

# THE EPISTLE

Saint James' Episcopal Church  
Livingston, Alabama

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July/August 2013  
(Double Issue)

## This Month's Cover

This month's cover picture is *The Assumption of the Virgin* by Nicolas Poussin, a seventeenth century French painter. It is oil on canvas, about 53x39", and is part of the Ailsa Mellon Bruce collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Very ancient Christian tradition teaches that the Blessed Virgin Mary was bodily assumed into heaven, and this is celebrated on August 15. As one theologian rather bluntly put it, this served to "to keep them from cutting her body up into tiny pieces for relics." The doctrine teaches that at the moment of death she received her resurrected body and assumed directly into heaven, where she was crowned the Queen of the Saints. This does not imply deification. Mary is venerated as a saint—she is not worshiped as a deity by any part of the Church.

Nicolas Poussin was one of the two most important European painters of the late Renaissance, along with his friend Claude Lorrain. However, by moving to Italy and not remaining in France, neither man qualified to join the Academie de Beaux-Artes in Paris. He was born in 1594 in Normandy, near Rouen, where he studied with Quentin Varin. In 1612 he moved to Paris, where he studied with Georges Lallermant and Ferdinand Elle. In Paris he studied works by and after Raphael, Titian and Giulio Romano, and these continued to inspire him throughout his career. He made two unsuccessful attempts to visit Rome in 1617 and 1622. It was in Paris that he met the poet Giovanni Battista Ma-

rino, who arranged for Poussin to go to Rome in 1624. Except for a brief return to France in 1641-42, Poussin remained in Rome the rest of his life.

There is little documentation of Poussin's early years in Rome, although it is clear that it was a period of great hardship for him. Nonetheless, he was well received in the best of Rome's artistic circles. He developed a friendship with the Flemish sculptor François Duquesnoy, the Bolognese painter Domenichino and the art collector Marcello Sacchetti. Through these and many other acquaintances he not only gained widespread recognition, but also obtained many important commissions. In 1632 he became a member of *Accademia di San Luca*, the most honored and influential of all the Roman artists' associations. Soon thereafter he received his first major French commission from Cardinal Richelieu. He went to France in 1641, but returned to Rome a year later. He received a number of French commissions, including one from Louis XIII, but he painted most of them while in Rome.

Poussin's crowning achievement was *The Four Seasons*, his penultimate work. His final opus, *Apollo and Daphne*, remained unfinished because he developed palsy in his hands. He died in 1665, and was buried in San Lorenzo de Lucina in Rome.

Richard R. Losch+

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## A Word from the Editor

There is an issue that the Christian Church has had to confront for centuries, at least from the time of the Protestant Reformation. That issue is the relationship of the Faith to culture. Is culture expected to conform to the Faith, or vice versa, or are they completely independent of one another?

When we use the term the Faith, we refer to the Faith that was deposited with the Apostles once and for all time, and which the Apostles (and we, their descendants and disciples) are expected to teach to the world.

No one could reasonably argue that culture and values do not change over time. As history clearly demonstrates, that change is at some times beneficial, and at others destructive. Uncontrolled destructive change will cause a culture to collapse and be replaced.

I have often heard the claim that if the Church will not conform to our changing society, it will die. Today's Western culture unabashedly accepts and even embraces things that would have shocked almost anyone just a few decades ago: cohabitation, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, serial divorce and remarriage, sexually active children, abortion, homosexuality and gay marriage, loss of honor and accountability, and rampant self-centeredness, to name just a few. These are things that are in direct violation of the traditional faith of the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, and even so, many parts of that Church wink at them at best, and endorse them at worst. This is a clear example of the Faith conforming to culture. Perhaps it is an

attempt to keep the Church from dying, but if so, it is an abysmal failure.

It is interesting to note that throughout Christianity, the only parts of the Church that are flourishing are those that remain true to the ancient Faith as deposited with the Apostles. The "happy-clappy let's-all-just-get-along" churches, the "Church of Nice" and the "feel-good" churches are dying on the vine. They may thrive for a time, but they do not last. The countryside is full of huge churches that for a while seated two or three thousand every Sunday, and now are empty. The queen of all mega-churches, the Crystal Cathedral, has been closed and sold.

On the other hand, the churches that have maintained the traditional Faith, or are returning to it, are growing at an amazing rate around the world. They demand discipline and accountability, and they teach spiritual responsibility. They are not afraid to identify sin, confront it, and condemn it. One would think that their firm expectations would drive people away, yet people are flocking to them.

Saint Paul referred to the Church as being "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). It is not built on the shifting sands of culture, but on solid rock.

I submit, then, that the answer to the old question is clear: if it will survive, culture must conform to the Faith—not be ruled by it, but look to it as its standard and guiding light.

*Father Rick Losch+*

## **Be Annoying**

On May 12, Mrs. Schori preached a controversial sermon in Saint Paul's Church in Curaçao, Venezuela. She denigrated Saint Paul, essentially calling him closed-minded, mean-spirited and bigoted, and claimed that we are saved not by faith but by diversity. In response, we call your attention to Pope Francis' sermon on the same day. It is well worth heeding:

"Paul is a nuisance. He is a man who, with his preaching, his work, his attitude, irritates others, because testifying to Jesus Christ and the proclamation of Jesus Christ makes us uncomfortable. It threatens our comfort zones—even Christian comfort zones. It irritates us. The Lord always wants us to move forward, forward, forward—not to take refuge in a quiet life or in cozy structures. And Paul, in preaching of the Lord, was a nuisance. But he had deep within him that most Christian of attitudes: Apostolic zeal. ... There are back-seat Christians. There are those who are well-mannered, who do everything well, but are unable to bring people to the Church through proclamation and Apostolic zeal. ... If we annoy people, blessed be the Lord."

Thanks be to God, Pope Francis can be very annoying to many.

*Richard R. Losch+*

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## **Sunday School Reminder**

Sunday School will resume in the fall on September 8th, the first Sunday after Labor Day. We will be planning the upcoming year and will need

volunteers to teach. Please remember the importance of Church School to our children and consider volunteering. If you would like to help with our children's classes, please speak with Hiram Patrenos.

*Hiram Patrenos*

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## **Deep South Landscaping**

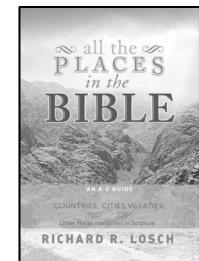
Thank you to Jason Gordy and his crew from Deep South Landscaping for their gift of pruning and cleaning out all the shrubbery, beds and hedges at the Rectory and the Church. We appreciate their hard work and generosity!

*Hiram Patrenos*

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## **All the Places in the Bible**

My new book, *All the Places in the Bible*, has just been published. It is available in hardcover and paperback at XLibris.com, BarnesandNoble.com and Amazon.com. If enough requests for it are made at local bookstores, it will also eventually be on the shelves there. It is a companion to *All the People in the Bible*. I also have copies at home. I plan to arrange a book signing in the late summer, but if you purchase a copy elsewhere in advance and bring it to the signing I will be happy to sign it there.



*Richard R. Losch+*

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*Pretty words are often not true, and  
true words are often not pretty.*

## **Independence Day Evening Prayer and Barbeque**

Our July service of Evening Prayer will be on Thursday, July 4th, Independence Day, at 6:00 p.m. with a barbeque supper following in the parish house. Pulled barbeque will be furnished and signup sheets for other dishes (salads, baked beans, bread or buns, deserts and tea) are posted in the parish house kitchen. There is also a sheet for those planning to attend, so that we may know how many to plan for. A nominal contribution will be asked of each person to defray the expenses for this event. You are also asked to bring canned goods for the Department of Human Resources Food Pantry. As always, there will be plenty of good food and fellowship. Please make your plans to attend.

Our August Evening Prayer will be on Wednesday, August 21st, at 6:00 p.m. Details will be announced in the Sunday bulletins and weekly e-mails as we approach the date.

Hiram Patrenos

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## **Parish Directory**

Copies of the updated Parish Directory are available on the table in the parish house. Please check it, and if you discover an error, please give the corrected information to Hiram Patrenos at (205) 652-4210 or at [patrenoj@bellsouth.net](mailto:patrenoj@bellsouth.net). The Directory will be updated again in November.

Hiram Patrenos

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*Shopping tip: You can get a pair of shoes for a buck at a bowling alley.*

## **Altar Flower Volunteers**

Volunteers are needed to provide Altar Flowers through the season of Pentecost. A sign-up chart is located in the Sacristy. You may use flowers from your yard or if you wish, make arrangements with a florist to provide them. For more information, please speak with Carolyn Patrenos.

Hiram Patrenos

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## **Congratulations, William**

Congratulations to William Green-Burns for being chosen for "All Stars" in the 9-10 year old Cal Ripkin Baseball League. William's team won the district playoffs and will be going to the state tournament.

Hiram Patrenos

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## **Roman Concrete**

Concrete is not a modern invention. The Romans invented it thousands of years ago, and Roman concrete was at least as strong and durable as the modern substance, according to the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. The Romans made it from pumice, mortar, lime and Italian volcanic ash called *pozzolana*, while modern concrete is made from lime and clay. Also, while Roman concrete took longer to set, it would set under water, making the casting of dams and sea walls much easier. Another advantage to it was that in making it the lime was fired at a much lower temperature than is used for modern concrete. This released a great deal less carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

Richard R. Losch+

## New Quarry Discovery

On May 8, 2013 the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of a massive limestone quarry just outside Jerusalem that was in use from the first century B.C. through the first century A.D. This discovery is important for many reasons. It is one of the largest in the area—over 10,000 square feet—and contains a great number of quarrying tools, including pickaxes and wedges. The quarry would have been of great value in its own time. Not only is the limestone of very high quality, but also the quarry is elevated, so the stones could be transported downhill almost all the way to Jerusalem. This was almost certainly the primary source of limestone for the building of Herod's temple and the attached Roman palace and fortress, the Antonia. One of the artifacts found in the quarry was an unusual angular key, but there is no indication of what it unlocked.

The method of quarrying was essentially the same as had been used for at least 1000 years. It was slow and tedious, but could produce very large stones.<sup>1</sup> First, the face of the stone was evened. This was done by chiseling the rock to produce a flat surface. Next, the top was flattened and leveled. When that was completed the quarryman cut narrow channels 4 to 6 inches wide on all sides except the bottom of the incipient stone. In

two of these grooves, at right angles, he would insert dry wooden beams and lightly hammer them in. They were then soaked with water, causing the wood to swell slowly. The resulting pressure of the swollen wood would split the stone free from the quarry wall, yet leave it firmly enough attached that it would not fall to the quarry floor and be smashed. It was then tied, broken free, and lowered to the floor of the quarry. This is called a rough ashlar. It was then smoothed and squared by workmen, producing what is called a smooth or perfect ashlar. At that point it was transported to the building site to be put in place. A projection was left on two opposite sides of the stone so that ropes could be attached to help in jockeying it onto oxcarts or rollers. These projections were removed at the building site.

The largest stones were used in the western retaining wall, which is the only part of the temple that still stands. In it are several ashlars that weigh in excess of 80 tons, and are still firmly in place at an elevation of over 100 feet above the foundation. This would be a challenge even to modern builders, and was a prodigious feat 2000 years ago. Some of the “small” ashlars that were thrown down by the Romans weighed as much as 10 to 20 tons.<sup>2</sup>

It is hoped that further excavation will reveal much more about the site.

*Richard R. Losch+*

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<sup>1</sup> The western retaining wall (the “Wailing Wall”), the only part of the Temple that still survives, contains some of the largest stones ever used in any building in the world.

<sup>2</sup> The Romans developed or perfected most of the building techniques used by Herod, but they were also as expert at destruction as they were at construction.

## July Birthdays . . .

- 6 Madelyn Mack  
 7 Milburn ("Butch") Lamb  
 7 Meredith Shah  
 16 Carl Sudduth  
 27 Ethel Garth Scott  
 29 Mira Muñoz



## . . . and Anniversaries

- 8 Charles and Linda Muñoz



*Happy Anniversary!*

<b>SAINT JAMES' EPISCOPAL CHURCH</b> <b>LECTOR, ACOLYTE, AND USHER SCHEDULE</b> <b>July 2013</b>				
	<b>Old Testament</b>	<b>New Testament</b>	<b>Crucifer/ Acolyte</b>	<b>Ushers</b>
<b>7</b>	Mary Helen Jones	Rosalie Dew	Bill Taylor	Charles Muñoz* Barry Green-Burnes
<b>14</b>	Valerie Burns	Ethel Scott	Valerie Burns	Barry Green-Burnes* Roy Underwood
<b>21</b>	Linda Muñoz	Madelyn Mack	Fr. Dennis	Raiford Noland* Jimmy Collins
<b>28</b>	Charles Muñoz	Brian Burns	William Green-Burns	Joe Moore* Charles Muñoz
<b>ALTAR GUILD:</b> Virginia Derby				*Hand out bulletins and ring bell
If you cannot serve on the day assigned, please exchange with another server and call Hiram Patrenos at 652-4210 as soon as possible.				

## *August Birthdays . . .*

- 8 Garland Scott  
 12 Harris Marks  
 25 Joe Moore



## *. . . and Anniversaries*

- 27 Mitesh and Meredith Shah



**SAINT JAMES' EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
LECTOR, ACOLYTE, AND USHER SCHEDULE  
August 2013**

	Old Testament	New Testament	Crucifer/ Acolyte	Ushers
4	Rosalie Dew	Mary Helen Jones	Bill Taylor	Charles Muñoz* Barry Green-Burnes
11	Ethel Scott	Roy Underwood	Valerie Burnes	Brian Burnes* Roy Underwood
18	Barry Green-Burnes	Linda Muñoz	Fr. Dennis	Raiford Noland* Barry Green-Burnes
25	Brian Burnes	Madelyn Mack	William Green-Burnes	Joe Moore* Charles Muñoz
<b>ALTAR GUILD:</b> Mary Helen Jones				*Hand out bulletins and ring bell
If you cannot serve on the day assigned, please exchange with another server and call Hiram Patrenos at 652-4210 as soon as possible.				

## Oldest Torah Scroll

The Torah is the foundation of Jewish theological thinking and tradition. It is in two parts: the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah consists of the first five books of Holy Scripture<sup>1</sup>—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The Oral Torah is so called because it was originally an oral tradition, but for centuries it also has been written. It is loosely defined, but generally refers to the Talmud, which is an exhaustive collection of rabbinical legal decisions, scriptural interpretations, and commentaries on these decisions and interpretations. In a sense it is rather like the body of English Common Law, which embodies all English legal decisions and precedents since the Magna Carta.<sup>2</sup>

In every well-constituted synagogue the focal point is a Sefer Torah, which is a hand-written scroll of the Written Torah. This is a sacred document, and is treated with the utmost respect and devotion. If a synagogue is in danger (as in a fire or attack), regardless of how many extremely valuable possessions it may have, the very first thing the people will attempt to save is the Sefer Torah.

These scrolls are also of great importance to biblical scholars. Being so important to Jewish worship, they are

prepared with excruciating care. By ancient tradition, when a scroll is completed it is checked for accuracy letter by letter by several different rabbinic scribes. If any error is found it is not corrected, but the scroll is destroyed. The result is that for over many centuries the transmission of these five books has been as accurate as is humanly possible. This means that of all the biblical documents we have, among the most reliable are the Torah scrolls used in synagogues.

In the University of Bologna library there is a 120-foot long parchment Sefer Torah that was catalogued in 1889 as a seventeenth century scroll. Last year Italian scholar Mauro Perani undertook to catalogue the large collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the library. When he opened the scroll he was immediately struck by the script. It was a considerably earlier style than anything that was used in the seventeenth century. Also, it did not follow the scribal standards established by Maimonides at the turn of the thirteenth century. Maimonides, a Spanish rabbi, was the leading intellectual figure in mediaeval Judaism. The scribal standards he set for Torah scrolls were almost immediately accepted throughout world Judaism. Subsequent carbon-14 tests established the date of the Bologna scroll at A.D. 1155-1225. This makes it the oldest complete Sefer Torah known anywhere. There are earlier Hebrew biblical documents, but no earlier copy of a Sefer Torah.

The 760-page Aleppo Codex (A.D. 920) contains the entire Tanakh (He-

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew term for the Holy Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament) is *Tanakh*.

<sup>2</sup> England is a Constitutional Monarchy. It has no written Constitution, but the equivalent is the Common Law, which limits the power of government in Britain like the U. S. Constitution is supposed to do in the United States.

brew Bible). A codex is a document in book form rather than scroll form (a Sefer Torah may only be in scroll form).<sup>1</sup> It has been accepted as the most authoritative text of the Bible, and is the standard for modern Hebrew Bibles. It is complete with vowel pointing, punctuation, directions for liturgical chants, and textual notes. Unfortunately, it was damaged and several pages were lost during a Muslim uprising in Aleppo in 1947. Because of that, the Leningrad Codex (A.D. 1010) is now the oldest complete Tanakh.

*Richard R. Losch+*

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## ***Be Wordly Wise “In” Words***

By “in words” we don’t mean socially acceptable or politically correct words, but those with the prefix *in-* (or *im-* if the root begins with *b*, *m*, or *p*).<sup>2</sup> This prefix can mean either “in” or “into” (as in “infuse” and “import”), or “non” (as in “ingratitude” and “immovable.”). We will focus here on the latter meaning.

Oftentimes we tend to take these words for granted, being unaware that they are actually negative forms of positive words. In fact, the positive forms are often rare or have disappeared completely from common use.

For example, when did you last hear about a nocent (harmful) act or a maculate (stained) tablecloth? Yet the meaning is clear if we talk about an innocent child or an immaculate shirt. These words come from the Latin *nocere*, “to harm” and *macula*, “spot.”

Sometimes the prefix can be confusing. For example, “inflammable” can mean either “capable of being enflamed (set on fire),” or “non-flammable” (“incapable of being enflamed”). For this reason most product markings these days avoid “inflammable” and use only the terms “flammable” and “non-flammable.”

Not every word that begins with *in-* actually begins with a prefix. For example, “inane” (“empty or void”) is not a negative of “ane.” It comes from the Latin *inanis*, which has the same meaning. In early Latin, *uanis* and *inuanis* were identical terms (like “flammable” and “inflammable”). The former evolved into *vanus* and the latter *inanis*, both meaning “empty.”

The dictionary’s list of words beginning with *im-* and *in-* is huge. In Latin the list is equally large, as Latin has had an enormous influence on English. The Latin *in-* came from two Greek sources: *en-* (“in”) and *a-* or *an-*, (“without”). English is also directly affected by the Greek, as in “amorphous” (“without shape”) and “amoral” (“without morals”).<sup>3</sup>

*Richard R. Losch+*

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<sup>1</sup> In the first century A.D. Christians began using the codex as their standard book form. It did not become common in Judaism, however, until the end of the seventh century.

<sup>2</sup> These sounds are called “bilabials,” from the Latin *labia*, “lips,” because they are made using both lips.

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<sup>3</sup> “Amoral” (“without morals”) is not the same as “immoral” (“not moral”). An amoral person has no moral values, while an immoral person fails to meet accepted moral values.

## Gas and Guidance from the Gods

One of the very important phenomena of the ancient world was the Delphic Oracle in Greece. It was high up on Mount Parnassus, a rugged mountain near Delphi, just north of the Gulf of Corinth in the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula. The ancient Greeks believed that the sibyl, who was always a woman, was a conduit to the gods, particularly Apollo. She did not predict the future, but answered questions with cryptic phrases that supposedly enabled her questioners to make wise decisions and choices. People traveled from all over the known world, sometimes journeying for months, to seek her counsel. They might want guidance, for example, on who to elect as a leader; where to plant a new colony; whether it was a good time to engage in war, make an investment or to marry off a daughter; what offering to make to a particular god; how to lift a curse, etc. After the sibyl spoke, priest-poets in the temple of Apollo would then put her words into verse. The critical thing, of course, was to interpret her enigmatic words correctly. A classic story tells of when King Croesus of Lydia<sup>1</sup> inquired of the oracle whether he should attack Persia. The sibyl told him, "If you wage war on Persia you will destroy a mighty empire." He attacked, was defeated, and Lydia was ravaged. He did indeed destroy a mighty empire—his own.

There were many oracles in the ancient Mediterranean region, but by far the most important and most highly regarded was that at Delphi. Because of its prestige the Delphic Oracle became the richest and most famous of all the Hellenic shrines. The Greeks called it *Ho Omphalos Kosmou*, "The Navel of the Universe." Its origin is unknown, but most scholars believe that it began around the eighth century B.C. This was the period of Greek colonial expansion, and city-state kings would consult the oracle before setting out to plant new colonies. The legend is that a goatherd named Koretas noticed that when his goats stood in a particular spot on Mount Parnassus they began to bleat strangely. As he approached the spot he was taken into a trance and spoke prophetically.

The sibyl was called a Pythia. She had been trained and prepared from childhood for this role, and girls who received this training were carefully selected from the time they were very young. It was a great honor for a girl to be selected as a Pythia, because it meant that she had favorably attracted the attention of the gods. For one thing, the child had to show potential to be very spiritual and to be able to communicate with the higher world. From the descriptions of the time, it is likely that in modern times the girls selected would have been discussed by the local gossips with some statement such as, "Bless her heart, she always was a strange little child."

Every day petitioners would climb

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<sup>1</sup> Lydia was one of the richest nations in the ancient world. This is where we get the expression "rich as Croesus."

the rough trail up Mount Parnassus to the mile-high temple of Apollo. They were then lined up according to their importance: high state officials and emissaries from other nations first, then military commanders, powerful patricians, influential civic leaders, athletes<sup>1</sup>, poets, rich businessmen, and finally average citizens who might want to know what crop to plant in a particular field or whether it was time to declare a son to be of age.

As they worked their way up the trail, the petitioners would pass bronze and marble statues, small shrines, and other monuments donated by grateful suppliants whose endeavors had prospered because of the oracle's counsel. As they approached the temple they would see engraved over the terrace the two famous Delphic aphorisms, "Know Thyself" and "Nothing in Excess." They then walked up a long ramped colonnade of Doric columns to the great bronze temple doors. Inside there was an eternal pinewood fire tended by the women of Delphi.<sup>2</sup> Once in the temple, the petitioners would offer a sacrifice—usually to Apollo—and then

wait to be led down to a lower chamber where they faced a large egg-shaped stone, the *omphalon*, that marked the sacred spot that was believed to be the navel of the universe. Beside it was a huge gold statue of Apollo. They were then led past that



*Omphalon*

into the *adyton*, a small chamber deep in the bowels of the rock under the temple. *Adyton* is a Greek word meaning "not to be entered." There was a crack in the floor of the *adyton*, and the Pythia sat on a tripod stool directly over it. Each morning the Pythia would sacrifice a goat to Apollo to ensure that the day's prophecies were auspicious, then enter the *adyton*. Once she was seated on the stool the petitioners would be brought to her, one at a time, throughout the day. The petitioner would ask his question, and the Pythia would then answer, using unconnected words and phrases, and rarely using complete sentences. She was able to prophesy only when she sat on the stool in the chamber, and when she spoke her voice was severely altered from her normal voice outside the chamber. Several ancient writers described this, one of the most important and reliable being the Greek geographer Strabo (c.64 B.C. - A.D. 25).

Part of Strabo's description has been rejected by most scholars for well over a century. He said, "The seat of the oracle is a cavern hollowed down in the depths ... from which arises a *pneuma* that inspires a divine state of possession" *Pneuma* means

<sup>1</sup> Athletes were highly regarded in ancient Greece, because the Greeks believed that athletic prowess was a divine gift and was to be exercised only as an act of worship. All athletic competitions were religious events.

<sup>2</sup> Women were happy to volunteer for this service. Not only was it an honor to serve the god, but also it was one of the few opportunities a woman ever had to leave the house. In ancient Greece women were rarely if ever allowed to leave their father's or husband's house, and then never unaccompanied.

breath, gas, vapor or spirit. This was rejected because there is no volcanic activity anywhere near that region, and gases of that sort were believed to come only from volcanism. Strabo was not the only ancient writer to describe the *adyton* and the hallucinogenic gas. Plutarch (A.D. 46-120) also described a vapor which made the Pythia prophetic when she inhaled it. He had been a priest of Apollo at Delphi, so he spoke with some authority. The second century A.D. traveler Pausanias wrote of a spring in the *adyton* that gave the Pythia prophetic powers when she drank of it.

Modern research began in 1890, when French archaeologists began excavating the oracle. They first moved an entire village, house by house, down to a lower spot on the mountainside. This enabled them to excavate the Sacred Way, the trail that led up to the temple. By 1893 they reached the temple site itself, only to find that nothing was left of it above the floor. The columns had all fallen, and most of the material of the temple had been carried away for other building projects centuries earlier. They could not find the *adyton*, as water had filled all the lower areas. Around 1900, a young English scholar named Adolph Paul Oppé proposed that the real site of the oracle was a nearby gorge, and that the accounts of the vapor were pure fiction that had been passed down by tradition for centuries. He justified his claim with the



argument that there had not been any volcanic activity in the region for hundreds of millions of years, and he wrote so convincingly that scholars almost universally accepted his hypothesis. He was only in his early twenties at the time, but he went on to become a highly respected scholar in many fields, and this enhanced his authority even in the area of the oracle, a field in which he was not truly an expert. In 1927 M. F. Courby published the French team's findings, giving strong evidence that the stories of the fissure in the rock may have been correct. However, by that time Oppé's hypothesis was so firmly established that scholars refused to accept any other. Finally, in 1950, Pierre Amandry of the Ecole Française d'Athènes claimed definitively—or so most believed—that any production of intoxicating gases in that region was geologically impossible. From that time on until quite recently the case was closed and there was no further discussion or research on the subject.

The first crack in the matter (no pun intended) came in the 1980s when the Dutch geologist Jelle Zeilinga de Boer, commissioned by the United Nations and the Greek government, made a study of active fault lines in the earthquake-prone Balkan peninsula. While studying the region around Mount Parnassus, he discovered an exposed fault that ran from the east to the west sides of the traditional site of the Delphic Oracle. He suspected that the fault ran right under the temple, but he did not pursue the matter further. In the summer of 1995, de Boer

met archaeologist John Hale of the University of Louisville, and in a chance conversation mentioned the fault at Delphi. Hale said that this was very unlikely, but if it were true it would be a discovery of immense importance. They decided to pursue the matter, and enlisted Jeff Chanton, a chemist/geologist at FSU, and Henry Spiller, a toxicologist with the Kentucky Poison Center.

The team found that the fault did indeed run under the temple site, where it joined with another fault. The profusion of springs in the area made excavation almost impossible, because the digs would fill up with water immediately. Greek geologists, however, had already identified the limestone in the area as bituminous, meaning that it was oil-bearing. They determined that the petrochemical content of the rock could be as high as 20%. That would be a likely source of intoxicating gases, except that those gases could only be released by intense heat. Since there was no volcanic or geothermal activity in the region (and there had not been for hundreds of millions of years), there was no way to release the gases.

About two million years ago (geologically quite recently), a great rift or graben was created, running horizontally across the northern Mediterranean. This is a vast, deep crack in the earth's crust that today is filled by the waters of the Gulf of Corinth.<sup>1</sup> This rift continues to widen, and as it does it places great stress on the faults in

the Balkans, causing frequent earthquakes. An earthquake destroyed the temple of Apollo at Delphi in 373 B.C. Every time there is a shift, the friction of one fault face against the other generates intense heat that would vaporize the petrochemicals in the rock. Once things have settled down and cooled, however, these vapors do not re-condense. Rather, they become locked up in crevices and pockets in the rock, whence they slowly seep through cracks to the surface. The fissure in the floor of the *adyton* was surely one of these cracks, and when the Pythia sat on the stool over it she was able to inhale the intoxicating gases. It would appear that Strabo and Plutarch are exonerated.

Geologists have studied gases from bituminous limestone in the Gulf of Mexico—methane, ethane and ethylene—for years. All three are intoxicants. Similar gases have been found being exhaled from rocks under the Gulf of Corinth and the Aegean island of Zakynthos. The spring water at Delphi leaves travertine deposits, indicating that it rises from very deep in the earth. Sure enough, the travertine and the water itself showed traces of the three bituminous gases. This is very strong evidence that these gases probably were also exhaled through the fissure in the *adyton*.

Ancient writings describe two types of trances into which the Pythia would fall. The more common event was for her to lapse into a semi-conscious state in which she would answer questions in disjointed words and phrases, using a significantly al-

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<sup>1</sup> The Red Sea is a similar water-filled graben.

tered voice from that which she used when outside the *adyton*. In that state she would remain seated on the tripod stool the entire time. Plutarch wrote that when she was through and came back to the surface she was very relaxed, but also very tired, much like a runner after a race. The other trance was rarer, but quite different. It involved a frantic delirium that was accompanied by spasms, violent flailing of the arms and legs, wild groaning and inarticulate cries. Plutarch observed that she usually died a few days after such a trance, and would then be replaced by another Pythia.

Henry Spiller, the toxicologist on the research team, has long studied the inhalation of hydrocarbon gases. His field of study has been “huffers.” These are young people, usually teens, who seek to get high by inhaling hydrocarbons, most often glue, paint thinner and the like. Their symptoms are very similar to those of the Pythia as described by Strabo and Plutarch. In fact, Plutarch’s writings may even help in identifying the gas. He was a priest of Apollo at Delphi, so he would have been very familiar with what went on. He said that the *pneuma* in the *adyton* had a sweet smell like expensive perfume. That, of course, enhanced the idea that it came from the gods. However, ethylene has such a smell, and is an ingredient in many products sniffed by “huffers.”

Isabella Herb, a pioneering anesthesiologist in the early twentieth century, experimented on humans with ethylene. It worked twice as fast as nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”) and

required only half as much. In heavy doses it brought about complete unconsciousness with minimal bad after-effects, and in small doses brought about a trance-like state very similar to that described by Plutarch. Research on it stopped, however, because it is extremely explosive, and even a tiny static electric spark could blow up the whole operating room.

Spiller’s research with “huffers” has confirmed that small doses of the hydrocarbon gases can cause a benign “out-of-body” experience. The danger, of course, is that it can also cause violent delirium as Plutarch observed, and this is usually either fatal or causes severe irreversible brain damage. This happens in about one in six cases —thus the odds of a “bad trip” are far too high to be worth the chance. Also, repeated use increases these odds.

It seems, therefore, that the Pythia was blissfully “stoned” when she gave her prophecies. We must also remember that she had been trained since early childhood for this duty, so it is impossible to know how much of her trance was chemically induced and how much was psychosomatic.

Unfortunately, we have no record of the oracle when it was at its height in the seventh to fifth centuries B.C. By Plutarch’s time the gas exhalations had diminished significantly. He tells us that they were weak and unpredictable, and sometimes they were insufficient to put the Pythia into a trance. This is a compelling clue that hydrocarbon gases were probably the primary cause of the Pythia’s trances.

Richard R. Losch+

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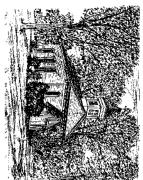
JAMIE

by Richard R. Losch



*"Hold on, son. Are you confessing,  
or bragging?"*

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