

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT

### THE GODS OF CORINTH

Hubbard

Religion

Many of us have probably wondered what it would have been like to travel alongside the apostle Paul, to listen to him teach, watch him work—to see the world as he saw it. The experience would certainly be eye-opening. Perhaps the

GOOD LUCK. KAR-  
PYS, AT HIS OWN  
EXPENSE, ERECTED THIS  
ALTAR TO THE GODS  
IN THE BEEHIVE.

\*INSCRIPTION, CORINTH

most mystifying feature of the ancient world for those of us from modern Western societies would be the all-pervasive nature of polytheism. There were gods everywhere. Gods for travelers, gods for hunters, gods for sailors, gods for warriors, gods for lovers, gods for poets; gods to help with childbirth, gods to help with baking, gods to help with treachery, gods to protect the hinges of your doors . . . the list is endless. While visiting Athens Paul himself felt confounded by the myriad of deities that surrounded him (Acts 17:16), and his opening remarks to the Athenian intellectuals were both generous and accurate: "Men of Athens! I perceive that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22).

Corinth, like Athens, Rome, Philippi, Ephesus, and every other Greco-Roman city or village was likewise "very religious." Zoe's stroll into Corinth took her past numerous temples, shrines, altars, and so on, and these were but a small portion of the rich array of deities vying for the attention of Corinthian aristocrats, townsfolk, and peasants. Inscriptions, coins, and statuary from Corinth attest to the worship of more than fifty deities in the area—including "the gods

GAIUS JULIUS SYRUS  
DEDICATED THIS  
COLUMN TO ISIS  
AND SERAPIS

INSCRIPTION, CORINTH

of the beehive"—and even this is only a partial listing. So crowded were the celestial realms above the Roman Empire that the second-century satirist Lucian penned "The Parliament of the Gods" in response. In this sardonic theological lampoon, Zeus summons a council of all the gods to address the heavenly population explosion. A resolution

is passed, divine credentials are checked, and all pretenders are sent packing!

The principal deities honored in Roman Corinth were Aphrodite (Venus) and Poseidon (Neptune), along with Apollo, Asclepius, Demeter and her daughter Kore, Nike (Victoria), Tyche (Fortuna), Jupiter Capitolinus, Isis and Serapis (Egyptian deities), Athena, and the imperial cult (see *City and Society: Urban Landscape and Environment*). Local deities and legendary heroes also figured prominently in the religious life of Corinth, such as Aphrodite Melanis (Black Aphrodite, associated with death and the afterlife), Athena Chalintis (Athena the Bridler, who helped tame Pegasus), Bellerophon with his winged

### TABLE OF PRINCIPAL GREEK AND ROMAN GODS AND PERSONIFICATIONS

GREEK NAME	ROMAN NAME	Principal Roles in Mythology
Aphrodite	Venus	Goddess of beauty, sexual love, and fertility
Apollo	Apollo	God of music, prophecy, healing, and archery. In later mythology, associated with the sun
Ares	Mars	God of war
Artemis	Diana	Goddess of fertility, the wilderness, hunting
Asklepios	Aesclepius	God of healing
Athena	Minerva	Patron deity of Athens; goddess of wisdom, arts and crafts, and war; helper of heroes
Demeter	Ceres	Goddess of grain
Dionysus/Liber	Bacchus	God nature, wine, and merriment
Eros	Cupid	God of love
Hades	Pluto	God of the underworld and the dead
Hephaestus	Vulcan	God of fire; blacksmith of the gods
Hera	Juno	Goddess of marriage, wife of Zeus
Herakles	Hercules	Hero, worshipped as the god of strength, bravery, and victory
Hermes	Mercury	Messenger of the gods; helper of travelers and merchants
Hestia	Vesta	Goddess of hearth and home
Nike	Victoria	Goddess of victory; helper of athletes and soldiers
Poseidon	Neptune	God of the sea and earthquakes
Uranus	Uranus	God of the sky; father of the Titans
Zeus	Jupiter	Ruler of the gods

horse Pegasus, and Melicertes/Palaimon, god of harbors and patron deity of the Isthmian games (see *City and Society: Festivals and Sport*). In addition to these major deities, scores of lesser deities governed the affairs of everything from the household to the sheepfold.

### POLYTHEISM

Polytheism, by its nature, is inclusive and tolerant, capable of accommodating new gods and absorbing innovative religious movements.<sup>1</sup> First-century religious shoppers could fill their baskets with any number of deities, depending on their particular needs or their occupation. The young woman in love could appeal to the goddess Peitho (Persuasion) to convince a hesitant suitor. The merchant selling his wares frequented the temple of Tyche (Success) to ensure

that his business would thrive. The farmer fertilizing his field invoked Sterculius, the god presiding over the spreading of manure. Athletes flocked to Herakles (Hercules), the infirm to Asclepius, mariners to Poseidon (Neptune). The casual reader of first-century literature will stumble across heartfelt petitions to herb

#### TO THE GOD WHO CURES HANGOVERS

\*INSCRIPTION, CORINTH

divinities and the goddess Earth and will hear of devout worshipers of nebulous celestial deities dutifully offering incense on the slopes of Mount Aetna in hopes of averting an eruption.<sup>2</sup> Some divinities of Greece and Rome are known from only a single literary reference or an obscure inscription. No wonder that Juvenal could look back wistfully on days of old when "there was no grim Pluto reigning over the gloomy underworld, no Ixion with his wheel or Sisyphus heaving his stone, no Furies, no vulture-pecked Tityus, no mob of deities as there is today."<sup>3</sup>

And there was no reason to be exclusive in one's worship. Jews (and later, Christians) were an oddity in this regard. As the Jesus movement grew and became more noticeable, the idiosyncratic and obstinate refusal of its members to worship other deities invited sarcasm from principled Romans like Celsus, a second-century philosopher: "It is absurd that these Christians guard against

#### CONSIDER THE MAN WHO WORSHIPS HE- DONES, THE GODDESS OF PLEASURE, AND WHO IS PASSIONATELY DEVOTED TO THE BURNING MADNESS OF SEXUAL INDULGENCE

\*DIO CHRYSOSTOM

serving several gods. . . . He who serves many gods does that which is pleasing to the Most High, because he honors that which belongs to Him."<sup>4</sup> The typical Roman might begin his day with a prayer to Ops for an abundant harvest, offer a sacrifice to Jupiter at midday, toast Serapis at dinner, and all with a good conscience—why not cover all your bases? Inscriptions from Philippi reveal individuals with dual priesthoods. Marcus Velleius Marci, for example, a resident of Philippi, erected a gravestone for his wife that proudly touts his position in both the imperial cult (see *City and Society: Urban Landscape and Environment*) and the cult of the great mother goddess, Cybele.<sup>5</sup> Lucius Apuleius, a devotee of Isis, was eager to let everyone know that he had also been initiated into the mysteries of Aesclepius and "mysteries of many a kind, rites in great number, and diverse ceremonies."<sup>6</sup> Polytheism, however, was not for everyone, and one group in particular remained obstinately opposed to worshiping multiple deities: the Jews.

### DIASPORA JUDAISM

By the first century C.E. it is probable that considerably more Jews lived outside of Palestine than inside the Jewish heartland itself.<sup>7</sup> The word *Diaspora*

Quite apart from these isolated, and somewhat disparate sound bites from antiquity, the surviving literary and inscriptional evidence, including the NT, depict Jewish communities in the Greco-Roman world centered around houses

THE WHOLE EARTH WILL  
BE FILLED WITH YOU  
[THE JEWISH PEOPLE],  
AND EVERY SEA. EVERY-  
ONE WILL BE OFFENDED  
AT YOUR CUSTOMS.

\*JEWISH ORACLE, 2D  
CENTURY B.C.E.

Jews were particularly distinguished by their worship of the one God of Israel. These identity markers were widely disparaged by Gentiles, and writers of the period are generally disdainful of Jews.<sup>14</sup>

Often, Jewish beliefs were misunderstood by Gentiles. For example, Jews were commonly accused of being atheists. Dio Cassius records how the emperor Domitian had the consul Flavius Clemens executed on the charge of atheism

LIKE EVERYONE ELSE,  
BEWARE YOU TOO  
OF THE JEWS

\*FROM A FIRST-  
CENTURY LETTER

and notes that this was a charge "which many others who drifted into Jewish ways were condemned."<sup>15</sup> The imageless God of the Hebrews was perplexing to Greeks and Romans accustomed to statuary, painting, mosaics, and other visual depictions of the divine world. Juvenal remarks that Jews seem to worship "nothing but the clouds."<sup>16</sup> Others, however, supposed that Jews abstained from pork because they worshiped a pig god.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, observing the Sabbath was sometimes attributed to laziness.<sup>18</sup>

In spite of this generally negative appraisal, there were Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism, frequented the synagogues, and became full proselytes. Although their numbers were probably few, it remains true that Judaism appealed to some, even if most remained God-fearers and not full converts.<sup>19</sup>

## SUPERSTITION

Far more important for daily life than the Olympian deities or the major imports from the east like Isis and Cybele were the innumerable demons and malevolent spirits that had to be kept at bay or placated as best one could. The religion of the masses—if "religion" is the right word—was a confused conglomeration of superstition, divination, astrology, and magic. While the phi-

losophers and academics were waxing eloquent on the nobility, grandeur, and perfection of the gods,<sup>20</sup> the butcher etched in lead a curse on his competitor, the farmer cleared space in his field for the divinely obscene Priapus,<sup>21</sup> the innkeeper trembled at the omen forecast by the stars, and the dotting grandmother scrupulously enacted a dark ritual ensuring the prosperity of her progeny:

See how the granny, fearing the gods, takes the baby out of his cradle: skilled in averting the evil eye, she first, with her rebuking middle finger, applies the charm of magical spittle to his forehead and slobbering lips; then she rocks the wizened hopeful in her arms and destines him in her prayers to . . . the mansions of a Crassus.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the townsfolk, travelers, merchants, and magistrates whom Paul encountered daily were deeply superstitious and envisioned the spiritual universe as a vast, multistoried *insula* with swarms of supernatural beings occupying the floors above and below them. All throughout the Roman world the intersection of two roads was believed to be the gathering place of spirits (*daemones*) of the underworld, "the most harmful beings in the universe," according to Plutarch.<sup>23</sup> Shrines to Hecate, goddess of the underworld, were strategically placed at the crossroads as protection against these sinister ghouls. The Cynic philosopher sending off his disciple with the farewell, "May the gods and spirits (*daemones*) treat you well," is indicative of the metaphysical notions of the first-century milieu.<sup>24</sup> Lucius Apuleius's widely shared conviction that there are "divine beings holding a position . . . midway between gods and men, and that all divination and the miracles of magicians are controlled by them," forms the basis of the chilling curse he pronounces on his opponent in a crowded courtroom:

May that same god, the intermediary between the living and the dead, give you the hatred of the gods of both worlds. May he always heap up before your eyes unavoidable apparitions of the dead, ghouls, specters, ghosts, wandering spirits: all the things that you encounter in the night, all the horrors of the tomb, all the terrors of the grave.<sup>25</sup>

One result of such a densely layered spiritual universe was the understandable concern that the correct deity be supplicated, and in the correct manner. Ancient writers mention altars to "unknown gods" scattered throughout Greece, which stood as visible monuments to the anxiety the ancients felt concerning

BUT THE RIDICULOUS  
ACTIONS AND EMOTIONS  
OF SUPERSTITION,  
ITS WORDS AND GESTURES,  
MAGIC CHARMS, SPELLS,  
RUSHING ABOUT AND BEATING OF  
DRUMS, IMPURE AND OUTLANDISH  
PENANCES AND MORTIFICATIONS  
AT THE SHRINES MAKE  
ONE WISH THERE WERE NO GODS!  
PLUTARCH

identifying and appeasing the appropriate divinity.<sup>26</sup> Among the many leaden tablets found at the oracle of Zeus at Dodona in northwest Greece comes the entreaty of one fretful soul wanting only to know where to go for help: "Nikokra-

GREETINGS FROM YOUR  
SISTERS AND THE CHILDREN  
OF THEONIS,  
WHOM THE EVIL EYE  
SHALL NOT HARM

A LETTER TO A BOY  
FROM HIS MOTHER

teia wishes to know to which god she should offer sacrifices in order to regain her health and be rid of her disease.<sup>27</sup> Often the petitioner would feel compelled to add, "or by whatever name you wish to be called," after addressing the deity, in case he or she might have misdialed and an unfamiliar god picked up on the other end.<sup>28</sup> Another trend observable from at least the first century onwards is the fusing of several gods into one, almost as a means of reducing the clutter: "To Zeus Helios great Sarapis and his fellow gods. Is it to my advantage to buy the slave called Gaion? Grant me this!"<sup>29</sup> The worship of Isis and Sarapis was particularly keen to absorb deities: "As you stand there [in the temple of Serapis] say, 'One is Zeus Sarapis.'"<sup>30</sup>

A word of clarification is necessary before proceeding. By "superstition" I mean a great variety of quasi-animistic folk beliefs and magical practices that are at variance with traditional conceptions of Greco-Roman "orthodoxy" and that were commonly disparaged by the intelligentsia of first-century society. Yet there is an implicit value judgment being made in using this term, and one that is difficult to defend when one considers that the "superstitious" would comprise the great majority of people in the NT milieu. Even the enlightened

O QUEEN OF HEAVEN—  
WHETHER YOU BE  
BOUNTIFUL CERES, OR  
HEAVENLY VENUS, OR  
PHOEBUS, OR DREADED  
PROSERPINA—BY WHATEVER  
NAME, WITH  
WHATEVER RITE, IN  
WHATEVER IMAGE IT  
IS RIGHT TO INVOKE  
YOU, DEFEND ME NOW!

\*APULEIUS

critics of popular piety held views that by modern standards would be considered comically unenlightened and tragically superstitious. The thunderous collision of our largely disenchanting universe (in the post-industrial West, at least) with the thoroughly enchanted universe of the first century is nowhere more earsplitting than when contemplating popular religiosity in its seemingly infinite permutations. Most of us, for example, would find it difficult to take seriously the idea that burying a frog at an intersection could prevent a fever<sup>31</sup> or that the ground where lightning strikes is sacred<sup>32</sup> or comprehend why a host would abruptly pour wine under the table and change the rings on his finger after hearing a cock crow.<sup>33</sup> Yet these beliefs and actions made sense to the ancients and were rational in the kind of universe they inhabited: an enchanted universe; a universe where the line between the spiritual and the physical was only faintly drawn and easily crossed.

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Cicero defines superstition as "groundless fear of the Gods," and this sentiment is echoed throughout the literature of the period.<sup>34</sup> Seneca, Horace, Persius, Juvenal, Lucian, Plutarch, Valerius Maximus, and others besides, all cast a critical eye on the superstition of the masses and lament the sorry state of religion in their day. In mocking tones, Horace tells of the elderly freedman who, after fasting and ritual washing, runs frantically to the shrines at the crossroads in the wee hours of the morning crying "Save me! Save me!" and the distraught mother who vows that her sick son will stand naked in the Tiber on the day of the fast if Jupiter answers her prayer and heals him. With acidic wit Horace remarks that the vow is more likely to kill the poor boy than the illness, and then asks, "What is the malady that has stricken her mind? The fear of the gods."<sup>35</sup>

The embarrassment and frustration felt by Horace and other cultured despisers of the superstition of the masses is most perfectly articulated in Plutarch's masterful *On Superstition*. Plutarch compares the lot of the superstitious with the atheist—disapproving of both—and concludes that the deluded atheist is far better off than the wretched bloke gripped by superstition who finds himself "smeared with mud, wallowing in filth, succumbing to immersions, cast down with face to the ground performing disgraceful besieging of the gods and uncouth prostrations," all at the bidding of some crone of a witch.<sup>36</sup> There is, no doubt, an element of playful exaggeration in Plutarch's description, but it remains true that the superstitious were at the mercy of soothsayer and sorcerer alike, and the antidotes prescribed by this rabble were limited only by their imagination and their greed.

And there certainly was money to be made in the science of the supernatural. Numerous stories are told of charlatans and purveyors of snake oil preying on the phobias of the gullible:

One man supplies magical spells; another sells Thessalian charms by which a wife may upset her husband's mind, and lather his buttocks with a slipper; thence come

THEN AGAIN THERE  
ARE THE BLACK SPEC-  
TERS AND THE PERILS  
OF THE "BROKEN EGG";  
THERE ARE THE HUGE  
PRIESTS OF CYBELE AND  
THE ONE-EYED PRIESTESS  
WITH HER RATTLE, WHO  
WILL DRIVE DEMONS  
INTO YOU THAT MAKE  
YOUR BODIES SWELL IF  
YOU DO NOT SWALLOW  
THE PRESCRIBED MORN-  
ING DOSE OF THREE  
HEADS OF GARLIC.

PERSIUS

WHAT THEN INDUCES  
US TO SUCH CONSTANT  
USE OF DIVINATION?  
COWARDICE, DREAD OF  
THE FUTURE. THIS IS  
THE REASON WHY WE  
FLATTER THE DIVIN-  
ERS, SAYING, "MASTER,  
SHALL I INHERIT MY  
FATHER'S PROPERTY?"  
IF HE SAYS, "YES!" WE  
THANK HIM AS IF WE  
RECEIVED THE INHERI-  
TANCE FROM HIM!

\*EPICTETUS

loss of reason, and darkness of soul, and blank forgetfulness of all that you did but yesterday.<sup>37</sup>

In a letter to a friend, Pliny the Younger relates the exploits of a certain Regulus, a notorious pseudo-psychic who managed to conjure up a fortune through artfully devised astrological calculations given to wealthy widows on their deathbeds.<sup>38</sup> Exposing religious frauds was a

WHAT CAN THEY FEAR  
FROM THE GODS WHEN  
THEY USE SUCH MEANS  
TO WIN THEIR FAVOR?  
. . . THEY SLASH THEM-  
SELVES IN TEMPLES  
AND MAKE SUPPLICA-  
TION WITH THEIR OWN  
BLEEDING WOUNDS.  
ONE WILL FIND PRAC-  
TICES SO INDECENT . . .  
SO UNLIKE THOSE OF  
SANE MEN, THAT IF  
THEIR NUMBER WERE  
FEWER NO ONE WOULD  
HAVE ANY DOUBT THAT  
THEY WERE DEMENTED.

\*SENECA, ACCORDING  
TO AUGUSTINE

favorite pastime of the satirist Lucian, and invariably money and avarice figure prominently in his tales.<sup>39</sup> Valerius Maximus tells of the Gallic city of Massilia, which took extreme care to bar any "who by some pretense of religion seek sustenance for sloth, holding that false and fraudulent superstition should be ousted."<sup>40</sup> The association of peddlers of the paranormal with rank profiteering was so commonly made that the Greek word for "sorcerer" (*goēs*) came to be a simple synonym for "swindler." Before considering more directly the crucial subject of magic and divination, a word about Jewish superstition is in order.

It was not only the Gentile world that was befogged with spirits, fair and foul. Many Jews, too, perceived the cosmos to be brimming with supernatural beings, and for them, like their pagan counterparts, this was not an altogether pleasant reality. One of the most important developments in Judaism of the Hellenistic and Roman eras was

the widespread belief that the hosts of heaven were actively involved in human affairs—individual and national. These angelic forces, however, were not all benevolent; indeed, much of the speculation in the surviving extrabiblical Jewish texts focuses on the activity of the evil angelic host. A stroll through this literature takes the reader into a dark and foreboding land, a world where humanity often appears as a defenseless and expendable pawn in a vast cosmic battle. Not surprisingly, prayers for protection are commonplace:

Save me from the hands of evil spirits which rule over the thought of the heart of man!<sup>41</sup>

Strengthen your servant against fiendish spirits so that he can walk in all that you love and loathe all that you hate.<sup>42</sup>

The apocryphal "Dream of Amram" (see Num 26:58–59), found in fragments in cave four at Qumran, describes a vision of this demon-infested universe:

And behold, two [demons] were quarreling over me. . . . And they said to me, "We have received control and we rule over all the sons of Adam. . . . Which of us do you choose to be ruled?" And I raised my eyes and saw that one of them had a dreadful appearance like the pestilence, and his clothing was colored and obscured by darkness. And the other was smiling. . . . and he said to me, "This one is called King of Evil."<sup>43</sup>

The Jewish author of the book of *Jubilees*, written somewhere between 150 and 100 B.C.E., tries to iron out the theological wrinkles of Genesis by ascribing its problematic episodes to the shenanigans of fallen angels. According to this writer, it was not Yahweh who tempted Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, or who slew the firstborn of Egypt, or who hardened Pharaoh's heart, but Mastema, the prince of the demons.<sup>44</sup> These fallen angels are also held responsible for introducing humanity to astrology, disease, warfare, idolatry, slavery, murder, poverty, and all manner of evil. The writer of *I Enoch* adds to this litany of villainy the degenerate crime of teaching women to wear makeup and jewelry!<sup>45</sup> In fact, in much of this literature it is not the sin of Adam in the garden that led to the entrance of sin, death, and disease into the world but the sin of angelic "watchers" described in Gen 6:1-8. This is not to say that every Jew everywhere staggered through his or her day trembling, waiting for the sky to fall. Yet it is true that Jewish literature of this period—hymns, histories, testaments, apocalypses—reveals an elaborate and complex system of angelic and demonic hierarchies, ranks, divisions, and so on, and this worldview is assumed rather than argued. From this substantial body of material representing diverse theological perspectives and a variety of geographical regions we learn of the creation of angels, the classes of angels, the circumcision of angels, the number of angels, the worship of angels, the work of guarding angels, and much, much, more. We are also introduced to individual angels, like Raphael, who bound the evil angel Azazel and buried him in the desert;<sup>46</sup> Jerahmeel, guardian of Hades and the abyss;<sup>47</sup> Sariel, protector of Isarel's armies;<sup>48</sup> Purouel, the archangel who had authority over fire;<sup>49</sup> and the angel Repentance, who renewed the penitent Aseneth.<sup>50</sup> This list could go on for several pages. Among the material from

MOREOVER, SEND  
FORTH CATERPILLARS  
AND LOCUSTS, RUST  
AND GRASSHOPPERS,  
HAIL WITH LIGHTNING  
AND FURY. PUN-  
ISH THEM WITH THE  
SWORD AND DEATH,  
AND THEIR CHILDREN  
WITH DEMONS.

3 BARUCH 16:2

AND I, A SAGE, DECLARE  
THE SPLENDOR OF HIS  
RADIANCE IN ORDER TO  
FRIGHTEN AND TERRIFY  
ALL THE SPIRITS OF THE  
RAVAGING ANGELS AND  
THE BASTARD SPIR-  
ITS, DEMONS, LILITH,  
OWLS, AND JACKALS.  
DEAD SEA SCROLLS

Qumran yet to be published are a handful of texts bearing the provisional title "Catalogue of Spirits."<sup>51</sup>

The rise of Jewish angelic speculation corresponds to a time in Israel's history when its monarchy was eradicated, its sovereignty was eviscerated, and the hopeful expectation of the prophets was fading into oblivion. This national

AND CRUEL SPIR-  
ITS LED THE SONS OF  
NOAH ASTRAY. AND  
THE PRINCE MASTEMA  
... SENT OTHER SPIR-  
ITS TO THOSE WHO  
WERE SET UNDER HIS  
HAND TO PRACTICE  
ALL ERROR AND SIN  
AND ALL TRANSGRES-  
SION, TO DESTROY, TO  
CAUSE TO PERISH AND  
TO POUR OUT BLOOD  
ON THE EARTH.

#### JUBILEES

and theological crisis was assuaged somewhat through tales of angelic intervention. To those struggling to reconcile the chaos of the present with the promises of the past, these angelic mediators revealed the mysteries of God's inscrutable purpose.<sup>52</sup> To those suffering under the heavy boot of foreign domination, bewildered that God's chosen people could be so oppressed, this popular folklore offered a convincing explanation: Satan and his minions were working in concert with the Gentiles to destroy, if possible, the seed of Abraham.<sup>53</sup>

The affinities between pagan superstition and Jewish angelic speculation are noteworthy, though the more or less rigid monotheism of Judaism provides a clear line of demarcation. Philo, Paul's Jewish contemporary in Alexandria, also noted the

similarities and argued that what the Gentiles call divinities, "the sacred Scripture calls *angels*."<sup>54</sup> Other Jewish thinkers, like the authors of *1 Enoch*, *Biblical Antiquities*, and Paul, were less generous: "The gods of the Gentiles are demons."<sup>55</sup>

## MAGIC

In order to understand the religious context in which primitive Christianity emerged, one must reckon seriously with the widespread practice of magic, divination, and all manner of related paranormal activities. The principal varieties of magic in Greco-Roman antiquity were protective magic (protection from evil spirits, black magic, illness), imprecatory magic (invoking curses on an enemy or competitor), and love magic (compelling affection in another). The common denominator among all these is the belief that one can manipulate the gods through the correct execution of secret rites and incantations. The practice of injurious black magic was not strictly legal, and perpetrators of such mischief could face criminal prosecution.<sup>56</sup> Yet traffickers in magic and the dark arts are abundantly attested in the Roman world, and this great supply implies a great demand. Horace mentions one area of Rome known for its fortune tellers<sup>57</sup> and another for its witches:

'Tis not so much the thieves and beasts wont to infest the place that cause me care and trouble, as the witches who with spells and drugs vex human souls . . . gathering bones and harmful herbs, as soon as the roving Moon has uplifted her beauteous face.<sup>58</sup>

While it would be wrong to assume that this situation was typical of every metropolis in the Roman world, it would be a greater error to assume that Rome was an anomaly. Writing from Alexandria, Philo paints a similar picture of the plethora of magical practitioners:

But the magic practiced by wandering beggars, jesters, the most disreputable women and slaves is a disfigurement of this art. . . . They promise to achieve a purification or expiation by magical means, assuring that they can supply love potions and secret utterances. . . . They lead astray and entice above all simple and harmless persons.<sup>59</sup>

Both Suetonius and Horace refer to entire books devoted to sorcery and spells,<sup>60</sup> and understanding the abundance of such works considerably illuminates the great magical bonfire described in Acts 19:19 (see Religion and Superstition: Magic in Acts). Indeed, some of these literary productions have survived, and they reveal a world of poisons, potions, charms, incantations, curses, voodoo, amulets, and so on. Lengthy formulae are prescribed detailing the precise terminology for summoning a deity, making a request, and dismissing the deity, together with symbols to be inscribed and mysterious procedures to be enacted. Quite commonly the invocation would involve reciting nonsense words and naming scores of divinities and spirits regardless of their derivation—Greek, Roman, Pagan, Hebrew—in order to maximize the effectiveness of the petition. Knowing and employing the name of a spirit was believed to grant power over that spirit and oblige it to respond to the summons: “Hear me great god, in every ritual which I perform, and grant all the petitions of my prayer completely, because I know your signs, who you are each hour, and what your name is.”<sup>61</sup> In the following abridged incantation, an experienced shaman offers instruction on the correct method for procuring aid from the spirit world. The role of the boy in the ritual is unclear:

BUT YOU WHOSE PRACTICE IT IS TO LURE THE MOON DOWN FROM THE SKY AND TO PROPITIATE SPIRITS OVER THE MAGIC FIRE, COME, ALTER THE HEART OF MY MISTRESS AND SEE THAT SHE TURN PALER THAN THIS CHEEK OF MINE. THEN I SHOULD CREDIT YOU WITH THE POWER OF SUMMONING GHOSTS AND STARS WITH THESALIAN SPELLS.

PROPERTIUS

“PROTECT HIM [NAME] WHOM SHE [MOTHER'S NAME] BORE.” ATTACH THIS AS AN AMULET AROUND THE NECK.

PROTECTIVE AMULET

Say, "Come to me god of the gods, the only one who appears from fire and wind . . . Loth Mouloth Pnout Ei Esioth, hail lord Lampsoure Iaaio Ia. . . ." Say these things many times. If, while you are reciting the apparition delays, say, "Open up, open

I BIND DIONYSIOS THE  
HELMET MAKER AND  
HIS WIFE ARTEMIS THE  
GOLD WORKER AND  
THEIR HOUSEHOLD  
AND THEIR WORK  
AND THEIR PRODUCTS  
AND THEIR LIFE.

CURSE TABLET

Inscribe the magical characters. Fasten the stone to the left side of the saucer. . . . Cast in the saucer the afterbirth of a dog called "white" which is born of a white dog. On the boy's chest write in myrrh: "Karbaoth."<sup>62</sup>

Magic had a place among Jews as well, though the surviving evidence suggests it resided on the margins of first-century Jewish practice, at least in comparison with the Gentile world. A number of Greek and Roman writers refer to Jewish fortune tellers and sorcerers,<sup>63</sup> and the book of Acts records several significant encounters with Jewish exorcists and magicians (Acts 8:9; 13:6-12; 19:13-20; see 2.12). More significant is the material from Qumran dealing with exorcism, astrology, and the like,<sup>64</sup> and the *Prayer of Jacob*, an early Jewish magical text with striking similarities to its pagan counterparts: a summoning formula, secret names, nonsense words, and a recitation ritual. In contrast to these, however, the *Prayer of Jacob* asks for moral transformation and angelic immortality.

I ASK FOR AND RE-  
QUEST YOUR POWER  
AND YOUR AUTHORITY.  
. . . BRING TERMOUTIS  
WHOM SOPHIA BORE,  
TO ZOEL WHOM DRO-  
SER BORE, WITH CRAZED  
AND UNCEASING EV-  
ERLASTING LOVE.

MAGICAL INCANTATION

Black magic and sorcery were the grimy underside of Greco-Roman religion, and their ubiquitous presence in the first century is easily confirmed but rarely taken adequately into account when exploring the socio-religious matrix of the fledgling Jesus movement. Images of marble temples, Doric columns, and exquisite statuary of the gods can all too easily obscure the less romantic reality of curse tablets, talismans, and bizarre nocturnal rituals. Yet this is the environment from which new believers entered the church, and so it is not surprising, as we will see (see Religion and Superstition: Magic in Acts), that the residue of this worldview would occasionally become visible.

up, Olympus; open up, Hades; open up Abyss. Let the darkness be dispelled." If it still delays, cry out in this way and again close the eyes of the boy: "Hail holy light! Hail eye of the world. . . Abra A O Na Babrouthi Bie Barache, god, come in Lord." Then ask what you wish.

Dismissal: "I give thanks to you because you came in accordance with the command of god. I request that you keep me free from terror and free from demonic attacks, Athathe Athathachthe Adonai. Return to your holy places."

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## DIVINATION

Knowledge of future events, the revelation of hidden truth, supernatural guidance in pressing decisions—these have ever been the fascination of mortals, and first-century pagans had devised a great many methods for plumbing the depths of the mysterious unknown. As we have seen, spiritists, mediums, and soothsayers were in plentiful supply and, not surprisingly, there was both a low-rent and a high-rent district for psychic pursuits:

If the woman be of humble rank, she will promenade between the turning posts of the Circus Maximus; she will have her fortune told, and will present her brow and her hand to the seer who asks for many an approving smack. Wealthy women will pay for answers from a Phrygian or Indian augur well skilled in the stars and the heavens.<sup>65</sup>

Of course, there's divination, and there's divination. Official divination was a venerated and hallowed form of discerning the will of the gods and occupied an important place in Rome's social and political history. It involved, principally, studying the flight patterns and eating habits of birds (augury), examining the entrails of animals (haruspicy), and observing significant cosmological phenomena (lightning, eclipses, earthquakes). In Cicero's *On Divination*, although he is doubtful of its usefulness, we see divination elevated to a science, complete with methods, rules, and procedures. Its significance in Roman history is recounted by Valerius Maximus, whose prosaic enumeration of notable portents is only thinly veiled political propaganda.<sup>66</sup>

Divination, however, was hardly confined to cities, political aristocracy, and the leaders of the empire. Diviners were also common figures in the forums and farmlands of the Roman world, as evidenced by the casual, almost parenthetical, references to such prophetic practitioners among writers of the period: Dio tells of a fortunate chance encounter with a prophetess while lost in the countryside of the Peloponnese;<sup>67</sup> Horace alludes to a Sabine seer and her divining urn;<sup>68</sup> the mural unearthed from Pompeii depicts a common scene in the marketplace: a traveler seeking an omen from a sorceress.<sup>69</sup> We have numerous similar examples,

THEN COMES THE  
JEWESS . . . A HIGH  
PRIESTESS OF THE TREE,  
A TRUSTY GO-BETWEEN  
OF THE HIGHEST  
HEAVEN. SHE TOO FILLS  
HER PALM, BUT MORE  
SPARINGLY, FOR A  
JEW WILL INTERPRET  
DREAMS OF ANY KIND  
YOU PLEASE FOR THE  
MINUTEST OF COINS.

\*JUVENAL

THE MANNER OF  
HER PROPHESYING  
WAS NOT THAT OF  
SO MANY OTHER  
MEN AND WOMEN  
SAID TO BE INSPIRED;  
SHE DID NOT GASP  
FOR BREATH, WHIRL  
HER HEAD ABOUT  
OR TRY TO TERRIFY  
WITH HER GLANCES.

DIO CHYRSOSTOM

but a short vignette from the Cynic epistles humorously fills out the picture. In this apocryphal anecdote, the legendary cynic Diogenes is strolling through the

WHO DOES NOT  
KNOW THAT THIS CITY  
WAS FOUNDED ONLY  
AFTER TAKING THE  
DIVINATIONS, THAT  
EVERYTHING IN WAR  
AND IN PEACE, AT HOME  
AND ABROAD, WAS  
DONE ONLY AFTER TAK-  
ING THE DIVINATIONS?

LIVY

forum of Olympia, people watching. He passes merchants hawking their goods, poets reciting verse, philosophers discoursing learnedly on the nature of the cosmos, and finally espies a diviner:

He was seated in the middle of a crowd, wearing a wreath larger than Apollo's, who discovered the art of divination. So I asked him, "Are you a very good diviner, or a poor one?" When he answered that he was very good I brandished my staff and said, "Tell me then, what will I do? Will I whack you with my staff, or not?" He thought to himself for a moment and replied, "You will not." Whereupon I whacked him with a laugh, while those standing around roared.<sup>70</sup>

## ORACLES

Oracles, dreams, and astrology were also common currency in the first century, and the surviving evidence indicates that nearly everyone made at least some use of this preternatural tender. Consulting an oracle, like that of Apollo at Delphi, or the Sybil at Cumae, or Asclepius at Epidaurus, was a time-honored tradition in antiquity and considered to be a valid means of finding a divine answer to a perplexing dilemma. Although the method for obtaining a reply

AM I TO BE SOLD?  
AM I TO GET A FUR-  
LOUGH?  
IS HE WHO LEFT HOME  
ALIVE?  
SHALL I BE AN AMBAS-  
SADOR?  
AM I TO BE DIVORCED  
FROM MY WIFE?  
HAVE I BEEN POISONED?

FROM A LIST OF QUESTIONS  
TO AN ORACLE

could be quite complex—the ritual at the oracle of Trophonius at Lebadeia took several days<sup>71</sup>—often the petitioner would simply scratch out his or her question on a lead tablet and await a word from the sybil or officiating priest. Another method was to sit quietly at a shrine, listening for whatever phrase might be heard from a passerby, which would constitute the response from the gods. Valerius Maximus tells of one woman whose practice it was to wait until she heard the word that suited her intention!<sup>72</sup> Sometimes the supplicant would be required to spend the night at the shrine in the hope of receiving a nocturnal vision or healing from the deity. Dreams, in fact,

were commonly held to be messages from the gods, and this not only by the superstitious and unsophisticated masses. Plutarch calls dreams "the most ancient and respected form of divination"<sup>73</sup> and for a time refused to eat eggs because of

a recurring dream.<sup>74</sup> Pliny the Younger relates that his friend, the historian Suetonius, feared he would be humbled in court owing to an unpleasant dream, because "dreams come from Zeus."<sup>75</sup> The lengthy defense of nighttime revelations offered by Valerius Maximus might give the impression that their interpretation was a safe and straightforward matter, though other voices of antiquity would beg to differ. Martial mentions those who consulted mediums to sort out their slumbering revelations,<sup>76</sup> and then there is this poor fellow whose vision in the temple went drastically sour:

Apollonius to Ptolemaeus his father, greetings.

I swear by the god Serapis that if I had not a little compunction you would never see my face again; for you utter nothing but lies, and your gods likewise, for they have plunged us into a deep mire in which we may die, and when you have a vision that we are to be rescued, then we sink outright! . . . Never again can I hold up my head in Tricomia for shame that we have given ourselves away and been deluded, misled by the gods and trusting in dreams!

Farewell!<sup>77</sup>

## OMENS

If dreams were the common currency of popular superstition, then omens and portents were the coins exchanged by all and sundry, from peasant cobbler to provincial aristocrat. An ill omen or a favorable portent could take almost any form, and so great care was taken to recognize and interpret any premonitory sign. Ominous cosmological phenomena (lightning, thunder, comets) could forebode calamity, but so, too, could inconsequential, even trivial occurrences: a mouse eating a hole through a shoe, a donkey braying in the distance, an animal born with a deformity, even an inopportune sneeze! Superstition surrounding sneezing was still common at the time of Augustine (354–430 C.E.), who poked fun at the bedeviled soul who would return straight to bed if anyone should happen to sneeze while he dressed himself for the day.<sup>78</sup> Tacitus's inventory of malefic omens during the consulship of Asinius and Acilius (54 C.E.) highlights the diversity of potentially foreboding ciphers and hints at the paranoia naturally accompanying such a worldview:

WHEN A RAVEN CROAKS  
INAUSPICIOUSLY, DON'T  
GET CARRIED AWAY!  
RATHER, SAY TO YOUR-  
SELF, "NONE OF THESE  
PORTENTS ARE FOR ME."

\*EPICTETUS

In the year of the consulship of Marcus Asinius and Manius Acilius it was seen to be portended by a succession of prodigies that there were to be political changes

for the worse: the soldiers' standards and tents were set in a blaze by lightning; a swarm of bees settled on the summit of the Capitol; births of monsters, half man, half beast, and of a pig with a hawk's talons, were reported. It was accounted a portent that a quaestor, an aedile, a tribune, a praetor, and consul all died within a few months.<sup>79</sup>

The desire to avert an evil omen or ward off a malicious spirit generated no small industry in the Greco-Roman world, where amulets, talismans, and

HEALTH TO YOU, VIC-  
TORIA, AND WHEREVER  
YOU ARE MAY YOU  
SNEEZE SWEETLY!

GRAFFITO, POMPEII

protective charms were common fashion accessories. Amulets were occasionally carved from gemstones but were usually fashioned from metal or papyrus. They might contain a sacred image of power (a deity or magical symbol) or be inscribed with an incantation. They could be worn as necklaces or rings or carried somewhere

TRUE IT IS THAT THOSE  
WHO KNOW BY HEART  
THE NAMES OF THE  
IDAEAN DACTYLS USE  
THEM AS CHARMS  
AGAINST TERRORS,  
REPEATING EACH NAME  
WITH CALM ASSURANCE.

PLUTARCH

in one's clothing. Before donning their adult toga, Roman boys wore a *bulla* (a necklace with a small pouch) that usually contained a phallus: a small replica of the male genitalia, which was a common protective symbol. The phallus, in fact, was nearly ubiquitous in the Roman world, being found on rings, statuary, household fixtures, and other decorative knick-knacks. The excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum have uncovered numerous phallic-shaped lamps, serving trays, wind chimes (*tintinnabuli*), and so on. The protective powers of the phallus could be found guarding the entry to a home or shop, watching over crops in the field, guiding a chariot in the races—and all this quite apart from the prominent religious use of the phallus in the worship of Dionysus or Cybele. It would probably not be an overstatement to say that if someone from our century were magically transported to the first century, the visual impact of phallic symbolism would be striking.

## ASTROLOGY

Predicting the future by means of the stars is an ancient form of divination and one that was particularly important in the NT era. The emperors Tiberius and Nero were avid devotees of astrology, and in the case of Tiberius, Suetonius remarks that this led to "a neglect of the gods and religious matters . . . being convinced that everything was in the hands of fate."<sup>80</sup> Ancient writers regularly refer to superstitious stargazers and streetcorner astrologers ready to plot one's destiny or one's day according to the zodiac or some other astral phenomena.

Horoscopes were often drawn up at the birth of a child, providing the anxious parents a portent of what the future would hold.

Although the science of astrology was truly complex, involving precise calculations based on the position of the planets,<sup>81</sup> its popularity issued from the conviction that one's fate, fortune, character, and temperament were determined by the heavenly bodies, often conceived of as deities. In a technical manual entitled *Astronomica* (written in verse!), Marcus Manilius explains: "Nature also made the lives and the destinies of mortals dependent on the stars. . . . Every possible situation, every activity, every achievement, every skill, every circumstance that might possibly happen in human life was embraced in her lot by Nature and arranged in as many portions as there are stars placed by her."<sup>82</sup> Sensing the ethical implications of this determinism, Manilius goes on to offer an intriguing rationale for morality: "Let one's merits, therefore, possess glory all the greater, seeing that they owe their excellence to heaven; and, again, let us hate the wicked all the more, because they were born for guilt and punishment."<sup>83</sup>

A comical literary presentation of popular astrological fascination comes from the pen of Gaius Petronius Arbiter. In his *Satyrica* the pretentious parvenu Trimalchio hosts an elaborate feast in which appetizers are served on a platter depicting the twelve signs of the zodiac. Over Pisces is draped pieces of fish, over Taurus slices of beef, over Leo African figs, and so on. The entryway of the dining room is marked by a calendar depicting the course of the moon and planets, and at one point during the festivities Trimalchio attempts to give a learned discourse on providence and the zodiac but succeeds only in establishing beyond any doubt his own stupidity.<sup>84</sup> No wonder Cicero concluded his assessment of the claims of popular astrological lore with the frustrated cry, "What utter madness!"<sup>85</sup>

## SKEPTICISM

With so many divinities and malevolent spirits hovering about, and with all the antics and angst that could accompany their worship, it is inevitable that

THE BIRTH OF PHILOE.  
THE 10TH YEAR OF  
ANTONINUS CAESAR  
THE LORD, PHAMENOTH  
15 TO 16, 1ST HOUR  
OF THE NIGHT. SUN IN  
PISCES, JUPITER AND  
MERCURY IN ARIES,  
SATURN IN CAN-  
CER, MARS IN LEO,  
VENUS AND MOON  
IN AQUARIUS, HORO-  
SCOPUS CAPRICORN.

### HOROSCOPE

AND IF THE YEAR  
BEGINS IN TAURUS:  
EVERYONE WHOSE  
NAME CONTAINS A  
BETH OR A YODH, OR  
KAPH WILL BECOME  
ILL, OR BE WOUNDED  
BY AN IRON WEAPON.

### JEWISH HOROSCOPE

the snickering of skeptics could be heard outside temple precincts. Cicero's Epicurean spokesman in *On the Nature of the Gods* equates the beliefs of the common folk with the basest of ruinous delusions, "a mere mass of inconsistencies

X | "GOOD GOD!" EX-  
CLAIMED GALAXIDORUS.  
"HOW HARD IT IS  
TO FIND A MAN UN-  
TAINTED WITH HUMBUG  
AND SUPERSTITION!"

PLUTARCH

sprung from ignorance."<sup>86</sup> Certainly the pounding excess of *hoi polloi* produced fissures in the ancient columns of Greco-Roman piety—rumors of disbelief expressed in muffled undertones by the lettered elite: a petulant sophist mocks the oracle at Delphi;<sup>87</sup> a poet overhearing a prayer yields to cynicism;<sup>88</sup> a senator dismisses the entire religious edifice as a charade for fools.<sup>89</sup>

Yet "the vitality of paganism," as Ramsay MacMullen calls it,<sup>90</sup> was never under serious threat, even among the literati of the ancient world. Dio Chrysostom, an orator and statesman, maintained that belief in the gods is the innate conviction of all rational beings,<sup>91</sup> and this sentiment is abundantly illustrated throughout the literary and archeological remains of antiquity. Pausanias, educated and enlightened, traveled through the heartland of Greece critically appraising local variations of the epic legends but never casting doubt on the gods to which they referred. Even a self-proclaimed skeptic like Cicero acknowledged that the existence of the gods "is the most probable view, and the one to which we are all led by nature's guidance."<sup>92</sup> Popular stoicism, itself an admixture of pantheism, polytheism, and pseudotheism, offered no consolation to the atheist and could erupt in almost

THE GOOD RULER WILL  
GIVE THE FIRST AND  
CHIEF PLACE TO RE-  
LIGION, NOT MERELY  
CONFESSING BUT ALSO  
BELIEVING IN HIS HEART  
THAT THERE ARE GODS.  
HE WILL BE ZEALOUS  
TO WORSHIP THEM.  
AND HE WILL BELIEVE  
ALSO IN DEMIGODS  
AND GOOD SPIRITS.

DIO CHRYSOSTOM

psalm-like praise to the creator: "Why, if we had sense, would we be doing anything else, publicly and privately, other than praising the Deity and rehearsing his benefits? Should not we, as we dig and eat, sing hymns of praise to God? 'Great is God that He has furnished us these tools! Great is God that he has given us hands!'"<sup>93</sup> Not only the musings of the academy or the propaganda of imperial coinage but also graffiti, inscriptions, artwork, funerary monuments, and scores of other varieties of artifacts from antiquity bear witness to the vigor of religious devotion in the Roman world. In some quarters, failure to show proper honor to the gods was regarded as a criminal offense.<sup>94</sup> Still, the lengthy essay of Plutarch

on the implausibility of atheism, as well as the jeers of skeptics that occasionally rose above the din of superstition, betray a deeper, gnawing frustration; a prescient intimation of naïveté.