

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 1)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Of the three ways in which, upon naturalistic principles, the genesis of the religion of Paul has been explained, one has been examined, and has been found wanting. Paulinism, it has been shown, was not based upon the Jesus of modern liberalism. If Jesus was simply a teacher of righteousness, a revealer of God, then the religion of Paul was not derived from Him. For the religion of Paul was a religion of redemption.

But if the religion of Paul was not derived from the Jesus of modern liberalism, whence was it derived? It may, of course, have been derived from the divine Redeemer; the Jesus whom Paul presupposes may have been the Jesus who actually lived in Palestine. But that explanation involves the intrusion of the supernatural into the course of history; it is therefore rejected by "the modern mind." Other explanations, therefore, are being sought. These other explanations are alike in that they derive the religion of Paul from sources independent of Jesus of Nazareth. Two such explanations have been pro-posed. According to one, the religion of Paul was derived from contemporary Judaism; according to the other, it was derived from the paganism of the Greco-Roman world. The present chapter will deal with the former of these two explanations—with the explanation which derives the religion of Paul from contemporary Judaism.

This explanation is connected especially with the names of Wrede¹ and Brückner.² It has, however, seldom been maintained in any exclusive way, but enters into combination with other hypotheses. Indeed, in itself it is obviously insufficient; it will hardly explain the idea of redemption in the religion of Paul. But it is thought to explain, if not the idea of redemption, at least the conception of the Redeemer's person, and from the conception of the Redeemer's person the idea of redemption might in some way be derived. The hypothesis of Wrede and Brückner, in other words, seeks to explain not so much the soteriology as the Christology of Paul; it derives from the pre-Christian Jewish conception of the Messiah the Pauline conception of the heavenly Christ. In particular, it seeks to explain the matter-of-course way in which in the Epistles the Pauline Christ is everywhere presupposed but nowhere defended. Apparently Paul was not aware that his Christology might provoke dissent. This attitude is very difficult to explain on the basis of the ordinary liberal recon-struction; it is difficult to explain if the

¹ See p. 26, footnote 2.

² See p. 27, footnote 1.

Pauline Christology was derived by a process of development from the historical Jesus. For if it had been so derived, its newness and revolutionary character would naturally have appeared. As a matter of fact, however, Paul does not regard it as anything new; he treats his doctrine of Christ as though it were firmly established and required no defense. How shall this confident attitude of the apostle be explained? It is to be explained, Wrede says, by the theology of contemporary Judaism. Paul was so confident that his conception of Christ could not be regarded as an innovation because as a matter of fact it was not an innovation; it was nothing but the pre-Christian Jewish notion of the Messiah. The Pauline conception of Christ was thus firmly fixed in the mind of Paul and in the minds of many of his contemporaries long before the event on the road to Damascus; all that happened at that time was the identification of the Christ whom Paul had believed in all along with Jesus of Nazareth, and that identification, because of the meagerness of Paul's knowledge of Jesus, did not really bring any fundamental change in the Christology itself. After the conversion as well as before it, the Christ of Paul was simply the Christ of the Jewish apocalypses.

In order that this hypothesis may be examined, it will be advisable to begin with a brief general survey of the Jewish environment of Paul. The survey will necessarily be of the most cursory character, and it will not be based upon original research. But it may serve to clear the way for the real question at issue. Fortunately the ground has been covered rather thoroughly by recent investigators. In dependence upon Schürer and Charles and others, even a layman may hope to arrive at the most obvious facts. And it is only the most obvious facts which need now be considered.

Three topics only will be discussed, and they only in the most cursory way. These three topics are (1) the divisions within Judaism, (2) the Law, (3) the Messiah.

The most obvious division within the Judaism of Paul's day is the division between the Judaism of Palestine and that of the Dispersion. The Jews of Palestine, for the most part, spoke Aramaic; those of the Dispersion spoke Greek. With the difference of language went no doubt in some cases a difference in habits of thought. But exaggerations should be avoided. Certainly it is a serious error to represent the Judaism of the Dispersion as being universally or even generally a "liberal" Judaism, inclined to break down the strict requirements of the Law. The vivid descriptions of the Book of Acts point in the opposite direction. Opposition to the Gentile mission of Paul prevailed among the Hellenists of the Dispersion as well as among the Hebrews of Palestine. On the whole, although no doubt here and there individuals were inclined to modify the requirements imposed upon proselytes, or even were influenced by the thought of the Gentile world, the Jews of the first century must be thought of as being a strangely unified people, devoted to the Mosaic Law and jealous of their God-given prerogatives.

At any rate, it is a grave error to explain the Gentile mission of Paul as springing by natural development from a liberal Judaism of the Dispersion. For even if such a liberal Judaism existed, Paul did not belong to it. He tells us in no uncertain terms that he was a "Hebrew," not a Hellenist; inwardly, therefore, despite his birth in Tarsus, he was a Jew of Palestine.

No doubt the impressions received from the Greek city where he was born were of great importance in his preparation for his life-work; it was no mere chance, but a dispensation of God, that the apostle to the Gentiles spent his earliest years in a seat of Gentile culture. But it was Jerusalem rather than Tarsus which determined Paul's outlook upon life. At any rate, however great or however little was the influence of his boyhood home, Paul was not a "liberal" Jew; for he tells us that he was a Pharisee, more exceedingly zealous than his contemporaries for the traditions of his fathers.

Birth in Tarsus, therefore, did not mean for Paul any adherence to a liberal Judaism, as distinguished from the strict Judaism of Palestine. According to Montefiore, a popular Jewish writer of the present day, it even meant the exact opposite; the Judaism of the Dispersion, Montefiore believes, was not more liberal, but less liberal, than the Judaism of Palestine; it was from Tarsus, Montefiore thinks, that Paul derived his gloomy view of sin, and his repellent conception of the wrath of God. Palestinian Judaism of the first century, according to Montefiore, was probably like the rabbinical Judaism of 500 A. D., and the rabbinical Judaism of 500 A. D., contrary to popular opinion, was a broad-minded régime which united devotion to the Law with confidence in the forgiveness of God.³ This curious reversal of the usual opinion is of course open to serious objection. How does Montefiore know that the Judaism of the Dispersion was less liberal and held a gloomier view of sin than the Judaism of Palestine? The only positive evidence seems to be derived from 4 Ezra, which, with the other apocalypses, in an entirely unwarranted manner, is apparently made to be a witness to the Judaism of the Dispersion. And were the rabbinical Judaism of 500 A. D. and the Palestinian Judaism of 50 A. D. really characterized by that sweet reasonableness which Montefiore attributes to them? There is at least one testimony to the contrary—the testimony found in the words of Jesus.

Distinct from the question of fact is the question of value. But with regard to that question also, Montefiore's opinion may be criticized. It may well be doubted whether the easygoing belief in the complacency of God, celebrated by Montefiore as characteristic of Judaism, was, if it ever existed, superior to the gloomy questionings of 4 Ezra. Certainly from the Christian point of view it was not superior. In its shallow view of sin, in its unwillingness to face the ultimate

³ Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul*, 1914, Compare Emmet, "The Fourth Book of Esdras and St. Paul," in *Expository Times*, xxvii, 1915-1916, pp. 551-556.

problems of sin and death, the Jewish liberalism of Montefiore is exactly like the so-called Christian liberalism of the modern Church.

And it is as far removed as possible from the Christianity of Paul. At one point, therefore, Montefiore is entirely correct. The gospel of Paul was based not upon a mild view of law, but upon a strict view; not upon a belief in the complacency of God, but upon the cross of Christ as a satisfaction of divine justice. Neither before his conversion nor after it was Paul a "liberal."

Besides the obvious division between the Judaism of Palestine and that of the Dispersion, other divisions may be detected, especially within Palestinian Judaism. Three principal Jewish sects are distinguished by Josephus; the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes.⁴ Of these, the first two appear also in the New Testament. The Essenes were separated from the ordinary life of the people by certain ascetic customs, by the rejection of animal sacrifice, and by religious practices which may perhaps be due to foreign influence. Apparently the Essenic order did not come into any close contact with the early Church. It is very doubtful, for example, whether Lightfoot was correct in finding Essenic influence in the errorists combated in Paul's Epistle to the Colossians. At any rate, there is not the slightest reason to suppose that Paul was influenced from this source.

The Sadducees were a worldly aristocracy, in possession of the lucrative priestly offices and reconciled to Roman rule. Their rejection of the doctrine of resurrection is attested not only by the New Testament but also by Josephus. They were as far removed as possible from exerting influence upon the youthful Paul.

The Pharisees represented orthodox Judaism, with its devotion to the Law. Their popularity, and their general, though not universal, control of education, made them the real leaders of the people. Certainly the future history of the nation was in their hands; for when the Temple was destroyed the Law alone remained, and the Pharisees were the chief interpreters of the Law. It was this party which claimed the allegiance of Paul. So he testifies himself. His testimony is often forgotten, or at least the implications of it ignored. But it is unequivocal. Saul of Tarsus was not a liberal Jew, but a Pharisee.

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⁴ Josephus, *Antiq.* XVIII. i. 2-5.

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