

What Did Ancient Christians Say When They Cast Out Demons? Inferences from Spells and Amulets

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Abstract: In the second and third centuries CE, Christian apologists contrast the simplicity and efficacy of their forms of exorcism with the elaborate and incomprehensible incantations employed by polytheists and ‘false’ Christians. Since these writers emphasize discontinuity rather than continuity with ambient customs, it is useful to compare their claims with documentary evidence of Christian exorcistic practices. Some inferences about what Christians said when they exorcised evil spirits can be drawn from Greek spells and amulets with Christian elements from Egypt. The evidence both confirms and contradicts the apologists’ claims. There are many indications that Christians adjured evil spirits by the name or power of Jesus, and that the invocation of his name or power could be accompanied by a creedal acclamation, as the apologists say. But at the same time Christian exorcists as likely as not reiterated customary practices of incantation, including the uttering of esoteric names, threatening injunctions, and multiple adjurations.

Keywords: exorcism, spells, amulets, early Christianity

Introduction

The representation of exorcism in early Christian literature is an intriguing portal into the symbolic and social world of early Christians.¹ What exorcism entailed and what it meant varies according the

Abbreviations of series of early Christian writings: CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina; GCS = Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte; SC = Sources Chr tiennes. Details of works cited from these series are given in the bibliography. Abbreviations of corpora of ‘magical’ procedures and spells: PGM = Karl Preisendanz and Albert Henrichs, eds., *Papyri Graecae Magicae: Die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1974–1975); SM = Robert W. Daniel and Franco Maltomini, eds., *Supplementum Magicum*, 2 vols., Papyrologica Coloniensia 16 (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1991–1992); GMPT = Hans Dieter Betz, ed., *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, Including the Demotic Spells*, 2d ed., vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992); ACM = Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, eds., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994). Papyrological series are abbreviated according to John F. Oates, Roger S. Bagnall, Sarah J. Clackson, Alexandra A. O’Brien, Joshua D. Sosin, Terry G. Wilfong, and Klaas A. Worp, eds., *Checklist of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>, May 2014, to which the reader is referred for

sources one is reading. In the synoptic gospels demonic possession manifests itself in physiological ailments and self-destructive behaviour. The expulsion of demons restores the possessed to physical health and permits their reintegration into society. It is also a visual sign that the coming Kingdom of God is overcoming the power of Satan.² Although Paul in his writings refers to signs and wonders performed by him and others as ancillary to the message of the gospel, he shows little interest in acts of exorcism. He is much more concerned with the ethical struggle between sinful and righteous motivations and with the Spirit of God's ability to overcome the influence of the principalities of this age in that struggle.³ In the canonical and apocryphal acts, exorcisms performed by the apostles—occasionally quite spectacularly in the apocryphal acts⁴—demonstrates their superiority over Jewish and polytheistic counterparts and confirms the authority of their message about Jesus.⁵ In the second century, Christian apologists and polemicists contrast the simplicity and efficacy of their forms of exorcism with the elaborate and incomprehensible incantations employed by polytheists and 'false' Christians.⁶ Initially the gift of exorcism, bestowed by God, could come to any Christian, woman or man, but over the course of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries the practice was regulated within the structure of lay and clerical offices under the authority of the bishop.⁷

From Christian literature of the second and third centuries we have a general understanding of what Christians said and did when they were casting out demons. Typically, exorcism was pronounced in the name of Jesus or God, accompanied by laying on of hands and the sign of the cross.⁸ The exorcist might expand on the name of Jesus. Justin, for instance, speaks several times of

bibliographical details. *PGM* created a convention of referring to Greco-Egyptian items by Roman numerals (I-V in vol. 1; VI-LXXXI in vol. 2, pp. 1-208; *GMPT* continues this convention, adding to the texts published in *PGM*), and 'Christian' items by Arabic numerals (vol. 2, pp. 209-32), prefacing papyri and parchments with the letter 'P'. References to items in *SM* and papyrological editions are by volume number in Roman numerals and item number in Arabic numerals.

¹ The principal recent studies are Andrea Nicolotti, *Esorcismo cristiano e possessione diabolica tra II e III secolo*, *Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 54 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011); Graham H. Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Eric Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2. Reihe 157 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002); Elizabeth Ann Leeper, "Exorcism in Early Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1991). Important earlier studies are Otto Böcher, *Dämonenfurcht und Dämonenabwehr: Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe*, *Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament*, Fünfte Folge, 10 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1970); Klaus Thraede, "Exorcismus," *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 7 (1969): 44-117; Franz Joseph Dölger, *Der Exorcismus im altchristlichen Taufritual: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie*, *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des Altertums* 3.1-2 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1909).

² Sorensen, *Possession*, 118-31.

³ Sorensen, *Possession*, 153-66.

⁴ E.g., *Act. Ioh.* 37-45; *Act Pet.* 11; *Act. Thom.* 68-81. But cf. Jan N. Bremmer, "Magic in the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*," in *The Metamorphosis of Magic from Late Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer and Jan R. Veenstra, *Groningen Studies in Cultural Change* 1, 51-70 (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 51-70 at 60.

⁵ Sorensen, *Possession*, 148-53; Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 269-361.

⁶ Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 146-55, 229-34.

⁷ Leeper, "Exorcism," 295-331.

⁸ Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 69-70, 76; Sorensen, *Possession*, 184-85.

demons being cast out “by the name of Jesus Christ, crucified under Pontius Pilate.”⁹ On one occasion his description of Jesus’ life is more detailed, drawing on what appears to have been an early summary of faith regarding Jesus.¹⁰ This sort of summary may be what Origen refers to when he states that Christians drive out demons “by the name of Jesus, together with a recital of narratives about him.”¹¹ In the same passage Origen notes that they also add “other reliable words, in accordance with the divine scripture,”¹² possibly referring to stories of healings and exorcisms from the gospels.¹³ Tertullian offers a few more details, explaining that the demons flee at the name of Jesus and the reminder of the punishments they will receive from him—which he refers to as adjurations¹⁴—accompanied by laying on of hands and blowing of air.¹⁵

These descriptions of exorcisms come from writers intent on contrasting Christian practice with Jewish or polytheistic practice. Given their tendency to emphasize discontinuity over continuity with ambient customs, one would like to have independent corroboration of their claims. Sources that purport to describe the rites and offices of the early church—the so-called ‘church orders’—are of little help in this regard. They date from the fourth century or later, and have complex manuscript traditions incorporating later practices.¹⁶ Moreover, they tell us more about exorcism as part of the rite of initiation than about occasional, ad-hoc exorcism. The witness of the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, often discussed in studies on the transition to institutionalized forms of exorcism,¹⁷ is a case in point.¹⁸ However, we do have evidence of Christian adjurations against evil

⁹ *Dial.* 30.3, ed. Philippe Bobichon, *Justin Martyr, Dialogue avec Tryphon*, 2 vols., Paradosis 47 (Fribourg: Academic Press and Éditions Saint-Paul, 2003), 1:256; 2 *Apol.* 6.6, ed. Munier, SC 507:334.

¹⁰ *Dial.* 85.2, ed. Bobichon, 1:416: κατὰ γὰρ τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ τούτου τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ πρωτοτόκου πάσης κτίσεως, καὶ διὰ παρθένου γεννηθέντος καὶ παθητοῦ γενομένου ἀνθρώπου, καὶ σταυρωθέντος ἐπὶ Ποντίου Πιλάτου ὑπὸ τοῦ λαοῦ ὑμῶν καὶ ἀποθανόντος, καὶ ἀναστάντος ἐκ νεκρῶν καὶ ἀναβάντος εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν, πᾶν δαιμόνιον ἐξορκιζόμενον νικᾶται καὶ ὑποτάσσεται. On *regulae fidei* in the second century, see P. Smulders, “Some Riddles in the Apostles’ Creed: II. Creeds and Rules of Faith,” *Bijdragen* 32 (1971): 350-66.

¹¹ *Cels.* 1.6, ed. Borret, SC 132:90: Οὐ γὰρ κατακλήσεσιν ἰσχύειν δοκοῦσιν ἄλλὰ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ, μετὰ τῆς ἀπαγγελίας τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν ἱστοριῶν; cf. *Cels.* 3.24, ed. Borret, SC 136:56.

¹² *Cels.* 1.6, ed. Borret, SC 132:90: σαφές ὅτι Ἰησοῦς οὐδεμιᾶ μελέτῃ ἐπὶ τῶν χρωμένων τυγχάνουσιν ἀλλὰ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Ἰησοῦ μετ’ ἄλλων λόγων πεπιστευμένων κατὰ τὴν θείαν γραφήν.

¹³ Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 72.

¹⁴ *Apol.* 32.2-3, ed. Dekkers, CCSL 1:143.

¹⁵ *Apol.* 23.15-16, ed. Dekkers, CCSL 1:132-33; Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 492-509.

¹⁶ For an overview, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 73-97.

¹⁷ See Sorensen, *Possession*, 10-16, and the literature cited there.

¹⁸ On exorcism as a charismatic gift and an aspect of the rite of initiation in the *Apostolic Tradition*, see Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 585-620; R. J. S. Barrett-Lennard, *Christian Healing after the New Testament: Some Approaches to Illness in the Second, Third and Fourth Centuries* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), 233-76. On problems posed by the transmission of the *Apostolic Tradition*, see Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002), 6-11; Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation*, 2d ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 96-110.

spirits in another body of material: the spells, amulets, and manuals of occult procedures that have survived from Roman Egypt, where such texts written on papyrus or parchment have been preserved because of dry climatic conditions. If we compare what we find in these materials with the testimony of Christian writers in the second and third centuries, what can we extrapolate about the Christian practice of ad-hoc exorcism in that early period or later? Given the space allotted for this paper, I shall focus on spells and amulets replete with Christian elements,¹⁹ referring only occasionally to materials that are largely free of such elements. These spells and amulets are not all strictly exorcistic; many are meant to heal from sickness, most often fevers and chills, or to protect from other threats to life, such as poisonous animals. But since such threats were believed to be the work of evil spirits,²⁰ it is likely that similar formulae were used when directing or expelling evil spirits. Indeed, the two objectives—to be protected or delivered from threats to life and to be protected or delivered from evil spirits—are often combined in individual spells and amulets containing Christian elements.²¹

Christological summaries

First, several amulets against fever and illness confirm that christological summaries were employed when directing evil spirits. One amulet, *SM I 31 (V/VI)*,²² opens with a declarative summary of the career of Christ: “[† Christ was born of the Virgin] Mary, and was crucified by Pontius Pilate, and was buried in a grave, and rose on the third day, and was taken up into the heavens, and [. . .].” In two other amulets the summary takes the form of a series of short acclamations: *SM I 23 (V)*: “† Christ was born, amen. Christ was crucified, amen. Christ was buried, amen. Christ arose, amen. He has woken to judge the living and the dead”; *SM I 35 (VI)*: “Christ was proclaimed in advance. Christ appeared. Christ suffered. Christ died. Christ was raised. Christ was taken up. Christ reigns.” From these amulets, I would suggest, we can infer that christological summaries, already used in ad-hoc exorcisms in the second century, continued to be so used well into late antiquity. (Christological

¹⁹ For a list of materials with Christian elements, see Theodore S. de Bruyn and Jitse H. F. Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets and Formularies from Egypt Containing Christian Elements: A Checklist of Papyri, Parchments, Ostraka, and Tablets,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 48 (2011): 159-214. When identifying an item in this paper, I refer to its publication in *PGM* or *SM*. For editions or revisions of an item prior to its publication in *PGM* or *SM*, see the introductions there. I provide references for editions, republications, or revisions subsequent to an item’s publication in *PGM* or *SM* at the first instance.

²⁰ Böcher, *Dämonenfurcht*, 152-56.

²¹ E.g., *PGM P 3*, 5b, 9, 10, 12 (see now Franco Maltomini, “Un ‘utero errante’ di troppo? *PGM 12* riconsiderato,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 160 [2007]: 167-74; Cornelia E. Römer, “Gebet und Bannzauber des Severus von Antiochia gegen den Biss giftiger Tiere, oder: Maltomini hatte Recht,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 168 [2009]: 209-12), 13, 17 (see now *P.Giss.Lit.* 5.4); *SM I 30*, 31 (republished in *BKT IX* 134); *SM II 84*.

²² The date of an item, provided in Roman numerals in parentheses, is usually assigned on palaeographical grounds. IV-V = fourth or fifth century; IV/V = late fourth or early fifth century. I provide the date assigned in *PGM* or *SM*, referring the reader to de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” Table 1, when the date has subsequently been disputed.

acclamations also appear as preambles to exorcistic and healing injunctions in medieval and modern manuscripts.²³) While the summaries in these amulets resemble the second article of ancient creeds, their wording does not correspond exactly to any known creeds.²⁴ However, despite the differences among them, the three examples all use the aorist passive indicative (e.g., ἐγεννήθη) rather than the aorist passive participle (e.g., γεννηθέντα) found in ancient creeds. This suggests that they drew on a liturgical practice of reciting the summary in an acclamatory rather than a confessional form (“I/we believe that . . .”). This acclamatory form would be well suited to the imperative mode of exorcisms and healings. In *SM I 23*, for example, the acclamations are followed by an injunction commanding the fever to flee. In *SM I 35*, the acclamations continue directly with the assertion that Christ heals the woman in question, the certainty of the outcome as secure as the present reign of Christ.

These three amulets do not, however, help to decide what Origen was referring to when he spoke of exorcisms “by the name of Jesus, together with a recital of narratives about him.”²⁵ Recollections of miracles performed by Jesus also function as preambles to petitions or adjurations in amulets,²⁶ taking the form of *historiola*e commonly used in spells to bring an event in the mythic past to bear on the need or request at hand in the present.²⁷ In fact, in *SM I 31*, the declarative summary is followed by a recollection of healings, which then leads to a request for healing.

Esoteric incantations

²³ A. Vassiliev, ed., *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina: Pars Prior* (Moscow: Universitatis Caesareae, 1893), 339; Armand Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, vol. 1: *Textes grecs inédits relatifs à l'histoire des religions* (Liège: Vaillant-Carmanne; Paris: Édouard Champion, 1927), 146, 616; Fritz Pradel, *Griechische und südditalienische Gebete, Beschwörungen und Rezepte des Mittelalters* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1907), 13.23–14.6 with 48–49; Agamemnon Tselikas, “Spells and Exorcisms in Three Post-Byzantine Manuscripts,” in *Greek Magic: Ancient, Medieval and Modern*, ed. J. C. B. Petropoulos (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2008), 72–81 at 75, 77–78.

²⁴ Cf. Liuwe H. Westra, *The Apostles' Creed: Origin, History, and Some Early Commentaries*, *Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia* 43 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 38–39. The overview of the second article of ancient creeds in Hans Lietzmann, “Symbolstudien III,” in *Kleine Schriften III: Studien zur Liturgie- und Symbolgeschichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* 74 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962), 194–211 at 198–208, should now be supplemented, for the fourth century, by Markus Vincent, “Die Entstehung des ‘Römischen Glaubensbekenntnisses,’” in Wolfram Kinzig, Christoph Marksches, and Markus Vincent, *Taufragen und Bekenntnis: Studien zur sogenannten ‘Traditio Apostolica’, zu den ‘Interrogationes de fide’ und zum ‘Römischen Glaubensbekenntnis.’* *Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte* 74 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 185–409 at 309–59. For complete texts of ancient *regulae fidei* and creeds, see August Hahn and G. Ludwig Hahn, eds., *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche*, 3d ed. (1897; reprint, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962).

²⁵ See n. 11 above.

²⁶ E.g., *PGMP* 5b, 18, 23; *SM I 32*; cf. *SM II 59*, where the *historiola* is a preamble to a curse.

²⁷ David Frankfurter, “Narrating Power: The Theory and Practice of the Magical *historiola* in Ritual Spells,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain* 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 457–76.

What, next, can amulets tell us about the use of esoteric incantations to direct or expel evil spirits? No apologist or polemicist in the second and third centuries—and later—wanted to be associated with such gibberish or, worse, sorcery. Celsus impugns Christian clergy by alleging that he “has seen books with *nomina barbara* of daimones and charlatanry in the possession of some presbyters”; these presbyters “promise nothing useful but everything that is harmful to humankind.”²⁸ Origen retorts by equating the allegations with the manifestly false accusations that Christians eat the flesh of infants or have unrestrained sex with women; the polytheistic masses, says Origen, know such allegations to be untrue.²⁹ To expel demons, Origen elsewhere asserts (as we have already noted),³⁰ Christians do not use incantations, but only the name of Jesus, along with some words from scripture.

The evidence of amulets with Christian elements would suggest that the reality encompassed both poles of this antithesis, and the territory in between. Some amulets simply juxtapose Greco-Egyptian and Christian elements. For instance, in an amulet in the Cologne collection, *SM I 20 (IV/V)*,³¹ a petition that presumably would have been acceptable to Origen—“Lord God, Lord of all gods, heal Thaesas [. . .] release in the name of Jesus Christ”—is surrounded by elements that Celsus was scornful of—series of vowels, the names Ablanathamala (i.e., Ablanathanalba) and Akrammachamari, and *charaktêres* (esoteric signs), all common features of spells. The amulet enjoins these signs to heal Thaesas, ending with the customary closing formula, “now now, quickly quickly.” A similar combination is found in another Cologne amulet, *SM I 21 (IV/V)*. It opens with the Christian acclamation “One Father, one Son, one Holy Spirit, amen,” punctuated by three gammate crosses. This is followed by the palindrome Ablanathanalba written repeatedly in a diminishing, grape-cluster shape, a common device in amulets. Around this are *charaktêres* that again are enjoined, explicitly, to heal: “Holy *charaktêres*, heal Tiron, whom Palladia bore, from all shivering, tertian, quartan, or every-other-day or quotidian [. . .].” Such direct invocation of *charaktêres*, common in ancient spells,³² is also found in *SM I 23*. There the christological acclamation and accompanying injunction are followed by the drawing of a stele and two *charaktêres* that are, in turn, enjoined to chase away the fever “now, now, now, quickly, quickly, quickly.” (A sixth-century amulet that juxtaposes a Christian and a Greco-Egyptian healing formula, *SM I 34 [VI]*,³³ shows that such combinations continued later as well.) A last example, *PGMP 3 (IV)*,

²⁸ Origen, *Cels.* 6.40, ed. Borret, SC 147:274: ἔφησεν ἑωρακέναι παρά τισι πρεσβυτέροις τῆς ἡμετέρας δόξης τυγχάνουσι βιβλία, βάρβαρα δαιμόνων ὀνόματα ἔχοντα καὶ τερατείας· καὶ ἔφασκε τούτους—τοὺς δὴθεν πρεσβυτέρους τῆς ἡμετέρας δόξης—οὐδὲν μὲν χρηστὸν ὑπισχνείσθαι πάντα δ’ ἐπ’ ἀνθρώπων βλάβαις. On the meaning of πρεσβύτεροι, see Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 384-85, who rightly takes it to refer to Christian clergy and dismisses the notion that here Celsus is referring only to heterodox or ‘gnostic’ Christians.

²⁹ *Cels.* 6.40, ed. Borret, SC 147:274.

³⁰ See n. 12 above.

³¹ Cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 193 n. 146.

³² See *SM I 21*, commentary on lines 10-12.

³³ Cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 194 n. 148.

employs a typical Greco-Egyptian formula appealing to Horus, Iaô Sabaôth Adônai, and the more opaque figure Salaman Tarchi to bind a scorpion-demon to “preserve this house with its occupants from all evil, from all bewitchment of spirits of the air and human (evil) eye and terrible pain [and] sting of scorpion and snake, through the name of the highest god.”³⁴ This is followed by *voces mysticae* (esoteric sounds and words) that are also found in a protective spell that lacks any Christian elements, *SM I 15*.³⁵ All these traditional elements are framed by Christian ones. The Christian monogram XMI appears at the head of the papyrus,³⁶ and the spell ends with the injunction, “Be on guard, O Lord, son of David according to the flesh, the one born of the holy virgin Mary, O holy one, highest God, from the Holy Spirit. Glory to you, O heavenly king, amen,” followed by several Christian monograms. The language of this injunction, which correctly attributes the human and divine origins of Jesus, suggests that the scribe was familiar with Christian liturgical and theological usage.

Other amulets lack the more obvious Greco-Egyptian elements found in the above examples. But they nevertheless employ expressions customarily used in spells. Thus one amulet, *SM I 22* (IV-V), directs the “power of Jesus Christ”—an expression used in spells when obtaining the power or qualities of a deity,³⁷ here punctuated three times by a Christian monogram comprising alpha, omega, and a staurogram—to heal a certain Eremega of various illnesses. Another amulet, *SM I 25* (V), employs a variant of a formula frequently used to command a maleficent entity to flee because a greater power pursues it:³⁸ “Shivering, and fever with shivering, and fever, the Son of God pursues you.” Then the trisagion is used to enjoin God to heal: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord Sabaôth, heal Gennadia, your servant.” These two injunctions are framed by the acclamation “Jesus Christ is victorious.” Amulets like these suggest that the formal structure of Christian exorcism may not have been all that different from polytheistic adjurations; it was the powers, and the naming of the powers, that changed. Incidentally, all of the amulets we have reviewed thus far corroborate the claims of Christian apologists that their exorcists healed in the name of God or Jesus.

In other amulets the request to be protected or delivered from evil spirits takes the form and phraseology of Christian prayer. A remarkable amulet assigned to the fourth or fifth century, *PGMP 13* (IV-V), preserves an extended liturgical invocation and epiclesis.³⁹ The invocation recounts the

³⁴ Trans. *ACM*, 49-50. For the formula, cf. *PGMP XXVIIIa-c*, 2. On the Artemisian scorpion, and the power attributed to scorpions to protect against other animals, including poisonous ones, see Samson Eitrem, “Der Skorpion in Mythologie und Religionsgeschichte,” *Symbolae Osloenses* 7 (1928): 53-82 at 61-62, 69-71; Marcus N. Tod, “The Scorpion in Graeco-Roman Egypt,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 25 (1939): 55-61.

³⁵ For the revised reading of the relevant lines in both texts, see Robert W. Daniel. “Some Φυλακτικα,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 25 (1977): 145-54 at 150-53.

³⁶ On this monogram, see de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 169 n. 24.

³⁷ Cf. *PGMP VII.1019*, XXXV.21, LXI.9, 24.

³⁸ See *P.Prag.* I 6, commentary on lines 1-5.

³⁹ I here correct my use of these terms in Theodore S. de Bruyn, “Ancient Applied Christology: Appeals to Christ in Greek Amulets in Late Antiquity,” in *From Logos to Christos: Essays in Christology in Honour of Joanne McWilliam*, ed. Ellen M. Leonard and Kate Merriman, Editions SR / Éditions SR 34 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 3-18 at 6-7.

descent, birth, death, and ascent of “the god of the aeon”—an alternative to the christological summaries discussed above. The epiclesis describes this figure’s descent to the underworld, binding the adversary who rules there and releasing the souls he held captive—the exorcistic event *par excellence* that is the basis for the apotropaic petition with which the amulet concludes. In later amulets petitionary prayers are employed, some of them appealing to the intercessions of Mary and the saints. In *PGM P 9* (VI),⁴⁰ Silvanus prays to God and St. Serenus to drive out various demons and to deliver from every illness. The prayer is followed by the recitation of a portion of the Lord’s Prayer and the *incipits* of two gospels—texts that were believed to have an apotropaic effect.⁴¹ So too, *SM I 31*, which we have already noted for its declarative christological summary and its recitation of healings performed by Jesus, concludes with a prayer for deliverance “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and [. . .].” Yet even at this late date, prayers for protection against evil spirits may preserve phraseology of an earlier era, as *PGM P 13a* (VI), a prayer copied by Dioscorus of Aphrodito, shows.⁴²

Long incantations

Finally, how elaborate or dramatic were the incantations used to direct or expel evil spirits? A pseudonymous tract on the way of life of itinerant Christian ascetics, written in the third or early fourth century and circulating in Egypt within the next century,⁴³ reveals that they could be quite elaborate.⁴⁴ One of the practices the writer disapproves of is the use of lengthy incantations when praying over demoniacs. When visiting them, one is to pray to God with faith, “not by combining many words or declaiming adjurations for human display so as to appear eloquent or endowed with

⁴⁰ Joseph E. Sanzo, “Canonical Power: A ‘Tactical’ Approach to the Use of the Christian Canon in P. Berlin 954,” *Saint Shenouda Coptic Quarterly* 4 (2008): 28-45.

⁴¹ On the apotropaic use of the Lord’s Prayer, see Thomas J. Kraus, “Manuscripts with the *Lord’s Prayer*—They Are More Than Simply Witnesses to That Text Itself,” in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World*, ed. Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 227-66. On gospel *incipits*, see Joseph E. Sanzo, *Scriptural Incipits on Amulets from Late Antique Egypt: Text, Typology, and Theory*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 84 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

⁴² See Leslie S. B. MacCoul, “P. Cair. Masp. II 67188 Verso 1-5. The *Gnostica* of Dioscorus of Aphrodito,” *Tyche* 2 (1987): 95-97; *SM II 65*, commentary on lines 31-33; David Jordan, “A Prayer Copied by Dioskoros of Kômê Aphroditês (PGM 13a),” *Tyche* 16 (2001): 87-90 at 87-88. I accept Jordan’s restoration of ἐπικαλοῦμαι at line 1.

⁴³ The writer censures cohabitation or mingling of male and female ascetics, an innovation that church authorities in the fourth century sought to end, substituting more socially acceptable institutions, such as separate monasteries for women and men. Cf. Pseudo-Clement, *Ep. ad virgines* 1.10.1-4, ed. F. Diekamp and F. X. Funk, *Patres apostolici*, 2 vols., 3d ed. (Tübingen: Laupp, 1913), 2:17-18; Susanna Elm, *Virgins of God: The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 47-51, 162-64, 341, 374-75.

⁴⁴ Pseudo-Clement, *Ep. ad virgins*. For the versions, see Mauritius Geerard, ed., *Clavis Patrum Graecorum*, vol. 1: *Patres antenicaeni* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1983), 6-7 (no. 1004). On the date and provenance, see Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 621, and the literature cited there.

a good memory.”⁴⁵ An example of what the author may have had in mind can be found in the so-called ‘Great Magical Papyrus of Paris,’ the longest of the manuals of procedures and spells found in the region of Thebes.⁴⁶ The manuscript, which has been assigned to the late third or fourth century,⁴⁷ preserves a procedure for the demon-possessed, PGM P IV.3007-86, that includes a long series of adjurations alluding to important events in Jewish biblical and postbiblical narratives.⁴⁸ The exorcist is instructed to prepare a mixture while reciting *voces mysticae*, write *voces mysticae* on a tin amulet to be hung on the possessed, and recite the adjurations while facing the possessed. While the litany clearly originated in a Jewish milieu, it shows signs of having been reworked by an outsider impressed

⁴⁵ Pseudo-Clement, *Ep. ad virgines* 1.12.2, ed. Diekamp and Funk, *Patres apostolici*, 2:22-23; μή ἐκ συνθέσεως πολλῶν λόγων ἢ μελέτας ἐξορκισμῶν πρὸς ἐπίδειξιν ἀνθρωπαρεσκείας πρὸς τὸ φανῆναι εὐλόλους ἢ μνήμονας ἡμᾶς. For the Coptic version, see L.-Th. Lefort, ed., *Les pères apostoliques en copte*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 135 and 136 (Louvain: L. Dubecq, 1952), 135:41-42. The Greek, Syriac, and Coptic versions can be conveniently compared at Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 622-24.

⁴⁶ On the so-called ‘Theban Magical Library,’ see Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 168-70; W. J. Tait, “Theban Magic,” in *Hundred-Gated Thebes: Acts of a Colloquium on Thebes and the Theban Area in the Graeco-Roman Period*, ed. S. P. Vleeming, Papyrologica Lugduno-Batava 27 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 169-82; William M. Brashear, “The Greek Magical Papyri: An Introduction and Survey; Annotated Bibliography (1928-1994),” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, part 2, vol. 18.5: *Heidentum: Die religiösen Verhältnisse in den Provinzen*, ed. Wolfgang Haase (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 3380-684 at 3402-4; Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual (100-300 CE)*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 153 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 12-15; Richard Gordon, “Memory and Authority in the Magical Papyri,” in *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World*, ed. Beate Dignas and R. R. R. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 145-80 at 147-51.

⁴⁷ F. Ll. Griffith, “The Date of the Old Coptic Texts and their Relation to Christian Coptic,” *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 39 (1901), 78-82.

⁴⁸ The literature is considerable: Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: The New Testament Illustrated by Recently Discovered Texts of the Graeco-Roman World*, trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (1927; reprint Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 260-63; Wilfred Lawrence Knox, “Jewish Liturgical Exorcism,” *Harvard Theological Review* 31 (1938): 191-203; Samson Eitrem, *Some Notes on the Demonology in the New Testament*, 2d ed., Symbolae Osloenses 20 (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1966), 15-30; GMPT, 96-97; Roy Kotansky, “Greek Exorcistic Amulets,” in *Ancient Magic and Ritual Power*, ed. Marvin Meyer and Paul Mirecki, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 129 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 243-77 at 262-66; Bernd Kollmann, *Jesus und die Christen als Wundertäter: Studien zu Magie, Medizin und Schamanismus in Antike und Christentum*, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 170 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1996), 156-60; Reinhold Merkelbach, ed., *Abrasax: Ausgewählte Papyri religiösen und magischen Inhalts*, vol. 4: *Exorzismen und jüdisch/christlich beeinflusste Texte*, Papyrologica Coloniensia 17.4 (Cologne: Westdeutscher, 1996), 36-43; Morton Smith, “Jewish Elements in the Magical Papyri,” in *Studies in the Cult of Yahweh: New Testament, Early Christianity, and Magic*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 130.2 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 241-56; Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Elements in Gnosticism and Magic c. CE 70–c. CE 270,” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3: *The Early Roman Period*, ed. William Horbury, W. D. Davies, and John Sturdy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1052-78 at 1073-74; Pieter W. van der Horst, “The Great Magical Papyrus of Paris (PGM P IV) and the Bible,” in *Jews and Christians in their Graeco-Roman Context: Selected Essays on Early Judaism, Samaritanism, Hellenism, and Christianity*, ed. Pieter W. van der Horst, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 196 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 269-79; Lynn LiDonnici, “According to the Jews: Identified (and Identifying) ‘Jewish’ Elements in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism*, ed. Lynn LiDonnici and Andrea Lieber, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 119 (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 87-108 at 95-99.

with the reputed power of Jewish adjurations.⁴⁹ This probably explains the opening words of the litany: “I adjure you by the god of the Hebrews, Jesus.” It too expresses the perception of an outsider: the phrase employs a *nomen sacrum* for ‘god’ (θε̅υ), as one finds elsewhere in the manual,⁵⁰ but not for ‘Jesus,’ as one would expect of a scribe familiar with Christian conventions.⁵¹ The phrase adds to evidence that the power of the name ‘Jesus’ when dealing with spirits had become more widely known, alongside the already established reputation of “the God of the Hebrews” or “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”⁵²

As is often the case with normative prescriptions, the counsel of this tract was honoured as much in the breach as the observance. The impulse to pile on adjurations when driving out evil spirits was, in fact, persistent. For example, *PGM P 10 (VI)*,⁵³ a Greek amulet meant to protect the wearer from all manner of harm, waking or sleeping, comprises six long adjurations that command the evil spirits by “[the four] gospels,” “the God of Israel,” “[the seven circles] of heaven,” “the ‘Amen’ and the ‘Alleluia’ and the ‘Gospel of the Lord,’” and “the Father and the [Son] and the Holy [Spirit].” Likewise, a Coptic amulet that may date from the early Islamic period combines a set of apotropaic texts commonly cited in Christian amulets—Psalm 90:1-2 LXX and the *incipits* of the four gospels⁵⁴—with twelve short adjurations to protect a certain Philoxenos from “all [harm] and all evil and all sorcery and all injury induced by the stars and all the demons and all the deeds of the hostile adversary.”⁵⁵ Some Coptic spells reveal a marked predilection for elaborate incantations referring to gnostic powers, hosts of angels and archangels, liturgical formulae, *vores mysticae*, *charaktères*, material preparations—in short, the entire technical repertoire that Christians were supposed to

⁴⁹ Alexander, “Jewish Elements,” 1074; Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 206-7.

⁵⁰ Ludwig Traube, *Nomina Sacra. Versuch einer Geschichte der christliche Kürzung*, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur lateinischen Philologie des Mittelalters 2 (Munich: Beck, 1907), 38-40.

⁵¹ Cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 169 n. 22, 171.

⁵² Cf. *PGMP IV.1227-64*, another procedure for casting out demons in the same manuscript. The incantation begins with the following invocation, expressed in Egyptian but written in Greek characters: “Hail, God of Abraham; hail, God of Isaac; hail, God of Jacob; Jesus Chrēstos, the Holy Spirit, the Son of the Father, who is above/below the seven, who is within the seven. Bring Iaô Sabaôth; may your power issue forth from NN, and may you drive away this unclean daimon, Satan, who is upon him” (*PGMP IV.1231-39*). Space does not permit the discussion this text requires; I treat it at length in a monograph in preparation. On the widespread use of the formulae “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and “the God of the Hebrews” in incantations, see Origen, *Cels.* 1.22, 4.33-34, ed. Borret, SC 132:130, 136:266-70; cf. Nicolotti, *Esorcismo*, 442-49.

⁵³ Cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 189 n. 133.

⁵⁴ Cf. Sanzo, *Amulets*, 89-90 (no. 13). On the apotropaic value of Psalm 90 LXX, see Juan Chapa, “Su demoni e angeli: il Salmo 90 nel suo contest,” in *I papiri letterari cristiani: atti del convegno internazionale di studi in memoria di Mario Naldini*, Firenze, 10-11 Giugno 2010, ed. Guido Bastianini and Angelo Casanova (Florence: Istituto Papirologico “G. Vitelli,” 2011), 59-90; Thomas J. Kraus, “Septuaginta-Psalm 90 in apotropäischer Verwendung: Vorüberlegungen für eine kritische Edition und (bisheriges) Datenmaterial,” *Biblische Notizen* n.f. 125 (2005): 39-73.

⁵⁵ James Drescher, “A Coptic Amulet,” in *Coptic Studies in Honor of Walter Ewing Crum*, ed. Thomas Whittemore (Boston: The Byzantine Institute, 1950), 265-70, discussion of the date at 266; trans. *ACM*, 115-16.

eschew, according to their second- and third-century apologists.⁵⁶ The tendency to multiply adjurations was not limited, however, to exorcists with syncretistic tendencies, as we can see from a lengthy Coptic hymn and prayer, “The Praise of Michael the Archangel.”⁵⁷ In fact, Greek exorcisms attributed to church fathers, several now taken up into the liturgical books of the Orthodox Church, contain a seemingly endless series of adjurations, to be uttered until the demon leaves.⁵⁸

Conclusion

To sum up: the evidence of Greek spells and amulets replete with Christian elements partly confirms and partly contradicts what Christian apologists say about the Christian practice of exorcism. There are many indications that Christians adjured evil spirits by the name or power of Jesus, and that the invocation of his name or power could be accompanied by a creedal acclamation, as the apologists claim. But at the same time Christian exorcists as likely as not reiterated customary practices of incantation, including the uttering of esoteric names, threatening injunctions, and multiple adjurations.

In an effort to rehabilitate the term ‘syncretism’ as a way of understanding how Christian ‘holy men’ or ‘prophets’ in late antique Egypt both preserved and altered older Egyptian religious traditions, David Frankfurter has drawn on the theory of *habitus* or ‘habit-memory.’⁵⁹ What people expected of Christian exorcists, and the ways in which Christian exorcists responded, would have had to be recognizable and meaningful within their social contexts. The extent to which the actions of a particular exorcist would have conformed to or diverged from, for example, the normative description of an Origen would have depended on historical and contextual variables that might constrain the exorcist, either consciously or unconsciously:⁶⁰ the background and training of the exorcist; the presence of alternatives that would incline the exorcist to behave similarly to or differently than the competition; the strength of institutions and authorities capable of cultivating or imposing a normative practice; the latitude afforded the exorcist by the nature of his or her role

⁵⁶ Cf., e.g., *ACM*, 275-92 (nos. 129-132), a portfolio of spells for various purposes, three of which name a certain Severus, son of Joanna, as the beneficiary.

⁵⁷ *ACM*, 323-41 (no. 135).

⁵⁸ E.g., Vassiliev, *Anecdota Graeco-Byzantina*, 332-33; Delatte, *Anecdota Atheniensia*, 228-62; Louis Delatte, *Un office byzantin d'exorcisme (Ms. de la Lavra du Mont Athos, 9 20)* (Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1954), *passim*, with remarks at 102, 141-46; cf. Richard P. H. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1988), 141-47.

⁵⁹ David Frankfurter, “Syncretism and the Holy Man in Late Antique Egypt,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11 (2003): 339-85 at 344-48.

⁶⁰ Cf. David Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of ‘Magicians,’” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 141 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159-78.

and authority; the expectations of people seeking relief from sickness and danger; and so on. In short, there would have been various exorcistic practices, some more innovative and distinctive, others more customary and traditional.

While one cannot posit an exact correspondence between processes of preservation and innovation in the ritual practice of exorcism and processes of preservation and innovation in the scribal practice of amulet-writing,⁶¹ the fact that amulets manifest both distinctive Christian innovations and traditional Egyptian customs—in varying relationships—suggests that the same was likely true for exorcism. The persistence of deeply rooted fears and expectations, such as the fear of scorpions and snakes and the demand for amulets against them, could elicit a customary response, perhaps slightly modified as in *PGM P 3*, or a fully developed Christian alternative, as in a prayer attributed to Severus of Antioch, *PGM P 12* (VII or later).⁶² An exorcist with a liturgical culture akin to that attested in *PGM P 5b* (V), with its several allusions to the cult of saints in sixth-century Oxyrhynchus, would have formulated an exorcism differently than, say, an exorcist with a liturgical culture akin to that attested in *PGM P 13*, which rehearses the cosmological drama of the descent and ascent of the “god of the aeon.” While some exorcists would have eschewed the recital of *voces mysticae*, as in *SM I 22*, others would have incorporated them, as in *SM I 20*, because that was simply what an exorcist did and what others expected. It is not possible here to explore further any clues to the social circumstances that would have elicited these different expectations and responses, but the evidence leaves no doubt that there were many permutations to what Christian exorcists—or exorcists appealing to the Christians’ god—would have said when warding off or expelling demons.

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⁶¹ Frankfurter, “Syncretism,” 385.

⁶² Cf. de Bruyn and Dijkstra, “Greek Amulets,” 189 n. 134, where, however, the page referred to in Maltomini, “Un ‘utero errante,’” should be p. 168.

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