

## The Origin of Paul's Religion

### The Hellenistic Age (Part 8)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

With regard to the origin of the ideas in the Hermetic writings, there is considerable difference of opinion. Reitzenstein allows a large place to Egyptian and Persian elements; other scholars emphasize rather the influence of Greek philosophy, which of course is in turn thought to have been modified by its contact with oriental religion. J. Kroll,<sup>1</sup> W. Kroll,<sup>2</sup> Reitzenstein,<sup>3</sup> and others deny emphatically the presence of any considerable Christian influence in Hermes; but at this point Heinrici, after particularly careful researches, differs from the customary view.<sup>4</sup> Windisch is enough impressed by Heinrici's arguments to confess that Christian literature may have influenced the present form of the Hermetic writings here and there, but insists that the Christian influence upon Hermes is altogether trifling compared to the influence upon primitive Christianity of the type of religion of which Hermes is an example.<sup>5</sup> The true state of the case, according to Windisch, is probably that Christianity first received from oriental religion the fundamental ideas, and then gave back to oriental religion as represented by Hermes certain forms of expression in which those ideas had been clothed. At the same time Windisch urges careful attention to Heinrici's argument for Christian influence upon Hermes for three reasons: (1) all Hermetic writings are later than the New Testament period, (2) the Hermetic writings are admittedly influenced by Judaism, (3) at least the latest stratum in the Hermetic writings has admittedly passed through the Christian sphere. These admissions, coming from one who is very friendly to the modern method of comparative religion, are significant. When even Windisch admits that the form of expression with regard to the new birth in the Poimandres may possibly be influenced by the Gospel tradition, and that the author of the fourth Hermetic tractate, for example, was somewhat familiar with New Testament writings or Christian ideas and "assimilated Christian terminology to his gnosis," and that the term "faith" has possibly come into Hermes (iv and ix) from Christian tradition-in the light of these admissions it may appear how very precarious is the employment of Hermes Trismegistus as a witness to pre-Christian paganism.

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>2</sup> Article "Hermes Trismegistos," in Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, xv, 1912, pp. 791-823.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Heinrici, *Die Hermes-Mystik und das Neue Testament*, 1918.

<sup>5</sup> Windisch, "Urchristentum und Hermesmystik," in *Theologisch Tijdschrift*, lii, 1918, pp. 186-240.

Opinions differ, moreover, as to the importance of the Hermetic type of thought in the life of the ancient world. Reitzenstein exalts its importance; he believes that back of the Hermetic writings there lies a living religion, and that this Hermetic type of religion was characteristic of the Hellenistic age. At this point Cumont and others are in sharp disagreement; Cumont believes that in the West Hermetism had nothing more than a literary existence and did not produce a Hermetic sect, and that in general Reitzenstein has greatly exaggerated the Hermetic influence.<sup>6</sup> With regard to this controversy, it can at least be said that Reitzenstein has failed to prove his point.

Detailed exposition of the Hermetic writings will here be impossible. A number of recent investigators have covered the field with some thoroughness. Unfortunately a complete modern critical edition of the Hermetic corpus is still lacking; the student is obliged to have recourse to the edition of Parthey (1854),<sup>7</sup> which is not complete and does not quite measure up to modern standards. Reitzenstein has included in his "Poimandres" (1904) a critical edition of Tractates I, XIII, XVI, XVII, XVIII. There has been no collection, in the original languages, of all the Hermetic writings (including those outside of the corpus), though Ménard has provided a French translation,<sup>8</sup> and Mead an English translation with elaborate introduction and notes.<sup>9</sup> The work of Mead, which is published by the Theosophical Publishing Society, is not usually regarded as quite satisfactory. But the translation at least will be found exceedingly useful. The systematic exposition of the thought of the Hermetic writings by J. Kroll is clear and instructive,<sup>10</sup> and Heinrici, who differs from Kroll in treating the individual writings separately, has also made a valuable contribution to the subject.<sup>11</sup>

In the Hermetic tractates I and XIII, upon which Reitzenstein lays the chief emphasis, there is presented a notion of the transformation of the one who receives divine revelation. The transformation, as in the Hermetic writings generally, is for the most part independent of ceremonies or sacraments. An experience which in the mysteries is connected with an initiation involving an appeal to the senses here seems to have been spiritualized under the influence of philosophy; regeneration comes not through a mystic drama or the like but through an inner experience. Such at least is a common modern interpretation of the genesis of the Hermetic doctrine. At any rate, it seems to be impossible to reduce that doctrine to anything like a consistent logical scheme. Reitzenstein has tried to bring order out of chaos by distinguishing in the first tractate two originally distinct views as to the origin of the world and of man, but his analysis has not won general acceptance. It must probably be admitted, however, that the

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<sup>6</sup> Cumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 340, 341 (English Translation, pp. 233, 234, note 41).

<sup>7</sup> Parthey, *Hermetis Trismegisti Poemander*, 1854.

<sup>8</sup> Ménard, *Hermès Trismégiste*, 1910.

<sup>9</sup> Mead, *Thrice-Greatest Hermes*, three volumes, 1906.

<sup>10</sup> *Op. cit.* Cf. the review by Bousset, in *Göttingische gelehrte Anzeigen*, clxxvi, 1914, pp. 697-755.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*

Hermetic literature has received elements from various sources and has not succeeded in combining them in any consistent way.

The student who will first read Tractates I and XIII for himself will probably be surprised when he is told (for example by Reitzenstein) that here is to be found the spiritual atmosphere from which Paulinism came. For there could be no sharper contrast than that between the fantastic speculations of the Poimandres and the historical gospel of Paul. Both the Poimandres and Paul have some notion of a transformation that a man experiences through a divine revelation. But the transformation, according to Paul, comes through an account of what had happened but a few years before. Nothing could possibly be more utterly foreign to Hermes. On the other hand, the result of the transformation in Hermes is deification. "This," says Hermes (Tractate I, 26), "is the good end to those who have received knowledge, to be deified." Paul could never have used such language. For, according to Paul, the relation between the believer and the Christ who has transformed him is a personal relation of love. The "Christ-mysticism" of Paul is never pantheistic. It is indeed supernatural; it is not produced by any mere influence brought to bear upon the old life. But the result, far from being apotheosis, is personal communion of a man with his God. In connection with Hermes Trismegistus may be mentioned the so-called Oracula Chaldaica, which apparently sprang from the same general type of thought.<sup>12</sup> These Oracula Chaldaica, according to W. Kroll, constitute a document of heathen gnosis, which was produced about 200 A. D. Although Kroll believes that there is here no Christian influence, and that Jewish influence touches not the center but only the circumference, yet for the reasons already noticed it would be precarious to use a document of 200 A.D. in reconstructing pre-Pauline paganism.

A very important source of information about the Greco-oriental religion of the Hellenistic age is found by scholars like Dieterich and Reitzenstein in the so-called "magical" papyri. Among the many interesting papyrus documents which have recently been discovered in Egypt are some that contain formulas intended to be used in incantations. At first sight these formulas look like hopeless nonsense; it may perhaps even be said that they are intended to be nonsense. That is, the effect is sought, not from any logical understanding of the formulas either on the part of those who use them or on the part of the higher powers upon whom they are to be used, but simply and solely from the mechanical effect of certain combinations of sounds. Thus the magical papyri include not only divine names in foreign languages (the ancient and original name of a god being regarded as exerting a coercive effect upon that god), but also many meaningless rows of letters which do not form words at all. But according to Dieterich and Reitzenstein and others, these papyri, nonsensical as they are in their completed form, often embody materials which belong not to magic but to religion; in particular, they make use, for a magical purpose, of what was originally intended to be used in a living religious cult. Indeed the distinction

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<sup>12</sup> See W. Kroll, *De Oraculis Chaldaicis*, 1894; "Die chaldäischen Orakel," in *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, 1, 1895, pp. 636-639.

between magic and religion is often difficult to draw. In religion there is an element of interest, on the part of the worshiper, in the higher powers as such, some idea of propitiating them, of winning their favor; whereas in magic the higher powers are made use of as though they were mere machines through the use of incantations and spells. But when this distinction is applied to the ancient mystery religions, sometimes these religions seem to be little more than magic, so external and mechanical is the way in which the initiation is supposed to work. It is not surprising, therefore, if the composers of magical formulas turned especially, in seeking their materials, to the mystery cults; for they were drawn in that direction by a certain affinity both of purpose and of method. At any rate, whatever may be the explanation, the existing magical papyri, according to Dieterich and others, do contain important elements derived from the oriental religious cults; it is only necessary, Dieterich maintains, to subtract the obviously later elements – the nonsensical rows of letters and the like—in order to obtain important sources of information about the religious life of the Hellenistic age.

This method has been applied by Dieterich especially to a Paris magical papyrus, with the result that the underlying religious document is found to be nothing less than a liturgy of the religion of Mithras.<sup>13</sup> Dieterich's conclusions have not escaped unchallenged; the connection of the document with Mithraism has been denied, for example, by Cumont.<sup>14</sup> Of course, even if the document be not really a "Mithras liturgy," it may still be of great value in the reconstruction of Hellenistic gnosis. With regard to date, however, it is not any more favorably placed than the documents which have just been considered. The papyrus manuscript in which the "liturgy" is contained was written at the beginning of the fourth century after Christ; and the composition of the "liturgy itself cannot be fixed definitely at any very much earlier date.<sup>15</sup> Dieterich supposes that the beginning was made in the second century, and that there were successive additions afterward. At any rate, then, not only the papyrus manuscript, but also the liturgy which it is thought to contain, was produced long after the time of Paul. Like the Hermetic writings, moreover, Dieterich's Mithras liturgy presents a conception of union with divinity which is really altogether unlike the Pauline gospel.

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<sup>13</sup> Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, 2te Aufl., 1910.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. cit.*, P. 379 (English Translation, pp. 260f.).

<sup>15</sup> Dieterich, *op. cit.*, pp. 43f.

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