

## The Origin of Paul's Religion

### The Hellenistic Age (Part 3)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Before any account can be given of the eastern religions taken separately, and of their progress toward the west, it may be well to mention certain general characteristics of the period which followed the conquests of Alexander. That period, which extended several centuries into the Christian era, is usually called the Hellenistic age, to distinguish it from the Hellenic period which had gone before.

The Hellenistic age was characterized, in the first place, by cosmopolitanism. Natural and racial barriers to an astonishing extent were broken down; the world, at least the educated world of the cities, was united by the bonds of a common language, and finally by a common political control. The common language was the Koiné, the modified form of the Attic dialect of Greek, which became the vehicle of a world-civilization. The common political control was that of the Roman Empire. On account of the union of these two factors, inter-communication between various nations and races was safe and easy; the nations were united both in trade and in intellectual activity.

With the cosmopolitanism thus produced there went naturally a new individualism, which extended into the religious sphere. Under the city-state of ancient Greece the individual was subordinated to the life of the community. But in the world-empire the control of the state, just because it was broader, was at the same time looser. Patriotism no longer engrossed the thoughts of men. It was impossible for a subject of a great empire to identify himself with the life of the empire so completely as the free Athenian citizen of the age of Pericles had identified himself with the glories of his native city. Thus the satisfactions which in that earlier period had been sought in the life of the state, including the state-religion, were in the Hellenistic age sought rather in individual religious practice.

The ancient religions of the city-state did indeed find a successor which was adapted to the changed condition. That successor was the worship of the Emperors. The worship of the Emperors was more than a mere form of flattery. It expressed a general gratitude for the reign of peace which was introduced by Augustus, and it had its roots, not only in Greek religion, but also, and far more fundamentally, in the religions of the East. The worship of the rulers was firmly established in the kingdoms into which Alexander's empire was divided, and from there it was transmitted very naturally to the new and greater empire of Rome.

Very naturally it became a dangerous enemy of the Christian Church; for the refusal of the Christians to worship the Emperor seemed inexplicable to an age of polytheism, and gave rise to the charge of political disloyalty. At first, however, and so during the period of Paul's missionary journeys, the Church shared more or less in the special privileges which were granted to the Jews. Christianity at first seemed to be a variety of Judaism, and Judaism in Roman practice was a *religio licita*.

But the worship of the Emperors, important as it was, was not practised in any exclusive way; it did not at all exclude the worship of other gods. It remains true, therefore, that in the Hellenistic age, far more than under the ancient Greek city-state, there was room for individual choice in religious practice.

It is not surprising that such an age was an age of religious propaganda. Since religion was no longer an affair of the nation as such, but addressed itself to men as men, free scope was offered for the extension to the whole world of religions which originally had been national in character. The golden age of such religious propaganda, it is true, did not begin until the second century; and that fact is of very great importance in dealing with certain modern theories of dependence so far as Pauline Christianity is concerned. Nevertheless the cosmopolitanizing of national religions had begun to some extent in an early period and was rendered natural by the entire character of the Hellenistic age.

Even before the fall of the Greek city-state, little communities of the worshipers of eastern gods had established themselves here and there in Greece; and in other parts of the world the barriers against religious propaganda were even less effective. In the Hellenistic age such barriers were almost everywhere broken down. When any religion ceased to be an affair of the nation, when it could no longer count on the devotion of the citizens or subjects as such, it was obliged, if it desired to subsist, to seek its devotees through an appeal to the free choice of individuals.

This religious propaganda, however, was not carried on in any exclusive way; the adoption of one god did not mean the abandonment of another. On the contrary, the Hellenistic age was the age of syncretism *par excellence*. Gods of different nations, originally quite distinct, were identified almost as a matter of course. One example of such identification has already been noted; at an early time the gods of Rome were identified with those of Greece. But in the later portion of the Hellenistic age the process went on in more wholesale fashion. And it was sometimes justified by the far-reaching theory that the gods of different nations were merely different names of one great divinity. This theory received classic expression in the words of the goddess Isis which are contained in the "Metamorphoses" of Apuleius: "For the Phrygians that are the first of all men call me the Mother of the gods at Pessinus; the Athenians, which are sprung from their own soil, Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians, which are girt about by the sea, Paphian Venus; the Cretans which bear arrows, Dictynnian Diana; the Sicilians,

which speak three tongues, infernal Proserpine; the Eleusians their ancient goddess Ceres; some Juno, other Bellona, other Hecate, other Rhamnusia, and principally both sort of the Ethiopians which dwell in the Orient and are enlightened by the morning rays of the sun, and the Egyptians, which are excellent in all kind of ancient doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies accustomed to worship me, do call me by my true name, Queen Isis."<sup>1</sup>

But what is perhaps the most important feature of the religion of the Hellenistic age has not yet been mentioned. It is found in the widespread desire for redemption. In the golden age of Greece men had been satisfied with the world. Who could engage in gloomy questionings, who could face the underlying problem of evil, when it was possible to listen with keen appreciation to an ode of Pindar or to a tragedy of Eschylus? The Greek tragic poets, it is true, present in terrible fashion the sterner facts of life. But the glorious beauty of the presentation itself produces a kind of satisfaction. In the age of Pericles, life was rich and full; for the Athenian citizen it was a joy to live. The thought of another world was not needed; this world was large and rich enough. Joyous development of existing human faculties was, in the golden age of Greece, the chief end of man.

But the glorious achievements of the Greek genius were followed by lamentable failure. There was failure in political life. Despite the political genius of Athenian statesmen, Athens soon lay prostrate, first before her sister states and then before the Macedonian conqueror. There was failure in intellectual life. The glorious achievements of Athenian art were followed by a period of decline. Poets and sculptors had to find their inspiration in imitation of the past. Human nature, once so proud, was obliged to confess its inadequacy; the Hellenistic age was characterized by what Gilbert Murray, borrowing a phrase of J. B. Bury, calls a "failure of nerve."<sup>2</sup>

This failure of nerve found expression, in the religious sphere, in the longing for redemption. The world was found not to be so happy a place as had been supposed, and human nature was obliged to seek help from outside. Thus arose the desire for "salvation." The characteristic gods of the Hellenistic age are in some sort saviour-gods—gods who could give help in the miseries of life. Asclepius finally became more important than Zeus. Dissatisfied with the world of sense, men turned their thoughts to another world; dissatisfied with the achievements of human nature, they sought communion with higher powers. Opinions may differ as to the value of this development.

To the humanist of all ages, it will seem to be a calamity. From the glories of Pindar to the morbid practices of the Hellenistic mysteries, how great a fall! But

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<sup>1</sup> Apuleius, *Metam.* xi. 5, Addington's translation revised by Gaselee, in Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, in the *The Loeb Classical Library*, p. 547.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, 1912, pp. 8, 103-154 Compare, however, Rohde (*op. cit.*, ii, pp. 298-300), who calls attention to an opposite aspect of the Hellenistic age.

there is another way of regarding the change. Possibly the achievements of ancient Greece, glorious as they were, had been built upon an insecure foundation. Scrutiny of the foundation was no doubt painful, and it dulled the enthusiasm of the architects. But perhaps it was necessary and certainly it was inevitable. Perhaps also it might become a step toward some higher humanism. The Greek joy of living was founded upon a certain ruthlessness toward human misery, a certain indifference toward moral problems. Such a joy could not be permanent. But how would it be if the underlying problem could be faced, instead of being ignored? How would it be if human nature could be founded upon some secure rock, in order that then the architect might start to build once more, and build, this time, with a conscience void of offense? Such is the Christian ideal, the ideal of a loftier humanism—a humanism as rich and as joyful as the humanism of Greece, but a humanism founded upon the grace of God.

But however "the failure of nerve" which appears in the Hellenistic age be appreciated by the student of the philosophy of history, the fact at least cannot be ignored. The Hellenistic age was characterized by a widespread longing for redemption—a widespread longing for an escapé from the present world of sense to some higher and better country. Such longing was not satisfied by the ancient religion of Greece. It caused men, therefore, to become seekers after new gods.

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