Biblical Perspectives Magazine Volume 27, Number 44, October 26 to November 1, 2025

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Introduction (Part 4)

By John Gresham Machen

The most widespread naturalistic explanations of the religion of Paul are what may be called the "liberal" view. The name is highly unsatisfactory; it has been used and misused until it has often come to mean almost nothing. But no other term is ready to hand. "Ritschlian" might possibly describe the phenomenon that is meant, but that term is perhaps too narrow, and would imply a degree of logical connection with the "Ritschlian" theology which would not fit all forms of the phenomenon. The best that can be done, there-fore, is to define the term "liberal" in a narrower way than is sometimes customary and than use it in distinction not only from traditional and supernaturalistic views, but also from various "radical" views, which will demand separate consideration.

The numerous forms of the liberal view differ from other naturalistic hypotheses in that they attribute supreme importance in the formation of the religion of Paul to the influence of the real historic person, Jesus of Nazareth, and to the experience which Paul had near Damascus when he thought he saw that person risen from the dead. Jesus of Nazareth, according to the liberal view, was the greatest of the children of men. His greatness centered in His consciousness of standing toward God in the relation of son to Father. That consciousness of sonship, at least in its purity, Jesus discovered, was not shared by others. Some category was therefore needed to designate the uniqueness of His sonship. The category which He adopted, though with reluctance, and probably toward the end of His ministry, was the category of Messiahship.

His Messianic consciousness was thus not fundamental in His conception of His mission; certainly, it did not mean that He put His own person into His gospel. He urged men, not to take Him as the object of their faith, but only to take Him as an example for their faith; not to have faith in Him, but to have faith in God like His faith. Such was the impression of His personality, however, that after His death the love and reverence of His disciples for Him not only induced the hallucinations in which they thought they saw Him risen from the dead but also led them to attribute to His person a kind of religious importance which He had never claimed. They began to make Him not only an example for faith but also the object of faith. The Messianic element in His life began now to assume an importance which He had never attributed to it; the disciples began to ascribe to Him divine attributes. This process was somewhat hindered in the case of His intimate friends by the fact that they had seen Him under all the limitations of

ordinary human life. But in the case of the apostle Paul, who had never seen Him, the process of deification could go on unchecked. What was fundamental, however, even for Paul, was an impression of the real person of Jesus of Nazareth; that impression was conveyed to Paul in various ways— especially by the brave and pure lives of Jesus' disciples, which had impressed him, against his will, even when he was still a persecutor. But Paul was a child of his time. He was obliged, therefore, to express that which he had received from Jesus in the categories that were ready to hand. Those categories as applied to Jesus constitute the Pauline theology. Thus Paul was really the truest disciple of Jesus in the depths of his inner life, but his theology was the outer and perishable shell for the precious kernel. His theology was the product rived from Jesus of Nazareth and is a permanent possession of the human race.

Such in bare outline is the liberal view of the origin of Paulinism and of Christianity. It has been set forth in so many brilliant treatises that no one may be singled out as clearly representative. Perhaps Von Harnack's "What is Christianity?"[1], among the popular expositions, may still serve as well as any other. The liberal view of the origin of Christianity seemed at one time likely to dominate the religious life of the modern world; it found expression in countless sermons and books of devotion as well as in scientific treatises. Now, however, there are some indications that it is beginning to fall; it is being attacked by radicalism of various kinds. With some of these attacks it will not now be worthwhile to deal; it will not be worthwhile to deal with those forms of radicalism which reject what have been designated as the two starting-points for an investigation of the origin of Christianity-the historicity of Jesus and the genuineness of the major epistles of Paul. These hypotheses are some of them interesting on the negative side, they are interesting for their criticism of the dominant liberal view; but when it comes to their own attempts at reconstruction they have never advanced beyond the purest dilettantism. Attention will now be confined to the work of historians who have really attempted seriously to grapple with the historical problems, and specifically to those who have given attention to the problem of Paul.

Two lines of explanation have been followed in recent years by those who reject, in the interest of more radical views, the liberal account of the origin of Paulinism. But these two lines run to a certain point together; they both reject the liberal emphasis upon the historic person of Jesus as accounting for the origin of Paul's religion. The criticism of the customary view was put sharply by W. Wrede in 1904[2] when he declared that Paul was no disciple of Jesus, but a second founder of Christianity. The religious life of Paul, Wrede insisted, was not really derived from Jesus of Nazareth. What was fundamental for Paul was not the example of Jesus, but His redeeming work as embraced in the death and resurrection, which were regarded as events of a cosmic significance. The theology of Paul-his interpretation of the death and resurrection of Jesus—

---

[1] Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1900. (English Translation, *What is Christianity?,* 1901.)

[2] Wrede, *Paulus*, 1904, (English Translation, Paul, 1907.)

cannot, therefore, be separated from his religion; on the contrary, it is in connection with the theology, and not in connection with any impression of the character of Jesus, that the fervor of Paul's religious life runs full and free. Theology and religion in Paul, therefore, must stand or fall together; if one was derived from extra-Christian sources, probably the other must be so derived also. And such, as a matter of fact, Wrede concludes is the case. The religion of Paul is not based at all upon Jesus of Nazareth.

Such, in true import, though not in word or in detail, was the startling criticism which Wrede directed against the liberal account of the origin of Paulinism. He had really only made explicit a type of criticism which had gradually been becoming inevitable for some time before. Hence the importance of his little book. The current reconstruction of the origin of Christianity had produced a Jesus and a Paul who really had little in common with each other. Wrede, in his incomparably succinct and incisive way, had the courage to say so.

But if Paulinism was not derived from Jesus of Nazareth, whence was it derived? Here the two lines of radical opinion begin to diverge. According to Wrede, who was supported by M. Brückner,[3] working contemporaneously, the Pauline conception of Christ, which was fundamental in Paul's religious thought and life, was derived from the pre-Christian conception of the Messiah which Paul already had before his conversion. The Messiah, in the thought of the Jews, was not always conceived of merely as a king of David's line; sometimes he was regarded rather as a mysterious, preexistent, heavenly being who was to come suddenly with the clouds of heaven and be the judge of all the earth. This transcendent conception which is attested by the Jewish apocalypses like the Ethiopic Book of Enoch, was, Wrede maintained, the conception of the Jew, Saul of Tarsus. When, therefore, Paul in his Epistles represents Christ as preexistent, and as standing close to the Supreme Being in rulership and judgment, the phenomenon, though it may seem strange to us, is not really unique; it is exactly what is found in the apocalypses. What was new in Paul, as over against pre-Christian Judaism, was the belief that the heavenly Messiah had already come to earth and carried out a work of redemption. This belief was not derived, Wrede maintained, from any impression of the exalted moral character of Jesus; on the contrary, if Paul had really come into any close contact with the historical Jesus, he might have had difficulty in identifying Him so completely with the heavenly Messiah; the impression of the truly human character of Jesus and of His subjection to all the ordinary limits of earthly life would have hindered the ascription to Him of the transcendent attributes. Jesus, for Paul, merely provided the one fact that the Messiah had already come to earth and died and risen again. Operating with that fact, interpreting the coming of the Messiah as an act of redemption undertaken out of love for men, Paul was able to develop all the fervor of his Christ-religion.

---

[3] Die Entstehung der paulinischen Christologie, 1903; "Zum Thema Jesus und Paulus," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft,* vii, 1906, pp. 112-119; "Der Apostel Paulus als Zeuge wider das Christusbild der Evangelien," in *Protestantische Monatshefte*, x, 1906, pp. 352-364.

In very recent years, another account of the origin of Paulinism is becoming increasingly prevalent. This account agrees with Wrede in rejecting the liberal derivation of the religion of Paul from an impression of the historical person of Jesus. But it differs from Wrede in its view of the source from which the religion of Paul is actually to be derived. According to this latest hypothesis, Paulinism was based not upon the pre-Christian Jewish conception of the Messiah, but upon contemporary pagan religion.

This hypothesis represents the application to the problem of Paulinism of the method of modern comparative religion. About twenty years ago that method began to be extended resolutely into the New Testament field, and it has been becoming increasingly prevalent ever since. Despite the prevalence of the method, however, and the variety of its application, one great comprehensive work may now fairly lay claim to be taken as summing up the results. That work is the book of W. Bousset, entitled "Kyrios Christos," which appeared in 1913.[4] It is perhaps too early as yet to estimate the full importance of Bousset's work. But unless all indications fail, the work is really destined to mark an epoch in the history of New Testament criticism. Since the days of F. C. Baur, in the former half of the nineteenth century, there has been no such original, comprehensive, and grandly conceived rewriting of early Christian history as has now appeared in Bousset's "Kyrios Christos." The only question is whether originality, in this historical sphere, is always compatible with truth.

According to Bousset, the historicity of Jesus is to be maintained; Jesus was really a religious teacher of incomparable power. But Bousset rejects much more of the Gospel account of Jesus' life than is rejected in the ordinary "liberal" view; Bousset seems even to be doubtful as to whether Jesus ever presented Himself to His disciples as the Messiah, the Messianic element in the Gospels being regarded for the most part as a mere reflection of the later convictions of the disciples. After the crucifixion, the disciples in Jerusalem, Bousset continues, were convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that He was truly the Messiah. They conceived of His Messiahship chiefly under the category of the "Son of Man"; Jesus, they believed, was the heavenly being who in their interpretation of the Book of Daniel and in the apocalypses appears in the presence of the supreme God as the one who is to judge the world. This heavenly Son of Man was taken from them for a time, but they looked with passionate eagerness for His speedy return. The piety of the early Jerusalem Church was therefore distinctly eschatological; it was founded not upon any conviction of a present vital relation to Jesus, but on the hope of His future coming. In the Greek-speaking Christian communities of such cities as Antioch and Tarsus, Bousset continues, an important additional step was taken; Jesus there began to be not only hoped for as the future judge but also adored as the present Lord. He came to be regarded as present in the meetings of the Church. The term "Lord," with the conception that it represents, was never, according to

[4] Compare also Bousset, *Jesus der Herr,* 1916.

Bousset, applied to Jesus in the primitive Palestinian Church; it was first applied to Him in Hellenistic Christian communities like the one at Antioch. And it was there derived distinctly from the prevalent pagan religion. In the type of religion familiar to the disciples at Antioch, the term "Lord" was used to denote the cult-god, especially in the so-called "mystery religions" ; and the Antioch disciples naturally used the same term to designate the object of their own adora-tion. But with the term went the idea; Jesus was now considered to be present in the meetings of the Church, just as the cult-gods of the pagan religions were considered to be present in the worship practiced by those religions. An important step had been taken beyond the purely eschatological piety of the Jerusalem disciples.

But how about Paul? Here is to be found one of the boldest elements in all the bold reconstruction of Bousset. Paul, Bousset believes, was not connected in any intimate way with the primitive Christianity in Palestine; what he "received" he received rather from the Hellenistic Christianity, just described, of cities like Antioch. He received, therefore, the Hellenistic conception of Jesus as Lord. But he added to that conception by connecting the "Lord" with the "Spirit." The “Lord” thus became present not only in the meetings of the Church for worship but also in the individual lives of the believers. Paulinism as it appears in the Epistles was thus complete. But this distinctly Pauline contribution, like the conception of the Lordship of Jesus to which it was added, was of pagan origin; it was derived from the mystical piety of the time, with its sharp dualism between a material and a spiritual realm and its notion of the transformation of man by immediate contact with the divine. Paulinism, therefore, according to Bousset, was a religion of redemption. But as such it was derived not at all from the historical Jesus (whose optimistic teaching contained no thought of redemption) but from the pessimistic dualism of the pagan world. The "liberal" distinction between Pauline religion and Pauline theology, the attempt at saving Paul's religion by the sacrifice of his theology, is here abandoned, and all that is most clearly distinctive of Paulinism (though of course some account is taken of the contribution of his Jewish inheritance and of his own genius) is derived from pagan sources.

The hypothesis of Bousset, together with the rival reconstructions which have just been outlined, will be examined in the following discussion. But before they can be examined it will be necessary to say a word about the sources of information with regard to the life of Paul. No discussion of the literary questions can indeed here be undertaken. Almost all that can be done is to set forth very briefly the measure of agreement which has been attained in this field, and the bearing of the points that are still disputed upon the subject of the present investigation.

The sources of information about Paul are contained almost exclusively in the New Testament. They are, first, the Pauline Epistles, and, second, the Book of Acts.

Four of the Pauline Epistles - Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Romans—were accepted as certainly genuine by F. C. Baur, the founder of the "Tübingen School" of criticism in the former half of the nineteenth century. This favorable estimate of the "major epistles" has never been abandoned by any number of really serious historians, and three of the other epistles—1 Thessalonians, Philippians, and Philemon—have now been added to the "homologoumena." Seven epistles, therefore, are accepted as genuine to-day by all historians except a few extremists. Of the remaining epistles, Colossians is accepted by the majority of investigators of all shades of opinion, and even in the case of 2 Thessalonians and Ephesians, the acceptance of the hypothesis of genuineness is no longer regarded as a clear mark of "conservatism," these two epistles being regarded as genuine letters of Paul by some even of those who are not in general favorable to the traditional view of the New Testament.

With regard to the Pastoral Epistles—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus-the issue is more clearly drawn. These epistles, at least in their entirety, are seldom regarded as genuine except by those who adopt in general the traditional view of the New Testament and the supernaturalistic conception of the origin of Christianity. That does not mean that the case of the Pastoral Epistles is desperate – certainly the present writer is firmly convinced that the epistles are genuine and that a denial of their genuineness really impoverishes in important respects our conception of the work of Paul - but it does mean that with regard to these epistles the two great contending views concerning the New Testament come into sharp conflict; common ground, in other words, cannot here be found, as in the case of the major epistles, between those who hold widely divergent views as to the origin of Christianity.

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.