

1 Corinthians 10:14-22: An Argument against the Syncretism of Christianity and Pagan Religions

Mary Jo Sharp

Introduction

The syncretism of first century pagan religions and Christianity seems to be a prevailing popular-level argument that has reared its head, even within academia, once again. According to the argument, the doctrines of the Christian Faith are merely recycled pagan myths with a Judeo-Christian flavor. The similarities suggested range from the Lord's Supper feast as a copy of a pagan sacrificial feast to the Resurrection as a copy of a dying-and-rising god.¹ However, as with many of these arguments, the evidence available for the historical and cultural setting of the Christian Faith

¹ In a recent conversation with Shadid Lewis, a Muslim apologist, he compared Osiris' return from the dead and subsequent position of god of the underworld with Jesus' resurrection.

is often cherry-picked or ignored; namely the texts of the first century writers. The letters of the apostle Paul, along with other first-century writings of non-Christian authors must be addressed in any treatment of this topic. One particular text to be taken into account is Paul's specific rebuke of participation in pagan practices that would indicate a follower of Christ's willful *or ignorant* communion with pagan gods (whom Paul identifies as demons, in reality) in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22. Once Paul's rebuke of pagan practices is set in its proper historical-cultural background, the message of his writing conveys a striking contrast to the surrounding cultural acceptance and worship of numerous gods. The reality of his text is that Paul, once a Pharisee, and later a leader of the rapidly spreading Christian faith among the Gentiles, specifically stated communion with the Lord Jesus Christ was exclusive of communion with any other pagan 'god.'

Historical and Cultural Background

Paul the Apostle

Paul was born in the region of Cilicia, in the city of Tarsus, into a Jewish home;² his family was of the tribe of Benjamin.³ Tarsus was a great Roman port city with a mixed population.⁴ A.N. Wilson, in his book, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, suggests that the ancient writers speak of the people of Tarsus (of the time of Paul's youth) as worshippers of Mithras.⁵ Wilson then attempts to establish Paul as influenced by the *taurobolium*, or the initiate "blood bath," along with other rites of Mithraism or as impressed by the worship of Herakles, a cult influenced by the dying and rising gods of other Mediterranean vegetation gods: the Syrian Adonis, the Babylonian Thammuz, and the Egyptian Osiris.⁶ Wilson also questions Paul's "Jewishness" and points out that Paul's tentmaker occupation and his reading from the Septuagint would have been

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 21. See also: A.N. Wilson, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 23.

³ Philippians 3:5.

⁴ A.N. Wilson, 25.

⁵ Wilson cites Franz Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithras*. Cumont, Franz *The Myteries of Mithras*, [book on-line]; available from www.sacred-texts.com/cla/mom/mom05.htm#fn_18; Internet; accessed 21 April, 2008.

Cumont utilizes Plutarch's writing on Pompeii as a reference on the presence of Mithraic worship in Cilicia.

⁶ A.N. Wilson, 26.

questionable for a rabbinic Jew.⁷ However, even Wilson admits that the texts referring to the possible uncleanness of the tentmaker occupation came a few hundred years after Paul, and that Philo, a great Jewish philosopher of the first century, also read the Hebrew Bible in Greek.⁸ Not only does A.N. Wilson fail to provide references for a reason to doubt Paul's "Jewishness,"⁹ he also fails to recognize the writings of Philo and Josephus, two first-century Jewish authors, as they both indicate that Jewish boys were instructed in the Scriptures and traditions from "earliest youth."¹⁰

Paul explicitly cites his Jewish background in Philippians 3:5-6, "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic

⁷ Ibid., 30-31.

⁸ Ibid., 30-31.

⁹ Wilson states that we have too few sources on this and speculates that other sources may have been destroyed in the fall of Jerusalem, AD 70, 31-32.

¹⁰ Josephus, "Against Apion, Book 2," *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, Kregel Publications, 1999), 971. "...beginning from the earliest infancy...";

Philo. *On the Embassy to Gaius*, 210. [text on-line]; available from www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book40.html; Internet; accessed on 21 April, 2008. "and having been instructed in this doctrine from their very earliest infancy they bear in their souls the images of the commandments contained in these laws as sacred"

righteousness, faultless.” Here Paul describes himself as genuine “stock” of Israel by using the term *ek génous Israeél* (“of the people of Israel” in the NIV); he is not a proselyte.¹¹ In mentioning the tribe of Benjamin, Paul states that he is from the tribe that: 1) gave Israel her first king, 2) was the lone faithful tribe to Judah at the separation under Rehoboam, and 3) held a place of honor in the Israelite army; Israel’s battle cry was “After thee, O Benjamin” (Jud. 5:14).¹² Paul also mentions that he was born of Hebrew parents, *Hebraios ex Hebraíoon*, literally “a Hebrew from Hebrew parents.”¹³ He includes that he is a Pharisee concerning the law to give his reader an understanding of his basic doctrines (as compared to the Sadducees). As Acts 22:3 states, Paul was not just a Pharisee, but had come to Jerusalem to train under one of the greatest Rabbis of the first century, Gamaliel I.¹⁴ Paul establishes that in all ways he was a Jew. Unless sufficient evidence can be given to the contrary, the evidence *that exists* points to understanding Paul as adhering to

¹¹ *Biblesoft's Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament*, s.v. “Philippians 3:5” [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc., 1997, 2003).

¹² *Biblesoft's Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, s.v. “Phillipians 3:5” [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc 1997, 2003); *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, (Broadman Press, 1985).

¹³ *Vincent's Word Studies: Philippians 3:5*.

¹⁴ Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul*, 22.

the commonly described Judaism of his day; a Judaism that was exclusively monotheistic.¹⁵

In the debate over whether or not Christianity borrowed from pagan mysteries, Paul's background is crucial to the argument. Paul, being a first-century, exclusively monotheistic Jewish Pharisee, (who was persecuting believers in Christ for equating Christ with God: Phil. 3:5), would not be a likely candidate to incorporate surrounding religious influences into his conception of God. Quite to the contrary, the picture of Paul that emerges from the New Testament texts and from the description of the exclusivity of Jewish worship found outside the texts,¹⁶ is one of a devout monotheist who despises any practice or social celebration that even brings to mind the worship of a pagan god.

¹⁵ "...their religion demonstrates what we can call 'exclusivist monotheism.' Both in theology and in practice, Greco-Roman Jews demonstrate concerns for God's supremacy and uniqueness with an intensity and a solidarity that seem to go far beyond anything else previously known in the Greco-Roman world." Larry Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God? Historical Questions about Earliest Devotion to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 130.

¹⁶ Josephus, "Against Apion, Book 2," 972; Philo. *The Decalogue*. (53) [text on-line]; available from <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book26.html>; Internet; accessed 28 March, 2008.

Corinth

When Paul came to Corinth, it was a cosmopolitan city with a population speculated to be between 150,000 to 600,000 people.¹⁷ The city had rapidly revived in the previous one hundred years, since its destruction in 146 BC¹⁸ Previously the people of Corinth had followed in an Achaian revolt against the Roman Empire. Roman military commander, Mummius, had led the Roman army in the complete devastation of Corinth; and the city lay in ruins for one hundred years.¹⁹ In 44 BC, Julius Caesar determined the location of Corinth to be that of strategic commercial importance for the Roman Empire and had it rebuilt.²⁰

¹⁷ Several differing opinions from the various authors cited in this paper.

¹⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: I Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1984), viii. See also: David E. Garland. *I Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1 ; R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Publishing House, 1937, 1963), 10; Hans Conzelmann, "1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians," *Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, trans. James W. Leitch, ed. George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 11.

¹⁹ Strabo, *Geography*, trans. H. L. Jones (ed.) [text on-line]; available from <http://classics.mit.edu/Strabo/strab.6.html>; Internet; accessed 8 April, 2008.

²⁰ MacArthur Jr, *New Testament Commentary*, viii. See also: Lenski, *Interpretation*, 10; Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*, 11.

Sea travel around the southern portion of Greece (the Peloponnesus) was a dangerous journey. It was so treacherous that Strabo, a first-century Greek writer, mentioned in his *Geography*, “And just as in early times the Strait of Sicily was not easy to navigate, so also the high seas, and particularly the sea beyond Maleae [the cape at the south end of the peninsula], were not, on account of the contrary winds; and hence the proverb, "But when you double Maleae, forget your home."²¹ Therefore, most mariners chose to run their boats across the Isthmus on skids or rollers²², from one harbor to the other, leading most of the marine traffic directly past Corinth; located just south of the middle of the isthmus that connected northern Greece to Southern Greece. Dio Chrysostom mentions the great numbers of people that pass through Corinth on account of its location in *Discourses, Book 8*, “For he observed that large numbers gathered at Corinth on account of the harbours and the hetaerae²³, and because the city was situated as it were at the cross-roads of Greece.” Most important to note, for the purpose of

²¹ Strabo, *Geography*. See also: MacArthur Jr., *ibid.*, vii.

²² MacArthur Jr., *ibid.*, vii.

²³ Dio Chrysostom. “Diogenes” *Discourses*. 8.5. [text on-line]; from http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dio_Chrysostom/home.html; Internet; accessed 8 April, 2008. Footnote from webstie on term, “hetaera”: *Literally, "female companions." The name was applied to a wide class of women, ranging from those whose marriages lacked legal sanction all the way to the lowest harlots.*

this article, is the wide variety of people that passed through Corinth anticipating opportunity for trade and entrepreneurship; bringing their pagan gods with them.

Business, however, was not the only draw to Corinth; her amusements and entertainment brought throngs, as well. Corinth hosted one of the two great athletic festivals of the day, the Isthmian games; a showcase of the world's finest athletes, comparable in grandeur to the Olympian games.²⁴ Corinth was also known for its number of courtesans²⁵ and its licentiousness.²⁶ The ancients utilized a phrase, "to Corinthianize," which meant "to fornicate,²⁷ or *corinthiazesthai* ('to behave like a Corinthian') which "came to represent gross immorality and drunken debauchery."²⁸ The Apostle

²⁴ Lee Martin MacDonald and Stanley Lee Porter, *Early Christianity and Its Sacred Literature* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2000), 430. See also: Lenski, *Interpretations*, 12; MacArthur Jr, *New Testament Commentary*, viii; Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 4; Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, 8.6

²⁵ Dio Chrysostom, 8.5. See also: Strabo, *Geography*, 20.90.

²⁶ Conzelman, *Hermeneia*, 12. See also: *Biblesoft's Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Modern Edition*, s.v. "1 Corinthians" [CD-ROM] (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1991); Leon Morris, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 1985), 18.

²⁷ MacDonald and Porter, *Early Christianity*, 432.

²⁸ MacArthur Jr., viii. See also: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: New Modern Edition*, s.v. "1 Corinthians" [CD-ROM] (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 1991).

Paul comments on some of the vices found in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 as fornication, idolatry, adultery, effeminacy, homosexuality, stealing, covetousness, drunkenness, reviling, and swindling.²⁹

Socio-Religious Aspect of Corinth

The people of Corinth came from many places and backgrounds, bringing with them the worship of numerous pagan gods. Craig Steven de Vos lists the gods and cults recognized in Corinth as “Apollo, Aphrodite/Venus, Asclepius, Athena, Athena Chalinitis, Demeter and Kore, Dionysus, Ephesian Artemis, Hera Acraea, Hermes/Mercury, Jupiter Capitolinus, Poseidon/Neptune, Tyche/Fortuna, and Zeus.”³⁰ In ancient writings, such as Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, there is evidence of Egyptian mystery cults, including the worship of Isis, in Corinth.³¹ R.C.H. Lenski states that this presence of Egyptian deities can be attributed to extensive trade

²⁹ MacArthur Jr., *ibid.*, viii.

³⁰ Craig Steven de Vos, “Church and Community Conflicts: The Relationships of the Thessalonian, Corinthian, and Philippian Churches with Their Wider Civic Communities”. *Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 168*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 192.

³¹ Apuleius. *Metamorphoses* 11, quoted in Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 9. See also: Lenski. *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*: 11.

with Alexandria.³² The Roman culture was polytheistic, as demonstrated by the temple of Demeter in Pergamum, which had altars to the gods Hermes, Helios, Zeus, Asclepius, and Heracles;³³ also acknowledged by Paul in Acts 17:23 as he spoke in Athens at the meeting of the Aeropagus referencing altars to various gods, including the one to the “unknown God.”

In addition to this pantheon of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian gods, the Corinthians also participated in Emperor Worship - the Imperial Cult - which was gradually instated by the Roman Senate in the first century.³⁴ Divinity was ascribed to the emperor by Roman emperors such as Augustus who saw the practice as a tool “to encourage patriotism and inspire political unity in the empire.”³⁵ Other emperors, such as Caligula, openly sought worship for themselves.³⁶ The worship of the emperor was an important aspect of Roman life in the first century; for it demonstrated allegiance to the Roman state. The practice of honoring the emperor offering incense to his statue in his temple became increasingly problematic

³² Lenski. *Interpretation*, 11-12.

³³ Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 9.

³⁴ Thomas D. Lea, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*. 2nd edition, ed. David Alan Black (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 49.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

for the Christians who would not present any kind of worship to a being other than God.³⁷

The general religious attitude prevalent of Greco-Romans was that of tolerance, inclusion, and syncretism. The Hellenistic world was a “great religious melting pot.”³⁸ Thomas Lea, in *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, lists four points that characterized Greco-Roman religion:

- Greco-Roman religion was non-exclusive. A Roman who worshipped one deity could also give devotion to another deity. In Christianity such a compromise of worship would be unthinkable.
- In Greco-Roman religion the power of fate was thought to be quite strong. This belief led to a faith in astrology and a gullible respect for all forms of magic.
- Greco-Roman religion was corporate. Religion was to be practiced by society at large; it was not viewed as an essentially private matter.

³⁷ Garland, 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 472.

- Religion and morality were separated. The rules governing religions were those of ritual purity rather than ethical or moral guidelines.³⁹

Paul's insistence of exclusive loyalty to one religion would have been considered uncommon in Corinth.⁴⁰ The people of Corinth were accustomed to joining in various sacrificial meals of various deities without an exclusive relationship with any one deity.⁴¹ David Garland, in *1 Corinthians: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, states, "The relative disinterest in doctrine and the utilitarian interest in the power of individual gods to deliver a desired outcome also mitigated the potential for any theological friction." With the exception of the Imperial Cult – since all citizens were required to pay homage to the imperial cult – the Romans honored gods they thought were useful and believed in a sort of safety in numbers approach, so were more likely than not to worship several gods.⁴² This is the cultural milieu in which the Corinthian church was planted and with which it struggled.

³⁹ Lea and Black, *The New Testament*, 48.

⁴⁰ Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 472.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 472.

The Message of the Text

The Problems in the Corinthian Church

The Corinthian church struggled with succumbing to its surrounding environment. J.M.G. Barclay, in *Thessalonica and Corinth: Social Contrasts in Pauline Christianity*, states that even though the two churches were founded within months of each other, “these sibling communities developed remarkably different interpretations of the Christian faith.”⁴³ The Thessalonian Christians had a sense of alienation from their society and the conflicts they encountered included severe persecution (1 Thes. 1:6, 2:14, 3:4). By contrast, the Corinthian church seemed to have no troubles reconciling their faith with the pagan culture that was “inherently hostile to the wisdom of the cross,”⁴⁴ and demonstrated no signs of any persecution from Corinthian society, even though, as previously established, Corinth was noted for its licentiousness. Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 to the Corinthian church deals specifically with setting boundaries for the believers as to participation in idolatrous practices. Apparently, the problem was not that the church was in Corinth (as the Thessalonians experienced

⁴³ J.M.G. Barclay, “Thessalonica and Corinth: Social Contrasts in Pauline Christianity.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 47: 1992, 50, as quoted by Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 7.

⁴⁴ Garland, 8.

in their region), but that too much of Corinth was in the Church;⁴⁵ namely her tolerance of idolatry.

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

From the outset of the passage, Paul uses unambiguous, emphatic language to demonstrate the importance of his admonishment against idolatry. Verse 14, “Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry.” *Dioper*, “therefore,” in verse 14 is a stronger particle than that found in verse 12⁴⁶, *hoste*, “therefore,” sometimes translated “so.”⁴⁷ *Dioper* is a direct command serving as the conclusion to his previous arguments in 10:1-13.⁴⁸ Paul chose a stronger wording coupled with a unique statement of affection for the Corinthians “my dear friends” (*agapetoi mou*, “my beloved”) to emphasize his deep emotion for his friends as he gives them counsel to take the right course.⁴⁹ Paul wants his readers to understand the grave nature of the act of idolatry; the vilest of sins against God. Verse 14 clearly reveals to the reader that Paul commands the

⁴⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 4.

⁴⁶ Morris, *Tyndale*: 142.

⁴⁷ *Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*. s.v. “hoste,” [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc., 1994, 2003).

⁴⁸ Garland, 473.

⁴⁹ Morris, *Tyndale*, 142.

turning from idolatry with utmost urgency, through the utilization of the present imperative, *feúgete* (flee), implying a continuance of the action to flee⁵⁰ and that this must be an “an unremitting battle.”⁵¹ David E. Garland, in his exegesis of First Corinthians, even goes so far as to say the interpretations of *feúgete* as “shun,” found in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, or “have nothing to do with,” from the Revised English Bible, are too weak of translations.⁵² Garland suggests of Paul’s wording that, “Idolatry is like radioactive waste: it requires them to bolt from this area immediately to avoid contamination and certain death.”⁵³

In verse 15, “I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say,” Paul does not merely give a command and expect obedience; he desires an obedience that comes from personal conviction.⁵⁴ Because the term *frónímois*, “intelligent” or “wise,”⁵⁵ had previously been used in a sarcastic way by Paul in 4:10, commentators have differed on whether to treat the verse

⁵⁰ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 406.

⁵¹ Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 474.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lenski, 407.

⁵⁵ *Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*. s.v. “frónímois,” [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc., 1994, 2003).

sarcastically.⁵⁶ However, in light of Paul's preceding use of *agapetoi mou*, "my beloved," *fronimois* here can be looked at as Paul appealing to the Corinthians power of discernment and sensibility. The aorist, *krinate*, "judge," solicits a "definite and final decision"⁵⁷ after the reader has read Paul's words; this judgment, once made, does not need to be made again.

Paul invites the Corinthians to investigate the validity of his message. He is about to explain to the Corinthians that communion with Jesus Christ is exclusive of any other "gods" or, as Paul describes, demons disguised as idol gods. The invitation in verse 15 to judge for themselves is important, because Paul's statements set Christianity apart from the surrounding pagan culture by commanding an exclusive worship of Christ.⁵⁸

Verse 16, "Is the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" In this verse, Paul uses two rhetorical questions to establish his point; when we

⁵⁶ *Biblesoft's United Bible Societies New Testament Handbook Series*. s.v. "1 Corinthians 10:15" [CD-ROM] (Biblesoft, Inc. and United Bible Societies, 1961-1997).

⁵⁷ Lenski, 407.

⁵⁸ The general acceptance of all deities, including emperor worship, by the pagan Corinthians was common place. The exclusive worship of one god would have been an unusual practice for them; although the concept would have been encountered from their interaction with the Corinthian Jews.

participate in the Lord's Supper, we partake in *koinoonia*, or "communion," with Christ and with the body of Christ, the Church.⁵⁹ The "cup of thanksgiving" or "the cup of the blessing" alludes to the third cup of the Passover meal, which originally bore that name, *kom habberakah*, because a blessing was given over it.⁶⁰ The speculation has been put forth that Christ used the "cup of blessing" in the Upper Room when he introduced the Eucharist.⁶¹ What matters here, for Paul's purposes, is establishment that "the cup is not just any cup but the Lord's, and it recalls his action at the Last Supper when he served as host to his disciples."⁶² Participation in the cup of blessing and in the breaking of the bread, both actions of the Lord's Supper, create *koinōnia* with Christ; a spiritual binding together with Christ.⁶³

Verse 17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." Some translations of *hoti* use "for"⁶⁴ or "in that" instead of "because." The *Vincent's*

⁵⁹ Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*: 172.

⁶⁰ Lenski, 408. See also: David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, ed. John R. Stott (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 173.

⁶¹ Morris, *Tyndale*, 143; Fee, 468.

⁶² Garland. *Baker Exegetical*, 476.

⁶³ Morris, *Tyndale*, 143. See also: Garland, *Baker Exegetical*, 477.

⁶⁴ New King James Version.

Word Study on 1 Corinthians suggests that the better translation would actually be “seeing that,”⁶⁵ because Paul is deducing the mutual communion of the believers on account of their “partaking,” *metéchomen*, with their common Lord⁶⁶; “Seeing that there is one loaf....” Paul directly states that when Christians are partakers in the Lord’s Supper, they become “in every way one with each other and with Christ.”⁶⁷ The reader is also to understand that a partaker in the Lord’s Supper cannot do so as a detached observer.⁶⁸ The partaker literally becomes one with the Lord of the table, that is, Christ.

[In the next verse Paul provides reasoning for his harsh admonition to avoid pagan practices.] Verse 18, “Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?” Paul utilizes the phrase, *Israēl kata sarka*, which means “Israel after the flesh,” or literally physical Israel;⁶⁹ not *Israēl kata pneuma*, the spiritual Israel composed of both Jews and Gentiles

⁶⁵ *Biblesoft’s Vincent’s Word Studies*, s.v. “1 Corinthians 10:17”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary*, 477.

⁶⁹ *Biblesoft’s United Bible Societies*, s.v. “1 Corinthians 10:18”. See also, Morris, 144; Lenski, 413; J. Smit, "Do Not Be Idolaters" Paul's Rhetoric in First Corinthians 10:1-22," *Novum Testamentum*, vol. 39, Fasc. 1, (Jan., 1997), 47.

(Rom. 2:28, 9:8).⁷⁰ Paul is making an historical reference to the practice in Leviticus 7:6, 15, which established that the sacrifice offered to God is to then be consumed on the same day, because that meat is holy; instituting a communal meal.⁷¹ The communal meal was understood by Israel to bring communion with the God to whom the sacrificial altar belonged.⁷² David E. Garland points out Paul may also be alluding to the golden calf Aaron built and burned sacrifices to, binding *Israēl kata sarka* to the “god” of that altar.⁷³ This allusion demonstrates that eating any food offered on an altar binds the participant to that particular altar. Paul uses the phrase, *koinoonoi tou thusiastteriou*, which literally means “communion with the altar.”⁷⁴ As Paul will forthrightly expound, the *thusiastteriou*, or altar, in which the Corinthian Christians are participating amounts to *koinoonoi* or “communion” with demons.

Verses 19-20, “Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want

⁷⁰ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: The Epistles of Paul*. vol. 4, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), 155.

⁷¹ Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*, 172.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Garland, *Baker Exegetical*, 479.

⁷⁴ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 155. See also: J. Smit, “Do Not Be Idolaters,” 47: explained in footnote number 24.

you to be participants with demons.” The English Standard Version of the Bible translated verse 19 a bit differently as, “What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?” Paul’s question in the Greek, *ti oûn feemi*, translated “what do I imply then,” qualifies verse 18’s injunction that participation in the altar is communion with the god of the altar.⁷⁵ Previously, in 8:4, Paul stated that an idol has no real existence, so Paul offers to explain himself, avoiding a contradiction.⁷⁶ The phrase, *daimoniois kai ou Theoo*, “to demons, and not to God,” is from the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:17, “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded.”⁷⁷ Paul uses the word, *daimonios*, which is the adjective form of *daimonia*, a neuter derivative of *daimōn*.⁷⁸ *Daimon* refers to an inferior deity or supernatural spirit of a bad nature,⁷⁹ and is the same root word used in Acts 17:18, when Paul was accused of “advocating foreign gods [*daimoníoon*].” Therefore,

⁷⁵ Garland, 479.

⁷⁶ Garland, 479; See also: Conzelmann, 173; Lenski, *Interpretation*, 414.

⁷⁷ Robertson, 155. See also *Biblesoft’s Vincent’s Word Studies*, s.v. “1 Corinthians 10:20”; *Biblesoft’s United Bible Studies*, s.v. “1 Corinthians 10:20”; Fee, *First Epistle*, 472.

⁷⁸ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 155; *Biblesoft’s Strong’s Concordance*, s.v. “daimonion.”

⁷⁹ *Biblesoft’s Strong’s Concordance*, s.v. “daimon”.

what Paul is “implying” is that he regards these idols as real beings (see 8:5), specifically, demons.⁸⁰

In the final admonishment of verse 20, Paul again stresses that he does not want the Corinthian Christians to *koinoonoús*, “to partake,” or “have fellowship,” with *daimoníoon*. The phrase, “I do not want you to be participants with demons,” is not as strong of language as “flee from idolatry,” but it is a key phrase to understanding Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians 10:14-22.⁸¹ As Hans Conzelmann describes, “The thing is to behave accordingly, that is, not to participate in their [demons] cult, since otherwise we make them ‘something’; and that is perverse. The presupposition of vv.19-20 is the same as of 8:5: behind the gods there lurk demons.”⁸² David E. Garland further summarizes, “The problem for Paul is not that Corinthian Christians join in camaraderie with

⁸⁰ Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*, 173. See also: Morris, *Tyndale*, 144-145 “Thus, when people sacrifice to idols, it cannot be said that they are engaging in some meaningless or neutral activity. They are sacrificing to evil spirits (cf. Dt. 31:16f)”; Fee, *First Epistle*, 472, “Paul’s point is simple: These pagan meals are in fact sacrifices to demons; the worship of demons is involved.”

⁸¹ Garland, *Baker Exegetical*, 480.

⁸² Conzelmann, 173.

idolaters but that they become actual partners with demons....however innocent the Christians' intentions might be.”⁸³

Verse 21, “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons.” The table of demons, *trapézees daimoníoon*, can be taken to literally mean the pagan's sacrificial feast where they ate the meat of the slain offering to their god and drank wine in communion with their god. Ancient sources evidence this kind of “table,” such as in Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 8:

The loaves were serv'd in canisters; the wine

In bowls; the priest renew'd the rites divine:

Broil'd entrails are their food, and beef's continued chine....

Ye warlike youths, your heads with garlands crown:

Fill high the goblets with a sparkling flood,

And with deep draughts invoke our common god.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Garland, 281. Lenski, in *Interpretation*, concludes as well, “All altars, all sacrifices, and all worship that are not intended to serve the true God are thus actually though not necessarily consciously and intentionally devoted to these demons,” 415.

⁸⁴ Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 8, trans. John Dryden (New York: P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1937), 274, 277.

Frederic Louis Godet, in his book, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, further comments on the *cup*, or *poteérion*, of demons: “*The cup of demons* is an expression easily understood, when we remember that in the solemn feasts of the ancients the consecration of the banquet took place with that of the cup, accompanied by the libation in honor of the cups. The first cup was offered to Jupiter; the second to Jupiter and the Nymphs; the third to Jupiter Soter.”⁸⁵ Many of the Corinthian believers were former pagans and would be familiar with the imagery of the contrasting tables Paul utilizes in drawing a definitive “line in the sand” for believers. It is interesting to note that Paul uses the word, *metechō*, (share, participate), in reference to the table of demons rather than *koinonia* (communion). Paul stresses that a believer, who has *koinonia* with Christ cannot also have *koinonia* with demons; so he utilizes *metechō* to highlight this contrast,⁸⁶ further clarifying the definitive aspect of his admonition. Gordon Fee also describes this contrast as a warning in

⁸⁵ Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 518-519.

⁸⁶ W. Harold Mare, “1 Corinthians,” ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1976), 252.

addition to a prohibition: “one is not merely eating with friends at pagan temples; one is engaged in idolatry.”⁸⁷

Verse 22, “Are we trying to arouse the Lord’s jealousy? Are we stronger than he?” Both A.T. Robertson and Frederic Louis Godet compare the Greek term, *parazēloumen* (to provoke to jealousy), to that of the term used in Deuteronomy 32:21 of the impudence of the Israelites in inciting the Lord’s jealousy.⁸⁸ The same word is, in fact, used in the Septuagint version of this Old Testament passage, which states, “They *made me jealous* [*parazhlosan*] by what is no god and angered me with their worthless idols” [emphasis mine]. Paul again relates his warning to the Corinthians in verse 22 back to the example from Israel’s history, in which Israel was rejected by the Lord for their idolatry.⁸⁹ He ends this section with a rhetorical question that shifts the focus from the problem of communion with demons to the problem of the jealousy of the Lord: “Are we stronger than he?”⁹⁰ Some interpreters have taken this last question to be directed at those in the Corinthian church who thought they were “strong” in

⁸⁷ Fee, *First Epistle*, 473.

⁸⁸ Robertson, *Word Pictures*, 156. Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 519. Fee, *First Epistle*, 473-474.

⁸⁹ Fee, 474.

⁹⁰ Garland, *Baker Exegetical*, 282.

knowledge; thus secure, by reason, in their actions.⁹¹ Others have taken this question not to be an ironic inquiry regarding the Corinthian Christians' knowledge, but have taken Paul's inclusion of himself ("we") as more of an all-inclusive address to the Corinthians.⁹² Either way the question is interpreted, it surely implies a negative response⁹³; no one is stronger than the Lord and thus they should not invoke God to anger as Israel has previously through idolatrous practices.

Practical Application of the Text

Against Syncretism of Pagan Practices

Though speculation abounds concerning the syncretism of pagan religions with Christianity, the message of 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 clearly defines for the reader that the worship of God, in the Christian faith, is exclusive of the worship of any other "god." Paul, being the author of these words, cannot conscientiously be represented as a leader who incorporated pagan practices or concepts into his religious framework to formalize a worship of

⁹¹ Fee, 474.

⁹² Garland, 282.

⁹³ Ibid.

Jesus Christ.⁹⁴ David E. Garland succinctly states, “Paul adamantly rejects this syncretism and anything that might smack of it.”⁹⁵

Though a thorough investigation into Paul and syncretism would include much more than one passage, certainly the evidence surrounding even just this one passage strains the interpreter to affirm a syncretistic view of Paul’s Christology. On the contrary, this 1 Corinthians 10 passage, in its proper cultural and contextual setting provides compelling testimony to the exclusive nature of Paul’s worship of Jesus as God. And, as this passage is part of one of the most well-attested and earliest biblical texts available to the critic today, it must receive attention when discussing syncretism.⁹⁶

Polytheistic Environment and Paul

As previously established, in the Mediterranean world of the first century, it was perfectly acceptable and commonplace for

⁹⁴ See Garland, *Baker Exegetical*, 473.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Conzelmann, *Hermeneia*, 1. “The first letter to the Corinthians has been preserved on papyrus; Papyrus 46 [Chester Beatty] contains the whole epistle.” As footnoted: “Kurt Aland dates P46 to ca. 200 A.D. and p15 to 3rd century. P 11 contains: 1:17-20, 20-22, 2:9f, 11d, 14; parts of chaps. 3,4, 5, 6, 7. In addition, p14 (from the same papyrus as p11?) has 1:25-27; 2:6-8; 3:8-10, 20. p68 has 4:12-17 and 4:19-5:3. The other papyri are p34 and p61. For more info, Kurt Aland, *The Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1966).”

people to worship more than one god or goddess.⁹⁷ Not only was it acceptable, but, as Richard B. Hays states, “it was probably a good bet to worship several gods as a way of diversifying one’s spiritual investments.”⁹⁸ This was the pluralistic environment in which Paul was raised, trained as a Pharisaic Rabbi, and in which Paul brought his message to the Corinthians. If Paul was influenced by the cultural environment of his day, that influence stopped short of his philosophy of religion. The apostle defied the inclusive philosophical nature of the Roman worship of many gods; for he strikingly contrasted the worship of pagan gods against the worship of the Lord (v.20). Paul told his readers to “flee from idolatry,” because they could not divide their communion between God and demons (v.21). He even defined pagan idols or gods *as* demons; not just another form of worship, but *as actual participation with demons* (v.20).⁹⁹ The exclusivism Paul demonstrates in these passages was nothing like the Hellenistic culture of his day. Much more of a case can be made for the *difference* between Paul and the pagan culture of Corinth.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 472.

⁹⁸ Richard B. Hays, “First Corinthians,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 170.

⁹⁹ David Prior, *The Message of 1 Corinthians*, ed. John R. Stott (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 174.

Apologetic Value

Believers today can look at 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 as a main ingredient (among many others) in a case against the claim of rampant borrowing of pagan mystery religious patterns by the earliest believers of Christ. These verses serve great apologetic value, especially when added to a cumulative case against the syncretistic arguments; including arguments of anachronism, historical evidence, and Jewish cultural background. In simply dealing with 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, a myth-theory proponent would need to demonstrate: 1) these verses are not authored by the apostle Paul, 2) these verses do not demonstrate a strict admonition against idolatry and pagan practices, and/or 3) these verses contradict the majority of Paul's writing on this subject. However, this task will be difficult considering: 1) a majority of critical scholars agree on Pauline authorship of 1 Corinthians, 2) the verses show a clear rebuke of paganism/idolatry, and 3) the verses line up with other Scriptures by Paul rebuking paganism and idolatry (Acts 15:20-29, 17:16; 1 Cor. 5:11, 6:9, 8:4, 12:2; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 5:5; 1 Thes. 1:9). First Corinthians 10:14-22 provides a strong defense of the exclusively monotheistic mind of Paul.

Practical Apologetics: the Personal Application

Richard B. Hays, in “First Corinthians,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, presents three practical ways to interpret the passage. First, believers must understand the danger of idolatry.¹⁰⁰ We do not want to find ourselves caught in the same cultural trap as that of the Corinthians: supposing there *is no real danger of idolatry* in our lives. There is a tendency for us to participate in whatever the cultural norms are for our day. However, 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, should remind us to “scrutinize our compromises”¹⁰¹ realizing that we cannot feasibly share communion with our “idols” and our Lord; for in so doing, we are provoking the judgment of God. Second, worship creates communion, or fellowship, with God and with other believers.¹⁰² This communion appeared to cost the Corinthian believers nothing; however, this communion includes religious ideology inherently incompatible with worldly ideology. Believers need to ask themselves what their fellowship with God and the Church has cost them lately. Has the fellowship required any sacrifice from social gain or worldly pleasures? Finally, we should learn to see ourselves

¹⁰⁰ Hays, “First Corinthians,” 172.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

in Israel's story.¹⁰³ Hays describes this third interpretation as Paul paralleling Israel's history with Corinth's modern problems. Though I agree with him, I will offer a slightly different view on his interpretation. Believers must know what they believe and why they believe, in order to understand how to combat the false philosophy of their own time in history. The syncretistic argument of the pagan religions and Christianity, though it has been aptly refuted, may still find an audience with a believer who does not study their Scripture.¹⁰⁴ As 1 Peter 3:15 reminds us, we must all be ready to offer a defense for our beliefs. Instead of worrying about making the Biblical texts more relevant, or molding the Church into a palatable image for the world, all believers should strive to understand Biblical history's relevance to our lives through the diligent, tenacious study of the Word. In doing so, professors, preachers, and parishioners will be able to aptly combat false claims, as those found in the syncretistic arguments.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Most recently noted in the controversial Nooma video #15 with Pastor Rob Bell.