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ΧΡΗΚΤΟC IN A MAGICAL PAPYRUS

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At Papyri Graecae Magicae XIII.289 the manuscript has:

Δεσμόλυτον. λέγε | ἑκλῦθί μοι, ὁ Χρητός, ἐν βασιάνοις, βοήθησαν ἐν ἀνάγκαις, | ἐλ[ε]ήμων ἐν ὥραις βιάιοις, πολὺ δυνάμενος ἐν κόσμῳ, | ὁ κτίσας τὴν Ἀνάγκη(ν) καὶ Τιμωρίαν καὶ τὴν βάσανον' | ιβ' ἡμ(έρα)ς κυρίας τρις ὀκτάκις λέγε τοῦ Ἡλίου τὸ ὄνομα ἀπὸ τοῦ (<Α>χεβυκρωμ. ||

Preisendanz emends Χρητός to Χριστός, reasoning that the πολὺ δυνάμενος must be the Christian Saviour.¹ In this note I argue that, while his interpretation is correct, the manuscript reading should remain unchanged. I shall argue, that is to say, that the form is not a vulgar orthographic variant, but the key to the identity of the group for whom the petition was composed.

Neither pagans nor Christians in late antiquity could distinguish Χρητός and Χριστός by their sounds. From this phonetic fact it has been inferred that the orthography of Christ's name was also a matter of indifference, at least to pagans who knew of the sect by hearsay, just as the ι of Χριστός gives way to η and ει both within and outside the Church.² It has not, however, been shown that such an error was ever committed by the pagans: Tacitus and Pliny both spell the appellation correctly, and since Suetonius was another member of their circle, and is able to render the word Christiani accurately enough, it is clear that he has another person in mind when he speaks of riots instigated in Rome by Chrestus the Jew.³ Orthodox Christians were no less careful: they may indeed, as Horsley has suggested after Gibson,⁴ have discerned a significant pun in the juxtaposition of Χρητός and Χριστός at Luke 6.35 and Ephesians 4.32; but it is one thing to play upon words and another to think them identical, or advance one as a substitute for the other. The same observation applies with even greater force to those inscriptions and papyri (pagan and orthodox) in which the

¹ K. von Preisendanz, *Papyri Graecae Magicae Vol. II* (Leipzig 1931) p.102. I reproduce Preisendanz's text, including accentuation, except that I substitute Χρητός for Χριστός.

² Blass, "ΧΡΗCΤΙΑΝΟΙ - ΧΡΙCΤΙΑΝΟΙ" in *Hermes* 30 (1895) pp.466ff, collected the data from the Apologists, but was not able to consider the variant spellings of Χριστιανοί (which appear in texts discovered later. For the more important bearers of the name Chrestus, see Pauly-Wissowa, *RE* 3 (1897-9) pp.2449-50.

³ See Pliny, *Letters* X.96 for Christus and Christiani; Tacitus, *Annales* XV.44.2-4 for Christus and Christiani; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2 for Christiani and *Claudius* 25.4 for Chrestus, on which name see also note 2. Even if we were to accept, with H.Fuchs, "Tacitus über die Christen", *VC* 4 (1950) pp.68-74, the reading of the MS (our only manuscript of Tacitus) which gives Chrestiani at *Annales* XV.44, there is still no evidence for Chrestus in the circle to which Suetonius belonged.

⁴ See G.H.R.Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (Macquarrie University 1983) p.129, citing E.Gibson, "Christians for Christians" p.19.

substitution of Χρητιανός for Χριστιανός is regular,⁵ but that of Χρητός for Χριστός more rare.⁶

No proof of scribal confusion can be drawn from those commonplace texts in which the Christians rebuke the pronunciation of the pagans, for their aim is to wrest an argument *ad hominem* from the failure to discriminate the sounds. (Cf. Justin, 1Apol 4.5, Theophilus, *Ad Autolyicum* I.12, Tertullian, *Ad Nationes* I.3.8, where it is argued that the pronunciation is a testimony to Christ's goodness). Where it can be proved, as with some heretics, that the name was spelt in an irregular fashion, the object can be shown to be tendentious: when Mark the Mage adopts the spelling Χρειτός it is because the eight letters lend themselves more readily to an esoteric reading (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* I. xv. 1-2): the normal spelling would not complete the sum.

What reason might a heretic have for preferring the variant reading? He might be desirous to take away from the Saviour any epithet which suggested that he was the envoy of the Creator, the Anointed One of the Jewish Scriptures; he might prefer instead the designation which implied that he was the consubstantial emissary of the God who stood above Yahweh and was the only being entitled to the word "good". There are two other sacred verses by which the ingenuity of such commentators might have been repaid:

1. Κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστός (Col. 3.24; Rom. 16.18; Phil. 2.11; Philemon 3) is a formula with which all Christians, orthodox or heretical, were certain to concur. To the Church it signified that Jesus was the Anointed One of Israel; but this interpretation would be resisted by any heretic who wished to divorce the Creator of the Old Testament from the Saviour of the New. Prophesied he might be, since even the tools of the Demiurge might feel the divine inspiration (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* II. xxxv.2 and IV. 35.4); but Marcion, Valentinus and Mani could not allow that the Christian Redeemer had been commissioned by the purblind god of Israel.⁷ They would therefore be glad of a similar term which lacked the connotations of the name Christ.

2. Χρητός ὁ κύριος (Ps. 34.8) was another acclamation with apostolic authority (1Peter 2.3), but heretics would be careful not to take it in the right sense. The Lord, as the Jews conceived him, was at best a being of limited virtue in the eyes of docetic heretics, and

⁵ S. Angello, *Silloge di iscrizioni paleocristiane della Sicilia* (Rome 1953) p.34, where the orthography of Christ's name remains unclear; SB XVI 12497.50; P.Oxy. XLII 3035.4-5 (corrected by P.J. Parsons, p.100); P.Oxy. XLIII 3119.14, 18; *ibid.* 3149.3-4 (corrected by Rea, p.134); P.Laur. II.42 R 2. I owe these papyrus references to the editors of ZPE.

⁶ SB VI 9605.4f; P.Nessana III. 145.12, 13. The first dates from the beginning of the fourth century, the second from the sixth or seventh. There is no reason to suspect a Christian heresy in either case; but the comparative scarcity of such documents in the early Christian centuries suggests that the deviant spelling of Christ's title was avoided by men who were not so scrupulous with that of his sect.

⁷ For Marcion on prophecy and the Messiah see Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* III. 2-4 and 15. For the Manichees' rejection of the Old Testament see, e.g., Alexander of Lycopolis, *Contra Manichaeos* 24 with the commentary of Van den Horst and Mansfeld, *An Alexandrian Platonist against Dualism* (Leiden 1974).

the formula would be repeated only if it were taken to mean, not "the Jewish God is good", but "the Christian Redeemer is the Lord".

Thus Christ, and Christ alone, is the Lord for any heretics of Gnostic inclinations, but only if the term "Christ" is robbed of its Biblical meaning. It would therefore be wholly false to the intention of the author to substitute the reading Χριστός for Χρητός when it occurs in a text which is known to come from the hand of a Christian heretic.

This rule has been observed in Coptic documents, viz:-

1. De Resurrectione, p.43.37 (Layton): "Repose--true repose--we obtained from the Saviour, our Lord, the Excellent [khrestos]". (Cf. 48.19 and 50.1).

This work is agreed to emanate, like the others in the same codex, from the school of Valentinus.⁸ Peel renders "khrestos" by the name Christ,⁹ but Layton, while acknowledging the play on words, argues correctly that the spelling is not due to mere confusion, which is rare in Coptic texts.¹⁰

2. PMG IV.1231ff. here ΠΙΧΡΗΤΟC is hailed as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to which title is added that of Iao Sabaoth and an allusion to the Hebdomad, which plays so important a role in Gnostic and proto-Gnostic thought (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I.30.5 etc). Preisendanz does not emend the orthography at this point.

The use of tendentious spelling by at least one unorthodox group is undeniable. Alexander of Lycopolis (Contra Manichaeos 24) complains that the Manichaeans preferred the appellation Χρητός to the correct and familiar form (cf. H.J.Polotsky, *Manichäische Homilien* (1934) 72.9).¹¹

That the prayer at PMG XIII.289 is the work of a Judaizer is easily proved from the words that follow. κτίζω is the verb in regular use in the Septuagint, though not in pagan Greek, to denote the creative activity of the Deity,¹² and when it appears in the Magical Papyri, it is generally as a part of some locution also found in the Jewish scripture.¹³ Here it

⁸ See introduction to M.E.Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginus* (London 1969).

⁹ See Peel, op. cit. pp.54-5.

¹⁰ B.Layton, *The Gnostic Treatise on Resurrection from Nag Hammadi* (Harvard 1979) pp.11 and 44-5. Layton's translation is the one reproduced here.

¹¹ A.Henrichs and L.Koenen, editing the Cologne Mani Codex, ZPE 5 (1970) p.168 n.180 and ZPE 19 (1975) p.26, maintained that the name Chrestus appeared in that document also; but Dr. C.Römer and Professor R.Merkelbach inform me that this interpretation cannot be sustained, and that the word should not be printed as a name. Note that Alexander's attention to Christian nomenclature, surprising in a pagan, coincides with an increased density of allusions to Jewish scripture (which he even styles "the ancient history": see n.5 above) and the adoption of the word ecclesia in its Christian sense. Perhaps this part of his treatise was composed or revised by a Christian redactor.

¹² See G.Zuntz, "On the Hymns in the Corpus Hermeticum" in *Hermes* 90 (1955) pp.83-5. Also Foerster in G.Kittel (ed.) *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* Vol III (Stuttgart 1967) pp.1000-4 (Pagan uses of κτίσις) and 1022-7 (reasons for Jewish use of the term to denote the activity of the Creator).

¹³ Thus: cf. XIII.145 and Wisdom 11.17; V.459 and Amos 4.13 (also Sirach 39.28); V.98 and Genesis 19.14 and 22 (also Wisdom 1.14); IV.1040 and Psalms 32,47; I.207 (and IV.1202) and Hosea 13.4.

governs terms which are not combined with it in the Septuagint, but appear in close proximity in one source which evinces strong Jewish traits.¹⁴ Towards the end of the "Hermetic" tract called the Poimandres (Hermetica I. 18), we hear that God commended all the κτίσματα to increase and multiply, himself allotting roles to male and female. His providence (I. 19) created a bond of Necessity (εἰμαρμένη, a synonym for ἀνάγκη) and over the wicked he set a τιμωρός (I. 23) to inflict upon them (βαρύνει) the proper reward (τιμωρία) of their transgressions. This, though a demiurgic act, is a benign and secondary one, distinct from the creation of the world..

The sun might be invoked by any syncretist,¹⁵ but Χρηστός, enhanced by such Judaic phrases, is evidently not the title of any pagan deity. Had the author of the prayer been an orthodox Jew, he would have attached it to the Creator of the universe, but πολὺ δυνάμενος ἐν κόσμῳ is not an appropriate designation of Jahweh, nor, for that matter, of Christ as he is honoured in the Epistle to the Colossians. The creative power of this Deity works within the universe framed by another, as does that of the Gnostic Saviour, and this imprecation must therefore proceed from some group like the Manichaeans, whose Jewish-Christian origins were visible in their literature even when they had torn the world away from the Jewish God.¹⁶

It is tempting to assign the prayer to the circle that produced the Book of Thomas the Contender, the peroration of which invokes the Good One to obtain relief from the torments that are otherwise due to the soul in its prison of flesh:

Watch and pray, that you come forth from the bondage of the bitterness of this life... For when you come forth from the sufferings and passions of the body, you will receive rest from the Good One. (p.145. 8-14; cf. De Res. above).

¹⁴ See C.H.Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London 1935) and B.A.Pearson, "Jewish Elements in Corpus Hermeticum I" in R.Van den Broek and M.J.Vermaseren (eds.) *Studies in Gnosticism and Hellenistic Religions* (Leiden 1981) pp.336-48.

¹⁵ For a Jewish adaptation of a prayer to Helios see P.Alexander (Sefer ha-Razim 4.61-3) in E.Schürer (ed. G.Vermes, F.Millar and M.Goodman) *History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, Vol. III Part 1 (Edinburgh 1986) p.349.

¹⁶ On the origins of the Manichees see A.Henrichs, "The Cologne Mani Codex Reconsidered" in HSCP 83 (1979) pp.354-67. On the Sun as a deity see Alexander, *Contra Manichaeos* 7 (p.11.17 Brinkmann, but not quite compatible with Chapter 5).

This conjecture must remain doubtful, since the word employed is not ΠΙΧΗΤΟC but ΠΑΓΑΘΟC; if it has any merit, it may indicate that the author of the prayer is a Syrian precursor of Mani, a representative of Edessene Christianity.¹⁷ But whether we have to do here with Manichaeans, with Valentinians or with some other group of docetics, we may surmise that what they wrote in this passage was ΧρηστόC, and that they wished it to be retained.¹⁸

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¹⁷ See J.D.Turner in J.M.Robinson (ed.) *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden 1977) p.188, from which this (apparently undisputed) translation is taken.

¹⁸ I am indebted to Professor Merkelbach for many helpful comments and corrections.