

## The Origin of Paul's Religion

### The Hellenistic Age (Part 9)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

Information about pre-Christian paganism is being sought not only in ostensibly pagan sources; it is also being sought in the Gnosticism which appears in connection with the Christian Church. Gnosticism used to be regarded as a "heresy," a perversion of Christian belief. Now, on the contrary, it is being regarded as essentially non-Christian, as a manifestation of Greco-oriental religion which was brought into only very loose connection with Christianity; the great Gnostic systems of the second century, it is said, when they are stripped of a few comparatively unimportant Christian elements are found to represent not a development from Christianity but rather the spiritual atmosphere from which Christianity itself sprang.

If this view of the case be correct, it is at least significant that pagan teachers of the second century (the Gnostics) should have been so ready to adopt Christian elements and so anxious to give their systems a Christian appearance. Why should a similar procedure be denied in the case, for example, of Hermes Trismegistus? If second-century paganism, without at all modifying its essential character, could sometimes actually adopt the name of Christ, why should it be thought incredible that the compiler of the Hermetic literature, who did not go quite so far, should yet have permitted Christian elements to creep into his syncretistic work? Why should similarity of language between Hermes and Paul, supposing that it exists, be regarded as proving dependence of Paul upon a type of paganism like that of Hermes, rather than dependence of Hermes upon Paul?

But the use of Gnosticism as a witness to pre-Christian paganism is faced with obvious difficulties. Gnosticism admittedly been influenced by Christianity. Who can say, then, exactly how far the Christian influence extends? Who can say that any element in Gnosticism, found also in the New Testament, but not clearly contained in pagan sources, is derived from paganism rather than from Christianity? Yet it is just exactly such procedure which is advocated by Reitzenstein and others.

The dangers of the procedure may be exhibited by an example. In Hermes Trismegistus the spirit is regarded as the garment of the soul.<sup>1</sup> This doctrine is the exact reverse of Pauline teaching, since it makes the soul appear higher than the spirit, whereas in Paul the Spirit, in the believer, is exalted far above the soul.

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<sup>1</sup> *Corp. Herm.* X. 13.

In Hermes the spirit appears as a material substratum of the soul; in Paul the Spirit represents the divine power. There could be no sharper contradiction. And the matter is absolutely central in Reitzenstein's hypothesis, for it is just the Pauline doctrine of the Spirit which he is seeking to derive from pagan religion. The difficulty for Reitzenstein, then, is that in Hermes the spirit appears as the garment of the soul, whereas in the interests of his theory the soul ought to appear rather as the garment of the spirit. But Reitzenstein avoids the difficulty by appealing to Gnosticism. The Hermetic doctrine, he says, is nothing but the necessary philosophic reversal of the Gnostic doctrine that the soul is the garment of the spirit.<sup>2</sup> Thus Gnosticism is here made to be a witness to pre-Christian pagan belief, in direct defiance of pagan sources. Is it not more probable that the difference between Gnosticism on the one hand and pagan gnosis as represented by Hermes on the other, is due to the influence upon the former of the Christian doctrine? It is interesting to observe that J. Kroll, from whom the above illustration is obtained, insists against Reitzenstein that the Gnostic doctrine, as over against the doctrine of Hermes, is here clearly secondary.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, then, the reconstruction of a pre-Christian pagan doctrine of the soul as the garment of the spirit is a matter of pure conjecture.

Similar difficulties appear everywhere. It is certainly very hazardous to use Gnosticism, a post-Pauline phenomenon appealing to Paul as one of its chief sources, as a witness to pre-Pauline paganism. Certainly such use of Gnosticism should be carefully limited to those matters where there is some confirmatory pagan testimony. But such confirmatory testimony, in the decisive cases, is significantly absent.

The use of Gnosticism as a source of information about pre-Christian paganism might be less precarious if the separation of the pagan and Christian elements could be carried out by means of literary criticism. Such a method is employed by Reitzenstein in connection with an interesting passage in Hippolytus. In attacking the Gnostic sect of the Naassenes, Hippolytus says that the sect has been dependent upon the pagan mysteries, and in proof he quotes a Naassene writing. This quotation, as it now exists in the work of Hippolytus, is, according to Reitzenstein, "a pagan text with Gnostic-Christian scholia (or in a Gnostic-Christian revision), which has been taken over by an opponent who did not understand this state of the case, and so, in this form, has been used by Hippolytus."<sup>4</sup> Reitzenstein seeks to reproduce the pagan document.<sup>5</sup>

Unquestionably the passage is interesting, and unquestionably it contains important information about the pagan mysteries. But it does not help to establish influence of the mysteries upon Paul. It must be observed that what is now being maintained against Reitzenstein is not that the Gnostics who appear in the

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<sup>2</sup> Reitzenstein, *Hellenistische Mysterienreligionen*, 2te Aufl., 1920, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup> J. Kroll, *op. cit.*, Pp. 286-289, especially p. 288, Anm. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 83-98.

polemic of the anti-heretical, ecclesiastical writers of the close of the second century and the beginning of the third were not influenced by pre-Christian paganism, or even that they did not derive the fundamentals of their type of religion from pre-Christian paganism. All that is being maintained is that it is very precarious to use the Gnostic systems in reconstructing pre-Christian paganism in detail—especially where the Gnostic systems differ from admittedly pagan sources and agree with Paul. In reconstructing the origin of Paulinism it is precarious to employ the testimony of those who lived after Paul and actually quoted Paul.

All the sources of information about Greco-oriental religion which have thus far been discussed belong to a time subsequent to Paul. If the type of religion which they attest is to be pushed back into the pre-Christian period, it can be done only by an appeal to earlier sources. Such earlier sources are sometimes found in passages like Livy's description of the Bacchanalian rites of the second century before Christ in Italy, and in writers such as Posidonius and Philo. But the presence of Bacchanalian rites in Italy in the second century before Christ is not particularly significant, and the details of those rites do not include the features which in the later sources are thought to invite comparison with Paul. Posidonius, the Stoic philosopher of the first century before Christ, seems to have been a man of very great influence; and no doubt he did introduce oriental elements into the Stoic philosophy. But his works, for the most part, have been lost, and so far as they have been reconstructed by the use of writers who were dependent upon him, they do not seem to contain those elements which might be regarded as explaining the genesis of Paulinism. With regard to Philo, who was an older contemporary of Paul, the investigator finds himself in a much more favorable position, since voluminous works of the Alexandrian philosopher have been preserved. There is a tendency in recent investigation to make Philo an important witness to Greco-oriental religion as it found expression in the mysteries.! But the bearing of the evidence does not seem to be absolutely unequivocal.

At any rate, the relation between Paul and Philo has been the subject of investigation for many years, and it cannot be said that the results have accomplished anything toward explaining the genesis of Paul's religion.

Direct dependence of Paul upon Philo, it is admitted, has not been proved, and even dependence of both upon the same type of thought is highly problematical. The state of the evidence is not essentially altered by designating as the type of thought upon which both are supposed to have been dependent the Greco-oriental religion of the mysteries.

The real question is whether the testimony of Philo establishes as of pre-Christian origin that type of mystical piety from which Paulinism is being derived—the type of religion which is attested, for example, by Firmicus Maternus or by the fourth-century inscriptions that deal with the taurobolium, or by Hermes Trismegistus, or by Dieterich's "Mithras liturgy," or by the pagan elements which

are supposed to lie back of second-century Gnosticism. And so far as can be judged on the basis of the evidence which is actually being adduced by the comparative-religion school, the question must be answered in the negative. Even the living connection of Philo with the mysteries of his own day does not seem to be definitely established. And if it were established, the further question would remain as to whether the mystery religions of Philo's day contained just those elements which in the mystery religions of the post-Pauline period are supposed to show similarity to Paul. If the mystical piety which is attested by Philo is sufficient to be regarded as the basis of Paulinism, why should the investigator appeal to Firmicus Maternus? And if he does appeal to Firmicus Maternus, with what right can he assume that the elements which he thus finds existed in the days of Philo and of Paul?

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