

# Greco-Roman Religion and the New Testament

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Early Christians regularly defined themselves not only in relation to their fellow Jews but also in relation to the many other inhabitants of the ancient Mediterranean world and the Near East. The need first became acute with the launch of gentile missions during the years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. This chapter discusses references to Greco-Roman religion in the New Testament as a feature of early Christian self-definition.

## Gentiles and Gentile Missions

The term *Greco-Roman* is academic shorthand for two civilizations that overlapped in space and time: that of ancient Greece during the archaic, Hellenic, and Hellenistic periods; and that of ancient Rome during the periods of monarchy, republic, and empire. The two civilizations were multicultural, extending far beyond such cities as Athens, Sparta, or Rome itself on the Italian peninsula. Thus the term applies to Greeks and Romans proper along with numerous subordinates. In that sense, early Christians and their fellow Jews can be classified as Greco-Roman to the extent they were influenced by Hellenistic culture one way or another and lived within the boundaries of the Roman Empire. In a somewhat more restricted sense, scholars may use *Greco-Roman* to signify anyone or anything non-Christian and non-Jewish. It can therefore be interchangeable with *gentile* and *pagan*, which are far from neutral terms.

When the different authors of the various books of the New Testament wanted to refer to non-Jews, sometimes they referred to them as “Greeks” or “Hellenes” (e.g., Acts 16:1), and only occasionally did they refer to them as “Romans” (e.g., Acts 28:17). Most often they referred to them simply as “Gentiles” (e.g., Acts 4:27). Christians also came to refer to non-Jews and non-Christians as “pagans,” but that was much later, long after the New Testament was written. The English word *pagan* comes from the Latin adjective *paganus* (plural *pagani*); it means someone “from the countryside,” or a “peasant.” In a military context it could also mean “civilian.”<sup>1</sup> The term was used in classical Latin before Christianity, but ancient Romans did not self-identify as pagans. Christians developed that identification for them beginning in the fourth century AD in an effort to characterize them as being either unrefined or outside the ranks of the “army of Christ.”<sup>2</sup> Much later still, Christians living in the Latin West (Italy, Gaul, Britain) used the term *heathen* as an English equivalent of *pagan*.<sup>3</sup> But because it tends to be derogatory, as well as anachronistic, scholars normally avoid the term.<sup>4</sup> As for *pagan* and *Gentile*, there is debate, but many scholars still use those terms even though the former is also anachronistic to earliest Christianity—not to mention with regard to ancient Greece and Rome in the centuries BC.

The New Testament authors wrote in Greek (a prime example of the influence of Hellenistic culture), and in Greek the underlying words for “Gentiles” are *ethnē* (singular *ethnos*) and *ethnikoi* (singular *ethnikos*); *ethnē* literally means “nations.”<sup>5</sup> In Latin the equivalents are *gentes* (singular *gens*) and *gentiles* (singular *gentilis*).<sup>6</sup> Like the term *pagan*, *Gentile* is not an insider designation. As used by Christians, the term can be overtly pejorative, and it assumes a non-Greek, non-Roman point of view that Christianity largely inherited from earlier Judaism. Very broadly speaking, ancient Israel saw itself as God’s chosen people or nation. Everyone else belonged to “the nations,” *goyim* in Hebrew (singular *goy*); for hellenized Jews who could no longer comprehend Hebrew or Aramaic, *goyim* was rendered as *ethnē* in Greek versions of Jewish scripture known as the Septuagint, the versions of scripture that the New Testament authors were familiar with.<sup>7</sup> The supposition was that Israel worshipped the one true God and everyone else worshipped idols. There were some efforts to proselytize non-Israelites before Christianity came along, and a number of Jews even anticipated that Gentiles would be welcomed in at the end of time. But for the most part, Jews kept to themselves, and their religion was for them. In Jesus’s day the boundary between Jews and non-Jews was physically drawn in the architecture of the Jerusalem temple, where Gentiles were limited to the outer court and occupied the least holy space surrounding the inner courts for Jewish women, Jewish men, and Jewish male priests.<sup>8</sup> Certain Jewish believers in Jesus, most notably the (former) Pharisee Paul, defied the distinction between Jews and Gentiles while still seeing themselves as the chosen people or nation of God.

All twenty-seven books of the New Testament were written after Christians decided to start preaching to non-Jews in earnest, and the authors of the books have provided accounts of multiple gentile missions. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul claims he was called directly by God through revelation, not by the original apostles or any other mortal agent. Moreover, he says the original apostles, such as Peter, were involved in a mission to Jews, not

Gentiles (Galatians 1:1, 11–2:10). According to the book of Acts, however, the gospel was first taken to non-Jews when Philip preached to the Samaritans, and then when he taught an Ethiopian who had traveled to Jerusalem (8:4–40). Next was Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus in Syria, but according to Acts, he did not preach to Gentiles right away;<sup>9</sup> Peter preceded him. Upon seeing a vision and hearing a divine voice, Peter, not Paul, visited the house of a Roman army commander, Cornelius, in Caesarea Maritima. Peter had him and his household baptized, thereby formally launching the gentile mission in the region of Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (10; 11:1–18; 15:6–21). Acts states that it was later that Paul and his companions, headquartered in Syrian Antioch, took the gospel to Gentiles elsewhere. Even then Paul did not do so until after two things had occurred: first, he was commissioned and set apart by his peers in Antioch who included “Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen” (13:1–3); second, Jews repeatedly rejected his message as he went throughout Asia Minor (modern Turkey), Greece, and eventually the empire’s capital (13:46–48; 14:27; 18:4–6; 28:24–28). After those events, at last he preached to Gentiles. Such is the story in the book of Acts, which is not the same story Paul himself told in Galatians.

However exactly the decision was made to start preaching to non-Jews, some Christians were not supportive of gentile missions or else disagreed as to how the missions ought to be run. This should not be surprising. It was hardly a foregone conclusion that Jesus and his disciples would preach to non-Jews. For instance, according to the Gospel of Mark, when a Greek Syrophenician woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter, he said, “Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it unto the dogs” (7:27). According to Matthew, he also said he was “not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24), which matches the Matthean version of Jesus’s call and commission of the original apostles: “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (10:5–6). Again according to Matthew, Jesus updated the mission to include non-Jews after his resurrection (28:18–20; compare Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). But that information reflects what Christians decided some years later. Both Mark and Matthew as well as Luke–Acts were written in light of post-Easter developments, after Paul’s opening revelation. Paul wrote in the late 40s, 50s, and early 60s AD, and according to him the original apostles were still involved in a mission to Jews, not Gentiles. Mark was probably written in the late 60s or 70s, Matthew in the 70s or 80s, and Luke–Acts in the 80s or 90s.<sup>10</sup>

At any rate, the decision to preach to Gentiles was controversial even among Christians. Their missionizing brought them into closer contact as well as conflict with the diverse religious practices and beliefs of the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East. As missionaries preached to Gentiles besides their fellow Jews, they had to determine what they wanted their converts to do and not do, to believe and not believe, in order to become Christians like them. Paradoxically, wherever the similarities were already too close they had to distinguish themselves from those they were trying to missionize. The process of preaching, then, was simultaneously one of defining Christianity.

## New Testament References to Greco-Roman Religion

With perhaps a rare exception or two, the authors of the New Testament came from Jewish backgrounds; they were not gentile converts, though, to be sure, they narrated the conversion stories of several non-Jews. Justin Martyr's account may be the earliest autobiographical record of gentile Christian conversion, and it dates to the middle of the second century. In his case, he converted from Greek philosophy, Platonism in particular.<sup>11</sup> Therefore the New Testament authors did not write as former worshippers of Greek and Roman gods and goddesses; they wrote as Judeo-Christians. At best their references to non-Jewish, non-Christian religion are mildly sympathetic, at worst dismissive or outright condemnatory, either way communicating more about themselves than about Gentiles. Greeks and Romans do not speak in these references; the voices are generally those of the New Testament authors.

Most of the references to Greco-Roman religion are in the letters of Paul and the book of Acts. By no means passive, they work to establish a series of distinctions between the one true God and false deities, inspiration and possession, and religion and magic. To better understand these distinctions that involve Jews as well as Gentiles, it is necessary to read references to Greco-Roman belief and practice together with references to Judaism.

### *The one true God versus false deities*

Consistent with his Jewish background, in his letters Paul counts idolatry among the many sins for which he thinks unconverted Gentiles will be liable to incur divine wrath. Part of his gospel message to non-Jews was that they should turn away from idols, toward the worship of the one true God instead, thereby avoiding the imminent doom that otherwise awaited them. For Paul the true God was living, which suggests that idols were not, though Paul does ultimately posit metaphysical existence behind the statues and images of Greek and Roman divinities, namely demons. The true God is the immortal creator, but idols have been fashioned after mortal creation: figures shaped like humans, birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles (1 Thessalonians 1:9–10; 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; Romans 1:18–32, esp. 18–25).

These ideas in Paul's letters are elaborated in a speech attributed to Paul in the book of Acts, where he waxes philosophical in the company of Athenian intelligentsia. Remarking on their many idols, if not their superstition, he tells them that they do not actually know God. They think God resides in the holy places they build for him, that he requires their sacrifices and other offerings, and that their representations of him in precious metal and stone are both adequate and accurate. But God transcends all these, Paul tells the Athenians while inviting them to repent before the coming judgment (Acts 17:16–31).

On the basis of his letters, it is not always obvious precisely how Paul wanted Gentiles to turn away from idols. Statues and other artistic representations of the many non-Jewish gods and goddesses were ubiquitous in the Roman Empire, and there was no separation of church and state then, as there is in some modern societies. Throughout the provinces and cities, in public temples and shrines, as well as in private households, sacrifices and offerings were made to this or that deity represented by his or her image. The idea that Gentiles

worshipped beast-shaped gods and goddesses is a stereotype accurate enough in Egypt and other ancient Near Eastern civilizations, but not true of Romans, who sometimes mocked them for it. In fact, starting long before Christianity, Greek philosophers as well as other critics questioned popular beliefs that the divine was anthropomorphic and that divinities and their images were one and the same. In sacrifices and offerings in both Greek and Roman religions, usually just a portion of the animal sacrificed at the altar was placed on the fire to be burned for the god or goddess. The rest of the meat went to the priests and celebrants, and anything that remained was sold. Meat was not the only food offering; there were also offerings of grain and wine.<sup>12</sup>

In 1 Corinthians, Paul flatly tells the saints not to consume food offered to idols, because it has been sacrificed to demons and participation in demon worship is wholly incompatible with belief in Jesus: “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord’s table, and of the table of devils” (10:21; a better translation than “devils” would be “demons,” as in the NRSV). Paul’s reasoning seems to be in line with monotheistic and aniconic passages from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament stating that God stands alone and yet is jealous of worship directed at any other deity or representation thereof (10:6–22; compare Deuteronomy 4; 5:6–8; 32:16–21). Incidentally, according to the book of Acts, the Jerusalem Council led by Jesus’s brother James also ruled that gentile converts not eat food offered to idols (15:19–21).<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless in the same epistle to the Corinthians, Paul makes allowances. He tells the Corinthians not to worry about asking whether the meat they buy in the market or that is served to them as guests in the houses of Gentiles has been sacrificed to idols. They could eat it regardless. But if somebody points out that it has been sacrificed to a non-Jewish, non-Christian deity, then Paul instructs them not to eat it. The rationale here has to do with grouping the saints into strong and weak adherents. The strong know that idols are nothing and that it is faith rather than food that matters most. The weak do not understand yet, and until they do they should not eat sacrificial food. To help the weak, neither should the strong eat when the weak are around and watching. At least hypothetically, though, the strong could walk into a Greek or Roman temple and eat and drink there with gentile worshippers, so long as the weak were not nearby to be upset (see 1 Corinthians 10:23–11:1; also 1 Corinthians 8; Romans 14).

The issue was not Jewish dietary regulations and the catalog of clean and unclean animals in Jewish scripture, though there could be overlap. For instance, along with sheep and cattle, pigs were one of the animals that Greeks and Romans often sacrificed, and of course eating pork was prohibited by Jewish law. Paul was and is (in)famous for disregarding aspects of the law, such as the requirement of circumcision for males, which he even vehemently opposed in some of his writing (Galatians 5:2–12; Philippians 3:2–4). When it came to food, he was prepared to say everything was clean, and thus believers in Jesus, whether from a Jewish or gentile background, need not keep kosher. But once more, at the same time, he did not want anyone to be bothered, and it all hinged on the knowledge and conscience of the strong and weak.

Despite his flexibility, Paul was clearly opinionated, and though his behavior made sense to him, he was met with anger from all sides. In his letters he enumerates the hazards and violence he experienced, but he does not go into detail (2 Corinthians 11:21–29). In the book of Acts, there is an account of a riot in Ephesus that resulted from his preaching against idols and Greco-Roman deities. The Greek goddess Artemis (KJV Diana) could be amalgamated with other local goddesses throughout the Roman Empire, and her Ephesian temple was renowned, a wonder of the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>14</sup> In Acts the silversmiths selling figurines of the temple feel threatened by Paul. As one of them is said to have put it, “Not alone at Ephesus, but almost throughout all Asia, this Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people, saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands: so that not only this our craft is in danger to be set at nought; but also that the temple of the great goddess Diana should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshippeth” (19:26–27; see 23–27). Some of Paul’s companions are pushed and pulled around by the ensuing mob, while Paul is at a safe distance. After a couple of hours of chaos, a city official has to disperse the crowd and remind them of civil order and due process (19:28–41). Embellishments are to be expected in Acts as in any literature, even the Greco-Roman genre of history, but this is precisely the kind of negative response Paul sometimes undoubtedly encountered. Some Gentiles converted and turned away from idols; others did not. To them Paul’s preaching might easily have been perceived as an attack on their religion, cultural identity, and in some instances their immediate livelihood.

It would be one thing for Paul to have run afoul of Greco-Roman religious rivals by jeopardizing their monetary interests, another for him to have undermined the well-being of the empire and the legitimacy of imperial rule, which were thought to rest, in no small degree, on the traditional pantheon and the cultivation of their favor and protection through traditional worship; in ancient Rome, political peace and stability came from the gods. What is more, several Hellenistic kings and queens and not a few Roman emperors and empresses themselves—especially in the eastern half of the Roman Empire—were given divine honors, like gods and goddesses, in their own lifetime, not just after death.<sup>15</sup> In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells the saints in the capital city to “be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God” (13:1; a better translation than “higher powers” would be “governing authorities,” as in the NRSV). Paul even goes so far as to tell them to give honor to their rulers (13:2–7). It is doubtful, though, that he would have approved sacrifices and offerings made to an emperor or king as a divinity. That would have blurred the distinction between the one true God and false deities, be they idols, demons, or human beings. Note how Paul positions the one true God atop government, thereby maintaining the legitimacy of Roman rule in the eyes of Judeo-Christians.<sup>16</sup> From his preaching against idols, his audience might have arrived at the perilous conclusion that demons were controlling the empire and thus that they should not support imperial administration. Paul reassures them that their God is in charge. This would have allowed for sacrifices and offerings to be made to the Lord on behalf of the emperor, rather than to the emperor as deity—a key difference.

The writings of an older contemporary, another Greek-speaking Jew, Philo of Alexandria, provide an instructive parallel. Alexandria, in Roman Egypt, was home to many Jews and of course to non-Jewish Egyptian Greeks, or Greco-Egyptians. Relations were so strained in the 30s AD that both sent embassies to the emperor Gaius, nicknamed Caligula, in Rome. The Greeks alleged that the Jews would not sacrifice in affairs of state. Philo headed up the Jewish embassy, and according to his telling of events he and the rest of the Jewish delegation unanimously insisted that they had sacrificed hundreds of animals on multiple occasions during Caligula's reign: upon his rise to power, to give thanks for his improved health after a keen sickness, and in the hopes of his success in battle. Their insistence, however, did not satisfy the emperor. According to Philo, Caligula wanted the Jews to sacrifice to him, not merely on his behalf. This visibly terrified the Jewish ambassadors.<sup>17</sup>

Paul may have been of the same mind as Philo: willing to sacrifice on a ruler's behalf, if the sacrifices and offerings were made to the Lord according to Jewish practice. For centuries, ancient Israelites ritually slaughtered animals at their altars. They eventually stopped after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in AD 70 and never rebuilt (Samaritans, by contrast, sacrifice on Mount Gerizim to this day). But the temple was still there when Paul was alive. He and the original apostles would have participated with their fellow Jews in sacrifices and offerings even after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, whether it was the daily rites, those of the Sabbath, or the major pilgrimage festivals.<sup>18</sup> Paul had no reason to oppose Jewish sacrifice made to the one true God of Judaism and Christianity on behalf of the Roman emperor. But he almost certainly would have resisted any form of ruler worship.

In the book of Acts, the gentile error of worshipping human beings is a narrative theme, from the worship of government authorities to holy men and wonder-workers. The subject is initially introduced with the conversion of the centurion Cornelius and the launch of the gentile mission in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. When Cornelius encounters Peter, he prostrates himself (10:24–25). Peter corrects him and says, “Stand up; I myself also am a man” (10:26; a better translation than “man” would be “mortal,” as in the NRSV). The subject is addressed again with the death of Herod Agrippa I (a grandson of Herod the Great), who ruled Palestine AD 41–44 as a Jewish client king appointed by Rome. In Acts, after his speech to the people of Tyre and Sidon (in modern Lebanon), they cheer that they have listened to a deity, not a human being (12:20–22). Then Herod dies: “And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost” (12:23). The subject is broached for a third time with the missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas from Syrian Antioch to Lystra (near Konya in modern Turkey). While preaching there, Paul heals a man in front of a sizable audience. The people who witness the miracle think that Paul and Barnabas are the Greek gods Hermes and Zeus respectively (14:8–12; KJV Mercurius and Jupiter). As with the goddess Artemis, these deities could be amalgamated with other local gods throughout the Roman Empire, and their worship, especially the worship of Zeus, was widespread. In Acts, as the Lystran priest of Zeus prepares to offer sacrifice to Barnabas and Paul, they are horrified and yell, “Sirs, why do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that ye should turn

from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein” (14:15; see 13–18; a better translation than “men of like passions with you” would be “mortals just like you,” as in the NRSV). The common denominator in each of these instances is that Gentiles are prone to venerate humans, and the point is that anyone whom Gentiles might try to worship should decline obeisance and should defer to the one true God. Peter and Paul and Barnabas defer, whereas Herod Agrippa does not. This Judeo-Christian view of Greco-Roman religion is a trope. Greeks and Romans did not understand themselves to be worshipping mere mortals; they believed, some more than others, that their rulers, heroes, holy men, and healers could be divine. Moreover, they believed that their immortal gods and goddesses could appear on earth disguised as mortals.

Worth noting is that ancient Judaism also had a tradition of theophanies and angelophanies, including the belief that the one true God or his angels might be disguised temporarily among humans—a tradition that facilitated early Christian belief that Jesus pre-existed as a divine being and that he descended from heaven and was incarnated.<sup>19</sup> Over the centuries of late antiquity and on into the Middle Ages, Jesus’s godhood and incarnation became one of the major doctrines separating mainstream Christianity from Rabbinic Judaism and Islam. For many Greeks and Romans, however, those teachings would have been relatively unobjectionable; they were accustomed to the idea of a deity appearing as a human being on earth, even the idea that the son of a god might be born to a human mother (virgin birth is another topic).<sup>20</sup> The potential offense to Gentiles was the exclusivity of Christian doctrine: that Jesus alone was God made manifest and that his incarnation within a negligible territory of the empire was a singular event of universal consequence.

### *Inspiration versus possession*

The distinction between the one true God and false deities is fundamental in New Testament references to Greco-Roman religion. It brings with it a further distinction: protagonists are inspired by the one true God, that is, by his Spirit; antagonists are possessed by some other false spirit or demon. In Paul’s epistles, the communities of saints he describes are charismatic, exercising numerous spiritual gifts such as prophecy and speaking in tongues. Paul describes and prescribes the activity of multiple prophets and prophetesses even in one gathering of saints. He gives instructions for weighing and testing prophecy, and he lists the discernment of spirits itself as a spiritual gift (1 Thessalonians 5:19–22; 1 Corinthians 11:2–16; 12:4–11; 14:1–33, 37–40; esp. 12:10; 14:29).<sup>21</sup> So in these charismatic communities it must have been accepted that some utterances might be false, coming from a source besides the Spirit of the one true God. Presumably that is how Paul would have categorized Greco-Roman prophecy and divination, but he does not talk about gentile oracles, seers, prophets, or prophetesses in his letters, and so he does not say that they were possessed by the wrong spirit.

The closest Paul comes to discussing gentile possession is in his general statements about the lives of gentile converts before they believed in Jesus. Things become complex,



though, because he makes analogous statements about the former life of Jewish converts as well. In his epistle to the Galatians, he employs metaphor to explain what he regards to be the expiration of aspects of Jewish law. The metaphor he uses is that of a juvenile's status before maturity and inheritance: "Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: but when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons [and daughters]" (4:3–5; a better translation than "elements" would be "elemental spirits," as in the NRSV). It is difficult to be sure, but Paul is apparently referring to the former life of both Jewish and gentile converts as servitude. By the "elemental spirits" of the world or cosmos, he may mean the angels through whom the law of Moses was added to God's will or testament (3:6–29), as if these angels surreptitiously changed the promises and blessings to Abraham and his seed after God gave them. Shifting from the first person *we* to the second person *you*, Paul also means the divinities of Greco-Roman religion. This is clear from the statement he makes a few verses later. Addressing the Galatian saints who had begun to observe Jewish law more rigorously at the encouragement of some of Paul's Jewish-Christian competitors, he writes, "Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods;" a patent reference to gentile deities and religious statuary. "But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (4:8–11; again a better translation than "elements" would be "elemental spirits," as in the NRSV). To judge from these two statements in his letter to the Galatians, it seems that Paul was not averse to classifying Judeo-Christian angels and Greco-Roman deities together as "elemental spirits" when it suited his purposes in arguing with his co-religionists over how gentile missions ought to be run (e.g., whether male converts should be circumcised or not). Saying that someone is enslaved to idols and the elemental spirits of the cosmos is, in a measure, proximate to saying they have been possessed.

Paul makes another statement about the former life of gentile converts in 1 Corinthians. This time he may have something else in mind, and the context is, in fact, gifts of the Spirit, or charismata: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren [and sisters], I would not have you ignorant. Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led. Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man [or woman] speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man [or woman] can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (12:1–3). The thought here is difficult to grasp. Perhaps the Corinthian saints had wanted to know whether correct information (Jesus is Lord) could ever come from a false spirit or from outside the community. Writing in reply, Paul reminds them of their former life as pagans, and in so doing he resorts to a Judeo-Christian cliché of gentile religion, that is: Gentiles worship idols, and idols of stone and wood are not living and cannot say anything. But then without acknowledging it, Paul seems to proceed on the assumption that idols—or, more correctly, the demonic spirits behind them—do speak. A person inspired by the Spirit of the one true God would not utter incorrect information;

that oracular content would have to come from a false spirit. Whereas anyone who utters correct information, whether as a member of the community or not, is not possessed by an idolatrous spirit or demon; that content would have to come from the Spirit of God. Hence, membership in the community is not altogether definitive. Correct content is the important thing. And the source or origin of an utterance simply follows its content: someone who curses Jesus is possessed; someone who calls Jesus Lord is inspired.

If that is what Paul was thinking in 1 Corinthians, it may be difficult to reconcile that idea with an account in the book of Acts, where he happens upon a girl in Philippi who has a Pythian spirit, or in other words a divinatory spirit of the oracle of the Greek god Apollo (16:16). Apollo's foremost oracle was at Delphi, and the oracle herself, the Pythia, was a woman through whom the deity was supposed to answer questions. There were other oracles in the ancient Mediterranean, large and small, as well as a host of freelance practitioners of divination and prophecy of various kinds, not to mention official priests who interpreted the entrails of sacrificial animals, the flight of birds, and so on.<sup>22</sup> Some of these freelance practitioners are known to have had children working for them as mediums.<sup>23</sup> According to Acts, the girl in Philippi "brought her masters much gain by soothsaying" (16:16), which is entirely plausible. The girl begins accompanying Paul and his associates, rightly shouting day after day to the people around: "These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation" (16:17). For whatever reason, Paul is aggravated after a while, and in Jesus's name he expels the Pythian spirit from the girl. Since she would not be able to tell fortunes any longer, this infuriates the practitioners she was working for, and Paul and Silas end up in prison (16:17–24). The account here suggests that the source or origin is what is definitive, not content. The information that the girl uttered was correct. Nevertheless, the source of that declaration, according to Acts, was not the Spirit of the one true God; it came from another spirit that Paul cast out of her, like the many other evil or unclean spirits and demons in Luke–Acts that must be driven from the sick and disabled (see Luke 4:31–36; 6:17–19; 8:1–3, 26–39; 9:37–43; 11:14–26; Acts 5:16; 8:6–7; 19:11–16). Thus, the girl was not an inspired gentile prophetess whose utterances could be tolerated as a complement to the gospel message—she was possessed.

The Paul of Galatians and 1 Corinthians could see himself as a liberator of sorts, bringing freedom to Gentiles who had been "in bondage under the elements of the world," who "did service unto them which by nature are no gods," and who had been "carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led" (Galatians 4:3, 8; 1 Corinthians 12:2). But when it came to physical slavery, Paul equivocated (see Philemon; 1 Corinthians 7:17–24).<sup>24</sup> Whatever the situation of physical slaves in his epistles, in the book of Acts the girl with a Pythian spirit is not said to have been freed from her owners. Nothing is recorded regarding what happened to her next. The spotlight is on Paul, and the upshot is that his religious rivals, the practitioners of divination and prophecy in Philippi, were financially motivated, just as the silversmiths in Ephesus.

*Religion versus magic*

Along with the worship of idols, in his letters Paul counts sorcery as a sin. He cautions the Galatians against it and a broad range of other types of misconduct (5:19–21). The inventory of transgressions may be a set list, so this is not automatically evidence of saints practicing magic in Galatia. But some of Paul's gentile converts likely did practice what he would have considered sorcery. Almost no one ever says that the rituals they are performing are anything other than religious. Typically, religion is what insiders say they do, and sorcery and magic are labels they apply to the religious practices of outsiders.<sup>25</sup>

The distinction between religion and magic is established again and again in Acts. First, in Samaria there is Simon the magician. The Samaritans are said to have regarded him as “the great power of God” (8:10). He is supplanted by the evangelist Philip, who impresses everyone, Simon included, with exorcisms and healings. For his profiteering Simon is denounced by Peter, who arrives with John to confer the Spirit on the Samaritans after their baptism (8:4–24). Second, on the island of Cyprus there is the magus Bar-Jesus, that is, “son of Joshua.” He is also known as Elymas and is described as “a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew” (13:6). He battles Barnabas and Paul over the potential convert Sergius Paulus, a Roman provincial governor. In a dramatic display of superiority, Paul blinds Elymas, thus vanquishing him and securing the governor's conversion (13:4–12). Third, in Ephesus there are “certain of the vagabond Jews, exorcists,” said to be “sons of one Sceva, a Jew, and chief of the priests” (19:13–14; a better translation than “vagabond” would be “itinerant,” as in the NRSV). As they attempt to imitate Paul's success and cast out evil spirits in Jesus's name, one evil spirit possessing a man tells them it recognizes Jesus and Paul; it does not recognize the sons of Sceva. The possessed man then attacks and injures the sons of Sceva, who run away. At the news, scores of Ephesians are converted and give up magic themselves by burning their expensive spellbooks (19:11–20).

All of the named magicians in these passages are Jewish or else Samaritan, perhaps because the foundations of magic were associated with Judaism in Greco-Roman imagination. For one, Pliny the Elder, a Roman statesman and Latin author of the first century AD, wrote in his encyclopedia that along with Zoroaster and the Persian magi, Moses and the Jews were responsible for bringing magic to Greece and Rome.<sup>26</sup> The author of Luke–Acts may be playing on Greco-Roman imagination as he distances himself and Christianity from the practice of magic. Be that as it may, there are many unnamed and privately practicing gentile sorcerers among the converts who burn their books in Ephesus.

In these passages from Acts, Christians are defined more than non-Christians and their rituals are described. Philip, Peter, John, Paul, and the increasing tally of believers are distinct from sorcerers and magicians because they are affiliated with the one true God and his Spirit, not the alternative. They perform signs and miracles; they don't practice magic, nor are they looking to make money (Acts 5:1–11). All this is in contrast to Simon and Elymas and the sons of Sceva. When Simon learns that Peter and John have the ability to cause God's Spirit to enter into someone by placing their hands on the person, he wants to buy the power from them, like a transaction between businesses, presumably so that he could then sell their

product and service to his clients in Samaria. His offer to Peter assumes that the original apostles care about revenue just as he does and just as he would if they wanted to purchase his trade secret. Peter condemns him and suggests that Simon's wickedness may not be forgivable (8:14–24). Paul is even harsher on Elymas. The unstated reason that Elymas is on Cyprus in the presence of the Roman provincial governor (13:7) is that the governor paid him for his consultations. He cannot lose his best customer, so he strives to prevent the governor from believing Barnabas and Paul (13:8). Although Paul's curse of blindness on Elymas is temporary, the words leave little hope of salvation for him: "Thou child of the devil, thou enemy of all righteousness, wilt thou not cease to pervert the right ways of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon thee, and thou shalt be blind, not seeing the sun for a season" (13:9–11). The curse not only shows Paul to be the winner of the contest, it also lets the governor know that Elymas has been operating by the forces of evil. As for the sons of Sceva in Ephesus, they do not want to buy Paul's ability to drive bad spirits out the way Simon wanted to buy Peter and John's power; the sons just try to mimic it, using the potent name of Jesus in their exorcisms. The attempt backfires, however. Use of the name in and of itself is not enough (19:11–16). The lesson that the people of Ephesus seem to learn from this is that their valuable spellbooks are actually worthless given that Jesus is more effective than any other deity they could pray to or invoke. And even if Jesus's name were added to invocations in their books, the prayers would not work on the lips of non-Christians, just as the exorcisms of the sons of Sceva failed. Another option, then, would have been for gentile converts to keep and Christianize their spellbooks, but the author of Luke–Acts has them burn them as a gauge of their conversion (Acts 19:17–20).

However many tomes of magic the converted Ephesians may have destroyed, that sort of literature still survives. Most manuscripts come from Roman Egypt because the arid climate has preserved them. The bulk of them were copied in the 200s and 300s AD, though transcribed from even older manuscripts. They are specific to the regional culture there, having been written in a combination of Greek, Demotic, and Coptic (the latter two are stages of the Egyptian language, Coptic being the final hellenized form of Egyptian that employs the Greek alphabet and Greek loanwords). The manuscripts are also thoroughly representative of ritual practices from across ancient Greece and Rome. Not only do they represent what may have been in the spellbooks of Paul's Ephesian converts, but some of the rituals they contain are similar to the signs and miracles performed by Christians in Acts.<sup>27</sup>

In these manuscripts, for example, are escape spells. One such spell is "a sacred rite for acquiring an assistant" or junior god who, once summoned, "frees from bonds the person chained in prison, he opens doors, and causes invisibility."<sup>28</sup> In another manuscript there is a prayer and invocation that "loosens shackles, makes invisible."<sup>29</sup> Yet another contains a charm to release one from bonds. The instructions read, "If you want to do something spectacular and want to free yourself from danger, stand at the door and say the spell, and having said it, go out, adding: 'Let the bonds of him, NN (supply the name), be loosened, and let the doors be opened for him, and let no one see him. . . .'" NN is a placeholder where the practitioner is to substitute his or her name or the name of the person for whom the

ritual is being performed. The instructions continue: “When the bonds break, say: ‘I thank you, lord, [because] the holy spirit, the unique one, the living one, has [released] me.’”<sup>30</sup> That manuscript also prescribes wearing an all-purpose gemstone amulet set in a ring: “Anyone can open doors and break chains and rocks if he touches them with the stone, that is, the gem, and says the name written below,” the name carved on the amulet, on the underside against the finger of the person wearing it.<sup>31</sup> Yet another manuscript contains prayers and invocations, songs and chants “for release from bonds” and “to open doors.”<sup>32</sup> And another also contains a “charm to open a door.”<sup>33</sup>

In Acts, Peter and Paul both escape from jail, Peter more than once. He and the rest of the original apostles are arrested and imprisoned in Jerusalem by the Jewish high priest, Sadducees, and temple police (5:17–26). Peter is incarcerated again by Herod Agrippa I (12:6–11). And Paul and Silas are jailed by city officials in Philippi (16:19–40). They all escape incredibly, sometimes getting away unnoticed as though they were concealed from view even walking in front of the guards. Divine messengers aid Peter, like the assistant or junior god who “frees from bonds the person chained in prison, he opens doors, and causes invisibility,” mentioned in the manuscript quoted above. According to Acts, the first time Peter and the rest were imprisoned, “the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors” (5:19). The second time, after much prayer for him by members of the church, an angel appeared to Peter, “his chains fell off from his hands,” and “the iron gate . . . opened to them of his [the gate’s, its] own accord” (12:5, 7, 10). Paul and Silas were not assisted by an angel, but while they “prayed, and sang praises unto God,” a tremor rattled the prison “and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one’s bands were loosed” (16:25–26). Even though the author of Luke–Acts has distinguished between Christian signs and miracles on the one hand and magic on the other, similarities are present—from jail escapes and healings to exorcisms and protection against snakebites (28:1–6). Such affinities belie the author’s own efforts to define Christianity as something separate from Greco-Roman religion.

## Conclusion

Nearly two millennia after the launch of its gentile missions in the mid-first century AD, Christianity is now the largest religion on the planet. Recent statistics estimate that almost one-third of the global population is Christian.<sup>34</sup> The traditional religious practices and beliefs of many ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples, to say nothing of cultures and societies missionized later, either are totally gone or else have been absorbed and transformed by Christianity and other religions. But discussion of New Testament references to ancient Greco-Roman religion still has relevance for our day, not least because it highlights the question of how to treat those who belong to different religions (or to none at all), be they family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or acquaintances. While some passages from the New Testament are relatively inclusive (Galatians 3:28; compare 2 Nephi 26:33), others are not. At almost any moment, Latter-day Saints have the opportunity to interact with people who hold a variety of different religious beliefs. Thus, our challenge is to remain true to our

individual convictions while showing respect and love for those whose beliefs are different from our own (compare Articles of Faith 1:11).



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## Further Reading

- Beard, Mary, John North, and Simon Price. *Religions of Rome*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. The first volume is a roughly chronological survey. The second is a collection of primary texts in English translation, arranged by topic. Both focus on the Roman Republic and especially the Roman Empire, so they are narrower in scope but more detailed than Johnston's edited volume.
- Ferguson, Everett. *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003. This book features an introductory chapter on Hellenistic-Roman religions. It is topically arranged, and all words from ancient languages are transliterated.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. Boasting an interdisciplinary team of some 140 contributors, this book is highly comparative, focusing not only on ancient Greece and Rome but also on Egypt, Mesopotamia, Israel, and so forth. The book is arranged by topic and includes chapters that summarize the history of each culture and its religion. Ancient languages are transliterated.
- Klauck, Hans-Josef. *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religions*. Trans. Brian McNeil. Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2000. This book covers many of the same topics as Ferguson's chapter, plus philosophy, but at greater length and engaging more with European scholarship. It is arranged topically, with Greek words often left untransliterated.

## Notes

1. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1282, s.v. "pāgānus."
2. For a summary of evidence and scholarship, see Michele R. Salzman, "Pagans and Christians," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187.
3. OED Online, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com>, s.v. "heathen."
4. For example, following the precedent of older English translations, the translators of the King James Version of the Bible, published in 1611, frequently used *heathen* in the books of the Old Testament and even sometimes in the books of the New (Matthew 6:7; 18:17; Acts 4:25; 2 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 1:16; 2:9; 3:8). The term is also found in the Book of Mormon (2 Nephi 26:33; 3 Nephi 13:7; 21:21), Doctrine and Covenants (45:54; 75:22; 90:10), and Pearl of Great Price (Abraham 1:5, 7). By contrast, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, published in 1989, have avoided *heathen* altogether in both the Old and New Testaments, opting instead to use the term *Gentile* and occasionally the term *pagan*.
5. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick William Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 276–77, s.v. "ἔθνικός," "ἔθνος."
6. *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, 759–60, s.v. "gens," "gentilis."
7. Ronald E. Clements and G. Johannes Botterweck, "גֵּוֹי," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. and trans. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:426–33; and Bertram and K. L. Schmidt, "ἔθνος, ἔθνικός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New*

- Testament*, ed. and trans. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:364–72.
8. See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 538–39, 546–51, 562–65.
  9. Paul's preaching to Gentiles is foreshadowed in Acts 9:15 but only commences in Acts 13:46–47.
  10. On Paul, his chronology, and the disputed authorship of some of the letters attributed to him, see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1997), 422–45. For theories of how the Gospels were composed, particularly the Synoptic Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, see Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 100–125.
  11. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 3–8.
  12. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 188–93; Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religions*, trans. Brian McNeil (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 2000), 12–23; Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 325–69 (esp. 340–46) and 598–621 (esp. 614–19); and Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2:148–66.
  13. But in Galatians 2:10 Paul seems to preclude any such ruling, and he was an eyewitness, writing before the author of Luke–Acts.
  14. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 198–99.
  15. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 199–212; Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 250–330; Johnston, *Religions of the Ancient World*, 547–63 (esp. 556–61); and Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 1:140–49, 2:222–28, 253–59.
  16. Other examples are Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 11.332–339, for the Jewish legitimization of Alexander the Great and his contingent of Jewish soldiers; and Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 8.13; 9.9, for the Christian legitimization of the emperor Constantine and his engagement in civil war.
  17. Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius* 355–57, quoted in Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2:259.
  18. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 555–67; Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 12; and Johnston, *Religions of the Ancient World*, 547–63 (esp. 333–36).
  19. Some of the go-to examples are the appearance of God and angels in Genesis 18 and the appearance of the angel Raphael in the book of Tobit.
  20. One go-to example is the conception and birth of the emperor Augustus as son of the god Apollo: Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 2.94.4, quoted in *Documents for the Study of the Gospels*, 2nd ed., ed. David R. Cartlidge and David L. Dungan (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress, 1994), 133.
  21. Arguably, 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 was not written by Paul but added by an interpolator.
  22. See Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 213–22; Klauck, *Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 177–209; Johnston, *Religions of the Ancient World*, 370–91 (esp. 383–90); and Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2:166–93.
  23. See Johnston, *Religions of the Ancient World*, 385, referencing the Greco-Egyptian ritual papyri, such as PGM IV.88–93, 850–929; PGM V.1–53; PGM VII.348–58, 540–78; and PDM xiv (throughout).
  24. There is no equivocation in the disputed Pauline Letters, which perpetuate and reinforce slavery. See Ephesians 6:5–9; Colossians 3:22–4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10.
  25. Latter-day Saints should be able to appreciate this in their own modern church history. For instance, most members of the Church would not say that Joseph Smith practiced magic; they would say that the seer stones he gazed into while seeking buried treasure and translating the gold plates of the Book of Mormon were “instruments” and “sacred objects.” See “Book of Mormon Translation,” Gospel Topics, <https://www.lds.org/topics>.
  26. Pliny, *Natural History* 30.2.

27. English edition of the manuscripts: Hans Dieter Betz, trans. and ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); hereafter *Greek Magical Papyri*.
28. PGM I.96–133, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 5–6.
29. PGM V.458–89, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 109–10.
30. PGM XII.160–78, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 159–60.
31. PGM XII.270–350, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 163–65.
32. PGM XIII.288–96, 327–34, 1064–75, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 180–81, 195.
33. PGM XXXVI.312–20, *Greek Magical Papyri*, 277.
34. See “The Changing Global Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, April 5, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>. In some countries the Christian population is much more. The United States is approximately 70.6 percent Christian, including 46.5 percent Protestant, 20.8 percent Catholic, and 1.6 percent Latter-day Saint. See “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.