

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Redemption in Pagan Religion and in Paul (Part 1)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

It has been observed thus far that in comparing Paul with Hellenistic pagan religion, the question of priority cannot be ruled out so easily as is sometimes supposed. Another preliminary question, moreover, remains. Through what channels did the supposed influence of the mystery religions enter into the life of Paul? The question is somewhat perplexing. In view of the outline of Paul's life which was set forth in Chapters II and III, it would seem difficult to find a place for the entrance of pagan religious thought.

One suggestion is that pagan thought came to Paul only through the medium of Judaism. That suggestion would explain the consciousness that Paul attests of having been, before his conversion, a devout Jew. If pagan religion had already entered into the warp and woof of Judaism, and if the throes of the process of assimilation had already been forgotten before the time of Paul, then Paul might regard himself as a devout Jew, hostile to all pagan influence, and yet be profoundly influenced by the paganism which had already found an entrance into the Jewish stronghold.

But the trouble is that with regard to those matters which are thought to be necessary for the explanation of Paul's religion there is no evidence that paganism had entered into the common life of the Jews. It has been shown in Chapter V that the Judaism of the first century, as it can be reconstructed by the use of the extant sources, is insufficient to account for the origin of Paulinism. That fact is admitted by those scholars who are having recourse to the hypothesis of pagan influence. Therefore, if the pagan influence came to Paul through the medium of Judaism, the historian must first posit the existence of a Judaism into which the necessary pagan elements had entered. There is no evidence for the existence of such a Judaism; in fact the extant Jewish sources point clearly in an opposite direction. It is exceedingly difficult, therefore, to suppose, in defiance of the Jewish sources, and in the mere interests of a theory as to the genesis of Paulin-ism, that the Pharisaic Judaism from which Paul sprang was imbued with a mystical piety like that of the mystery religions or of Hermes Trismegistus. In fact, in view of the known character of Pharisaic Judaism, the hypothesis is nothing short of monstrous.

Therefore, if Paul was influenced by the pagan mystery religions it could not have been simply in virtue of his connection with first-century Judaism; it must have been due to some special influences which were brought to bear upon him. Where could these influences have been exerted? One suggestion is that they were exerted in Tarsus, his boyhood home. Stress is thus laid upon the fact that Paul was born not in Palestine but in the Dispersion. As he grew up in Tarsus, it is said, he could not help observing the paganism that surrounded him. At this point, some historians, on entirely insufficient evidence, are inclined to be specific; they are tempted, for example, to speak of mysteries of Mithras as being practised in or near Tarsus in Paul's early years. The hypothesis is only weakened by such incautious advocacy; it is much better to point merely to the undoubted fact that Tarsus was a pagan city and was presumably affected by the existing currents of pagan life. But if Paul grew up in a pagan environment, was he influenced by it? An affirmative answer would seem to run counter to his own testimony. Although Paul was born in Tarsus, he belonged inwardly to Palestine; he and his parents before him were not "Hellenists" but "Hebrews." Moreover, he was a Pharisee, more exceedingly zealous than his contemporaries for his paternal traditions. The evidence has been examined in a previous chapter. Certainly then, Paul was not a "liberal" Jew; far from being inclined to break down the wall of partition between Jews and Gentiles he was especially zealous for the Law. It is very difficult to conceive of such a man—with his excessive zeal for the Mosaic Law, with his intense hatred of paganism, with his intense consciousness of the all-sufficiency of Jewish privileges—as being susceptible to the pagan influences that surrounded his orthodox home.

The hypothesis must, therefore, at least be modified to the extent that the pagan influence exerted at Tarsus be regarded as merely unconscious. Paul did not deliberately accept the pagan religion of Tarsus, it might be said, but at least he became acquainted with it, and his acquaintance with it became fruitful after he entered upon his Gentile mission.

According to this hypothesis, the attitude of Paul toward pagan religion was in the early days in Tarsus merely negative, but became more favorable (whether or no Paul himself was conscious of the real source of the pagan ideas) because of subsequent events. But what were the events which induced in Paul a more favorable attitude toward ideas which were really pagan? When did he overcome his life-long antagonism to everything connected with the worship of false gods? Such a change of attitude is certainly not attested by the Epistles.

It will probably be admitted that if pagan influence entered into the heart of Paul's religious life it could only have done so by some more subtle way than by the mere retention in Paul's mind of what he had seen at Tarsus. The way which finds special favor among recent historians is discovered in the pre-Pauline Christianity of cities like Damascus and Antioch. When Paul was converted, it is said, he was converted not to the Christianity of Jerusalem, but to the Christianity of Damascus and Antioch. But the Christianity of Damascus and Antioch, it is

supposed, had already received pagan elements; hence the very fact of Paul's conversion broke down his Jewish prejudices and permitted the influx of pagan ideas. Of course Paul did not know that they were pagan ideas; he supposed that they were merely Christian; but pagan they were, nevertheless. The Hellenistic Jews who founded the churches at Damascus and Antioch, unlike the original apostles at Jerusalem, were liberal Jews, susceptible to pagan influence and desirous of attributing to Jesus all that the pagans attributed to their own cult-gods. Thus Jesus became a cult-god like the cult-gods of the pagan religions, and Christianity became similar, in important respects, to the pagan cults.

This hypothesis has been advocated brilliantly by Heitmüller and Bousset.¹ But what evidence can be adduced in favor of it? How may the Christianity of Damascus and Antioch, which is supposed to have been influenced by pagan religion, be reconstructed? Even Heitmüller and Bousset admit that the reconstruction is very difficult. The only unquestioned source of information about the pre-Pauline Christianity which is the subject of investigation is to be found in the Pauline Epistles themselves. But if the material is found in the Pauline Epistles, how can the historian be sure that it is not the product of Paul's own thinking? How can the specifically Pauline element in the Epistles be separated from the element which is supposed to have been derived from pre-Pauline Hellenistic Christianity?

The process of separation, it must be admitted, is difficult. But, according to Bousset and Heitmüller, it is not impossible. There are passages in the Epistles where Paul evidently assumes that certain things are known already to his readers. In churches where Paul himself had not already had the opportunity of teaching, notably at Rome, those elements assumed as already known must have been derived, it is said, from teachers other than Paul; they must have formed part of the pre-Pauline fund of Hellenistic Christianity.

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¹ See especially Heitmüller, "Zum Problem Paulus und Jesus," in *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, xlii, 1912, pp. 320-337; "Jesus und Paulus," in *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, xxv, 1915, Pp. 156-179; Bousset, *Jesus der Herr*, 1916, pp. 30-37.

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