

where the interaction between paganism and Christianity is both significant and illuminating. The broad-stroked picture of paganism in the Roman world offered above will now be nuanced with finer detail and local color as we observe first-century believers in specific settings slowly, and sometimes haltingly, realigning and reconfiguring their belief system in light of their newfound faith. We begin in Corinth.

## MONOTHEISM IN CORINTH

Is it possible to be a Christian and a polytheist? The answer is no. However, a close reading of 1 Cor 8 reveals that the matter is perhaps not so simple. Paul's topic is a controversial issue among the Corinthians: dining in pagan temples and eating food sacrificed to idols (see *City and Society: Urban Landscape and Environment* as well as *City and Society: Paul and Poverty*). Paul prefaces his instruction by reminding the Corinthians that knowledge must always be tempered with love; correct belief without correct behavior is pointless (8:1-3). He then specifies the correct belief in question, monotheism: "We know that an idol is nothing in all the world and there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods . . . yet for us there is but one God" (8:4-6). This affirmation is quickly qualified, however: "But not everyone knows this. Some are still so accustomed to idols [pagan gods] that when they eat such food they eat it as though it were idol food, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled" (8:7). Paul goes on to describe members of the Corinthian assembly ("brothers," 8:11, 12, 13) whose faith is "weak" and deals a serious blow by the callous insensitivity of the strong who continue to dine in pagan temples (8:10-12); yet these "brothers" do not quite understand that there is only one God (8:7). How can this be? Welcome to first-century Corinth. What we see here is the gospel taking root in a pagan environment, in a city whose heritage and culture were virtually inseparable from the polytheistic framework of the ancient world. The picture that emerges from 1 Cor 8 is of a probably small group of new believers who have put their faith in Christ but have not been divested of all their pagan notions and have not fully comprehended this novel idea of monotheism. Given their background, this is entirely understandable.

PLUTARCH

However, it is important not to exaggerate the situation. Paul is not describing a group of people who have simply added Jesus to their pantheon of deities and fit happily between the temples and the Christian assembly. No.

There are too many passages in Paul's letters like 2 Cor 6:14-18 to allow us to believe that the apostle would ever tolerate that. Nor are these people who have consciously repudiated monotheism. What Paul describes in 1 Cor 8 are new believers whose knowledge is incomplete, whose embryonic faith is "weak," and for whom polytheism is so deeply rooted in their cultural-religious psyche that eating food sacrificed in the temple of Apollo constitutes eating food sacrificed to Apollo. It becomes for them a betrayal of their new allegiance, the faith they know deep in their hearts to be true.

Given Paul's abhorrence of polytheism (Acts 17:16; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Thess 1:9), his approach to this problem demonstrates remarkable pastoral sensitivity. Of primary importance, Paul is clear that this lingering, hesitant polytheism is not acceptable, and these people are not where they should be. Their knowledge is incomplete, and their faith is weak. Yet he also recognizes that when people come to faith in Christ, the Apostles' Creed is not simply downloaded into their cranium; if their embryonic faith is going to develop and their knowledge is going to grow, they will need patience, nurturing, and a lot of support from the strong. Indeed, it is the inconsiderate behavior of the strong that seems to be the focus of Paul's parental scrutiny in this passage.

PAUSANIAS

## FAITH IN GALATIA

Galatians is unlike any other letter of Paul. Dispensing with the polite formalities that characterize his other missives—an opening prayer or expression of thanksgiving—Paul instead expresses his utter consternation: "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel!" (1:6). We soon hear the apostle calling his spiritual children "foolish" and "bewitched" (3:1), and later he calls on the Judaizing intruders who are advocating circumcision to "go all the way and emasculate themselves!" (Gal 5:12).

Paul's anger is understandable. The Galatians are tempted to embrace a very different gospel from the one that Paul preached, a gospel that "is really no gospel at all" (1:7). What is less understandable is why the largely Gentile assemblies in the province of Galatia would be tempted to add torah observance to their faith. Circumcision and dietary restrictions were hardly selling points of Judaism as far as Gentiles were concerned. Were these Jewish-Christian missionaries particularly winsome? Rhetorically persuasive? Was it the prestige and antiquity of the Jewish faith that won over some of the Galatians? In other

("Legalism")

words, what was the plausibility basis of their message? By "plausibility basis" I mean those social and cultural factors that allow a religious belief to seem obviously tenable.<sup>95</sup>

This puzzle has vexed generations of NT scholars, but the recent work of Clinton E. Arnold, a specialist in folk religions of Asia Minor, may have provided the missing pieces.<sup>96</sup> Drawing on and synthesizing a large amount of inscriptional data from these regions,<sup>97</sup> Arnold demonstrates that the indigenous folk religion of Asia Minor was characterized by a strong sense of obligation to fulfill cultic requirements and perform good works in order to maintain a favorable standing with the gods. The inscriptions themselves are monuments erected by individuals who have sinned in some way and who now publicly confess their sin and praise the deity, usually after experiencing severe punishment from the god or goddess.

The range of infractions that incurred the wrath of the gods included ritual misdemeanors, social offenses, and even inadvertent transgressions: a woman passes through a sacred area while ritually impure; a husband spends an evening at home with his wife instead of fulfilling his obligations at the temple; a woodsman inadvertently fells a tree belonging to a sacred grove.<sup>98</sup> The punishment inflicted by these regional deities (Men Axiotrenos, Ainatas, Leto, Zeus Sabazios, Artemis, to name a few) depended on the nature of the offense. Images of body parts (feet, arms, eyes) on some of these monuments indicate specific bodily afflictions, and death is also meted out on occasion. Among the more heart-wrenching is the situation of Hermogenes Valerius, who, apparently out of ignorance, swore falsely to the deity:

Then the god showed his power and punished Hermogenes, inflicting damages. He killed his ox and his donkey, and when he continued in disobedience, he killed his daughter. Then, he cancelled the vow. We, Aphias, his wife, and Alexander, Arraluis, Apollonius, and Amion his children, erected this monument and on it record the power of the god and praise him from now on.<sup>99</sup>

Small wonder that Neis, a mother guilty of an unnamed transgression, pleads to the goddess Meter Tazene to spare her children: "Neis, who has been punished by Meter Tazene, has consecrated this monument for the preservation of her and her children."<sup>100</sup>

In light of the cultural context of the Galatian churches and their native religious scruples regarding adherence to all the requirements of their gods, it is not surprising that the message of the Judaizers found a hearing. Their ap-

peal to the observance of proper rituals harmonized well with the pre-Christian sensibilities of some Galatians and made the transition to a law-oriented piety that much easier. In fact, in other inscriptions from this area, the deities Hosios (Holy) and Dikaioi (Just) are pictured with scales and measuring rods preparing to weigh the deeds of their worshippers.<sup>101</sup>

Understanding the indigenous religious notions of the Roman provinces of Asia Minor adds definition and texture to the somewhat generic Greco-Roman polytheism outlined earlier and considerably illuminates the text and context of Paul's letter to the Galatians. For example, after reading scores of inscriptions detailing the vicious and vindictive punishments imposed by these territorial gods—often for minor transgressions—Paul's words in Gal 6:1 sound almost as if they were deliberately composed in antithesis: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently."<sup>102</sup>

## MAGIC IN ACTS

Disabling a treacherous sorcerer, exorcising a menacing spirit, destroying a library of dark incantations—this may sound like the storyline for one of J. K. Rowling's blockbuster, but they are chapters from Paul's travels through Greece and Asia Minor. The book of Acts follows the apostle Paul as he wanders about the Mediterranean, proclaiming the good news that Jesus, the Jewish messiah crucified by the Romans, had risen from the dead and now called all people everywhere to turn from their idols and serve him exclusively. If this sounds preposterous, so it was. Many of the Athenian sophisticates scratched their heads and wondered, "What is this babbling trying to say?" (Acts 17:18). But Paul remained undaunted and undeterred. His mission to proclaim God's love to the furthest reaches of the Gentile world was rooted in his own crucifying, transforming encounter with Jesus (Acts 9; Gal 2:19–20), and neither Greek skepticism nor Jewish hostility (Acts 14:2, 19; 17:5–6) could divert him from his task: "I do all things for the sake of the gospel . . . troubles, hardships,

GREAT IS METER  
ANAITIS! APOLLONIUS,  
SON OF MENODOROS,  
ERECTED THIS FOR HIS  
BROTHER DIONYSIOS.  
SINCE HE UNDERTOOK  
A RITUAL WASHING,  
BUT DID NOT KEEP  
THE DATE APPOINTED  
BY THE GODDESS, SHE  
STRUCK HIM DEAD.  
INSCRIPTION, ASIA MINOR

ALEXANDER, SON  
OF THALLUSA, TO-  
GETHER WITH JULIUS  
AND HIS SISTER, HAVE  
BEEN RANSOMED  
FROM THEIR TRANS-  
GRESSION—KNOWN  
AND UNKNOWN—  
BY THE GOD MEN  
EG DIODOTOS.  
INSCRIPTION, ASIA MINOR

INSCRIPTION, ASIA MINOR

62. PGM LXXII.24-26.
63. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings*, 3.3-4; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.542-47; Lucian, *Gout* 171-73; Celsus in Orogen's *Against Celsus* 1.26.
64. 4Q560; 11Q11 5.4; 4Q444; 4Q561; 4Q186; 4Q318. But the scrolls also contain injunctions against divination and sorcery: CD 12.5; 11Q19 60.18.
65. Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.582-86.
66. See especially 1.4-6 of his *Memorable Doings and Sayings*. As a proud Roman, Valerius Maximus's ideological agenda is to promote and defend Roman values and imperial policies.
67. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 1.52.
68. Horace, *Sat.* 1.9.30-34.
69. See J. B. Ward-Perkins and Amanda Claridge, *Pompeii A.D. 79: Treasures from the National Archaeological Museum, Naples, and the Pompeii Antiquarium* (Boston: Boston Museum of Fine Arts, 1978).
70. \*Pseudo-Diogenes, *Epistle* 38.2.
71. Pausanias, *Descr.* 9.39.5-14.
72. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.5.4.
73. Plutarch, *Mor.* 159A, Dinner of the Seven Wise Men.
74. Plutarch, *Mor.* 635E, Table Talk.
75. Pliny, *Ep.* 1.18.1, quoting Homer, *The Iliad* 1.63.
76. Martial, *Ep.* 7.54; 11.49.
77. \*P. Par. 47 (*Select Papyri*, #100).
78. Augustine, *Christian Instruction* 2.20.31. Celsus, the second-century opponent of Christianity, argued that a sneeze was sure proof of a prophetic divinity within (Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.94).
79. \* Tacitus, *Ann.* 12.64. Similar enumerations are found at 12.43 and 15.47.
80. Suetonius, *Tib.* 69. Josephus also comments on Tiberius's devotion to astrology in *Ant.* 18.216.
81. Our word "mathematics" comes from the Latin word (borrowed from Greek) for astrologer, *mathematicus*.
82. Manilius, *Astr.* 3.47-66.
83. Manilius, *Astr.* 4.114-16.
84. Petronius, *Satyre* 39.
85. Cicero, *Divination* 2.90.
86. Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 1.43.
87. Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings* 1.8 ext. 8.
88. Juvenal, *Sat.* 13.34; see also 2.149-52.
89. Petronius, *Poems* 3.
90. MacMullen, *Paganism*, 62.
91. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 12.29; cf. 12.60; 3.51-52.
92. Cicero, *Nature of the Gods* 1.2.
93. \*Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.16.15-17.
94. Lucian, *Demonax* 11; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 43.11; 75.5; Apuleius, *Defense*; *Marr. Pol.* 12.

95. Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 187.
96. Clinton E. Arnold, "I Am Astonished That You Are So Quickly Turning Away!" (Gal 1.6): Paul and Anatolian Folk Belief," *NTS* 51 (2005): 429-49.
97. Collected by Georg Perzl in *Die Beichtinschriften Westkleinasiens*, Epigraphica Anatolica 22 (1994), hereafter *BWK*. Analysis is offered by Hans-Josef Klauck, "Die kleinasiatischen Beichtinschriften und das Neue Testament," in *Geschichte—Tradition—Reflexion: Festschrift für Martin Hengel zum 70. Geburtstag: Frühes Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996).
98. *BWK* 76.
99. \**BWK* 34.
100. *BWK* 41. This inscription is dated to 81/82 C.E.
101. Arnold, "Astonished," 440-41.
102. *Ibid.*, 448-49.
103. This is the unanimous witness of the ancient church and remains the most reasonable conclusion from the evidence. See Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 51-64; David John Williams, *Acts* (NIBC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 2-11. On the testimony of the ancient church, see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1, I-XIV (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 30-48.
104. For other contrasts, see Hans-Josef Klauck and Brian McNeil, *Magic and Paganism in Early Christianity: The World of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 17-23.
105. Literally, "son of Jesus." The name Jesus was the Hellenized form of the Hebrew and Aramaic Yeshua (Joshua) and was a common Jewish name.
106. Following Klauck and McNeil, *Magic*, 48.
107. Suetonius, *Tib.* 13, 69; *Nero* 36, 41; *Ortho* 6; *Dom.* 15; See also Tacitus, *Ann.* on Orho (1.2) and Vespasian (2.78).
108. Josephus, *Ant.* 20.142.
109. For more on Sergius Paulus and archaeological finds possibly mentioning him, see Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 137-46.
110. The term Luke uses for this "place of prayer," *prosoché*, could refer to a synagogue or simply to a place of prayer.
111. The phrase "[God] Most High," or its equivalent, occurs nearly one hundred times in the Greek version of the OT (e.g., Gen 14:18; Num 24:16; Ps 78:35; Dan 5:18).
112. See Paul Trebilco, "Paul and Silas: 'Servants of the Most High God' (Acts 16:16-18)," *JSNT* 36 (1989): 51-73; Peter Pilhofer, *Die Erste Christliche Gemeinde Europas* (WUNT 87; Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 182-86; Richard S. Ascough, *Paul's Macedonian Associations: The Social Context of Philippians and I Thessalonians* (WUNT 2.161; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 158, 195-200; Witherington, *Acts*, 494-95.
113. Pilhofer, *Gemeinde*, 184; Colin H. Roberts, T. C. Skeat, and Arthur Darby Nock, "The Guild of Zeus Hypsistos," *HTR* 29 (1936): 72.
114. Cited in Pilhofer, *Gemeinde*, 186.

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