

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Jewish Environment (Part 5)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

It may be questioned whether Paul before his conversion held the apocalyptic view of the Messiah. It might indeed, even be questioned whether he was particularly interested in the Messianic hope at all.

If Baldensperger is correct in saying that the Messianic dogma was in some sort a substitute for the Law, and the Law a substitute for Messianic dogma, so that finally rabbinical interest in the Law tended to dampen interest in the Messiah,¹ then the pre-Christian life of Paul was presumably not dominated by Messianic expectations. For Paul himself, as Baldensperger observes,² does not, in speaking of his pre-Christian life, reckon himself with the Messianists. He reckons himself, rather, with those who were zealous for the Law. Such considerations are interesting. But their importance should not be exaggerated. It must be remembered that according to the testimony of the whole New Testament the doctrine of the Messiah was firmly established in the Judaism of Paul's day. It is hardly likely that Paul the Pharisee dissented from the orthodox belief. In all probability, therefore, Paul before his conversion did hold some doctrine of the Messiah.

It is not so certain, however, that the pre-conversion doctrine of Paul presented a transcendent Messiah like the heavenly Son of Man of the apocalypses. Certainly there is in the Pauline Epistles no evidence whatever of literary dependence upon the apocalyptic descriptions of the Messiah. The characteristic titles of the Messiah which appear in the Similitudes of Enoch, for example, are conspicuously absent from Paul. Paul never uses the title "Son of Man" or "Elect One" or "Righteous One" in speaking of Christ. And in the apocalypses, on the other hand, the Pauline terminology is almost equally unknown. The apocalypses, at least 1 Enoch, use the title "Messiah" only very seldom, and the characteristic Pauline title, "Lord," never at all. It is evident, therefore, that the Pauline Christology was not derived from the particular apocalypses that are still extant. All that can possibly be maintained is that it was derived from apocalypses which have been lost, or from an apocalyptic oral tradition. But dependence upon lost sources, direct comparison not being possible, is always very difficult to establish.

¹ Baldensperger, *Die Messianisch-apocalyptischen Hoffnungen des Judentums*, 3te Aufl., 1903, pp. 88, 207f., 216f.

² Baldensperger, *op. cit.*, Pp. 216f.

Thus the terminology of the Epistles and of the apocalypses is rather unfavorable to the view which attributes to the youthful Paul the apocalyptic doctrine of the Messiah. No literary relation can be established between the Epistles and the extant apocalypses. But will general considerations serve to supply the lack of direct evidence of dependence? On the whole, the reverse is the case. General considerations as to the pre-Christian opinions of Paul point rather to a less transcendent and more political conception than the conception which is found in the apocalypses. No doubt the Messiah whom Paul was expecting possessed supernatural attributes; it seems to have been generally expected in New Testament times that the Messiah would work miracles. But the supernatural attributes of the Messiah would not necessarily involve a conception like that which is presented in the Similitudes of Enoch. Possibly it is rather to the Psalms of Solomon that the historian should turn. The Psalms of Solomon were a typical product of Pharisaism in its nobler aspects. Their conception of the Messiah, therefore, may well have been that of the pupil of Gamaliel. And the Messiah of the Psalms of Solomon, though possessed of supernatural power and wisdom, is thought of primarily as a king of David's line, and there is no thought of his preëxistence. He is very different from the Son of Man of 1 Enoch.

It is, therefore, not perfectly clear that Paul before the conversion believed in a heavenly, preexistent Messiah like the Messiah of the apocalypses. There is some reason for supposing that the apocalyptic Messiah was the Messiah, not of the masses of the people and not of the orthodox teachers, but of a somewhat limited circle. Did Paul belong to that limited circle? The question cannot be answered with any certainty.

The importance of such queries must not, indeed, be ex-aggerated. It is not being maintained here that Paul before his conversion did not believe in the Messiah of the apocalypses; all that is maintained is that it is not certain that he did. Possibly the diffusion of apocalyptic ideas in pre-Christian Judaism was much wider than is sometimes supposed; possibly the youthful Paul did come under the influence of such ideas. But Wrede and Brückner are going too far if they assert that Paul must necessarily have come under such influences. The truth is that the pre-Christian life of Paul is shrouded in the profoundest obscurity. Almost the only definite piece of information is what Paul himself tells us—that he was zealous for the Law. He says nothing about his conception of the Messiah. The utmost caution is therefore in place. Brückner is going much further than the sources will warrant when he makes Paul before his conversion a devotee of the apocalyptic Messiah, and bases upon this hypothesis an elaborate theory as to the genesis of the Pauline Christology.

But even if Paul before his conversion was a devotee of the apocalyptic Messiah, the genesis of the Pauline Christology has not yet been explained. For the apocalyptic Messiah is different in important respects from the Christ of the Epistles.

In the first place, there is in the apocalypses no doctrine of an activity of the Messiah in creation, like that which appears in 1 Cor. viii. 6; Col. i. 16. The Messiah of the apocalypses is preexistent, but He is not thought of as being associated with God in the creation of the world. This difference may seem to be only a difference in detail; but it is a difference in detail which concerns just that part of the Pauline Christology which would seem to be most similar to the apocalyptic doctrine. It is the Pauline conception of the preëxistent Christ, as distinguished from the incarnate or the risen Christ, which Wrede and Brückner find it easiest to connect with the apocalypses. But even in the preexistent period the Christ of Paul is different from the apocalyptic Messiah, because the Christ of Paul, unlike the apocalyptic Messiah, has an active part in the creation of the world.

In the second place, there is in the apocalypses no trace of the warm, personal relation which exists between the believer and the Pauline Christ.³ The Messiah of the apocalypses is hidden in heaven. He is revealed only as a great mystery, and only to favored men such as Enoch. Even after the judgment, although the righteous are to be in company with Him, there is no such account of His person as would make conceivable a living, personal relationship with Him. The heavenly Messiah of the apocalypses is a lifeless figure, clothed in unapproachable light. The risen Christ of Paul, on the other hand, is a person whom a man can love; indeed He is a person whom as a matter of fact Paul did love. Whence was derived the concrete, personal character of the Christ of Paul? It was certainly not derived from the Messiah of the apocalypses. Whence then was it derived?

The natural answer would be that it was derived from Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that the risen Christ of Paul is not merely a heavenly figure but a person whom a man can love is most naturally explained by supposing that Paul attributed to the Messiah all the concrete traits of the striking personality of Jesus of Nazareth. But this supposition is excluded by Wrede's hypothesis. Indeed, Wrede supposes, if Paul had come into such close contact with the historical Jesus as to have in his mind a full account of Jesus' words and deeds, he could not easily have attached to Him the supernatural attributes of the heavenly Son of Man; only a man who stood remote from the real Jesus could have regarded Jesus as the instrument in creation and the final judge of all the world. Thus the hypothesis of Wrede and Brückner faces a quandary. In order to explain the supernatural attributes of the Pauline Christ, Paul has to be placed near to the apocalypses and far from the historical Jesus; whereas in order to explain the warm, personal relation between Paul and his Christ, Paul would have to be placed near to the historical Jesus and far from the apocalypses.

This quandary could be avoided only by deriving the warm, personal relation between Paul and his Christ from something other than the character of the historical Jesus. Wrede and Brückner might seek to derive it from the one fact of

³ Compare especially Olszewski, *Die Wurzeln der paulinischen Christologie*, 1909.

the crucifixion. All that Paul really derived from the historical Jesus, according to Wrede and Brückner, was the fact that the Messiah had come to earth and died. But that one fact, it might be maintained, was sufficient to produce the fervent Christ-religion of Paul. For Paul interpreted the death of the Messiah as a death suffered for the sins of others. Such a death involved self-sacrifice; it must have been an act of love. Hence the beneficiaries were grateful; hence the warm, personal relationship of Paul to the one who had loved him and given Himself for him.⁴

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⁴ Compare Brückner, *Die Entstehung der paulinischen Christologie*, 1903, p. 237.