

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 7)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

When was the identification of the Messiah with Wisdom accomplished? Was it accomplished by Paul himself after his conversion? Or was it received by Paul from pre-Christian Jewish doctrine? If it was accomplished by Paul himself after his conversion, then absolutely no progress has been made toward the explanation of the Pauline Christology. How did Paul come to identify Jesus of Nazareth with the divine figure of Wisdom? It could only have been because Jesus was such a person as to make the identification natural. But that supposition is of course excluded by the naturalistic principles with which Windisch is operating. The identification of Jesus with Wisdom at or after the conversion is, therefore, absolutely inexplicable; in substituting Wisdom for the apocalyptic Messiah as the basis of the Pauline Christology, Windisch has destroyed whatever measure of plausibility the theory of Wrede and Bruckner possessed. For it is really essential to Wrede's theory that Paul before his conversion had not only believed in the existence of a heavenly being like the Son of Man of 1 Enoch, but had also expected that heavenly being to appear. Since he had expected the heavenly being to appear, it might seem to be not so absolutely inexplicable that he came to think that that being had actually appeared in the person of Jesus. But no one expected Wisdom to appear, in any more definite way than by the entrance which she had already accomplished into the hearts of wise men. The thought of an incarnation or a parousia of Wisdom is absolutely foreign to Jewish thought. What possible reason was there, then, for Paul to think that Wisdom actually had appeared and would finally appear again in the person of Jesus?

Thus the theory of Windisch can be maintained only if the identification of Wisdom with the Messiah was accomplished not by Paul after the conversion but by pre-Christian Judaism. If Paul's pre-Christian doctrine of the Messiah already contained vital elements drawn from the doctrine of Wisdom, then and then only might it be held that the Pauline Christ, with His activity in creation and His spiritual indwelling in the believer, was merely the pre-Christian Messiah. But was the pre-Christian Messiah ever identified with the hypostasis Wisdom? Upon an affirmative answer to this question depends the whole structure of Windisch's theory. But Windisch passes the question over rather lightly. He tries, indeed, to establish certain coincidences between the doctrine of the Messiah in 1 Enoch and in the Septuagint translation of Micah v. 2 and Ps. ex. 3 on the one hand,

and the descriptions of Wisdom on the other; but the coincidences apparently amount to nothing except the ascription of preexistence to both figures.

But the fundamental trouble is that Windisch has an entirely inadequate conception of what really needs to be proved. What Windisch really needs to do is to ascribe to the pre-Christian doctrine of the Messiah two elements— activity in creation and spiritual indwelling—which in the extant sources are found not at all in the descriptions of the Messiah but only in the descriptions of Wisdom. Even if he succeeded in establishing verbal dependence of the descriptions of the Messiah upon the descriptions of Wisdom, that would not really prove his point at all. Such verbal dependence as a matter of fact has not been established, but if it were established it would be without significance. It would be far more completely devoid of significance than is the similarity between the descriptions of the heavenly Messiah as judge and the descriptions of God as judge. This latter similarity may be significant, when taken in connection with other evidence, as being a true anticipation of the Christian doctrine of the deity of Christ, but in itself it will hardly be held (at least it will hardly be held by Windisch) to establish the complete personal identity, in Jewish thinking, of the Messiah and God, so that everything that is said about God in pre-Christian Jewish sources can henceforth be applied to the Messiah. Why then should similarity in language between the descriptions of the Wisdom of God as preexistent and the descriptions of the Messiah as preëxistent (even if that similarity existed) establish such identity between the Messiah and Wisdom that what is attributed to Wisdom (notably spiritual indwelling) can henceforth be attributed to the Messiah? There is really no evidence whatever for supposing that the Messiah was conceived of in pre-Christian Judaism either as being active in creation or as dwelling in the hearts of men. Indeed, with regard to the latter point, there is decisive evidence of the contrary. The figure of the Messiah in the apocalypses is as incongruous as anything can possibly be with the idea of spiritual indwelling. Wisdom is conceived of as dwelling in the hearts of men only because Wisdom in Jewish literature is not really or completely a concrete person, but is also an abstract quality. The Messiah is a concrete person and hence is not thought of as indwelling. It was something absolutely without pre-cedent, therefore, when Paul regarded his Christ—who is nothing if not a person, and a person who may be loved—as dwelling in the heart of the believer.

Objection will no doubt be raised against this treatment of the idea of personality. Wisdom, we have argued, was never in Jewish literature regarded consistently as a person distinct from God; whereas the Messiah was always regarded as a person. Against this argument it will be objected that the ancient world possessed no idea of personality at all, so that the difference between Wisdom and the Messiah disappears. But what is meant by the objection? If it is meant only that the ancient world possessed no definition of personality, the point may perhaps be conceded. But it is quite irrelevant. If, on the other hand, what is meant is that the ancients had no way of distinguishing between a person and a mere quality, no way of feeling the difference even if the difference could not be

put into words, then an emphatic denial is in place. Without such a power of practical, if not theoretical, distinction, no mental or moral life at all, to say nothing of the highly developed life of the Hellenistic age, would have been possible. It is highly important, therefore, to observe that Wisdom in Jewish literature hardly becomes regarded as a person in any consistent way. Undoubtedly the hypostasizing has gone to considerable lengths, but it is always possible for the writers to hark back to the original sense of the word "wisdom" —to play at least upon the original meaning. Wisdom seems to be treated not merely as a person but also as an attribute of God.

Thus Windisch is entirely unjustified when he uses passages which represent the Messiah as possessing "wisdom" to prove that the Messiah was regarded as identical with Wisdom. A striking example of this mistake is found in the treatment of 1 Enoch xlix. 3, where it is said that in the Elect One "dwells the spirit of wisdom, and the spirit which gives in-sight, and the spirit of understanding and of might and the spirit of those who have fallen asleep in righteousness." A still more striking example is found in the use of 1 Cor. i. 24, 30, where Christ crucified is called the power of God and the wisdom of God, and is said to have become to believers wisdom and justification and sanctification and redemption. Windisch actually uses these passages as evidence for the application to the apocalyptic Messiah and to the Pauline Christ of the attributes of the hypostasis Wisdom. Could anything be more utterly unwarranted? The inclusion of "wisdom" in a considerable list of what the Son of Man possesses or of what Christ means to the believer, far from proving that 1 Enoch or Paul identified the Messiah with the hypostasized Wisdom, rather proves, if proof be necessary, that they did not make the identification.

It is a very different thing to say that Christ possesses wisdom (along with other qualities) or brings wisdom to the believer (along with other gifts) from saying that Christ is so identical with the hypostasis Wisdom of the "wisdom literature" that what is there said about Wisdom is to be attributed to Him. Windisch himself observes, very significantly, that Paul could not actually designate Christ as "Wisdom" because the word wisdom is of feminine gender in Greek. The difference of gender is here the symbol of a profound difference in essential character. The figure of Wisdom in Jewish literature, with its curious vacillation between personality and abstraction, is absolutely incongruous with the warm, living, concrete, personal figure of the Pauline Christ. The two belong to totally different circles of ideas. No wonder that even Bousset (as Windisch complains) has not ventured to bring them into connection. The Pauline Christology was certainly not based upon the pre-Christian doctrine of Wisdom.

Thus the first great objection to Wrede's derivation of the Pauline Christology is that it is simply insufficient. The Messiah of the Jewish apocalypses is not great enough to have been the basis of the Pauline Christ. If before the conversion Paul had believed in the apocalyptic Messiah, then when he was converted he lifted his conception to far greater heights than it had before attained. But what

caused him to do so? Apparently he ought to have done exactly the reverse. If Jesus was a mere man, then the identification of the Messiah with Him ought to have pushed the conception of the Messiah down instead of lifting it up. As Baldensperger significantly remarks, the Jewish apocalyptists faced less difficulty in presenting a transcendent Messiah than did their successors, the exponents of a metaphysical Christology in the Christian Church, since the Jewish apocalyptists could give free course to their fancy, whereas the Christians were hampered by the recollections of the earthly Jesus.¹ This observation, on the basis of Baldensperger's naturalistic presuppositions, is entirely correct. But the strange thing is that the recollections of Jesus, far from hampering the Christians in their ascription of supernatural attributes to the Messiah, actually had just the opposite effect. Paul furnishes a striking example. Before he identified the Messiah with Jesus, he did not really think of the Messiah as divine not even if he believed in the transcendent Messiah of 1 Enoch. But after he identified the Messiah with Jesus, he said "not by man but by Christ." Why was it that identification with Jesus, instead of bringing the apocalyptic Messiah down to earth, lifted Him rather to the throne of God? Was it, after all, because of something in Jesus? If it was, then the eternal Son of God walked upon earth, and suffered for the sins of men. If it was not, then the fundamental historical problem of Christianity is still entirely unsolved.

But another objection faces the solution proposed by Wrede and Brückner. Suppose the apocalyptic doctrine of the Messiah were really adequate to the strain which is placed upon it. Suppose it really represented the Messiah as active in creation and as indwelling in the hearts of the faithful and as exalted to the throne of God. These suppositions are entirely without warrant in the facts; they transcend by far even the claims of Wrede and Brückner themselves.

But suppose they were correct. Even then the genesis of Paul's religion would not be explained. Suppose the Pauline doctrine of the Messiah really was complete in his mind before he was converted. Even then, another problem remains. How did he come to identify his exalted Messiah with a Jew who had lived but a few years before and had died a shameful death?

The thing might be explained if Jesus was what He is represented in all of the extant sources as being—a supernatural person whose glory shone out plain even through the veil of flesh. It might be explained if Paul before his conversion really believed that the heavenly Christ was to come to earth before His final parousia and die an accursed death. But the former alternative is excluded by the naturalistic presuppositions of the modern man. And the latter is excluded by an overwhelming weight of evidence as to pre-Christian Judaism and the pre-Christian life of Paul. How then did Paul come to identify his heavenly Messiah with Jesus of Nazareth? It could only have been through the strange experience which he had near Damascus. But what, in turn, caused that experience? No answer, on the basis of naturalistic presuppositions, has yet been given. In

¹ Baldensperger, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

removing the supernatural from the earthly life of Jesus, modern naturalism has precluded the only possible naturalistic explanation of the conversion of Paul. If Jesus had given evidence of being the heavenly Son of Man, then Paul might conceivably, though still not probably, have become convinced against his will, and might, conceivably though still not probably, have experienced an hallucination in which he thought he saw Jesus living in glory.

But if Jesus was a mere man, the identification of Him with the heavenly apocalyptic Messiah becomes inconceivable, and the experience through which that identification took place is left absolutely uncaused. Thus the hypothesis of Wrede and Brückner defeats itself. In arguing that Paul's pre-conversion conception of the Messiah was not a conception of a mere earthly being or the like, but that of a transcendent being, Wrede and Bruckner are really digging the grave of their own theory. For the more exalted was the Messiah in who Paul believed before his conversion, the more inexplicable becomes the identification of that Messiah with a crucified malefactor.

But still another objection remains. Suppose the Pauline Christ were simply the Messiah of the Jewish apocalypses; suppose Paul knew so little about the historical Jesus that he could even identify the exalted Messiah with Him. Even then another fact requires explanation. How did Paul come to be so strikingly similar to the historical Jesus both in teaching and in character? Wrede was audacious enough to explain the similarity as due to a common dependence upon Judaism.² But at this point few have followed him. For the striking fact is that Paul agrees with Jesus in just those matters to which Judaism was most signally opposed. It would be more plausible to say that Paul agrees with Jesus because both of them abandoned contemporary Judaism and returned to the Old Testament prophets. But even that explanation would be quite inadequate. The similarity between Jesus and Paul goes far beyond what both hold in common with the Prophets and the Psalms. And why did two men return to the Prophets and Psalms at just the same time and in just the same way? The similarity between Jesus and Paul might then be regarded as due to mere chance. Paul, it might be supposed, developed the ideal of Christian love from the death of the Messiah, which he interpreted as an act of self-sacrifice.³ This ideal of love happened to be just the same as that which Jesus of Nazareth exemplified in a life of service to which life of service, however, Paul was completely indifferent. Such, essentially, is what the hypothesis of Wrede really amounts. The hypothesis is really absurd. But its absurdity is instructive. It is an absurdity to which the naturalistic account of the origin of Christianity is driven by an inexorable logic. Paul, it must be supposed, could not have regarded Jesus as a divine being if he had really known Jesus. The similarity of his life and teaching to that of Jesus cannot, therefore, be due to knowledge of Jesus. It must therefore be due to chance. In other words, it is dangerous, on naturalistic principles, to

² Wrede, *Paulus*, 1904, pp. 90, 91 (English Translation, *Paul*, 1907, pp. 157, 158).

³ See Brückner, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

bring Paul into contact with Jesus. For if he is brought into contact with Jesus, his witness to Jesus will have to be heard.

And when his witness is heard, the elaborate modern reconstructions of the "liberal Jesus" fall to the ground. For according to Paul, Jesus was no mere Galilean prophet, but the Lord of Glory.

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