

**The Letters of Paul,  
Sixth Edition**

*Conversations in Context*

Calvin J. Roetzel

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# Contents

---

<i>List of Images</i>	ix
<i>Preface to the Sixth Edition</i>	xi
Introduction: Contrary Impressions	1
1. Paul and His Hellenistic World	7
2. Paul and His Jewish World	39
3. The Anatomy of the Letters	69
4. Traditions behind the Letters	85
5. The Letters as Conversations	97
6. Paul and His Myths	149
7. New Testament Interpreters of Paul	163
8. Currents and Crosscurrents	193
<i>Suggested Additional Reading</i>	225
<i>Index</i>	235

# Images

---

1. Healing God of Asklepios	23
2. Theater of Epidauros	24
3. Wadi Qumran	47
4. Qumran Cave 4	47
5. Sunrise over the Aegean Sea	98
6. Miletus Roman Road	98
7. Via Egnatia	99
8. Bema	101
9. Arch of Galerius in Thessalonica	102
10. Corinth Fortress and Temple of Aphrodite	106
11. Temple of Apollo	108
12. Lechaion Way in Corinth	117
13. Caesarea Maritima Marble Columns	144
14. Paul and Thecla Grotto Sketch in Ephesus	223

## Preface to the Sixth Edition

---

Forty years ago I sat down to write the preface to the first edition on my office IBM typewriter. My students were struggling to make sense of Paul's letters, arguably the most important collection of letters ever, and I was trying to help. Fortunately at the same time I was a member of a seminar on the ancient letter in the Society of Biblical Literature. Those two events conspired with the endorsement of this project by Richard Ray, then chief editor of John Knox Press, to give life to the first edition of *The Letters of Paul*. It was 114 pages in length and sold for \$4.95. Since that initial effort, teachers, laypersons, seminarians, pastors, and even a prison inmate have joined the readers' circle and offered suggestions for improving this book. I have read them all and am grateful for their suggestions.

While the former revisions addressed gaps and urgent issues left hanging or in need of further development, this edition seeks to be more forthright about how the field has developed and how my mind has changed since that first iteration. It includes an additional chapter on the place of the Gentiles and the Law in the Judaisms of Paul's day, an updated bibliography for further study, and other changes that note the ongoing study of Paul, the marginal Jew, and his conversations with a broadened context. I have tried to smooth lumpy phrasing, to make judicious cuts, and to add some relevant photographic material. I have also tried to underscore the brilliance of Paul's theologizing in context and to acknowledge his human struggles with doubt, the "thorn's" torture, suspicions of converts, prison experience, outsiders' harsh critique, and the heartbreak that the rejection of his own "children" of faith caused. I recognize that Paul was capable of outbursts so harsh and angry that they spawned regret and freely admit that on occasion Paul changed his mind. In his day when the Gentile aggregation of believers was a minority, Paul could

hardly have been certain that his version of an inclusive Gentile gospel would survive to shape a majority movement.

Recognizing that reality will help us better appreciate the heat of Paul's defense of his "law-free" gospel and his apostolic legitimacy, while finding in those contrarities the inspiration for a radical redefinition of power. This edition unapologetically asks more of the first time *and* experienced readers. For those who persevere, however, this edition promises rich treasure. For example, one may find in Paul's vigorous engagement with his context an eschatological vision of reconciliation so grand that it almost takes the breath away, the excitement generated by an unfinished and open future simply inspires, and an emphasis on the solidarity forged by the offering for the "poor among the saints" in Jerusalem that was pregnant with meaning.

In what is likely my last revision of this introduction, no words can express my heartfelt thanks to teachers, students, family, colleagues, friends, laity, and editors past and present who have used and supported this project for forty years. I am especially grateful to Dr. Warren Kendall for allowing me to use photographs made as he followed in some of Paul's footsteps and to Linda Brooks for her expert preparation of photos for print. To the original dedication of the book in memory of my dear parents, "the poor among the saints," this edition adds the name of Juanita Garcíagodoy, student, colleague and friend who was snatched from us at a young age by cancer's greedy hand. Her wit, insight, love of texts, compassion, poetic genius, and puckish smile enlivened and enriched her world in countless ways. Of all of my students only she was in the first class at Macalester where we were trying to make sense of Paul's letters *and* with me in my last, where she sat as an auditor. She also was a dear colleague and friend.

This preface must also pay tribute to Ernst Käsemann, who welcomed my family in Tübingen, Germany, when I came to study under him in his last year of his teaching before retirement. I was just a green, aspiring student of Paul beginning my journey, and he was at the end of his distinguished career. His welcome of us as "strangers within his gates" was inspiring and initiated a relationship that continued until his death some thirty years later. His abiding influence on this book will be obvious to any serious student of Paul.

And finally to my esteemed colleagues at Macalester College, where I taught for thirty-five years; to colleagues and students at the University of Minnesota, where I taught and served for portions of eight years; and to colleagues, students, and the dean of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, who welcomed me as a guest professor: my fragile vocabulary fails to adequately express my thanks. My debt to this great host makes clear that this work was a joint enterprise. Its errors I freely own, and its pages clearly and positively show the fingerprints for good from that great host. Last but

not least, I must express my undying thanks to my family that in life's high and low tides nurtured, supported, and encouraged my fascination with Paul: my wife, Caroline; children, Lisa (Alan), Frank (Lisa Chandler), and Mary; and grandson, Anthony.

January 1, 2015  
Calvin J. Roetzel,  
Arnold Lowe Professor of Religious Studies,  
Macalester College, Emeritus;  
Sundet Professor of New Testament and Christian Studies,  
University of Minnesota, Emeritus;  
Visiting Professor, University of Chicago Divinity School

## Paul and His Hellenistic World

---

Most might agree with second-century Polycarp, that neither he nor anyone like him was “able to follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul” (*Letter to the Philippians* 3.2). Parts of the letters are “hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16), and at times we might side with the great Pauline scholar Ernst Käsemann, who once complained that no one understood Paul except the heretic Marcion, and even he misunderstood him. Nevertheless, information about Paul and his world, now available, makes attempts to understand the apostle less daunting, though still difficult. While Paul’s letters are understandable only in light of his genius and gospel, understanding their contexts will offer clues to their purpose. In the discussion below we shall examine the milieu of both Paul and his readers for hints of the dynamic of the letters, the refinement of Paul’s theologizing and fiery rhetoric that helped shape the Jesus movement.

As Acts suggests, Paul probably grew up in Tarsus, an important commercial, intellectual, administrative, and cultural center on the southeast coast of Asia Minor, modern Turkey (Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3). As the Roman provincial capital of Cilicia, Tarsus rivaled Alexandria, Corinth, and Athens in importance. There Paul would have learned his first language. There he would have studied the Septuagint (LXX), the Hebrew Scriptures in Greek translation. There he would have learned to read, to write, and to imitate Greek literary and rhetorical forms. There he would have received his Latinized Greek name *Paulos* (Paul), rather than the Hebrew *Shaul* (Saul, Acts 13:9). There he would have been introduced to a vibrant Hellenistic culture—its anthropology, its political and religious institutions, its cosmology, its sports, and its universalism. There he doubtless would have had both Jewish and non-Jewish friends and playmates. And that rich, multifaceted experience would

have lingered to influence his messianist thinking and his worldly experience. Some sense of the interplay of these multiple factors is fundamental for a serious and discerning reading of the letters.

## SELECTED WAYS LANGUAGE CREATED A WORLD

The great philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein has taught us that a whole mythology is embedded in our language. Similarly the blind, deaf, and speechless Helen Keller once wrote that the power of language to create and affirm identity is magical. Language, we now know, is no mere passive mirror of the world or a mute tool, to be discarded after world construction is complete. Rather, language shapes one's worldview, one's sense of self, and one's understanding of ultimate reality, history, community, family; and it identifies such mundane things as color, smells, and sacramental meaning. Paul also gained his understanding of life, death, fate, freedom, sin, piety, and community through his native language. Within his Diaspora community Paul became what Adolf Deissmann almost a century ago called a "Septuagint-Jew."<sup>1</sup> But before turning to consider his Greek Scriptures, let us first survey the Hellenistic world bequeathed to him.

While the Septuagint was central to Paul's theology, much of his language and important religious expressions came from the wider Hellenistic culture. The Greek word for "conscience" (*syneidēsis*), for example, commonly appeared in the writings of the Stoic philosophers but is missing entirely from Jewish Scriptures. Even allowing that the thing may exist when the word does not, "conscience," as used by Paul, resembled its Hellenistic parent even when sharing a family likeness with its Jewish genealogy. The apostle appropriated the word to defend himself against charges of insincerity (1 Cor. 4:2), and he asked the Corinthians to acknowledge the truth of his apostolic claim (2 Cor. 5:11). In the first reference Paul allowed that conscience was culturally conditioned, and thus partially flawed, for he argued there that even though no charge was brought against him by his conscience, he was not, therefore, necessarily innocent. For he recognized that he would ultimately have to stand before the divine tribunal ("I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me," 1 Cor. 4:4). Elsewhere, however, he spoke of the important function of the conscience for the Gentile unbeliever (Rom. 2:15) as well as the "weak" (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12). So

1. Adolf Deissmann, *Paulus*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1925), 69. Eng. trans.: *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. William E. Wilson, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Bros., 1927), 90.



Paul's understanding embraced both concepts—conscience that served as an inner critical voice that he recognized as culturally shaped, and conscience as an awareness of the ultimate accountability to the one God. The two stand in tension in Paul's thought, even though both play important roles.

Elsewhere Paul drew on the tradition of the Hellenistic church that predated him. But even if Paul borrowed these traditions, they were no less his own, for in adopting and using the traditions of others Paul shared the views expressed, even if he did not author them. In the closing admonition of his letter to the Philippians, for example, he cited a tradition packed with language from his Hellenistic milieu. There he wrote, "Whatever is true (*alēthē*) is honorable (*semna*), whatever is just (*dikaia*), whatever is pure (*hagna*), whatever is pleasing (*prospilē*), whatever is commendable (*euphēma*), if there is any excellence (*arētē*), and if there is anything worthy of praise (*epainos*), think about these things" (Phil. 4:8). A survey reveals ways this passage mirrored a world quite apart from that of the Hebrew parent. For example, *alēthēs*, the "true, truthful, or honest," and *semnos*, that which is "august, sacred, or worthy of honor," are hardly intelligible apart from their Hellenistic origin. Anything judged more important—for example, the majesty of the king's throne, gorgeous dress, eloquent speech, beautiful music, or graceful motion—shared that same world. *Hagnos*, much used in Hellenistic circles to refer to the sanctuary, and *prospilēs*, that is, the "lovely, pleasing, or agreeable," likewise are of Hellenistic parentage. *Euphēmos*, what is "auspicious, praiseworthy, attractive, or appealing," and *arētē*, a prominent word in Greek philosophy and literature, referred to excellence of achievement or mastery of a field; it may even signify valor. Also special merit, honor, good fortune, success, and fame likewise had a Hellenistic genealogy. *Epainos*, "recognition, approval, or praise," similarly shared the Hellenistic world of the words above.

The alert reader will recognize the nonbiblical character of other materials in the Pauline epistles. Scholars recognize, for instance, that the virtue and vice lists that interlarded Hellenistic writings shared the world of Paul's letters. Galatians 5:19–23, for example, lists "works of the flesh"—"fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing and things like these"—to admonish readers to produce the "fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>2</sup> Such lists came to Paul from his Hellenized Judaism, and more than an emphasis on works of the law were the focus of his native faith framed by the Hellenistic world. Except for "love," his list of virtues contains nothing

2. For a survey of the literature, see Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 281–83.

that would have appeared as strange or unusual in conventional Greek ethical writings. The eschatological tone of those lists came from Paul. The very use to which Paul put these lists demonstrates how fully he inhabited his Hellenistic Jewish world.

Paul also made copious use of metaphors from his Greek milieu. While not literally true, the metaphor aimed to provoke thought and to engage the hearer as an imaginative partner in conversation. If one should say, “Sam Jackson is a horse,” or “Stephanie Grant is a gazelle,” the hearer would know those expressions are not to be taken literally, but at some level they are true.

So also Paul’s letters use metaphors from sports, politics, nature, and religion to provoke thought. In 1 Corinthians 9:24–27, for example, Paul used a boxing metaphor to describe his discipline of the body to make it serve his mission. While boxers try to defeat opponents in a slugfest, Paul pummeled his body to bring it into submission to Christ (see also Phil. 3:12–15). This statement offered believers an optic through which they might view their world afresh. Similarly, when Paul bestowed citizenship in heaven’s colony (*politeuma*) on Philippian converts (Phil. 3:20), he invited them to ponder the fateful difference between this world and another. Likewise, he admonished fractious Corinthians to ponder their place in the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). With sharp irony Paul invited them to reflect on a conversation between the ear and the eye. How silly for the ear to say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body” (12:16). Designed to puncture inflated pretensions, these metaphors aimed to move believers from a self-absorbed, individualistic, puffed-up spirituality into a concern for the welfare of the whole church. Similarly, his metaphorical statement that among the Thessalonians he was “gentle . . . like a nurse” (1 Thess. 2:7) aimed to assure a cell of converts of his tender care for them.<sup>3</sup> While all of these metaphors spring from a Greek context, they depend on the familiarity of converts with their place in the “new creation” and on their ability to translate those images into their religious experience. Note how elsewhere also Paul used metaphor to advance his mission, to educate his churches, and to instruct his converts in the gospel’s imperative.

Paul’s play with metaphor often signaled a crucial turn or a struggle with a seemingly insolvable problem. In Romans 9:30–33 and 11:11, for example, he sketched a scenario in which Israel, while running a race, comically (or tragically) tripped on a rock placed on the track by *God*, only to be beaten to the finish by Gentiles who were not even competing. After its introduction

3. Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Cynic Epistles: A Study Edition* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977).

in 9:30–33, this farcical construction ferments for more than a chapter before resurfacing in 11:11. There Paul asks, “Have they [i.e., the Israelites] stumbled so as to fall?”<sup>4</sup> Then he snorted, “No, no, absolutely not!”

In an aha moment, the racing metaphor provoked new thought even in the apostle himself. Paul opined that this race was unlike other races in which winners require losers; this race, he argued, was to have only winners. Jews who ran the Torah race and Gentiles who did not would both be victorious. When we come to discuss Romans 9–11 and Paul’s response to the question, “Now in turning to the Gentiles, has God reneged on promises made to Israel?” we shall see how this metaphor worked to advance thought about a difficult question.

Mixed with the language drawn from his Hellenistic environment were also metaphorical expressions that were unmistakably Jewish in origin. For example, Paul called the church “God’s temple” (1 Cor. 3:16–17) and thus used a powerful religious symbol to bolster the identity of Christ people. He also referred to Philippian believers as “the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3),<sup>5</sup> and he invited the Romans to present their bodies as a “living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom. 12:1). All such metaphors bore the unmistakable fingerprints of a vital Jewish legacy. Inasmuch as Paul’s background contained a dynamic blend of Jewish and Hellenistic elements, it is no surprise to find a mix of those elements in nonmetaphorical language as well. That complex mix may account in part for Paul’s success in preaching a Jewish gospel to a Hellenistic audience. Sensitivity to the interplay of Hellenistic and Jewish language worlds will offer the curious reader clues to the dynamic of the exchanges between Paul and his churches.

## METHODS OF ARGUMENTATION

Rudolf Bultmann once noted how Paul used a form of Hellenistic philosophical argumentation, the diatribe, to respond to those contesting his gospel.<sup>6</sup> Used as a tool of Stoic and Cynic argumentation from the third century BCE onward, the diatribe enjoyed broad popular use in Jewish circles as well. The diatribe was an argument form that placed sharp questions on the lips of hypothetical objectors as an entry to blunt responses.

4. Victor C. Pfitzner, *Paul and the Agon Motif: Traditional Athletic Imagery in the Pauline Literature* (New York: Humanities Press, 1967), and Calvin Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 129–31.

5. Not “true circumcision” as in RSV. AE.

6. Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910).

In reading Romans in particular, you will recognize how cleverly Paul used the form to respond to opponents. For example, sensitive to the slanderous charge that his gospel of salvation by grace actually encouraged immorality, the apostle offered the hypothetical question: “Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?” (Rom. 6:1), which opened the door to strong denial, (Gk. *mē genoito*) “No! No! Never.” Answering those who charge that his gospel is antinomian, that is, antilaw, Paul introduced his sharp reaction with the question, “What then should we say? That the law is sin?” (7:7). Elsewhere, when he was accused of denying God’s promises to Israel to offer a gospel to Gentiles, the question, “Is there injustice on God’s part?” (9:14) introduced his strong denial. Although the questions were all hypothetical, they were rooted in real-life experience. Thus Paul made the diatribe respond to the charge against his gospel that it encouraged immorality and that it implied that a good gift of God—the law—was evil. Critics charged that in offering salvation to Gentiles, Paul implied that God had reneged on promises to Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Recently critics have shown that Paul used methods of oral argument from Hellenistic rhetoric to persuade his audience. The expense of learning and developing these rhetorical skills, either in schools of rhetoric or from private tutors, was prohibitive for all except the most privileged. Designed to equip persons for service in law or politics, rhetoric also took literary form in the apologetic letter. Hans Dieter Betz, for example, has argued that Paul’s letter to the Galatian churches followed such a strategy, and Betz even offered an outline of the letter drawn from rhetorical speech.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing its popularity in Roman circles, Betz employed the Latin structure of rhetorical speech in a letter analysis:

- I. Epistolary prescript (Gal. 1:1–5)
- II. *Exordium*, or statement of the cause of the letter (1:6–11)
- III. *Narratio*, or autobiographical support for the cause (1:12–2:14)
- IV. *Propositio*, or points of agreement and disagreement (2:15–21)
- V. *Probatio*, or evidential arguments from Scripture, experience, Torah, Christian tradition, friendship, and allegory (3:1–4:31)
- VI. *Exhortatio*, or warnings and recommendations (5:1–6:10)
- VII. *Conclusio*, or attack on the opposition (6:11–18)

Although Betz’s work provides a welcome fresh look at Galatians, scholars have expressed reservations about the degree of Paul’s reliance on classical

7. See Stanley Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981) for an excellent treatment of this phenomenon.

8. See Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians, a Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 14–23.

rhetoric.<sup>9</sup> Paul, for example, did not enjoy the privilege required to finance such an education. Moreover, classical rhetoric as practiced by Cicero, a first-century rhetorician of note, was primarily an oral vehicle. Some scholars have doubted that Paul and others adapted classical oral, rhetorical strategies of persuasion to letter writing. Others have objected that while a consideration of strategy may be important, the truth of Paul's gospel, not his political acumen as a persuader, was invariably his primary concern.

While questions about rhetorical criticism will continue to be raised, and confusion will continue, the serious student of Paul cannot dismiss the concerns of rhetorical criticism: its interest in the arrangement of an argument and persuasion throws light on the foreground of the text. Such a focus on the politics of persuasion draws attention to the foreground rather than exclusively to the background of the text and rightfully brings the reader into the text's context.<sup>10</sup>

As we shall see, Paul's method of Scripture interpretation owed much to his Pharisaism. However, in Galatians 4:21–5:1, with its allegory of Sarah and Hagar, we have an example of a popular Hellenistic method of text interpretation. Allegory was seen as a veiled presentation of meaning, usually in the form of a story, where each part of the story stood for a deeper truth. Unlike metaphor, allegory was self-enclosed, carrying its own explanation and leaving less room for the creative role of the listener (see Mark 4:14–20).

First used by the Greeks responding to the unseemly and even immoral actions of the gods of the classical myths, allegory was employed by the Stoics to rationalize those actions by seeking in them a deeper meaning. An instance of the use of allegory appears in the explanation of the adulterous relationship between Aphrodite and Ares. Aphrodite invited Ares, "Come and lie down, my darling, and be happy! Hephaistos [my husband] is no longer here but gone" (Homer, *Odyssey* 292–93). But their tryst ended abruptly when the suspicious husband, Hephaistos, returned to find them out and snared them in his net. Using an allegorical approach, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus found in this text not just a description of a bawdy affair but of a harmonious relationship between love and conflict (*Homeric Questions* 69). Allegory thus became the key that unlocked the treasure of texts dealing with gods at war, deceit, and treachery.

While instances of allegory appear in the Old Testament and the Qumran texts, and apocalyptic allegory was present in Jewish pseudepigraphy, it

9. Hans Hübner's review, "Der Galaterbrief und das Verhältnis von antiker Rhetorik und Epistolographie," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109 (1984): 241–50.

10. See Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where Is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49 (1987): 448–63 offers a positive assessment of this approach and a helpful bibliography.

was the literature of Diaspora Judaism that exploited the allegorical method to the fullest. One of the most skillful writers in this use was Philo of Alexandria. Like the Greeks, Philo believed that the literal meaning of a text was only its superficial meaning and that the literal text pointed beyond itself to a deeper reality. Philo expressed contempt for unimaginative literalists, calling them “slow-witted” (*On Flight and Finding*, 179), “obstinate” and “rigid” (*On Dreams*, 2.301), and he noted that it was silly to think God literally planted a garden of “soulless” plants. The reference to God’s planting a garden in Genesis 2:8, Philo argued, was not to literal trees and herbs but to divine plants that have virtue, insight, and wisdom to distinguish between the ugly and the beautiful (*On the Creation* 154). Similarly, since no botanist knows of a “tree of life” (Gen. 2:9), Philo suggested that the image expressed “reverence toward God . . . by means of which the soul attains to immortality” (*On the Creation* 154). When we later discuss Paul’s use of allegory (e.g., the story of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4:21–5:1), Philo’s use of allegorical interpretation will be helpful. Although Paul never knew Philo, he grew up in a Diaspora community (probably Tarsus) that in some ways resembled that of Philo, and for that reason a consideration of Philo’s writings is useful.

## HELLENISTIC RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

In the Hellenistic world the line between religion and philosophy was a blur. The philosopher’s search for wisdom was often informed by religious piety, and even when philosophers were self-consciously atheistic, as were some Sophists, they vigorously engaged religious issues. Even the Epicureans from the third century BCE did not, as some suggest, deny the existence of the gods. They asserted instead that it was useless to solicit their aid in prayer or to propitiate them with sacrifice, for they were either indifferent to human concerns or chose not to intervene in them. Conversely, major religious figures of the day like Apollonius of Tyana and Philo of Alexandria worked in the current philosophical idiom. We are being faithful to the spirit of the time, therefore, when we link religion and philosophy in this treatment. Both were vital parts of Paul’s world and that of his churches.

Any suggestion that Paul’s hearers had no religious practice before baptism is erroneous. Although Gentiles made up a great part of Paul’s congregations,<sup>11</sup> some had at least a nodding acquaintance with Jewish traditions, institutions, philosophy, and Scriptures. As God-fearers, sympathetic or even

11. Here I follow Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. Frank Clarke (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959).

partial to Judaism but not yet converts, some of Paul's hearers might have been more receptive to Paul's Jewish gospel. Others, however, worshiped the popular deities of the Greek and Roman worlds. Aware of their participation in Hellenistic religious rites, Paul reminded them that they had "turned to God from idols" (1 Thess. 1:9) and warned them against any lingering reverence for old religious rites associated with "pagan"<sup>12</sup> devotion. He urged the Corinthians to "flee from the worship of idols" (1 Cor. 10:14) and warned that idolaters (i.e., converts still clinging to old religious rites) would not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:20).

But sometimes the divide between life in the new age and the previous existence was indistinct and moved Paul to forbid participation in local cults, even while he allowed the consumption of idol meat. (In the entire New Testament such behavior is endorsed only by Paul; cf. 1 Cor. 8:1–13 and 10:14–22.) Paul's gospel, therefore, did not address a religious vacuum but contended with other religions in a highly pluralistic setting. Sparked off by the conquests of Alexander in the third century BCE, which opened up the whole eastern Mediterranean to a dynamic exchange of ideas, the older religions<sup>13</sup> competed with the new for converts. But all were affected by a disenchantment that characterized the Hellenistic world.

The causes of that first-century malaise go back to the third century BCE, a period of severe economic depression, civil war, infanticide and depopulation, the decline of the city-state, and a serious weakening of the judicial system that worsened the suffering. Infanticide of female infants was common; but two sons were kept, for it was assumed that one would die in a war, leaving only one to maintain the family legacy. The decline of social institutions and the rise of religious doubt profoundly influenced the old religions. To be sure, certain primitive forms of religion remained. But even though people still stood in awe of the power and mystery of certain primal forces, devotion to the old gods—Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, and others—was in decline.

With the decline of traditional religions, Hellenistic piety assumed new forms. In some cases the old corporate theology gave way to a type of individualistic piety fixed on some particular god or even foreign deity. In other cases belief in an impersonal divine force present in the world (e.g., in Stoicism) replaced the venerable old tradition. In still other instances many felt no kinship with any divine principle that gave the cosmos any semblance

12. The word "pagan" used here hardly refers to a religionless people but instead to a people outside the orbit of the Abrahamic religion.

13. I recognize the falsity of the phrase "older religions," but I use it nevertheless for the sake of convenience.



of order. The feeling was pervasive that an oppressive, blind, impersonal, cosmic force called *heimarmenē* controlled the world. That dark necessity that ruled was a stranger to love, and many felt like reeds at the mercy of a capricious wind.

This shift in mood and darkness of spirit cast menacing shadows over the Hellenistic landscape, and the great dream of one world, free of barbarism and corruption, soured. Any hope that a political power could deliver the good life evaporated. As Professor Helmut Koester noted,

In Athens, the city in which the most magnificent cultic buildings were erected, the visible presence of splendid temples did little but create the impression that this city was only a museum of classical greatness. The more the old traditions received support and were subsidized by the government, the more the cultic activities of the temples were estranged from the religious consciousness of the majority of the population.<sup>14</sup>

This eclipse of the old had far-reaching implications. For example, in place of the earlier Greek fascination with the body and appreciation for beauty and order in the universe, there appeared a devaluation of the world and the body. The Greek word for “athlete” (*askētēs*) came to mean “ascetic.”<sup>15</sup> Gilbert Murray once characterized the period thus:

This sense of failure, this progressive loss of hope in the world, in sober calculation, and in organized human effort, threw the later Greek back upon his own soul, upon the pursuit of personal holiness, upon emotions, mysteries and revelations, upon the comparative neglect of this transitory and imperfect world for the sake of some dream-world far off, which shall subsist without sin or corruption, the same yesterday, today and forever.<sup>16</sup>

Even granting this decline of traditional religions, their wasting away hardly left a landscape barren of religious expression. Fertility cults remained viable in the rural areas; the mystery religions enjoyed a resurgence in the cities; the healing cult of Asclepius became increasingly popular everywhere; and religious movements from the east grew in favor in the cosmopolitan west. Because of the urban character of Paul’s mission, the latter three are of special interest to us here.

14. Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament, History, Culture and Religion in the Hellenistic Age* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 1:4.

15. Martin P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 188.

16. Gilbert Murray, *Five Stages of Greek Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1955), 4.



## The Mystery Religions

Perhaps because of their success in guarding their secrets, we know little about the mystery religions in first-century Greece.<sup>17</sup> What we do know harmonizes well with the spirit of the time. Although participation in the mysteries was most often corporate, the central concern of the mysteries was salvation through direct identification with the deity. This knowledge was less intellectual than mystical, less rational than relational. Through the prescribed rites the participants received more than a vision; they experienced solidarity with the god. Preparation included elaborate cleansing rites (lustrations or baptisms), and in some of the mysteries sexual union in a cultic setting offered ecstatic union. Through ritual mergers with the deity, initiates experienced a state of blessedness: the terror of history was overcome, release from the corruption of this world was achieved, and immortality became a present reality.

### The Eleusinian Mystery

The dying and rising god or goddess at the center of the mystery cult normally had his or her first home in agriculture, with its vital interest in the turning of the seasons. In that context the deity's life and death had practical issue for the renewal of crops. Eventually, however, under the influence of the mystery religions, the ancient fertility rites changed focus from the renewal of crops to the renewal of life after death.<sup>18</sup> In the words of Firmicus Maximus we see how the fate of the god became the fate of the initiate: "Take courage, ye initiates! As the god was saved, so too for us comes salvation from suffering."<sup>19</sup>

17. The term "mystery religion," though problematic, is used here for the sake of convenience. No definition of the mysteries is without objection. For example, if one defines the mysteries as religions of secret rites, one can place Christianity in this category, while excluding the cult of Dionysus, with its public rites and festivals. If one uses the term to refer to religions whose rites brought its devotees into a mystical union with the god, one may note the Christian union with Christ. If one thinks of the mysteries as those promising to their initiates esoteric wisdom that sets them apart from the masses, and offering a new life or conversion that transcends human limit, mortality, or culpability, then the definition is so broad that it fits almost all religious movements and is, therefore, useless. Here we accept the self-description of the movements themselves—that is, as those that are privy to the divine mysteries and as such can offer deliverance from this mortal web of fate, matter, mortality.

18. See Frederick C. Grant, ed., *Ancient Roman Religion* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1957), xxiv. For materials ascribed to the mystery religions, see Charles K. Barrett, ed., *The New Testament Background: Selected Documents* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), 92–104.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, trans. R. H. Fuller (New York: World Publishing Co., 1947), 159.

Most typical of this pattern was the Eleusinian mystery, based on a myth in which Hades-Pluto kidnaped Kore-Persephone, the beautiful young goddess of fertility, carrying her off to the underworld to rape her. In her absence Demeter, her mother, mourned, the earth languished, and the grain wilted. Demeter's desperate search for her daughter met success only after her persistent appeal persuaded Zeus to intervene and rescue the people from starvation and death. As a result, Kore-Persephone spent eight months of every year on earth and four months in the underworld. (The four months were the hot, dry summer months, when the grain lay dormant.)

Though little is known of the rituals marking these seasonal passages, surely rites of mourning and celebration existed. But evidence from the Roman period proves that the Eleusinian mysteries had a reach far beyond their immediate agricultural home. Cicero, one of the most important Roman jurists and philosophers of the Roman period, was an Eleusinian initiate and spoke of the power of the mystery to enable believers to "live with joy . . . and die with a better hope."<sup>20</sup> A number of emperors accepted initiation into the cult (Augustus, Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, and others), but the expense of the initiation discouraged participation by the poor and slaves. The attention given in the mystery to ties with the dead heightened its appeal. Yet there was no community of Eleusinian initiates, and the mystery's individualistic character separated it radically from the early Christian community.

### Isis and Osiris Myth (or Serapis Cult)

One of the most popular mysteries of the first century was the Isis-Osiris (or Serapis) cult, a transplant from Egypt that flourished in the cities ringing the Mediterranean. In this rite Isis was ritually recalled as an Egyptian goddess, the consort of Osiris, who was murdered by his brother Seth and departed to become lord of the netherworld. Though linked to the realm of the dead, Osiris held the secret to the powers of life and fructification. He brought the benevolent Nile floods that caused the delta to bloom. He caused the wine to ferment, the bread to rise, and the crops to yield their fruit. Osiris's green face, still evident in tomb drawings from the second century BCE, symbolized his intimate association with verdant nature's abundance.

Although the history of the Osiris myth informing the first-century mystery is complex, the basic outline of the sacred story is known. Both born of the sun god Ra, Seth, the older, jealous rival sibling, murdered Osiris, dismembered him, and heaved the mutilated carcass fragments into the Nile. Stricken with grief, Isis, Osiris's consort, scoured the land in search of her lover. Eventually, she located the fragments of his body, reassembled them,

20. Cicero, *De leg.* 2.38.

breathed life into the reassembled corpse, and consummated her love. From this sexual union issued Horus, Osiris's heir to the throne and the pharaoh of upper and lower Egypt. Later interred by the jackal-headed Anubis, Osiris returned to the netherworld to become lord of the Nile, which caused it to flood, thus assuring abundant harvests. Meanwhile, Horus, his son, ruled the land from a throne shaped like the lap of his mother Isis.

Depicted often as a black or Apis bull, a powerful symbol of fecundity, Osiris became the guarantor of life after death and the god with whom Egyptian women and men identified as they faced their own mortality.<sup>21</sup> Through their participation in this myth, they expressed their hope someday to join the great god Osiris and thus be absorbed in the great rhythm of the universe.<sup>22</sup> The name Osiris, when combined with the name Apis, the name of the beautiful, virile black bull in which he was manifest, produced Serapis, the Greek version of the Egyptian cult that became highly popular well into the Roman period. In the translation into the Greek experience by Alexander's successors, the Ptolemies, however, it was Isis, not Osiris, who became the dominant figure.

So this primal myth, so deeply rooted in Egypt's fertile cultural landscape, promised victory over mortality to its initiates and became influential with the masses in the great urban centers of the Greco-Roman world. To establish its importance it is unnecessary to see parallels, as does Koester.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Paul's account of dying and rising with Christ (Rom. 6:3–5) and the rite of participation in the Isis initiation may have resonated with many in Paul's congregations who were aware of the cult and may have even been attracted to its wondrous vision of Isis:

The mother of the universe,  
The mistress of all the elements,  
The first offspring of time,  
The highest of the deities,  
The queen of the dead.<sup>24</sup>

Sketches of Mary later betray the influence of the Isis myth on the Jesus tradition and thus reveal the continuing appeal of this mystery religion. But most would have recognized the profound differences between Paul's gospel and the message of Isis. Whereas the Isis cult promised a triumph over

21. An old but still highly instructive work on Egyptian religion is Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948). On Isis and Osiris, see esp. 104–23.

22. *Ibid.*, 106.

23. Koester, *Introduction*, 191.

24. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5.1.

death in the present, the triumph over the power of death for Paul remained a future prospect. And, of course, although both begin with the story of a tragic murder (Jesus and Osiris), Paul's gospel had a historical dimension that the Isis-Osiris myth lacked and a radical monotheism that would have been totally alien to the Isis-Osiris mystery.

### The Mystery of Dionysus

No sketch of the mysteries would be adequate without some reference to Dionysus, the most popular Greek mystery of the Hellenistic age. Although Dionysus is a venerable god of distant antiquity, his land of origin is disputed.<sup>25</sup> However that dispute turned, all who recognized and revered Dionysus before the sixth century BCE would have still venerated him in the first.

Dionysus's myth of origin recalled that he was conceived in a tryst between the god Zeus and the mortal Semele, the daughter of Cadmus the king of Thebes. His birth, like his conception, stood outside the order of nature. Jealous of Semele's success with Zeus, Hera tricked Semele into begging Zeus to reveal his full splendor to her. After initially resisting, Zeus reluctantly agreed, but in the theophany Semele was struck down, consumed by a bolt of lightning. Dionysus, the foetus, was rescued from the dying Semele (birth #1) and carried to full term by Zeus in his thigh (perhaps a euphemism for abdomen). From there he eventually emerged (birth #2). Devotees, identifying with Dionysus, spoke of themselves as "born again" or recipients of a "second birth." Once grown, Dionysus descended to Hades to rescue his mother, Semele, and return her to Mount Olympus to live with the gods. In addition to presiding over a cult of rebirth, he was best known as the bringer of wine and as the victor over death symbolized by a green ivy headband.

Vase paintings from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE depict maenads, or female worshipers, in wild, ecstatic nocturnal and highly erotic dances. Under the power of Dionysus they broke free of onerous work at looms. Other sources describe the feast of *sparagmos*, in which ecstatic women tore flesh from living animals and devoured it raw in a reckless act of divine possession. Since many believed that Dionysus was somehow present in both the wine and the wild animals, to eat the sacred flesh and drink the wine became the mythical basis for enthusiasm (literally, having "god within"). Given the prominence of both the bloody sacrifice and wine from the crushed grape, the symbolic association of blood and wine as living sacrifice was natural.

25. Martin P. Nilsson, *The Dionysiac Mysteries of the Hellenistic Roman Age* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1957), followed by Koester, traces Dionysus's origins back to Thrace and Phrygia. Walter Friedrich Otto, *Dionysus, Myth and Cult* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 58, disputes Nilsson's claim, arguing that Dionysus was always thought to be of Greek origin.

Whether the church's association of blood and wine in the Eucharist was influenced by the Dionysiac mysteries is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that the command to drink the wine as Jesus' blood, so repulsive to Jews, would have sounded entirely natural to converts familiar with the mystery. Men also worshiped Dionysus, though their adulation was usually segregated from that of women. In their stag parties they drank copious amounts of the wine symbolically containing the spirit of the god. Only in the spring festival apparently did women and men join together in one joyous act of celebration. But whether segregated or integrated, men and women throughout Greece, the islands, and onto the coast of Asia Minor hailed Dionysus in intoxication and dance as the "'Raw-Eater,' 'Man-smasher,' 'Great Hunter,' 'Steer,' 'Roarer,' 'the-one-with-the-black-goatskin,' 'Erect,' 'Tree-like,' 'Flowerer,' 'Liberator.'"<sup>26</sup>

These metaphors associated with Dionysus reveal some of the complexity and irreconcilable polarity of this god. He stood for blood and gore, as well as rescue and salvation. His dark side touched on bloodshed and pollution, his light side on liberation and freedom. His savagery and destructiveness linked him with death; his rescue of his mother from Hades established him as giver of life. His association with life and death, light and darkness, the world above and the world below, and the wild and the tamed inevitably tied him to contradictions many felt.

From the third century BCE to the first, however, the gravity and complexity of the earlier Dionysus gave way to a vision of the god much more in tune with Hellenistic ideals. Now more a symbol of the sophisticated, refined lifestyle of the Hellenistic period and an advocate of the ecumenical vision of the one civilized world, Dionysus was increasingly used by rulers to reinforce political agendas. Nevertheless, Dionysus did not lose touch with the common lot. His gospel promised strength to endure life's trials and offered rescue from death in the world to come. His association with wine, dance, and drama remained unshakable, and his powers remained to be implored by emperor and slave alike. His tolerance for excess made it easy for followers to identify with him.<sup>27</sup> His affirmation of the physical legitimized the sensual element in the human experience and offered release from the mundane. Caroline Houser aptly summarizes the basis of Dionysus's appeal: Dionysus "is a realist who knows the dark and frightening side of nature as well as

26. Albert Henrichs, "Greek and Roman Glimpses of Dionysus," in *Dionysos and His Circle, Ancient through Modern*, ed. Caroline Houser (Cambridge, MA: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 1979), 6.

27. Nilsson, *Dionysiac Mysteries*, 143–47, usefully summarized the Dionysiac mystery religion; however, he overemphasized its elitist appeal to the rich and cultured conservatives. Caroline Houser's estimation is more convincing.

the light and joyful side. He promises transcendence or metamorphosis, not annihilation."<sup>28</sup>

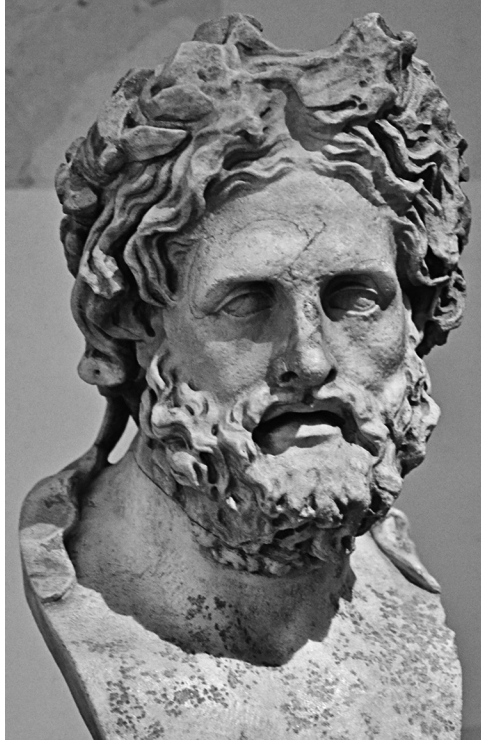
In sum, one might say that the primary emphasis of the Dionysiac mystery was on the struggle between life and death. The emphasis on the life-giving power of the phallus must be seen against an awareness of death as the one great absolute. As early as the fifth century BCE the mystery was concerned with the terror and bliss of the afterlife. This emphasis on funereal elements continued well into the Roman period. Yet the Roman version of the worship of Bacchus (Latin for Dionysus) differed in the way it exaggerated certain elements in the Greek version. Devotees of Bacchus, for example, were much more direct in their pursuit of erotic pleasure, and the Roman maenads, or female devotees, were much more provocative than their Greek counterparts. Although Paul's warnings against drunkenness and lust may not have been specifically aimed at the devotees of Dionysus, surely the context required such warnings, for Paul would have been acutely aware of the hold of this mystery on some of his followers.

### The Healing Cult of Asclepius

Due to the short life span common in the first-century world and the pervasiveness of illness and epidemics, no ancient was a stranger to illness, and that human extremity often prompted an appeal to the gods for help. In the Hellenistic world, that request most frequently was lifted up to Asclepius, the god of healing. Son of the god Apollo and the mortal Coronis, according to one account, Asclepius was born at Epidaurus, which later became the location of an impressive sanctuary in his honor. According to the myth, Asclepius died as a mortal but returned to earth as a god to live and serve humanity as the compassionate god of healing. Devoted primarily but not exclusively to the poor and disadvantaged, Asclepius was known as the kind, compassionate god.

Seeking relief from sickness at any one of more than three hundred sanctuaries dedicated to him at Epidaurus, Athens, Corinth, Pergamum, the island of Cos, and other places, the masses came. There were 160 rooms for guests at Epidaurus alone. As precursors of modern holistic medicine, these centers ministered to the mind and spirit as well as the body. Like that at Epidaurus, for example, these centers included libraries, gymnasia, theaters, baths, clinics for physicians, and a holy place (*abaton*) where the ill slept, hoping for a healing encounter with the merciful god, Asclepius. For example, we read that at Epidaurus, a young girl was visited by Asclepius as she slept in the *abaton*.

28. Caroline Houser, "Changing Views of Dionysos," in *Dionysos and His Circle*, 24.



Healing God of Asklepios (Courtesy of Warren Kendall; used by permission)

“The god appeared before her [Ambrosia], telling her that she would be cured and that she had to dedicate a pig made of silver as a token of her gratitude. Having said this he cut out the bad eye and immersed it in medicine. She awoke at dawn, cured.”<sup>29</sup>

While no such centers of healing existed in Jewish or early Jesus circles, there was, nevertheless, as the Gospels show, a profound interest in the powers of charismatic healers. One difference, however, was that the emphasis on healing in the Asclepius cult was individualistic, whereas the corporate

29. *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, 1902), vol. 4, no. 951, 11:36, cited in Frederick C. Grant, ed., *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism* (New York: Liberal Art Press, 1953), 57; see also 49–59. See also Howard C. Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), and E. J. and L. Edelstein, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945).





Theater of Epidaurus (Courtesy of Warren Kendall; used by permission)

dimension of Jewish and Christian healing stories is unmistakable. Although Paul's addressees, like all people of the time, and he himself suffered many illnesses and physical handicaps, except for 2 Corinthians 12:7–12, the letters themselves record no single healing he performed. He did note that he was able to perform mighty works (Gal. 3:5) and that he suffered from various afflictions, but he more strongly emphasized God's strength made manifest in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9), in contrast to those who displayed their miracle-working powers as proof of the truth of their gospel. Yet healing cults were very much a part of the environment in which Paul proclaimed his gospel and may have influenced his hearers more than we know.

### **Stoicism**

The personal agony and social upheaval of the third century BCE provided the ingredients for the formation of Stoicism. With the shaking of the foundations that came with the collapse of Alexander's empire, questions about the gods' concern were raised in the sharpest possible way. Social upheaval, civil war, famine, corruption, infanticide, and tyranny prompted the questions: If



the gods care about the plight of humanity, why do they fail to redress the wrongs inflicted by this hostile world? If Providence favors justice and fairness, then why is life so unfair?

The Stoics answered by affirming rather than denying a divine presence in the world. “God” for the Stoics was less a divine personality engaged in human affairs than a divine principle (*logos* or divine reason) that pervaded and governed the universe. As Edwyn Bevan noted, for the Stoic “the whole universe was only one Substance, one *physis*, in various states” and “that one Substance was Reason, [and] was God.”<sup>30</sup> Like humans, the world, the Stoics held, had a soul that directed its affairs, and existence was deemed fundamentally rational. Even natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or famine advanced the divine purpose in ways beyond human comprehension; perhaps they controlled population or served hidden purposes. In this spirit, Chrysippus once remarked that even the lowly bed bug was an instrument of the divine reason, because it kept people from sleeping too much or too long. The humble pig, likewise, mirrored this divine reason, for its “soul of salt” allowed its flesh to be preserved for eating, and its tendency to fatness made its meat delicious and nourishing.

Chrysippus had the rather optimistic view that if the world could have been better arranged, the divine reason would have made it so. In the third century BCE, the famous Stoic Cleanthes well articulated this vision in his hymn to Zeus:

For nought is done on earth apart from thee,  
Nor in the earth nor in the sea,  
But skill to make the crooked straight is thine,  
To turn disorder to a fair design  
Ungracious things are gracious in thy sight  
For ill and good thy power doth so combine.<sup>31</sup>

Once a person understood the universe to be fundamentally rational, he or she could accept whatever happened with equanimity (or *apatheia*). *Apatheia* was no mere resignation to fate (as its English cognate “apathy” suggests) but a source of strength based on the conviction that a divine will controlled and directed all things. *Apatheia*, therefore, was the gateway to true freedom, for the truly disinterested person was untrammelled by the cares of the world. In the Stoic view, a kind of self-sufficiency or spiritual autonomy characterized the life of the truly liberated person. Though

30. Edwyn Bevan, *Stoics and Skeptics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 41.

31. AChrysippus, as cited by Edward Vernon Arnold, *Roman Stoicism* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1971), 86.

Stoicism was pantheistic (i.e., the universe was infused with divine soul, *logos*), it was no mystery religion.

Its emphasis on the inner life and personal initiative, however, did give it an individualistic character. Its stress on personal detachment and the orderliness of the cosmos undermined any interest in history. Since the world moved in ways predetermined by cosmic reason, it minimized the importance of either a past or a future.

As Bultmann once said, "The Stoic believes that it is possible to escape from his involvement in time. By detaching himself from the world he detaches himself from time. The essential part of man is the Logos, and the Logos is timeless."<sup>32</sup> One can easily translate this statement to make it gender neutral without violating Bultmann's intent.

Paul's early years were probably spent in Tarsus, a center of Stoic teaching. Certainly his letters show signs of Stoic influence. His use of the diatribe to argue his case in Romans and his creative appropriation of the allegorical method of Scripture interpretation both owe something to the Stoics. His tendency to view believers as citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20) rather than of the city (*polis*) strongly resembles a Stoic vision. Possibly even the scope of Paul's vision embracing the whole world may owe something to a Stoic cosmopolitanism (Rom. 10:18).

At points, however, Paul's worldview differed markedly from that of his Stoic contemporaries. His gospel's emphasis on history departed from the Stoic outlook. Paul's gospel was rooted in a historical event, was based on a historical person, and anticipated fulfillment in a historical (real) future, which separated his vision from that of the Stoics. Unlike the Stoic view of freedom as spiritual autonomy, freedom for Paul meant liberation from hostile cosmic powers (e.g., King Death, or Satanic Sin) for service to Christ. The Stoic was confident that individuals could win freedom through their own dedication; Paul took freedom to be an eschatological gift of God. And whereas the Stoic's concern centered on freedom, and thus on the individual, Paul's emphasis was corporate, implying a positive interaction of persons in a common bond. We see, therefore, that while Paul used the Stoic idiom, he normally subordinated it to his gospel and in the process transformed it. But what was true of Paul was not always true for his converts, who were often inclined to familiar and even natural compromises that led to sharp exchanges with the apostle. While strictly speaking Stoicism was no mystery religion, with the call for identification with the divine logos there was a mystical element.

32. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 159.

## Cynic Philosophy

The Cynics were less philosophers than advocates of a lifestyle and method of teaching; but since their contemporaries called them philosophers, they deserve our attention. The word “Cynic,” from the Greek for dog (*kyōn*), was an epithet hung on them by the culture critics of the day. Tracing their lineage back to Diogenes of Sinope (fourth century BCE), their presence in cities of Paul’s day was significant. Claiming to live by nature (*physis*), they expressed their contempt for the well dressed by wearing rags; they registered their disdain for the wealthy by begging. They gave voice to their repudiation of the politically powerful with sarcasm. As keen observers of nature, they modeled their lives by its rules. Living as naturally and comfortably as possible, they, like animals, defecated in public places and had sexual intercourse wherever they felt the urge. Like animals they sought to reduce life to its barest simplicity. So impressed was Diogenes, for example, by a child’s drinking from cupped hands that he discarded his cup, saying, “A child has beaten me in the plainness of living.”<sup>33</sup> Boldness of speech they claimed for themselves as a freedom usually reserved for citizens in the assembly. Reportedly, so overawed was he by Diogenes’s example that Alexander the Great told the philosopher, “Ask me any boon you like.”<sup>34</sup> To which Diogenes allegedly replied, “Stand out of my light.”

Paul, like the Cynics, spoke of having boldness “in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition” (1 Thess. 2:2). Although they were not atheistic, Cynics found religious language discomfiting;<sup>35</sup> they viewed such language as an expression of popular religion, which they criticized as an endorsement of the status quo.

Understandably, many found the Cynics’ ragged, dirty clothing, smelly hair, matted and unkempt beards, surly manner, and disgusting personal contempt for normal habits of behavior to be revolting. Writing in the middle of the first century, Seneca scoffed at their behavior and at their “repellent attire, unkempt hair, sloven beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth and . . . other perverted forms of self-display.”<sup>36</sup>

In spite of popular disdain for them, Cynics, nevertheless did at points influence New Testament writings. Paul’s use of the diatribe came at least indirectly from Cynics *and* Stoics. Some of his language (e.g., “boldness of

33. Diogenes Laertius, “Diogenes,” in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, 1925), 4.39.

34. *Ibid.*, 6:41.

35. Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, 159.

36. Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 5:21.

speech”) shows some debt to the Cynic philosophers. The lists of hardships that he notes in 2 Corinthians 11:23–29 closely follow a Cynic pattern. Paul’s own understanding of the radical character of his wandering mission may have owed something to the Cynic practice. At other points, Paul emphatically distanced himself from wandering popular preachers whom many deemed hucksters preying on simple souls. Paul’s letters reveal little inclination to engage in a radical critique of society. Why should they? He was convinced that the form of this world was passing away and would soon be replaced by a new creation. And he, much more than any Cynic preacher, saw the necessity of religious institutions and the importance of corporate support for the life of radical obedience to God (e.g., the offering for the church in Jerusalem).

So, being aware of this vibrant conceptual context in which Paul preached, we must also exercise caution, for conceptual parallels may not mean or suggest agreement. It is important to see that Paul based his critique of the world and his readers on the gospel he preached, which was significantly different from the Cynic philosophy and ethos.

### Neo-Pythagoreanism

Because of its ability to synthesize diverse traditions, Pythagoreanism enjoyed a widespread revival in the first century BCE. With the venerated name of Pythagoras to legitimate their teachings, the neo-Pythagoreans forged a union of philosophy and religious piety that had genuine popular appeal. Far from being just an exercise in speculation, this philosophy concerned itself with cultivating a sensitivity to the divine element within. The axiom that “like seeks like” was a fundamental of neo-Pythagorean thought of the first century. This meant that humans, like the movie character E.T., constantly sought to return home to their cosmic divine source; the aim of life was to strip off the body to allow the spirit to rejoin the divine source. Naturally this loyalty to one’s higher nature required repudiation of the flesh, because it was by flesh, they believed, that the spirit was tethered to this world. This emphasis on liberation from the body often led to a repression or a sublimation of sex (i.e., body) and to a life of poverty, free from earth’s trappings. Sometimes a vow of silence was taken to stifle traffic with this world and afford fuller contemplation of the world of spirit.

Since the soul was divine, and the divine eternal, neo-Pythagoreans firmly believed the soul was immortal, and this led to a belief in transmigration. Soul was not the exclusive property of human life: the divine element went beyond the human family to include animals. This belief formed the basis of the conviction that the divine ether was present in animals and led neo-Pythagoreans

to ban the eating of meat and to forbid the wearing of clothes made from animal pelts or wool.

A strong mystical current ran through neo-Pythagoreanism. Like the god-intoxicated worshipers of the mysteries, they called themselves *entheoi* (“those with god within”) or *ekstatikoi* (“those possessed or beside themselves” with the spirit).

This enthusiasm (literally, “infusion with god”) often manifested itself in miraculous works. In some circles miracles were thought to reveal the divine within of the one performing them. In this view, charismatic male figures, or “god men,” performed divine or miraculous deeds as authenticating signs.

For some neo-Pythagoreans, numbers held significance beyond their numeric value as abstract ciphers. Apparently this reverence for numbers sprang from the conviction that harmony was the essence of divine nature. The precise rhythm of the cosmos, as well as the delicate and perfect balance between odds and evens, between the one and the many, and between finitude and infinity, suggested a divine principle holding opposites in harmony. Between the one and the many they saw a fundamental reality that manifested itself in the division between male and female, light and darkness, good and evil, and so on. Although their interest in astrology and numbers did prompt the neo-Pythagoreans to an accurate reading of the movements of the heavenly bodies, their aim was religious. The heavenly spheres were more than an expression of divine order; they were its source. The astral bodies were in some sense divine, and the will of the gods could be learned from their movements.

Knowing that divine will was important, because those bodies were thought to fix the destiny of the world. The goal of knowledge was to penetrate to the very heart of the cosmos and to find truth “as something at once beatific and comforting.” This philosophy “presents the human being as cradled in a universal harmony.”<sup>37</sup> The saving quality of this knowledge was especially precious in the first century BCE because of the decline of social structures and the loss of faith. Neo-Pythagoreans sought comfort in a belief that there was some connection between the heavenly “fixed glare of alien power and necessity”<sup>38</sup> and the destiny of the world. In the view of some, neo-Pythagoreanism was a degenerate philosophy. The movement did address itself, however, to a major concern of the time. Increasingly, many felt ruled by powers they

37. For still the best treatment, see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 482.

38. Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 328. Although meant to describe an existential dimension in Gnosticism, it applies equally well to a developing mood shared by neo-Pythagoreans.

could not pretend to comprehend or understand. Life seemed capricious and unfair; the only certainty was uncertainty. The elder Pliny well articulated that feeling, a feeling that was widespread in the cities of his day, when he said, “We are so much at the mercy of chance that Chance herself, by whom God is proved uncertain, takes the place of God.”<sup>39</sup>

Added to this sense of helplessness before those powerful forces was a growing suspicion that the powers were careless. Many felt as though they were mere playthings of Fate (*moira*), Chance (*tychē*), or Necessity (*anankē*). Life, they believed, was determined by forces that were fundamentally blind to and heedless of moral distinctions. Although neo-Pythagoreanism did not elevate reason, it did offer an alternative to surrender to Fate. It promised desperate men and women a way out of this world.

By touching the divine within, believers could anticipate liberation of the divine spark from its fleshly prison and a reunion of it with the source of all being and truth. Freed from the tyranny of capricious, irrational powers, life assumed meaning and purpose that made it tolerable.

The character of first-century neo-Pythagorean thought was perhaps best exhibited in the life of Apollonius of Tyana. Although his highly romanticized biography was not commissioned until 216 CE, over a century after his death,<sup>40</sup> the piety reflected in it conforms rather well to Apollonius’s actual first-century outlook noted by historians. Renouncing wine, meat, and marriage, Apollonius wandered about barefoot and was clad only in an “earth-wool” (linen) that spared animals. Through gifts to the poor he rid himself of the burden of wealth, and through a vow of silence that reputedly lasted for five years he screened out this world to concentrate on the divine. His travels carried him eastward to India, south to Egypt, and west to Rome. He conferred with the sages in Nepal, preached and performed miracles through Asia Minor and Greece, visited naked sages on the upper Nile, and advised public officials in Rome. His preaching emphasized a strong link between salvation and self-knowledge.

Inasmuch as knowing the self meant an existential or deep religious knowing of the divine within the self, he claimed self-knowledge to be synonymous

39. Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. Harris Rackham, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), 2.5.22.

40. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 135–46; E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951), 135–46, shows how interest grew in philosophic miracle workers; David L. Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), 16ff., saw the tension between traditions that viewed Pythagoras as a divine philosopher and those that remembered him as a miracle worker.

with becoming god. Consequently, to know oneself is to know all things, since the gods know everything. Moreover, the truly good person is divine, that is, one whose actions reflect what one essentially is. These divine acts reach beyond high moral concerns to include miraculous deeds. In the biographical account, for example, Apollonius not only denounced Roman tyranny, repudiated gladiatorial combat, exhorted the common people to improve their morals, and admonished all to be responsible citizens; he also reportedly predicted a plague, raised a dead girl, healed a boy bitten by a mad dog, exorcised demons, and quelled riots. There is little cause for wonder that when Nero asked Apollonius at his trial, "Why do people call you god?" he reputedly answered: "Every man believed to be good is honored with the title god."<sup>41</sup> Persecuted under Nero for his "meddlesome business," he was apparently martyred under Domitian near the end of the first century. One tradition, however, speaks of an end befitting an immortal: his mysterious disappearance and ascension before his execution.

Although the biography of Apollonius is late, his activity as a wonder worker, wise man, lawgiver, and patron of the mysteries is in tune with the spirit of the age. Whereas the literary portrait of Apollonius, broadly stroked by Philostratus, reflects some later concerns, the basic outline of his sketch closely resembles the portrait of first-century neo-Pythagorean philosophy presented by others.<sup>42</sup> Given the spiritual hunger of the fatalism many felt, the hopeful emphases of neo-Pythagoreanism were popular. It enjoyed success among rich and poor, privileged and slave, literate and illiterate. Considering its broad popular appeal, the likelihood is great it influenced some of Paul's hearers, perhaps rather significantly.

### Gnosticism

Gnosticism (from Gk. *gnōsis*, "knowledge") was important in the experience of the early church. Although the background of Gnosticism is extraordinarily complex, it is likely that the spirit of the Hellenistic age played some role in its genesis and formation. While it is unlikely that Gnosticism was merely an acute Hellenization of early Christianity, as Harnack claimed generations ago, it surely was at home and flourished in a deeply disenchanting age.

Whether Gnosticism antedated Christianity is much disputed, but gnostic materials with sources that go back to the second century CE were discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Now published, these materials

41. Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana* 8.7; vol. 2, 315.

42. Holger Thesleff, *An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period* (Abo: [Turku] Finland, Abo Akademi, 1961).



assist in sketching the contours of thought in this movement.<sup>43</sup> The polemical description of Gnosticism by the church fathers in the late second century was formerly discounted; but read in light of the Nag Hammadi collection, that description has proven not to be the caricature some thought it to be. Since our earliest secure historical evidence for second-century Gnosticism is second century, it is not always applicable to Paul, but certain features of the second-century version reflected those of the first.

While the presence of the divine *logos* in the natural world allowed the Stoic to view his environment positively, the devoted Gnostic viewed the world as evil. If the creation is evil, they reasoned, then the creator also must be evil. Thus the god of this world became an antigod or demonic figure. This radical dualism between the god above and the god below, between matter and spirit, between light and darkness, between knowledge and ignorance, formed the core of gnostic thought.

The denigration of matter profoundly influenced gnostic anthropology. The product of an evil being, imprisoned in a demonic world, unconscious of the divine within, humans wander aimlessly in perpetual stupor. Were it not for the great high god who took pity and sent a redeemer to remind them of their true origin and destiny, all would be hopelessly lost. But once awakened from the ignorance of one's divine origin, gnostics experienced salvation fully here and now. The knowledge of divine origin was no mere intellectual exercise but a signifier of a relationship. Liberated from the bodily prison, the "spiritual" person realized absolute freedom, a freedom that embraced both stringent asceticism and voluptuary license. In the repudiation of the flesh (asceticism), gnostics exhibited their freedom over the body. In their indulgence, gnostics demonstrated their freedom from the body, because what is done in the body does not affect the real self. Moreover, since the fallen god, YHWH, gave the laws, law breaking became a signifier of freedom from the clutches of that god.

The Corinthian correspondence opens a window onto a community with some of those tendencies. But those links are hardly iron clad, for it is anachronistic to argue for a second-century movement in the first. It is likely, however, that pre-gnostic emphases on wisdom (*gnōsis*), libertinism, devaluation of the creation, a realized eschatology or spiritual elitism, and even an ascription of evil to the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) were shared by some of Paul's converts. Those early gnostic tendencies received fuller development a century later in certain Egyptian and Syrian churches. Certain Pauline texts like

43. Most of these documents included in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977). For an older account needing correction, see Hans Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*.



1 Corinthians 15:50—“flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”—when taken out of context could be made to support a gnostic tendency.<sup>44</sup>

## THE GREEK TRANSLATION OF PAUL'S BIBLE

As an important feature of Paul's Diaspora Judaism, the Septuagint was the Bible of the common people. It was fully intelligible even to the illiterate person hearing it read in a synagogue meeting. It also was the focus of study and commentary by Jewish intellectuals like Philo of Alexandria and Aristobolus, and it inspired romantic legends like Joseph and Aseneth, a tale about Joseph's marriage to a beautiful, privileged, powerful Egyptian woman whose conversion offered permission for such inevitable unions in the Diaspora.

Moreover a popular legend, the *Letter of Aristeas*, lent the Septuagint a communal authority. According to that fanciful tale, the then-pharaoh brought seventy-two Hebrew scribes fluent in Greek to Alexandria from Jerusalem for the translation of Torah. Sequestered on an island in total isolation from one another, each of those scribes completed his translation in exactly seventy-two days, and when their translations were compared they were found to be identical. The end product completed the holdings of the “world famous” library of Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus (287–284 BCE) in Alexandria<sup>45</sup> and became the Bible of Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews. (This weird combination of seventies led to naming the book the Septuagint, or LXX, the Roman numeral for seventy.) In reality, the translation evolved over more than two centuries, and its faithfulness to the Hebrew varies greatly from book to book. Nevertheless, it provided guidance and instruction for minority Jewish communities living in a powerful, alluring, Hellenistic majority culture.

Once accepted and revered by the Greek-speaking Diaspora community, a vast body of commentary arose, lending an authority to the Septuagint. Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Jew, devoted most of his multiple volumes to commentary on the Septuagint. Even earlier, in the second century BCE, the Jewish scholar Aristobolus sought to render the anthropomorphic references of the Septuagint to God and make them acceptable to sophisticated, educated Jews of the Diaspora.<sup>46</sup> The later commentary on the romantic tale noted above had enduring relevance for a community in which intermarriage

44. A fuller development of these ties may be seen in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

45. “The Letter of Aristeas,” trans. R. J. H. Shutt, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1985), 2:177–201.

46. “Aristobolus,” trans. A. Yarbro Collins, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:831–42.

became more common.<sup>47</sup> These works and others lent authority to the Septuagint as God's preeminent vehicle of revelation. Annual festivities celebrated its origin, and weekly synagogue readings gave it a status that rivaled or even surpassed that of the Hebrew master texts.

More than a text generating interpretation, however, the Septuagint itself was an interpretation. From different periods, from many hands, and scribed in the vernacular Greek of the day, the Septuagint offered an interpretation of the Old Testament in Greek while seeking to remain true to the spirit of the Hebrew. The Greek translation inevitably, however, made adjustments in three important areas.

First, the Septuagint's view of God contained a Hellenistic bias. Especially noteworthy was the disappearance of Hebraic personal names for God. The proper nouns *YHWH* and *Elohim* of the Hebrew became a generic *theos* ("god"). The common Hebrew proper names *El Shaddai* and *YHWH Sabaoth* became *pantokratōr* ("almighty"). Likewise, *Adonai*, which implied a relationship between deity and worshiper, became *kyrios* ("sovereign lord").

That trend toward abstraction surfaces in Exodus 3:1–14, where Moses cleverly attempts to worm the secret, powerful divine name out of God. *Elohim* answers the impertinent Moses with "I AM WHO I AM. . . . Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me.'" In order for the wordplay to work, a knowledge of the Hebrew verb "to be," from which the word *YHWH* is formed, is required. The wordplay, however, is missing entirely from the Septuagint. The Greek translation has instead, "I am The Being. . . . say to the children, 'The Being (*ho ōn*) has sent me.'" With that move, God is depicted as the Self-Existent One, the absolute, cosmic divine being of the Greek philosophers.

In a pluralistic setting with many gods and daily contact with non-Jewish peoples, some level of tolerance was required to allow for tolerable working relationships. Aware of that need, translators made a clever move. Where Exodus 22:28 has the command "You shall not revile *Elohim*," the Greek translator(s) took the Hebrew plural form literally, whereas in its original the plural suggested a level of holy "otherness" that the Greek plural form did not capture. The Septuagint has instead, "You shall not revile the gods." Whereas the Hebrew commandment centered on the one holy God to the exclusion of all others, the Greek translation encouraged some level of tolerance for different forms of religious piety. While the worship of foreign gods was forbidden, a tolerance of other religious expressions was commanded. While

47. "Joseph and Aseneth," trans. C. Burchard, in *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:177–201.

Paul himself may have resisted such a broad tolerance, his converts were more open to the spirit of the age than he.

Second, the Septuagintal word “faith” (*pistis*) shaped Paul’s thought in important ways. The Septuagintal word *pistis* was used to translate the Hebrew *’emet*, which referred to firmness, stability, and/or reliability. When the Hebrew text intended to speak of trust in someone or something as reliable, most commonly the verb form was used. We see, therefore, that the Hebrew distinguished between reliability (or faithfulness) and faith or trust in that which was reliable. The Septuagintal word “faith” (*pistis*) was ambiguous enough to sometimes allow for both uses.

While this point may sound trivial, it does have relevance for understanding complex passages like Romans 1:17: “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” The Hebrew is clear and should be translated “the righteous live by *their* faith,” but Paul’s Septuagint has, “the righteous shall live by *my* [i.e., *God’s*] faithfulness” (AE). Did Paul refer to faith as “belief [i.e., trust] in” God’s work in Christ (i.e., Septuagint, hereafter LXX), or did he intend faith to refer to the fidelity of the righteous (i.e., as LXX suggests)? Or did he deliberately use Greek that was ambiguous to allow both meanings?<sup>48</sup> The scholarly debate has produced no consensus on this issue. In any case, the point is that the passage is so notoriously difficult at least in part because of the ambiguity of the language that Paul used.<sup>49</sup>

While this point may sound trivial, it has come to have relevance for the church in the centuries past. Martin Luther once deemed that verse the most important in the Bible. And his early lectures on the Psalms used it to guide his reading of that vast collection.

Third, the Septuagint’s interpretation of law shaped Paul’s understanding in ways that require the fuller discussion in the following chapter. Here we pause only to note that the Septuagint almost always translated the Hebrew word *torah* with the Greek *nomos*. Rather than the multivalent Hebrew that could refer to Israel’s sacred story, and rules and customs governing communal life within the covenant community, the translated Greek usually denoted the code guiding individual or community behavior, and cosmic principles like gravity, the turning of seasons, and parental protection of vulnerable offspring. The influence of these Septuagintal tendencies best accounts for Paul’s use of phrases like “law of my mind” (Rom. 7:23), or “law of works,”

48. See C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), 65–99. The most complete bibliography of *relevant* studies appears in Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 141–45, footnotes.

49. See Robert Jewett, *Romans, A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 145–47.

opposing the “law of faith” (Rom. 3:27) best rendered as “principle.” For a fuller treatment, see chapter 2.

In the following sample passages we can see how the Hellenistic spirit of the Septuagint intruded into the Hebrew text at points. While that intrusion may not have compromised the basic character of the Hebrew religion, it is inaccurate to claim that no change in emphasis occurred.

#### Translation of Hebrew Texts

Who has known the Spirit of the Lord . . . (Isa. 40:13)\*

He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:12)

The rabble among them had a strong craving. (Num. 11:4)

The righteous shall live by their faith. (Hab. 2:4)

By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves. (Gen. 12:3, RSV)

Moses went up to God (Exod. 19:3)

And they [i.e. Moses and the elders] saw the God of Israel. (Exod. 24:10)

[Isaiah said to Ahaz,] “Look, *the young woman* is with child and shall bear a son, And shall name him Immanuel.” (Isa. 7:14)

Elohim said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” (Exod. 3:14)

You shall not revile Elohim (Exod. 22:28)

YHWH is a man of war (Exod. 15:3)

#### Translation of Septuagint\*

Who has comprehended the mind of the Lord . . . (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16)

[He] bore away the sins of many, and on account of their lawlessness was he handed over. (cf. Rom. 4:25)

And the people who were among them had an eager desire . . . (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6)

The righteous shall live by my [i.e. God’s] faithfulness . . . (cf. Rom. 1:17)

In you shall all the peoples [i.e. Gentiles] of the earth be blessed. (cf. Gal. 3:8)

Moses ascended to the mount of God

And they saw the place on which the God of Israel stood.

“Behold, a *virgin* shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (cf. Gal. 4:4)

And the God spoke to Moses saying, “I am The Being.”

You shall not make light of the gods.

The Lord causes wars to cease.

\* = author’s translation,  
italics = emphasis added

## COMPARISON OF TRANSLATIONS OF HEBREW AND GREEK TEXTS

While no comprehensive treatment of tendencies of the Septuagint is available, scholars recognize that certain viewpoints of Paul’s native Greek translation influenced his religious outlook. Heard in the home, memorized in the school, read and discussed in the synagogue, the Septuagint was in Paul’s

blood as much as the King James translation was in the blood of Milton or my pious mother. Lodged in Paul's soul, the language of the Septuagint informed his views of such great issues as sin and justification, law and liberty, his Gentile mission, and his understanding of faith. Its language defined his world and informed his gospel. Paul indeed was a Septuagintal Jew. One must hasten to add his identity and the worldview of his Scriptures were also dramatically shaped by his encounter with Messiah Jesus, whose life, death, and resurrection he was convinced inaugurated history's final, dramatic, revolutionary episode.

### SUMMARY

Each of the elements of the Hellenistic world described above was in some ways peculiarly its own, but in other ways they were fully representative of the spirit of the age. Apart from these elements, what had previously been central to Hellenism continued, namely, openness to other cultures and to the surprises that came from engagement with other religious views. Although such cross-fertilization could be and often was fruitful, the risk was great that the gods of the Hellenistic world and its habits of being would radically alter or even supplant the religious views of the Christ community.

One other important motif from that Hellenistic world survived—its sense of community or *sympatheia*<sup>50</sup> with the divine. By the first century the heroic period of Hellenism had faded, but if the traditional gods of classical Greece had lost their power to save, in subtle ways they remained in the architecture and in fresh incarnations. Almost all felt related to a divine principle that bound all together and erased artificial distinctions between man and woman, barbarian and Greek, slave and free. Moreover, it was the godly ether shared by the animals that linked them with humanity through *sympatheia*.

A significant development in the Hellenistic period, however, was the emerging split between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, which revealed a terrifying rupture between flesh and spirit, between the world below and the world above, and between the gods of this world and of the world beyond. Whether this dualism was homegrown or imported is unclear. What is clear, however, is that it found conditions favorable for growth in Hellenistic soil. Even if many of Paul's readers had never read or heard of any of the philosophers, they would have been influenced by the spirit of the age.

50. *Sympatheia* stands behind the English word "sympathy," meaning to suffer with someone. Here, however, the word is taken to mean feel with or acknowledge kinship or relationship to all things, so that what affects one affects the whole.

Once we realize that Paul's gospel ran counter to that zeitgeist, we can begin to locate the point where his readers would have found it difficult to understand or accept his message without explanation or adjustment. Undoubtedly, Paul's gospel was a source of joy and hope to many, but the acceptance of his kerygma did not change cherished ideas overnight. Only reluctantly did Paul's converts surrender their views that matter was evil, that salvation was an individual not a corporate experience, that history was circular, or that God could be apprehended directly without the need of historical media like Scripture or apostles (1 Cor. 4:1–4:5). Over these and other habits of being, Paul and his converts often clashed. Once these points of friction are recognized, one can better read the letters as real conversations over real concerns.

In the discussion above we have seen important elements of the social, cultural, and spiritual environment inhabited by Paul and his churches. Their Greek Bible inevitably contained Hellenistic idioms. The mythology embedded in that language shaped their understanding of the human condition and the Christian gospel. For that reason, in their dynamic interaction with a rich Hellenistic, cultural legacy Paul's letters offered flashes of insight that generated new symbols, inspired new visions of the present and the future, destabilized patterns of religiosity that were taken for granted, and infused existing structures with ferment and even protest. This dynamic interaction was profoundly influenced by the Hellenistic Jewish home environment of Paul's formative years. To other important dimensions of that Jewish legacy we now turn.