

Faith Pulpit

Paul and the Pagans

In Roman history, the term *pagan* refers to an individual who was neither Jewish nor Christian. In other words, pagans were non-Christian Gentiles. The Apostle Paul definitely knew some pagan literature. For instance, he quotes the poet Aratus of Cilicia in Acts 17:28: “For we are also His offspring.” And he quotes Epimenides, a Cretan poet, in Titus 1:12: “The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies [lazy gluttons].”

These are examples of Paul’s direct referencing of pagan poets. But a cursory survey of pagan literature can indirectly assist in the interpretation of other Pauline texts, as it places his letters in their cultural milieu. Consider the following three examples:

Romans 2:12–16—The Conscience of the Pagans

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul establishes the fact that all individuals stand condemned before a righteous God. Even though the pagan Gentiles did not have the Law, they were still guilty because they transgressed their God-given sense of morality. “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.”

This truth of an internal law is clearly demonstrated in the writings of Julian, a fourth century Roman emperor. Julian, who had been tutored by Christians as a child, left this Christian heritage and reverted to paganism. Christian writers therefore labeled him as “Julian the Apostate.” He composed a work entitled *Against the Galilaeans*, which criticized Christianity and its Jewish foundation. At one point, he disparages the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments: “What nation is there, I swear before the gods, which does not think that it ought to keep the commandments, excluding ‘Thou shalt not worship other gods’ and ‘Remember the Sabbath day’? Thus also penalties have been assigned to transgressors,

sometimes more severe, and sometimes similar to those ordained by Moses, though they are sometimes more humane” (*Against the Galilaeans*, 152D).

Julian undoubtedly thinks he is disproving the divine origins of Christianity by demonstrating that the Decalogue is not unique. All nations have laws similar to many of the Ten Commandments. But actually, Julian is unwittingly corroborating Paul’s point: many values of the Mosaic Law are imprinted on the human conscience in a general, common manner.

Ephesians 4:17–24—The Immorality of the Pagans

Although Paul refers to the pagan conscience, he obviously realizes that the pagans did not live up to the revelation they possessed. Paul exhorts the Ephesians, “Henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.”

This excessive impurity of the pagans is found throughout Greco-Roman literature. One specific example can be found in the *Satyricon*, written by Petronius, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul. According to the Roman historian Tacitus, Petronius was the arbiter elegantiae (judge of taste) in the decadent Neronian court. Book fifteen of the *Satyricon* describes a hedonistic banquet held at the estate of a wealthy freedman named Trimalchio. The satire describes the gluttony, drunkenness, greed, astrology, vulgarity, spousal abuse, and mistreatment of slaves at the party. The indecent conversations of the participants revolve around adultery, pederasty, and homosexuality.

Underneath the lewd humor lies a nihilistic despair. Trimalchio poetically explains,

“Alas! Poor wretches! It’s all for naught!

Soon Death will snatch us, that is our lot.

So enjoy this life, before we rot” (*Banquet of Trimalchio*, 34).

Such pagan literature demonstrates that the Gentiles truly were “futile in their minds,” “darkened in their understandings,” and “blinded in their hearts,” just as the Apostle Paul characterized them.

1 Corinthians 5:1–5—The Customs of the Pagans

In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul deals with a disturbing situation in the Corinthian church: “It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife.” Paul censures the Corinthians because they have not properly disciplined a member who was cohabiting with his father’s wife. Even the pagan Gentiles, though they practiced many forms of immorality, prohibited such debased behavior.

Once again, pagan literature enlightens the subject. Seneca the Younger (another contemporary of Paul), wrote several Latin tragedies, including one entitled *Phaedra*. This tragedy illustrates the terrible consequences of the unnatural desire of Phaedra for her step-son Hippolytus. By the end of the play, Phaedra commits suicide and Hippolytus is murdered. Early on, Phaedra's nurse counsels her: "I beg you, then, extinguish the flames of your incestuous love, a sin which the barbarians have yet to commit. The nomadic Getae do not practice incest, nor the inhospitable Taurians, nor the scattered Scythians. Expel this perversion from your mind" (*Phaedra*, 160).

Thus Seneca, although he was a Stoic philosopher and pagan author of tragedies, buttresses Paul's argument. Even the most uncivilized tribes considered incest to be taboo. Such immorality, which was castigated by the barbarians, obviously had no part in the church.

The Apostle Paul knew his pagan culture. He understood the pagan heart, the pagan lifestyle, and the pagan customs. And his God-inspired writings are true descriptions of that environment. In many ways, that pagan culture of pre-Christian Rome resembles the neo-pagan culture of the post-Christian West. Certainly our citizens have a conscience and a sense of morality. But often it is seared and scarred by years of profligate living. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes the extreme cases paraded across the media to raise the pagan ire and to remind them about what they instinctively know: some things are right, and some things are wrong. There are both absolutes and an Absolute Law-giver.

Paul further reminds us that relevancy never involves compromising God's truths. He firmly embraced and fully preached God's unchanging values, and he consistently impacted the pagan culture of his day. The apostle exposed an unrighteous world before a righteous God, and he condemned ungodly intrusions into the church. May God help us to be similarly faithful in our own adverse culture.

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