

## ST. PAUL AND THE MYSTERY-RELIGIONS.

### I

#### PROLEGOMENA

OURS is an age of new things. In no province is this more apparent than in that of New Testament interpretation. And no section of the New Testament continues to stimulate more revolutionary theories than the Pauline Epistles. It is true that discussions of authenticity have lost the importance assigned to them by scholars of the earlier time, like Baur, or by later critical investigators, like Van Manen. The emphasis has been shifted. The primary question at issue is the essential nature of St. Paul's view of the Christian faith.

The answers given to the question are extraordinarily divergent. Scholars of the calibre of Holtzmann and Deissmann are still convinced that the clue to Pauline Christianity is to be found in the conversion-experience of the apostle. A. Schweitzer, in his recently published *Geschichte der Paulinischen Forschung* (Tübingen, 1911), believes that Paul's doctrine is "simply and exclusively eschatological" (p. 190). For Loisy, Paul has been the chief factor in transforming the original Gospel of Jesus into "a religion of mystery." Professor K. Lake holds that "Christianity . . . was always, at least in Europe, a Mystery-Religion" (*Earlier Epistles of St. Paul*, p. 215), and his statement that "Baptism is, for St. Paul and his readers, universally and unquestionably accepted as a 'mystery,' a sacrament which works *ex opere operato*" (p. 385), along with others of the

same drift, suggests that the Apostle of the Gentiles played a prominent part in creating such a type of Christianity.

It is obvious that if this mystery-theory of Pauline Christianity can be established, many of our fundamental ideas regarding the Apostle's religious outlook will require to be transformed. We must courageously face such a transformation if the facts demand it. In the following articles we propose to examine some of the available evidence and to ascertain how far it leads.

It is impossible, however, to appreciate the influences to which St. Paul and his converts were exposed, without attempting briefly to sketch, in the light of recent research, the religious atmosphere of the Hellenistic world, at the time when the new faith began to be propagated throughout the Roman Empire. It is needless to say that here we are supremely indebted to the investigations of Cumont, P. Wendland, Reitzenstein, Bousset, and Dieterich. We shall discuss, in turn, the religious revival associated with Stoicism, more especially those elements in it which may be largely attributed to the famous Stoic-Peripatetic, Posidonius; the Orphic strain so widely diffused over the Hellenistic area; certain influential tendencies appearing prominently in those Oriental cults which began to press westwards; and, finally, various significant features of current (popular) religion which, for convenience' sake, may be grouped under the designation of Earlier Gnosticism. It will often be difficult to draw sharp lines of division between those divergent but related phases of religious thought and aspiration.

It has long since been recognised that Stoicism<sup>1</sup> con-

<sup>1</sup> By "Stoicism" we mean that phase of development in the Stoic school which had become highly eclectic, adopting to a large extent Platonic conceptions, more particularly in its idea of God. See Wendland, *Hellenistisch-Römische Kultur*, p. 184, note 3.

tributed many of the elements best fitted to satisfy popular cravings at the time when the national faiths of the Graeco-Roman world were falling to pieces. The general drift towards a more or less vague monotheism was accelerated by a process, mediated in great measure, at least, by prominent Stoic teachers. This was the transformation of earlier deities, with the help of the allegorical method, into a hierarchy of hypostases of the supreme Divinity. Many of the Hellenistic speculations dealing with *νοῦς*, *λόγος*, *σοφία*, etc., have their origin in this circle of thought, and their bizarre outcome is apparent in the more fully-developed Gnostic systems. This type of theologising had a unique attractiveness from the Stoic point of view. The trained intellect regarded the abstractions referred to as attributes of the highest Deity, or as beings having a quasi-independent existence beside Deity.<sup>1</sup> In such an aspect they did not contradict the fundamental pantheism of Stoic thought. On the other hand, they were sure to be interpreted by the popular mind as separate divinities, belonging to a purer mythology than that which they had discarded. But, in effect, they ministered to a far higher religious ideal than the earlier, just because their function was to lead men's minds beyond themselves to the Divine Source from which they emanated, and apart from which they had no real existence.

But this effort of Stoicism was not merely an artifice. It was not merely a compromise between truth and error, intended to preserve what was useful in the beliefs of the masses, while paving the way for a higher type of religion. Through the instrumentality, mainly, of Oriental teachers, the doctrine came to be associated with a Mysticism which had far-reaching influence. An important feature of the transformation-process which we have described was the

<sup>1</sup> See Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis*, pp. 234, 235.

metamorphosis of the Elements of the Kosmos into Divine forces. Of course we are here reminded of an original element-worship, e.g., in Babylonia and Persia. In that quarter of Asia, also, from the most primitive times, the worship of the starry heavens had not only been an all-powerful feature in practical religion, but had gradually been developed by a learned priesthood along theoretical lines. The development seems to have been conditioned by the advancing knowledge of astronomy, so that here there emerged a notable combination between science and faith. But the ancient Chaldaean worship passed into a new phase under the influence of Hellenised Orientals, and, pre-eminently, of Posidonius, the renowned Stoic of Apamea in Syria.

The acute investigations of scholars like Cumont and Wendland have succeeded in demonstrating that Posidonius was perhaps the most remarkable figure of the transition period between the old era and the new. Cumont describes him<sup>1</sup> as a scholar of encyclopædic knowledge, a rhetorician of a rich and harmonious style, the builder of "a vast system whose summit was the adoration of that God who penetrates the universal organism and manifests Himself with clearest purity and radiance in the brightness of the stars." Posidonius was probably supreme among those Platonising Stoic teachers, who liberated the abstruse and formal astral worship from the domain of the purely intellectual, and wedded it to the highest emotions. For him a reverent contemplation of the heavens culminated in a mystic ecstasy. The soul which is stirred to its depths by the vision of the starry sky is itself akin to that upon which it gazes. For it was a Stoic doctrine that the soul is a fragment detached from the cosmic fires. Like is drawn to like.

<sup>1</sup> *Le Mysticisme astral*, Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres. Acad. Royale de Belgique, 1909, 5, p. 259.

The rapture of contemplation becomes real communion. The gazer is possessed by a divine love. He cannot rest until he participates in the divinity of those living, sparkling beings above. And the experience is intimately associated with ethical purity. Thus, the astrological writer, Vettius Valens, p. 242, 15 (ed. Kroll): "I desired to obtain a divine and adoring contemplation of the heavens and to purify my ways of all wickedness and all defilement." In an impressive passage Cumont contrasts the calm ecstasy of this sidereal mysticism with the delirious transports of Dionysiac worship.<sup>1</sup>

Its influence in Hellenistic religious thought was very notable. It seems practically certain<sup>2</sup> that Philo was largely indebted to Posidonius in some of his finest mystical ideas,<sup>3</sup> and numerous echoes of his doctrine are found, e.g., in Cicero and Seneca. One of the most convincing evidences of the religious domination of Posidonius appears in the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *περὶ κόσμου*, which has been carefully investigated by W. Capelle.<sup>4</sup> The book is a document of the current popular philosophy, dating, probably, from the beginning of the second century A.D. The author begins with a survey of the realm of nature, dealing with various sciences such as meteorology and geography. But the treatise reaches its climax in what is truly a religious meditation upon the harmony of the kosmos in God, from whom and through whom all has its being.<sup>5</sup> Here, therefore, there is presented a religious view of the world, based on a virtual monotheism, which has its foundations in Posidonius'

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 268, 269.

<sup>2</sup> Apelt, *De rationibus quibusdam quae Philoni Alexandrino cum Posidonio intercedunt*.

<sup>3</sup> See an instructive conspectus of passages in the appendix to Cumont, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-282.

<sup>4</sup> *Neue Jahrb. f. Klass. Altert.*, 1905, pp. 529-568.

<sup>5</sup> See especially *op. cit.*, pp. 556, 563.

re-shaping of the ancient astral worship of Babylon by means of Stoic-Platonic conceptions.

We have emphasised this remarkable strain of thought in St. Paul's Hellenistic environment because, while in certain situations it would inevitably be implicated in the ritual of a cult,<sup>1</sup> it bears witness to the existence of a yearning for communion with God, which could be felt and expressed without the aid of those sensuous ceremonies, so often scarcely distinguishable from magic.

But the development of religious ideas, highly important in their bearing on the appeal of the Christian mission, had been proceeding from another direction. This was distinctly ritual in its origin, and probably continued all along to be associated with mystic rites. Plato,<sup>2</sup> in some of his most remarkable speculations on the destiny of the soul (e.g., *Phaedo*, 69 C, 70 C), speaks of *οἱ περὶ τὰς τελετὰς* and of a *παλαιὸς τις λόγος*, references which, from their contexts, are obviously to be assigned to that cycle of thought known as Orphism. Its origins are shrouded in obscurity. Miss J. E. Harrison, in her fascinating exposition of the Orphic movement,<sup>3</sup> collects and emphasises the ancient evidence for the historicity of Orpheus, "a real man, a mighty singer, a prophet and a teacher, bringing with him a new religion, seeking to reform an old one" (*op. cit.*, p. 470). While her arguments are not entirely convincing, it is plain that from the sixth century B.C.<sup>4</sup> there had been a remarkable re-moulding of certain central elements in the older Dionysus-worship, which was to have far-reaching influence in the Hellenistic world. This refining of grosser ideas is found embodied in mystic doctrines im-

<sup>1</sup> We know, e.g., that Posidonius believed in divination.

<sup>2</sup> Prof. Burnet would say, Socrates. See the introduction to his recently-published edition of the *Phaedo*.

<sup>3</sup> *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, pp. 455-659.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Rohde, *Psyche*,<sup>2</sup> ii. p. 105.

parted to the initiated. The writers on Greek religion often speak of Orphic sects or communities. And such there must have been. But it seems highly probable that at a comparatively early stage they would become syncretistic. The Orphic tablets found in Southern Italy<sup>1</sup> bear out the references in Greek authors to a connexion between this type of doctrine and Pythagoreanism. Anrich<sup>2</sup> would make them contemporary growths, exercising a direct and decisive influence upon each other. We prefer to suspend judgment on the precise nature of their mutual relations.<sup>3</sup> It appears certain that they came into contact, and probably elements common to both go back to the Dionysus-cult. In any case, the Orphic doctrines seem to have been rapidly diffused.

The relation of Orphism to the Dionysus-cult is of primary importance. Both had come to Greece by way of the north. Fundamental for the Dionysiac religion was the delirious frenzy, common to all orgiastic ritual, in which the votary believed himself to be possessed by his deity. See Euripides, *Bacchae* (ed. Wecklein), 300 f. :

ὅταν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸ σῶμ' ἔλθῃ πολὺς,  
λέγειν τὸ μέλλον τοὺς μεμνηότας ποιεῖ.

The union was felt to be so complete that the person possessed came to be called by the name of the god. To attain this condition was virtually to share in the immortal life of the divinity. And no doubt, even in the crudest form of their *ἐνθουσιασμός*, in which the worshippers identified the bull which they slew and devoured raw with the god himself, there were dim hints of a craving for a life which should defy the restrictions of mortality. The Orphic sects

<sup>1</sup> See Prof. Gilbert Murray's appendix to Miss Harrison's *Prolegomena*.

<sup>2</sup> *Das Antike Mysterienwesen*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> As Dieterich cogently observes, the genuinely ancient Pythagorean revelations have still to be determined (*Abraxas*, p. 127, note 3).

seem to have adhered more or less closely to the Dionysiac ritual, but they liberated it from savage excesses, elevating its central conception of union with the god, and, as a preparation for this highest religious attainment, inculcating a life of austere purity. Whether or not we can be as sure as is Miss Harrison of a personal Orpheus, there is probably abundant truth in her statement (which will apply to the action of a community as well as to that of an individual): "The great step that Orpheus took was that, while he kept the old Bacchic faith that man might become a god, he altered the conception of what a god was, and he sought to obtain that godhead by wholly different means. The grace he sought was not physical intoxication, but spiritual ecstasy, the means he adopted not drunkenness but abstinence and rites of purification."<sup>1</sup>

It is possible that Orphism had cultivated an ascetic life before its association with the religion of Dionysus. But from this time onwards the significance of its cathartic ritual and practice has a new emphasis. Purity is needful in order to be set free from the "cycle of births" (*κύκλος τῆς γενέσεως*). It takes the form especially of *όσιότης*, consecration. The man who is fully initiated in the Orphic rites is *όσιωθείς*. What that involves is suggested by the mystic formulæ of the Compagno tablet. In answer to the confession of the mystic: "Out of the pure I come. . . . For I also avow me that I am of your blessed race. . . . I have flown out of the sorrowful weary wheel. . . . I have passed with eager feet from the circle desired," the assurance is given: "Happy and blessed one, thou shalt be god instead of mortal."<sup>2</sup> That these cathartic rites were often degraded, there is evidence in many Greek writers, e.g., Plato, *Republ.*, 364 B, 364 E. Apparently the purifying priest

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 477.

<sup>2</sup> J. E. Harrison, *Op. cit.*, p. 586.

was able to carry on a lucrative business among the credulous, and his ritual was mixed up with all manner of superstition and trickery. But that is a feature involved in the history of all religious movements. The new emphasis on purity was destined to make an ever-widening appeal and to rank as one of the most impressive factors in the evolution of Hellenic religion.

The reference above to the "cycle of births" reminds us of the existence of an Orphic theology, with elaborate speculations on the origin of the world and the human soul, implicated in Greek mythology, whose legends of Dionysus are interpreted as a picture of the fortunes of the soul.<sup>1</sup> To discuss this aspect of Orphism is alien to our purpose. We mention it because in the Hellenistic period with which we are directly concerned, fragments of Orphic theogonies are found widely diffused. It is possible that from the beginning these contained Oriental elements (Babylonian?)<sup>2</sup> In the course of their diffusion they came into direct contact with the various types of Oriental speculation. So that by the opening centuries of our era Orphism had been swept into that many-sided syncretistic movement which must be regarded as the source of the main currents of belief and systems of belief usually designated by the safely indefinite title of Gnosticism. There is enough evidence to indicate that from the sixth century B.C. onwards, the Orphic strain of religion had never died out. The collection of hymns which has survived,<sup>3</sup> and whose redaction in their present form is assigned by Dieterich<sup>4</sup> to the second century A.D., contains elements of high antiquity. But in the Hellenistic period Orphism received new life through its

<sup>1</sup> See Gruppe, *Griechische Mythologie*, Bd. II., pp. 1034-1041.

<sup>2</sup> See Gruppe, *Op. cit.*, p. 1039.

<sup>3</sup> *Orphica*, ed. Abel.

<sup>4</sup> *Abraxas*, p. 31.

touch with Eastern cults. It enriched them and was enriched by them in turn.<sup>1</sup>

In this movement, which struck its roots in a typically Hellenic soil,<sup>2</sup> it is evident that genuinely religious aspirations emerged, intimately associated with purifying rites and mystic initiation. In the various combinations which it would form, it must have been a pervasive element in St. Paul's spheres of operation. But we must now turn to certain features of primary importance in those Oriental cults, with which Orphism had many affinities, features contributed by them to the environment of the Pauline mission. In a later article we intend to sketch more concretely the main characteristics of the Mystery-Religions of Hellenism with which terms and ideas in the Epistles of Paul have been brought into detailed comparison.

In view of the fragmentary nature of our sources it is often easier to point to a definitely Oriental phase of religious faith or practice than to analyse its component parts, and assign their origin. Such a task, moreover, is endlessly complicated by the rampant syncretism of the Hellenistic period. No more crucial example could be found than that of Egypt. Apart altogether from the influence of primitive Egyptian doctrines, which has perhaps been exaggerated by Reitzenstein<sup>3</sup> in his investigations of the Hermetic literature, but which must surely be reckoned with, there appear the phenomena of Babylonian theology, such as the conception of the seven spheres and the sway of the planets,<sup>4</sup> along with the related belief in *εἰμαρμένῃ*, that fatalism which has mysticism as its counterpart.<sup>5</sup> Here also are

<sup>1</sup> On its contact with Phrygian cults, see Eisele, *Neue Jahrb. f. Klass. Altert.*, 1909, p. 630.

<sup>2</sup> For long Athens seems to have been its centre.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Wendland's judicious review of W. Otto's *Priester u. Tempel im Hellenistischen Aegypten*, *Theol. L.Z.*, 1911, 26, Sp. 807.

<sup>4</sup> For the connexion of the planetary spirits with demons, see Bousset. *op. cit.*, p. 54 f.

<sup>5</sup> See Reitzenstein, *Poimandres*, pp. 70, 77, 79.

found the curious dogma of the Heavenly Man, whose origin is lost in the mists of antiquity, the typically syncretistic cult of Osiris-Serapis and Isis, and the elaborate practice of magic, with its quaint apparatus of efficacious "names." In this whirlpool of ideas, too, may be discerned the framework of confusing Gnostic systems.

The fact, however, of Oriental influence on the Hellenistic civilisation which grew up from the time of Alexander's conquests, is perhaps the most vital which confronts us in attempting to understand its religious developments. Various aspects of the situation claim attention. It need not surprise us that forces of mighty potency in religion, as in all other spheres of human thought or achievement,<sup>1</sup> pressed in from the East. For in Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor, an intellectual life was pulsing to which there was no parallel in the Western world at the beginning of the Roman Empire. Science, literature, industry, were in this era the province of Orientals, not of Greeks or Romans.<sup>2</sup> And, moreover, as Cumont has impressively put it, "if the triumph of Oriental cults appears at times like a revival of savagery, as a matter of fact, in the evolution of religious forms, these cults represent a more advanced type than the ancient national devotions."<sup>3</sup>

There were many features of Oriental belief and worship which possessed a fascination for the Graeco-Roman world. A halo of reverence surrounded the mystic lore which came from the East. Thus, e.g., the Egyptian priesthood was supposed to have preserved in greater purity the earliest rites of Divine worship. Chaldaeans and Brahmins stood closer to the origins of things than Greeks or Romans.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Except perhaps, the military and legal, see Eisele, *op. cit.*, p. 633.

<sup>2</sup> See Cumont, *Les Religions Orientales*, pp 8-14.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> See Anrich, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

And the Gospel which Paul preached could count on this predilection in its favour. But such a conviction would not have sufficed to extend the sway of exotic faiths. As Reitzenstein has cogently shown, the influence of Oriental cults throughout the Roman Empire became intensely personal. Perhaps this was partly the result of a zealous propaganda.<sup>1</sup> But it was involved in the very method of the propaganda. That was carried on by priests who travelled hither and thither, bearing a message of hope, which was often delivered in ecstatic utterances.<sup>2</sup> These would impress audiences accustomed to a cold and formal ceremonial. Moreover, when they won the interest of yearning souls, they played upon them by the weird rites of mystic initiation. Every means was used to excite the feelings. Overpowering spectacles amidst the darkness of night, seductive music, delirious dances, the impartation of mysterious formulae—these made a unique appeal to men and women who had prepared for the solemn experience by long courses of rigid abstinence. But even more potent was the profounder side of the appeal: that which directly touched consciences unsatisfied by their ancestral rites. What Cumont has said of the Oriental priests in Italy gives the clue to the whole situation which we are trying to review. They brought with them “two new things, mysterious means of purification by which they proposed to cleanse away the defilements of the soul, and the assurance that an immortality of bliss would be the reward of piety.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Die Hellenistische Mysterien-Religionen*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. in this whole connexion Dill's fascinating chapter on the “philosophic director” and the “philosophic missionary,” *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius*, pp. 291-383.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 61. It is of importance to note, as Cumont points out, that Oriental cults had a more *restricted* influence in Greece because there analogous doctrines were familiar from the Hellenic mysteries. See *op. cit.*, p. 324, note 23.

The full significance of these truths will appear in a later article, when we examine the fundamental doctrines of the Mysteries in their relation to Paulinism.

One effect of this individualistic appeal is very suggestive. Many devout people, not content with a single initiation, embraced every fresh opportunity that came to them of this means of communion with deity. They felt they could not have too intense a consciousness of the deifying of their own individuality. And, doubtless, behind it all lay the thought, now dimmer, now clearer, expressed in *Diogenes Laertius*, vii. 135 : *ἐν τε εἶναι θεὸν καὶ νοῦν καὶ εἰμαρμένην καὶ Δία πολλαῖς τε ἑτέραις ὀνομασίαις προσονομάζεσθαι*. The assurance as to the supernatural, confirmed by so many solemn sanctions, opened a new vista for their spiritual vision. The truth which they would fain grasp was presented to them in the guise of Divine revelations, esoteric doctrines to be carefully concealed from the gaze of the profane, doctrines which placed in their hands a powerful apparatus for winning deliverance from the assaults of malicious demonic influences, and above all, for overcoming the relentless tyranny of Fate. It is not difficult to see how various aspects of Paul's message might be superficially interpreted on parallel lines. The word of the Cross might readily appear as a mysterious talisman with superhuman potencies.

Here we touch a crucial feature in the religious life of the Hellenistic period. Anz, in his important study, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprung des Gnosticismus*, is disposed to find in the doctrine of escape from the rule of *εἰμαρμένη* the pivotal conception of Gnosticism. This is scarcely probable. Gnosticism is too chameleon-like in its traits to allow of a single unifying idea. But there can be no question that conceptions like that of the seven Archons, who, from their planetary domain, determine the destinies of mortals, were almost

universally influential. Dieterich has briefly sketched the range of diffusion of such doctrines.<sup>1</sup> Originating in Babylon, they have penetrated into the religions of Persia and Egypt. They appear in Jewish Apocalyptic, in Orphic fragments, in Hermetic documents, in Greek astrological texts in every variety of Gnostic system. They can be discerned in the background of the Pauline Epistles, in those hierarchies of evil forces ruled by the *θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου*, the *ἄρχων τῆς ἐξουσίας τοῦ αἴρος*.

Perhaps this was the most crushing weight which oppressed human souls in the period with which we are dealing. It is scarcely possible to doubt that the *ἀσθενῆ καὶ πτωχὰ στοιχεῖα*, against whose bondage Paul warns in Galatians iv. 9 are the elemental spirits whose iron yoke was so grievously felt throughout the Hellenistic world. Indeed, his words in verse 8 remove all uncertainty: *τότε μὲν οὐκ εἰδότες θεὸν ἐδουλεύσατε τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσω θεοῖς*. Redemption from this servitude, which embittered daily existence, was probably the object of intensest craving in the higher life of Pagan society. It was realised by fellowship with higher powers too strong for these lower. In the present life it could be attained through mystic ecstasy. After death it would be consummated by the ascent of the soul to heaven.<sup>2</sup> The actual apparatus of ritual and magic by which communion with higher divinities was reached is vividly exemplified in the prayers and incantations of the so-called Liturgy of Mithras.<sup>3</sup>

The possession of means for escaping the thralldom of the Archons came at an early stage to be regarded and described as Gnosis *par excellence*. However intellectual might be

<sup>1</sup> *Abraxas*, p. 43 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Wendland, *Hellenistische-Römische Kultur*, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> Edited and elucidated by A. Dieterich. The second edition, considerably enlarged, brought out, after Dieterich's death, by R. Wünsch, Leipzig, Teubner, 1910.

the original basis of the idea involved, it now indicated the highest practical attainment of the religious life. Gnosis was pre-eminently *δύναμις*. It made possible mystic communion with deity. It was a religious rather than a speculative conception. But when we pass from the term to the communities or sects within which it found its chief realisation, we enter a field bristling with problems. Gnosticism is one of the most flexible designations in the vocabulary of the history of religion. It is used to cover phenomena which, while more or less closely allied to each other, are far from being identical. Some writers restrict the name to those fantastic developments of speculation within the life of the early Church, on which the Fathers pour their scorn. Others include under the title a variety of tendencies in the Hellenistic period, of which some took shape inside the Church, some remained completely Pagan, while some belonged to a debateable border-land, hard to define. But the complexity of the term is still further aggravated. Harnack, e.g., using the designation in its narrower sense, would lay the emphasis on its affinities with Greek philosophy. "Almost everything," he says, "which was matter of controversy between Gnosticism and the Church would have also been in dispute between the Church, on the one hand, and Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, etc., on the other."<sup>1</sup> Wendland, while acknowledging that Gnosticism knew how to provide cultivated minds with speculations, finds the clue to its origin and pervasive influence in Oriental-Hellenistic syncretism. It is not our purpose to discuss these more or less conflicting views. We are not concerned here with Gnostic phenomena inside the Church. What we wish in a sentence or two to indicate is that drift of tendencies in the Hellenistic period which makes itself felt in the environment of Paul's mission, and which, for convenience' sake,

<sup>1</sup> *Theol. L.Z.*, 1908, 1, *op.* 11.

may be described as incipient Gnosticism. This must directly affect our investigation of the main problem to be dealt with, the relation of Paul to the Mystery-Religions.

For incipient Gnosticism and the Mystery-Religions are overlapping magnitudes. There is an instructive passage in Hippolytus, v. 20, in which, describing the Gnostic sect of the Sethians, he derives their peculiar doctrine from "the ancient theologians, Musaeus and Linus and Orpheus, who, above all others, introduced the rites of initiation and the mysteries," and declares of a particular teaching that "it is found in this very form in the Bacchic rites of Orpheus." Whether the explanation given by Hippolytus have any foundation or not, it suggests a feature of undoubted significance in the movement we are concerned with. In fully-fledged Gnostic systems like the Valentinian, for all its curious mythological formations, we are confronted by philosophical constructions, which seem far removed from a traffic in magical formulae. But there is a "vulgar" Gnosis, of which traces appear even in those sects which exhibit metaphysical developments. It is often purely Pagan. And it reveals the influence of all manner of ancient beliefs and superstitions which, in a time of religious disintegration, have forced themselves up from various levels of popular fancy and tradition. These are associated with ritual (or magical) actions and mystic sacraments, some of which have their origin in early Greek Chthonian worship, and others in the multifarious Oriental rites which were being carried westwards in an unceasing stream. Behind most phases of this earlier "Gnosticism," as later at the basis of its more philosophical expressions, there seems to lie an essentially dualistic view of the universe. Bousset would associate the phenomenon with the direct influence of the religion of Persia, while admitting that in its Hellenistic environment Persian dualism lost its more concrete

mythological embodiment, and made way for a new anti-thesis, that between "the good spiritual and the evil corporeal world."<sup>1</sup> His view is highly probable. In any case, the ground-tone of the movement is a thorough-going pessimism, which often issues, on the one hand, in a rigid asceticism, on the other, in unbridled immorality. These are features which Paul has definitely to deal with side by side in the Epistle to the Colossians.

The truth is that this chaotic outgrowth of Hellenistic religion is our most faithful mirror of the prevailing syncretism of the period. Large additions to the knowledge of its essential character have been made in recent years by the magical papyri unearthed in Egypt. These have preserved fragments of hymns and spells and mystic names of Babylonian, Egyptian, Hellenic, and even Jewish origin. With ritual and liturgical texts are blended, in a bewildering medley, curious theogonies and cosmologies, which find their affinities in documents so far removed from each other as the poems of Hesiod and the Apocalypses of Judaism, and have undoubted associations with Stoic allegorisings. The process of which this is the product must have had a long and chequered history. Corresponding to the extended period of its development would be the width of area over which it was diffused. The graphic delineation of the burning of the books at Ephesus (Acts xix. 18, 19) gives us a casual glimpse of the forces which were potent in the common life of the cities of the Empire. This was a movement which in vague forms must continually have confronted the Apostle Paul as he moved from one great centre to another. Its atmosphere would surround him like the air which he breathed. Was he influenced by it consciously or unconsciously? Is the Christianity of Paul, as Gunkel asserts, "a syncretistic religion?"

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<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 118.