

Early Christian Magic

Paul Newman gave this talk in Wimbledon at the February TEMS meeting.

Paul began by giving an introduction to the history of the discovery of ancient magical manuscripts. In the 19th century Egyptian magical papyri started to become available, often from a recently looted tomb. The existence of readable and informative papyri came to the attention of a group of British scholars and attention was soon focused on a small Christian village, tucked away in a remote location in the Nile delta, called Oxyrhynchus. Soon after excavations commenced copious numbers of papyri were discovered which were brought back to Oxford and published in a series of volumes which continue to the present day.

The Oxyrhynchus community was as rich as any in the ancient world and the papyri uncovered reflected this: scraps of personal correspondence, villa management records, orders to servants and slaves, all manner of material came to light illuminating as never before an ancient community. And there, in tantalizing scraps, were pages of a clearly Christian nature. The nature of all of this material is fragmentary – most consist of material discarded in ancient times and only preserved because of the arid nature of the Egyptian climate. Consequently, although much Christian material was uncovered, a lot remained largely obscure until a most remarkable event took place. In 1945 an extensive bundle of papyri was reported by an Egyptian peasant in a village named Nag Hammadi. The Nag Hammadi corpus represents an unparalleled library of material relating to early Christianity and puts the material uncovered at Oxyrhynchus in a new light. The Nag Hammadi library material is more generally known as the Gnostic Gospels and Paul did not deal with these in this talk. Instead he focused on material that has largely been ignored, certainly by Christians, but also by pagan writers: Christian spellcraft.

The actual source material employed by the “Gnostic” and “Orthodox” Christian communities was largely held in common. Most of the material presented in this talk comes from orthodox communities (as Oxyrhynchus certainly was) although, as shall be seen, its content is remarkably different from that which might be expected today.

The spells in the collection span several hundred years. All the spells Paul presented during the talk originate in the first centuries CE. Virtually the entire collection of magical papyri from Egypt has been collected in two volumes. One, ‘Greek Magical Papyri in Translation’ by Hans Betz, covers specifically non-Christian material, and a companion volume, ‘Ancient Christian Magic’ ed Marvin Meyer, covers specifically Christian material, all of which is written in Coptic.

Paul gave this example of a short, snappy spell that gives a general impression of Christian spells:

Amulet against fever

(Heidelberg Kopt. 564)

Ananias [As]arias Misael Se[d]rak Misak Abdenago Thalal M[ou]lal [I] adjure you by your names and your powers that you extinguish the fiery furnace(s) of Nebuchadnezzar, you may extinguish [every fever]and every chill and

every malady that is in the body of Patrikou child of [..] akou, child of Zoe, child of Adam, yea, yea, at once, at once.

The spell starts with an appeal to the powers of, in this case, Old Testament figures, although in other cases this could be the Trinity, or more often Angelic powers. The end of the spell is a typical ending – a word like ‘yea’ or ‘at once’ repeated, usually 3 times in typical Christian spells, as a means of investing the spell with its final power. These spells were effectively mass produced. A client would approach a priest whose expertise was in spellcraft, to purchase a spell for a specific purpose. The priest would usually have a handy collection of spells ready, which would be copied out for the client.

The spell above was for an amulet, in other words it was written down by the priest and put into a phylactery, maybe to be worn, maybe to be put in the house (to protect it from evil), or sometimes in places we find strange and, indeed, perhaps disgusting, such as corpses.

Paul mentioned that in many spells, alongside obviously Christian elements, pagan elements were mixed in. He gave the following spell as representative of a particular group of spells, where the spell is effectively written twice. In one column is a Christian version of the spell and in a parallel column, a pagan spell for the same purpose.

Amulet to heal and protect Joseph from fever

(Cologne 851 C7)

Jesus Christ	ERICHTHONIE	Let the white wolf
	RICHTHONIE	
Heals	CHTHONIE	the white wolf
	CHTHONIE	
The chill	THONIE	the white wolf
And the	ONIE	heal the shivering
Fever	NIE	fever of Joseph
And every	IE	They are quick!
Disease of the	E	
Body of Joseph, who wears		
The amulet daily		
And intermittently.		
They are quick! Amen,		
Allelulia.		

The white wolf was connected to Horus and Apollo. Paul posed the question as to why Christians should adopt this particular device. A standard academic argument is that at this time, many pagan priests were converting to Christianity. They may have been trained in spellcraft in the temples and simply transferred their skills to their new religion. In addition, Paul went on to explain that the ancients viewed the matter around them as being set and maintained in motion by divine force. At this stage in Christianity, this was still accepted by Christians. So early Christians, although required to deny pagan gods the status of ultimate deities, nevertheless actually believed in the existence of, and indeed immanent presence of, pagan deities (in fact, Paul stated that they were terrified of them). Consequently, it might have appeared entirely natural for early

Christians to call upon pagan powers in order to harness their supernatural power.

Paul then moved on to one area of Christian spellcraft which might appear distasteful to us, that of curses. These are abundant in the Christian papyri, and blatant in their spiteful and vindictive tone and purpose. It seems ancient Christians had few compunctions about asking for divine aid to smite their enemies, and shared the general view of the day that the best way to success in worldly needs and pleasures was by using the underworld and the powers of death. Paul gave the following example of a curse involving two Christian women, Mary and Martha. Mary, it would seem, did not approve of the upcoming marriage of Martha although her means of preventing it may strike us as being a little harsh:

Mary's curse against Martha

(Aberdeen C4-5)

Maria

Michael, Gabriel, Souleel! You must bring her away by the method of an ulcerous tumour. Arise in your anger, bring her down to a painful end, to put aside marriage, and send forth punishment, she pouring forth worms, (that is) Martha. My lord Jesus Christ, you must bring her down to an end. Yea, Jesus Christ, you must dissipate her hope so that no one desires to assist her.

This spell was intended to be folded up and put into a corpse. It is the corpse who is urged to "rise up in anger" and inflict its own worm infested decay upon Martha.

Paul mentioned that these texts are full of angelic names of power, constantly invoked. There are some very fine invocations to be found; if you are ever short of a new Angel and relevant invocation to use, Christian magical texts can supply a host of new Angels to work with. Paul then recited a private invocation to Gabriel, which contained references to God's tattoos which were the vowels in the Greek alphabet, tattooed upon God's chest (!).

Paul then explained that all ancient magic, and Christian magic in particular, is results magic par excellence. Its practitioners (i.e. everybody) had particular desires in mind and saw no contradiction in asking for divine assistance in bringing them about. Paul stated that this was because ancient spellcraft was formulistic. Whether you were pagan or Christian, what was required was the correct formula of words of power to compel divine forces to work on your behalf, and all that was really required of the practitioner was to know the exact and precise formulas to bring about the desired end.

Looking through these collections of spells, it is immediately apparent that magic was employed in every sphere of life including the use of erotic spells. Christians were not only producing masses of erotic spells but they were known for their animal imagery as they imagined the objects of their desires.

A representative erotic spell

(London Hay 10414)

The favour that was given to the....of King Solomon, who "suffers" virginity and the love of women, CHAHE, until they take ...their hymens and throw them upon the face of the earth...

I will not, I will not....,

I will not sleep until I put to shame their parents.

KOK TPARKOKOK, this is the one whose head is in the abyss,

Whose feet are in the underworld.

We came to you today, we entrusted to you N daughter of N,

Until you give her food, so that I may be honey inside her, Manna on her tongue,

That she may desire me like the sun,

That she may love me like the moon,

That she may hang on me as a drop of water sticks on a jar,

That she may be (like) a honey bee seeking honey,

A bitch prowling,

A cat going from house to house,

A mare going under (sex)-crazed (stallions),

Right now, now, at once, by all the powers of the underworld!

Paul concluded his talk by pointing out that Christianity is defined in every age by the culture that gives it birth. In considering the texts which show what actually happened amongst ancient Christians, you need to bear in mind that virtually every practice and every belief was commonly held by all members of the culture of the day. In ancient days, the earliest Christians shared the hopes and aspirations of ordinary people and found no contradiction in continuing the same practices as their contemporaries.

Peter Mott (based upon Paul Newman's talk notes)

(Continued from page 5)

in which the patient were cured after exorcism in a vary short time that does not happen in psychiatric treatment.

The document goes on to make a case for the use of exorcism as a complementary methodology for the treatment of some psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, it points out how the term is somewhat all encompassing and draws a few analogies to explain why this should not be so.

The source of this document is an Islamic website that deals with healing topics and in general it makes for some informative reading. A feature of Islam is recognition of a class of entity known as the jinn, the nature of this is considered to be mischievous along with some other qualities and it is considered somewhat responsible for some of the ills that befall humankind. Indeed Islamic law takes account of the actions of the jinn and the resultant diminished responsibility that may occur for those affected by such. The document goes on to remind us of the possibility of jinn possession.

Quote: From this, we Muslims should not discard the possibility of Jinn possession. We have in the traditions of our prophet (pbuh) and the biography of early Muslim physicians much evidences to the value of reading the Quran and using its verses as therapy and a form of exorcism. We should be open minded in accepting the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of human nature...

... well-known traditional muslim healers discussed the value of

(Continued on page 11)