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St. Patrick and the 'Sun' (*Conf*. 20)

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According to St. Patrick, he suffered some form of Satanic attack one night during his wandering in a wilderness following his escape from slavery in Ireland. It is not clear whether the ship in which he had been travelling had landed in Britain or in Gaul, and it is difficult to explain how Patrick and his companions could really have wandered anywhere in either location for twenty-eight days as alleged before making human contact again, but these problems need not detain us here.[1] I want to focus here on the nature of Patrick's response to the Satanic attack, the reading and significance of the words which he is alleged to have called out during the course of this attack. The standard edition and a recent translation run (*Conf*. 20):

Eadem vero nocte eram dormiens et fortiter temptavit me satanas, quod memor ero quamdiu fuero in hoc corpore, et cecidit super me veluti saxum ingens et nihil membrorum meorum praevalens. Sed unde me venit ignaro in spiritu ut Heliam vocarem ? Et inter haec vidi in caelum solem oriri et dum clamarem 'Helia, Helia', viribus meis, ecce splendor solis illius decidit super me et statim discussit a me omnem gravitudinem, et credo quod a Christo domino meo subventus sum et spiritus eius iam tunc clamabat pro me et spero quod sic erit in die pressurae meae, sicut in evangelio inquit: In illa die, Dominus testatur, non vos estis qui loquimini, sed spiritus Patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis.[2]

That very night, while I was sleeping, Satan strongly tried me – I shall remember it 'as long as I am in the body'. Something like an enormous rock fell on top of me and I lost all power over my limbs. But where did it come to me, for I was ignorant in spiritual matters, that I should call on Helias ? And at this point I saw the sun rise in the sky and while I called out 'Helia, Helia' with all my strength, behold the sun's splendour fell on me and dispelled immediately all the heaviness from upon me. And I believe that Christ, my Lord, assisted me, and his spirit had already cried out through me. And I hope it will be so 'in the days of my distress' as it says in the gospel: 'On that day' the Lord declares, 'it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who will speak in you.'[3]

Who, or what, was *Helia*? As the author of the above translation, who carefully refuses to commit himself on this issue, has noted, this is 'one of the knottiest problems in this text'.[4] Furthermore, it is worth noting that the problem remains

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[1] There is a large bibliography on nearly every aspect of the life of St. Patrick. On these particular problems, see e.g. Edward A. Thompson, *Who was St. Patrick* (Woodbridge, 1985), 30-34; Thomas O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick* (London, 2005), 54-57. They reach the same conclusion, that we cannot in fact know whether Patrick and his companions landed in Gaul or Britain, although on very different grounds, the former stressing the political nature of the text, that Patrick may have remained deliberately vague in order to conceal some embarassing facts about this stage in his life, the latter stressing the theological or spiritual nature of the text, that Patrick was not writing a biography in the modern sense. In contrast, Raymond M. Keogh, 'Does the Armorican Forest Hold the Key to St. Patrick's Escape', *Studia Hibernica* 28 (1994), 145-57, argues that Patrick and his companions landed in Armorica in 409, but does not really add anything new to the long-running debate. Most recently, Stephanie Hayes-Healy, 'Saint Patrick's Journey into the Desert: *Confessio* 16-28 as Ascetic Discourse', *Archivium Hibernicum* 59 (2005), 237-59, has brilliantly demonstrated that Patrick drew heavily upon the *topoi* of monastic literature as he composed his account of his early life, to the extent that it seems clear that one can place little trust in most of what he says, least of all in his account of his journey through the 'desert' following his escape from slavery.

[2] Ed. Ludwig Bieler, *Clavis Patricii II: Libri Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi* (Dublin, 1993), 68-69.

[3] Trans. O'Loughlin, *Discovering St. Patrick*, 152.

[4] O'Loughlin, *Discovering St. Patrick*, 152, n. 116.

whether one wishes to take every word of Patrick's account absolutely literally or, on the other extreme, to dismiss it completely as a pious fiction modelled upon a standard *topos* of monastic literature, since we are concerned here with the interpretation and internal consistency of the story rather than an assessment of its historical accuracy.[5] Various solutions to this problem have been suggested and rejected. One possibility is that the text describes how Patrick called upon the old testament prophet Elijah. Hence it has been claimed that, although Patrick was not in the habit of invoking Elijah, his altered state of consciousness during this attack may well have caused him to remember 'some pictorial representation of Elijah seen in his childhood' and to have responded accordingly.[6] There are several problems with this interpretation. The first is that it is difficult to imagine how any Christian family could really have so reared a child that he came to attach a greater importance to the prophet Elijah than to Jesus Christ himself, to the extent that he instinctively called upon Elijah rather than Christ in his time of greatest need. Next, Patrick reveals no particular attachment to Elijah, past or present, anywhere else in the text. In these circumstances, it is difficult to believe that he could really have intended to call upon Elijah in this particular context. Finally, the manner in which Patrick describes the response to his outburst, his specific claim that he had been assisted by Christ and his Spirit rather than by anyone else, suggests that his outburst had been intended as a cry for help directly to Christ in the first place.

A second possibility is that Patrick had called upon the sun rather than the prophet Elijah, using the term *Helios* rather than *Helias*.[7] There are three main problems with this interpretation. First, it requires an interpretation of Patrick's description of his religious state in his youth which is inconsistent with his description of his family background and completely ignores the context and mental state of the author at the time of his writing. On the first point, since Patrick was a third generation Christian at least, and did not belong to just any Christian family, but to a clerical family even, being the son of a deacon and the grandson of a priest, his knowledge of Christian doctrine ought to have been above average for his age, to the extent that it is impossible to accept that he could really have believed that a Christian could call upon God by the name Helios.[8] On the second point, when Patrick says that he was

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[5] Hayes-Healy, 'Saint Patrick's Journey into the Desert', 251-52, draws attention to the striking similarities between Patrick's account of how Satan attacked him and bishop Athanasius of Alexandria's account of how Satan attacked the monk St. Anthony (*Vita Antonii* 8-10). As she highlights, 'both saints were rendered immobile by the devil's assault. Both would remember the torment for many years to come. Both were rescued by the power of Jesus, who arrived accompanied by a brilliant light.' On this *topos* within monastic literature, see now David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass. 2006). It is important, therefore, to consider Patrick's alleged cry not merely in its own particular context, but in the context of parallel passages within monastic literature also. The parallel between the alleged experiences of St. Patrick and of St. Anthony highlights the fact that Patrick ought to have cried out to Jesus rather than, as some have argued, to Elijah or Helios.

[6] Bieler, *Clavis Patricii II*, 145. See also Philip Freeman, *St. Patrick of Ireland: A Biography* (New York, 2004), 42: 'at least unconsciously in Patrick's mind, images of Elijah (*Helias*) and the sun (*Helios*) blended together so that the rays of the rising sun lifted the demonic weight from his limbs'.

[7] See e.g. Timothy E. Powell, 'Christianity or Solar Monotheism: The Early Religious Beliefs of St. Patrick', *JEH* 43 (1992), 531-40, esp. 538: 'In a family environment still influenced by paganism, though formally Christian, Patrick had acquired the idea that God could be called on under the name Helios'.

[8] Powell, 'Christianity or Solar Monotheism', 532, implies some form of comparison between the young Patrick and the young Augustine. This is invalid since Augustine was the child of a mixed-marriage, of a pagan father and a Christian mother, while there is no evidence that this was the case with Patrick.

ignorant of the True God at the time of his captivity, and that he and his friends did not listen to their priests (*Conf*. 1), these are relative, not absolute, statements. He means only that he was ignorant of God in his youth relative to his situation by the time that he was writing, and that he and his friends did not listen to their priests anywhere near as much as he thought they ought to have by the time that he was writing. The same is true of all similar such statements (*Conf*. 2, 10, 27). The second objection to this interpretation is that it tends to confuse metaphor and reality so that it exaggerates the temptation to religious syncretism on the part of those Christians who used solar imagery.[9] One can no more use the apparent recognition by the young Patrick of the rising sun as a symbol of God to argue that he was confusing the cult of a traditional pagan Sol with that of Christ than one can use the description by the adult Patrick of Christ as the True Sun to argue the same (*Conf*. 60). Indeed, one notes that this interpretation requires an extremely literal and simplistic reading of the passage under discussion, that Patrick did suffer a particular moment of temptation or weakness during his wandering, and that this temptation occurred during one particular night, but ended with the onset of day. In fact, Patrick's references to night and day here may be no more than metaphors for the various stages of the spiritual struggle that he suffered about this time rather than precise indications of time. As to the third objection to this interpretation, it is difficult to understand why the Latin - speaking Patrick should suddenly have decided to call upon the sun by its Greek (*Helios*) rather than Latin (*Sol*) name, since the sun-god had normally been referred to by his Latin name *Sol* in the western Roman empire.[10]

The third possibility is that the young Patrick had been trying to imitate the cry of Christ on the cross as described by the evangelists Matthew and Mark, 'Eli, eli, lema sabachthani'.[11] As they explain, this means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me ?' While this interpretation has been strongly championed recently, and the conclusion drawn that this incident reveals 'a biblical Patrick, who in his anguish can impersonate Christ', objections remain.[12] First, regardless of the reality of the young Patrick's biblical knowledge at the time of his captivity, the idea that the young Patrick should have been depicted imitating the precise words of Christ on the cross is inconsistent with what the same passage says about his ignorance in spirit. The adult Patrick seems surprised that his younger self had known to turn to Christ at all, so that the idea that the latter should then have remembered to use the precise Hebrew phrase as allegedly used by Christ on the cross becomes farcical. The second objection is that the claim that the young Patrick is being depicted in imitation of Christ on the cross is inconsistent with the fact that he seems to have believed that he was calling out to Christ, and that Christ and his Spirit assisted him because of this. On the cross, Christ cried out to the Father, but in his crisis Patrick cried out to Christ. Hence the two incidents cannot be compared, and Patrick is not depicted in imitation of Christ here.

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[9] On the origin and continuation of salor imagery within Chritianity in late antiquity, see Martin Wallraff, *Christus Verus Sol: Sonnenverehrung und Christentum in der Spätantike* (Münster, 2001).

[10] As best revealed by Roman imperial coinage which always spoke of *Sol* rather than *Helios*, not least when the cult of Sol had reached its peak during the early fourth century. In general, see Gaston H. Halsberghe, *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden, 1972).

[11] Matthew 27.46; Mark 15.34.

[12] See Danuta Shanzer, ''Iuvenes vestri visiones videbunt:' Visions and the Literary Sources of Patrick's Confessio', *Journal of Medieval Latin* 3 (1993), 169-201, at 179-86. Earlier proponents include Thomas Olden, *Epistles and Hymns of St. Patrick* (London, 1894), 51; Terrot R. Glover, 'Note on *Confessio S. Patricii*', *Classical Review* 10 (1896), 39; Robert A.S. Macalister, *Ancient Ireland* (London, 1935), 170.

Of the three main traditional interpretations of the nature of Patrick's cry at his time of crisis as just outlined, there can be no doubt that the readings of the surviving manuscripts favour the first interpretation, that Patrick called upon Elijah. Yet the fact that the surviving manuscripts support a particular reading does not mean that this is necessarily the correct reading. The wider context must determine whether a particular reading is correct, and, as explained, the wider context raises serious doubts as to the reading of the text in this case. The editor of the standard edition has argued that the archetype (Σ) of the surviving manuscripts cannot have been written later than the first third of the seventh century.[13] This means that a period of up to a century and a half may have passed since Patrick's first composition of his *Confessio* and the production of the archetype, time enough for several generations of error or worse.[14] Hence the willingness of proponents that the young Patrick had really been described calling upon Helios or crying out in imitation of Christ to put their cases.

Once one allows that the copyist of the archetype (Σ) may have mistakenly corrected a text whose readings he did not properly understand to refer to Elijah instead, then there is another possibility which seems to have been neglected heretofore, that his examplar may have originally described how the young Patrick had cried out *eleison*, meaning 'Have mercy' in Greek, in imitation of the phrase *Kyrie*, *eleison*, 'Lord, have mercy', as used in litanies, most notably during the mass. The first reason to suggest this interpretation is the similarity between the name *Helias* and the verb *eleison*. It is not difficult to see why a copyist may have misinterpreted the latter term as a corruption of the first, a blundered accusative case singular perhaps.[15] The main factor in favour of this interpretation, however, is that it fits the context extremely well. First, nothing could have been more natural than that Patrick should have cried out for mercy in his crisis. Second, the prayer *Kyrie*, *eleison* was addressed to Christ as Lord, and it is Christ, identified as Lord, who assists Patrick following his cry. Finally, the cry *Kyrie*, *eleison* enjoyed massive popularity in the East far beyond its original liturgical usage. It was, by its very nature, suited to widespread popular and non-liturgical usage in a crisis, any crisis.[16] It would not have been at all surprising had it enjoyed a similar popularity in the West following its introduction there as the natural prayer which to employ in any crisis, real or fictional, exactly as alleged in the case of Patrick here.

The main objection to this interpretation must be that, as its language suggests, the prayer *Kyrie*, *eleison* was of eastern origin, where it was certainly in use by the late fourth century, but that there is no firm evidence for its use in the West before the so-called *deprecatio Gelasii* of Pope Gelasius (492-96).[17] Furthermore, the fact that the synod of Vaison in Gaul was only proposing to incorporate this prayer in the matins, mass, and vespers in 529, warns one against exaggerating the speed with which it

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[13] Bieler, *Clavis Patricii II*, 29.

[14] Patrick's own writings provide no firm evidence as to the date of his death, while the medieval annals preserve contradictory traditions pointing to his death c. 461 or c.493. See e.g. David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick AD493-1993* (Woodbridge, 1993), 29-33.

[15] It is interesting to note not only that the apparent name *Helias* is in the accusative case at its first occurrence, but that some manuscripts suggest that the young Patrick may have called it out in the accusative case also, '*Heliam*, *Heliam*' rather '*Helia*, *Helia*'. Shanzer (n. 12) , 185-86, prefers the accusative reading.

[16] See e.g. Theophanes, *Chron*. AM 5930 (AD437, earthquake at Constantinople); *Chronicle of Zuqnīn* AG837 (AD526, earthquake at Antioch); John of Ephesus, *HE* 3.36 (c. AD540, fall of a mason down a cliff).

[17] In general, see Joseph Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite* (2 vols, New York, 1951), i, 333-46.

spread throughout the rest of the West subsequently.[18] It is extremely unlikely, therefore, that Patrick would have been familiar with this prayer even by the time that he composed his *Confessio* sometime during the late fifth century, and next to impossible that he could have drawn upon it at a time of youthful crisis in the early or mid-fifth century.[19] It is important to remember, however, that we do not possess an autograph copy of the *Confessio*. There is a real possibility, therefore, that, writing sometime during the period between its original composition by Patrick and the production of the archetype Σ, a copyist may have subtly altered the original version of Patrick's temptation by Satan so as to include the term *eleison* which he borrowed from the liturgy of his day, only for a subsequent copysist to misunderstand the term *eleison* and amend it to read *Heliam*.[20] Yet it is difficult to believe that this second copyist would not have immediately recognized the true significance of the term *eleison* if the *Kyrie*, *eleison* had formed a regular part of the liturgy in his day. Hence the sequence of events proposed here could only have ocurred at a time of transition in the West, before the use of the *Kyrie eleison* had become the norm throughout the western church, but this was exactly the situation in the first half of the sixth century.

The idea that the archetype of our surviving manuscripts of the *Confessio* may have concealed two generations of copyists' errors already in this particular detail by the early seventh century may strike some modern critics as unnecessary and overly complicated. Yet it is important to highlight the fact that the passage under discussion here occurs in a section of text which had certainly suffered some serious disturbance by the early seventh century. It seems to be generally agreed now that the order of the chapters as preserved by the surviving manuscripts is wrong, and that the present chapter 22 should be moved to fall between the present chapters 20 and 21 instead.[21] While most seem prepared to accept the occurrence of only one dislocation, a strong argument has in fact been made in favour of two successive dislocations within the text, so that, first, the present chapter 20 was mistakenly moved from between the present chapters 21 and 23 to its present position, which then enabled the mistaken

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[18] See Charles de Clercq (ed.), *Concilia Galliae A. 511- A. 695* (CCSL 148A: Turnholt, 1963), 79: *Et quia tam in sede apostolica, quam etiam per totas Orientales adque Italiae provincias dulces et nimium salubres consuetudo est intromissa, ut Quirieleison frequentius cum grandi affectu et conpunctione dicatur, placuit etiam nobis, ut in omnibus ecclesiis nostris ista tam sancta consuetudo et ad matutinos et ad missas et ad vesperam Deo propitio intromittatur*.

[19] The third of so-called 'sayings' of St. Patrick preserved in the early ninth-century Book of Armagh constitutes an admonition to use the *Kyrie, eleison*. See Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (SLH 10: Dublin, 1979), 124: *Aeclessia Scotorum immo Romanorum, ut Christiani ita ut Romani sitis, ut decantetur vobiscum oportet omni hora orationis vox illa laudabilis 'Curie lession, Christe lession'; omnis aeclessia quae sequitur me cantet 'Cyrie lession, Christe lession, Deo gratias'*. As in the canon of the synod of Vaison, the emphasis upon doing what the church at Rome does, suggests that this instruction was addressed to a strong pre-existing local church to whom this prayer represented a novelty. This suggests that it was composed sometime after Patrick's mission to Ireland, and that the attribution to Patrick was a fiction designed to strengthen the admonition. I remain unconvinced by O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 107-08, who defends the alleged Patrician authorship of all three of these sayings simply on the basis that the second saying was indeed derived from a genuine work by Patrick.

[20] As to the reason why the first copysist should have wanted to introduce the term *eleison* into the text of the *Confessio*, it is important to remember that he would have been less concerned with the actual words spoken by Patrick during his time of crisis than their theological or spiritual significance. He may have done no more than substitute an *eleison* for an original *miserere*, and this simply to highlight that Patrick himself would have approved of the sentiment behind the newly introduced *Kyrie*, *eleison*.

[21] See Simon Young, ''Et iterum post': Dislocation in St. Patrick's 'Confessio'', *Studi Celtici* 2 (2003), 69-75; O'Loughlin, *Discovering Saint Patrick*, 152, n. 120.

copying of the present chapter 22 between present chapters 20 and 21.[22] Hence the present chapters originally ran 19, 22, 21, 20, 23. It is my suggestion, therefore, that the copyist responsible for this first error, the dislocation of the present chapter 20, may also have altered the reading of this chapter to include the term *eleison*, while the copyist responsible for the second dislocation may also have mistakenly amended this term to refer to the prophet Elijah instead.

In conclusion, there is no need to charge the young Patrick with any confusion whatsoever between the cult of the sun and any aspect of his Christian faith. He did not call upon sun-god Helios during his moment of crisis, whether in confusion with the prophet Elijah or in confusion with the Christian God. Patrick's actual words have been lost as one copyist altered them in allusion to the *Kyrie*, *eleison* of his contemporary liturgy and another failed to detect the allusion, and so corrected the *eleison* in reference to Elijah instead. Nevertheless, the context suggests that his original words would have been a simple cry for mercy addressed to Christ himself, just like the *eleison* itself, probably *miserere* or something very similar.

[22] See Tarlach Ó Raifeartaigh, 'Saint Patrick's Twenty-Eight Days' Journey', *Irish Historical Studies* 16 (1969), 404-05.