

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Hellenistic Age (Part 1)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

It has been shown in the last chapter that the religion of Paul was not derived from the pre-Christian Jewish doctrine of the Messiah. If, therefore, the derivation of Paulinism from the historical Jesus is still to be abandoned, recourse must be had to the pagan world. And as a matter of fact, it is in the pagan world that the genesis of Paulinism is today more and more frequently being sought. The following chapters will deal with that hypothesis which makes the religion of Paul essentially a product of the syncretistic pagan religion of the Hellenistic age.

This hypothesis is not only held in many different forms, but also enters into combination with the view which has been considered in the last chapter. For example, M. Brückner, who regards the Pauline Christology as being simply the Jewish conception of the Messiah, modified by the episode of the Messiah's humiliation, is by no means hostile to the hypothesis of pagan influence. On the contrary, he brings the Jewish conception of the Messiah upon which the Pauline Christology is thought to be based, itself into connection with the widespread pagan myth of a dying and rising saviour-god.¹ Thus Brückner is at one with the modern school of comparative religion in deriving Paul's religion from paganism; only he derives it from paganism not directly but through the medium of the Jewish conception of the Messiah. On the other hand, most of those who find direct and not merely mediate pagan influence at the heart of the religion of Paul are also willing to admit that some important influences came through pre-Christian Judaism—notably, through the Messianic expectations of the apocalypses. The division between the subject of the present chapter and that of the preceding chapter is therefore difficult to carry out. Nevertheless, that division will be found convenient. It will be well to consider separately the hypothesis (now in the very forefront of interest) which derives Paulinism, not from the historical Jesus, and not from pre-Christian Judaism, but from the pagan religion of the Greco-Roman world.

Here, as in the last chapter, the discussion may begin with a brief review of that type of religion from which Paulinism is thought to have been derived. The review will again use of recent researches.² These researches are becoming more and

¹ Brückner, *Der sterbende und auferstehende Gottheiland*, 1908.

² For example, Rohde, *Psyche*, 2 Bde, 3te Aufl., 1903; Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, vol. iii, 1907; Wendland, *Die hellenistisch-römische Kultur*, 2te u. 3te Aufl., 1912; Anrich, *Das antike Mysterienwesen*,

more extensive in recent years. The Hellenistic age is no longer regarded as a period of hopeless decadence, but is commanding a larger and larger share of attention from philologists and from students of the history of religion. The sources, however, so far as the sphere of popular religion is concerned, are rather meager. Complete unanimity of opinion, therefore, even regarding fundamental matters, has by no means been attained.

At the time of Paul, the civilized world was unified, politically, under the Roman Empire. The native religion of Rome, however, was not an important factor in the life of the Empire certainly not in the East. That religion had been closely bound up with the life of the Roman city-state. It had been concerned largely with a system of auguries and religious ceremonies intended to guide the fortunes of the city and insure the favor of the gods. But there had been little attempt to enter into any sort of personal contact with the gods or even to produce any highly differentiated account of their nature. The native religion of Rome, on the whole, seems to have been rather a cold, unsatisfying affair. It aroused the emotions of the people only because it was an expression of stern and sturdy patriotism. And it tended to lose its influence when the horizon of the people was broadened by contact with the outside world.

The most important change was wrought by contact with Greece. When Rome began to extend her conquests into the East, the eastern countries, to a very considerable extent, had already been Hellenized, by the conquests of Alexander and by the Greek kingdoms into which his short-lived empire had been divided. Thus the Roman conquerors came into contact with Greek civilization, not only in the Greek colonies in Sicily and southern Italy, not only in Greece proper and on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor, but also to some extent everywhere in the eastern world. No attempt was made to root out the Greek influences. On the contrary, the conquerors to a very considerable extent were conquered by those whom they had conquered; Rome submitted herself, in the spiritual sphere, to the dominance of Greece.

The Greek influence extended into the sphere of religion. At a very early time, the ancient Roman gods were identified with the Greek gods who possessed roughly analogous functions—Jupiter became Zeus, for example, and Venus became Aphrodite. This identification brought an important enrichment into Roman religion. The cold and lifeless figures of the Roman pantheon began to take on the grace and beauty and the clearly defined personal character which had been given to their Greek counterparts by Homer and Hesiod and the dramatists and Phidias and Praxiteles. Thus it is not to the ancient official religion of Rome but to the rich pantheon of Homer that the student must turn in order to find the spiritual ancestry of the religion of the Hellenistic world.

Even before the time of Homer, Greek religion had undergone development. Modern scholarship, at least, is no longer inclined to find in Homer the artless simplicity of a primitive age. On the contrary, the Homeric poems, it is now supposed, were the product of a highly developed, aristocratic society, which must be thought of as standing at the apex of a social order. Thus it is not to be supposed that the religion of Homer was the only Hellenic religion of Homer's day. On the contrary, even in the Homeric poems, it is said, there appear here and there remnants of a popular primitive religion-human sacrifice and the like-and many of the rough, primitive conceptions which crop out in Greek life in the later centuries were really present long before the Homeric age, and had been preserved beneath the surface in the depths of a non-literary popular religion. However much of truth there may be in these contentions, it is at any rate clear that the Homeric poems exerted an enormous influence upon subsequent generations. Even if they were the product of a limited circle, even if they never succeeded in eradicating the primitive conceptions, at least they did gain enormous prestige and did become the most important single factor in molding the religion of the golden age of Greece.

As determined by the Homeric poems, the religion of Greece was a highly developed polytheism of a thoroughly anthropomorphic kind. The Greek gods were simply men and women, with human passions and human sins-more powerful, indeed, but not more righteous than those who worshiped them. Such a religion was stimulating to the highest art. Anthropomorphism gave free course to the imagination of poets and sculptors. There is nothing lifeless about the gods of Greece; whether portrayed by the chisel of sculptors or the pen of poets, they are warm, living, breathing, human figures. But however stimulating to the sense of beauty, the anthropomorphic religion of Greece was singularly unsatisfying in the moral sphere. If the gods were no better than men, the worship of them was not necessarily ennobling. No doubt there was a certain moral quality in the very act of worship. For worship was not always conceived of as mere prudent propitiation of dangerous tyrants. Sometimes it was conceived of as a duty, like the pious reverence which a child should exhibit toward his parent. In the case of filial piety, as in the case of piety toward the gods, the duty of reverence is independent of the moral quality of the revered object. But in both cases the very act of reverence may possess a certain moral value. This admission, however, does not change the essential fact. It remains true that the anthropomorphic character of the gods of Greece, just because it stimulated the fancy of poets by attributing human passions to the gods and so provided the materials of dramatic art, at the same time prevented religion from lifting society above the prevailing standards. The moral standards of snowy Olympus, unfortunately, were not higher than those of the Athenian market place.

In another way also, the polytheistic religion of Greece was unsatisfying. It provided little hope of personal communion between the gods and men. Religion, in Greece scarcely less than in ancient Rome, was an affair of the state. A man was born into his religion. An Athenian citizen, as such, was a worshiper of the

Athenian gods. There was little place for individual choice or for individual devotion. Moreover, there was little place for the mystical element in religion. The gods of Greece were in some sort, indeed, companionable figures; they were similar to men; men could understand the motives of their actions. But there was no way in which companionship with them could find expression. There was a time, in-deed, when the gods had come down to earth to help the great heroes who were their favorites or their sons. But such favors were not given to ordinary mortals. The gods might be revered, but direct and individual contact with them was for the most part not to be attained.

These limitations, however, were not universal; and for purposes of the present investigation the exceptions are far more important than the rule. It is not true that the religion of Greece, even previous to the golden age, was entirely devoid of enthusiasm or individualism or mystic contact with the gods. The polytheism of Homer, the polytheism of the Olympic pantheon, despite its wide prevalence was not the only form of Greek religion. Along with the worship of the Olympic gods there went also religious practices of a very different kind. There was a place even in Greece for mystical religion.

This mystical or enthusiastic element in the religion of Greece is connected especially with the worship of Dionysus. Dionysus was not originally a Greek god. He came from Thrace and is very closely related to the Phrygian Sabazius. But, at an early time, his worship was widely adopted in the Greek world. No doubt it was not adopted entirely without modification; no doubt it was shorn of some of those features no doubt it was short of which were most repulsive to the Greek genius. But enough remained in order to affect very powerfully the character of Greek religion.

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