

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Hellenistic Age (Part 4)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

But what was the attitude of philosophy? Philosophy had contributed to the decline of the ancient gods. Had it been equally successful on the positive side? Had it been able to fill the void which its questionings had produced. The answer on the whole must be rendered in the negative. On the whole, it must be said that Greek philosophy was unsuccessful in its efforts to solve the riddle of the universe. The effort which it made was indeed imposing. Plato in particular endeavored to satisfy the deepest longings of the human soul; he attempted to provide an escape from the world of sense to the higher world of ideas. But the way of escape was open at best only to the few philosophical souls; the generality of men were left hopeless and helpless in the shadow-existence of the cave. And even the philosophers were not long satisfied with the Platonic solution. The philosophy of the Hellenistic age was either openly skeptical or materialistic, as is the case, for example, with Epicureanism, or at any rate it abandoned the great theoretical questions and busied itself chiefly with practical affairs. Epicureans and Stoics and Cynics were all interested chiefly, not in ontology or epistemology, but in ethics. At this point the first century was like the twentieth. The distrust of theory, the depreciation of theology, the exclusive interest in social and practical questions—these tendencies appear now as they appeared in the Hellenistic age. And now as well as then they are marks of intellectual decadence.

But if the philosophy of the Hellenistic age offered no satisfactory solution of the riddle of the universe and no satisfaction for the deepest longings of the soul, it presented, on the other hand, no effective opposition to the religious current of the time. It had helped bring about that downfall of the Olympic gods, that sad neglect of Zeus and his altar, which is described by Lucian in his wonderfully modern satires. But it was not able to check the rising power of the eastern religions. Indeed, it entered into a curious alliance with the invaders. As early as the first century before Christ, Posidonius seems to have introduced an element of oriental mysticism into the philosophy of the Stoics, and in the succeeding centuries the process went on apace. The climax was reached, at the close of pagan antiquity, in that curious mixture of philosophy and charlatanism which is found in the neo-Platonic writers.

The philosophy of the Hellenistic age, with its intense interest in questions of conduct, constitutes, indeed, an important chapter in the history of the human

race, and can point to certain noteworthy achievements. The Stoics, for example, enunciated the great principle of human brotherhood; they made use of the cosmopolitanism and individualism of the Hellenistic age in order to arouse a new interest in man as man. Even the slaves, who in the theory of an Aristotle had been treated as chattels, began to be looked upon here and there as members of a great human family. Men of every race and of every social grade came to be the object of a true humanitarian interest.

But the humanitarian efforts of Stoicism, though proceeding from an exalted theory of the worth of man as man, proved to be powerless. The dynamic somehow was lacking. Despite the teaching of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, despite the beginnings of true humanitarian effort here and there, the later Empire with its cruel gladiatorial shows and its heartless social system was sinking into the slough of savagery. What Stoicism was unable to do, Christianity to some extent at least accomplished. The ideal of Christianity was not the mere ideal of a human brotherhood. Pure humanitarianism, the notion of "the brotherhood of man," as that phrase is usually understood, is Stoic rather than Christian. Christianity did make its appeal to all men; it won many of its first adherents from the depths of slavery. It did inculcate charity toward all men whether Christians or not. And it enunciated with an unheard-of seriousness the doctrine that all classes of men, wise and unwise, bond and free, are of equal worth. But the equality was not found in the common possession of human nature. It was found, instead, in a common connection with Jesus Christ. "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female"—so far the words of Paul can find analogies (faint analogies, it is true) in the Stoic writers. But the Pauline grounding of the unity here enunciated is the very antithesis of all mere humanitarianism both ancient and modern—"For ye are all one person," says Paul, "in Christ Jesus." Christianity did not reveal the fact that all men were brothers. Indeed it revealed the contrary. But it offered to make all men brothers by bringing them into saving connection with Christ.

The above sketch of the characteristics of the Hellenistic age has been quite inadequate. And even a fuller presentation could hardly do justice to the complexity of the life of that time. But perhaps some common misconceptions have been corrected. The pagan world at the time when Paul set sail from Seleucia on his first missionary journey was not altogether without religion. Even the ancient polytheism was by no means altogether dead. It was rather a day of religious unrest. The old faiths had been shaken, but they were making room for the new. The Orontes, to use the figure of Juvenal, was soon to empty into the Tiber. The flow of eastern superstition and eastern mystical religion was soon to spread over the whole world.

But what were the eastern religions which in the second century after Christ, if not before, entered upon their triumphal march toward the west?¹ They were of diverse origin and diverse character. But one feature was common to a number of the most important of them. Those eastern religions which became most influential in the later Roman Empire were mystery religions-that is, they had connected with them secret rites which were thought to afford special blessing to the initiates. The mysteries did not indeed constitute the whole of the worship of the eastern gods. Side by side with the mysteries were to be found public cults to which everyone was admitted. But the mysteries are of special interest, because it was they which satisfied most fully the longing of the Hellenistic age for redemption, for "salvation," for the attainment of a higher nature.

It will be well, therefore, to single out for special mention the chief of the mystery religions-those eastern religions which although they were by no means altogether secret did have mysteries connected with them.

The first of these religions to be introduced into Rome was the religion of the Phrygian Cybele, the "Great Mother of the Gods."² In 204 B.C., in the dark days of the Carthaginian invasion, the black meteoric stone of Pessinus was brought, by command of an oracle, to Rome. With the sacred stone came the cult. But Rome was not yet ready for the barbaric worship of the Phrygian goddess. For several hundred years the cult of Cybele was kept carefully isolated from the life of the Roman people. The foreign rites were supported by the authority of the state, but they were conducted altogether by a foreign priesthood; no Roman citizen was allowed to participate in them. It was not until the reign of Claudius (41-54 A.D.) that the barrier was finally broken down.

The myth of Cybele is narrated in various forms. According to the most characteristic form, the youthful Attis, beloved by Cybele, is struck with madness by the jealous goddess, deprives himself of his virility, dies through his own mad act, and is mourned by the goddess. The myth contains no account of a resurrection; all that Cybele is able to obtain is that the body of Attis should be preserved, that his hair should continue to grow, and that his little finger should move.

The cult was more stable than the myth. No doubt, indeed, even the cult experienced important changes in the course of the centuries. At the beginning, according to Hepding and Cumont, Cybele was a goddess of the mountain wilds, whose worship was similar in important respects to that of Dionysus. With Cybele Attis was associated at an early time. The Phrygian worship of Cybele and Attis was always of a wild, orgiastic character, and the frenzy of the worshipers culminated even in the act of self-mutilation. Thus the eunuch - priests of Cybele,

¹ The sketch which follows is indebted especially to Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, 2^e éd., 1909 (English translation, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, 1911).

² For the religion of Cybele and Attis, see Showerman, *The Great Mother of the Gods*, 1901; Hepding, *Attis*, 1903.

the "Galli," became a well-known feature of the life of the Empire. But the Phrygian cult of Cybele and Attis cannot be reconstructed by any means in detail; extensive information has been preserved only about the worship as it was carried on at Rome. And even with regard to the Roman cult, the sources of information are to a very considerable extent late. It is not certain, therefore, that the great spring festival of Attis, as it was celebrated in the last period of the Roman Empire, was an unmodified reproduction of the original Phrygian rites.

The Roman festival was conducted as follows:³ On March 15, there was a preliminary festival. On March 22, the sacred pine-tree was felled and carried in solemn procession by the "Dendrophori" into the temple of Cybele. The pine-tree appears in the myth as the tree under which Attis committed his act of self-mutilation. In the cult, the felling of the tree is thought by modern scholars to represent the death of the god. Hence the mourning of the worshipers was connected with the tree. March 24 was called the "day of blood"; this day the mourning for the dead Attis reached its climax. The Galli chastised themselves with scourges and cut them-selves with knives—all to the wild music of the drums and cymbals which were connected especially with the worship of the Phrygian Mother. On this day also, according to Hepding's conjecture, the new Galli dedicated themselves to the service of the goddess by the act of self-mutilation. Finally, the resurrection or epiphany of the god Attis was celebrated. This took place perhaps during the night between March 24 and March 25. But Hepding admits that the time is not directly attested. It is also only conjecture when a famous passage of Firmicus Maternus (fourth century after Christ) is applied to the worship of Attis and to this part of it.⁴ But the conjecture may well be correct. Firmicus Maternus⁵ describes a festival in which the figure of a god rests upon a bier and is lamented, and then a light is brought in and the priest exclaims, "Be of good courage, ye initiates, since the god is saved; for to us there shall be salvation out of troubles." Apparently the resurrection of the god is here regarded as the cause of the salvation of the worshipers; the worshipers share in the fortunes of the god. At any rate, March 25 in the Roman Attis festival was the "Hilaria, a day of rejoicing. On this day, the resurrection of the god was celebrated. March 26 was a day of rest; and finally, on March 27, there was a solemn washing of the sacred images and emblems.

As thus described, the worship of Cybele and Attis was, for the most part at least, public. But there were also mysteries connected with the same two gods. These mysteries apparently were practised in the East before the cult was brought to Rome. But the eastern form of their celebration is quite obscure, and even about the Roman form very little is known. Connected with the mysteries was some sort of sacred meal.⁶ Firmicus Maternus has preserved the formula: "I have eaten

³ See Hepding, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-176.

⁴ Loisy (*Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*, 1910, p. 104) prefers to attach the passage to Osiris rather than to Attis.

⁵ See Hepding, *op. cit.*, pp. 166, 167.

⁶ See Hepding, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-190.

from the drum; I have drunk from the cymbal; have become an initiate of Attis." And Clement of Alexandria (about 200 A. D.) also connected a similar formula with the Phrygian mysteries: "I ate from the drum; I drank from the cymbal; I carried the 'kernos'; I stole into the bridal chamber." The significance of this ritual eating and drinking is not clear. Certainly it would be rash to find in it the notion of new birth or sacramental union with the divine nature. Hepding suggests that it meant rather the entrance of the initiate into the circle of the table-companions of the god.

The actual initiation is even more obscure in the Attis mysteries than it is in those of Eleusis; Hepding admits that his reconstruction of the details of the mysteries is based largely on conjecture. Possibly in the formula quoted above from Clement of Alexandria, the words, "I stole into the bridal chamber," indicate that there was some sort of representation of a sacred marriage; but other interpretations of the Greek words are possible. Hepding suggests that the candidate entered into the grotto, descended into a ditch within the grotto, listened to lamentations for the dead god, received a blood-bath, then saw a wonderful light, and heard the joyful words quoted above: "Be of good courage, ye initiates, since the god is saved; for to us shall there be salvation out of troubles," and finally that the candidate arose out of the ditch as a new man ("reborn for eternity") or rather as a being identified with the god.⁷

According to this reconstruction, the initiation represented the death and the new birth of the candidate. But the reconstruction is exceedingly doubtful, and some of the most important features of it are attested in connection with the Attis mysteries if at all only in very late sources. Hepding is particularly careful to admit that there is no direct documentary evidence for connecting the blood-bath with the March festival.

This blood-bath, which is called the taurobolium, requires special attention. The one who received it descended into a pit over which a lattice-work was placed. A bull was slaughtered above the lattice-work, and the blood was allowed to run through into the pit, where the recipient let it saturate his clothing and even enter his nose and mouth and ears. The result was that the recipient was "reborn forever," or else reborn for a period of twenty years, after which the rite had to be repeated. The taurobolium is thought to have signified a death to the old life and a new birth into a higher, divine existence. But it is not perfectly clear that it had that significance in the East and in the early period. According to Hepding, the taurobolium was in the early period a mere sacrifice, and the first man who is said to have received it in the sense just described was the Emperor Heliogabalus (third century after Christ). Other scholars refuse to accept Hepding's distinction between an earlier and a later form of the rite. But the matter is at least obscure, and it would be exceedingly rash to attribute pre-Christian origin to the developed taurobolium as it appears in fourth-century sources. Indeed, there seems to be no mention of any kind of taurobolium

⁷ Hepding, *op. cit.*, pp. 196ff.

whatever before the second century,⁸ and Hepding may be correct in suggesting that possibly the fourth-century practice was influenced by the Christian doctrine of the blood of Christ.⁹

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⁸ Showerman, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

⁹ Hepding, *op. cit.*, p. 200, Anm. 7.