

Chapter VI

The Religious Background

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It ought to be self-evident to every reader of the New Testament that one of the most important tools in the understanding of its message is a proper appreciation of the religious background to its thought. Jesus himself and his disciples, along with almost all the writers of the New Testament, were Jews, and most of the early churches embraced people with very diverse religious backgrounds. We cannot get very far through the New Testament without encountering the representatives of various religions, whether it be the Pharisees and Sadducees of the gospel traditions or the enigmatic representatives of pagan religious thought who are mentioned in the Pauline letters and Acts. It is therefore essential for the student of the New Testament to be thoroughly familiar with the background of religious thought against which it was written.

I. *The Sources*

This religious background to the New Testament writings comprises three main elements:

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is of crucial importance for a correct understanding of the message of the New Testament. On almost every page of the New Testament we are reminded of the fact that the coming of Jesus was the decisive conclusion to a long history of religious experience. He was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament (Mk. 14:61f.), and his coming was the fulfilment of the ancient prophecies (Lk. 4:21). Even relatively trivial incidents in his life and work could be seen in this light (Mt. 2:16-23), and though it was not generally apparent at the time, even the events of his death and resurrection were later seen as the fulfilment of Old Testament predictions (Acts 2:22-36).¹

Not only could Jesus' own life, death and resurrection be seen in the context of the Old Testament, but the new life of the Christian church could also be interpreted in terms of Old Testament categories. St. Paul had no doubt that because of their relationship to Jesus the Christ, even Gentile

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Christians could be described as "sons of Abraham", heirs of the promises made in the Old Testament to God's chosen people (Gal. 3:29). On almost every page of St. Paul's

¹ Cf. B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic* (London 1961), pp. 32-137.

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correspondence, Old Testament figures are taken up and reinterpreted, while even small details of his language can often conceal an allusion to some Old Testament event. Even such a cosmopolitan church as that at Corinth could be expected to have their Christian faith thoroughly grounded in the Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1ff.).

2. CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM

The Judaism of the first century A.D. was no doubt more complex than people often suppose,² but three main strands appear to have had an important influence on the faith of the first Christians:

(a) *The Pharisees* and their beliefs almost certainly exercised an important influence on the development of New Testament theology. Though to the first evangelist they were the arch-enemies of Jesus and his followers (Mt. 22-23), St. Paul could boast more than once of his upbringing and education as a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5; cf. Gal. 1:13f.). Though his attitude to the Old Testament Torah shows that he had cast aside many of the most cherished beliefs of the Pharisees, it is certain that he continued to be deeply influenced by what he had learned from his Pharisaic teachers. At his trial before Agrippa (Acts 26:4-8), as before the Sanhedrin at a previous trial (Acts 23:6-10), the author of Acts depicts him appealing to the belief in the future resurrection which he shared with the Pharisees—and we can see from his own treatment of this very subject in 1 Cor. 15 how deeply indebted he was to the traditions of his fathers.³

(b) *Qumran doctrines* have also played their part in helping us to understand the religious background of the New Testament. Though we must reject outright any theories that Christianity was derived from the Qumran community, there are many points of contact. One of the most spectacular reversals of scholarly opinion in recent years has come about largely because of the discovery that the dualism of the Qumran scrolls bears a certain resemblance to that of the Fourth Gospel. As a result of this, the Fourth Gospel can now be seen in a completely new light, both historically and theologically,⁴ while some scholars are suggesting a much earlier date for it than has hitherto been proposed.⁵

(c) *Hellenistic Judaism* must also be taken into account. This was the kind of Judaism that developed among the Jews of the Diaspora, as they tried to accommodate their ancestral faith to the requirements of a different situation. Its most eloquent exponent was Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus and St. Paul, who set himself the task of interpreting the Old Testament in terms of Greek philosophy. In order to do this, he had to allegorize almost the whole of the

² W. Forster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (E.T. Edinburgh 1964).

³ W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London 1970³), pp. 303ff. At the same time, we cannot understand the ideas that Paul was opposing without taking into account the Gnosticising background of the Corinthian correspondence: cf. W. Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth* (E.T. Nashville 1971), pp. 155-159.

⁴ Cf. J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *John and Qumran* (London 1972).

⁵ After a survey of the present debate on the Fourth Gospel, A. M. Hunter is willing to date it as early as A.D. 80. Cf. his *According to John* (London 1968). J. A. T. Robinson is willing to support an even earlier date; see his book, *Redating the New Testament* (London 1976).

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Old Testament, thus removing it from the realm of the truly historical, but in the process he claimed to have proved that Moses had anticipated all that was best in classical Greek philosophy! The thought of Philo and those who followed him is often an important consideration in

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the interpretation of Pauline theology. In Gal. 4:21-31, for instance, Paul uses the allegory of Sarah and Hagar to prove his theological points, and the question naturally arises whether Paul was using the same method as the Alexandrian Jews, and if so whether he did it with the same presuppositions in mind. The answer to this question will give us an important insight into St. Paul's attitude towards the Old Testament, and his understanding of Jesus in Old Testament categories.

3. HELLENISTIC THOUGHT

The other main area of religious thought that provided a backcloth to the early church is the religion of the Hellenistic world. By New Testament times, the cults of the old Greek gods had lost their former power and the main religions of the Roman empire were the mystery cults and various forms of what later became known as Gnosticism. Both these systems were concerned with the provision of a personal salvation for the individual. Generalization in this area of study is always a hazardous business, but we shall perhaps not go too far wrong if we distinguish the Mysteries from Gnosticism by saying that the former claimed to provide a personal salvation by magic, whereas the latter did it by more philosophical-theological means. This distinction is not a very clear-cut one, but in this it merely reflects the confusion of the Hellenistic world, where men were willing to grasp any straw that held out the slightest support for their future spiritual security.

What we know of these Hellenistic religions has come from two main archaeological finds. From about 1850 large quantities of papyri were discovered in Egypt, many of them containing accounts of the magical religious observances of the Hellenistic world. These were gathered together and published by Adolf Deissmann as *Licht vom Osten* in 1908.⁶ These magical papyri shed a great deal of light on the popular superstitions of Hellenism. None of the papyri as such can be dated earlier than the Christian era, and most of them are from the second to the sixth centuries A.D. But there is plenty of other evidence for the widespread practice of magic in New Testament times. This includes cursing tablets, magical amulets and magicians' apparatus, some of it dating from the pre-Christian era.⁷ The Gnostic religion is known to us through the accounts of Christian forms of Gnosticism given by the early church Fathers, and also through a vast quantity of MSS discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt about 1945.⁸ This collection, written in

⁶ E.T. *Light from the Ancient East* (London 1927).

⁷ For a comprehensive account of all this material, see J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition* (London 1974), pp. 5-15, 20-44.

⁸ For an account of their discovery, cf. J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics*, (E.T. London 1960).

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Coptic, includes sayings attributed to Jesus but not contained in the canonical gospels (e.g. *The Gospel of Thomas*), along with more speculative and philosophical Gnostic treatises. These MSS are still in the process of being edited and published by scholars, but so far none has come to light from a pre-Christian period.

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II. The Use of Background Materials

How can we use such varied materials? There are two main points at which such comparative materials can be a help to the exegete:⁹

1. THE USE OF SIMILAR LANGUAGE

A quick reading of the comparative texts soon reveals that the same terminology often occurs in several different contexts. Take the idea of "knowledge", for instance, which runs like a metallic thread through the fabric of all the materials enumerated above. An uncritical approach to the subject might lead us to suppose that in all these religious texts it has one and the same meaning, and so there will be no difficulty in deciding its meaning in the New Testament. But in fact, there is great variety even among the non-Christian sources. "Knowledge" is a prominent theme in the Old Testament, where knowledge of God is the prerogative of those who live in close covenant fellowship with him;¹⁰ and in the Qumran scrolls "knowledge" is the possession of the religious elite of the community.¹¹ In the writings of Philo and the Gnostics, on the other hand, knowledge (*γνῶσις*) is something secret that can be obtained only by the soul to which esoteric religious truths have been revealed.¹²

In view of these distinctions of emphasis, we can see that the meaning of *γνῶσις* in the New Testament is a matter for careful exegesis of the text. What we must do is to make a careful analysis of the use of the word as it occurs in all the relevant religious contexts, and then to compare the different uses. As often as not, we will discover that the New Testament concept, though having some relationship to Jewish or Hellenistic religious thought, is in a distinctive class of its own, and the Christian meaning of a given word will usually be determined by the eschatological fact of Christ.¹³

⁹ See B. M. Metzger, "Methodology in the Study of the Mystery Religions", in *Historical and Literary Studies*, (Leiden 1968), pp. 1-24 (originally in *Harvard Theological Review*, 48, 1955, 1-20).

¹⁰ According to N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London 1944), p. 9, knowledge of God was the one feature of Old Testament religion that distinguished it from other ancient religions.

¹¹ Cf. W. D. Davies, *Christian Origins and Judaism* (London 1962), pp. 119-144. F. F. Bruce, *Second Thoughts on the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Exeter 1966), pp. 115f [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/book_dss_bruce.html].

¹² Cf. Philo, *Somn.* 11.226.

¹³ The kind of study required is exemplified in J. Dupont, *Gnosis* (Louvain/Paris 1949).

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The importance of exercising due caution in dealing with linguistic terms is now generally recognised, though in the early days after the discovery of the Hellenistic magical texts some extravagant statements were made on the flimsy basis of common terminology. In 1913, Wilhelm Bousset wrote the first edition of his important book, *Kyrios Christos*,¹⁴ in which he suggested that since the first Gentile Christians were accustomed to hailing their pagan gods as κύριος, they instinctively worshipped the Christian Jesus by using the same word—though the practice went far deeper than that, for the word itself carried with it a multitude of theological associations, which were also transformed into beliefs about Jesus.¹⁵ Consequently, when the New Testament writers refer to Jesus as ὁ κύριος they are demonstrating their theological isolation from the historical Jesus, and their close association with the pagan theology of the Hellenistic world. Far from being the guardians of the truth revealed once and for all by Jesus the Christ, the apostles were religious plagiarists of the worst sort, attempting to conceal the rags of a discredited Jewish apocalypticist beneath the rich robes of Hellenistic deity.

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No-one today would accept this kind of argument in its entirety, for it is now seen that in his enthusiasm for newly discovered sources of information Bousset ignored the important semantic problems involved in transferring a set of ideas from one culture to another. No doubt the early Christians thought of Jesus as in some way a superior counterpart to their pagan "lords", but the evidence does not allow us to go much beyond that.¹⁶ James Barr has gone so far as to suggest that it is a linguistic impossibility for isolated words to convey theological meaning from one context to another, and though his judgment may well be too sweeping, it is a timely reminder that if linguistic comparisons are to mean anything a very complex analysis is called for.¹⁷

2. THE USE OF RELIGIOUS MYTHOLOGY

The next question that arises is this: if several religious sources describe their deity in similar ways, doing similar things in the same contexts, what are the possible relationships between them? In the case of the New Testament, this has resolved itself into two main issues, concerned with the miracle stories of the synoptic gospels and the Christology of the Pauline churches.

(a) *Miracle Stories*. It was recognised from the very start that the synoptic miracle stories had a certain similarity to the magical performances of wizards and "divine men" in the Hellenistic world. There is ample evidence for that in the New Testament itself (Mt. 7:22; 1 Jn. 4:1; cf. 2

¹⁴ E.T. Nashville 1970.

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, pp. 119-152.

¹⁶ For a full discussion of this particular example, see J. G. Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (London 1921), pp. 293-317; V. Taylor, *The Names of Jesus* (London 1953), pp. 38-51. In a recent discussion of the christology of the early church, M. Hengel argues that there is little value in considering the Hellenistic parallels at all, and suggests that its true background is to be found in Judaism and the Old Testament (*The Son of God*, E.T. London 1976).

¹⁷ J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London 1961).

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Thes. 2:9; Rev. 13:13ff.), and at a later date Clement of Alexandria used the similarity as an argument to advance the claims of the Christian faith: Gentiles, he said, had no reason to deny the miracles accredited to Jesus, since their own religious traditions contained miracles of a similar nature (*Strom.* vi.3). There were also miracle stories told of the Jewish rabbis,¹⁸ though most scholars have failed to discern any meaningful relationship between these and the synoptic traditions.¹⁹ It is more usual to treat the gospel miracles as stories that describe Jesus after the pattern of the familiar figure of Hellenistic magic.²⁰ Nor is there any good reason for us to dispute the general validity of this assertion. In a world thoroughly permeated with the superstitious and the magical, where magicians and miracle-workers were two a penny,²¹ it is no surprise that the early Christians should soon have realised the apologetic value of the miracle traditions. For people who had previously followed the local *magus*, it was important to know that Jesus had exercised a more powerful form of supernatural power. In the traditions themselves, Jesus was often portrayed doing the very same things as the Hellenistic magician claimed to be able to do. The exorcism of demons, coupled with magical methods of healing, like the use of spittle, were the stock-in-trade of the Hellenistic wonder-worker.²²

Some recent studies have emphasised again the importance of this aspect of the synoptic traditions. R. P. Martin argues that one of the purposes of Mark's gospel was to tone down these magical associations that were so

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clear in the miracle stories. In the face of a Docetic Christology that had arisen in the Gentile churches from a misunderstanding of Pauline teaching, Mark edited the miracle traditions to exclude the possibility of misunderstanding. He wanted to avoid the impression that Jesus was very closely allied with the commonplace magic of Hellenism, hoping that this would sweep the ground from under the feet of would-be Docetists.²³ J. M. Hull reaches somewhat different

¹⁸ For the value of rabbinic parallels, cf. P. Fiebig, *Jüdische Wundergeschichten des neutestamentlichen Zeitalters unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihres Verhältnisses zum Neuen Testament* (Tübingen 1911). SB *in loc.* cite a number of rabbinic parallels, while R. Bultmann often refers to them in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (E.T. Oxford 1972), pp. 209-244.

¹⁹ According to Fiebig (*op. cit.*) the rabbinic parallels are the only ones worth taking seriously, for they at least share the monotheism of the New Testament traditions, whereas the Hellenistic parallels are usually polytheistic. But Dibelius has argued on form-critical grounds that the rabbinic miracle stories are quite different from their Christian counterparts and from the Hellenistic stories. Rabbinic miracles fall into two formal types: "theodicy legends", designed to show God's interest in the keeping of the Law, and "personal legends", designed to enhance the reputation of the wonder-worker. Since there is no formal analogy to these types in the New Testament, he argues that there can have been no real relationship (*From Tradition to Gospel*, E. T. Greenwood 1971, pp. 133-151). On this whole question of Hellenistic and Rabbinic parallels, cf. L. Sabourin, "Hellenistic and Rabbinic 'Miracles' ", *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2 (1972), pp. 281-307.

²⁰ Cf. H. D. Betz, "Jesus as Divine Man", in *Jesus and the Historian*, ed. F. T. Trotter (Philadelphia 1968), pp. 114-133.

²¹ According to Petronius, *Sat.* 17, in Rome "the gods walk abroad so commonly in our streets that it is easier to meet a god than a man."

²² Cf. Hull, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-72. Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp.81-103.

²³ R. P. Martin, *Mark: Evangelist and Theologian* (Exeter 1972), pp. 175f, 214ff.

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conclusions after his analysis of the synoptics. According to him, Mark portrays Jesus acting in precisely the ways expected of the Hellenistic "divine man", while in Luke the contrast between the magic of Jesus and that of his opponents is brought out very clearly, and in Matthew Jesus is portrayed not so much as a miracle worker as a teacher of faith.²⁴

Can we go further, and suppose that the synoptic miracle stories are pagan myths applied to the Christian Jesus? The earlier form critics often thought so, but they tended to make pronouncements about such historical questions on quite inadequate grounds.²⁵ The fact that the gospel traditions have the same "form" as the Hellenistic stories proves nothing except that the first Christians were fully aware of the apologetic requirements of the moment, and presented their material accordingly.

In dealing with such a vast subject, we need to decide each case on its own merits,²⁶ but there are a number of guidelines that may be noted briefly here:

(i) The purpose of the magical performance in Hellenistic religion was usually to coerce the gods to do as the "holy man" wanted.²⁷ The magical papyri contain the incantations, prayers and rituals to be used to this end. Each circumstance could be dealt with in a particular way, so that with increasing pressure being brought to bear, the god was finally forced to submit to the will of the magician. There is no parallel to this in any of the New Testament miracles. Jesus does not operate in order to pressurize God into acting on his behalf—indeed, on one crucial occasion there is a definite emphasis on Jesus' submission to the will of God (Mk. 14:32ff.). Nor is there any record of Jesus using the kind of spells, incantations or magical apparatus that are described in the papyri.

(ii) It is unlikely that it would have been possible to credit Jesus with miraculous powers if he had not in fact possessed such powers in one form or another. Both the rabbinic and the Hellenistic miracle stories had been evolved over a long period of time, but with the gospel traditions the situation was quite different, for the traditions were reduced to writing within the lifetime of eyewitnesses of the events they purport to describe. This does not necessarily mean that Jesus actually thought of himself as a magician after the Hellenistic model, though we can have no doubt that the early Christians were being faithful to their Lord and Master when they so portrayed him.²⁸

²⁴ Op. cit., pp. 142-145.

²⁵ See p. 160.

²⁶ For this kind of study, cf. H. van der Loos, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Leiden 1968², Supplement to Nov.T IX).

²⁷ Hull, op. cit., pp. 42ff.

²⁸ "We can perhaps venture to suggest... that Jesus did not think of himself as a magician... But to the early Christian the myth of the magus was helpful in various ways; it drew attention to certain aspects of the salvation of Christ in a manner which no other myth was able to do." (Hull, op. cit., p. 145).

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(iii) The miracles play a theological part in the gospels that is unparalleled both in pagan and in later Christian sources.²⁹ They are eschatological events, portraying the coming of the Kingdom and themselves being a part of the salvation brought by Jesus. In them God's ac-

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tion in Christ is revealed, his power is made manifest, and men are called to faith and repentance. This is quite different from the purposes of either Hellenistic or rabbinic magic.³⁰

(b) *Christology*. Some scholars have gone further, and have argued that the Christology of the early church was largely dependent on an earlier Hellenistic doctrine. It has often been urged that there was in the Hellenistic world, specifically in Gnostic circles, a widespread myth of a Primal Man, who took upon himself the appearance (though not the reality) of material form, descending to save the souls of men, in much the same fashion as the Christian Jesus is said to have done.³¹ Thus, the pre-existence of Jesus as a divine figure, his true involvement in material flesh, his death, resurrection and ascension are all nothing more than a projection of pagan religiosity through the befuddled minds of the apostles onto the pages of the New Testament.

This suggestion founders on the fact that there is no evidence for such a myth in pre-Christian times, though there is plenty of evidence for it from the second century onwards.³² This highlights another basic consideration to be applied in the comparison of religious texts, for it is all too easy to compare texts from quite different ages, and so to arrive at misleading conclusions. The fact that comparative dating of materials has caused so much confusion in this area of study draws our attention to another problem in utilising non-Christian sources to interpret the New Testament, for in this field, as perhaps in no other, the attitude of every scholar is bound to be determined by his own presuppositions, and particularly his answer to the question: Is there such a thing as the supernatural?

The scholar who answers that question negatively must regard the whole concept of deity as the New Testament presents it as nothing more than an elaboration of pagan religious mythology. Since Jesus can have been no different from any other man, the true message of the New Testament is not one we can readily understand today in its own terms. It was essentially an existential message, related to the thought-patterns and ideas of ancient man, who in a vague way believed in miracles, though in fact what he thought he believed in only existed as a mythological hangover from his religious past. According to this view, the concept of miracle was an invention of unsophisticated man, designed to answer questions which at that stage of his development were incapable of any other explanation. Consequently, if we find ancient records

²⁹ Jesus and his followers were often portrayed as Hellenistic magicians in the second century and many of the apocryphal gospels describe miracles that are clearly borrowed from Hellenistic magical traditions. Compared with these, the New Testament traditions are remarkable for their constraint and their recognition that the portrayal of Jesus as a master-magician was not the final judgment on his significance. Cf. Hull, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-4.

³⁰ Cf. R. H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (London, 1963), pp. 39-45. A. Richardson, *The Miracle Stories of the Gospels* (London 1941), pp. 38-58.

³¹ Cf. inter alia R. Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (E.T. Oxford 1971), p. 102 n. 1.

³² For a full discussion of this theory, see E. M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (London 1973), pp. 163-169.

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like the New Testament which appear to relate incidents in which the miraculous took place, it must be explained as a reflection of an unsophisticated stage in the development of humanity. Since Greek pagans were at the same stage of development as the New Testament Christians, the miraculous elements of the New Testament and the pagan miracles are all of a piece, and are nothing more or less than variant forms of the same irrelevant phenomenon.

To the scholar who does accept the possibility of the miraculous, the question is seen in a different light. He will take his starting point from the assumption that there is no *a priori* reason why miracles should not happen.

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Nor indeed is there any *a priori* reason why Jesus should not have been divine, as he evidently claimed to be. Beginning as they do from completely different premises, it is not surprising that supernaturalists reach quite different conclusions from naturalists. For the supernaturalist, it is possible that Jesus was divine and that miracles could take place. Whether in fact Jesus was divine and did perform miracles is something that needs to be established by the norms of historical and literary investigation. In this enquiry no investigator has the right to impose his own preconceived ideas onto the New Testament texts (nor indeed onto the Hellenistic or rabbinic texts), but we all need to be aware of our presuppositions, and to make due allowance for them.

From this brief survey we can see that the benefits of a judicious use of other religious texts in the exegesis of the New Testament are many. The main advantage is a simple one: we are enabled to view the New Testament writings from the perspective of men and women of the first century. This is something we take for granted today, but it is fundamental to our whole modern understanding of the New Testament. If we did not know about the paganism of Hellenism we would be unable to understand most of the New Testament. If we knew nothing about contemporary Judaism, we could hardly begin to exegete the synoptic traditions and much of St. Paul's writings. Used wisely, these materials can add a basic dimension to our comprehension of the New Testament. Used indiscriminately, they can lead us up many a blind alley. But no reader of the New Testament can say they are irrelevant.

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Prepared for the Web in November 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

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