performed on a substitute for an intended object will affect the object. This notion, the basis of all substitutionary magic, is so familiar that it need not be illustrated.

Between Christian baptism and the recognizedly magical rites there was an important difference. In the other magical (and/or mystery) rites known to us, the initiate's death and resurrection were not conceived as participation in events previously experienced by the god. The death was symbolic of the initiate's present condition; union with the deity was attained only by/in resurrection. The Christian's god, however, had been executed, died, and been raised; the initiate's union with him began with magical participation in his death, and *thence* in his resurrection. Because of this peculiar history of its god, Christianity was allied with another type of magic, that by which the recalled spirits (*not* resurrected bodies) of executed criminals and of persons who had died unmarried or childless were invoked to aid the magician.¹¹ Jesus belonged to all three of these categories. The spirits of such persons were the most powerful of the *nekydaimones*, "spirits of the dead", who might be acquired as *paredroi*—spirits in attendance on the magician and ready to obey his orders, so that no

⁸Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.23 with the commentaries of Griffiths (1975) and Hildebrand (1842); "Lampridius," *Commodus* 9, with those of Casaubon and Salmasius (in the Hacks edition, Leiden, 1671).

⁹E.g., A. Delatte and P. Derchain, *Bibliothèque Nationale . . . Les Intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris, 1964) 89–104; 221–31.

¹⁰Further expressions of important elements of the notion, especially death and resurrection in Christ, appear in 1 Cor 6:14 (read *exegeirei*, the *lectio difficilior*; 2 Cor 5.15f; Gal 2:19f.; 5:24; Phil 1:21; etc).

¹¹*PGM* 4.333ff.; 1391ff.; 1871ff.; 2730ff.; 5.330ff.; 58.

considerable rite was needed to activate them.¹² Such a “familiar”—to use the old English term—might play a role in the magician’s life not dissimilar to that of “the spirit” in Paul’s. That Paul recognized the similarity is shown by his recommendation of celibacy on the ground that it would free the Christian from distractions and make him *euparedron* for the Lord—well suited to be joined with Jesus as a *paredros*.¹³ In modern terms, the lack of normal sexual satisfaction is likely to lead to compensatory connections with spirits, hence the requirement of celibacy by many shamanistic and priestly groups has probably some functional justification. The medicine man is more likely to get the spirit if he foregoes the flesh. It is worth noting that the ordinary magician got a spirit as *his paredros*, but Paul wants the Christian to be the *paredros* of the spirit (i.e., of Jesus). Since a *paredros* is properly a judge’s advisor/associate, literally “one who sits beside” him, Paul’s insistence that the Lord is to have the central seat—the spirit is to be in control, not the man—indicates an important difference between Pauline Christianity and ordinary magic, cf. Rev 3:21.

Not all *paredroi* were constant companions. Many had to be called when needed for one another purpose. It is clear from Paul’s descriptions that the services in Corinth were largely devoted to calling spirits and to expression of utterances the spirits were thought to inspire. Fossilized remains of such practices can still occasionally be found in Christian services; “Come, Holy Ghost,” is a hymn of which the meaning would shock the average congregation only a little less than would the Holy Ghost’s arrival. Paul’s converts, however, were, he says, “wild about spirits” (1 Cor 14:12) and from the rules he had to lay down in 1 Cor 14:26–40 it seems that his suggestion of what unbelievers would think if they walked into a Christian meeting (“that you are mad” 14:23) was on the charitable side. We should have expected, “that you are possessed” (*daimonate*), but Paul’s pretensions prohibited the implicit comparison of the *daimonia* with the spirits who came to the Christians. Notice the plural, “spirits,” in 14:12. It appears also in 14:32 and 12:10, where “distinguishing between spirits” is one of God’s gifts to the Church.

¹²PGM 4.2000–99 is the best example.

¹³1 Cor 7:35. As Lietzmann suggested (*ad loc*) the word seems to have been coined by Paul. The earliest subsequent usages (Dorotheus of Gaza, Pseudo-Macarius) are based on this text, of which they show the developed orthodox interpretation. The editors of *TWNT* omitted the word as of no theological importance.

This contradicts Paul's repeated accounts of all Christian utterance as the work of "the one and the same Spirit" (of Jesus).¹⁴ Insistence on a single source fits Paul's theology and is motivated by his need to minimize the rivalries in his churches, hence the discordant passages, indicating contacts with a considerable number of spirits, not all of them good, are the more trustworthy and presumably reflect what was actually going on. Paul himself, at the beginning of 1 Corinthians 12, gave a rule of thumb by which spirits could be judged: If anyone speaking "with a spirit" says "Jesus is anathema," that spirit is not "of God." This shows how far the variations went. Other references in 1 John 4:1; 1 Tim 4:1, and magical material,¹⁵ to things that must be done to make sure of getting the sort of spirit one wants, prove that the problem, and, therefore, the practice that occasioned it, were not peculiar to the Pauline churches. On the other hand, they were rare in ordinary pagan worship as distinct from magic. Ordinary pagan worship was a matter of offerings (sacrifices, libations, incense) and petitionary prayer; on solemn occasions a choir might sing hymns praising the gods and asking them to be present at the sacrifice and favor the petitioners. Such requests meant no more than "Come, Holy Ghost," now does. A Pauline service devoted to effectual invocation of spirits for observable results differed from such respectable, public performances, as a voodoo ritual differs from solemn high Morning Prayer.

The plurality of spirits in Pauline and other Christian passages indicates that Paul's peculiar theology, which represents *all* aspects of the Christian life as the work of "the one" constantly indwelling and ever-active Spirit, is an idealization—perhaps a projection of Paul's own spiritual ambition, but also propaganda for himself. It enabled him to claim, like other magicians, that his utterances were those of his god,¹⁶ that he had the mind of his god,¹⁷ that he

¹⁴1 Cor 12:11; cp. 12:4–9; Rom 12:5ff. In 1 Cor 12:28 all are gifts of the one God.

¹⁵*PGM* 7.635 (a spell to get "the true Asclepius and not some deceptive demon instead of the god"); 8.81 (a spell to get "*the true* prophet"). Iamblichus *De mysteriis* 2.3ff. gives a long list of criteria by which spirits of different sorts can be distinguished.

¹⁶2 Cor 13:3; contrast 1 Cor 7:10, where he did have good tradition, therefore appealed to it, and therefore was more modest in 7:12. Magicians often represented themselves as the god present and speaking; references to such passages, under *ego*, fill most of a column in the index of *PGM*.

¹⁷1 Cor 1:16; cp. *PGM* 3.591ff., "We recognize (our debt of) thanks to Thee (Helios) . . . who hast given us mind . . . that we may know thee . . . who hast deified us by knowledge of thyself."

was the revelation of his god,¹⁸ etc. Such claims, however, implicitly contradict his many other claims to special revelations¹⁹ which, if he had had the mind of Christ, should have been needless. In fact, his spiritual state seems to have been anything but stable. He spoke with tongues more than any of the Corinthians (1 Cor 14:18). Accordingly we should suppose that for Paul, as well as for the other members of the Corinthian church, its meetings were largely group *séances* of which the most important elements were invocation of spirits, the utterances they inspired, and the changes they produced in the personalities of the possessed—this notwithstanding the fact that all members had received “the spirit” in baptism. The same contradiction persists in “Pentecostal” and similar sects to the present day; apparently the intellectual problem causes no great difficulty to members of such groups.

The content of a typical Pauline prayer meeting is outlined by Paul himself in 1 Cor 14:26: “When you come together each has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, an interpretation.” This list seems to begin with liturgical elements imitative of those in traditional Jewish worship—psalms, instruction—go on through new revelations to the climax of inarticulate utterance (“speaking with tongues”) and then subside to articulate “explanation” of what had just been gibbered. Invocation of spirits to prophesy was perhaps the commonest of ancient magical practices.²⁰ It regularly led to revelations, commonly given by a medium who reported what he saw or what the god said to him.²¹ Alternatively, the magician himself might be identified with the god and go on to a divine pronouncement that would assure the occurrence of what was said. Such pronouncements often culminated in inarticulate utterances which seem to have resembled very closely the noises the Christians made when they “spoke with tongues.”

¹⁸ Gal 1:15f.; see the many passages collected in *Jesus the Magician*, 125f. and notes.

¹⁹ 2 Cor 12:6ff.; Gal 2:2; and often.

²⁰ For a full account see T. Hopfner, *Griechisch-ägyptischer Offenbarungszauber* (Leipzig, 1921–24) 2 vols. (*Studien zur Palaeographie und Papyrskunde*, 21 and 23).

²¹ For “revelation” Paul uses *apokalypsis*, but this need not be taken to refer to a work having literary form or eschatological content like those of the NT Apocalypse. The use of *apokalypsis* for works of this latter sort began (so far as we know) with the title of the NT book, probably given it half a century or more after Paul’s time. See my article in the forthcoming volume of the International Conference on Apocalyptic held at the University of Uppsala in 1979. Paul unquestionably used *apokalypsis* for revelations that answered immediate, practical questions, e.g., Gal 2:2. It seems likely that most revelations given the members of Pauline communities, like most of those sought in the magical papyri, were of this sort.

Paul's best known discussion of "speaking with tongues," that in 1 Corinthians 12–14, was written to correct the divisive conceit of some Corinthian Christians who prided themselves on their performances. This explains Paul's insistence (1) that *all* Christian activities are equally works of the spirit, (2) that all are subordinate to love, which should unite all members of the congregation, (3) that in particular "speaking with tongues" is inferior to teaching and prophecy which are immediately edifying, (4) that Christian meetings are to be conducted "decently and in order" (14:40)—even the spirits of the prophets should be disciplined: it was the prophets' duty to keep them under control and make them yield the floor to their fellows (14:29–32).

Elsewhere, when free of such disciplinary concerns, Paul wrote of "speaking with tongues" much more favorably. When he could, he found meanings for the utterances. If his converts cried *abbaabbaabba* he explained, that, by receiving the spirit of Jesus, they, too, had become sons of God, and that *abba* meant "father" in Aramaic (God's language); the spirit was prompting them to claim divine paternity.²² When he had to admit that the sounds were incomprehensible, he explained that the reward destined for Christians exceeds imagination. "Therefore we do not know for what we ought to pray," but "the spirit helps out our weakness" for it "entreats on our behalf with inarticulate groanings" (*stenagmois alalêtois*) and God knows what it intends to say (Rom 8:26f.). Such utterances are thus made the supreme prayer of the Church, precisely as they are the climaxes of many prayers in the magical papyri. *Stenagmos* was a term for a characteristic form of magical utterance,²³ and later Christian texts which try to represent the secret prayers of Jesus present passages of jabberwocky filled with "words" found also in magical texts: *iao*, *aoi*, *psinother*, *thernops*, *zagoure*, *pagoure*, *thobarrabau*, *sabaoth*, etc.²⁴ Such passages probably reflect prayers actually made in the authors' congregations.

Finally, besides these *séances*, the Corinthian Christians met for meals in which they ate bread and drank wine identified with the body and blood of Jesus. Such consumption of food identified

²²Rom 8:14ff. (*ho pater* is Paul's translation); again Gal 4:6. With *abbaabba* compare *hubbahubba* and the like in modern popular songs; ecstatic utterances in western society have probably changed little through the ages.

²³C. Bonner, "Traces of Thaumaturgic Technique in the Miracles," *HTR* 20 (1927) 171ff.

²⁴*Pistis Sophia*, trans. Schmidt-Till, chaps. 136, 142, discussed in my *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973) 233, where the many parallels from magical texts are cited.

as the body or blood of a god was a familiar form of love magic. As in the case of baptism, *no other ancient parallels to Paul's words are so close as those in the magical texts*.²⁵ In Christianity the rite seems to have been introduced by Jesus (as I argued in *Jesus the Magician*, see the citations in the preceding note) probably to bind his followers to himself when persecution seemed imminent. Paul's discussion of the rite in 1 Cor 10:16–22 and 11:17–34 takes for granted the identification of the elements with Jesus' blood and body (10:16) and the unitive function (10:17). Paul argues that in pagan sacrifices, too, those who eat of the elements partake of the gods (*daimones*—16:20); this was particularly the case in magical rites (see the examples cited in the note above). The wording of 11:23ff. suggests that by Paul's time the magical identification of elements, body, and blood was thought to be effected by telling the story of what Jesus did; such paradeigmatic storytelling often served as the essential element of magical rites.²⁶ That those who eat the elements without adequate preparation fall sick or even die (1 Cor 11:27–32) is further proof of the sacrament's magical power.

The body and blood of a sacrificed and life-giving god might figure not only in magical rites, but also in the sacred meal of a cult group that celebrated the god's mysteries. Consequently it is not surprising that as Christianity gained more upper class followers the eucharist was commonly treated as a "mystery," described with the language of the mysteries and protected by their discipline. This development, familiar from patristic material, should be seen as one of the adjustments of Christianity to respectable Roman imperial society. Paul's claim to "speak the wisdom of God in a mystery" (1 Cor 2:7) and to be "an administrator (*oikonomos*) of the mysteries of God" (4:1) may reflect the beginning of the process, but Mk 4:11, now supported by the secret text of Mark used in Clement's church in Alexandria, makes it seem more likely that Jesus himself called at least one of his magical rites "the

²⁵ PGM 7.643ff. *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (henceforth DMP) eds. F. Griffith and H. Thompson (London, 1904; cited by column and line) 15.1–23; 21.10ff. See *Jesus the Magician*, 110ff. (where PGM 7.643 is translated) 122 (where DMP 15.8ff.) and 146f. for a brief discussion of some other proposed explanations of the rite. E. Bickerman ("Ritualmord und Eselskult" *MGWJ* 71 [1927] 171ff. and 255ff.) has shown that drinking human blood is a rite used in primitive societies all over the world to establish alliances. Such usage presumably often reflects belief in its magical efficacy.

²⁶In PGM the great example is 13.139–209, parallel 441–563, but there are many minor instances: 4.95ff., 2978ff., etc.

mystery of the kingdom of God.” Mysteries and magic cannot always be sharply distinguished; respectable Greek tradition (e.g., Ephorus *apud* Diodorus 5.64.4) attributed the institution of mysteries to magicians (*goētes*) and Paul may have been influenced by such notions. They, conversely, influenced the pagan notion of Paul. In the fourth century, when the interpretation of Christianity as a “mystery” was well established, the emperor Julian, himself experienced in magic and far from prejudiced in Paul’s favor, would describe him as “the man who surpassed all magicians and deceivers that ever were, anywhere.”²⁷

Here we cannot go on to discuss the many other magical aspects of Paul’s work, for instance, his “handing over” an opponent to Satan “for destruction of his flesh”—an idea expressed, with some of the same words, by many magical curse tablets;²⁸ his repeated claim that his converts had been won by his success in working miracles and invoking the spirit, *not* by his skills as a preacher;²⁹ his references to some sort of magical power over the members of his churches, a power by which, if they are not obedient, they may be harmed (1 Cor 4:19ff.; 2 Cor 10:1ff.; 12:20ff.; 13—hence his congregations received him “as an angel of God . . . Christ Jesus” Gal 4:14); his claim to have the same magical marks (tattooing?) as Jesus;³⁰ and most important, the many magical traits in his teaching, beginning with its essential element, the belief that the death or life of one creature can be ritually imparted to another.³¹ As initially indicated, the primary purpose of this paper has been to show what Paul’s pagan contemporaries would have seen if they had been able to see the services in his churches *as he himself described them*. That they would have thought such services magical rites is presumable from the parallels cited. The presumption is confirmed by the fact that they did think them so and acted accordingly.

²⁷ *Against the Galileans* 100 A.

²⁸ See the evidence in *Jesus the Magician*, 110 and notes on 196.

²⁹ 1 Cor 2:4; 2 Cor 1:12; 12:12; Rom 15:19; cf. Gal 3:2.

³⁰ *Jesus the Magician*, 47ff. and notes.

³¹ 2 Cor 4:10 and the many parallels cited *ad loc* in Nestle-Aland, *PGM* 1.1ff. (the life of the drowned and thus *deified* hawk); 4.1823ff., 2943ff.; 7.335ff.; 12.32ff., 311ff.