



## **DID NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS COPY PAGAN RELIGIONS?**

**Reasonable Faith Adelaide  
10th of October, 2013  
7pm - 9pm**

## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

### Is Christianity a Religion?



*1893 First Parliament of the World's Religions (Chicago, USA)*

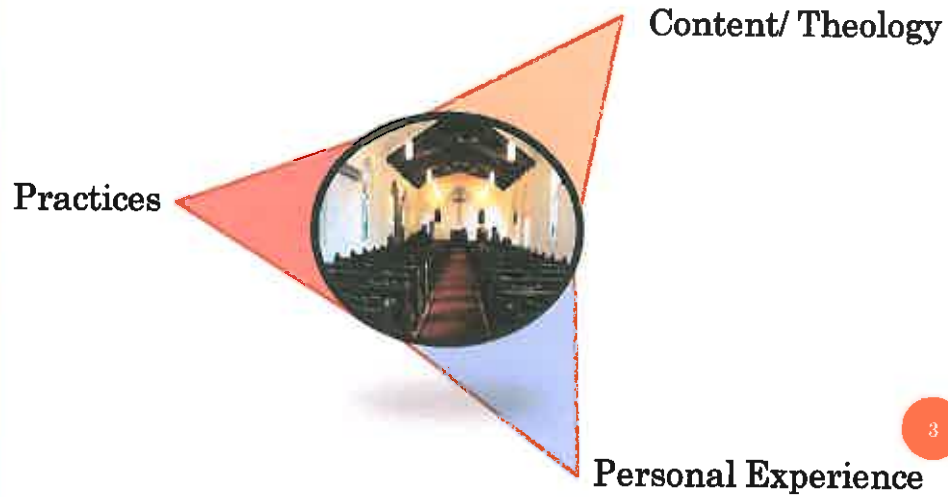
### Or is Christianity *sui generis*\*?

\* Latin: "unique in its characteristics"

"Religion is man's search for god; Christianity is God's search for man." This is a value statement not a **statement** that describes what we are looking at.

# HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

No single answer; it depends upon perspective.



## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

Taking Creation and Incarnation seriously.

- We live in a material world. Experiences, even spiritual ones, are mediated via the brain
- Incarnation confirms that God takes this seriously.
- God communicates and shapes through culture and language.

# HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

## *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*

- started in the 1880s in Göttingen (Germany)
- among Protestant Theologians
  - Otto Pfleiderer (1836-1900)
  - Wilhelm Boussett (1865-1920)
- a domination paradigm in NT studies for 40 years



## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

**“...Christianity can be understood only if it is studied as one phenomenon among the many phenomena of religion in the Roman Empire...”**

Neill and Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (1988)

- Religion was considered as an historical phenomenon understandable only in light of its origins and roots.
- Biblical ideas are the product of their religious/cultural milieu
- Comparative religious phenomena and literature, not doctrinal concepts, must be utilized in interpretation.

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Separate approach to comparative religions looked at the evolution of religion from atheism, fetishism, nature-worship, shamanism, idolatry, to ethical monotheism.  
[ideological restructuring of facts]

## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

An agenda:

*Christianity is not unique, therefore, it is not true.*

- The new in Christianity is not from revelation but from religious-cultural development and syncretism.

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+ Paul's paradigm shift caused by Resurrection

+ Paul's experiences of the H.S.

## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

This required a theory (and evidence) of transmission.

Greco-Roman Pagan Christians

Hellenistic Jewish Christians

Palestinian Jewish Christians

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Common  
through  
mid-20th

M. Hengel, Judaism and Hellenism

L. Hurtado, One God, One Lord.

Christ devotion starts in layer 1.

Resistance of Judaism/Christianity to syncretism

No general evidence of transmission  
but this does not exclude particular examples.



## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

### Sources used in comparative study of Christianity

**Greek/Latin authors**

**Greek Mysteries**

**Dead Sea Scrolls**

**Nag Hammadi  
Library**

**Second Temple  
Judaism**

## Common Phenomena.

### HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

#### Ritual:

- Initiation
- Sacred meals

#### Experiences:

- Healing

10

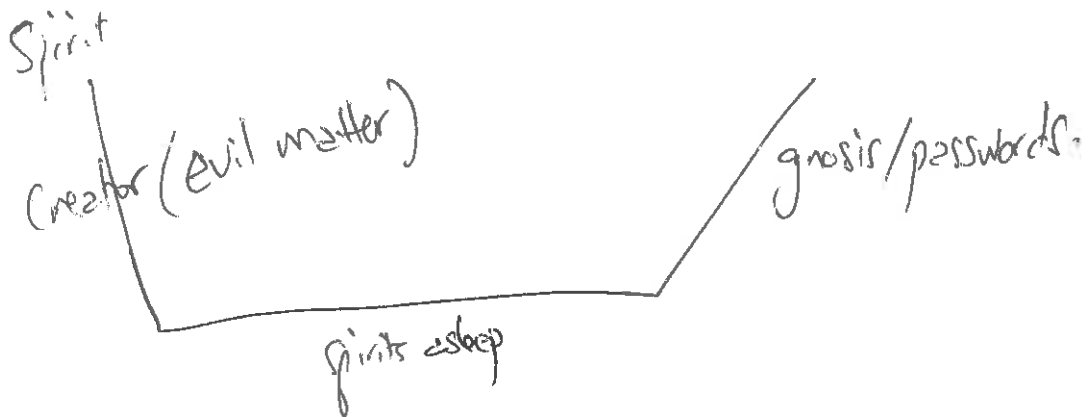
1<sup>st</sup> C church closer to pagan ritual  
meals than 21<sup>st</sup> C churches.

## HISTORY OF RELIGIONS

### Myth/Story:

- Gnostic Redeemer Myth
- Resurrection
- Virgin Birth

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Johannine / 1 John

## PARALLELOMANIA

“...the **extravagance** among scholar  
*which first* overdoes the supposed similarity in  
passages  
*and then* proceeds to describe source and derivation as  
if implying a literary connection flowing in an  
inevitable or predetermined direction.”

Samuel Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 (1962): 1

## PARALLELOMANIA

- Rituals are not self-interpreting, they require context.
- Agreement of external form does not equate to functional agreement or agreement of meaning.
- Stories function within a world of meaning.
- New ideas are expressed in common language until new vocabulary is developed.

## PARALLELOMANIA

### Ferguson on "The Mystery Religions"

- Scarcity of information
- Lateness of the information
- Missing from Palestinian layer
- Dying/rising gods NOT resurrection
- Baptism/Eucharist distinctive with no stray elements

E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Eerdmans, 1993)

## PARALLELOMANIA

### Talbert on Divine Births

- Dionysus and Romulus !
- Sex with gods is not virginal conception
- Signaling individual superiority
- Honouring of a benefactor

C. H. Talbert, "Miraculous Conceptions and Births in Mediterranean Antiquity," pp.79-86 in *The Historical Jesus in Context* (PUP, 2006)

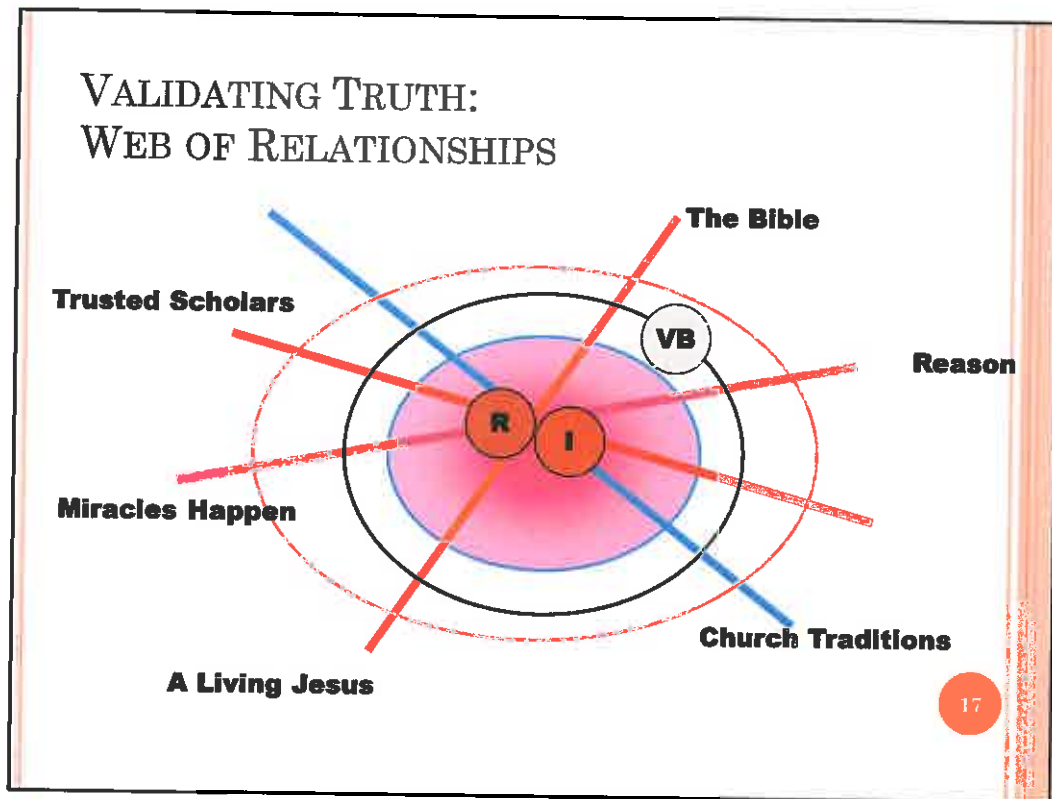
## CHRISTIAN NATIVITY STORY

- Jewish not Pagan
- Stories told with Intent (Son of God from birth)
- Historicity/Apologetic
  - Mark and John missing, perhaps alluded to by Paul
  - Not a primary doctrine
  - Luke 1-2 a very Jewish story from a Gentile
  - Matthew using a “fulfillment” motif
  - Hinted at but not argued for in the Gospels
  - No competing birth narratives

See Raymond Brown, e.g.,

[http://raymondcbrown.org.uk/uploads/2/0/5/9/20590966/raymond\\_brown\\_the\\_virginal\\_conception\\_of\\_jesus.pdf](http://raymondcbrown.org.uk/uploads/2/0/5/9/20590966/raymond_brown_the_virginal_conception_of_jesus.pdf)





Our sense of truth is based upon a web of relationships:

The Bible: 2 different sources that are consistent with the Jesus revealed in the Gospels

Reason: (1) illegitimacy, (2) no precedent, incl. Isaiah 7:14

Church Tradition: consistent testimony, past and present

Trusted Scholars: e.g., *DJG*, Raymon Brown, Stanley Grenz, Donald Bloesch

Personal Experience: (1) miracles happen, (2) Jesus is living and, therefore, unique

Which comes first? Differs, but quickly it is a web.

Core Truths like Resurrection and Incarnation (which has stronger evidence) make plausible the secondary truths like the Virgin Birth (which has lesser evidence).

Raymond Brown, "The Virgin Birth and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus" (1973) or "The Birth of the Messiah" (1993).

Donald Bloesch, "Jesus Christ" (1997)

Stanley Grenz, "Theology for the Community of God" (1997)

B. Witherington III, "Birth of Jesus" in "Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels" (1992)

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH AS PART OF A LARGER STORY

- Life is filled with divine **mystery**.
- There is something **unique** about Jesus.
- He is God's **gift** to the world.
- He **bridges** the chasm that had divided God from creation, proving that the divine and the mundane can be brought together.
- This gives us **hope** of participating in the life of God and is a **witness** to the breadth and wonder of **God's grace**.

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The Virgin Birth is part of the larger of story of God that starts with **Creation** and which embraces **our personal salvation**.

Life is filled with a divine mystery.

There is something unique about Jesus.

Jesus is God's gift to the world.

Jesus bridges the chasm that had divided God from creation,  
proving that the divine and the mundane can be brought together.

This gives us hope of participating in the life of God  
and is a witness to the breadth and wonder of God's grace.

## THE VIRGIN BIRTH IS *SIGNIFICANTLY* TRUE!



- God takes the initiative
- God takes risks
- God enters into our world

***A Story Worth Joining***

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Forty years ago, as I grew up in the church, all that was asked of me was that I accept that the Virgin Birth was true because the church and the Bible told me so. Back then that was enough for me. But it didn't make difference to how I lived my Christian life.

Today, I believe that the Virgin Birth is true for many different and interconnected reasons but, more importantly, I believe it to be significantly true. It makes a difference to how I understand who God is and how he works in our world. I now understand the Virgin Birth to be not just an isolated fact to be argued over. Rather the Virgin Birth is part of a grand story of God which God invites me to join.

## COMPARATIVE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

- Genealogy
- Analogy
- Each on its own terms

## NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES

**Social-Cultural Criticism:** the importance of context for hearing meaning.

### **Second-Temple Judaism(s)**

- continuity and discontinuity

### **Greco-Roman**

- culture/religion/philosophy/politics

Context helps us to hear the Gospel stories more faithfully.

From: Larry Hurtado's Blog [comment-reply@wordpress.com]  
Sent: Wednesday, 9 October 2013 9:37 PM  
To: Stephen Spence  
Subject: [New post] "Kyrios Christos": New Reprint Edition

larryhurtado posted: "In today's post I was pleased to find copies of the reprint edition of the English translation of the classic work by Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (trans. John E. Stee"

Respond to this post by replying above this line

## New post on Larry Hurtado's Blog



### **"Kyrios Christos": New Reprint Edition**

by [larryhurtado](#)

In today's post I was pleased to find copies of the reprint edition of the English translation of the classic work by Wilhelm Bousset, *Kyrios Christos: A History of the Belief in Christ from the Beginnings of Christianity to Irenaeus* (trans. John E. Steely; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013). The German first edition appeared in 1913, a revised edition in 1921, the English translation in 1970 (Abingdon Press). This Baylor edition is a reprint of the 1970 translation (thus preserving page numbers of the 1970 edition).

For this reprint edition, I was invited to provide a new Introduction (p. v-xx), in which I briefly describe the scholarly and historical context in which Bousset worked, and the scholarly reception and critique of *Kyrios Christos* (both in response to the German edition and the English translation). In addition, I note some major matters on which Bousset is now widely judged to have erred; but I also underscore features of *Kyrios Christos* that make it still instructive.

Since my own first reading of the book shortly after the publication of the English translation (while a graduate student in the USA), I have continued to regard it as one of the most stimulating works I have ever studied. It is also certainly one of the most influential works in history of scholarship on the New Testament and Christian Origins. I'm glad that this English translation is again in print, and I commend careful study of the book to all serious students. I think Bousset was wrong on some key matters (indeed, on several matters that he regarded as his essential emphases). But in his aim to approach earliest devotion to Jesus as a historical problem to be investigated, his insistence that it must be seen within its historical setting, and his emphases on earliest Christian worship of Jesus as perhaps the most striking and important religious development in the young religious movement, I regard him as correct.

You can find the book in the Baylor catalogue [here](#).

[larryhurtado](#) | October 9, 2013 at 11:06 am | Tags: [Christian Origins](#), [Important publications](#), [Jesus-devotion](#) | Categories:

"Mystery Religions and Christianity."

# Backgrounds of Early Christianity

*Second Edition*

pp. 279-82.

EVERETT FERGUSON

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1993.

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GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

## Mystery Religions and Christianity

The study of Christian origins has been responsible for much of the study devoted to the mystery religions (see the bibliography at the beginning of this unit). Early researchers tended to make generalizations without regard to methodological problems. There was a tendency to interpret one cult by another and so construct a general "mystery theology" or common "mystery religion." Not uncommonly this was done by (unconsciously) starting with Christian ideas, using these to interpret data about the mysteries, and then finding the mysteries as the source of the Christian ideas. Early Christian authors, it seems, did this too, only their conclusion was that the similarities came from demonic imitation of Christian rites. The Christian writers of the early centuries may have exaggerated the similarities, either from defensiveness or from the same psychological process as modern researchers, or (as seems more likely) because they could make apologetical capital for the truth of Christianity by claiming demonic imitations in paganism.

Major methodological difficulties are the scarcity of our information (the initiates kept their secret) and the lateness of much that is preserved. Early Christian authors are, in fact, a major source. How well informed were they? Did they really know as much as they claimed, or did they pass on rumor and gossip? How reliable are they? Did they really understand even what they knew? Most important of all for the *origins* of Christianity, does the information (particularly interpretations of the meaning of the rites) hold for the pre-Christian period? The mysteries underwent changes in new environments. Where the Christian authors were not reading them through the eyes of the church, there is the possibility that the mysteries themselves adopted Christian ideas. Borrowing need not have been in only one direction. On the other hand, there definitely was, by the fourth century and in some cases earlier, Christian borrowing of outward gestures from the mysteries (e.g., the magical hands dedicated to Sabazius show the thumb and first two fingers raised and the other two fingers bent in the same position used by the Catholic clergy in blessing),<sup>214</sup> of terminology (for apologetic purposes by Clement of Alexandria and more extensively for interpretive purposes by the Cappadocian fathers in the fourth century), and of artistic motifs (e.g., meal scenes), even as there was borrowing from pagan religion in general of ceremonies (processions), of ideas (geography of Hades), of funerary practices (cult meals for the dead), and even of deities (now disguised as Christian saints).

Nevertheless, there is very little evidence for much Christian indebtedness

214. Maarten J. Vermaseren, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii*, Vol. 1: *The Hands* (Leiden, 1983). The gesture was in wider use in the ancient world and may not have come into Christianity specifically from Sabazius. Other testimonies of the cult of Sabazius in E. N. Lane, *Corpus Cultus Iovis Sabazii*, Vol. 2: *The Other Monuments and Literary Evidence* (Leiden, 1985).



in the first century, and especially in Palestine. Hence, the search for pagan influences in early Christianity has focused on Hellenistic Christianity and especially on Paul as channels through which pagan ideas reached a religion that began on Jewish soil. This too has failed to be substantiated. Rather than deal only with Paul, we shall continue by discussing the larger question of primitive Christianity's relation to the mysteries on a conceptual basis, apart from the above-mentioned methodological considerations.

Parallels to the resurrection have been suggested in the "dying and rising savior-gods." But the "resurrection" of these gods is very different from what is meant by that word in Christian belief. There is nothing in the myth of Osiris that could be called a resurrection: the god became ruler over the dead, not the living. The myth of Attis contains no specific mention of a resurrection, though it has been thought that the gladness following mourning in his cult presupposed some such notion. The Adonis myth perhaps most clearly indicates the resuscitation of a god, but even here it is not strictly a resurrection. These beliefs are more closely allied to the cycle of nature, and the mysteries seem to have had their origin in the agricultural cycle. Even this element does not seem prominent in the mysteries of the Roman period where urban life had weakened the connection with the soil. But insofar as paganism offered "dying and rising gods," these gods are a world apart from Christ's resurrection, which was presented as a one-time historical event, neither a repeated feature of nature nor a myth of the past.

Initiation into the mysteries has been presented as a "pagan regeneration" in which there is a rebirth and a kind of mystical union with the deity. The terminology of regeneration is rare in connection with the mysteries and then as a metaphor for a new life. The idea of rebirth does not appear to be specifically connected with moral renewal. The salvation the mysteries brought was a deliverance from fate and the terrors of the afterlife, not a redemption from sins. The initiate was brought into the special favor of the deity and promised his or her protection in this life and often a blessed immortality in the afterlife. The union with the deity in the form of a sacred marriage, in spite of much that has been said, is not proved in the mysteries. There was no divinization, becoming children of the god, or receiving the divine nature.

There are no true parallels to baptism in the mysteries. Where water was applied it was done so for a preliminary purification, not as the initiation itself. The manner in which the initiation into the mysteries and baptism in the New Testament worked was entirely different: the benefit of the pagan ceremony was effective by the doing (*ex opere operato*), whereas the benefit of baptism was a grace-gift of God given to faith in the recipient. (Ideas perhaps derived from the mysteries influenced the thinking and practice of some Christians, and that from a quite early period [e.g., the misunderstandings about baptism and the Lord's Supper reflected in the warnings of 1 Cor. 10:1ff.].) All converts to Christianity received baptism, whereas initiation in the mysteries was for an inner circle of adherents.

Sharing meals was a common religious activity in paganism, Judaism, and Christianity, and there are certain similarities in all these meals. The significance of the "communion," however, was different in each case. The weekly memorial of the death and resurrection of Jesus and the specific note of thanksgiving (eucharist) in the prayers of consecration provide no pagan counterparts.

Christian baptism was a "repentance" baptism and so connected with a moral transformation of the believer, who was promised the gift of the Holy Spirit as the power of a new life. Whereas Christianity welcomed the unworthy, the pagan mysteries were for those already pure individuals who met accepted social standards. Of the mystery religions only Mithraism seems to have offered a supernaturally sanctioned ethic and moral earnestness comparable in some way to Christianity. This is not to say that the mysteries were incapable of higher, spiritual aspirations, but that had nothing to do with their essence. There was, to be sure, a personal attachment to a god. The nearest thing to Christian conversion in the mysteries was that of Lucius to Isis (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11); otherwise conversion was mainly to philosophy.<sup>215</sup> A Plutarch could find rich meaning in the myth and rites associated with Isis and Osiris, but any philosopher could find anything he wanted in the ceremonies, for no doctrine as such was involved. Thus, one could receive spiritual benefit and meaning from the rites, as well as emotional uplift, but that was largely a matter of what one brought with him or made of them, and not what inhered in the system.

The mysteries did not offer a god who came to earth to save humans. Their gods did not die voluntarily to save humankind. And there is no reason why they should, since the consciousness of sin was not so acute nor was there a strong desire for a new ethical life. The mysteries were not for everyone; for one thing they were expensive. Initiation was for the inner circle, not for the whole community of worshipers. The initiatory rites themselves were kept secret (one wants to keep a good thing at home), unlike the Christian "mystery" (*mystērion*), which was an "open secret," something previously hidden but now revealed and proclaimed to all.

The New Testament did not use the technical vocabulary of the mysteries.<sup>216</sup> Although there are some superficial similarities of language, even these have different meanings (as the word *mystērion* itself). Christianity remained "intolerant": it was an exclusive faith, whereas one could accumulate all the initiations he could afford and adherence to one deity was not a denial of others. Christianity established a worldwide brotherhood to an extent that the mysteries did not. The initiations of Lucius at Corinth and then at Rome illustrate the

215. See A. D. Nock, *Conversion* (Oxford, 1933), 138-55 for Lucius; 164-86 for conversion to philosophy.

216. A. D. Nock, "The Vocabulary of the New Testament," *JBL* 52 (1933):131-39 (*Essays*, 341-47).

limitations of the sense of brotherhood in the Isiac religion. Although initiates had formulas and signs by which they recognized one another, they did not form a community with a continuing life and organization such as was the church. Christianity imposed no racial or social bars. It became truly international. Although the mysteries moved in this direction, they never lost their identification with their national origin to the extent that Christianity was freed from Judaism: for example, Lucius shaved his head like an Egyptian priest upon his receiving initiation into the mysteries of Osiris; the initiate into Mithraism passed through the grade of "Persian."

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## GNOSTICISM, HERMETIC LITERATURE, CHALDAEAN ORACLES

The study of Gnosticism was long hampered by the circumstance that it was known almost entirely from the writings of its orthodox Christian opponents. Fully developed Gnostic thought in the second century provided a major doctrinal challenge to the church and prompted the polemical writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and later Epiphanius. The longest Gnostic work, which has been known for some years, is *Pistis Sophia*,<sup>217</sup> a work closely related in thought to some of the more recently discovered Gnostic documents.

217. *Pistis Sophia*, ed. Carl Schmidt, trans. Violet Macdermot (Leiden, 1978).

THE HISTORICAL  
JESUS  
• IN CONTEXT •

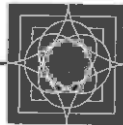
*Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison Jr., and  
John Dominic Crossan, Editors*

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PRINCETON READINGS IN RELIGIONS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

2006

## — 4 —

## Miraculous Conceptions and Births in Mediterranean Antiquity

Charles H. Talbert

pp. 79-86

Two canonical gospels, Matthew and Luke, contain infancy narratives. Matthew's narrative compares Jesus with the traditions about Moses' early life (e.g., Magi speak of the birth of a Jewish king; the current ruler attempts to kill all the Jewish male babies; the key baby is saved so he can be the future savior of the people; there is a flight from or to Egypt; after the ruler's death there is a message to return from whence the child had fled). This typology (i.e., viewing the earlier material as the prototype or foreshadowing of the latter) functions as part of Matthew's Christology (Jesus is the new Moses of Deuteronomy 18:15-18), and it adds authority to what Jesus will say in five teaching sections (chaps. 5-7; 10; 13; 18; 24-25). Luke's material about the birth and early life of Jesus functions within the ancient genre of prophecies of future greatness. Prophecies, portents, and other material foreshadow the future greatness of the child.

The two infancy narratives share a tradition that says Jesus was miraculously conceived by the Spirit. According to Matthew 1:20, the angel says to Joseph: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Luke 1:34 has Mary ask the angel who has told her she will bear the Son of the Most High: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answers in 1:35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

The question to be asked is: How would the authorial audience have heard this material in Matthew and Luke? What cultural assumptions did auditors bring?

Ancient Mediterranean peoples did tell stories of miraculous conceptions and births. There were accounts, set in the mythic past, of individuals born to a divine mother and a human father, for example, Achilles (son of the divine Thetis and the human Peleus—*Iliad* 20.206-7; 24.59), Aeneas (son of Aphrodite and the mortal Anchises—*Iliad* 2.819-22; 5.247-48; see also the late first-century BCE



through early first-century CE Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.588), and Persephone (daughter of Demeter and Iasion—*Odyssey* 5.116–28).

In the *Iliad* 20.199–209, Aeneas and Achilles meet in battle. As custom dictated, they taunted one another before fighting:

Aeneas said: "Son of Peleus, do not try to frighten me with words, as if I were a child, since I too know how to taunt. We know each other's parents and lineage for we have heard the ancient stories. . . . They say that you [Achilles] are the son of Peleus and that your mother was Thetis, a daughter of the sea. I am the son of Anchises and my mother is Aphrodite."

Those believed to be the offspring of a god and a human mother included Asclepius (son of Apollo and the mortal Coronis—so the first-century BCE Diodorus of Sicily 4.71.1); Hercules (son of Zeus and the human Alcmene—*Iliad* 14.315–28; Diodorus of Sicily 4.9.1, 3); Dionysus (son of Zeus and Semele—*Iliad* 14.315–28); Perseus (son of Zeus and Danae—*Iliad* 14.315–28); Aristaeus (son of Apollo and Cyrene—Diodorus of Sicily 4.81.1–3); Romulus (son of Mars and the mortal Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia—so the first-century BCE Cicero, *Republic* 1.41; 2.2; Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, "Romulus," 2.3–6).

Diodorus of Sicily 4.2.1–4 relates what the Greeks say about Dionysus. Cadmus was sent from Phoenicia to search for the maiden Europa. During his travels, in obedience to an oracle, he founded the city of Thebes and settled there. He married Harmonia and had a number of offspring, one of whom was Semele:

Now with Semele, because of her beauty, Zeus had intercourse, doing it without speaking. . . . Whereupon she asked him to treat her as he did Hera. Zeus, therefore, encountered her as a god with thunder and lightning, making himself manifest as they came together. Semele, who was pregnant, was not able to bear the god's power. So she gave birth prematurely and was herself killed by the fire.

Zeus then had Hermes take the child to the Nymphs to raise. As a result of his upbringing, Dionysus discovered wine and taught humans how to cultivate the vines.

Diodorus of Sicily says: "Aristaeus was the son of Apollo and Cyrene, the daughter of Hypseus, son of Peneius" (4.81.1). According to myth, Apollo was attracted to a maiden named Cyrene. He carried her off to Libya, where he later founded a city named after her. In 4.81.2–3 Diodorus says:

Apollo begat of Cyrene a son, Aristaeus, in that land. He gave the baby to the Nymphs to raise. . . . The boy learned from the Nymphs how to make cheese, how to make beehives, and how to cultivate olives. He was the first to teach these things to humans. . . . those who received the benefits gave Aristaeus honors like those given to gods, as had been done for Dionysus.

The first-century BCE historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, tells of a vestal virgin, Ilia or Rhea (1.76.3–4), who went to a grove consecrated to

Mars to fetch pure water for use in the sacrifices and was "ravished by someone in the sacred area" (1.77.1):

Most relate a myth of the divinity of that place . . . whose appearance was much more marvelous than the size and beauty of humans. They say the ravisher . . . told her not to grieve. For the marriage had been with the divinity of that place. Out of her being ravished, she would give birth to two sons whose deeds would excel all others [i.e., Romulus and Remus]. (1.77.2)

Sometimes ancient authors would give two traditions: one miraculous and the other nonmiraculous. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, "Romulus," from the end of the first to the beginning of the second century CE, offers an example. One story, according to Promathion in his history of Italy, runs:

Tarchetius, king of the Albans, . . . encountered a strange phantom at home. A phallus rising up out of the hearth remained for many days. An oracle of Tethys was in Tuscany. From it an interpretation of the phenomenon was brought to Tarchetius. A virgin should mate with the phantom. From her a son would be born who would have great valor, good fortune, and great strength. Tarchetius, therefore, told the prophecy to one of his daughters and instructed her to mate with the phantom. She resisted and sent a handmaid instead. . . . When the handmaid bore twins by the phantom, Tarchetius gave them to Teratius to destroy. He carried them to the riverside. There a she-wolf came to them and nursed them. Birds brought bits of food to them. A cowherd found the twins and took them home with him. In this way they were saved. (2.3-6)

In 3.1-3, Plutarch says the story that has the greatest credence is the one given by Diocles of Peparethus and Fabius Pictor. It focuses on a vestal virgin, Ilia, or Rhea, or Silvia who was found to be pregnant, contrary to the law for vestals. She was saved from death by the intercession of the king's daughter, Antho. The vestal virgin gave birth to two boys, large and beautiful. Plutarch (4.2) says it was the boys' mother who claimed that Mars was the father. It was said by others, however, that the girl was deceived into doing this by Amulius, who came to her dressed in armor.

Stories of miraculous conceptions and births were also told about rulers and philosophers in historical time. Among the philosophers, Pythagoras was said to be the offspring of Apollo and the human Pythais, the most beautiful of the Samians (Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 2); Plato was believed to have been the son of Apollo and Amphictione (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.1-2; 3.45); Apollonius of Tyana was thought to be the son of Proteus, a divinity of Egypt, or Zeus (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.4.5-9; 1.6).

Diogenes Laertius, in the third century CE but citing early sources, says of Plato (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3:1-2):

Plato was the son of Ariston and Perictione. . . . Speusippus in the work titled *Plato's Funeral Feast*, Clearchus in the *Encomium on Plato*, and Anaxilaides in the second book *Concerning Philosophers*, tell how at Athens there was a story . . . that Apollo appeared to Ariston in a dream; whereupon he did not touch Perictione until the child's birth.

The early third-century church father Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.37, offers a supplement to Laertius's account:

It is not absurd to employ Greek stories to talk with Greeks, to show we Christians are not the only people who use a miraculous story like this one [i.e., about Jesus' conception]. For some (Greeks) think it proper . . . to relate even of recent events that Plato was the son of Amphictione, while Ariston was prevented from having sexual intercourse with his wife until she gave birth to the one sired by Apollo.

Philostratus, in his third-century CE *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, says of Apollonius (1.4.5–9):

To his mother, before his birth, came a divinity of Egypt, Proteus. . . . She was not frightened but asked him: "What will I bear?" He said: "Me!" She asked: "Who are you?" He said: "Proteus, the god of Egypt."

The narrator then explains that Proteus excelled in wisdom, knowing past and future. He promises that as the story progresses, Apollonius will be seen to excel even Proteus!

Among the rulers spoken of in terms of a miraculous conception and birth, Alexander the Great and Augustus Caesar stand out. At the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE, Plutarch's "Alexander" contains this account:

Philip, after the vision [in a dream, he saw himself putting a lion-shaped seal on his wife's womb—2.4], sent Chavion of Megalopolis to Delphi. Chavion then brought Philip a word from the god [Apollo], telling him to sacrifice to Ammon and to reverence this god greatly. He also told Philip that he would lose his sight in the eye with which he had spied on the god, who in the form of a snake, had shared the bed of his wife. Also Olympias, as Eratostheues says, when Alexander was sent upon his expedition, told him alone the secret about his begetting. She challenged him to behave worthily of his origins. Others, however, say she rejected the idea and said: "Alexander must stop slandering me to Hera." (3:1–4)

In the second century CE, Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 13.4.1–2, has this to say about Alexander's origins:

Olympias, wife of Philip, sent a witty response to her son, Alexander, when he wrote to her: "King Alexander, son of Jupiter Hammon, to his mother Olympias, sends greeting."

Olympias responded in this manner: "Please, my son, be quiet, neither slandering nor accusing me before Juno. She will be vengeful toward me if you say in your letters that I am her husband's lover."

Gellius comments that in this way Olympias urged Alexander to give up the foolish idea he had formed from his incredible success, namely, that he was the son of Jupiter (13.4.3).



In the early second-century CE, Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, "Augustus," 94.4, wrote:

In the books of Asclepias of Mendes, Theologumena, I read: Atia came to the solemn service of Apollo in the middle of the night. Her litter was set down in the temple and she went to sleep. A snake crawled up to her, then went away. Upon awakening she purified herself as she would after sexual relations with her husband. There then appeared on her body a mark colored like a snake. She could not rid herself of it, so she stopped going to public baths. Augustus was born ten months after and therefore was thought to be the son of Apollo.

In most of these stories the liaisons between gods and humans involved sexual relations, either with the deity's identity known (as with Zeus and Semele [Diodorus of Sicily 4.2.1–4] or Proteus and the mother of Apollonius of Tyana [Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 1.4.5–9]) or with the deity taking another form (e.g., when Zeus could not overcome Alcmena's chastity, he assumed the form of her husband [Diodorus of Sicily 4.9.3], or in a number of cases the deity took the form of a snake [Plutarch, "Alexander," 3.1–4; Suetonius, "Augustus," 94.4]).

There was, however, another tradition that was averse to thinking of physical sexual contact between deity and humanity; consequently, a begetting that did not involve physical sexual contact was sought. Aeschylus is an early example. In "Suppliants" 17–19, Io is said to be impregnated by Zeus in the form of "the on-breathing of his love." "Prometheus" 848–52 states that at Canobus near the mouth of the Nile, Io will be restored to her senses by Zeus through "the touch of his unterrifying hand." The offspring will be Epaphus (= touch-born, named from the touch [*ephapsis*] of the hand of Zeus).

46-170 AD Plutarch gives fullest exposition of this point of view. The first is in "Table Talk" VIII, Question 1.2 (*Moralia* IX, 114–19). The first speaker, Florus, refers to those who attribute Plato's parentage to Apollo and claim that Ariston, Plato's father, had a vision in his sleep, which forbade him to have intercourse with his wife for ten months. The second speaker, Tyndares, replies that it is fitting to celebrate Plato with the line: "He seemed the child not of a mortal man but of a god." When, however, Plato himself speaks of the uncreated and eternal god as father and maker of the cosmos, "it happened not through semen but by another power of God (*dunamei tou theou*) that God begot in matter the principle of generation, under whose influence it became receptive and was changed." So, Tyndares says he does not think it strange if "it is not by a physical approach, like a man's, but by some other kind of contact or touch that a god alters mortal nature and makes it pregnant with a more divine offspring." Tyndares continues: "The Egyptians say that Apis (= the sacred bull, the incarnation of Osiris) is begotten by the touch (*epaphe*) of the moon."

In "Numa" 4.1–4, Plutarch begins by speaking of the story that Numa forsook city life to live in the country because, it was said, he had a marriage with a goddess, Egeria. Such a tale, Plutarch states, is like stories from the Phrygians, Bithynians, and Arcadians. He concludes that it is not impossible to think that the

Deity should be willing to consort with men of superlative goodness, wisdom, and holiness. In 4.3, however, he says: "It is difficult to believe that a god or phantom would take carnal pleasure in a human body and its beauty." In 4.4 he continues: "Nevertheless the Egyptians make a plausible distinction in such a matter. A woman can be made pregnant by a spirit (*pneuma*) of a god, but for a human there is no physical intercourse with a god." This trajectory shows that it was possible in Mediterranean antiquity to think of a miraculous conception without understanding it in terms of sexual intercourse between a deity and a human. It would be no surprise, then, for ancient auditors to hear that Jesus' conception was via "spirit," "power," and involved "overshadowing" (touch).

I There were two main reasons the ancients spoke of miraculous conceptions and divine descent. The first was an attempt to explain an individual's superiority to other mortals. Generally Mediterranean peoples looked at one's birth or parentage to explain one's character and behavior. In Plutarch's "Romulus," 7.3–4, Remus has been brought before Numitor for punishment. When Numitor sees Remus, he is "amazed at the youth's surpassing greatness of body and strength, and noting from his face the unsubdued boldness and vitality of his psyche despite the present circumstances, and hearing that his works and acts were like his appearance, . . . he asked who he was and what were the circumstances of his birth." Birth explains later deeds and character!

If the possibility of miraculous conception or birth was believed to be true in general, then a truly superior person could only be explained by a divine origin. Several examples make the point. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 1.77.2, in his account of the vestal virgin Ilia's being ravished in the grove consecrated to Mars, has the ravisher say to the maiden after the event that she should not grieve because "out of her being ravished, she would give birth to two sons whose deeds would excel all others." A divine begetting results in superior deeds!

The first-century BCE Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 4.9.2, says: "When Zeus had sexual relations with Alcmene he made the night three times longer than usual and by the length of time given to making the child he foreshadowed the superior nature of the one begotten."

The second-century CE Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.30, says of Alexander the Great: "And so not even I can suppose that a man quite beyond all other men was born without some divine influence." Aulus Gellius, in *Attic Nights* 13.4.3 (second century CE), says that Olympias attempted to get Alexander to give up the idea he had formed from his incredible success, namely, that he was the son of Jupiter. Here great success implies a divine origin! The third-century CE Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 1.4.5–9, has the narrator explain that Apollonius would excel in wisdom because he had been begotten by the deity Proteus, who also excelled in wisdom. The early third-century CE Church Father Origen, *Against Celsus* 1.37, says that Greek stories like that of Apollo's begetting Plato

are really fables. They have been invented about a man they think has greater wisdom and power than others. Their claim, then, is that he received the beginning of



his physical existence from a better, diviner sperm, something that is fitting for persons who are greater than ordinary humans.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 3.45, quotes an epitaph:

And how, if Phoebus [Apollo] did not cause Plato to be born in Greece, did he [Plato] heal human minds with letters? For even as the divinely begotten Asclepius is a healer of the body, so Plato is of the immortal soul.

One could not do what Plato did had he not been the offspring of a god! One reason the ancients used stories of miraculous conceptions and births was as an explanation of the superiority of the individual.

The second function of such stories of miraculous conceptions in antiquity was the veneration of a benefactor. For example, Cicero, *The Republic* 1.41 (first century BCE), gives a quote from Ennius regarding Romulus: "O father, O sire, O one whose blood comes from gods." In 2.2 Cicero says concerning Romulus that he was one

who was born of father Mars (we concede this to the popular tradition, preserved from ancient times, handed down by our ancestors who thought that those who merited good from the community should be regarded as descendants of the gods and endowed with divine qualities).

Here the tradition of Romulus's supernatural conception is part of the ancient Roman veneration of benefactors.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.581–608, tells of Venus approaching Jupiter with a request on behalf of Aeneas, her son and Jupiter's grandson. Based on Aeneas's worthiness, Jupiter grants Venus's wish. So Aeneas, the legendary ancestor of the Romans, is honored by the Roman populace with temple and sacrifice. It was part of the Roman mentality to venerate benefactors by ascribing divinity to them. This often included stories of their miraculous conception and birth.

Early Christian auditors of Matthew and Luke would have assumed that the stories of Jesus' divine begetting were certainly needed to explain his marvelous life. A divine origin was appropriate for their chief benefactor and founder. This much the Greco-Roman materials make clear. These auditors, however, were heir not only to the Greco-Roman traditions but also to the Christian traditions before and contemporary with them. Two aspects of this Christian tradition call for attention.

First, the Gospel of Mark, which most scholars think was earlier than Matthew and Luke, lacks a birth narrative. It begins with John the Baptist and with Jesus as an adult. Second, some Christians believed that their relation with God depended on their taking the initiative and performing acceptably so that God would respond approvingly (e.g., Galatians 2:15–16; 3:1–5). The late second-century Church Father Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26, speaks of one Cerinthus (late first century) who believed

Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was the son of Joseph and Mary according to the usual manner of begetting. Because he was more righteous, more prudent, and wiser

II

than other humans, after his baptism the Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove. Then he preached the unknown Father and performed miracles.

The Gospel of Mark, without a miraculous birth narrative, was susceptible to such an interpretation of a meritorious Jesus who is rewarded by God. If Jesus is the model for Christians, then they too must be meritorious. Ever since Paul, at least, this was not what mainstream Christians believed. The relation with God was based on God's gracious initiative to which humans responded in trust and obedience (i.e., faith).

When Matthew and Luke added birth narratives with a miraculous conception as part of their rewriting of Mark, they were saying that this type of life can be produced only by God's prior gracious, creative act. If it is so for Jesus, then it is likewise true for his followers. The tradition of miraculous conceptions and births is thereby refined in its Christian-Jewish context. The Greco-Roman conviction that a human's superiority can be explained only by a divine creative act is used to establish the prevenience of divine grace in the divine-human relation. This is what an ancient auditor would have heard.

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Note: The translations are made from Greek and Latin texts found in the Loeb Classical Library and Migne's *Patrologia*. Quotations from the Bible are from the NRSV.

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Dionysus's mother was a mortal woman, Semele, the daughter of king Cadmus of Thebes, and his father was Zeus, the king of the gods. Zeus' wife, Hera, discovered the affair while Semele was pregnant. Appearing as a nurse, Hera befriended Semele, who confided in her that Zeus was the actual father of the baby in her womb. Hera pretended not to believe her, and planted seeds of doubt in Semele's mind. Curious, Semele demanded of Zeus that he reveal himself in all his glory as



proof of his godhood. Though Zeus begged her not to ask this, she persisted and he agreed. Therefore he came to her wreathed in bolts of lightning; mortals, however, could not look upon an undisguised god without dying, and she perished in the ensuing blaze. Zeus rescued the fetal Dionysus by sewing him into his thigh. A few months later, Dionysus was born on Mount Pramnos in the island of Ikaria, where Zeus went to release the now-fully-grown baby from his thigh.

Dionysus problems with Hera were not yet over. At Hera's orders the Titans seized Zeus's newly-born son Dionysus, a horned child crowned with serpents and, despite his transformations, tore him into shreds. These they boiled in a cauldron, while a pomegranate-tree sprouted from the soil where his blood had fallen; but, rescued and reconstituted by his grandmother Rhea, he came to life again. After this Zeus arranged for his protection and turned him over the mountain nymphs to be raised.

When Dionysus grew up, he discovered the culture of the vine and the mode of extracting its precious juice; but Hera struck him with madness, and drove him forth a wanderer through various parts of the earth. In Phrygia the goddess Cybele, better known to the Greeks as Rhea, cured him and

taught him her religious rites, and he set out on a progress through Asia teaching the people the cultivation of the vine.

Dionysus became one of the most important gods in everyday life. He became associated with several key concepts. One was rebirth after death. Here his dismemberment by the Titans and return to life is symbolically echoed in tending vines, where the vines must be pruned back sharply, and then become dormant in winter for them to bear fruit. The other is the idea that under the influence of wine, one could feel possessed by a greater power. Unlike the other gods Dionysus was not only outside his believers but, also within them. At these times a man might be greater than himself and do works he otherwise could not.

image:

[http://www.google.com.au/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/Michelangelo\\_Bacchus.jpg&imgrefurl=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus&h=1000&w=577&sz=247&tbid=Y1evgIOU8Tu\\_eM:&tbnh=94&tbnw=54&zoom=1&usg=\\_\\_Uh5HB1k-erjbu83rz9LiZe5sIj0=&docid=4wH0FanjeqXFUM&sa=X&ei=J-5UUoLNFYrDkgWqkIEQ&ved=0CD0Q9QEwAg](http://www.google.com.au/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2d/Michelangelo_Bacchus.jpg&imgrefurl=http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dionysus&h=1000&w=577&sz=247&tbid=Y1evgIOU8Tu_eM:&tbnh=94&tbnw=54&zoom=1&usg=__Uh5HB1k-erjbu83rz9LiZe5sIj0=&docid=4wH0FanjeqXFUM&sa=X&ei=J-5UUoLNFYrDkgWqkIEQ&ved=0CD0Q9QEwAg)

# THE INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

1861-1986

SECOND EDITION

*by*

STEPHEN NEILL

*and*

TOM WRIGHT

**COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA**

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He is depicted in friezes and monuments as the young warrior in conflict with the bull—his victory is the victory of the forces of light and order against the forces of chaos and darkness. His cult spread with astonishing rapidity, especially among and through the soldiers, to the extreme limits of the Roman Empire. As one descends into the depths of the earth in the church of San Clemente at Rome, below all the Christian remains one comes at last to what is almost certainly a Mithraeum. It was no great surprise to scholars when excavations in the City of London revealed what must certainly have been a temple of Mithras, probably of the third century, in a remarkably good state of preservation.

To most British readers Mithras will probably be familiar through Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*. Kipling's Roman legionary on the threatened northern wall, with his very British and moral hymn to Mithras, is a highly romanticized figure. Yet perhaps Kipling, with the insight of genius, came nearer to understanding the attraction of the cult of Mithras for the soldier than many of the patient scholars, laboriously deciphering the ambiguous archaeological evidence. There was a moment at which it seemed that Mithras might be a rival to Christ in bidding for the faith and loyalty of the decaying Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup>

## V

It is evident that the Christian fathers, especially of the second century, were well acquainted with the mysteries. Clement of Alexandria tells us a great deal about them and claims to speak from special knowledge. Christians could not fail to note certain parallels between the sacred meals of the mystery cults and the sacraments of the Christians; the closer the parallels, the more convinced were the Christians that these pagan sacraments were a diabolical parody of the Christian rites, directly inspired by the evil spirits in order to lead the faithful astray. At no point have the

<sup>1</sup> Our knowledge of the mystery religions and of their forms of worship has been enormously extended by archaeology, and by the material drawn from the inscriptions and the papyri. The best survey of this whole field in English is still S. Angus, *The Mystery Religions and Christianity* (1925), though at a good many points this is now somewhat out of date. There is also an excellent brief account of the subject, and in particular of Mithras and Mithraism, in Sir Samuel Dill's *Roman Society: Nero to Marcus Aurelius* [1904], pp. 584–626.

fathers a good word to say for the mysteries; never once do they suggest that they were in some way a preparation for the Christian Gospel, or that they expressed in some dim way universal human aspirations to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the true answer.

Yet it was impossible for the Christians entirely to escape the mystery atmosphere. At point after point their vocabulary is seen to include elements which are common to Christian faith and mystery practice. Two instances will prove the point. From the time of Justin Martyr on, a term which is constantly used for baptism is *φωτισμός*, enlightenment. Now this is a word which is not absent from the New Testament;<sup>1</sup> by the time of Justin it seems to have acquired a technical significance, and this significance, if not derived from the mysteries, is at least very closely related to them, since there exactly the same terminology is to be found. Another Christian term, very common in later usage, is *σφραγίς*, the seal. Tertullian uses the corresponding Latin term of those who have passed the tests, and have been sealed.<sup>2</sup> Here again we have quite definitely a technical term of the mysteries, which has made its way into Christian usage; this very same word is to be found by no means infrequently in the Pauline writings.

The extent of this mystery-influence from the second century onwards had been generally recognized by Christian scholars. A new field for study was opened up, when the question was raised whether we must not trace this influence very much further back, and recognize that the surrounding world exercised a profound influence on the language, the thought, and the theology of the New Testament itself. This was the field of the so-called religious-historical school, which affirmed that Christianity can be understood only if it is studied as one phenomenon among the many phenomena of religion in the decaying Roman Empire and the Levantine world. For forty years this was perhaps the strongest influence in the field of New Testament interpretation.

It seems that the first scholar to raise this question in quite specific form was Otto Pflleiderer (1836–1900), who has therefore earned the title of 'the father of religio-historical theology in Germany'. Pflleiderer was convinced that Paul's theology is a

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Hebrews 6. 4, 10. 32; Ephesians 1. 18.

<sup>2</sup> See E. Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas*, pp. 295 ff.

mixture of Jewish and Hellenistic ideas, so that it could be described as both 'Christianized Pharisaism' and 'Christianized Hellenism': 'We can confidently say that Paul's theology would not have been what it is, if he had not drawn deeply on Greek wisdom as this was made available to him through the Hellenized Judaism of Alexandria.'<sup>1</sup> Pflleiderer proceeds to ask whether Paul's views on baptism may not have been derived from the Eleusinian mysteries:

It may be appropriate to mention here that initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries was regarded as a kind of rebirth, and that, in particular the hierophant to the service of the temple had to take a sacramental bath, from which he emerged as 'a new man' with a new name, in which 'the first was forgotten', that is to say, the old man with his old name was put away. We may permit ourselves to ask whether Paul, when from Corinth he wrote Romans chapter 6, was not aware of this rite of the Eleusinian mystery, this 'bath of new birth', and described the sacramental significance of the Christian rite of baptism after this model. Just as in relation to the Lord's Supper he used the analogy of the pagan sacrificial meal, his mystical understanding of baptism may have stood in direct relation to the Greek mysteries.<sup>2</sup>

We may contrast the bold confidence of Pflleiderer in his interpretation of the Eleusinian mysteries with the discreet sobriety of Professor Guthrie on the same subject. There is, in fact, much that is questionable in the paragraph that we have quoted. But it is clear that the question that Pflleiderer has raised is a legitimate one; the Church from its beginnings has never lived in a closed ghetto; it has acted and reacted with its surroundings; it is perfectly correct to inquire into the origin of its thoughts and words, and into the influence that the environment may have exercised on them.

This problem of the sacraments and their possible relationship to the world of the mysteries was taken up by two scholars in the fifteen years following Pflleiderer's first enunciation of the theme.

<sup>1</sup> O. Pflleiderer, *Das Urchristentum* (1887), p. 170. Pflleiderer makes the astonishing claim that the Wisdom of Solomon must be recognized as one of the main sources of Paul's theology; in point of fact there are very few traces of an influence of the Book of Wisdom in Paul, and, where this exists, it is nearly always by way of violent repudiation; this kind of Hellenism is something that Paul knows and has rejected. Pflleiderer's chief book was translated into English and published under the title *Primitive Christianity* (1906-11).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-6, quoted in W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament*, p. 209.

Albert Eichhorn in his book on the Lord's Supper in the New Testament, *Das Abendmahl im neuen Testament* (1898), admits that he is unable to bridge the gap between what we may suppose to have happened at the Last Supper and the sacramental ideas that seem unmistakably to be present in Paul. He is convinced that advance must be along the lines of religio-historical investigation. No such hesitation assailed Wilhelm Hietmüller. In his book on baptism and the Lord's Supper in Paul, *Taufe und Abendmahl bei Paulus* (1903), he takes the line that it is quite clearly demonstrated that the origins of Paul's view of the sacrament are not to be found in the original Christian Gospel, that in fact they stand in sharp contrast to it. Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper belongs to the 'mystical and enthusiastic' side of his teaching; in the Eucharist the Body and Blood of Christ are given; faith no longer plays any essential role. The very ancient idea of the eating of the god is to be noted; we are here on the ground not of the original Gospel, but of the general religious history of mankind:

The interpretation of baptism and the Lord's Supper stand, therefore, in unreconciled and irreconcilable incongruity with the central significance of faith in Pauline Christianity, that is to say with the purely spiritual and personal understanding of the religious relationship, which plays a leading role in Paul's own religion and in the world of his ideas . . . If Paul had not already found baptism and the Lord's Supper practised as sacraments, he would have been able from his own resources to turn them into sacraments. Not only so; from the standpoint of the philosophy of history, this is something which he was bound to do, if it was his purpose to conquer the world with his Gospel; for the world which he had to win was not yet capable of that purely spiritual apprehension of the Gospel which best corresponds to its true religious genius.<sup>1</sup>

We note that in these statements of Hietmüller four principles are involved, which by constant repetition have become almost sacrosanct in many schools of contemporary theology:

1. There is a radical difference between the preaching of Jesus and the theology of Paul.
2. There is a radical contradiction at the heart of Paul's theology, of which he seems only in part to have been himself aware.

<sup>1</sup> W. Hietmüller, *op. cit.*, p. 35; quoted in W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament*, pp. 256 f.



3. The cause of this contradiction was the intrusion into Paul's thought of elements from the Hellenistic world around him, which, however useful temporarily as accommodation to the world in which he lived, were nevertheless destructive of the true quality of faith as simple trust in God without the intervention of any intermediary, human or sacramental.

4. Here we see the beginning of 'catholicism', that reliance on the outward and visible, on ordinances, on the institution, which is always in deadly warfare against the true spiritual Gospel as understood by German Protestantism.<sup>1</sup>

The man who more than any other is remembered, and deservedly, in connexion with the dissemination of knowledge about this whole world of Hellenistic and eastern religion and its possible influences on the New Testament is Richard Reitzenstein (1861-1931). Reitzenstein had studied theology, but he was a professor of classical philology, and his independence in relation to technical theology was perhaps an advantage to him in his approach to this strange and unfamiliar world of religion. His best-known book, *Die hellenistischen Mysterien-religionen*, appeared in 1910. Here Reitzenstein maintains emphatically that Paul must have been acquainted with the religious literature of the Hellenistic world, and that this literature exercised a profound influence on his mind as he set himself to proclaim the Jewish faith in the alien world of the Hellenistic religions:

A fresh study of this religious literature became necessary from the moment at which the apostle prepared himself, with total self-dedication, for the work of preaching among the Greeks. . . . He was bound to acquaint himself with the forms of speech and the mental world of those groups which it was his aim to win, and to establish norms for the communities which he wished to bring into existence and could not organise after the pattern of the earliest Christian Church, and also for those forms of worship which he wished to establish among them. Is it really impossible to suppose that he adapted for this purpose, as perhaps his predecessors had done before him, forms which were already in existence?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is a curious heads-I-win-tails-you-lose quality about this scheme of thought, since at the same time Paul is often held to be the one who made the necessary break with Judaism—precisely by reinterpreting the Gospel in Hellenistic thought-forms! On this whole matter see further the concluding chapter of the present work.

<sup>2</sup> R. Reitzenstein, op. cit., pp. 58, 60.

Reitzenstein goes on to note the standing contrast in Paul between his almost excessive self-confidence as a recipient of divine revelation, and his consciousness of a very human weakness and uncertainty. With this duality we are already familiar in the world of Hellenistic religion:

We find this sense of a duality of existence, in the strictest sense of the term, in the mystery-literature and in the mystery-religions; we find it again in the Gnosticism which grew out of them. Here the 'man of the Spirit' is essentially a divine being, and, in spite of his earthly body, has been caught up into another world, which alone has value and reality. We meet this basically Hellenistic religious experience as already present in Paul; and the religio-historical method of interpretation can find a place for him in this line of development not indeed as the first but as the greatest of all the Gnostics.<sup>1</sup>

At this point it is necessary to elucidate briefly the use of the terms Gnosis and Gnosticism in recent New Testament scholarship. Every student of church history is familiar with the Gnosis of the second century—that curious mixture of Christian, Greek, Jewish, and oriental elements, which in the work of Basilides and Valentinus grew into imposing systems, and attempted to supply the Christian faith with an elaborate philosophical undergirding such as seemed to be lacking in the simple presentation of the faith in the New Testament. The Church's struggle with Gnosticism is the fiercest that it has ever endured, and the whole of its subsequent history has largely been determined by the nature of that struggle, and by the manner in which the victory of the Church was secured. One of the leading features in all forms of Gnosticism is the idea that a certain number of fragments from a higher, spiritual world have become prisoners in this lower and physical world; these are 'the spiritual' who can be redeemed. It is the function of Christ to descend into this lower world, bringing the true Gnosis, the knowledge through which the spiritual, but they only, can be delivered from the bondage of corruption and return to their original home. In some of the later books of the New Testament we find a number of references to views which appear to be akin to those of the Gnostics, but in a much less developed form. It had, however, been

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

(Treasure) For here, at last, we do find the heavenly redeemer, *Manda da Hayye*, the 'knowledge of life', also called *Enos Uthra*, who did of old descend to earth and overcame the powers of darkness, and so can guide lost souls, the imprisoned fragments of light, back to that world of light to which they belong. It is admitted that the Mandaean writings as we have them are late (seventh or eighth century), but they may contain very much earlier material. If it can be shown that their redemption myth goes back to a time earlier than the New Testament, then here at last we have the outlines of the Gnostic myth, which Paul and the Gentile Christians knew and took over, and into which they fitted their knowledge and understanding of Jesus Christ. The 'primeval man' of the Gnostic myth and Jesus the Christ are in a strange fashion joined to form the Christian Redeemer adored by the Hellenistic Christians.

The discovery and publication of the mystery-texts led to a perfect rash of books on the subject, many of them of little originality, but all developing the idea of the dependence of the Christian faith in one direction or another on the mystery-religions. In my judgement, one man stands far above all others as a contributor to the development of this religio-historical school of interpretation, which sees the New Testament as one part of a much wider historical phenomenon, the religion of the Levant in the period before and after Jesus Christ. Wilhelm Bousset (1865-1920) was an outstanding scholar, distinguished by width of outlook, accuracy of knowledge, and sobriety of judgement. His book on the religion of Judaism in New Testament times<sup>1</sup> was one of the first attempts scientifically to survey the whole field of Jewish religion before, during, and after the time of Christ. His book on the problems of Gnosticism<sup>2</sup> was a pioneer work, and after nearly eighty years is still worth reading. His greatest book is *Kyrios Christos* (1913), in which he attempts to draw together all the threads of the religio-historical understanding of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Die Religion des Judentums im neutestamentlichen Zeitalter* (1903)

<sup>2</sup> *Die Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (1907)

<sup>3</sup> I must confess to a special interest in Bousset. *Kyrios Christos* is the first German theological work that I ever read, forty years before this chapter was first written! I borrowed it from Clement Hoskyns to read during the long vacation of 1922. It is evidence of the haphazard way in which we do things that this great book was not translated into English until 1970. Dr C. Colpe, in his book *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (1962), points out that in 1913 Professor Bousset was no longer representative of the religio-historical school, his book is a summing up of results, but other members of the school had already gone beyond the point of view set forth by Bousset in his great book.

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taken as axiomatic by scholars that Gnosticism was a Christian heresy, a corruption of the original Christian message by the incorporation into it of a variety of alien elements.

We shall consider later under another aspect the question of the origin and development of Gnosticism. At this point it is to be noted that scholars of the religio-historical school became convinced, as a result of their researches, that Gnosticism was much older than had generally been supposed. Before the first appearance of Christianity in the world, there was in existence all through the ancient East a system of religious thought, dualistic and pessimistic in character, but with its own characteristic doctrine of redemption. The first preachers of the Gospel, we are told, entered into this Gnostic world, took over the framework of its thinking, introduced into it the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who in this Hellenistic atmosphere became identified with the heavenly man, the Gnostic supernatural redeemer, in whom the earliest Christians in the Hellenistic world had already believed before their conversion to the Christian faith.

But where, in point of fact, do we find evidence for a pre-Christian belief in this Gnostic divine redeemer? The sources from the Graeco-Roman world appeared to be silent on the matter, so Reitzenstein pushed his researches ever further eastwards. Beyond the Levantine world lies Persia, with its ancient traditions of the conflict between light and darkness, between Ahuramazda and Ahriman; here Reitzenstein believed that he had found the missing link in the chain of evidence, and from 1916 onwards Iran, and the supposed Iranian myth of redemption, formed the centre of his thinking.<sup>1</sup> Here, he believed, it was possible to find the origins of much that had previously passed as Christian.

Then light seemed to come from a region which had long lain in almost total obscurity. The Mandaean are a small quasi-Christian sect living in Mesopotamia. Little was known of them with certainty until from 1905 onwards the Göttingen scholar M. Lidzbarski began to produce reliable translations of their literature, and especially of their main literary possession, the *Ginza*.

<sup>1</sup> The book in which this view was first put forth was *Das iranische Erlösungsmysterium* (1921). All that needs to be said about Reitzenstein's Iranian adventure has been expressed by the best Iranologist of this century, Professor R. C. Zaehner, in one rather unkind but truthful sentence: 'The Iranian *Erlösungsmysterium* is largely Reitzenstein's invention' (*Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (1961), p. 347).



*Kyrios Christos* is a work on the grand scale. In it Bousset tries to give a sketch of the whole development of Christian thought till the time of Irenaeus towards the end of the second century. The method that he has chosen to follow is well grounded. Irenaeus marks a great division within church history, he may be called the first of the great 'Catholic' theologians. With little originality he sums up clearly and intelligently the teaching of the Church as it had taken shape through the tremendous struggle of the Church with second-century Gnosticism, and as in fact it was to remain for many centuries. Irenaeus, as we saw earlier, quotes from every book of the New Testament except the Epistle to Philemon, and thus shows at an early stage the way in which the New Testament came to be collected and recognized as 'canonical'. He is a bishop at a time at which the bishop has already become the recognized centre of authority and unity. Irenaeus gives us a fixed point of doctrine, from which, if we wish, we can work backwards through the various stages of development until we come to the New Testament origins themselves.

Bousset's great contribution is that he understood the early Christian groups primarily as worshipping communities. It was in worship that, more than at any other time, they realized their own being, the nature of their existence as a Christian fellowship. Bousset uses the term *Kyrios* as the clue to the significance of their worship.

The term *Kyrios*, Lord, is a perplexing one. It is used in the Septuagint Greek translation of the Old Testament as the equivalent of the mysterious unspoken name of the Jewish God, the Jehovah of our Authorized Version. But it seems clear that it was also a title frequently used of the mystery gods in the Hellenistic world, 'the Lord Sarapis', 'the Lord Attis', and so on, and that it was specially used in this way by the groups of worshippers who gathered around the mystery-god, to be renewed by partaking of his life in a sacramental meal, and ecstatically to feel his presence with them. It is this, according to Bousset, that accounts for the prevalent use of the term among the Gentile Christians of the early period. 'The Son of Man of the primitive Christian community is derived from Jewish eschatology, and continues to be an eschatological figure... The *Kyrios* of the early Hellenistic Churches is a power which is *present* in the cult and

in worship.' But this understanding of the significance of Christ, so Bousset goes on to tell us, resulted in a major shift in the Christian's outlook on his world, and of the purpose of God in it.

In this presence of the *Kyrios* in the act of the worship, in the experiences of his apprehensible reality which came to Christians at worship, there was from the beginning a mighty alternative to the eschatological ideas of the earliest Christian communities—without observation, quite gradually, the centre of gravity of the faith began to shift from the future into the present. *Kyrios*-worship, liturgy and sacrament were the most dangerous and powerful foes of earlier communities. For if this concept were ever to take its place in fully developed form, then the other must necessarily lose its élan, the vital power by which it swept everything along with itself. This, however, we may take to have been the development, to a very large extent the Son of Man has been forgotten, and remains in the Gospels as a hieroglyph, the true significance of which has been forgotten, the future belongs to the *Kyrios*, who is present in the act of worship.<sup>1</sup>

Bousset draws a number of other conclusions from his interpretation of the evidence. In many cases these Christian groups had been associations of mystery-worshippers before they became Christians. All that has happened is that their mystery-god has acquired a new name and a new character as Jesus of Nazareth. Naturally such worshippers have very little interest in the historic events of the life of Jesus. Everything for them is concentrated in the *drama* of the death and resurrection, a drama that is repeated among them Sunday by Sunday, into which they feel themselves ecstatically caught up. In the sacrament they receive the very Body and Blood of the God, they become partakers of his life, and so they have the assurance that they have passed from death to life. The eschatological tension of a future which has become already present has been changed into the sacramental tension of an outward which has become already inward, of a time-conditioned being which already enjoys timelessness.

As usual, there was a certain time-lag before these German ideas

<sup>1</sup> It has to be recorded with regret that Bousset remarks elsewhere that this curious duplication of the object of adoration in Christian worship would be unthinkable, except in surroundings where the monotheism of the Old Testament no longer rules as an assuredly and unconditionally accepted truth. There is no evidence whatever that the Hellenistic Christian groups, deeply influenced as they were by the Old Testament, were less firm in their monotheism than any other part of the primitive Christian community.

became widely familiar in England. The greatest contribution to their popularization was made by one of the most notable English New Testament scholars of the century. Kirsopp Lake (1872-1946), as a young man, had rather surprisingly gone to Leiden in Holland as New Testament Professor. In 1913, Trinity College, Cambridge, was about to appoint a theological lecturer. One of the favoured candidates was Lake. At the crucial moment word reached the great Master of Trinity, Henry Montague Butler, that Lake was unorthodox in his views, and this, it must be confessed, was a mild way of putting it. The choice in consequence fell on the other candidate, Frederick Tennyant, Lake's senior by seven years, and hardly a pillar of the kind of orthodoxy that Butler approved. No criticism can be made of the choice of a man whose *Philosophical Theology* is one of those classics that is likely to survive for centuries. Yet it cannot but be regretted that Lake was lost to America. There he did distinguished work, especially on the text of the New Testament—the little book on the subject that he prepared in collaboration with Silva New is still the best short introduction to New Testament textual criticism that exists in any language. Yet Lake never seemed quite to fulfil the promise of his earlier years.

In 1911 he had produced a book called *The Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, which is a very notable book indeed. For the first time the conclusions of the religio-historical school were made known to the English-speaking world in most attractive and dramatic form. Some of Lake's positions could not be maintained today. And, as we came to read the German books which in fact he was summarizing and interpreting, we realized that Lake was not quite so original as we had supposed him to be. For all that, I think that those of us who read Lake when we were young will be inclined to think that this is one of the best books on the New Testament that has ever been written in the English language. This is the way it ought to be done. Under Lake's skilful guidance, we feel ourselves one with those new and struggling groups of Christians, in all the perplexities of trying to discover what it means to be a Christian in a non-Christian world. And there is the Apostle, so very much in working clothes and without a halo, we feel in our bones the passionate eagerness of Paul for better news from Corinth, the passionate relief when the good news arrives.

There were, of course, some very disturbing things in the book. Paul had always been regarded as the pillar of Protestant orthodoxy, what would Protestantism be without Paul's doctrine of justification by faith? Yet Paul, as Lake presents him, takes a very realistic view of the Lord's Supper in terms of the eating and drinking of the God. Anglo-Catholics were perhaps a little incautiously jubilant, their view of the Lord's Supper seemed to go back to much earlier times than had generally been supposed, and it appeared now to be possible to quote the Apostle of the Gentiles in favour of a view with which he was imagined by many to have been unfamiliar. Some Protestants were a little unduly alarmed. Wiser heads thought that, whatever view of the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist we may come to hold, the Hellenistic mystery-religions are not exactly the allies we would choose to have in the defence of our position. But, when we have made every allowance that can be made for later discovery and for the need for more prudent statement, nothing can alter the fact that Lake had made it necessary for every English student to take seriously the Hellenistic background of the New Testament. His interpretation might be wrong. There could be no evasion of the questions he had asked.

We waited long and eagerly for a complementary volume on the later Epistles of Paul, but somehow the book never came: *The Earlier Epistles* stands as a token, as the promise of a work that was never completed.

## VI

In the previous section we have given a sketch of the development of a certain school and type of New Testament interpretation which draws heavily on the alleged influences of the Hellenistic environment on early Christian thought. The outcome of this process has been the erection of three structures of thought which are accepted by a great many scholars of this school as though they were self-evident realities. These three are the pre-Christian Gnostic myth, Gentile Christianity, and 'early Catholicism'. It is now time to turn on these three structures the light of scientific criticism and to consider how far they have really been established beyond the possibility of cavil or disproof.