

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 2)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The mention of the Pharisees leads naturally to the second division of our sketch of pre-Christian Judaism—namely, the Law. According to Baldensperger, the two foci around which Judaism moved were the Law and the Messianic hope. These two foci will here be touched upon very briefly in order.

Unquestionably post-exilic Judaism was devoted to the Law. The Law was found in the Old Testament, especially in the books of Moses. But around the written Law had grown up a great mass of oral interpretations which really amounted to elaborate additions. By this "tradition of the elders" the life of the devout Jew was regulated in its minutest particulars. Morality thus became a matter of external rules, and religion became a credit-and-debit relationship into which a man entered with God. Modern Jews are sometimes inclined to contradict such assertions, but the evidence found both in rabbinical sources and in the New Testament is too strong. Exaggerations certainly should be avoided; there are certainly many noble utterances to be found among the sayings of the Jewish teachers; it is not to be supposed that formalism was unrelieved by any manifestations whatever of the goodness of the heart. Nevertheless, the Jewish writings themselves, along with flashes of true insight, contain a great mass of fruitless casuistry; and the New Testament confirms the impression thus produced. In some quarters, indeed, it is customary to discredit the testimony of Jesus, reported in the Gospels, as being the testimony of an opponent. But why was Jesus an opponent? Surely it was because of something blameworthy in the life of those whom He denounced. In the sphere of moral values, the testimony of Jesus of Nazareth is worth having; when He denounces the formalism and hypocrisy of the scribes, it is very difficult for any student of the history of morals not to be impressed. Certainly the denunciation of Jesus was not indiscriminate. He "loved" the rich young ruler, and said to the lawyer, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." Thus the Gospels in their choice of the words of Jesus which they record have not been prejudiced by any hatred of the Jews; they have faithfully set down various elements in Jesus' judgment of His contemporaries. But the picture which they give of Jewish legalism cannot be put out of the world; it seems clear that the religion of the Pharisees at the time of Paul was burdened with all the defects of a religion of merit as distinguished from a religion of grace.

a religion of merit as distinguished from a religion of grace. The legalism of the Pharisees might indeed seem to possess one advantage as a preparation for the

gospel of Paul; it might seem likely to produce the consciousness of sin and so the longing for a Saviour. If the Law was so very strict as the Pharisees said it was, if its commands entered so deep into every department of life, if the penalty which it imposed upon disobedience was nothing less than loss of the favor of a righteous God, would not the man who was placed under such a régime come to recognize the imperfection of his obedience to the countless commands and so be oppressed by a sense of guilt? Paul said that the Law was a schoolmaster to bring the Jews to Christ, and by that he meant that the Law produced the consciousness of sin. But if the Law was a schoolmaster, was its stern lesson heeded? Was it a schoolmaster to bring the Jews to Christ only in its essential character, or was it actually being used in that beneficent way by the Jews of the age of Paul?

The answer to these questions, so far as it can be obtained, is on the whole disappointing. The Judaism of the Pauline period does not seem to have been characterized by a profound sense of sin. And the reason is not far to seek. The legalism of the Pharisees, with its regulation of the minute details of life, was not really making the Law too hard to keep; it was really making it too easy. Jesus said to His disciples, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." The truth is, it is easier to cleanse the outside of the cup than it is to cleanse the heart. If the Pharisees had recognized that the Law demands not only the observance of external rules but also and primarily mercy and justice and love for God and men, they would not have been so readily satisfied with the measure of their obedience, and the Law would then have fulfilled its great function of being a schoolmaster to bring them to Christ. A low view of law leads to legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace.

Here and there, indeed, voices are to be heard in the Judaism of the New Testament period which attest a real sense of sin. The Fourth Book of Ezra,¹ in particular, struggles seriously with the general reign of evil in the lives of men, and can find no solution of the terrible problem. "Many have been created, but few shall be saved!" (4 Ezra viii. 3). "Or who is there that has not transgressed thy covenant?" (vii. 46). Alas for the "evil heart" (vii. 48)! In a very interesting manner 4 Ezra connects the miserable condition of humanity with the fall of Adam; the fall was not Adam's alone but his descendants' (vii. 118). At this point, it is interesting to compare 2 Baruch,² which occupies a somewhat different position; "each of us," declares 2 Baruch, "has been the Adam of his own soul." And in general, 2 Baruch takes a less pessimistic view of human evil, and (according to Charles' estimate, which may be correct) is more self-complacent

¹ See Box, in Charles, *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, 1913, ii, pp. 542-624; Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, Ste und 4te Aufl., iii, 1909, pp. 315-335 (English Translation, *A History of the Jewish People*, Division II, vol. iii, 1886, pp. 93-104). Charles has been used freely, without special acknowledgment, for the citations from the Jewish apocalypses.

² See Charles, *op. cit.*, ii, pp. 470-526; Schurer, *op. cit.*, iii, pp. 305-315 (English Translation, Division II, vol. iii. Pp 83-93).

about the Law. But the profound sense of guilt in 4 Ezra might conceivably be a step on the way to saving faith in Christ. "O Lord above us, if thou wouldst ... give unto us the seed of a new heart!" (4 Ezra viii. 6). This prayer was gloriously answered in the gospel of Paul.³

It must be remembered, however, that 4 Ezra was completed long after the Pauline period; its attitude to the problem of evil certainly cannot be attributed with any confidence to Saul of Tarsus, the pupil of Gamaliel. It is significant that when, after the conversion, Paul seeks testimonies to the universal sinfulness of man, he looks not to contemporary Judaism, but to the Old Testament. At this point, as else-where, Paulinism is based not upon later developments but upon the religion of the Prophets and the Psalms. On the whole, therefore, especially in the light of what was said above, it cannot be supposed that Saul the Pharisee held a spiritual view of law, or was possessed of a true conviction of sin. Paul was convicted of his sin only when the Lord Jesus said to him, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."

The other focus about which pre-Christian Judaism, according to Baldensperger, revolved was the Messianic hope. This hope had its roots in the Old Testament. A complete introduction to the subject would of course deal first with the Old Testament background. Here, however, the background will have to be dismissed with a word.

According to the ordinary "critical" view, the doctrine of an individual Messiah, and especially that of a transcendent Messiah, arose late in the history of Israel. At first, it is maintained, there was the expectation of a blessed line of Davidic kings; then the expectation of a line of kings gave way in some quarters to the expectation of an individual king; then the expectation of an earthly king gave way in some quarters to the expectation of a heavenly being like the "Son of Man" who is described in 1 Enoch. This theory, however, has been called in question in recent years, for example by Gressmann.⁴ According to Gressmann, the doctrine of an individual transcendent Saviour is of hoar antiquity, and antedates by far the expectation of a blessed line of Davidic kings and that of an individual earthy king. Gressmann is not, of course, returning to the traditional view of the Old Testament. On the contrary, he believes that the ancient doctrine of a heavenly Saviour is of extra-Israelitish origin and represents a widespread myth. But in the details of exegesis, the radicalism of Gressmann, as is also the case with many forms of radicalism in connection with the New Testament, involves a curious return to the traditional view. Many passages of the Old Testament, formerly removed from the list of Messianic passages by the dominant school of exegesis, or else regarded as late interpolations, are restored by Gressmann to their original significance. Thus the suffering servant of Jehovah of Is. li (a passage which the dominant school of exegesis has interpreted in a collective sense, as referring to the nation of Israel or to the

³ Compare Box, in Charles, *op. cit.*, p. 593. See also Emmet, *loc. cit.*

⁴ *Der Ursprung der israelitisch-jüdischen Eschatologie*, 1905.

righteous part of the nation) is regarded by Gressmann as being an individual (mythical) figure to whose death and resurrection is attributed saving significance.

The supernaturalistic view of the Old Testament agrees with Gressmann in his individualistic interpretation of such passages as Is. liii, but differs from him in that it attributes objective validity to the representation thus obtained. According to the supernaturalistic view, Israel was from the beginning the people of the Promise. The Promise at first was not fully defined in the minds of all the people. But even at the beginning there were glorious revelations, and the revelations became plainer and plainer as time went on. The various elements in the Promise were not indeed kept carefully distinct, and their logical connections were not revealed. But even long before the Exile there was not only a promise of blessing to David's line, with occasional mention of an individual king, but also a promise of a Redeemer and King who should far exceed the limits of humanity. Thus God had sustained His people through the centuries with a blessed hope, which was finally fulfilled, in all its aspects, by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Discussion of these various views would exceed the limits of the present investigation. All that can here be done is to present briefly the Messianic expectations of the later period, in which Paul lived.

But were those expectations widely prevalent? Was the doctrine of a coming Messiah firmly established among the Jews of the time of Paul? The answer to these questions might seem to be perfectly plain. The common impression is that the Judaism of the first century was devoted to nothing if not to the hope of a king who was to deliver God's people from the oppression of her enemies. This impression is derived from the New Testament. Somewhat different is the impression which might be derived from the Jewish sources if they were taken alone. The expectation of a Messiah hardly appears at all in the Apocrypha, and even in the Pseudepigrapha it appears by no means in all of the books. Even when the thought of the future age is most prominent, that age does not by any means appear in inevitable connection with a personal Messiah. On the contrary, God Himself, not His instrument the Messiah, is often represented as ushering in the new era when Israel should be blessed.

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