

## The Origin of Paul's Religion

### The Hellenistic Age (Part 6)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The most important of the religions which have just been examined had their rise in Asia Minor and in Egypt. No less important, at least in the last period of pagan antiquity, was the religious influence of Syria. The Syrian gods, called "Baals" ("Lords"), were not, according to Cumont, distinguished from one another by any clearly defined characteristics. Every locality had its own Baal and a female divinity as the Baal's consort, but the attributes of these local gods were of the vaguest character. The female divinity Atargatis, whose temple at Hierapolis is described by Lucian, and the male divinity Hadad, of Heliopolis, are among the best-known of the Syrian gods. The Syrian worship was characterized by especially immoral and revolting features, but seems to have become ennobled by the introduction of the Babylonian worship of the heavenly bodies, and thus contributed to the formation of the solar monotheism which was the final form assumed by the pagan religion of the Empire before the triumph of Christianity.

In point of intrinsic worth, the Persian mystery religion of Mithras is easily superior to any of the religions which have thus far been mentioned, but it is of less importance than some of the others for the purposes of the present investigation, since it became influential in the Roman Empire only after the time of Paul. Great stress has indeed been laid upon the fact that Plutarch attests the practice of Mithraic mysteries by the pirates whom Pompey conquered in the middle of the first century before Christ, and says furthermore that the Mithraic rites begun by the pirates were continued until the writer's own day.<sup>1</sup> The pirates practised their rites at Olympus, which is on the southern coast of Asia Minor. But the Olympus which is meant is in Lycia, some three hundred miles from Tarsus. It is a mistake, therefore, to bring the Mithraic mysteries of the pirates into any close geographical connection with the boyhood home of Paul. Against the hypothesis of any dependence of Paul upon the mysteries of Mithras is to be placed the authority of Cumont, the chief investigator in this field, who says: "It is impossible to suppose that at that time [the time of Paul] there was an imitation of the Mithraic mysteries, which then had not yet attained any importance."<sup>2</sup> Attempts have often been made to explain away this judgment of Cumont, but without success. The progress of Mithraism in the Empire seems to have been due to definite political causes which were operative only after Paul's day.

---

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, *Vita Pompei*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, p. xvi (English Translation, p. xx).

The Persian religion, from which Mithraism was descended, was superior to the others which have just been considered in its marked ethical character. It presented the doctrine of a mighty conflict between light and darkness, between good and evil. And Mithraism itself regarded religion under the figure of a warfare. It appealed especially to the soldiers, and only men (not women) were admitted to its mysteries. There were seven grades of initiation, each with its special name. The highest grade was that of "father." The Mithras cult was always celebrated underground, in chambers of very limited extent. There was a sacred meal, consisting of bread and water, which Justin Martyr, in the middle of the second century, regards as having been instituted through demoniac imitation of the Christian Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> This religion of Mithras finally became, with the religion of Isis, the most serious rival of Christianity. But at the time of Paul it was without importance, and could not have exerted any influence upon the apostle.

But the religion of the Hellenistic age was not limited to the individual cults which have just been considered, and it is not chiefly to the individual cults that recourse is had by those modern scholars who would derive Paulinism from pagan sources. Mention has already been made of the syncretism of the age; various religions were mingled in a limitless variety of combinations. And there was also a mingling of religion with philosophy. It is in the manifold products of this union between Greek philosophy and oriental religion that the genesis of Paulinism is now often being sought. Not oriental religion in its original state, but oriental religion already to some extent Hellenized, is thought to have produced the characteristic features of the religion of Paul.

The hypothesis is faced by one obvious difficulty. The difficulty appears in the late date of most of the sources of information. In order to reconstruct that Hellenized oriental mysticism from which the religion of Paul is to be derived, the investigator is obliged to appeal to sources which are long subsequent to Paul's day. For example, in reproducing the spiritual atmosphere in which Paul is supposed to have lived, no testimony is more often evoked than the words of Firmicus Maternus, "Be of good courage, ye initiates, since the god is saved; for to us there shall be salvation out of troubles."<sup>4</sup> Here, it is thought, is to be found that connection between the resurrection of the god and the salvation of the believers which appears in the Pauline idea of dying and rising with Christ.

But the trouble is that Firmicus Maternus lived in the fourth century after Christ, three hundred years later than Paul. With what right can an utterance of his be used in the reconstruction of pre-Christian paganism? What would be thought, by the same scholars who quote Firmicus Maternus so confidently as a witness to first-century paganism, of a historian who should quote a fourth-century Christian writer as a witness to first-century Christianity?

---

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apol.* 66.

<sup>4</sup> See above, p. 229, with footnote 3.

This objection has been met by the modern school of comparative religion somewhat as follows. In the first place, it is said, the post-Christian pagan usage which at any time may be under investigation is plainly not influenced by Christianity. But, in the second place, it is too similar to Christian usage for the similarity to be explained by mere coincidence. Therefore, in the third place, since it is not dependent upon Christian usage, Christian usage must be dependent upon it, and therefore despite its late attestation it must have existed in pre-Christian times.

A little reflection will reveal the precarious character of this reasoning. Every step is uncertain. In the first place, it is often by no means clear that the pagan usage has not been influenced by Christianity. The Church did not long remain obscure; even early in the second century, according to the testimony of Pliny, it was causing the heathen temples to be deserted. What is more likely than that in an age of syncretism the adherents of pagan religion should borrow weapons from so successful a rival? It must be remembered that the paganism of the Hellenistic age had elevated syncretism to a system; it had absolutely no objection of principle against receiving elements from every source. In the Christian Church, on the other hand, there was a strong objection to such procedure; Christianity from the beginning was like Judaism in being exclusive. It regarded with the utmost abhorrence anything that was tainted by a pagan origin. This abhorrence, at least in the early period, more than overbalanced the fact that the Christians for the most part had formerly been pagans, so that it might be thought natural for them to retain something of pagan belief. Conversion involved a passionate renunciation of former beliefs. Such, at any rate, was clearly the kind of conversion that was required by Paul.

In the second place, the similarity between the pagan and the Christian usages is often enormously exaggerated; sometimes a superficial similarity of language masks the most profound differences of underlying meaning. Illustrations will be given in the latter part of the present chapter.

Thus the conclusion is, to say the least, precarious. It is by no means so easy as is sometimes supposed to prove that a pagan usage attested only long after the time of Paul is really the source of Pauline teaching. And it will not help to say that although there is no direct dependence one way or the other yet the pagan and the Pauline teaching have a common source. For to say that a usage has a pagan source several centuries earlier than the time at which the usage is first attested is really to assume the point that is to be proved. We are not here dealing with a question of literary dependence, where the unity of the books which are being compared is assumed. In such a question the independence of the two writers may be proved by the general comparison of the books; it may be shown, in other words, that if one author had used the other author's work at all he would have had to use it a great deal more than as a matter of fact the similarity would indicate. In such cases, striking verbal similarity in one place may

prove that both books were dependent upon a common source. But if a pagan usage of the fourth century is similar to a Christian usage, the fact that in general the paganism of the fourth century is independent of Christianity does not disprove dependence of paganism upon Christianity at this one point.

*John Gresham Machen (1881-1937) was an American Presbyterian New Testament scholar, who led a revolt against modernist theology at Princeton, and founded Westminster Theological Seminary as well as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.*

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

**Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine***

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).