

## The Dionysian Background of Ephesians 5:18

Cleon L. Rogers, Jr.

[Cleon L. Rogers, Jr., Director, German Theological Seminary, Seeheim, Germany.]

In Ephesians 5:18, Paul wrote, “And be not drunk with wine, in which is excess, but be filled with the Spirit” (AV). Why does he contrast drunkenness with the filling of the Holy Spirit? Often this question is answered by referring to one or more comparisons between drunkenness and the Spirit’s filling, such as submission to and dominance by an outside control, loss of one’s rational functions, etc. But is this really what Paul was saying?

Is it not possible that Paul was referring to something more explicit in his own culture? This article is a presentation of the view that the wild, drunken practices connected with the worship of Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine, form the general cultural background for Paul’s two commands in Ephesians 5:18.<sup>1</sup>

Interpreting a passage of Scripture in its cultural setting is not new. It is a well-known and widely practiced axiom that any writing must be interpreted in the light of its cultural setting. Some obvious cultural or historical matters forming the background of the New Testament are clear and have been the subject of many profitable studies.<sup>2</sup> In addition to specific culturally couched terms, there is the general cultural New Testament background consisting of historical, social, economic, and religious conditions.

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Some of these cultural matters form a tacit background to the New Testament writings, though they are not specifically mentioned by the New Testament writers—perhaps because they were so commonplace and well known that they did not need elaboration. For example, Paul does not explicitly relate his injunctions against immorality to the cult of Aphrodite (e.g., 1 Cor 6:18–19) or to the other pagan deities, but hardly anyone would doubt that such worship in the city of Corinth or in Ephesus forms the cultural background for the general commands against sexual sins.

In the same manner, Paul may have had in mind the drunken activities of the Dionysian cult as he penned Ephesians 5:18. After an examination of the support for this suggestion, the significance of the Dionysian cult to Paul’s commands in Ephesians 5:18 will be discussed.

### Support for the Dionysian Background

The two major supports to be considered are the widespread character of the cult and the worship of the cult.

#### The Widespread Character of the Cult

The term *widespread* is used here to include temporal, geographical, social, and cultural aspects of the Dionysian cult. Although the exact beginnings of the deity are unknown, it is clear that Dionysus was known as early as the Homeric period (ca. 900 B.C.),<sup>3</sup> and as late as the church fathers.<sup>4</sup> The temporal span of Dionysus includes the New Testament period, during which time worship of him was quite active. It is generally acknowledged that Dionysus was not originally a Greek god, but probably had his origins in Thracia, Lydia, or Phrygia.<sup>5</sup> The name “Dionysus” appears to be the genitive of the word *Zeus* joined with the word *nysos*, (“son”) with the resultant meaning “son of Zeus.”<sup>6</sup> He is also referred to by the Lydian name

In spite of opposition<sup>8</sup> the worship of Dionysus spread throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia,<sup>9</sup> Greece, Italy, Egypt, Palestine, and even India. By the time of the Apostle Paul the cult of Dionysus or Bacchus was well established in most of the major cities in which Paul preached. In Thessalonica, for example, the epigraphical and historical evidence is said to indicate that there was not only the Dionysian cult there, but "a state priesthood of Dionysus existed in Thessalonica from the time of the founding of the city by Cassander."<sup>10</sup>

A Latin inscription from Philippi provides proof that the cult of Dionysus was active in that city.<sup>11</sup> In Athens the worship of this deity was prominent and his festivals very popular.<sup>12</sup> Pausanias describes the images of Dionysus which he saw at the marketplace in Corinth as being wooden images covered with gold, with the exception of the faces which were ornamented with red paint.<sup>13</sup>

The city of Ephesus was also filled, not only with the worship of Artemis (Diana), but also with the cult of Dionysus. When Anthony entered the city of Ephesus, Plutarch says, "women arrayed like Bacchanals, and men and boys like Satyrs and Pans led the way before him and the city was full of ivy and thyrsuwands and harps and pipes and flutes, the people hailing him as Dionysus, giver of Joy and Beneficent."<sup>14</sup>

Other major cities where the cult was prominent were Rome and its surrounding cities, and Smyrna, Pergamon, Philadelphia, Alexandria, and others.<sup>15</sup>

Palestine and the Jews did not escape the influence of Dionysus. The city of Beth Shean not only had certain links to Greek mythology in connection with Dionysus, but also it is highly possible that Dionysian worship was carried on there.<sup>16</sup> It was the infamous Antiochus Epiphanes who accused the Jews of being worshipers of Dionysus. He set up the "abomination of desolation"<sup>17</sup> in the Temple, and imposed the cult of Dionysus on the Jews by compelling them during the feast of Dionysus to wear wreaths of ivy and to walk in the procession in honor of Dionysus.<sup>18</sup>

From these examples it can be seen that the cult had spread to practically every area of the Roman Empire. However, not only was the cult widespread geographically; it had also penetrated every level of society. It is common knowledge that women played a major role in Dionysian worship,<sup>19</sup> and it was becoming increasingly popular for both men and children to have an active part in the cultic practices.<sup>20</sup> The social levels ran from slaves to the rich, including nobility and even the emperor.<sup>21</sup> Of course, not every individual was a worshiper of Dionysus, but certainly everyone must have been aware of the great festivals which were also great social occasions.

The influence of Dionysus on the cultural aspects of the world is astonishing. He is the subject of drama, sculpture, paintings, music, poetry, etc.<sup>22</sup> One only has to walk through the British Museum, or examine pictures of museum collections to see how many vases, paintings, sculptures, and household objects (such as plates, drinking vessels, pitchers, etc.) have Dionysian Motifs.<sup>23</sup> It would have been hardly possible to have visited an ancient city and to have remained any length of time without seeing Dionysus and his ever-present companions, the Satyrs, Silens, and Maenads.<sup>24</sup>

It would seem that the cult of Dionysus was so widespread and common that anything having to do with grapes, wine, ivy, or any other Dionysian motif was at once connected to Dionysus and his worship. Many pagans even accused the Jews of worshiping Dionysus, simply because certain things in Judaism appeared to have Dionysian Motifs.<sup>25</sup> To talk of wine and drinking immediately brought Dionysian expressions in the conversation,<sup>26</sup> and to live a riotous, wanton, debauched, drunken life was characterized as a "Dionysian mode of life."<sup>27</sup> The cult was so widespread that it was part of common everyday life in the ancient world.

## The Worship of the Cult

Since the cult developed over the years and experienced many adaptations,<sup>28</sup> this study will touch on only certain salient features of the worship and consider briefly the significance of them.

The festivals celebrated in honor of Dionysus varied from place to place, but it seems that one common feature was the emphasis on fertility and sex.<sup>29</sup> The emphasis on the phallus (the male sex organ) in the so-called "Phallus Procession" along with such things as "the Phallus Song," certainly indicate the lewd debauchery connected with this worship.<sup>30</sup> The significance was evidently to please Bacchus so that he would grant fertility.

Another feature of the festivals was the wild, frenzied dancing and uncontrolled ravings, in connection with wine drinking and the music of flutes, cymbals, drums, or tambourines.<sup>31</sup> Along with this was the mountain dancing of the women, which sometimes took place in the dead of winter, and the devouring of the raw flesh of animals.<sup>32</sup> The purpose of the intoxication by wine and also the chewing of ivy, as well as the eating of raw animal flesh, was to have Dionysus enter the body of the worshiper and fill him with "enthusiasm" or the spirit of the god.<sup>33</sup> Dionysus was to possess and control such ones so that they were united with him and partook of his strength, wisdom, and abilities. This resulted in the person doing the will of the deity (either willingly or unwillingly)<sup>34</sup> and

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having the ability to speak inspired prophecy,<sup>35</sup> and was often thought to be the source of artistic or poetical ability.<sup>36</sup> During these festivals many unusual phenomena were to have occurred in the woods. Not only was Dionysus to have appeared in the form of various animals, but also milk, honey, and wine were seen bubbling out of the ground.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to such festivals, the mystery religion aspect of Dionysian worship had become popular in Hellenistic times. Although comparatively little is known about these rites, it seems that they had to do with unification with the deity as a preparation for the afterlife.<sup>38</sup>

The significance and appeal of the Dionysian cult to the ancient world is aptly described by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf. He points out that after having gone through the experience of a frenzied Dionysian orgy, one evidently felt a sort of release from the pressures and stress of the daily drudgery of life. It was especially the women who felt lifted above their lowly status in life and felt freed from the weary burden of their work.<sup>39</sup> When both the widespread character of the cult and the worship of the cult are considered, it seems difficult to doubt that Dionysian worship would not at least have been thought of when Paul gave the command, "Be not drunk with wine."

## The Significance of the Dionysian Background

If the cultural background was Dionysian worship, then the two commands of Paul in Ephesians 5:18 and their context take on a new light. The several features to be considered are almost in themselves further support for a Dionysian background.

## The Concept of ἄσωτία

"Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess, but be ye filled with the Spirit" (Eph 5:18, AV). The word translated "excess"

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basically means "without health," or "incurable."<sup>40</sup> The word then refers to "one who by his manner of life, especially by dissipation destroys himself."<sup>41</sup> After discussing the various uses of the word, especially in the

New Testament, Foerster concludes, “In all these passages the word signifies wild and disorderly rather than extravagant or voluptuous living.”<sup>42</sup> Though not limited to Dionysian practices, this is certainly a fitting and descriptive term to describe the behavior of Dionysian worshipers. There was no salvation (σωτηρία in being filled with the spirit of Dionysus; only wild behavior ἄσωτία accompanied such filling.

## The Contrast of the Commands

It is obvious that there is a certain contrastive parallelism<sup>43</sup> in the commands “be not drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit.” The grammatical parallels and contrasts reveal a close connection between the two commands. “Do not be drunk” is a present negative imperative prohibiting a manner of life, while the command “be filled” is a positive present imperative calling for a continued consistent manner of life.<sup>44</sup> The two datives with the imperatives have the same function, i.e., instrumental (“with wine”) and agency (“with the Spirit”).<sup>45</sup> The parallelism may also indicate a certain equation in meaning. If the filling of the Spirit has to do with a supernatural infilling of the Spirit of the living God, it would only be logical to suppose that the “drunk with wine” could have a supernatural implication. The significance would then be a contrast with the filling of the “spirit” of Bacchus through wine and the filling of the true and living God by His Spirit. The wisdom and power, the intellectual and artistic ability, the freedom from the drudgery of daily life, as well as a prophetic message from the true

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God, are not to be found in the Dionysian drunkenness, but in the control of the Spirit of the true God.

## The Continuing Context of the Command

It seems significant that the things Paul wrote about in Ephesians 5:19–33 have to do with some matters which played a vital part in the Dionysian worship. First, there is the mention of singing (v. 19). This is the singing of spiritual songs (ὕδαῖς πνευματικαῖς) to the Lord Himself, not the raving of drunken worshipers singing the praises of Dionysus. Second, there is the giving of thanks for all things (v. 20). Philo, in his appeal to Gaius, extolls the positive benefits of Dionysus.<sup>46</sup> However, the true source of blessing is not Bacchus but the true God. Third, there is Paul’s discussion of marriage and the responsibilities of each partner. Wild sexual debauchery is not the God-ordained way of conduct; instead, the marriage relationship is the means of fulfillment. Even more relevant is the instruction regarding the ordained order in marriage. Wives are to be in submission to their husbands (v. 22) and are not to be leaders in wild worship. The way to a fulfilled life of freedom and accomplishment is not through Dionysus but through the filling of the Spirit and submission to God’s order.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to identify a possible cultural background for Ephesians 5:18 and has suggested that it is the worship of the wine god Dionysus. This does not mean that the commands of Paul were necessarily directed primarily against the cult of Dionysus. It does, however, indicate that the Dionysian worship could well have formed the background against which Paul gave his general instructions. In answer to Marcus Barth’s question regarding the “sudden reference to drunkenness,”<sup>47</sup> some have suggested that a general problem of drunkenness prevailed in the private lives of the saints, but another suggestion is that the saints attempted “to gain or to increase unity with the divine world by cultic inebriation as practiced in the Dionysus cult.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps both possibilities should be combined: Paul’s command was given against the cultural background of Dionysian worship, and that command is valid for all times and all cultures. Spiritual strength, wisdom, and divine help to live a godly life are obtained by being controlled by the Spirit of God, not by any other means.

The suggestion for this study postulating a Dionysian background for Ephesians 5:18 was provided in reading the erudite commentary of Marcus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1974), p. 580.

2

For example, on crucifixion, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977); on slavery, see S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and First Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973).

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Homer *Iliad* 6.13; 14. 325; *Odyssey* 11. 324; 24. 74.

4

See Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1955), 2:352–53.

5

See *ibid.*, 1:564–68, 578–82; Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), A. 2:60; and *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “Dionysus,” pp. 352–53.

6

See Hjalmar Frisk, *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter-Universitätsverlag, 1973), 1:396; Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 1:567–68; and Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube*, 2:62.

7

*Ibid.*, 2:62; and Frisk, *Griechisches*, 2:42.

8

The opposition of Pentheus, king of Thebes, to Dionysus is considered to be “hubris” (shameful, arrogant treatment) and he is horribly punished by the deity (Euripides *The Bacchanals*). Note also the Roman Senate decree of 186 B.C., “Senatusconsultum de Bacchanalibus,” prohibiting the cult. See Carlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 218.

9

It was particularly Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great, who spread the wild orgies of the women who worshiped Dionysus in Macedonia (see Plutarch *Lives, Alexander* 2. 5–6; and Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube*, 2:61–62).

10

Charles Edson, “Cults of Thessalonica,” *Harvard Theological Review* 41 (July 1948): 164. Edson even suggests that “the temple of Dionysus in Roman Thessalonica stood at or near the site of the Theodosian church of the Akheiroipoietos” (p. 179).

11

See Martin P. Nilsson, “The Bacchic Mysteries of the Roman Age,” *Harvard Theological Review* 46 (October 1953): 184.

12

See, e.g., Aristophanes *The Archarnians*, 245; Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.15; and *Lexikon der Antike, Religion-Mythologie* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1976), s.v. “Dionysia,” by F. R. Walton, 1:213–14.

13

Pausanias *Description of Greece* 2:6.

14

Plutarch *Lives, Antony* 24.3. For further evidence of the worship in Ephesus as found in inscriptions, see Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 2:359–62.

15

See *ibid.*, 2:358–67; and Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 235–36. Schmitz observes, “The worship of Dionysus was almost universal among Greeks in Asia as well as in Europe” (*A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* [London: John Murray, 1872], s.v. “Dionysia,” by Leonhard Schmitz, p. 412).

16

See David Flusser, “Paganism in Palestine,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Assen/Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1976), 2:1067–68, 1083–84.

17

Goldstein has suggested that the “abomination of desolation” consisted of three meteorite cult-stones, representing the God of the Jews, the queen of heaven, and the divine son Dionysus (Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976], p. 224; also see pp. 125–60, esp. 143–57). He also suggests that the pig sacrificed was in honor of Dionysus (p. 158).

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2 Maccabees 6:7; also see Flusser, “Paganism in Palestine,” 2:1068–69.

19

See, e.g., Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube*, 2:72–74.

20

“The men prophesied like insane persons, with ecstatic bodily movements” (Livy *Ab urbe condita* 24.13, cited in Lohse, *The New Testament Environment*, p. 235; also see Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 2:350; 1:58–59; and Nilsson, “Bacchic Mysteries,” pp. 179–80).

21

See *ibid.*, pp. 185–86; Plutarch *Lives, Antony* 50. 3. Caligula impersonated, among other deities, the god Dionysus (Dio Cassius *Roman History* 59.6; Philo *Embassy to Gaius* 78–79). Wilamowitz-Moellendorf points out that the movement arose from the lower class of society and these remained true to their god (*Der Glaube*, 2:71).

22

Note, e.g., Euripides *The Bacchanals*; Aristophanes *The Archarnians* 245, 280; for sculpture, painting, etc., see David Soren, “The Fogg Kleophrades Vase under the Ultraviolet Light,” *Bulletin of the American Society of Oriental Research* 228 (October 1977): 29–46; and Mary C. Sturgeon, “The Reliefs on the Theater of Dionysus in Athens,” *The American Journal of Archaeology* 81 (1977): 31–53. Note her discussion of and bibliography on such motifs as “The Birth of Dionysus,” “Entrance of Dionysus into Athens,” “Sacred Marriage of Dionysus and the Basilinna,” and “The Enthronement of Dionysus.” For music, note the so-called “Dithyrembos,” a song of the theater concerning Dionysus (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. “Dithyram,” p. 356; and Jacob Burckhardt, *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* [Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977], 3:191–92).

23

See, e.g., Nilsson, *Geschichte*, vol. 1, Tafel 35–38.

24

For a description of these male and female figures, half-clad, carrying musical instruments, wearing ivy wreaths, and having animal features, see *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, s.v. “Satyrs and Sileni” and “Maenads,” pp. 636, 956.

25

For example, one of the Temple gates in Jerusalem was decorated with golden grapevines from which huge grape clusters hung (Josephus *Jewish Wars* 5.210). Plutarch gives quite an elaborate “Proof” that the Jews worshiped Dionysus. He appeals to such things as vines and ivy used in the Feast of Tabernacles, etc. (Plutarch *Table-Talk* 4. 6). For a discussion of these and other possible associations, see Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, pp. 129-30; and Flusser, “Paganism in Palestine,” 2:1068–69. Also see Tacitus *Histories* 5. 5.

26

Note especially Plutarch *Table-Talk* 1; 3.1; etc.

27

See Plutarch *Lives, Antony*, 60.2. The Latin phrase “Bacchanalia vivere” means “to live in the manner of the Bacchantes,” i.e., “to live riotously and wantonly” (Lewis and Short, *A Latin Dictionary*, p. 218). Cf. the expression κορυθαίρεσθαι, “to live an immoral life.”

28

For example, as a vegetation god, he had to do with fertility, or in the mystery religions he was connected with Demeter or Osiris (Nilsson, *Geschichte* 1:582–603; 2:359; Strabo *Geography* 10. 3. 10; and Plutarch *Moralia: Isis and Osiris* 362).

29

“The sexual associations of the cult of Dionysus were a commonplace of conversation and the comic theater” (Goldstein, *I Maccabees*, p. 133).

30

See Aristophanes *The Archarnians*, 245-75; and Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 1:590–94.

31

For this common occurrence, see E. R. Dodds, “Maenadism in the Bacche,” *Harvard Theological Review* 33 (July 1940): 155-76; Euripides *The Bacchanals* 116, 134, 137, 380, 510; and Nilsson, *Geschichte* 1:585–90.

32

See Dodds, “Maenadism,” pp. 156, 164-66.

33

See H. Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas: Beiheft der Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1929), pp. 43-44; *Real-lexikon für Antike und Christentum*, 10 vols. (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1950–78), s.v. “Ekstase,” by F. Pfister, 4(1959): 944-87; *Lexikon der Antike, Religion-Mythologie*, s.v. “Enthusiasmus,” by B. Lohse, 1:227–28.

34

For examples Pentheus was forced to do the will of Dionysus (Euripides *The Bacchanals* 910-1150), and Dionysus forced Hephaistos to return to Olympus “by intoxicating him and leading him back in a frenzied Bacchic procession” (Soren, “The Fogg Kleophrades Vase,” p. 31; cf. Homer *Iliad* 18. 398).

35

For a detailed discussion of this, see Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas*, pp. 45-50; Plutarch *Moralia: Obsolescence of Oracles* 432; and Euripides *The Bacchanals* 298.

36

Lewy, *Sobria Ebrietas*, pp. 50-51: Bacchus was to the Romans the “god of poets” because of his intoxicating and inspiring acts (Lewis and Short, p. 218).

37

Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube*, 2:68; and Euripides *The Bacchanals* 142, 300, 700.

38

See esp. Nilsson, "Bacchic Mysteries," pp. 175–202; and Nilsson, *Geschichte*, 1:599–601; and 2:358–59.

39

Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube*, 2:68.

40

*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἄσωτος, ἄσωτία," by Werner Foerster, 1:506. One interesting fact is that the related term Σαώτης was applied to Dionysus as a descriptive title (Frisk, *Griechisches*, 2:844).

41

*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "ἄσωτος, ἄσωτία," 1:506.

42

Ibid., p. 507. in addition to the extra-biblical passages mentioned by Foerster, also see Josephus *Jewish Wars* 4. 651; Philo *De Sobrietate* 40 and *De Praemius et Poenis* 52.

43

Note the contrastive ἀλλά.

44

See G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), pp. 272-73. Also see W. F. Bakker, *The Greek Imperative* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1966).

45

For a discussion of the preposition ἐν used like the dative and with an instrumental force with the passive πληρόω see Robert Helbing, *Die Kasussyntax der Verba bei den Septuaginta* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1928), pp. 145-47.

46

Philo *Embassy to Gavis* 78-79.

47

Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 580.

48

Ibid.

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