WITH PAUL IN PAPHOS AND LYSTRA
MAGIC AND PAGANISM IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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ABSTRACT
The article examines two closely interrelated, but nevertheless distinguishable themes in Acts, which have so far not yet found the interest they deserve: the struggle of the Christian preachers with magicians and magical practices, and their confrontation with pagan polytheism. Starting with Acts 13:4-12 in one case and with Acts 14:8-20 in the other, the syntagmatic narrative line is broken up into two paradigms which are in turn illustrated with contextual materials from social and religious history. Luke is shown as opposed to the danger of syncretism, but open to the process of acculturation.

There are several lines of continuity—'red threads', as we say in German—running through the texture of the wonderful and colourful narrative we know as the Acts of the Apostles. Luke, the author of Acts, needs them to bind together the series of vivid little scenes and single episodes, which he composes with great skill, and he uses, as is well known, the speeches of the main characters of the narrative to make sense of what is happening and to develop the overarching themes. In what follows, we will concentrate on two of those themes, closely interrelated, but nevertheless distinguishable: magic and paganism, and we will take up the loose ends, so to speak, of the two threads we have to disentangle at a specific point of the narrative. We join Paul and Barnabas for their so-called first missionary journey (cf Beutler 1968), which leads them to the island of Cyprus and to the south-eastern parts of Asia Minor. In Paphos on Cyprus we will detect traces of the magic connection, and in Lystra in Asia Minor we will find an example of the encounters of the Christian message with...
idolatry.¹

1 THE MAGIC CONNECTION

1.1 The conflict with a magician on Cyprus: Acts 13:4-12

1.1.1 Locating the episode
In Ac 13:1-3 Barnabas and Saul, as he is still called here by Luke, are sent out by the church of Antioch in Syria, which served as their home base for several years. They go down to the next port, Seleucia, embark there, sail to Cyprus (13:4), reach Salamis at the east end of the island (13:5) and cover the 100 or so miles to Paphos, the capital of the island with the Roman administration, at the opposite west end (13:6). There they not only meet the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus, who shows interest in the Gospel, but also a Jewish magician named Bar-Jesus in his entourage. The ensuing conflict between Bar-Jesus and Paul is clearly won by the latter. Bar-Jesus is punished with blindness and will not see the light of the sun any more, though only for a while (13:11).

What genre does this remarkable story belong to? Especially in the second half, elements of a miracle of the punishing type (cf Ac 5:1-11: Ananias and Sapphira) dominate.² We have the miracle-working word of Paul, the protagonist, in 13:10:11a, the confirmation and the demonstration of the miracle, that is the sudden blindness of the opponent Bar-Jesus and his groping about in 13:11b, and finally the astonished reaction of the public, represented by Sergius Paulus, combined with the admiration motif in 13:12. For the overall text-type we may as well compare tales about the contests of magicians well-known not only to universal folklore (and to modern mythology, cf Gandalf and Saruman in J R Tolkien's The Lord of the rings), but also to the Old Testament and to early Christian literature (Wildhaber 1987:75f). We remember immediately, for example, the competitions between Moses and the Egyptian magicians in Ex 7-8 or those between Peter and Simon Magus in the Acts of Peter and the Pseude­Clementines. Needless to say who wins.

We are mainly interested now in the characterisation of the two main figures

¹ The whole topic has been treated in a monograph as far as I know only once, namely recently by Wildhaber 1987, but cf also the helpful article by Wildhaber's teacher Tremel (1981). Some common ground is also covered by Garrett 1989 and Klein 1967 (in the index of topics of Neyrey 1991 magic occurs only once, paganism, polytheism and religion—except peasant religion, with a cross-reference to the single entry on magic—not at all; only ritual figures prominently). I refrain from quoting all the commentaries on Acts and all the entries in dictionaries I have consulted when preparing this paper, and from showing and describing all the tools I have applied. My main interest is with the message.
² The most extensive comparison and discussion of the two texts in Ac 5:1-11 and Ac 13:4-20 so far is supplied by Tosco 1989.
of our story, Bar-Jesus and Saul or Paul.

1.1.2 The portrait of Bar-Jesus

Luke invests great pains in the description of Paul's opponent, for he characterises the man (Ac 13:6: ἄνδρα τινό) in six different ways:

a) He first calls him a magician (μάγος). There existed several brands of magician in Luke's time. The word itself is derived from the Persian language where it means the members of a class of priest, highly respected, learned and wise. In this sense, Mt 2:1 speaks of μάγοι ἀν' ἀνατολῶν, wise men from the East, coming to see the newborn king of the Jews. But there is, of course, also another side to it. Philo has got the differences very clear when he writes in his On the special laws 3:100-101:

Now the true magic, the scientific vision by which the facts of nature are presented in a clearer light, is felt to be a fit object for reverence and ambition and is carefully studied not only by ordinary persons but by kings and the greatest kings, and particularly by those of the Persians, so much so that it is said that no one in that country is promoted to the throne unless he has first been admitted into the caste of the Magi. But there is a counterfeit of this, most properly called a perversion of art, pursued by charlatan mendicants and parasites and the basest of women and the slave population, who make it their profession to deal in purifications and disenchantments and promise with some sort of charms and incantations to turn men's love into deadly enmity and their hatred into profound affection.3

No doubt Luke is inclined to see magic mostly in this more sombre light cast upon Philo's second set of illustrations.4

b) In Ac 13:6 Luke adds as a second attribute false prophet. Thus he evokes Old Testament traditions which relate of the true prophet, speaking and acting as God's messenger, and his opponents, the false prophets, who speak in their own name and act in their own best interests. We are reminded especially of Jer 23:9-40:

Both prophet and priest are ungodly; even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the Lord. Therefore their way shall be to them like slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall [Bar-Jesus's destiny!]; for I will

3 Transl by Colson 1968:539; if not indicated otherwise the translations from the Classical sources are my own.
4 Another fine example of the distinction Philo makes here is Apuleius' Apologia 25:4-26:5; cf Abt 1908:106-134. On ancient magic in general cf the collections of texts in Preisendanz 1973/74; Betz 1986; Luck 1990; and the studies by Aune 1980; Faraone/Obbink 1991; Daxelmüller 1993.
bring disaster upon them in the year of their punishment (vv11-12). ... Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord (v16). ... I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed" (v25). ...  

Maybe Bar-Jesus, too, dealt in the interpretation of dreams and other oracular devices.

c) Now we come, thirdly, to Bar-Jesus's qualification as a Jew. That is not as surprising as it might first seem. The title 'false prophet' with its distinctly scriptural background already gave a hint in this direction. First-century Judaism displays some fairly strong tendencies to become mixed up with more popular and unorthodox religious practices. Quite a few Hebrew and Aramaic formulae and holy names have been incorporated into the Greek magical papyri, and with the Roman satirists, with Juvenal for example (in Stern 1980:100f), the old Jewish woman with her charms and spells and magic potions becomes a stock figure.

d) As a fourth item, we get to know the proper name of this man: Bar-Jesus. That should astonish us once again. No doubt, Jesus is a common Jewish name, found even in the New Testament for another person than Jesus Christ (cf 'Jesus who is called Justus' in Col 4:11), and that is generally also true for the use of patronymics, composed with bar, 'son', the Aramaic equivalent to the Hebrew ben. Luke seems to take a special delight in this combination, referring not only to Barabbas, 'the son of the father', in the passion story (Lk 23:18par), but also to Barnabas, 'the son of encouragement', in Ac 4:34, and to two different persons called Barsabbas (Ac 1:23; 15:22). But Bar-Jesus, nevertheless, means 'son of Jesus', and Luke indicates that he recognises the hidden potencies and dangers of this name: in v10 he has Paul launching his counterattack with the opening address: 'You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness...'. The self-styled son of Jesus in reality proves to be a son of the utter darkness into which he will fall very soon, because he opposes the gospel of the Lord.

e) In v7 Luke informs us that Bar-Jesus 'was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus'. That means: he served as his court theologian, as his advisor and perhaps also as his astrologer (this specialisation could be indicated by a peculiar feature of his punishment in v 11: he will be 'unable to see the sun', which he needs for his calculations). All the Roman emperors had their private astrologers, often known by name like Thrasyllos, Tiberius's man, and they rarely took a single

5 The translations from Scripture are usually taken from the NRSV.
step without consulting them. Most of these specialists had oriental origins; they were Egyptians, Babylonians, Chaldeans, Syrians or Jews. Josephus relates the following story in his *Antiquities of the Jews* 20:142:

Felix, the Roman procurator of Judaea, had hardly seen Drusilla, a woman excelling in great beauty, when he was inflamed with love for her. He had a Jewish friend, named Atomos, who came from Cyprus(!) and claimed to be a magician. Him he sent to Drusilla to persuade her to leave her husband...

I don't maintain the thesis which was once propounded by Theodor Zahn (1904:195-200), who thought that Atomos from Cyprus and Bar-Jesus, who is called Hetoimos in a variant reading of the Western text of Ac 13:8, are one and the same person.

f) But that takes us to our sixth and last point: in v8, Bar-Jesus gets a new name: 'Elymas, the magician—for that is the translation of his name—opposed them [i.e Saul and Barnabas] and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith.' The word 'Elymas' still remains an unsolved riddle. So far there seems to be no better solution (cf Yaure 1960; Daniel 1971) than to explain it as an Aramaic expression meaning something like 'interpreter of dreams', thus roughly doubling the Greek μάγος, magician, and not translating the proper name Bar-Jesus. Anyhow, we understand now why Bar-Jesus Elymas opposes the Gospel: he fears that he will lose his lucrative job once and for all.

**1.1.3 Bar-Jesus Elymas and Saulus Paulus**

We have concentrated mainly on the portrait of Bar-Jesus. In a similar way we could study the characterisations of Sergius Paulus or of Barnabas or even of John Mark who makes one of the crowd (v5). But the leading role as Bar-Jesus's antagonist is clearly taken by Saul. Here in v9 ('But Saul, also known as Paul...'; cf Harrer 1940) and not, as is commonly assumed, at his conversion in chapter 9, he is called Paul for the first time in Acts. From now on Luke will consistently only use the name Paul in his narrative.

We will single out only one further point of major interest. By Paul's powerful command Bar-Jesus is struck with blindness for a while, and 'he wandered about groping for someone to lead him by the hand' (v11). But just the same had happened to Paul himself before. After having seen the Lord on the road to Damascus, he could see nothing any more for a certain time, 'so that they had to lead him by the hand' (9:8). Luke evidently wants us to discover some hidden parallel between the Jewish itinerant preacher and miracle-worker Paul and the Jewish professional magician with the telling name Bar-Jesus, between the—now—true prophet and the false prophet. I think that Johnson and Tanne-
hill are right with their tentative explanations: 'Perhaps we are to see Saul, at the moment he takes on his new and proper identity as Paul the Apostle, fighting the final battle with the “Jewish false prophet” within him, blinding the hostile magician that is his former self at the moment he assumes his role as “light to the Gentiles” (see 13:47)’ (Johnson 1992:227); ‘Paul in denouncing Elymas is rejecting his own former personality and value structures, which remain threatening potentialities within himself’ (Tannehill 1990:163n15; cf also Garrett 1989:84f).

1.2 Following the lines of continuity
Above we have referred to lines of continuity running through the whole narrative. Now we have to establish the fact in relation to the magic connection.

1.2.1 Simon Magus
Bar-Jesus Elymas is not the first magician we meet in the Book of Acts, not even the most famous one. Much better known is Simon Magus from chapter 8, whom the early Fathers declared to have been the founder of the Gnostic movement in toto or at least of the Simonian sect and who is engaged in magical combats with Simon Peter in the apocryphal literature. But these are only later embellishments of the basic story in Ac 8:4-24 (cf Spencer 1992:26-127). There the evangelist Philip comes to Samaria where ‘Simon had previously practised magic in the city and amazed the people, saying that he was someone great’ (v9).

In brief: Simon proclaims himself, and he practises his art for money, obviously, whereas Philip proclaims Jesus Christ and does miracles without asking for payment (cf 3:7), and Peter later speaks of the Spirit as of God’s free gift that cannot be bought (8:20). That makes all the difference. Therefore the Christian preachers are more than a match for Simon Magus. He acknowledges their superiority by becoming a believer and getting baptised himself, with the best intentions, we may presume, but later on he relapses again, motivated by his greed for more money and more spiritual power. Nevertheless, despite Peter’s curse in v20 his case remains open-ended, like that of Bar-Jesus. ‘Pray for me to the Lord that nothing of what you have said may happen to me’, are the last words we hear of him (v24). The main point Luke is driving at seems to lie along the following lines (cf Klein 1967:67-77): not only is the Christian message confronted with popular magical beliefs and practices in a half-Jewish,
half-pagan surrounding (Samaria!), it even runs the risk of being misunderstood as the better and stronger form of magic; magic is thus not uprooted once and for all but remains a latent danger also for Christian believers, who more than once relapse.

1.2.2 The Philippian slave-girl
Magic in its broadest sense also covers popular forms of oracular devices (cf Luck 1990:289-382). In Ac 16:16-18, Paul in Philippi ‘meets a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling’. Empowered by her spirit, she follows Paul for many days, crying out: ‘These men are servants of the Most High God and proclaim to you a way of salvation’, until Paul gets angry and exorcises her by saying to the spirit: ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ Obeying Paul’s command the spirit leaves her. She is now useless for her owners, who therefore have Paul put into prison because of his offence against their property.

Luke thus demonstrates that Christians have other options than consulting fortune-tellers and pagan soothsayers, who are clearly inferior, and on top of that he incriminates the exploitation of human beings like the poor slave-girl through merciless owners only interested in their profit. On the other hand, remarkable, too, seems the fact that the girl correctly identifies the servants of the Most High God and their message of salvation. That resembles the phenomenon of valid prophecy through outsiders and strangers like Bileam in the Old Testament. There may be something useful even in pagan divination after all or at least in the persons practising this art.

1.2.3 In Ephesus
a) It is the tactic of incrimination by insinuating purely financial interests which Luke chooses again when dealing with the riot in Ephesus in Ac 19:21-41: the artisans who make little silver models of the famous temple of Artemis and sell them to visitors fear for their profitable business and provoke a general uproar. But that does not add so much to our general topic. Just before the riot narrative in 19:11-20, we find three small but fascinating other scenes (cf Garrett 1989:89-99):

b) God performs some extraordinary miracles through Paul, which for a neutral observer fall only very slightly short of magic: ‘When the handkerchiefs or

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8 For this text, see esp Elliger 1978:23-77; Trebilco 1989; Richter Reimer 1992:162-201.
9 For this Lukan paradigm, which is a dominating one in the Gospel and in Acts, and which is, as we see, closely interwoven with the magic connection, cf Klauck 1987:108f; 1989.
aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them’ (v12).

c) Then there are the seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva, who are working as itinerant exorcists and trying the name of Jesus as a spell for a change, saying to the evil spirits: ‘I adjure you by the name of Jesus whom Paul proclaims.’ But they have no luck. Completely unmoved one spirit answers: ‘Jesus I know, and I have heard of Paul, but who are you?’ And the man with the evil spirit leaps on the would-be exorcists, gives them a thrashing and throws them out of the house. Luke here doubtless engages in the humorous and burlesque style.

d) The people in Ephesus are very impressed. Many of those who have already become Christians confess their hidden practices (v18). Magical books are brought forward and burned publicly, though they had the enormous value of fifty thousand silver coins (v19). Magical books in Ephesus—that is not so unusual, the city was famous for them. But magical practices and, possibly, magical books in Christian circles? That is shocking, but it leads us again to the point Luke is constantly driving at (cf esp Klein 1967:50-60,77-80).

1.3 Summary
We are now in a position to sum up. The Jewish magician Bar-Jesus, the Samaritan magician Simon, the poor Philippian slave-girl with the spirit of divination, the unlucky Jewish exorcists in Ephesus—they have several features in common: the confrontation with the Christian missionaries, the Jewish or half-Jewish background (with the exception of the slave-girl), the magical profession, unspecified or specified (divination, exorcism), the interest in money, success and social standing, more or less pronounced (and in the case of the slave-girl represented by their masters; to be added here are the Ephesian silversmiths, too), and last but not least a certain affinity to Christian topics (Bar-Jesus’s name, Simon’s baptism, the slave-girl’s confession, the futile attempt of Sceva’s sons to use Jesus’s name). And there still lingers large the surprising fact of the existence of magical acts and magical books among Ephesian Christians. Magic on its own, according to Luke, is no real match for Christianity. In the direct contest of the systems the Christian preachers always prove stronger. But there is a certain danger of confusing magic with Christian miracles, therapies and exorcisms, and, still worse, of taking Christian belief for a more powerful manifestation of magic. That may lead to a blasphemous usurpation of Christian holy names for magical purposes. It may provoke conversions to Christianity mixed up with dubious motives, and it may, worst of all, cause sincere believers to relapse into their old life and take up magic once again, but
now hidden under the veil of the newly acquired faith. In short, what Luke fears most is a syncretism, a religious mix that swallows up everything: paganism, Judaism and Christianity, which is an obstacle to the Christian mission and a continuing threat to the established local churches.

2 ENCOUNTERING IDOLATRY

2.1 ‘Zeus and Hermes’ on a visit in Lystra: Acts 14:8-20

2.1.1 Locating the episode
We have left behind Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey in Paphos on Cyprus. From there they sail to the mainland of Asia Minor, arrive at Perga, then at Antioch in Pisidia, where Paul preaches in the synagogue. Driven on by the hostility of the local Jewish communities they reach Iconium, Lystra and finally Derbe, before retracing their steps again and returning on the same route—only omitting Cyprus—to their home base in Syrian Antioch.

There lies a certain logic in the development that leads to the events which happen at Lystra. In Paphos we had a Roman official, but also a Jewish magician in his entourage. For Pisidian Antioch pagans are mentioned (13:48: ‘When the gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord’), but the setting is still mainly Jewish, and many of those gentiles seem to have been sympathisers of the synagogue before. That changes at Lystra. There any mediating Jewish influence is missing. Paul and Barnabas are suddenly confronted with pure paganism and polytheism, not yet touched by Jewish monotheism and not engaged in philosophical discussions about true religion as the Epicureans and Stoics Paul will meet in Athens (Ac 17) are. How will those sheer pagans react? How can the gospel reach them? Where are the chances, and where do the dangers lie? These are the questions Luke tries to answer, again with the help of an impressive and detailed story.

The dominating genre of this text is the healing miracle, the therapy of the lame man in vv8-10. Paul thus rivals Peter, who did a similar deed in Ac 3:1-10. The admiring reaction of the crowd, topical in a miracle story, is expanded into a small scene of its own in vv11-13 and is answered by Paul with a miniature missionary discourse in vv14-18. In vv19-20 the account of Paul’s stoning follows, which was possibly the second, unfavourable reaction of the frustrated crowd in a more original version of the pre-Lukan tradition, but which is now instigated by hostile Jews from Pisidian Antioch. We will concentrate on the admiring reaction of the crowd and the missionary discourse.

2.1.2 The admiring reaction of the crowd
When Paul has healed the lame man, who jumps up and walks around, the
crowd begins to shout in the Lycaonian language: 'The gods have come down to us in human form' (v11). The Lycaonian language has an important function: Paul and Barnabas, not so well versed in native local dialects, don't understand for some time what is going on (Plümacher 1972:93f). The acclamation of the crowd looks a bit excessive in relation to the rather simple healing miracle, but is nevertheless not completely implausible. Epiphanies of gods in human shape on earth are a stock conception of Hellenistic religiosity. We only have to compare the 'Bible of the Greeks', Homer's epic poems. In the Odyssey, the protagonist returns to his home disguised as a beggar. The spokesman of the suitors who are courting Penelope, Odysseus's wife, throws a footstool at him. The others reprimand him: 'No, Antinoos, that was not nice, this throwing at the poor beggar. You fool, what if he were a god, a divine being? Gods indeed pass through our cities. They come in various shapes, they look like strangers from foreign countries, but they examine the men and test men's just behaviour' (Od 17:483-487). The examples could easily be multiplied.

In v12 the two 'gods' in human shape are identified: the crowd calls Barnabas, obviously the more impressive person, Zeus and Paul Hermes, because he was the chief speaker, and that is one of the functions of the god Hermes in Greek mythology: to speak for Zeus and the other gods, to be their messenger, to interpret them—cf Philo of Alexandria, who writes in The embassy to Gaius 99: 'Hermes is shod with sandals like outstretched wings, why? Is it not because it befits the interpreter (ἐρωτικος) and spokesman of things divine...?' (the Jewish historian Artapanos transfers the name of Hermes to Moses, because he interpreted the hieroglyphs).

This identification also gives more local colour to the story. Ovid in his Metamorphoses (8:626-724) has preserved a tale which took place in Phrygia, not too far from Lystra. Zeus and Hermes, substituted for the native gods Tar-chunt and Runt (Breytenbach 1993:399), visit the country in human form. No one is willing to receive them as guests in his house, except the elderly couple Philemon and Baucis, who share their meagre resources with the unrecognised gods and are richly rewarded afterwards, while all the others are punished (Malten 1939/40). Luke probably knows this legend and alludes to it. Perhaps he even wants to represent the Lycaonians as in effect saying: We are not going to make the traditional mistake again, we recognise a god when we see one (in the words of Arthur D Nock and Richard J Pervo).

Gods have to be honoured by sacrifices, especially in their own temple. Therefore in v13 the priest of Zeus-Outside-the-City—which means that the temple of Zeus was located just outside the city-gates—makes all the necessary

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10 A collection of testimonies is to be found in Bludau 1907:109; cf also Gärnter 1962.
preparations bringing oxen and garlands to the gates to form the sacrificial procession. But now, at last, Paul and Barnabas (plural!) recognise what is going on, and now it is their turn to react, which they do through action and word.

2.1.3 The missionary discourse

The missionary discourse of Paul and Barnabas in v 15-17 is prepared by their tearing of their clothes and their jumping into the crowd. The first feature indicates their horror at the impending blasphemy, the second feature expresses their wish to belong to the people and not to the gods, to be on equal terms with the crowd. That is also stressed by the opening words of their speech: 'Friends, why are you doing this? We are mortals just as you.' The following discourse shows points of contact with the mission kerygma of Hellenistic Judaism and with the Pauline kerygma in 1 Th 1:9. Sheer pagans first have to be told to turn away from their many idols and to give honour to the only living God who made the heavens and the earth. Then they will, too, no longer erroneously take mortal men for gods. There is no room yet for Christology in this pioneering preaching. But the God incarnate can only be proclaimed if these basic facts are clear. Luke here stresses the idea of creation. He explains creation as a deed of God’s grace for all men. God’s generosity has been at work in the pagan past of the addressees, too, giving them rains from heaven and fruitful seasons and food and joy of heart (v 17). But now the time has finally come to submit openly to this true God, because now he is proclaimed to them.

It is not so easy for Paul and Barnabas to convince their public: ‘They scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them’ (v 18), and perhaps the crowd, having hoped for a big sacrificial meal in vain, now grew nasty and attempted to stone their former heroes.

2.2 Taking up the threads

2.1.1 Some smaller items

Again we are confronted with the task of taking up the threads leading to this story and further on beyond it. There is some preparation for the main thrust of Paul’s and Barnabas’s response already in earlier chapters. Even in a Jewish context Peter has to argue against a misunderstanding of his miracles. After having healed the lame man (!) at the temple-gate in Jerusalem, he asks the people: ‘You Israelites...why do you stare at us, as if by our own power and piety we had made him walk?’ (3:12). No, it has been God, the one true God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, working through him. When Cornelius in 10:25-26 falls at Peter’s feet, trying to worship him, Peter immediately makes him get

12 Its Septuagint vocabulary is studied by Lerle 1960/61.
up, saying: ‘Stand up, I am only a mortal man.’

In Ac 12:21-23 Herodes Agrippa I does not act so prudently (cf Wildhaber 69-74). He takes his seat on a platform, dressed in his royal robe, and delivers a public address. The people keep shouting: ‘The voice of a god and not of a mortal.’ He is immediately punished because he had not given the glory to God: an angel of the Lord strikes him down; he is eaten by worms and dies. This episode, small as it is, implies a sharp criticism of the Hellenistic ruler-cult and the Roman emperor-cult. There the borders between God and human beings are constantly violated. No wonder that Paul and Silas, when the Philippian jailer asks them: ‘Sirs (κύριοι, a Christological title, also used in the ruler-cult), what must I do to be saved?’, answer: ‘Believe in the Lord (κύριον) Jesus’ (16:29-30).

2.2.2 Paul in Athens

There are undoubtedly some lines pointing forward from the events in Lystra to Paul’s Areopagus speech in Ac 17, certainly a highlight in Luke’s narrative. There, though, Paul now longer with barbarians with a poor cultural background, but with a very educated public, consisting of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. This show-piece of course really deserves more detailed treatment. We have to be content with the following few insights: even this native city of Greek philosophy Paul finds full of idols, and he is deeply distressed (v16). To the Athenians he pays the somewhat dubious compliment that they are ‘extremely religious’ (v22), which could also be understood as “extremely superstitious”. The altar with the inscription ‘To an unknown god’ he takes as a very handy starting point for the message of the one God who made heaven and earth, thus totally altering the original sense of the inscription, which served in a polytheistic worldview as a precaution against the danger of forgetting any foreign god who might take revenge (cf van der Horst 1989). He refers to Stoic philosophy, even quoting a Stoic axiom in v28, but interpreting it in contrast to Stoic practice in a transcendental way. He runs into trouble with his public when he ends his speech, mentioning very carefully, without using the name, Jesus Christ and


14 For the overall interpretation, Dibelius [1939] 1961 is still remarkable; the local atmosphere is covered very well by Elliger 1978:117-199; Plümacher 1972:97f; for Paul’s speech see now esp Löning 1992:102-110.

15 No doubt that on the narrative level δεισιδαιμονεστέρους functions as a captatio benevolentiae and is therefore understood by Paul’s audience in its positive sense, but that need not be the case on the level of communication between the implied author and his readers. Christian readers will discover the double entendre very soon and will smile at the self-deception of the Athenians. That could be proved, too, by an analysis of δεισιδαιμονία, which I have tried to give in another lecture dealing with Plutarch’s treatise On superstition.
his resurrection from the dead.

2.2.3 Paul on Malta
On Malta in Ac 28:1-6 Paul is more successful than he was in Athens, but there he faces problems similar to those in Lystra (Wildhaber 1987:138-151). Stranded on the island after the shipwreck, Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it in the fire, when suddenly a viper, driven out by the heat, bit him in his hand. When the natives saw the creature dangling down from his hand, they said to one another: ‘He must be a murderer; though having escaped from the sea, Dike, the goddess of justice, does not allow him to live.’ But when Paul shook off the viper and didn’t swell up or drop dead after some time, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god. Afterwards Paul healed the father of the leading man of the island and the rest of the people who had diseases, and they bestowed many honours on him (28:7-10).

The acclamation as a god remains uncorrected this time. Luke leaves it to his readers to translate the naive admiration felt by the natives into more orthodox theological terminology: it is not Paul who is a god in human shape, he only does his miracles, accompanied by his preaching, in the name of God and of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The natives of Malta were, by the way, predestined for salvation, like Cornelius in Ac 10, because of the philanthropy they showed to the shipwrecked in 28:2 (Löning 1992:90f).

2.3 Summary
Luke’s condemnation of pagan idolatry is whole-hearted, as is to be expected, but it is nevertheless also nuanced in some respects, and Luke even shows sympathy for individual pagans and gentiles. In paganism, the borderlines between the divine and the human are somewhat permeable, gods appearing in human form and humans becoming heroes and gods (in Ovid, Philemon and Baucis are deified at the end). Therefore Luke is stressing the necessary distinction between God, the creator, and all his creatures. That puts the miracle-working of the Christian missionaries in the right perspective, and it underlines the unique position of Jesus Christ as the only Son of God. But pagan religion is in Luke’s view also open for the Christian message. There are human values in it and ideas about the divine which might prove useful if corrected and freed from any misunderstanding. Luke is on his own terms venturing into the ambitious program of acculturation and evangelisation: of adapting the gospel as far as necessary and possible to the demands of different cultural situations, and of transforming the cultures by the power of the gospel. That is a dialectical process which never has ended since Luke’s day. Luke was a pioneer,16 and for that in

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16 His situation reminds me somehow of the scenario which Franz Cumont, the great
my opinion he deserves praise, not blame (or, to be more up to date: honour, not shame).

WORKS CONSULTED

Abt, A 1908. *Die Apologie des Apuleius von Madaura und die antike Zauberei.* Beiträge zur Erklärung der Schrift *De magia.* Gießen: Verlag Alfred Töpelmann. (RVV 4,2.)


Harrer, G A 1940. Saul who is also called Paul. *HTHR 33, 19-33.*


Belgian historian, in a flash of prophetic insight described at the beginning of our century ([19092] 1956:196f): 'Let us suppose that in modern Europe the faithful had deserted the Christian churches to worship Allah or Brahma, to follow the precepts of Confucius or Buddha, or to adopt the maxims of the Shinto; let us imagine a great confusion of all the races of the world in which Arabian mullahs, Chinese scholars, Japanese bonzes, Tibetan lamas and Hindu pundits would be preaching fatalism and predestination, ancestor-worship and devotion to a deified sovereign, pessimism and deliverance through annihilation—a confusion in which all those priests would erect temples of exotic architecture in our cities and celebrate their disparate rites therein. Such a dream, which the future may perhaps realize, would offer a pretty accurate picture of the religious chaos in which the ancient world was struggling before the reign of Constantine.'

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