

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Hellenistic Age (Part 5)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

No less important than the religion of Cybele and Attis was the Greco-Egyptian religion of Isis and Osiris. Isis and Osiris are both ancient Egyptian gods, whose worship, in modified form, was carried over first into the Greek kingdom of the Ptolemies, and thence into the remotest bounds of the Roman Empire. The myth which concerns these gods is reported at length in Plutarch's treatise, "Concerning Isis and Osiris." Briefly it is as follows: Osiris, the brother and husband of Isis, after ruling in a beneficent manner over the Egyptians, is plotted against by his brother Typhon. Finally Typhon makes a chest and promises to give it to any one who exactly fits it. Osiris enters the chest, which is then closed by Typhon and thrown into the Nile. After a search, Isis finds the chest at Byblos on the coast of Phoenicia and brings it back to Egypt. But Typhon succeeds in getting possession of the body of Osiris and cuts it up into fourteen parts, which are scattered through Egypt. Isis goes about collecting the parts. Osiris becomes king of the nether world, and helps his son Horus to gain a victory over Typhon.

The worship of Isis and Osiris was prominent in ancient Egyptian religion long before the entrance of Greek influence. Osiris was regarded as the ruler over the dead, and as such was naturally very important in a religion in which supreme attention was given to a future life. But with the establishment of the Ptolemaic kingdom at about 300 B. C., there was an important modification of the worship. A new god, Serapis, was introduced, and was closely identified with Osiris. The origin of the name Serapis has been the subject of much discussion and is still obscure. But one motive for the introduction of the new divinity (or of the new name for an old divinity) is perfectly plain. Ptolemy I desired to unify the Egyptian and the Greek elements in his kingdom by providing a cult which would be acceptable to both and at the same time intensely loyal to the crown. The result was the Greco-Egyptian cult of Serapis (Osiris) and Isis. Here is to be found, then, the remarkable phenomenon of a religion deliberately established for political reasons, which, despite its artificial origin, became enormously successful. Of course, the success was obtained only by a skillful use of existing beliefs, which had been hallowed in Egyptian usage from time immemorial, and by a skillful clothing of those beliefs in forms acceptable to the Greek element in the population.

The religion of Isis and Serapis was, as Cumont observes, entirely devoid of any established system of theology or any very lofty ethics. It was effective rather on

account of its gorgeous ritual, which was handed down from generation to generation with meticulous accuracy, and on account of the assurance which it gave of a blessed immortality, the worshipers being conceived of as sharing in the resuscitation which Osiris had obtained. The worship was at first repulsive to Roman ideals of gravity, but effected an official entrance into the city in the reign of Caligula (37-41 A. D.). In the second and third centuries it was extended over the whole Empire. In alliance with the religion of Mithras it became finally perhaps the most serious rival of Christianity.

The cult was partly public and partly private. Prominent in the public worship were the solemn opening of the temple of Isis in the morning and the solemn closing in the afternoon. Elaborate care was taken of the images of the gods—the gods being regarded as dependent upon human ministrations. Besides the rites that were conducted daily, there were special festivals like the spring festival of the "ship of Isis" which is brilliantly described by Apuleius.

But it is the mysteries which arouse the greatest interest, especially because of the precious source of information about them which is found in the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius (second century after Christ). In this book, although the secrets of the mysteries themselves are of course not revealed, Apuleius has given a more complete and orderly account of the events connected with an initiation than is to be found anywhere else in ancient literature. The hero Lucius is represented first as waiting for a summons from the goddess Isis, which comes with miraculous coincidence independently to him and to the priest who is to officiate in his initiation. Then Lucius is taken into the temple and made acquainted with certain mysterious books, and also washes his body at the nearest baths. This washing has as little as possible the appearance of a sacrament; evidently it was not intended to produce "regeneration" or anything of the sort.¹ The purpose of it seems to have been cleanliness, which was naturally regarded as a preparation for the holy rite that was to follow. There follows a ten days' period of fasting, after which the day of initiation arrives. Lucius is taken into the most secret place of the temple. Of what happens there he speaks with the utmost reserve. He says, however: "I came to the limits of death, and having trod the threshold of Proserpine and been borne through all the elements I returned; at midnight I saw the sun shining with a bright light; I came into the presence of the upper and nether gods and adored them near at hand."² It is often supposed that these words indicate some sort of mysterious drama or vision, which marked the death of the initiate, his passage through the elements, and his rising to a new life. But certainly the matter is very obscure. The next morning Lucius is clothed with gorgeous robes, and is presented to the gaze of the multitude. Apparently he is regarded as partaking of the divine nature. Two other initiations of Lucius are narrated, one of them being an

¹ But compare Kennedy, *St. Paul and the Mystery-Religions*, 1913, p. 229.

² Apuleius, *Metam.*, xi. 29 (ed. Van der Vliet, 1897, p. 270): "Áccessi confinium mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine per omnia vectus elementa remeavi; nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine; deos inferos et deos superos accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo."

initiation into the mysteries of Osiris, as the first had been into the mysteries of Isis. But little is added by the account of these later experiences, and it has even been suggested that the multiplication of the initiations was due to the self-interest of the priests rather than to any real advantage for the initiate.

Similar in important respects to the Egyptian Osiris was the Adonis of Phoenicia, who may therefore be mentioned in the present connection, even though little is known about mysteries connected with his worship. According to the well-known myth, the youth Adonis, beloved by Aphrodite, was killed by a wild boar, and then bemoaned by the goddess. The cult of Adonis was found in various places, notably at Byblos in Phoenicia, where the death and resurrection of the god were celebrated. With regard to this double festival, Lucian says in his treatise "On the Syrian Goddess": "They [the inhabitants of Byblos] assert that the legend about Adonis and the wild boar is true, and that the facts occurred in their country, and in memory of this calamity they beat their breasts and wail every year, and perform their secret ritual amid signs of mourning through the whole countryside. When they have finished their mourning and wailing, they sacrifice in the first place to Adonis, as to one who has departed this life: after this they allege that he is alive again, and exhibit his effigy to the sky."³ The wailing for Adonis at Byblos is similar to what is narrated about the worship of the Babylonian god Tammuz. Even the Old Testament mentions in a noteworthy passage "the women weeping for Tammuz" (Ezek. viii. 14). But the Tammuz-worship does not seem to have contained any celebration of a resurrection.

Attis, Osiris, and Adonis are alike in that all of them are apparently represented as dying and coming to life again. They are regarded by Brückner⁴ and many other modern scholars as representing the widespread notion of a "dying and rising saviour-god." But it is perhaps worthy of note that the "resurrection" of these gods is very different from what is meant by that word in Christian belief. The myth of Attis, for example, contains no mention of a resurrection; though apparently the cult, in which mourning is followed by gladness, did presuppose some such notion. In the myth of Osiris, also, there is nothing that could be called resurrection; after his passion the god becomes ruler, not over the living, but over the dead. In Lucian's description of the worship of Adonis at Byblos, there is perhaps as clear an account as is to be found anywhere of the celebration of the dying and resuscitation of a god, but even in this account there is not strictly speaking a resurrection. A tendency is found in certain recent writers to exaggerate enormously the prevalence and the clarity of the pagan ideas about a dying and rising god.

According to a common opinion, Attis, Osiris, and Adonis are vegetation-gods; their dying and resuscitation represent, then, the annual withering and revival of vegetation. This hypothesis has attained general, though not universal, acceptance. Certainly the facts are very complex. At any rate, the celebration of

³ Lucian, *De dea syria*, 6, translation of Garstang (*The Syrian Goddess*, 1913, pp. 45f.).

⁴ *Der sterbende und auferstehende Gottheiland*, 1908.

the principle of fecundity in nature was not of a purely agrarian character, but found expression also in the gross symbols and immoral practices which appear in connection with the gods just mentioned at various points in the ancient world.

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