

# STVDIA ANTIQVA

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THE JOURNAL OF THE STUDENT SOCIETY  
FOR ANCIENT STUDIES

Vol. 1 No. 1

Fall 2001

Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah

# STUDIA ANTIQUA

## THE JOURNAL OF THE STUDENT SOCIETY FOR ANCIENT STUDIES

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*Studia Antiqua* is a semi-annual student journal dedicated to publishing the research of undergraduate and graduate students from all disciplines of Ancient Studies at Brigham Young University. To submit an original article, apply for an editorial position, or for any other questions and comments, contact the Ancient Studies Office in HBLL 5435 (378-3498). The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Student Society for Ancient Studies, Brigham Young University, or The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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## An Introduction to the BYU Student Society for Ancient Studies

The need for an organization like the BYU Student Society for Ancient Studies has plagued the university for many years. Although at various times over the past few decades ambitious students have attempted to facilitate student involvement in the field of ancient studies at BYU by developing similar organizations, the incessant predicament of obtaining sponsorship and achieving academic validity has led to the discontinuation of each of these past attempts. Last year (Fall 2000) Thomas Spackman and Jason Coombs took the first salient steps in an effort to overcome these polemical issues by forming the BYU Ancient Studies Club, an official university club, under the guidance of BYUSA. These two students set an outstanding precedent upon which we have continued to build by regularly inviting BYU professors to speak on a certain topic of expertise to a general audience of students. Last April, the BYU Ancient Studies Club held a meeting to elect new officers. The election lasted less than a minute since only two students, Davin Anderson (President) and John Robison (Vice-President), attended the meeting.

Over the intervening summer months, Robert Hunt (Secretary), Carli Anderson (Treasurer), and Bradley Ross (Historian) were welcomed into the club presidency, while the overall vision for the club was likewise expanded to include biweekly professor lectures and biweekly student forums. Near the beginning of the 2001 fall semester, the organization discovered the enthusiastic Matthew Grey (Publication Manager) and his innovative perspective to launch a semi-annual student publication entitled *Studia Antiqua: The Journal of the Student Society for Ancient Studies*. As more and more students and faculty members embraced the idea of a journal geared toward scholarly student papers apropos the ancient world, the time had come to find a new permanent home to sponsor the



organization for years to come, a home that would augment the academic validity of our efforts. We found what we were searching for in October of 2001 under S. Kent Brown, Director of Ancient Studies at BYU. As a newly organized departmental club, we promptly changed the name of the organization to the BYU Student Society for Ancient Studies.

In response to the new name, some have asked whether only an elite group of "society" members may take part in the activities sponsored by the organization. This is a valid inquiry, but let it be known that the Society is still the same organization, offering the same services to all who have any sort of inclining toward the study of the ancient world. In short, the professor lectures, student forums, and Journal provide a format through which students, university faculty, and the general public may obtain in-depth, semi-technical information concerning historical, philological, religious, archaeological, political, and cultural topics relating to the world of antiquity. Thus far, no insurmountable barriers have hindered our efforts because we represent an independent party seeking to bring together the wealth of knowledge available from various BYU departments such as History, Archeology, Classics, Near Eastern Studies, and Religion.

Although we have had much success, the Society is not yet satisfied, for we feel so much more can be done to help elevate the level of student scholarship in relation to ancient studies here at BYU. We are currently working on plans to further expand the services offered by the Society. If you have any questions or suggestions concerning the operations of the Society, especially if you desire to have an opportunity to present an original research paper at a student forum or publish such a paper in the Journal, please contact any member of the presidency. We thank you for your support of the Society and look forward to your continued involvement.

Davin Anderson  
Society President

## Editor's Preface

The Student Society for Ancient Studies at Brigham Young University is pleased to present this first issue of *Studia Antiqua*. From its inception, the Society has sought to provide BYU students from all disciplines of ancient studies opportunities to further their academic interests. Certainly one element that is critical for such a specialized field is that of student research and publication. To provide this venue of student publication, *Studia Antiqua* ("Ancient Studies") has been recently created. The journal is dedicated to publishing original undergraduate and graduate research in all areas of ancient studies. It is hoped that such a publication will offer students the opportunity to improve their research and writing abilities, allow them to experience the editing and publication process, as well as prepare them for further educational pursuits by building their academic résumé. This new opportunity also hopes to motivate ancient studies students in their current class work by allowing them to expand their academic vision and goals.

The process employed by the journal is as follows: first students submit papers they have written, which are then reviewed by the Student Editorial Advisory Board (consisting of the Society presidency). Once the board decides which papers represent the highest quality of original research and writing, those selected papers are given to the appropriate member of the Faculty Review Board. As respected faculty in each area of ancient studies review their respective papers, the students are given helpful and professional suggestions for improvement, making each paper more academically credible. The papers are also given to competent student editors who help with grammar, structure, and formatting.

As this issue represents the first attempt at such a product, we thank the readers for their patience and understanding in noticing possible weaknesses inherent in its expected growing pains. This initial

groundbreaking process explains the belated publication of the Fall 2001 issue. Work has already begun on the Winter 2002 issue and the journal hopes to continue publishing every Fall and Winter semester. The Society is confident that each subsequent issue will only show improvement.

*Studia Antiqua* would like to publicly thank many who have made this venture possible. S. Kent Brown and Pat Ward in Ancient Studies, and Paul Y. Hoskisson as Associate Dean of the Religion Department have been our greatest support and have provided the opportunities to make the Society and Journal possible. Likewise, each member of the Faculty Review Board continues to offer their suggestions and expertise, adding a more professional quality to the project. Also to be thanked are the various departments and entities on campus, including Roger T. Macfarlane in Classics, Dilworth Parkinson in Near Eastern Languages, Joel Janetsky in Archaeology, and M. Gerald Bradford from the Institution for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, all of whom have contributed financially to the publication of the journal. Certainly without their encouragement, the project would never have become a reality. The Society would also like to thank the authors who have put so much time and effort into their papers, as well as the work of Robert Ricks and Mindy Anderson. These competent student editors have volunteered hours of their time to make the quality of the product as high as possible.

We hope that all who read this journal will enjoy the work done by these dedicated and capable students. As publication of the journal continues, we also hope that the profile of ancient studies on campus will be raised and future students and scholars in the field will be increasingly motivated and inspired.

Matthew J. Grey  
General Editor

February 2002  
Brigham Young University  
Provo, Utah



# CLASSICAL STUDIES



# From Vestal Virgin to Bride of Christ: Elements of a Roman Cult in Early Christian Asceticism

*Ariel E. Bybee*

Many histories of Christian asceticism concern themselves with the Middle Eastern origins of the movement. Henry Chadwick and other historians of early Christianity attribute the movement's beginning to Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, religious cults departed into the desert to form communities. Jewish fringe groups such as the Essenes in Israel and the Therapeutae in Egypt sought a closer relationship with divinity through the strict, religious practice of celibacy and communal living in the wilderness. Hermits wandered the desert, living on wild plants and honey, hoping to find spiritual communion with God through the denial of all physical appetites. The ascetic practices of these zealous Jewish believers were later echoed in the religious patterns and institutions of Christianity. Often unrecognized, however, are the precedents set by the pagan cults of Rome that influenced the evolving Christian ideology.

Asceticism was not unknown in pagan Rome, especially among the philosophers. For example, Plotinus, one of the most famous of the second century A.D. Neo-Platonists, lived a rigorously ascetic life, rejecting marriage, eating as little as possible, and seeming to be ashamed of his body.<sup>2</sup> Also, the Salian priests, the cult of the Magna Mater, the Seven of the Banquets, the cult of Bona Dea, and the Fifteen in charge of the Sibylline Books were among the Roman religious institutions and priesthoods whose responsibilities and societies later influenced Christian ascetic practices.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most fascinating and influential of all these Roman priesthoods was the cult of the goddess Vesta. Vesta, the Roman goddess of the hearth, was served by six virgins whose duty was to maintain the sacred flame that served as the cult statue within her temple. The institution of the priesthood was attributed to Numa Pompilius, the religious second king of Rome, who purportedly lived in the seventh century B.C. It continued to be one of the most prominent cults throughout the duration of the empire.<sup>4</sup> The cult of Vesta was one of the only full-time priesthoods in Rome. The Vestal Temple and the virgins who lived there were maintained by public funds.<sup>5</sup>

Commonly overlooked are the many similarities of the Vestal Virgins to early Christian ascetic women. As a prominent and enduring institution within the Roman Empire, this cult helped to pave the way within Roman society for the practice of female Christian virginity. This fact, however, has been obscured due to a difficult historiographical problem. Criteria for a comparison of this type must be divided into two categories. One set of criteria for a comparison are the concrete and visible, the most easily recognized characteristics lying in such categories as the appearance, communal structure, legal rights, and privileges of the different women. The second group of criteria is more abstract and difficult to identify as it deals more with the ideological similarities that surround these women and give them identity in their respective worlds. Existing similarities, or a lack of them, are usually readily identifiable when evidence is examined for the first type of characteristics. However, too often the mistake is made of ending comparison at this point. Many times, only by sorting through the more complex categories of cultural ideology—such as gender—can we find the underlying and often more important patterns which we seek. Using this second category facilitates a deeper understanding of the cultural structures of Rome, as well as of human nature in general.

The Vestals and the first Christian virgins of Rome have often



been compared under the set of more physical criteria and been found lacking in similarities worth writing about. The Vestals were a very small and exclusive group of aristocratic women who were either forced into the order by their parents or drawn in by losing the lottery of the Pontifex Maximus.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they had great freedoms and lived and were entertained as most aristocratic Romans. Christian virgins came to be numbered into the thousands and volunteered out of all classes of society, often against parental wishes, to be "eunuchs for the love of heaven."<sup>7</sup> Many of them lived in total isolation, devoting all time to prayer and fasting. In dress, community, religious practice, status, and legal rights they also seem to be at odds with each other in many cases. Yet such a superficial evaluation fails to expose the solid core of Roman ideology which held these two groups of women in almost identical positions within their societies.

The Vestals and the Christian virgins were tangibly different, but conceptually very similar. The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss those social constructs and conceptions about the Vestal cult and fourth-century A.D. Christian virginity that unify them ideologically: their purposes for celibacy, its results, and their status and situation in Roman society. In the process of doing so, several of the readily "visible" criteria will be discussed and many parallels that are superficially unclear between them will be exposed. The vital role the Vestal Virgins played in preparing Roman society to receive Christian virgins will become clear.

### **The Politics of Celibacy**

The predominant and defining characteristic of both the Vestals and the later Christian virgins is celibacy. Sexual abstinence is the basis of all that set them apart from other women. In Roman society, womanhood was defined solely in terms of marriage and reproduction. A daughter was born to be married and reproduce to continue the family line and secure property and alliances. For a

woman to be anything else would leave her a social anomaly.<sup>8</sup> As women living in this society, albeit at different time periods, both the Vestals and Christian virgins had to be defined in these terms. A careful examination reveals how similar the two institutions were within the Roman mind despite their tangible differences.

Vesta, or Hestia in Greek mythology, was the goddess of the hearth and its fire, as well as the patron deity of all household activities. As she spurned the amorous advances of Neptune and Apollo and chose to remain virginal, she was also honored as a goddess of chastity and virtue. When Numa Pompilius established the Cult of Vesta, he chose four young women to serve as priestesses.<sup>9</sup> In order to be worthy for service to the virgin goddess, it was mandatory that they were celibate, undefiled by sexual relations, and without speech or hearing defect or any other bodily imperfection.<sup>10</sup> They served for a term of at least thirty years, allowing them ten years to learn their responsibilities, ten years to perform what they had learned, and ten to teach others their duties.<sup>11</sup>

For Christian virgins, life-long celibacy was neither compulsory nor institutionalized as it had been for the Vestals. Virginity as a religious practice first appeared in the young Christian church as the members interpreted the admonition of Paul in Corinthians as an exhortation of the practice: "It is good for a man not to touch a woman...For I would that all men were even as myself...It is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry" (1 Cor. 7:1, 7-9). Celibacy rose in popularity for several centuries, and virginity became a standard institution within the church by the time of Constantine, much as the cult of Vesta was within the Roman state.<sup>12</sup> However, the ascetic practice of virginity was largely disorganized and generally practiced on an individual basis. Although local congregations had begun to band together under the ideal of worldly renunciation and suppression of the flesh, they still lacked the common rule, dress, and purse that would characterize later communities.

Yet with the rapid expansion of the church in the third centu-

ry, a double ethical standard became more pronounced which made the celibate lifestyle increasingly popular. It was acceptable for average Christians to marry but preferable to remain chaste and celibate, as those who sacrificed more for Christ would surely receive the greater reward.<sup>13</sup> The Church Fathers were largely responsible for this doctrine. "Those who decide to marry . . . must of necessity confess that they are inferior to virgins," wrote Ambrose.<sup>14</sup> Augustine also perpetuated this idea in his treatise *On the Good of Widowhood*, where he praised the young Roman girl Demitrias for choosing to dedicate her life to virginity. He extols her above her own mother, Juliana. "[She], coming after you in birth, has gone before you in conduct; descended from you in lineage has risen above you in honor; following you in age has gone before you in holiness . . . spiritually enriched in a higher degree than yourself, since, even with this augmentation, you are inferior to her."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the new ideology was that to be of the holier part of the church, it was implicit that a girl dedicate her life to chastity and virginity. As the Vestal Virgins, who had to be more pure than others to serve their deity, the virginal Christian woman became more pure and holy than those married around her. They were the earthly counterpart of the angels, more worthy to serve her god on earth and to achieve the first rank of his heaven in death. As women flocked to take vows of celibacy, virginity became not only a sexual status but an important institution within Christian society, eventually becoming as central to the church as the Vestal Virgins had been within the civic religion of the Roman state.

The virginity of both the Vestals and many Christians women was seen as a personal sacrifice made for the good of the entire community in which they lived. The Vestal Virgins were chosen for the priesthood between the ages of six and ten and then served for at least thirty years. Although they were free to marry once their service had ended, Plutarch states that only a few took this opportunity, and those who did were less than successful. "But rather because they were afflicted by regret and depression for the rest of

their lives they inspired pious reverence in the others, so that they remained constant in their virginity until old age and death.”<sup>16</sup> The service of the Vestal Virgins stipulated absolute celibacy between the ages of ten and forty—the entirety of her reproductive years. In essence, the Vestals sacrificed their fertility for the benefit of the community. The welfare of the state of Rome was dependent upon the maintenance of the sacred flame of Vesta and the rituals associated with her cult. In order to guarantee continual prosperity and stability, they personally forsook their reproductive powers and channeled these energies into the constant regeneration of the Roman state.<sup>17</sup>

As the Vestal Virgins who inspired “pious reverence” in others, the Christian virgins also merited honor in their celibacy. Virginity was seen as a self-inflicted martyrdom. The carnal desires were suppressed, pleasure and reproduction were sacrificed, and, therefore, the physical body was, in a manner, killed for the cause of spirituality. The spiritual power thought to be achieved through a life of chastity was similar to the powers which martyrs obtained for the giving of their lives. “For virginity is not praiseworthy because it is found in martyrs, but because itself makes martyrs,” Ambrose explained.<sup>18</sup> Just as martyrs could use their powers to benefit others in the Christian community, virgins could also bring public benefit. By renouncing their personal potential for fertility, they were seen as symbols that could bring fruitfulness or prosperity to the community at large. Often the virgin is referred to by the Church Fathers as being a garden or a fountain or as other images of fertility.<sup>19</sup> Just as that of the Vestal Virgins, the reproductive powers of Christian virgins were channeled in a public direction to regenerate the community and renew the church.<sup>20</sup>

### **Lives of Privilege**

This fertility, a uniquely feminine characteristic, resulted in a great deal of power and many privileges for both those taken into

the cult of Vesta and Christian women who chose the celibate life. When the Vestal Virgins went outside, they were preceded by lictors with faces.<sup>21</sup> The lictor was a symbol of sacred power; only certain magistrates had right to its company. Most priests and tribunes traveled without this emblem. A Vestal Virgin was immediately identifiable on the streets as no other women in Rome had this privilege.<sup>22</sup> Other rights set them apart from the other women of their day as well. All Roman women, despite their age, remained under male guardianship "because of their levity of mind" with exception only to the Vestal Virgins, who were free from that male authority.<sup>23</sup> Although women were generally prohibited from athletic displays and matches in the theater, Augustus himself assigned them reserved seats facing the tribunal of the praetor, who presided over the games.<sup>24</sup> They had the right to make a will during their father's lifetime and to conduct their own business affairs.<sup>25</sup> Although regular women were excluded from the Roman court system, a Vestal Virgin had the right to appear in court and serve as an instrument in a Senate investigation.<sup>26</sup>

Likewise, Christian virgins enjoyed privileges which exceeded those of the regular women of their day. In the fourth century A.D., the emperor Constantine repealed the imperial legislation which had granted extra privileges for those who married. He allowed unmarried women to draw up a will before reaching adulthood, just as the Vestal Virgins had.<sup>27</sup> The old "patriarchal power" of the Roman imperial period had virtually dissolved by this time. Virgins were free to exercise control over their income and could increasingly handle legal matters without the mediation of a guardian.<sup>28</sup> Free from the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood, they also had a wealth of time in which they could educate themselves. Some virgins became renowned as intellectuals, such as Anonyma of Alexandria, who was "famous on account of her wealth, her origins, and her education."<sup>29</sup> Melania the Younger, another celebrated virgin, made several pilgrimages, traveled widely preaching the

Gospel, and was so respected and trusted in her celibacy as to be admitted by the male monks into their monasteries—a privilege never extended to regular women.<sup>30</sup>

### Creating Ambiguity

The extraordinary rights allowed to the Vestal Virgins and later to their Christian sisters are accounted for by the ambiguous position they both held within their societal structures. Mary Beard wrote the authoritative work on the stance of the Vestal Virgins in Roman society as she addressed the classic debate over the origins of the Vestal priesthood. Were the first Vestal Virgins daughters of the kings or their wives? In searching for a definite role in which to classify the Vestals, she concluded that they fit into none of the natural categories existing in Roman society. They seemed to be daughters as they were always virgins and plural. Yet they resisted simple classification. Their dress was the *stola*, a wide band of color sewn onto the tunic indicating that the wearer was a matron. They wore their hair in the *sex crines* or “six curls,” the traditional style of brides on their wedding days. The Vestals were overseen by a Pontifex Maximus who in some ways acted as a husband or father figure among his wives. In other words, they were neither daughters nor matrons but both in some ambiguous way.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, the Vestal Virgins not only crossed categorical lines within their own gender but also entered into the opposite one. The unusual privileges which they enjoyed—a lictor to precede them, seats with the senators at games, and the right to testify in court, among others—generally belonged to aristocratic Roman men. Why was this group of women allowed so many male freedoms? Beard later explains that the Virgins were categorically men as much as they were daughters and matrons.<sup>32</sup> The order of the Vestal Virgins was created by a man and held in place within society through male initiative and interest. These young women were taken into the order before reaching puberty and then, under

the restriction of celibacy, never achieved sexual maturity. Rather, they were held in a unisexual, undeveloped state—a female variety of social eunuchism. Deborah Sawyer suggests that only in this circumstance, as “de-sexed” creatures, are they safe for men to grant power and privileges to.<sup>33</sup> As the legal privileges enjoyed by the Vestals do not nearly add up to those enjoyed by Roman men, this argument seems valid. They do not exist as pseudo-males or females but outside of all Roman gender categories. They existed instead within one that was uniquely their own—a male-created gender defined by de-sexualization. Dwelling within this state of neither traditional womanhood nor manhood, the Vestal Virgins were set apart and transformed into beings capable of giving the energy and fertility of their lives to the essence of the Roman state, and as such merited privileges and freedoms known by few.

Like the Vestal Virgins, the Christian ascetics achieved their power and privilege by not fitting into categorical norms. These women asserted autonomy and self-control by purposely not fitting into traditional gender roles through making vows of celibacy as the Virgins had. In rejecting marriage, they rejected those paradigms which defined them in Roman society. Marriage was seen as a social, familial, and legal necessity in late-imperial Rome—a daughter’s very reason for existence was to marry and have children, so as to assure the preservation of private property.

Also in existence in Late Antiquity were classic stereotypes for male and female behavior and characteristics. Women were seen as carnal while men were primarily spiritual. Men were considered holy when they exhibited male characteristics of power and spirituality. Their sanctity emerged from their natural masculinity. Thus, women who aspired to be holy had to renounce those things which made them women, or in other words, reject or transcend their gender.

For a woman to take her sexual destiny into her own hands was to make an assertion of independence which was considered to be the prerogative of men alone.<sup>34</sup> In going against society and often her family by declaring celibacy, she was seen as having passed the

boundaries of her own sex through her forceful and aggressive decision, entering into the role of the opposite. The Church Fathers praised the masculinity of this decision. Jerome said, "As long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from men as body is from soul. But if she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man."<sup>35</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus praised the masculine soul of his widowed mother.<sup>36</sup> Ambrose wrote: "She who believes progresses to complete manhood ... She then does without worldly name, gender of body, youthful seductiveness, and garrulousness of old age."<sup>37</sup> JoAnn McNamara points out that at the turn of the third century, "... African churches were afire with the question of whether or not virgins were still women."<sup>38</sup>

As in the case of the Vestal Virgins, the Christian virgins only gained respect and privilege through womanhood. Women were seen as being "in transition" towards a "transcendence of femaleness."<sup>39</sup> However, as much as the Church Fathers encouraged a masculinity of spirit, they were not recommended to actual physical manhood. Jerome and Chrysostom decried feminine clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics, but they did not wish for women to become men in appearance.<sup>40</sup> Rather, they advocated de-sexualization through a neutralization of feminine features. Many women, upon their conversions to Christianity, had been cutting off their hair and adopting male dress, but these masculinising practices were frowned on by Jerome and Tertullian. In 340, the Council of Gangra in Paphlagonia met to firmly check these tendencies.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Christian virgins, who with dressed in clothing ambiguous to either gender, physically remained women but possessed masculine souls. Where the Vestals were dressed so as to create this ambiguity in their social position within their own gender, the Christian virgins were attired to create equivocity between both genders. Both had the same result: a new category within their societies defined by de-sexualization.



## Accompanying Consequences

This hybrid gender construct was, as has been shown, extremely complex and difficult to create. Its very existence was a disturbance to normal social patterns. Membership came only with significant sacrifice but won great status and privilege. However, if a Vestal Virgin or a Christian ascetic renounced her vow to celibacy, the punishments for the loss of virginity were severe.

In Rome the adultery of a woman was not tolerated. For the first several hundred years of government, the husband had a legal right to kill his adulterous wife. Augustan legislation later forbade this, but permitted a husband to kill the lover if caught in his house or if he was of a lower class. Augustus made adultery a crime punishable by exile not only on request of the husband but by any citizen of Rome. The powers of a woman's father were more extensive in this case, however. He could kill his daughter and her lover regardless of his social standing with the condition that he kill both of them and not just one or the other.<sup>42</sup>

For a Vestal Virgin, the consequences of lost chastity were even higher. As an amorphous mixture of societal categories which included some characteristics of a wife, she was subject to adultery laws. But as a consecrated priestess in the service of Vesta, her virginity was vital to the well-being of Rome; her sexual transgression was an infidelity to the Roman state, a form of high treason. Rather than being quickly murdered by an enraged spouse or father, a seduced Virgin was buried alive. The Vestal was placed on a litter, bound down with straps, and covered so her voice could not be heard. She was carried that way through the Forum to the Colline Gate. A room had been dug underground and prepared there for her, and she, with her face veiled, descended down into it as the chief priest intoned certain secret prayers to the gods. Finally, the entrance to the room was buried and she was left to starve to death underground where no one could hear her screaming and wailing. Plutarch records that there is no day more distasteful for the

people of Rome than that of such an execution.<sup>43</sup> Although this grand execution ceremony is painstakingly recorded by several Roman historians, the histories record no more than two cases of Vestal Virgins who were ever actually entombed alive.<sup>44</sup>

For the Christian virgins, the consequences of lost chastity were serious as well. They were subject to Augustan law and its punishments, but since they were not legally married, did not qualify as adulteresses in the case of lost virginity in secular courts. However, the fall of a virgin was considered adultery within the church.<sup>45</sup> St. Matthew recorded the words of Jesus Christ taking a hard position against adultery in his gospel. "Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matt. 5:27–28). A virgin was a "spouse of Christ and a holy vessel dedicated to the Lord." For her to betray her Husband was the gravest and worst of sins.<sup>46</sup> The church itself had no power to inflict capital punishment. Its course of action for adultery was excommunication, perhaps a more terrifying prospect for a faithful Christian woman. Disfellowshipped from among Christ's followers on earth and denied the sacraments and ordinances of the church, only endless torment awaited her after she died. Her crime was so severe that repentance was impossible.<sup>47</sup>

Both the Vestal Virgins and their Christian sisters paid the utmost price which their controlling bodies could extract for the loss of their virginity. They had both, in their respective manners, asserted an independence and received, at the hands of men, some power and privileges by leaving womanhood behind. When they made the choice to leave their de-sexed state and return to the traditional female role of reproducer, they violated the trust of those who had given them their rights and the conditions upon which their rights were given. Therefore, they were punished to the greatest extent possible, often suffering more than an average woman would have for the same transgression.

## Conclusion

Vestal Virgins and Christian virgins have much more in common than has been previously recognized. Through examining the implications of celibacy in Rome and the Christian church, a thread of common ideology is found which brings the Vestals and Christians into a close proximity. Although the origins of their virginity differ, the meanings given to their celibacy were essentially the same. Being women, they possessed a fertile capacity which, as virgins, they channeled into the renewal and regeneration of their respective communities. With an inherent power of life within them that they sacrificed for the good of the state, they received many rights and privileges generally given only to men. These concessions came to them only after they had de-sexed themselves through vows of celibacy, not necessarily becoming males but transcending womanhood and the frailties it was commonly held to embody. In doing so, they created a new gender category within Roman society and the Christian church. However, once a virgin had crossed into this new classification there were the stiffest possible penalties for leaving it—alive entombment or spiritual damnation.

It is clear that these Vestals and Christians occupied the same ambiguous position within their respective societies. These strikingly-similar factors, as well as chronology, suggest that the Order of Virgins was not an innovation on the part of Christianity but rather a continuance of a Roman tradition. The institutionalization of virginity within the church at the beginning of the fourth century was merely an adaptation of a Roman pattern of organization which had already been in existence for nearly eight hundred years. Over the course of time, the Vestal cult had created a role within Roman society in which unmarried women could be accepted as a legitimate and contributing part of the state. The Christian virgins slipped into a category within their society which had already been defined by their pagan sisters, a category in which celibacy brought ambiguity, privilege, power, and extreme punishment.

The incorporation of this Roman element into the church structure is only a small part of a larger, well-documented Romanization of Christianity.<sup>48</sup> Although the church decried pagan cults, many of their ideas would be incorporated into the Christian church in the centuries that succeeded the death of Christ. The cult of Vesta was merely one of the many Roman elements which would affect the dogma, although perhaps their legacy is one of the greatest and most long-standing. Their virgin sisters still in existence today within the walls of convents retain much of a role defined thousands of years ago by women who dedicated their lives to preserving the sacred flame of Vesta and the welfare of the Roman state.

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## Notes

1. Henry Chadwick, *The Penguin History of the Church, Volume One: The Early Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 5.
2. Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 1 in A.H. Armstrong, trans., ed., *Plotinus* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966–88), 5.
3. See Ariadne Staples, *From Good Goddess to Vestal Virgins: Sex and Category in Roman Religion* (London: Routledge, 1998).
4. Plutarch, *Life of Numa Pompilius* 9.5–10.7 in Mary R. Lefkowitz & Maureen B. Fant, ed., trans., *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 288–9.
5. Plut. *Num.* 10.2, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.
6. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 1.12 in Lefkowitz, 290. The Pontifex Maximus was the chief priest over the Vestal Virgins. This position was always filled by a male, usually a senator, and then later by the emperor.
7. Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God: Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, A.D. 350–450* (London: Routledge, 1995), 57.
8. For a more in-depth discussion about the ideological status of women

in Rome, see Gillian Clark, *Women in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), especially the first chapter entitled "On the Nature of Women."

9. The number of Vestal Virgins was purportedly expanded under the Roman king Servius to bring the number up to six in the sixth century B.C. The number remained unchanged after that. See Plut. *Num.* 10.1.

10. Gell. *NA* 1.12, cited in Lefkowitz, 290.

11. Plut. *Num.* 10.1, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.

12. Jane Simpson, "Women and Asceticism in the Fourth Century: A Question of Interpretation," *Journal of Religious History* 15, no. 1 (June 1988): 47.

13. Chadwick, 176.

14. Ambrose, *On Virginit*y 1.36 in Daniel Callam, trans., *On Virginit*y (Saskatoon: Peregrina Publishing, 1980), 8.

15. Augustine, *On the Good of Widowhood*, 11 in Elizabeth Clark, trans., ed., *Saint Augustine on Marriage and Sexuality* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 23.

16. Plut. *Num.* 10.2, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.

17. Deborah F. Sawyer, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1996), 70. Plutarch gives further evidence of the power of renewal the Vestals possessed: "When they [the Vestal Virgins] go out . . . if they accidentally happen to meet a criminal being led to execution, his life is spared." (Plut. *Num.*, 10.3, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.) The power of regeneration which they possessed was so great and inherent within them that a criminal coming near them was cleaned and forgiven of his crime.

18. Ambrose, *Virginit*y 1.36, cited in Callam, 9.

19. Ambrose, *Virginit*y 16.335, cited in Callam, 9.

20. Joyce E. Salisbury, *Church Father, Independent Virgins* (London: Verso/New Left Books, 1991), 29.

21. Plut. *Num.* 10.3, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.

22. Staples, 145.

23. *The Twelve Tables* 5.1, cited in Lefkowitz, 95.

24. Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 44.6, cited in Lefkowitz, 165.

25. Plut. *Num.* 10.3, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.

26. Sawyer, 126.

27. Anne Jensen, *God's Self-Confident Daughters: Early Christianity and the*

*Liberation of Women* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1996), 49–50.

28. Jensen, 25.

29. Jensen, 27.

30. Paulinus of Nola, *Epistola* 44.61 in P. G. Walsh, trans., ed., *Ancient Christian Writers: Letters of Saint Paulinus of Nola, Volume Two* (New York: Newman Press, 1967), 167.

31. Mary Douglas, "Self Evidence," in *Implicit Messages: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1975), 70.

32. Mary Beard, "Re-Reading Vestal Virginity," in Richard Hawley & Barbara Levick, eds., *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments* (London: Routledge, 1995), 168.

33. Sawyer, 127.

34. For further discussion concerning the male-female prerogative conflict in Greco-Roman society, see Gail Paterson Corrington, "The 'Divine Woman'? Propaganda and the Power of Celibacy in the New Testament Apocrypha: A Reconsideration" in David Scholer, ed., *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays, Vol. XIV* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1993).

35. Jerome, *Commentariorum in epistolam : Ephesios libri III* 26.533 in Salisbury, 26.

36. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epitaph for His Mother*, 70.38, 47 in Carolinne White, trans., ed., *Autobiographical Poems of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86.

37. Ambrose, *Exposito Evangelii Secundum Lucam*, 15:1844, cited in Salisbury, 26–7.

38. JoAnn McNamara, *Sexual Equality and the Cult of Virginity* in Scholer, 152.

39. Jane Simpson, "Women and Asceticism in the Fourth Century: A Question of Interpretation" in Scholer, 55.

40. Elizabeth A. Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends: Essays and Translations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 55.

41. Simpson, 56.

42. Eva Cantarella, *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 123.

43. Plut. *Num.* 10.5–7, cited in Lefkowitz, 289.

44. On both occasions, the accusations of Vestal immorality came in the aftermath of disastrous defeats of the Roman army. For the specific cases, see Staples, 136.

45. Sister Mary Lawrence McKenna, *Women of the Church: Role and Renewal* (New York: P.J. Kennedy & Sons, 1967), 100.

46. Basil, *Epistolae* 199.18 in Sister Agnes Clare Way, trans., ed., *Saint Basil: Letters, Volume Two* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1969), 56.

47. In Augustine's *Sermons* 9.4, he becomes one of the first men to argue that repentance is possible for an adulterous wife. Apparently adultery is still an unpardonable sin within the Church in the fifth century A.D. See Cloke, 107.

48. See Chadwick, *The Early Church* and also R. W. Southern, *The Penguin History of the Church 2: Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1970).





# Need the Poet Know It?:

## Anglo-Saxon Poets and Ancient Greek Bards

*Joseph A. Pomeroy*

A. B. Lord's twentieth-century evaluations of oral poetry shed a distinct beam of light on Homer's epic songs of ancient Greece that eventually began to illuminate the sagas and poetic tales of numerous other European traditions. Among these, Anglo-Saxon poetry quickly caught Lord's analytical eye and proved a significant source for investigation and debate. The heroic tale of Beowulf relative to the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition is comparable to Homer's tales of Achilles and Odysseus within the Greek tradition. One corresponding aspect of each tradition is the depiction of minstrels. The description of these performers and their performances meaningfully reveals that the source of their poetic inspiration varied, that the Anglo-Saxon poet relied upon his excellent memory, and that the Greek bard depended on divine assistance.

The *Odyssey* identifies two named court minstrels, *Beowulf* mentions one unnamed, and the *Iliad* refers to none by name.<sup>1</sup> Book 1 of the *Odyssey* mentions Phemius, who entertains the household of his patron Odysseus. Similarly, Demodocus performs for King Alcinous of the Phaeacians. Book 8 relates three distinct performances in which Demodocus sings for the king's guest, Odysseus. *Beowulf* refers to no bard by name yet recounts three particular performances on behalf of Beowulf and his men, who are guests of King Hrothgar in Daneland.

Each tradition consistently uses distinct words to identify bards; the Homeric appellation is ἀοιδός, Old English designations are *scop* and *gleomann*. Homer seldomly refers to an ἀοιδός, in the

*Iliad*, but often in the *Odyssey*, and always identifies one who sings heroic themes for a patron king. *Beowulf* also refers contextually or appositionally to the Anglo-Saxon minstrel as a *þegn* (thane, servant), *secg* (man) or *guma* (man). All five Old English appellations are interchangeable.<sup>2</sup>

Homer portrays the ἀοιδός variously. θεῖος ἀοιδός, the most frequent description, indicates a divinely inspired singer. Πολύφημος ἀοιδός describes one familiar with many songs or one who possesses a rich, full voice. The Homeric bard is also θέσπις, τετιμμένος, περικλυτός, and οὐκ αἴτιος, emphasizing his piety, esteem, renown and blamelessness, respectively (see fig. 1).

*Beowulf* describes the scop in three ways: *gilphlæden*, *hador*, and *gidda gemyndig*. *Gilphlæden* denotes eloquence or magniloquence, *hador*, clearness of voice, and *gidda gemyndig*, recollection of many

Name/Title	Definition	Occurrences
ἀοιδός	minstrel, bard, poet, singer	37
αἰδοῦς ἔμμορος	endued with reverence, respect	1
αἴτιος οὐ	unblameworthy, blameless	1
αὐτοδίδακτος	self-taught	1
ἐρίηρος	worthy, faithful, trusty	2
θεῖος	divine, immortal; inspired	13
θέσπις	pious, divine, glorious	1
περικλυτός	famed, renowned, famous	4
πολύφημος	knowing many songs or tales; voiceful, full of voices	1
τετιμμένος	esteemed, honored, respected	2
τιμῆς ἔμμορος	endued with honor, dignity	1

Figure 1. Homeric definitions of ἀοιδός

tales. In addition to these specific nouns and adjectives, each poem contains epithets which emphasize and amplify the bard's qualities.

Homer twice designates a poet as λαοῖσι τετιμένος (revered by the people), and even broadens that description: πᾶσι γὰρ ἀνθρώποισιν ἐπιχθονίοισιν ἀοιδοὶ / τιμῆς ἔμμοροί εἰσι καὶ αἰδοῦς (poets are endowed with honor and respect by all men who inhabit the earth).<sup>3</sup> On one occasion Demodocus begins to sing ὀρμηθεὶς θεοῦ (one who has been inspired, or urged on, by a god).

*Beowulf* consistently correlates the *scop* with the mead-hall, and therefore also with the king, who shows hospitality within the hall. Hence the term *cyninges þegn* (king's thane or servant) contextually identifies a *scop*, and is parallel to the

Name/Title	Definition
scop	court poet, bard, hall singer
gleomann	minstrel, singer
cyninges þegn	king's thane or servant
gumia gilphlæden	eloquent, praise-giving one
gidda gemyndig	able to recall songs or tales
hador	clear-voiced
secg	man

Figure 2. Descriptions of bards in *Beowulf*

phrase, *Hroþgares scop* (Hrothgar's minstrel). These epithets and adjectives more specifically define the role, ability and reception of the poet in these two ancient societies.

Consider next specific poetic performances. Phemius performs in Odysseus' halls in various books of the *Odyssey*. In the very first book he entertains Penelope's suitors with songs of the Trojan War.

κῆρυξ δ' ἐν χερσὶν κίθαριν περικαλλέα θῆκε  
 Φημίῳ, ὅς ῥ' ἤειδε παρὰ μνηστῆρσιν ἀνάγκη.  
 ἦτοι ὃ φορμίζων ἀνεβάλλετο καλὸν ἀεῖδεν.  
 τοῖσι δ' ἀοιδὸς ᾄειδε περικλυτός, οἳ δὲ σιωπῇ  
 εἴατ' ἀκούοντες· ὁ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ᾄειδε  
 λυγρόν, ὃν ἐκ Τροίης ἐπετείλατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.<sup>4</sup>

A herald placed a very beautiful lyre in Phemius' hands, who sang near the suitors by compulsion. As he began playing the lyre, he struck up a beautiful melody and sang. . . . [And] while the *renowned bard* sang to them, the hearkening [suitors] sat in silence. He sang the bitter return of the Achaeans from Troy, which Pallas Athene had required [of them].

The harsh truth of his tale disheartens Penelope and she bids him change his theme. But Telemachus interrupts her and warns that she must not forbid Phemius to sing what his mind (νόος) prompts him. He reminds her that οὐ νότ' αἰδοῖ / αἴτιοι, ἀλλὰ ποθεὶ Ζεὺς αἴτιος<sup>5</sup> (bards are *not blameworthy* [for the songs they sing], but somehow Zeus is responsible [for their tales]).

Demodocus performs thrice for Odysseus and Alcinous' household: once previous to some sporting events, again following the events, and a third time after an exchange of gifts. His performances treat varied subjects and demonstrate the breadth of his knowledge and abilities. First, he sings of a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles, and the tale's vivid authenticity brings tears to Odysseus' eyes. Later, after the court has enjoyed some athletic contests, Alcinous bids a herald fetch Demodocus' harp so that he may play for a group of dancers. The focus, however, is not on the dance, but on the poet and his song. He sings of Aphrodite's romantic interlude with Ares, and of Hephaestus capturing them in his cunning snare. This tale delights Odysseus and the court. Finally, after Odysseus had been bathed and brought to the evening meal, Demodocus is given a seat at the center of the room. Odysseus offers him kind words and a choice piece of meat, then charges him to show his mettle by telling truly the triumphant Achaean sack of Troy. The bard complies exactly and the vividness of his tale once again brings tears to Odysseus' eyes. Demodocus tells tales of the gods and men, and relates true accounts of the Trojan War.

Like Demodocus and Phemius, the bard in *Beowulf* is certainly also the king's man.<sup>6</sup> He performs thrice: once in a gathering sub-

sequent to Beowulf's arrival in Daneland, and later during two separate banquets celebrating Beowulf's victory over Grendel. Each performance occurs in the mead-hall. The first is for revelry's sake as the bard delights and entertains the king's retainers. On the morning following Beowulf's victory over Grendel, however, the *scop* presents a victory ode in the hero's honor as his second performance. He tells of Sigemund's victory over the dragon and the tribes of giants, and contrasts these deeds with the terrible reign of Heremod. He sings during the second banquet and recounts the battle of Finnsburh and the sorrows and hardships of armed conflict. In each performance this Anglo-Saxon bard relates historic or legendary events in song. Demodocus, Phemius and Hrothgar's *scop* all perform for their king, most commonly in his hall or palace, and each sings historic and legendary episodes.

Book 9 of the *Iliad* recounts the Achaean embassy to Achilles. The approaching delegation finds Achilles playing the lyre: ἄειδε δ' ὄρα κλέα ἀνδρῶν<sup>7</sup> (and he was singing the noble [deeds] of men). On another occasion, Polydamas reminds Hector that Zeus grants different abilities to different people. Thus he endows some with the ability to play the lyre and sing.<sup>8</sup> Homer's *Iliad* further depicts a dialogue between Hector and Helen in which she reminds him that οἷσιν ἐπὶ Ζεὺς θῆκε κακὸν μόρον, ὥς καὶ ὀπίσσω / ἀνθρώποισι πελώμεθ' ᾠοῖδικοί ἐσσομένοι<sup>9</sup> (Zeus grants a bad fate to men, so that we [humans] may be the subject of song for those men who will later live).<sup>10</sup> Homer's *Iliad* recognizes the divine source of poetic and musical ability and acknowledges the ability of song to immortalize the mortal deeds of men through the performance of inspired bards.

The *Odyssey* builds on these themes. Book 22 reports Odysseus's slaughter of the suitors, after which Phemius pleads with Odysseus to spare him his anger. The crux of Phemius's argument is that he serves the gods and that his slayer would offend them and incur their wrath.

αὐτῷ τοι μετόπισθ' ἄχος ἔσσεται, εἴ κεν αἰοδὸν  
 πέφνης, ὅς τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισιν ἀείδῃ.  
 αὐτοδίδακτος δ' εἰμί, θεὸς δέ μοι ἐν φρεσὶν οὔμας  
 παντοίας ἐνέφυσεν.<sup>11</sup>

Grief will follow you if you slay a bard, who sings both for men  
 and for gods. Although I am self-taught, a *god plants songs of all  
 kinds in my mind.*

A passage about Demodocus reveals more explicitly the divine role  
 of the bard. Homer discloses that a Muse teaches him and endows  
 him with ability.

[αἰοδὸν] περὶ Μοῦσ' ἐφίλησε, δίδου δ' ἀγαθὸν τε καλὸν τε.  
 ὀφθαλμῶν μὲν ἄμερσε, δίδου δ' ἥδεϊαν ἀοιδίην.  
 Μοῦσ' ἄρ' αἰοδὸν ἀνήκεν ἀειδέμεναι κλέα ἀνδρῶν.<sup>12</sup>

The Muse loved the bard and had granted [him] good and bad  
 fortune. She deprived him of sight but endowed [him with]  
 sweet song. That Muse urged the bard on as she sang [to him  
 the] glorious [deeds] of men.

According to Segal, "the bard needs the Muse, or the god, to keep  
 him in touch with the memory of remote events, to provide inspi-  
 ration, or to complete his limited knowledge."<sup>13</sup>

Thus the *Odyssey* identifies two poets who are respectfully  
 treated by their patron kings. Zeus and the Muses are responsible  
 both for their information and their abilities. Moreover, men  
 revere their power to immortalize noble or ignoble deeds. Helen,  
 Alcinous and Telemachus agree that the gods arrange for the fates  
 of men to occur as *they* will so that there will be themes for *bards*  
 to sing.

*Beowulf* shares some of these themes. Music and song was cer-  
 tainly common within the mead-hall since the sound of merriment  
 from within urged Grendel against it. The monster distinctly rec-

ognized the *swutol sang scopes* (sweet song of the bard).<sup>14</sup> Hrothgar's *scop* knew the history of the people and also told the works of god.

Sægde se þe cuþe  
frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,  
cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,  
[ond] lif eac gesceop  
cynna gehwylcum þara ðe cwice hwyraþ.<sup>15</sup>

He spoke who knew how to recount [history] from long ago, [even from] the creation of men. He said that the almighty one made the earth [and] also created the life [of] each kind which moves about living.

These lines emphasize the *scop*'s memory, the attribute most often applied to him. Concerning Sigemund he tells all that he *secgan hyrde* (has heard tell), especially *uncupes fela / þara þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston*<sup>16</sup> (many of those things previously unknown, which the sons of men knew not at all). He is *gidda gemyndig* (able to recall songs or tales) and *gilphlæden* (praise-giving), and *Beowulf* accentuates these qualities.<sup>17</sup> Hrothgar's *scop* can find the proper words and bind them aptly together. He knows much more than most men and can therefore entertain and give glory by imparting his knowledge in song.

The bards of these two literary traditions correspond in three ways. First, each sings for his king and that king's household. Second, each sings of historical and legendary events. Third, each has spent time learning and perfecting his art. They contrast, however, in one striking way: the source of the bard's message, the means, that is, of his inspiration.

The *Odyssey* affirms that poetic inspiration is divine,<sup>18</sup> i.e., from one or more gods, particularly Zeus or the Muses.<sup>19</sup> *Beowulf* depicts poetic inspiration as mere recollection<sup>20</sup> and never acknowledges any form of divine intervention.<sup>21</sup> The *scop* is *se ðe ealfeala ealdgesegena / worn gemunde*<sup>22</sup> (he who *remembers* a great many ancient sagas), but

the αἰτιδός is ὁ ὀρμηθεὶς θεοῦ<sup>23</sup> (the one who is urged on by a god).

Of course neither Homer nor the Anglo-Saxon composer of *Beowulf* addresses oral poetry or poets thematically (i.e., intentionally attempting to explain poetic abilities), but note this significant point of contrast—they differ in their description of poetic inspiration. The present thesis discloses that the Anglo-Saxon *scop* is never specifically considered a divine instrument within *Beowulf*. Poets in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, however, though also referred to as skilled, knowledgeable and self-taught, are more precisely identified as agents of divine will.

Figure 3 substantiates the present thesis. *Beowulf* describes Hrothgar's poet more clearly as a well-qualified minstrel than the medium of a divine message. The three descriptive adjectives employed (*hador*, *gemyndig*, *gilphlæden*) specifically emphasize acquired characteristics. He is simply *se þe cuþe* (he who knows), and more specifically, *se þe cuþe . . . reccan* (he who knows *how* to tell).<sup>24</sup> The *scop* delights his audience with his ability to tell true tales in pleasantly chosen words. Thus his description as *gilphlæden* (praise-giving) and *hador* (clear-voiced) complements his role as "chronicler and historian."<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, Homer's descriptions more often lend emphasis to the revered and divine status of the αἰτιδός. The most frequent adjective, θεῖος, suggests divine qualities and designates an inspired messenger. Moreover, contextual evidence supports the supposition that these Homeric epithets retain descriptive significance. Phemius and Demodocus are inspired and taught by gods who endow them not only with musical and poetic abilities, but also with glorious tales to sing.

A. B. Lord submits that "[the *scop* was] a poet who was conversant with Germanic legend and history or, put another way, a poet in a rich tradition that contained many songs and stories from the Teutonic past."<sup>26</sup> But, Opland asks, "Is the *þegn* merely a man knowledgeable of the history of his people, or is he a man who has by heart a number of poems or songs treating that history?" "It is



Name/Title	Definition
ᾠοιδός	minstrel, bard, poet, singer
scop	court poet, bard, hall singer
gleomann	minstrel, singer
πολύφημος	knowing many songs or tales; voiceful, full of voices
αὐτοδίδακτος	self-taught
hador	clear-voiced
gidda gemyndig	able to recall songs or tales
gilphlæden	eloquent, praise-giving
αἵ τοις οὐ	unblameworthy, blameless
ἐρίηρος	worthy, faithful, trusty
θεῖος	divine, immortal; inspired
θέσπις	pious, divine, glorious
þegn	thane or servant
secg	man
guma	man
περικλυτός	famed, renowned, famous
αἰδοῦς ἔμμορος	endued with reverence, respect, regard
τετιμένος	esteemed, honored, respected
τιμῆς ἔμμορος	endued with honor, dignity

Figure 3. Comparison of poetic attributes in *Beowulf*,  
the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*.

likely," he responds, "that the *cyninges þegn* is a man well-versed in old poems or poems about past events."<sup>27</sup> The *scop* is known for his ability to find appropriate words and arrange them beautifully. One great distinction between ancient Greek poets and Anglo-Saxon bards is not the result of their song, for they both make men merry, but the means by which they compose their songs to entertain their audience.

This distinction is evident even in the names which identify the bards of each tradition. The Old English noun *scop* derives from the same root as the verb *scieppan* (to create or form) and corresponds to the Greek noun ποιητής (from which we derive poet). The *scop* is a designer who creates or shapes some object. The Greek noun αἰδός, on the other hand, derives from the same root as the verb αἰεῖν (to sing) and correlates with the Old English verb *singan*.

"The Homeric bard is a singer rather than a maker, an *aoidos* (αἰδός) rather than *poietes* (ποιητής), because he is the voice and the vehicle of an ancient wisdom . . . [and his] powers are divine."<sup>28</sup> The Anglo-Saxon *scop* is precisely the ποιητής who the Homeric αἰδός is not, for he primarily relies on his own abilities to create his poem rather than act specifically as an agent of the gods. Poets in each tradition certainly tell true tales and relate historic events, but Homeric bards demonstrate a distinct dependence upon divinity for their message, while the Anglo-Saxon court poet relies more on acquired knowledge.

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## Notes

1. There are, however, representations of comparable musical performances in the *Iliad*, such as Achilles in book 9.
2. Jeff Opland argues that the *gleomann* is generally distinct from the

scop, but concedes that "it is reasonable to accept that for the Beowulf poet a scop was also a *gleomann*" (*Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980], 199).

3. Hom. Od. 8.480.

4. Hom. Od. 1.153-155, 325-327; all translations mine.

5. Hom. Od. 1.347-348.

6. He is referred to twice in this manner: *Hroþgares scop* (1066b) & *cyninges þegn* (876b).

7. Hom. Il. 9.189.

8. Hom. Il. 13.730-734.

9. Hom. Il. 6.357-358. In essence, these two lines parallel Od. 8.579-580, in which Alcinous comments thus to Odysseus, τὸν δὲ θεοὶ μὲν τεύξαν, ἐπεκλώσαντο δ' ὄλεθρον / ἀνθρώποισι, ἵνα ᾗσι καὶ ἔσσομένοισιν αἰοιδῇ (the gods, who created destruction, allot it to men so that there may be a song for those who will yet live).

10. This theme recurs in Hom. Od. 3.202-209.

11. Hom. Od. 22.344-349. Note Phemius's concessive use of αὐτοδίδακτος. For further discussion of the implications of this adjective, see note 22 below.

12. Hom. Od. 8.63-64, 73.

13. Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), 139.

14. Beowulf, lines 86-90a.

15. Beowulf, lines 90b-92, 97b-98.

16. Beowulf, lines 867b-878.

17. Beowulf, lines 867b-874a; Nolan and Bloomfield emphasize that *gilphlæden* describes one who is endowed with glory-giving words rather than one laden with glory himself and cite a note by W. F. Bryan, which contends that *gilphlæden* is more specifically a "variant of *gidda gemyndig* and a close parallel to it in meaning; the singer is not himself 'covered with glory' but his memory is stored with glorious deeds, with famous lays of many a hero" (W. F. Bryan, "Beowulf Notes," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 19 [1920]: 85; Barbara Nolan and Morton W. Bloomfield, "Beotword, *Gilpcwidas*, and the *Gilphlæden Scop* of Beowulf," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 79 [1980]: 499-516).

18. Although Telemachus reminds his mother that οἱ νόος ὀρνυται (his mind inspires him [the bard]) and Phemius himself exclaims that he is

αὐτοδίδακτος (self-taught), these passages do not exclude divine support because their contexts show that they are merely supplementary or preparatory, the mind (νόος) being the medium of inspiration, and preparation a necessary step toward reception. (See Charles Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey* [Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1994], 138, n.41.)

19. The *Odyssey* mentions the following sources of information and inspiration: νόος (1.347), θεός (8.44, 498; 22.397), θεοί (8.457), ἀθάνατοι (24.198), Ζεύς (1.348), Μοῦσα (8.63, 73).

20. *Welhwylc gecwæð / þæt he fram Sigemundes secgan hyrde* (he declares everything which he has heard [anyone] say about Sigemund) (*Beowulf*, lines 874b-875). Patricia Lundberg suggests that the "scop not only knows the old stories and relates them well, but also could compose a song spontaneously" (Patricia Lorimer Lundberg, "The Elusive *Beowulf* Poet Self-Represented in the I-Narrator and the Scops," *Ball State University Forum* 30 (1989): 9).

21. Opland suggests that the Anglo-Saxon scop in general "may well . . . have been a divinely inspired seer," but this statement is contextually too general to apply to Hrothgar's scop, for there simply is no indication of such in *Beowulf* (*Oral Poetry*, 242). The emphasis in *Beowulf* is ever on the acquirable abilities of the scop and never on divinely inspired poets.

22. *Beowulf*, lines 869-870a.

23. *Hom. Od.* 8.499.

24. *Beowulf*, lines 90b-91.

25. Opland, *Oral Poetry*, 261.

26. Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer Resumes the Tale*, ed. Mary Louise Lord (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995), 109.

27. Opland, "Beowulf on the Poet," 458.

28. Segal, *Singers*, 139.

# Romulus and Quirinus:

## An Etruscan Deity in Ancient Rome

Rebecca A. Allen

During the Augustan Age, Latin writers were eager to connect the glorious tales of Rome's birth to her present supremacy and to show that her supposed divine origins had ensured her success. During this flourish of literature, a curious character emerges—Quirinus, whom most say is the deified Romulus.<sup>1</sup> These writers would have us believe that Romulus's apotheosis had been known since time immemorial, but evidence suggests otherwise. The tale was known at least as far back as Ennius but is of relatively late origin. Then, indeed, who is Quirinus, and why was his character so nicely molded to the heroic figure of Romulus? Moreover, why are there two tales of Romulus's death? There are indications that Quirinus was an ancient grain god, one of Rome's oldest deities. The legends of Romulus portray him as the war-loving founder of Rome. To connect the two, we must return to Rome's earliest organizational system, the *curiae*, and thence to a brief discussion of Etruscan religion to see that Romulus's death and apotheosis bear heavy Etruscan overtones. In all probability, Quirinus is simply one of the many faces of Mars, whose Etruscan origin, like Romulus's, has been shaded with foreign influences and so altered that his original intents are almost imperceptible.

Livy writes of Romulus's death and presents the two prevailing theories.<sup>2</sup> In order to give a mythical overtone to the tale and because of *admiratio viri et pavor praesens*, he holds that Romulus was taken up in a sudden thunderstorm while mustering his troops in the Campus Martius. However, as he often does, Livy adds that the

senators tore Romulus to pieces. Plutarch embellishes his account of Romulus's death with important details omitted by Livy, such as the fact that the king had summoned his troops for the dividing of the conquered lands and that his death occurred on the Nones of July (*Quintilis*). Plutarch also includes the two theories, but he gives the specifics of the senatorial assassination: "... the senators, convened in the temple of Vulcan, fell upon him and slew him, then cut his body into pieces, put each a portion into the folds of his robe, and so carried it away."<sup>3</sup> However, he also gives more credence to Romulus's apotheosis.

Before beginning a lengthy discussion of the mythological and historical aspects of Romulus's death, we must first consider some significant archaeological discoveries pertinent to our discussion. Excavations of the Roman Forum have yielded some interesting artifacts relevant to Romulus. Boni uncovered the legendary tombstone of Romulus in the Forum,<sup>4</sup> accompanied by other objects dating as far back as the seventh or sixth century. The stone lions of Etruscan origin, which reportedly kept watch over the grave, have not yet been unearthed. Other forum excavations have yielded extensive cemeteries of cremated tribal peoples, and the altar of Vulcan, reportedly consecrated by Romulus himself. As Altheim notes, it is fitting that an altar to the god of fire stands in a cemetery of cremated remains.<sup>5</sup> The relationship of these discoveries to the death of Romulus will be considered below.

The contradictions between the accounts of Romulus's death have been the topic of heated debate since antiquity. Livy's reticence belies incredulity at the story of his apotheosis, but he nonetheless transforms the mythical elements into what Ogilvie calls "a passage of moving speech."<sup>6</sup> Plutarch more enthusiastically relates both theories, leaving the final judgment to the reader. Both authors include the speech of Proculus Julius, who informed the Romans of Romulus's ascent to heaven. Proculus is rumored to have been added to the story as late as the first century by the Julian *gens* (some say Caesar himself), who, in an effort to strengthen its

own nobility, named Proculus as a distinguished farmer from Alba Longa.<sup>7</sup> The *gens* could not reasonably claim direct descent from the Alban kings at the time of the fabrication of the fable. However, in order to give some credence to their supposed role in the establishment of Rome, they conveniently created the mythological account of a Proculus who came from the same city as the Alban kings and prophesied of the greatness of Rome.<sup>8</sup> The supposed role of the Julian *gens* in the founding of Rome and its eagerness for any close association with Quirinus is further supported by the erection of a statue of Caesar on the Quirinal Hill in 44 B.C. Cicero himself called into question the reality of Proculus and the role of the Julii in the fabrication of the story.<sup>9</sup>

First, let us consider the account of Romulus's dismemberment at the hands of the Senate, the theory that Livy considers to have spread quietly among writers. Livy says that Romulus summoned the army *ad exercitum recensendum*<sup>10</sup> to the Capran marsh in the Campus Martius. Plutarch writes that he was distributing newly acquired lands to his men from the Sabines in the temple of Vulcan, known to be in the Forum. Plutarch's version at first glance seems unlikely for the simple reason that the army could not be assembled within the *pomerium*. However, his association with the temple of Vulcan may derive from Romulus's consecration of the same. Moreover, Plutarch may have confused the marshy Forum, which the Etruscan kings drained much later,<sup>11</sup> with the marshes of the Campus Martius. Scullard points out, however, that temples to Vulcan had to be built outside the city. He then concludes that the temple must have been built before the Forum was annexed to Rome and belonged to an earlier village settlement, which is in accordance with the legend of its founding.<sup>12</sup>

Romulus's violent death bears striking similarities to the assassination of Julius Caesar,<sup>13</sup> as Ogilvie notes. The common version names the senators as the assassins, but others have named Romulus's enemies or his new rabble of citizens. Some, in their etymological considerations of the Celeres, named Celer, the reputed

leader of the cavalry, as the murderer. Regardless of the identity of the assassin, whether a band of senators or a single perpetrator, the consensus seems to be that Romulus's tyranny, having surfaced especially after the death of Titus Tatius, was no longer tolerable and that his power needed to be checked.<sup>14</sup> His opponents lodged similar complaints against Caesar, especially after the death of Pompey,<sup>15</sup> and post-Caesarean writers undoubtedly capitalized on the likenesses to add color to their narratives.

The alternative to Romulus's violent death is far more pleasing and inspirational. Legend holds that Romulus ascended to heaven covered by a thunderstorm and assumed the name Quirinus. Although Livy does not specifically name Quirinus as Romulus's new identity, he refers to his deification in later passages. For example, Proculus simply calls him *deum deo natus*.<sup>16</sup> Also Tanaquil, to inspire ambition in her listless husband, reminds Tarquin of *Romulus deo prognatus deus ipse*.<sup>17</sup> For Romulus's first address as Quirinus, we turn to Plutarch's version of Proculus' speech. "It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, from whom I came, that I should be with mankind only a short time." After including a prophecy of Rome's supremacy, the heavenly being continues. "I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus."<sup>18</sup> However, Livy must have been aware of the legend since it dates to Ennius.<sup>19</sup> Livy's religious skepticism is most likely accountable for this omission.<sup>20</sup>

Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes one of the very few myths regarding Quirinus. During a festival of the Sabine god Quirinus, a girl of noble lineage danced in honor of the god. She was inspired by the god and went into a sanctuary whence she emerged, pregnant by him. She gave birth to a son, Modius Fabidius who when grown distinguished himself by exploits in war. He decided to found a city and gathered a band of companions. After journeying some distance, they came to rest, and at this spot he founded a city naming it Cures.<sup>21</sup> To anyone even poorly versed in mythology, this story will undoubtedly sound familiar, for it is not unlike the myth surrounding the birth of Romulus and his twin Remus. The origin



of the Modius Fabidius myth (Palmer cites Varro) is of negligible importance, but its similarities to the tale of Romulus are thought provoking. Most curious are the parallels between Quirinus and Mars. We read that Romulus assumed the name Quirinus upon his death, but the aforementioned myth implies Quirinus's previous identity.

Romulus's association with Quirinus raises several concerns regarding the origin of the myth, the appropriateness of Romulus's association with Quirinus, and Quirinus's pre-Romulean functions. In order to arrive at suitable conclusions, we must first turn to the pre-Romulean Quirinus, a member of the archaic triad which included Jupiter and Mars. He is certainly the god of the Quirites, but even the origin of Quirites is quite vague.<sup>22</sup> Uncertainty of Quirinus's primitive function prevailed even in antiquity as authors attempted to explain his origins through various etymological roots. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, borrowing from Varro,<sup>23</sup> writes that the name of Quirinus derives from Cures, whose god he is claimed to be. He continued that Cures derives from the Sabine word for spear or lance, *curis*,<sup>24</sup> thus implying an association with the Sabine god of war. Livy, Plutarch, and Ovid also include this etymological association with Cures.<sup>25</sup>

Much of our present knowledge of Quirinus and his function in Roman religion is owed to Georges Dumézil. His assimilation of the corpus of then-known facts about Quirinus laid the foundation of later discussions. The improbability of the existence of the Sabine Cures had long been realized.<sup>26</sup> The existence of *Quirinus* is equally unlikely,<sup>27</sup> but Dumézil undertook a trace of the etymological origins of the same. He expresses gratitude to Kretschmer for his recognition of the roots of *\*co-virio-*, suggesting a collective body of *virī*. However, Dumézil also discredits this and emphasizes the more likely theory that Quirinus derives from *\*coviria-*, in which *curia*<sup>28</sup> finds its root. Hence, Quirinus is the god of the whole curiate organization, or the entire Roman population, not just of the individual *curias*.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, a similar etymological analysis of *Quirites* yields helpful insights regarding Quirinus's earliest functions. *Quirites* most likely derives from \**co-virites*, which Dumézil translates as "the individualities" or simply, the "materials of the synthesis (*co-virites*) over which . . . Quirinus presides."<sup>30</sup> Palmer expands this theory into a complex but viable etymology of Quirinus and *curias*. Since *Quirites* were the only collective title by which Roman citizens were called, it is likely that *Quirites* refers only to members of the *curias*, which were the building block of the civilian society.<sup>31</sup> The *curia* has no familial or geographical origins; it is rather an assembly of citizens operating under mutual understanding of unity. In contrast with the *populus Romanus*, which is a collective body, the *Quirites* are individual.<sup>32</sup>

The *flamen Quirinalis* presided over at least three major festivals, Consualia, Robigalia, and Larentalia, but surprisingly, he did not seem to have played a significant role in the festival of his namesake, Quirinalia. Quirinus's own *flamen* was third in rank, next to *flamen Dialis* and *flamen Martialis*, but Palmer still insists that the *flamen Quirinalis* "fulfilled a major religious function that could be properly described as the salvation of Rome."<sup>33</sup> Several authors have shown that Consualia on 17 February coincides with *Feriae Stultorum* of Fornacalia during which feast the *cives Romani*, namely those not yet assigned to *curiae* assumed their curiate membership. Possibly, the connection between the *flamen Quirinus* and Consualia lies in Livy's account of the rape of the Sabine women at the festival Consualia, supposedly established by Romulus himself.

Though Quirinus was a distinct member of the archaic triad, his identification blurred as he began to be attached to other gods as an epithet, including Jupiter, Janus, and Mars. There are numerous assumptions about the relationship between Quirinus and his fellow deities, but I shall concentrate on one in particular, Mars. By the Augustan period, Quirinus had become firmly attached to his role as an epithet. Historians simply assumed that Quirinus was another title for Mars, a position that Palmer also holds.<sup>34</sup> "When

Mars rages, he is called Gradivus, when he is tranquil he is called Quirinus."<sup>35</sup>

The work of Greek historians unfortunately cemented the character of Quirinus. The Greeks naturally assumed that Ares and Mars were equivalent deities. When trying to translate Quirinus into an appropriate Greek title, the writers sought a Greek god with a relationship to Ares similar to the relationship between Mars and Quirinus, hence, Enyalios, a lesser Greek war-god.<sup>36</sup> Sadly, however, Quirinus's responsibilities are not purely war-related, nor are they clearly defined in any one canon. Thus, the Greek manipulation aggravated the corruption of Quirinus already incipient in his association with Mars. Furthermore, if Quirinus is little more than another epithet of Mars, as Palmer asserts, Quirinus's equation with Enyalios is tragic, for Quirinus loses his own significance within his context of the many facets of Mars and is endowed with foreign characteristics leading to more disturbing and confused distortions.<sup>37</sup>

Dumézil holds that, in his sometimes tenuous ideas of functional mythology, Mars and Quirinus themselves are laden with symbolism. Mars represents the warrior class, Quirinus the farmers, tillers, and even fertility itself. At the same time, he is the god of the Quirites, whose members include both the *milites* and the *populus*. Dumézil resolves the conflict quite nicely by arguing that Quirinus is a guardian of peace always ready for war.<sup>38</sup> It has also been suggested that the festivals in which his *flamen* participates mark the beginning and the end of the warring season or the preparation for such by sowing grain in the spring and its harvest in autumn.<sup>39</sup> For instance, Consualia stems from *condere* and is related to the preservation and storage of grain. Fowler adds that the burial of grain took root from archaic sacrifices to chthonic deities, which would have considered harvested crops an acceptable form of wealth before the widespread use of precious metals.<sup>40</sup>

Let us now return to Romulus's grave marker. For the sake of the argument, we will ignore the absurdity of a grave marker laid for a deified being. The burial patterns of the forum cemetery bear dis-

tinctly Etruscan characteristics. Two Etruscan-style lion sculptures guarded the gravestone commemorating Romulus. The altar to Vulcan is also telling of Etruscan influence, or possibly domination, for the god's name seems of Etruscan origin.<sup>41</sup> Since significant physical evidence surrounding Romulus's death is Etruscan, the tale itself may have also been influenced. Even several varied versions link Romulus to Etruscan heritage.<sup>42</sup> Coupled with the etymological evidence of the Etruscan origin of Romulus's name,<sup>43</sup> paternity, and his death gives strong support for the Etrurian source of the Romulus legend.

Likewise, the very accounts of Romulus's death have distinctive Etruscan religious overtones. For those who subscribe to Romulus's ascension to heaven in a sudden thunderstorm, there is fascination with lightning and its portentous meanings. Furthermore, Proculus' listeners immediately accept his tale unconditionally, no doubt because of the miraculous events which they have just witnessed. "In all Etruscan ritual manifestations, one receives an impression of surrender, almost abdication, of all human spiritual activity before the divine will, shown by the two-fold obsession: how to know the will of the gods and how to put it into practice."<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the citizens are given the will of the gods, namely that Rome become *caput orbis terrarum*, and they learn how they may put the will of the gods into practice. *Proinde rem militarem colant sciantque et ita posteris tradant nullas opes humanas armis Romanis resistere posse.*<sup>45</sup> Hellenistic influence on Etruscan religion is also evident in the deification of the semi-mortal Romulus, for primitive followers did not believe in the after-life. However, after communication with Greek religions, Etruria became aware of the possibility of post-mortal existence or even of apotheosis, but only by means of certain rigidly prescribed rituals.<sup>46</sup>

Plutarch records that Romulus was in the temple of Vulcan, but he does not say what Romulus was doing there. Incidentally, the dating of the *Nonae Caprotinae* as Romulus's demise is by no means verifiable. As mentioned earlier, Romulus could have mustered his troops near the temple of Vulcan, but it is equally likely that he was

performing some religious function, similar to that performed at Volcanalia. The rites of Volcanalia are vague, but the underlying principle seems related to worshipping a chthonic deity, the fire-god Vulcan, and seeking his protection of grain.<sup>47</sup> If Vulcan is the god of consuming fire, then Romulus's offerings to him almost seem a preparatory rite for his death. At the same time, Romulus's translation into a god with agricultural responsibilities could be an answer to the Romans' request for abundance with the Quirinus's protection of the grain supply, as suggested by his *flamen's* role in the agricultural festivals.

Romulus's association with Quirinus is hardly surprising in consideration of the primitive origins of the myth of Romulus. Romulus, the son of an Etruscan agricultural deity, later given to concerns of war, becomes Quirinus, an agricultural deity of Indo-European origin later associated with war-time preparations. The parallels are worth considering, but Quirinus is the only weak link in the chain. However, the assimilation of Quirinus and Romulus is relatively late and Palmer includes an excellent discussion of the legend's transmission.

In 388 B.C. the first temple of Mars was built by the Romans but outside the *pomerium*. Not quite a hundred years later, politically ambitious plebeians converted to their advantage the remnants of the Mars Quirinus cult which had languished with the ascendancy of Jupiter Feretrius. These statesmen fashioned a mythology of ancestry in which Romulus, the eponymous founder of Rome, bears the cult name Quirinus betokening the union and accord between the Romans and the Sabines. Severed from its deity, the word Quirinus became a deity in its own right. No longer was he Mars but Romulus, deified son of Mars. No doubt, the Romans were stimulated to these mythopoeic confections by the Greeks whose ancestry was traced back to Dorus, Ion, Achaeus, Aeolus, and Hellen. Hazy glimpses into their past induced the Romans to evolve a story of gods and men of the two towns of Rome and Cures. At the end of the Republic when Roman insight into the past

had grown even dimmer, and the political mythology of the third century had acquired the lustre of antiquity, the ingenious Sabine Terentius Varro breathed new life into the Sabine origins of the Tities, Quirites, and Quirinus and further injected the Sabine lance (*curis*) into the discussion, for his working hypothesis was 'Scratch a Roman, find a Sabine.'<sup>48</sup>

Quirinus is most likely one of the many faces of Mars, as Palmer argues, a claim supported by Pallotino's brief assessment of Tuscan religion. On the Etruscan concept of the divine, he writes, "This vagueness [towards number, attributes, sex, and appearance of the gods] seems to point towards an original belief in some divine entity dominating the world through a number of varied, occasional manifestations which later became personified into gods, or groups of gods and spirits."<sup>49</sup> Evidently, Quirinus encompasses Mars' agrarian responsibilities and has some connections with military functions, while at the same time there appears a veneer of association with the underworld, both of which give Quirinus a distinctly chthonic flavor. His character has been so muddled by foreign religious accretions that it is necessary to examine the origins of his myth rather than of his cult. And indeed, it seems that the Romans, anxious to sanctify their beginnings, would have liked to assume that Romulus returned to heaven as Mars. However, since the stories surrounding Romulus's birth were of later origin, writers could not make the substitution without causing numerous problems for an already complex story. Instead, under Etruscan influence, the writers separated Mars from Quirinus and gave the god's alter ego to their own *conditor* Romulus. Thus these writers created a new identity for Quirinus.

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## Notes

1. E.g. Liv. 1.16.6; Plut. *Rom.* 27.6.
2. Liv. 1.16.6.
3. Plut. *Rom.* 27.6.
4. Boni, *s.n.* "Roma: Forum Romanum" *PECS* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976).
5. Franz Altheim, *A History of Roman Religion* trans. Harold Mattingly (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1937), 95.
6. Robert Ogilvie, *Commentary on Livy Books 1-5* (London: Clarendon, 1965), 85.
7. Georges Dumézil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, trans. Philip Krapp (Chicago: U of Chicago, 1970), 249. Cf. Ogilvie 84-85.
8. Liv. 1.16.7: *caput orbis terrarum*.
9. Cic. *De Rep.* 2.20.
10. Liv. 1.16.1.
11. Liv. 1.42.
12. H.H. Scullard, *The Etruscan Cities and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 250.
13. Romulus's death also is quite similar to the mythological death of Dionysus. Little is known about the specific nature of the Dionysiac initiation rites, but they usually involved the mangling and devouring of wild animals at the hands of the participants. Dodd writes that behind this rite lay the belief that consuming the fresh blood of the victim added "its vital powers" to those of the participants and that "the victim was felt to embody the vital powers of the god himself, which by the act . . . were transferred to the worshippers" (Introduction, Eur. *Bacchae*, xvii). In the Romulean context, since Romulus was known to have been born from a god and to have possessed certain divine attributes, those who participated in his death were symbolically taking upon themselves some of his divinity, especially his ruling right, which incidentally returned to the Senate during the *interrex* following his death. Dionysiac worshippers also believed that such rituals prepared them for the afterlife. In the light of Michael York's hypothesis that Romulus as Quirinus was a type of underworld god, Dionysiac parallels emerge (York, "Romulus and Remus, Mars and Quirinus" *Journal of Indo-European Studies*, vol. 16, 1988, 165). In sup-

port of this hypothesis comes Altheim's discussion of funeral processions, which passed through the forum over the grave of Romulus as an essential component of the burial rituals (Altheim 95). Although the parallels between Dionysus and Romulus-Quirinus are interesting, they are by no means conclusive or helpful to clarifying the greater mysteries surrounding the identity of Quirinus, and a good deal of further research is needed for discussion of this question.

14. Dion. Hal. 2.22.

15. Cf. Livy's account of 'Tatius' death and Romulus's ill-feigned sorrow. Liv. 1.14.1-3.

16. Liv. 1.1.16.

17. Liv. 1.40.3.

18. Plut. *Rom.* 28.2-3.

19. *Annales* fragments 118-29.

20. D.S. Levene, *Religion in Livy* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1993), 16.

21. Dion. Hal. 2.48.

22. Liv. 1.13.5.

23. R.E.A. Palmer, *Archaic Community of the Romans*, 29.

24. Dion. Hal. 2.48.

25. Liv. 1.13.5: "*Ita geminata urbe ut Sabinis tamen aliquid daretur Quirites a Curibus appellati.*" Plut. *Rom.* 29, Ovid *Fasti* 2.475.

26. Palmer points out the absurdity of a state with a racially diverse population assuming the name of a minority. *Archaic Community of the Romans* 157. Dumézil 160n: "The etymology based on a Sabine *curis*, *quiris* 'spear' is rather unlikely: (1) Sabine *qui* causes difficulty; (2) the spear belongs to Mars rather than Quirinus; (3) the *Quirites*, as opposed to the *militēs*, can hardly have been defined by the spear or by any other weapon; (4) on the basis of the 'spear,' how are we to explain *curiae*?"

27. Quirium could not have taken its name from the Quirinal Hill; the Quirinal was actually first called the Agonus, not at all connected to the supposed root. See Palmer 157, 160, and 176.

28. Dumézil called the *curia* the smallest division of each of the primitive tribes. See Palmer, *Archaic Community of the Romans*, for a complete and conclusive discussion of the origin of the *curiae*.

29. Dumézil, 160-161. For a diverting discussion of the etymology of Quirinus, see Jaan Puhvel, "Remus et Frater," *History of Religions* (15:2, 1975).



30. Dumézil, 161.
31. Suet. *Caes.* 70.
32. Palmer, 156–8.
33. Palmer, 164. Much of the *flamen's* responsibility centered on warding off pestilence and ensuring the prosperity of crops through symbolic rituals.
34. Palmer, 171 argues that three *flamines* do not a triad make.
35. Serv. *On Aen.* 1.292.
36. Dion. Hal. 2.48, 9.60; see also Polybius 3.25.6.
37. Dumézil, 264.
38. Dumézil, 262.
39. Consualia was celebrated on 21 August and either 12 or 15 December and Robigalia on 25 April. See Michael York, *The Roman Festival Calendar of Numa Pompilius* (New York, 1986).
40. W.W. Fowler, *The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic* (Dallas: Kennikat, 1969), 207. Larentalia and Robigalia also have agricultural and fertility undertones.
41. Altheim, *Weltberrschaft und Krise* (GG 172ff.)
42. e.g. Macr. *Sat.* 1.10.16. Also, Mars is believed to be an Etruscan agricultural deity.
43. W. Schulze, *Zur Geschichte Lateinischer Eigennamen*, (Berlin 1904), 368.
44. Massimo Pallotino, *The Etruscans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 146.
45. Liv. 1.16.7.
46. Pallotino, 149.
47. Fowler writes that a renowned cult of Vulcan flourished at Ostia. In August, grain from trade partners arrived in their storehouses, and its citizens sacrificed to Vulcan to ward off the threat of burned grain supply. See *Roman Festivals*, 210.
48. Palmer, 171–2.
49. Pallotino, 140.



ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN  
AND BIBLICAL STUDIES



# Face to Face:

## The Visitation near Jabbok

*Davin B. Anderson*

Jacob, one of the great biblical characters during the Patriarchal Age, was a man who was well acquainted with heavenly visitations as recorded in the Book of Genesis. At Mahanaim, Jacob was met by a host of angels (Gen. 32:1–2). At Bethel, the ancient Canaanite city of Luz, it was God who on two different occasions appeared before Jacob (Gen. 28:11–22; 35:6–15). The biblical accounts of these three numinous experiences are straightforward in that they precisely document what type of activity took place during the event and what type of heavenly being (whether an angel or God) visited Jacob. However, the book of Genesis evinces that Jacob experienced yet a fourth heavenly visitation en route to Canaan from Northwest Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, this experience is not always categorized as such because of the unintelligible manner in which portions of the text have been preserved. This visitation is, of course, the famous “confrontation” of Genesis 32:22–32 near the Ford of Jabbok, east of the Jordan River.<sup>1</sup> The various disjointed and at times illogical sections of this pericope have engendered a timeless debate concerning five chief polemical issues: (1) the nature of the physical encounter, (2) the identity of the unnamed visitor, (3) the nature of Jacob’s injured thigh, (4) the nature of the undefined blessing obtained by Jacob, and (5) the nature and validity of the dietary proscription used to conclude the pericope.

It is the author’s view that each of these five controversial elements can be reconciled in such a way as to legitimize the experience recorded in Genesis 32:22–32 as a divine visitation—

encompassed in sacred ritual—between Jacob and God. This, the first in a series of planned papers, will cover the first two polemical issues concerning (1) the physical nature of the encounter and (2) the unidentified visitor.<sup>2</sup> The methodology used in this paper is based principally on analysis of the pericope itself rather than the exegetical “tendency to neglect the text,” to become “preoccupied with writing the text’s pre- or post-history,” and to overlook the “inescapable fact which is the testimony of scripture” in its original language.<sup>3</sup> The text is given below in its entirety with versification to benefit the reader:

**22** That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maid-servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. **23** After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. **24** So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. **25** When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. **26** Then the man said, “Let me go, for it is daybreak.” But Jacob replied, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” **27** The man asked him, “What is your name?” “Jacob,” he answered. **28** Then the man said, “Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome.” **29** Jacob said, “Please tell me your name.” But he replied, “Why do you ask my name?” Then he blessed him there. **30** So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, “It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.” **31** The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip. **32** Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon. (Genesis 32:22–32)<sup>4</sup>

### **The Physical Nature of the Encounter**

It is quite appropriate to begin with this topic since the overall significance of Jacob’s encounter near the ford of Jabbok rests

largely on the interpretation of the phrase  $\text{וַיִּאָבֶק}$  used in the Hebrew text to designate the so-called famous “wrestle.” Excluding the two occurrences in Genesis 32:25–26, the root  $\text{אָבֶק}$  appears a total of six other times in the Hebrew Bible where its basic meaning is linked to “dust” or “powder.” Based on this association with the dust of the earth, the traditional reading of verses 25 and 26 depict a wrestle or struggle on the ground in such a manner as to “get dusty.”<sup>5</sup> However, it should be emphasized that this mainstream interpretation of the root  $\text{אָבֶק}$  is more conjecture than fact due to the infrequency in which the root appears in the Hebrew Bible. Other estimations on the meaning of the root in the context of this pericope have been set forth. For instance, Wenham sees the usage of  $\text{בֶּק}$  in verses 25 and 26 as a discernable word play on the geographical location of the pericope at “Jabbok” ( $\text{בֶּק}$ ), or even as a crafty distortion of the name “Jacob” ( $\text{עֵקֶב}$ ).<sup>6</sup> On account of this, the meaning of  $\text{וַיִּאָבֶק}$  could be paraphrased as “he Jabboked him” or as “he Jacobed him.” Although such estimations are intriguing, they are essentially worthless in guiding the reader to a real understanding of what sort of physical encounter actually took place.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, other possible meanings for the root in question need to be investigated.

Nachmanides (1194–1270 A.D.), a prolific rabbinic authority and biblical commentator of Spanish descent, intimated that the phrase  $\text{וַיִּאָבֶק}$  should actually be  $\text{וַיִּחַבֶּק}$ , thereby generating the translation of “and he embraced him.”<sup>8</sup> Nachmanides proceeded to explain that the Hebrew letter  $\text{ק}$  was difficult for the Sages “to pronounce in their language and so they used the easier *aleph*” in this instance.<sup>9</sup> Hugh Nibley converges upon the same perspective by stating, “The word conventionally translated by ‘wrestled’ can just as well mean ‘embrace’ and . . . this [was a] ritual embrace that Jacob received.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, Keil and Delitzsch suggest, “It was not a natural or corporeal wrestling, but a real conflict of both mind and body, a work of the spirit with intense effort of the body, in which Jacob was lifted up into a highly elevated condition of body and mind.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is clear that some see the *by*-form *בִּי*, a root that surely engenders mystical images in the context of Jacob's encounter, as a highly probable substitute for *בְּנִי* in verses 25 and 26.<sup>12</sup> Such a ritualistic reading would not prove to be out of place in the Genesis account when one examines the structural underlining of Genesis 27 and 48 wherein "the formal summons to the son to be blessed, the subsequent identification of that son, the symbolic kiss exchanged between blesser and blessed, and the formulaic pronouncement of blessing are all motifs redolent with the language of ceremony and cult."<sup>13</sup> Hence, it is the author's opinion that the physical nature of Jacob's encounter near the ford of Jabbok was not one of moral strength and ingenuity, not a competitive brawl, but rather something like a ritualistic embrace in "a contest with the weapons of prayer."<sup>14</sup>

### **The Unidentified Visitor—An Angel?**

If one had to select the most puzzling element of the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope, it would most likely be the unidentified visitor whom Jacob encounters. Over the years, scholars have promulgated multiple views in reference to Jacob's mysterious caller depicted simply as a "man" (*אִישׁ*) in Genesis 32:24. The established theory among most scholarly circles purports that Jacob was confronted by an angel, sometimes deemed to be the popular, yet highly ambiguous being known as the "Angel of the Lord."<sup>15</sup> The most significant biblical passage supporting this rendering of the text is found in the book of Hosea where, in his intent to highlight a few monumental events in the "Genesis Jacob Cycle" (Genesis 25:19–35:22),<sup>16</sup> Hosea recounts:

In the womb [Jacob] grasped his brother's heel; as a man he struggled with God. He struggled with the angel and overcame him; he wept and begged for his favor. He found him at Bethel and talked with him there—the LORD God Almighty, the LORD is his name of renown! (Hosea 12:3–5)



As mentioned above, biblical scholars have often referred to this passage to conclude that Jacob's visitor near the ford of Jabbok was indisputably an angel. Although it is true that Hosea employed the Hebrew noun מַלְאָךְ, which is most commonly translated as (1) "messenger" or (2) "angel, as messenger of God,"<sup>17</sup> in Hosea 12:4, several important arguments can be made to demonstrate that Hosea's summary of the event is not sufficient evidence to insist that Jacob was visited by an angel and nothing more.

For example, Eslinger suggests that Hosea's summary of the Genesis Jacob Cycle should be viewed as a case of inner biblical exegesis, meaning that it is one of the "concrete examples of scriptural reinterpretation that have themselves been included in canon."<sup>18</sup> In his intriguing analysis of the reasons for and the product of Hosea's reinterpretation of the "Genesis Jacob,"<sup>19</sup> Eslinger notes in particular the usage of מַלְאָךְ in Hosea 12:4:

The change from the *'ish* of Gen.32:25 to the *mal'ak* of v. 5a [Eslinger uses MT versification throughout] . . . is to be viewed as a claim to authority by Hosea. He envisioned his own prophetic role as that of God's envoy sent to engage Israel in a conflict that would also lead to re-submission to God. In 12:3, Hosea makes formal announcement of Yahweh's dispute with contemporary Israel. This formal dispute was Hosea's way of engaging Israel in a confrontation with Yahweh, just as long before the messenger had struggled with Jacob and prevailed . . . Just as Jacob had wept and supplicated to Esau after submitting to God and the *mal'ak* [Hosea 12:4, Genesis 33:4, 10], so, Hosea suggests, Israel should do likewise.<sup>20</sup>

Eslinger's argument is rather compelling and one that seriously threatens the opinion of those who suppose that Jacob encountered an angel because it calls into question the historical authenticity of Hosea's reference to the מַלְאָךְ.

The textual structure of Hosea 12:2–6 is a second argument that challenges the validity of Hosea's מַלְאָךְ. A detailed perusal of

this text reveals that Hosea deliberately arranged this passage into Hebraic chiasmus form. In reference to this fact, Holladay states, "These chiasmi are not forced on Hosea by the contents of his message; the material could easily be rearranged into normal parallelism. Hosea has intended them."<sup>21</sup> Why did Hosea expend the effort to formulate the chiasmus? What significant meaning was he seeking to convey? It is well known that the main message of a chiasmic passage is derived from its center element, which in the chiasmus format of Hosea 12:2–6 is composed of two phrases: "as a man he struggled with *God*" and "he struggled with the *angel* and overcame him" (italics added). When distinguishing the parallel between "God" and the "angel" in these two salient phrases, the dominant theme of this chiasmus seems to focus on Jacob's interaction with heavenly beings more than anything else. According to this insight, it should be stressed that it was the notion of the divine visitor at the ford of Jabbok, not the angel *per se*, that Hosea chose to accentuate in his chiasmic account.

### **The Unidentified Visitor—God!**

Furthermore, there are several biblical passages that question whether Hosea meant to imply something more than a mere "angel" with his usage of the noun מלאך. The most applicable passage to the discussion at hand is found in Genesis 48 where Joseph brought his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, to his father Jacob so that they could obtain a blessing from the great Patriarch's hand. In this setting, Jacob addressed God by saying, "The *God* before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the *God* who has led me all my life long to this day, the *angel* who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads" (Genesis 48:15–16; RSV, italics added). With this simple, but most significant blessing, Jacob lucidly demonstrated his perception that God and angel can be seen as analogous terms, for he referred to the God of his fathers as the same "angel" of his deliverance. Nibley reasons through this overt paradox by

explaining that the noun "angel" has developed a "sense of a generic name for the beings of the heavenly world."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, "any heavenly being is properly an angel," including "Jehovah himself in his capacity of a messenger to men."<sup>23</sup>

In addition, a handful of other biblical passages make this same correlation between God and the otherwise mysterious Angel of the Lord (or Angel of God). One pertinent example that involves Jacob is a certain dream sequence in Genesis 31:11–13. The text reads, "The *angel of God* said to me in the dream . . . 'I am the *God* of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to *me*'" (italics added). The reference to Jacob's experience at Bethel in this passage is documented in Genesis 28:11–22 and Genesis 35:6–15. It is significant that this dream sequence begins with the "angel of God" as its main character because the Bethel texts indubitably establish God as Jacob's heavenly visitor. Thus, a careful comparison between this and other contextually related passages<sup>24</sup> reveals that this "most striking . . . figure of the *mal'ak yhw* [Angel of the Lord] . . . speaks in God's name and occasionally appears as Yahweh himself."<sup>25</sup>

To be sure, the confusion concerning the visitor in the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope would be presumably nonexistent if a more expressive Hebrew word other than *ʾiš* would have been utilized in Genesis 32:24 to describe the being whom Jacob encountered. The noun *ʾiš* when compounded with other nouns can take on various meanings, but when standing alone in the Hebrew Bible it is a rather generic term that is ordinarily rendered as "man," "husband," or "male."<sup>26</sup> However, in the case of the Jabbok encounter, none of these common translations are satisfactory, since neither of them support Hosea's somewhat tenuous poetic portrayal of Jacob's spiritual confrontation with an angel, nor more importantly, Jacob's enthusiastic claim to have seen God in Genesis 32:30. Thus, the critical inquiry that must be answered is whether textual examples from the Hebrew Bible exist in which the noun *ʾiš*, due to the narrative context of the passage, expresses the presence of a heavenly

being, either an angel or God himself.

There are, in fact, a few scattered biblical passages that provide evidence for such a phenomenon, the most salient reference being Genesis 18:1–33.<sup>27</sup> This lengthy scriptural segment begins by stating, “The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day” (Genesis 18:1). Thereafter the story relates that it was three unnamed “men” (אֲנָשִׁים, plural for אִישׁ) who wandered into Abraham’s camp. Thus, with the juxtaposition of these two sets of visitors—God and the three men—the biblical writer established a pattern that depicts God as being one of these three men. Even though the majority of the passage only hints at this relationship,<sup>28</sup> verse 22 drops any pretense of ambiguity by stating, “The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.” In other words, two of the אֲנָשִׁים left Mamre for Sodom (See Genesis 19:1), while God, being the third member of this unnamed party of אֲנָשִׁים, stayed behind to converse with Abraham about the future destruction of Sodom. Thus, Wenham asserts, “Here at last the identity of the visitors is clarified: one is or represents the Lord; the other two are angelic companions.”<sup>29</sup> As a result, Genesis 18:1–33 is a premier text with which to compare Genesis 32:22–32 because it plainly associates the Hebrew noun אֱלֹהִים with God.

Moreover, certain elements in ancient rabbinical thought constitute another viable source that draws a parallel between אֱלֹהִים and God. The ancient rabbis, or “Sages,” were astute in discovering appellations for God through their dedicated study of the Hebrew Bible. They were seen as men of “real piety and true knowledge of God” who illuminated “God’s relation to men and the world’s relation to God, His attributes and nature in such manifold ways and *names*.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, some of the most popular names for God in modern Jewry stem from the rabbinical tradition.<sup>31</sup> The exact number of appellations the ancient rabbis attributed to God varies from list to list. One highly pertinent source enumerates ninety-one rabbinic

titles for God and present among this list is the term  $\text{עֲלֹהִים}$ .<sup>32</sup> Although some prominent Jews of ancient times, such as the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.E.-50 C.E.), did not accept this designation as a true name for God, there were many authoritative rabbis who, like Rabbi Akiba (45-135 C.E.), fully endorsed the pronouncement of the term as a title for God.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, in the opinion of some of the earliest biblical scholars, the Hebrew term for "man" could, at times, be employed to represent God. Although this argument does not represent insurmountable evidence to directly link the divine appellation  $\text{עֲלֹהִים}$  of the rabbis with the usage of  $\text{עֲלֹהִים}$  in Genesis 32:24, it does, however, posit some portion of corroborating evidence that should not be ignored.

Of course, the most substantial source of textual support for the argument that it was God who visited Jacob near the ford of Jabbok is Jacob's personal witness near the end of the event: "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30, RSV). The key phrase here is "face to face" ( $\text{פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים}$ ), which occurs only five times in the entire Hebrew Bible, each reference solely dedicated to expressing an actual heavenly visitation (only one of which is not performed by God) to an individual or to the Israelites as a whole.<sup>34</sup> On account of this, Drinkard defines  $\text{פָּנִים}$  as "the most common word in the [Old Testament] for 'presence' in a broader sense than just 'face.' Thus *panim* was used in reference to . . . being in Yahweh's presence."<sup>35</sup> Drinkard concludes by stating, "It seems obvious that 'seeing Yahweh's face' had much the same meaning of entering Yahweh's presence directly."<sup>36</sup> Hence, analysis of the original Hebrew text unequivocally confirms that Jacob did not express some sort of aspirant desire, but rather an undeniable reality as he proclaimed, "I have seen God face to face." Shortly after his Jabbok encounter, Jacob further verified this reality by declaring to his brother Esau, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God" (Gen. 33:10).

## Conclusion

It is vital to explore every detail, no matter how minute, of each verse in the Genesis 32:22–32 pericope in order to come to a complete understanding of this highly significant text. It is also vital to allow the original Hebrew of the text to speak for itself in an effort to perceive its original meaning. By means of these two exegetical guidelines, the author has attempted to illustrate that it was indeed God who appeared before Jacob near the ford of Jabbok, as he did twice at Bethel; and that the physical nature of this encounter was a type of ritual embrace between man and deity.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, there are yet three other polemical elements in this pericope that likewise must be thoroughly defined in order to eliminate the mystery that surrounds the text and arrive at a solid conclusion of what actually happened in Jacob's encounter. The aim of this author is to do so in a series of papers of which this is the first; to ultimately show that Jacob's eventful night near the ford of Jabbok was not some indefinable "strange adventure,"<sup>37</sup> but rather a ritualistic temple experience *par excellence*.

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## Notes

1. In the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), the pericope begins with verse 23 and goes to verse 33. Therefore, the synchronization between MT (32:23–33) and the standard English versions (32:22–32) is off by one verse.
2. The next paper concerning this pericope will cover (3) the nature of Jacob's injured thigh and (4) the nature of the undefined blessing given to

Jacob, while the final paper of this series will be dedicated to exploring (5) the nature and validity of the dietary proscription used to conclude the passage of Genesis 32:22–32.

3. Robert Martin-Achard, "An Exegete Confronting Genesis 32:23–33," in *Structural Analysis and Biblical Exegesis* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: The Pickwick Press, 1974), 35.

4. Unless otherwise specified, all biblical passages cited in this paper are from the *New International Version* of the Bible (NIV).

5. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2000), 7, word #79.

6. Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Review: Genesis 16–50* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1994), 295.

7. Ibid.

8. Rabbi Charles B. Chavel, trans. and comp., *Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1971), 405. Another variant rendering of the phrase אִתָּבֶק offered by Nachmanides is "and he attached himself." [Ibid., 404.]

9. Ibid., 404.

10. Hugh Nibley, *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1975), 243.

11. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 305.

12. Wenham, *Word Biblical Review: Genesis 16–50*, 295. The root אִתָּבֶק appears a total of three times in the corpus of Genesis: Genesis 29:13; 33:4; 48:10.

13. Susan Ackerman, "The Deception of Isaac, Jacob's Dream at Bethel, and Incubation on an Animal Skin," in Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan, eds., *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1991), 93–94.

14. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949), 147. The ritualistic context of Jacob's encounter in Genesis 32:22–32 will become more apparent in a future paper that will discuss the issues concerning the nature of Jacob's injured thigh and the nature of the undefined blessing obtained by him. See note #4.

15. The "Angel of the Lord" appears six times in the Book of Genesis: Genesis 16:7, 9–11; 22:11, 15. See also note # 30.
16. Lyle M. Eslinger, "Hosea 12:5a and Genesis 32:29: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, no. 18 (1980) : 92.
17. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 521, word #4397.
18. Eslinger, "Hosea 12:5a and Genesis 32:29: A Study in Inner Biblical Exegesis," 91.
19. *Ibid.*, 96.
20. *Ibid.*, 94–95.
21. William L. Holladay, "Chiasmus, the Key to Hosea XII 3–6," *Vetus Testamentum* 16, no. 1 (January 1966) : 58.
22. Hugh Nibley, "Censoring the Joseph Smith Story" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1961), 18.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Genesis 16:7–13, Exodus 3:1–4:17, Judges 6:11–24; 13:2–24. See also Don Slager, "Who is the 'Angel of the Lord'?" *The Bible Translator* 39, no. 4 (October 1988) : 436–438.
25. Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 942.
26. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 35–36, word #376.
27. See also Joshua 5:13–15 and Judges 13:2–24, which respectively associate עֲמֹן ("man") with the heavenly "commander of the army of the Lord" and "the angel of the LORD."
28. God is explicitly mentioned in Genesis 18:13, 17, 20, 22, 26, and 33, while the set of unnamed עֲמֹנִים are mentioned in Genesis 18:2, 16, 22.
29. Wenham, *Word Biblical Review: Genesis 16–50*, 51.
30. A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God: The Names and Attributes of God*, vol. 1 (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1968), 55. [Italics added].
31. An example of some popular names for God that were first pronounced by the ancient rabbis are *Adonai*, *El*, *Eloha*, *Elohim*, *Shaddai*, *Ha-Kadosh*, *Barukh Hu*, *Ha-Makom*, *Shekinah*, *En Soph*, and *Melakhim*. [Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (New York: Macmillan



Publishing Company, 1989), 290].

32. For the list of ninety-one rabbinic titles for God see Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God: The Names and Attributes of God*, 54–107. For Xya 'ish as a rabbinic title for God see *Ibid.*, 65.

33. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrines of God: Essays in Anthropomorphism*, vol. 2, 7–9. Philo of Alexandria, a leader among Diasporan Jews in Egypt, was well trained in Hellenistic thought, and therefore, was opposed to honoring the name יְהוָה as a reverent title for God because of the anthropomorphic overtones inherently present in such a title. [*Ibid.*].

34. Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:10 both refer to Moses and his experiences of seeing God “face to face” (פְּנֵי אֵל פְּנֵי). Ezekiel 20:35 is metaphoric council given by Ezekiel to try to coerce the children of Israel to return to God in righteousness so that God could once again plead with them “face to face” as in the wilderness of Sinai. At first glance, Judges 6:22 is the only case wherein the phrase “face to face” is not explicitly used as a direct reference to beholding God, for in this verse Gideon’s heavenly visitor is described as the “Angel of the Lord.” Yet, this author argues that in respect to the evidence that has been presented in this paper concerning the literal correlation between God and the “Angel of the Lord” (see note #30), Judges 6:22 should not be viewed as a variant to the established pattern.

35. Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., “Face,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 743.

36. *Ibid.*

37. Alex Preminger and Edward L. Greenstein, comp., *The Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism* (New York: Ungar Publishing Company, 1986), 436.



# **Becoming as a Little Child:**

## **Elements of Ritual Rebirth in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity**

*Matthew J. Grey*

Throughout ancient cultures we find that consistent activities often combine to form variations of a pattern which emerge for use in both ritual and secular settings. Four of these elements include: (1) a washing with water, (2) an anointing with oil, (3) clothing in a garment, and (4) the receiving of a name. These activities are fairly consistent in the ancient world are present in different aspects of life and ritual, more particularly in an ancient scripture and temple context.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this article is to examine various combinations of these elements in light of another concept consistently found in ancient cultures—the idea of “ritual rebirth.” It is hoped that this article will demonstrate a connection between the two concepts. These actions of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming play out a major function in the process of becoming ritually “born again.” The first section of the article will discuss the concept of “ritual rebirth,” followed by the actual elements of birth and rebirth in ancient cultures. The second section will deal with uses and examples of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming as a symbolic new birth process in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

### **Ritual Rebirth in Ancient Cultures**

As a foundation to this discussion, there must be an understanding of the “ritual rebirth” concept as found in ancient cultures. Briefly stated, there are times in an ancient culture when initiation into a new phase of life is necessary. At these times the initiate makes

higher covenants with God, prepares for new responsibilities, is adopted into a new family, and so on. Because these experiences literally bring the individual into a new state of being, the ancients felt one must be "born again" to begin this new life. In many cases, the process of being born again involves rituals that call to mind the original birth process.

The rebirth ritual most familiar to Christians is of course the baptism that Jesus sets forth in the Gospel of John. When Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, he is told that men need to be "born again." Confused, he asks, "how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3:3). Jesus answers by explaining "except a man be born of water [baptism] and of the Spirit [Holy Ghost], he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). The chapter later implies that the blood shed (life given) by Jesus is another critical element to accept in being born again. That Jesus uses these three elements—water baptism, spirit of the Holy Ghost, and blood of the Atonement—as necessary components to enter this new life is significant. After all, everyone was "born into the world [originally] by water, and blood, and the spirit" (Moses 6:59). It is therefore appropriate that those three elements be present as the person is symbolically born the second time into the kingdom of God.

Two explicit examples from less familiar settings are given to us by Sir James George Frazer in his seminal work on ancient ritual. The first is from Greek society, the second from India.

In ancient Greece any man who had been supposed erroneously dead, and for whom in his absence funeral rites had been performed, was treated as dead to society till he had gone through a woman's lap, then washed, dressed in swaddling clothes, and put out to nurse. . . . In ancient India, under similar circumstances the supposed dead man had to pass his first night after his return in a tub filled with a mixture of fat and water; there he sat with doubled-up fists and without uttering a syllable, like a child in a womb, while over him were performed all the sacraments that

were wont to be celebrated over a pregnant woman. Next morning he got out of the tub and went through once more all the other sacraments he had formerly partaken of from his youth up.<sup>2</sup>

Arab cultures have similar rites when one is to be adopted into a family. "As the mother brings forth a child, she lets him slip through her dress from the neck to the hem. If he is so big that he cannot pass through her dress in this way she must place him under the hem of her dress."<sup>3</sup>

While these are different rites than were performed at the Christian baptism, the concept was the same; to enter a new phase of life one must be born again by ritually experiencing elements similar to the original birthing process. Passing through water, travelling through a woman's lap, or sitting in a fetal position are all examples of being ritually and symbolically reborn into a new stage of life.

### **Elements of Birth and Rebirth**

Based on this concept of ritual rebirth it is now necessary to outline the practices of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming present in the original birth process. Interestingly enough, much of what we know about the ancient birthing process, particularly in the Near East, come from manners and customs that have survived to this day. However, we do have enough information from the ancients themselves to speak with confidence as to how such things were indeed carried out. In any case, modern scholars seem to have come to a relative agreement on the birth process during the Old and New Testament periods.

Describing the process as many other scholars have, F. B. Knutson explains that after the baby is born, "the [navel] cord would be cut, the baby washed with water, rubbed with salt, and wrapped in clothes. Often the child was named at birth."<sup>4</sup> O.J. Baab writes that "after birth the infant's navel cord was cut; then the

infant was washed, rubbed with salt, and swathed in bands. . . . Children were named at birth.”<sup>5</sup> For further reinforcement, Edith Deen makes a similar statement in her work on family life during the biblical period. “After a baby was born he was washed, rubbed with salt . . . wrapped in swaddling clothes . . . [and] almost immediately his mother gave him a name.”<sup>6</sup> Here we can easily see, along with the cutting of the navel cord, the elements of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming. One of the purposes of this article is to demonstrate how the ancients saw in these natural experiences of childbearing practices that could easily be used later in life in a ritual context. Following the birth sequence as these scholars have set forth, let us briefly examine each step and their possible symbolic “rebirth” implications.

*Washing.* It was stated that the baby first had to be washed with water. This has definite hygienic and practical purposes. Of course the newborn baby would be covered with the blood of the mother, as well as any other embryonic fluids. Before anything else it was necessary to wash the baby clean.

The practice of washing with water appears almost universally in the world of ritual. Perhaps due to the natural and obvious symbolic values of water, various forms of washing are carried out in virtually every culture. The use of water in ritual typically parallels its purposes in everyday activity. One of the main roles of water is of course to make something clean. In ritual this is often a key component. For somebody or something to be washed with water symbolically cleanses them from a past action or life of impurity. In the Judaic tradition, the “act of washing [was and is] performed to correct a condition of ritual impurity and restore the impure to a state of ritual purity. . . . the main purpose of any ablution [washing] was to become ‘holy.’”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, washing makes one worthy to act in various capacities. In many cases, a person would have to wash either the entire body or certain parts of the body before entering a sacred place or carrying out a sacred responsibility. These concepts certainly carry over into early Christianity as well.

As relating to the ritual rebirth, it is interesting that we find the same imagery employed that naturally exists in the original birth process. Just as the baby had to be washed clean of the blood with which it was covered from its former sphere of life (the mother's womb), to be reborn a person must be washed clean of the blood (often a symbol for life and/or sins) of his past life. An explicit example of this is found in an Old Testament temple ritual. Hugh W. Nibley explains that following a specific sacrifice of an animal, the blood (life/sins) would be applied to the priests and smeared all over their garments. They would then be washed clean of the blood. "The sons of Aaron were made bloody, as if they had been sacrificed, and then cleansed, as if cleared of their sins."<sup>8</sup> Thus, a washing with water makes one worthy to begin new life or responsibilities as they have been cleansed from the blood and sins of their old life.

*Anointing.* The second step is the anointing. In the examples of the birth sequence given above, after the baby was washed it would be rubbed with salt. Salt in many ancient cultures (especially Israelite culture) had definite religious as well as practical value. While the religious implications of the salt are beyond the scope of this article, crucial to our discussion is the element that typically accompanied the salt. It is clear that in many cases the salt would be mixed with oil.

D.E. Garland insists that after birth, "the baby was washed, rubbed with *salt and oil*, and wrapped with strips of cloth."<sup>9</sup> Raphael Patai agrees and states that after the washing the baby would be rubbed "with salt and oil mixed together."<sup>10</sup> Further evidence that oil was an important part of this second step of anointing is confirmed by considering the modern Near Eastern practice. John Tvedtness discusses the "washing and anointing of newborn babies" in a biblical context by referring to his own experience among the modern Arabs.<sup>11</sup> He emphasizes the climatic reasons for use of the oil. Being in such a hot and dry climate, the oil can have both a soothing and a cleansing effect. Thus, "newborn babes are

still washed, then anointed with olive oil.”<sup>12</sup> One final example comes from the Arabs themselves. Presumably following ancient custom, they explain how, along with cutting the navel cord and washing with water, “they crush a handful of salt and mix it with oil. And smear the child with it. And anoint the whole child, even his eyes, ears and nose, and his mouth.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as an anointing of the baby follows washing, there is commonly an anointing that follows the ritual washing. The act of washing is typically to make one worthy. In most cases, the act of ritual anointing serves to empower or enable the person to do what he was made worthy to do through the washing. In its most common application, anointing with oil was used in the coronation of a king or in the consecration of a priest.<sup>14</sup> In both cases the individual is being empowered in his office using the anointing oil as a symbol of the act. Likewise, in both cases the person is beginning a new phase of life into which he must be reborn.

In Old Testament writings, this is made especially clear with Israel’s more famous kings. Before Saul could officially begin to rule as king, the prophet Samuel first “took a vial of oil, and poured it on his head” (1 Samuel 10:1). Likewise David, who was chosen to succeed Saul, had to be anointed as a symbol of his new responsibilities. In this case, the anointing is specifically associated with the receiving of the spirit of God. “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward” (1 Samuel 16:13).

The act of anointing also symbolizes the sanctification of the individual. In the case of an Israelite priest we are told that “the anointment ‘sanctifies’ the high priest by removing him from the realm of the profane and empowering him to operate in the realm of the sacred.”<sup>15</sup> Below we will see more possibilities of meaning for the anointings. However, whether it be empowering individuals to accomplish a task or preparing them for death and resurrection, the anointing consistently plays a role in being ritually reborn into a new life.



Occasionally we will encounter both the washing and anointing of specific parts or functions of the body. It is often important to correlate the symbolic meaning of the ritual act with the possible symbolism of the body part or function being dealt with. For example, in Leviticus a ritual is alluded to in which the blood of the sacrifice (here acting in the cleansing role of water) was applied to the priests "upon the tip of [the priests] right ear, and upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot" (Leviticus 8:23). Anointing oil would next be applied to those same parts (Leviticus 8:30). Consistent symbolism connected with those specific parts would certainly include the ear as one's ability to hear the word of God,<sup>16</sup> the hand as one's ability to do the works of God,<sup>17</sup> and the foot as one's ability to walk in the path of God.<sup>18</sup> Thus to wash and anoint those parts would carry the connotation of being worthy (washed) and empowered (anointed) to hear, to do, and to walk in accordance with the Lord's purposes.

The practice of anointing different parts of the body also surfaces as a preparation for death and resurrection. In the pseudepigraphical *Book of Adam and Eve*, we are told about Adam's preparations for death. It appears that the fall had delivered various "blows" of mortality to each part of his body, beginning with the head, eyes, ears, and each separate limb. To reverse these effects each part needed to be anointed in anticipation of the resurrection. As Adam asks for the oil from the Tree of Life, he cries "anoint me with it, that I may have rest [λυτροθω εκ—"will be redeemed"] from these pains, by which I am being consumed."<sup>19</sup> Hence, Hugh Nibley refers to this as the "oil of healing, which reverses the blows of death."<sup>20</sup>

Without elaborating, it is interesting to at least mention how familiar this sounds to the Egyptian "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony. This Osirian ritual was performed on the dead by a priest using a special instrument to touch the eyes, ears, nose and mouth in an attempt to "awaken" them for the resurrection. Indeed, "the purpose of the ceremony of Opening the Mouth was the restora-

tion of the deceased king to the normal condition of a living man with all his faculties resuscitated, and to make him ready for his purification which was the immediate step to the spiritualization of his body, the glorification of his spirit, and his deification."<sup>21</sup> We will encounter these kinds of symbolic practices as I examine examples of ritual rebirth in ancient Judaism and early Christianity.

*Clothing.* The third step in the birth sequence, following the washing and anointing, is the clothing or dressing of the baby. In ancient cultures this is referred to as wrapping the baby in swaddling clothes. To swaddle means literally "to entwine, [or] enwrap."<sup>22</sup> Obviously performed by one involved in the birth process, this was done primarily for reasons of strengthening the baby. The child would have been wrapped very tightly due to the "notion that movement would harm his arms and legs."<sup>23</sup> This step is still followed closely today in various Arab cultures. After "the child has been smeared with the oil it is wrapped again by the midwife."<sup>24</sup>

This action has deeply rooted ritual meaning in many different religions, especially Judaism and Christianity. The important concept of receiving ritual clothing can be traced back to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In referring to the fallen man, the 1611 King James English uses the phrase he was found "naked" (Genesis 2:25, 3:7). We immediately think of simply being without clothing. However, the meaning is deeper. The Hebrew word used is ערודה which also carries with it the connotation of "shame, uncleanness . . . dishonour."<sup>25</sup> Also, being "naked" (ערודה) is to be "exposed, undefended."<sup>26</sup> Thus symbolically, the idea of being "naked" denotes "defenselessness."<sup>27</sup> So once Adam falls and is found naked, he is now unclean, unprotected, and open to all the effects of the fall.

To remedy the situation a protection must be provided. This comes as the Lord makes a coat for Adam from the skins of an animal. "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21). This coat protected Adam from effects of his naked, fallen state. By implication we are

to understand that the animal had to die by way of sacrifice in order to provide the protective coat of skins. Through the death of the animal, Adam was now protected and covered from the effects of the fall. From a Christian perspective, the imagery of Jesus' death and sacrifice would have come to mind every time the coats were handled. It is interesting that the very word for "atonement" in Old Testament Hebrew (כפר) had the original meaning of "to cover."<sup>28</sup> Certainly in the Christian tradition, it is Jesus who atones for, or "covers," man from his naked, fallen state. This concept is taught and symbolized by the clothing in a garment (either literally or figuratively) upon entering into a new life as a disciple of Jesus. As having entered that new life, the person is now covered and atoned for.

*Naming.* The fourth step in the birth sequence, following the washing, anointing, and clothing, is the naming of the baby. This act seems to vary slightly among different cultures. Some name the child immediately, while some have a specified waiting period. In any case, it seems consistent that naming is the next thing that needs to take place. The different naming practices are too numerous to list here. However, one interesting aspect that most seem to have in common is the kind of name. Today in the Near East, as anciently, it appears to be customary to name the child after someone who has gone before, namely a specific ancestor with whom it is hoped the child will have some kind of connection. Occasionally, it can also be circumstances associated with that particular birth that has the deciding influence on the name.<sup>29</sup>

Just as the name given to a baby at birth will essentially become the child's identity, so in the ancient world the receiving of a new name is common in ritual to signify a person's new identity. "This act of [receiving a new name] often occurred at a time of transition in the life of the one renamed and frequently carried with it special privileges and honors for the one receiving the new name. . . . The name change of the receipt of a new name marks a turning point in the life of the initiate: he is 'recreated,' so to speak, and becomes a new man."<sup>30</sup>

Often in the Hebrew scriptures as an individual enters into a new covenant with God he receives a new name. A significant example, among many, would be the story of Abram. Once he made the all important covenant with the Lord, in which he was promised to become a “father of many nations,” (Genesis 17:5) his name underwent a change. Abram (lit. “exalted father”) became Abraham (lit. “exalted father of nations”).<sup>31</sup> Likewise Sarai becomes Sarah (Genesis 17:15) upon entering into the covenant. When the covenant was renewed with their grandson Jacob, he became known as Israel (Genesis 32:28).

This also carries over into the Christian tradition, with such figures as Simon (who becomes “Peter,” Πέτρος, “a stone,” or “a rock”)<sup>32</sup> and Saul (who changes to his Roman name of “Paul”). Throughout the book of Revelation, a sign to follow “him that overcometh,” was the reception of “a new name . . . which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (Revelation 2:17). In these instances, as in others, the change in name had importance relate to the covenant entered into as it indicated a new life of discipleship.

From all of this we see that the pattern of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming is common to the Near Eastern birth process. It has been briefly demonstrated that each of these natural practices can easily be used in ritual to provide the symbolism of being reborn into a new phase of life. First one is washed clean of his past life. He is then empowered or sanctified by the anointing. Third the person is clothed and protected from his previous, fallen life. Finally, he is given a new name to signify this new covenant relationship. These practices and symbols are abundantly attested in ancient cultures.

### **Uses of Washing, Anointing, Clothing, and Naming in Ancient Judaism**

Elements of the birth pattern we have been discussing are often ritually employed in ancient Judaism. Occasionally it is in a

sacred temple setting, and at other times it is found in a more secular, everyday context. Elements of this pattern and their use in both settings act to bring the person into a new phase of life. In some cases we will see all four aspects being employed, while in others we will see two or three being used. In any case, the concept of a rebirth ritual still applies.

*Sacred Settings.* One of the most common uses of this pattern bringing one to a new sphere is its use as a preparation (literally or figuratively) to enter the presence of God. First and foremost (and perhaps the origin of its application in secular settings) is the version of this idea found in Old Testament temple ritual. The temple is designed so that the High Priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement, ascends into the Holy of Holies—the symbolic presence of God. In the preparation phase of these ceremonies, and others similar to it, we find the pattern of washing, anointing, and clothing being carried out. In Exodus the sequence is laid out quite nicely. The priests were first brought to the door of the temple (tabernacle) and there Moses, or another in authority, was to “wash them with water” (Exodus 29:4). This would have made them clean and worthy to begin the ascent back into God’s presence (the Holy of Holies).

Next “thou shalt take the anointing oil, and pour it upon his head and anoint him” (Exodus 29:7) While the text only states that the oil was poured over the head, Alfred Edersheim gives more specifics. “In the olden days when [the High Priest] was anointed, the sacred oil was not only ‘poured over him,’ but also applied to his forehead, over the eyes, as tradition has it, after the form of the Greek letter X.”<sup>33</sup> Here again we see the oil being applied to various parts of the body to sanctify and empower the priest in preparation for the sacred journey he was previously washed worthy to take.

Following the washing and the anointing, “thou shalt bring [Aaron’s] sons, and put coats upon them” (Exodus 29:8). The clothing of the priests in this case was rather detailed. When the priest was ready to enter the inner sanctuary, he would have been wearing this coat, as well as other symbolic vestments. There would have

been “a breastplate, and an ephod [an apron<sup>34</sup>], and a robe, and a broidered coat, a mitre [a bound cap], and a girdle. . . . [also] linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins unto the thighs they shall reach” (Exodus 28:4,42). These articles of clothing symbolize the priest’s new role. Two such roles are those mentioned earlier in connection with ancient Israelite anointings. The recent covenant with God was that they were to be made a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6)—that is kings and priests. With the robe usually representing priesthood, the cap (mitre) is a natural symbol for the crown of the king.<sup>35</sup> Thus the new roles of king and priest are both represented by the clothing.

The concept of the new name is also explicitly involved in this case. Inscribed on a plate of gold to be fitted on the cap was ליהוה קדש “Holiness to the Lord” (Exodus 28:36–38). Writing the sacred Divine Name on the crown of the priest was a symbol of his consecration to the service of God. This entire scenario presents us with a good example of how washing, anointing, clothing and the use of a name were all used to prepare the priest to enter the presence of God. In this way it may be seen as a form of rebirth, as the priest is leaving his former state and ascending to a higher one.

Elements of this pattern appears in pseudepigraphical writings as well. In 2 Enoch, Enoch is beginning a celestial ascent and is told how to prepare for the journey. The Lord tells his escort to “extract Enoch from [his] earthly clothing. And anoint him with my delightful oil, and put him into the clothes of my glory.”<sup>36</sup> While the elements of washing and naming are absent, it is nevertheless clear that stripping Enoch of his old clothes, anointing him with oil, and clothing him in heavenly garments prepares him to enter into a higher sphere.

*Secular Settings.* A more secular example of this pattern comes from the book of Ruth. Here Ruth is certainly about to enter a new life as she will soon present herself to her future husband Boaz. Naomi instructs her on how to prepare. “Wash thyself therefore, and anoint thee, and put thy raiment upon thee” (Ruth 3:3). Washing and anointing generally precede marriage in the ancient

Near East. Again, here the pattern of washing, anointing, and clothing is used to denote a change in the way of life.

We find one more secular example in the welcoming of a guest into one's house by washing and anointing them. It is clear that by the time of Jesus, a common Jewish practice was to offer water and oil to a special guest upon entering the home. J.A. Balchin insists that "on arrival at a feast the guests' feet were washed and their heads anointed with oil."<sup>37</sup> We see the ideal of this practice still in existence in the time of Jesus. When in the house of a Pharisee for a special meal, a woman who was a sinner enters and approaches Jesus. "And stood at his feet behind him weeping, and began to wash his feet with tears . . . and anointed them with the ointment" (Luke 7:38). The Pharisee Simon was concerned about this, but Jesus read his thoughts and responded. "I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she has washed my feet with tears. . . . My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment" (Luke 7:44-46).

This secular act may have also originated with a sacred example. Before David entered the house of the Lord, he went through the same process. "Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped" (2 Samuel 12:20). Just as David had to perform these actions before entering the Lord's house, guests in the Old and New Testament periods experienced a similar welcome when entering another's house. In both cases, we again encounter the concept of leaving one place to come into another. And it is the washing and anointing that signifies the shift.

As was mentioned above, these activities also have a role in burial preparation. Just as the Egyptian "Opening of the Mouth" ceremony was an anointing at death, so we find the same concept in ancient Judaism. By the New Testament period, "after death the body was washed, its eyes were closed and its mouth and other orifices were bound shut. A mixture of spices were applied [anointed] to the body . . . it was then dressed in its own clothes or placed in

a linen shroud.”<sup>38</sup> While it is difficult to determine any originally intended symbolism, it is again interesting to see the same pattern employed before entering the next life.

One final example of this pattern as a type of new birth in ancient Judaism comes from the book of Ezekiel. Here the Lord is talking to His people as a whole. He reveals to them as a nation the missing elements of their original “birth” and then goes on to tell them of their “new birth” through the necessary process. “And as for thy nativity, in the day thou wast born thy navel was not cut, neither wast thou washed in water to supple thee; thou wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all” (Ezekiel 16:4). Next He reminds them of His salvation offered by performing the important steps. In this passage, birth symbolism signifies a new life for Israel.

Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord God, and thou becamest mine. Then washed I thee with water; yea I thoroughly washed away thy blood from thee, and I anointed thee with oil. I clothed thee also with brodered work . . . (Ezekiel 16:8–10)

This is perhaps one of the most explicit examples of what I have been discussing. Here the Lord uses very strong birth symbolism to explain how His people have been reborn into His covenants.

### **Uses of Washing, Anointing, Clothing, and Naming in Early Christianity**

Having shown examples of the pattern in ancient Judaism, this article will conclude by demonstrating some of its uses in early Christianity. Indeed, Jesus Himself as well as the early church fathers, saw the elements of this pattern as useful in signifying a new life for an individual. As would be expected, the early Christian writers tend to emphasize the spiritual rebirth more than anything else.



*New Testament.* For example, John 9 tells of a man who was blind from birth. John seems to use the story of Jesus' interaction with him to teach a spiritual lesson. In this case, blindness is most likely being equated with spiritual blindness. To both heal the blind man as well as to teach the necessity of being brought to a higher spiritual awareness, Jesus uses elements from the pattern to carry it out. First "he anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay, and said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. . . . He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing" (James 9:6-7). In response to questions about his healing, the man told how Jesus "anointed mine eyes, and said unto me, Go . . . and wash: and I went and washed, and I received sight" (John 9:11). In this case, both literally and figuratively, a washing and anointing allowed this man to see, and introduced him to into a new phase of life.

The same imagery is employed by John in Revelation. Here the Lord reminds the churches of their fallen condition. "Thou art wretched . . . and blind and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me . . . that thou mayest be rich; and with raiment that thou mayest be clothed and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see" (Revelation 3:17-18). Again a clothing and an anointing is necessary for ultimate salvation.

*Early Christian Ritual.* While these are examples of various combinations of the pattern in different New Testament passages, perhaps the best example from early Christianity comes from the baptismal ritual: the ultimate rebirth ritual in all of Christianity. The Christian baptism of the first few centuries is the most explicit use of this pattern as a rebirth ritual. Most of our understanding of this ritual comes from the early church leaders and writers, such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, Chrysostom, and others, along with some very able modern scholars. Their records specify the various steps of being born again in the early church.

Cyril's writings show that the ceremony was performed in some kind of "inner chamber," most likely a form of baptismal font. The

baptismal candidate first took off his former garment, symbolic of putting off the old life. Having put off old sins, the person is now like Adam naked in the garden.<sup>39</sup> In fact, the person is actually standing naked, a definite element of the original birth process. Hugh M. Riley, who has done extensive work on the topic, explains how the removal of the garment was a common ceremony in the ancient world. It is, he writes, a “return to primeval innocence.”<sup>40</sup> Along with this, there is also an account of a pre-baptismal anointing.<sup>41</sup>

Then comes the actual baptism, or washing. “After these things, ye were led to the pool of Divine Baptism . . . and descended three times into the water, and ascended again.”<sup>42</sup> That the Christian baptism is a washing that cleanses the person from his past life and sins hardly needs further comment. And of course Cyril, like Christ in John 3, equates this act with going through the birth process all over again. “And at the selfsame moment, ye died and were born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.”<sup>43</sup>

Following the baptism of water comes the baptism of the Holy Ghost. Interestingly enough, oil has long been a symbol for the Holy Ghost and to signify its reception, the early Christian would have been anointed with oil immediately after coming out of the water. Extant texts describe the post-baptismal anointing ceremony are very instructive and employ a concept we had discussed earlier. Most of the writings from the early church fathers agree that the anointing oil would have been applied to various parts of the person's body, along with special blessings in connection to the body part that is being anointed.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps the most explicit description of the ceremony comes from sixth century Gaul. The prayer would have been as follows.

Receive the seal of Christ [Χριστός—“anointed”], listen to the  
divine words, be enlightened by the Word of the Lord,  
because today you are accepted by Christ.

I sign your forehead in the name of the Father, the Son, and the  
Holy Spirit so that you may be a Christian.

I sign your eyes so that you may see the glory of God.

I sign your ears, so that you may hear the voice of the Lord.  
 I sign your nostrils so that you may breathe the fragrance of  
 Christ.  
 I sign your lips so that you may speak the words of life.  
 I sign your heart so that you may believe in the Holy Trinity.  
 I sign your shoulders so that you bear the yoke of Christ's service.  
 I sign your whole body, in the name of the Father, the Son, and  
 the Holy Spirit so that you may live forever and ever.<sup>45</sup>

Cyril gives his own description of the post-baptismal anointing ceremony and elaborates on the specific blessings.<sup>46</sup> For example, he connects the anointing of the ears to the common New Testament phrase "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." To him that phrase was in direct reference to those who had specially anointed [empowered] ears. They were able to "hear" things others were not.<sup>47</sup> The anointing of the various body parts was given special significance by other early church leaders, as Hugh Riley explained.<sup>48</sup>

Most records after washing and anointing indicate that there would have been a new white robe ("the royal robe") given to the person to dress with. This act has much the same meaning as the coat of skins given to Adam. The person is now literally and spiritually "covered" from their naked, fallen state. Indeed, the "putting on of the white robe [is] a symbol that the sins of the baptized person have been forgiven or covered over"<sup>49</sup> through the sacrificial atonement (כִּפּוּר "covering") provided by Jesus. That it was white symbolized the purity expected in the person's new life.<sup>50</sup> Chrysostom saw cosmic significance in the baptismal garment: it was a symbol for immortality.<sup>51</sup> He also believed the garment provided great spiritual protection and it was not to be defiled by "untimely words, or idle listening, or by evil thoughts, or by eyes which rush foolishly to see whatever goes on [the same senses that were previously anointed]. Let us . . . keep our garment of immortality unspotted and unstained."<sup>52</sup> By wearing the garment faithfully and living a pure life Chrysostom also believed it would protect one from temptation and allow outsiders to see the light of the person's

new life with Christ and become converted themselves.<sup>53</sup> By all accounts, however, the garment represented Christ Himself. It is widely accepted that this garment was what Paul had in mind when he said that “as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have *put on Christ*” (Galatians 3:27, italics added).<sup>54</sup>

The final step is the receiving of the new name—the name of “Christ.” All of this ritual implied that one was born again or adopted into Christ’s heavenly family. As such, and as one who had received the anointing, the new name received would be that of “Christ” Himself. The Greek word for Christ (Χριστός) literally means “anointed.”<sup>55</sup> Since the reception of the Holy Ghost is an anointing (Χρίσμα, or unction),<sup>56</sup> it is appropriate to receive the name of “anointed,” or “Christ” upon receiving the Spirit. “Only after receiving this anointing can the neophyte properly be called ‘Christian.’”<sup>57</sup> To again quote Cyril, “When you are counted worthy of this Holy Chrism, you are called Christians, verifying also the name by your new birth.”<sup>58</sup> As the act signifies adoption into Christ’s family, the initiate now bears the title of “Christ’s Son,” or “Christian.”

The early Christian baptismal ceremony provides an ideal example of how the pattern of washing, anointing, clothing, and naming are used as a rebirth ritual. The baptism is a washing that cleans the person from all past sins. The Holy Ghost was symbolized by an actual anointing with oil that blessed the person’s senses and abilities as a Christian. There was a white robe given to clothe the person from their former naked, fallen state. Finally, the new name of “Christ” was received as the person began his new life of discipleship. This is a striking example of being ritually born again into a new phase of life.

## Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the role of ritual rebirth in ancient cultures. In pointing out that the original birth process in

the ancient Near East included the baby being washed, anointed, clothed, and named, I hope to have demonstrated that the use of this pattern, or variations on it, offered possibilities for ritual rebirth. Examples have been given from ancient Judaism and early Christianity that demonstrate how aspects of this pattern were used and viewed as symbols of entering into a new phase of life. It is interesting to see how these things originate, circulate, and acquire didactic and symbolic significance. As Latter-day Saints, we can learn much about our own rituals (in our baptismal ceremony as well as the higher liturgies of the church) and theology by examining these ancient customs. Truly we have been left a rich symbolic and ritualistic legacy from our ancient Jewish and Christian theological ancestors.

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## Notes

1. As the focus of the present work is mainly ancient Judaism and early Christianity, I will here give a few examples of this pattern from cultures not discussed in this paper. During the Roman era, for example, we find the "sharp-eyed Athena" statue going through an annual ritual of being washed, polished with oil, and being robed before being put on display. See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 114. In ancient Babylon the same pattern emerges. Here the "main object of the cult was the service of the gods . . . The gods were supposed to live a physical life and had daily to be washed, anointed, perfumed, dressed, attired and fed." See Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 212. For Adapa to enter the presence of Ea, he is given "water, clothes to put on and oil with which to anoint himself." *Ibid.*, 106. Also before the "sacred marriage" ceremony, the priestess representing the goddess must bathe and be sprinkled with oil. *Ibid.*, 91.

2. Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 17.
3. Hilma Granqvist, *Birth and Childhood Among the Arabs* (Helsingfors: Soderstrom & Co., 1947), 114.
4. F.B. Knutson, "Birth," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:514.
5. O.J. Baab, "Birth," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abington Press, 1962), 1:440.
6. Edith Deen, *Family Living in the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 88.
7. "Ablution," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, Keter Pub. House, 1971), 2:81-86.
8. Hugh W. Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 56. Here Nibley is also discussing the value of blood as a ritual cleansing property in and of itself. It is the concept of being "washed clean in the blood" that comes up so often in the scriptures.
9. D.E. Garland, "Swaddling," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4:670, italics added.
10. Raphael Patai, *Family, Love, and the Bible* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1960), 169-170.
11. John Tvedtness, "Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost," *Allegory of the Olive Tree* (Salt Lake: Deseret Book, 1994), 441.
12. Ibid., 428.
13. Granqvist, 95.
14. See "Anointing," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 3:27.
15. Ibid., 3:28.
16. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 223. "In the Bible the ear is synonymous with the heart and mind as an organ of cognition (Prov. 2:2; Is. 6:9-10), and true hearing involves listening and understanding (Job 34:16). The ear is personified as hearing and understanding (Job 13:1), seeking knowledge (Prov. 18:15) and testing words (Job 12:11). . . . Hearing symbolizes the proper response to God in the Bible."
17. Ibid., 361.
18. Ibid., 280.
19. The Books of Adam and Eve, 34:1-2, 36:2, *The Apocrypha and*

*Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 2:142–143. For a further discuss on the Greek, *Lutrotbo ek*, see Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Pub., 2000), 384.

20. Nibley, 56.

21. Samuel A. B. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1952), 4:36–7. Here Mercer gives us further references for the details of this ceremony. “The opening of the mouth occurs in many places in these texts, especially in Uts. 20–22 and 37–42. The opening of the eyes occurs in Uts. 638–639; opening of the mouth, nose, and ears is mentioned in 712a-b; and in 1673a-b all four, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth are named.”

22. O. J. Baab, “Swaddle,” *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:468.

23. Deen, 88.

24. Granqvist, 95.

25. James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), word numbers 6172 and 6173, 110 of the New Strong's Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible.

26. F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Massachusetts: Henrickson, 1996), 788–9.

27. *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 581.

28. *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word numbers 3722 and 3725, 66 of the New Strong's Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Hebrew Bible. See also, *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 497–8.

29. See Patai, 170–173.

30. Bruce H. Porter and Stephen D. Ricks, “Names in Antiquity: Old, New, and Hidden,” *By Study and Also By Faith Vol. I* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 504&507.

31. There are actually many possibilities for what the two names originally meant. However, the literal translations provided in the text are the most common given by scholars. For a deeper discussion on the etymology of this particular name see “Abraham,” *Encyclopedia Judaica* 2:112.

32. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 507.

33. Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 67.

34. This is suggested by Hugh Nibley in "Sacred Vestments," *Temple and Cosmos*, 98–99. See also Carol Meyers, "Ephod," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:550. Here Meyers describes the ephod as "an apron-like garment, suspended from waist level downward . . . it probably completely encircled the lower body."

35. See J. M. Myers, "Turban," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 4:718. Myers actually describes the cap of the High Priest as a "crown."

36. Enoch 22:8, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, James H. Charlesworth, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1:138.

37. J.A. Balchin, "Oil," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3:586.

38. Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1988), 239.

39. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* II:1–2, in *St Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, F.L. Cross, ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1977), 59.

40. Hugh M. Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington D.C.: Consortium Press, 1974), 159–160.

41. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* II:3.

42. *Ibid.*, II:4.

43. *Ibid.*

44. See Riley, 349–391. Here Riley describes Cyril's emphasis on the anointing of the "forehead, the ears, the nostrils, and the breast of the neophytes" (pg. 349). In Ambrose we read of the bishop anointing the initiate and reciting the formula, "God the father almighty, Who regenerated you by water and the Holy Spirit and forgave you your sins, will Himself anoint you unto life everlasting" (pg. 353). Other examples are given in greater detail in this section of Riley's work.

45. Arthur McCormack, *Christian Initiation* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1969), 50.

46. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* III:4. "Ye were first anointed on your forehead, that ye might be delivered from the shame, which the first man, when he transgressed, bore about with him everywhere; and that with open face ye might behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord. Then on your ears; that ye might receive ears quick to hear the Divine Mysteries . . . Then on your nostrils . . . Then on your breast."

47. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* III:4.

48. Riley, 372–375. Riley summarizes the early church leaders' interpreta-



tions as follows: "The Anointing of the Forehead . . . represents the restoration of this gift of God's spirit. . . . The Anointing of the Ears . . . [that the initiate] will listen to and learn, becoming versed in this divine communication . . . [and] to awaken one to the communication of a spiritual reality. . . . The Anointing of the Nostrils . . . makes the neophytes aware that he is participating in Christ Himself. . . . The Anointing of the Breast . . . in order that, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, they might resist the manoeuvres of the devil."

49. Ibid., 417.

50. Ibid., 418.

51. Ibid., 425&429. Chrysostom describes those having "put on the royal robe; they almost vie in brilliance with heaven itself. We see them shine more brilliantly than the stars, as they light up the faces of those who look at them."

52. Ibid., 428–429.

53. Ibid., 430–431. Chrysostom: "Christians, having put on Christ, signified by the insignia of the white garment, must be careful in the conduct of their lives, and in so doing will attract others to praise Christ: 'Now the robe you wear and your gleaming garments attract the eyes of all; if you should will to do so, by keeping your royal robe shining even more brightly than it does now, by your godly conduct and your strict discipline, you will always be able to draw all who behold you to show the same zeal and praise for the Master.'"

54. This is a conclusion arrived at by the early church leaders themselves and has been reaffirmed by modern scholars such as Hugh M. Riley in *Christian Initiation*, 413–45, as well as Hugh W. Nibley. See Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987).

55. *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, word number 5547 in the New Strong's Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament, 99. See also *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 895.

56. Ibid., word number 5545. The author of 1 John uses the same language in referring to the Holy Ghost when he calls it an "unction," and an "anointing" in 1 John 2:20&27.

57. Riley, 376.

58. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catechesis* IV:5.









