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THE GREEK ELEMENT IN PAUL'S LETTERS

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It is now just twenty years since Dr. Hatch gave his lectures on "The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages on the Christian Church" —a course in which he did the work of a pioneer. But these lectures do not deal directly with the New Testament. Their field is the second century and the early part of the third. They seem to assume, what Loofs has more recently said,[1] that the decisive beginnings of the gradual Hellenization of Christianity are to be sought in the apologists of the second century. It is the aim of the present article to carry the investigation back into the New Testament, and to ask, in particular, what influence Greek thought had upon the teaching of the apostle Paul.

The limit of space and the aim of the series of articles of which this is a part exclude all detailed discussion. What we can give will be a rather brief survey of the subject. Nor is it imagined that this will be complete, or that its judgment of the various data will satisfy every reader. The field is wide and in places dark, and there is chance for difference of judgment regarding the origin of this or that feature. All will agree, however, that the subject is highly important for every teacher of the New Testament and New Testament times.

We will begin with Paul's conception of God. That this was deeply and broadly Jewish and Christian, a conception of God as one and as the heavenly Father, is indeed manifest in all the letters, and yet here and there one may note a distinctly Greek or Hellenistic tinge in the thought. Thus, in the first place, to speak of the "*form* of God" (Phil. 2:6) suggests a writer who is outside the sphere of pure Judaism, whose fundamental law forbade the making of any likeness of the divine Being; and the use of this word "form" with the related word "fashion" (Phil. 2:8) reveals a distinction that was made by the Greek philosophers.[2] Un-Jewish also and suggestive of the Greek's

[1] *Dogmengeschichte*, 1906, p. 714.

[2] See Lightfoot, *Philippians*, pp. 127–33.

analytical method is Paul's discrimination between "Godhead" (θεότης) and "divinity" (θειότης), and treating each of these as an attribute of God (Rom. 1:19; Col. 2:9). Again, when Paul speaks of those that "by nature are no gods," it is implied that he would speak of the true God as being such *by nature*—a thought suggestive of Greek philosophy. It appears as though we should judge in the same manner of the apostle's mode of argument in Rom. 3:29, 30. Here he infers that God is God of the gentiles because he is *one*. He does not appeal, as a Christian might, to the character of God, nor does he appeal, as a Jew might, to the record of Genesis, which traces the origin of all men to Adam and Eve, but he argues from the oneness of God, a method of which we may at least say that it accords with the fact that Paul was a Hellenized Jew. The influence of Greek philosophy is more apparent in the declaration attributed to Paul in Acts 17:28, where he says of God, "in him we live, and move, and have our being." This conception of a divine environment of our physical being harmonizes with what Paul's fellow-Cilician, the Stoic Chrysippus, and Paul's fellow-townsman, the Stoic Zeno, taught. And finally, Paul is on un-Jewish ground, whether it is distinctly Hellenistic or not, when he describes God as "The Fulness" (Col. 1:19). The manner in which this term is introduced suggests that it was well known in Colossae, presumably a term used by the false teachers whose activity threatened the church and occasioned the letter. What Paul meant by this striking term may be learned from Col. 2:9, and more especially from its use in Eph. 1:23; 3:19; 4:13 which was written at the same time with Colossians. The "Fulness," according to these passages, designates the character of God, which was manifested in Jesus and which was made the goal of all his true followers.[3]

We turn now from Paul's thought of God to his thought of Jesus. Here also the main stock is obviously Jewish. The Messiahship of Jesus is fundamental in all the earlier letters. Paul's doctrine of Christ, if we except certain points to be noticed, was based on his own experience and was practical. But there is an element in the prison epistles which can only be explained with the aid of the Greek conception of the Logos. It takes us into a new world of thought, to

[3] See Von Soden, *Comm. on Colossians.*

which neither the teaching of Jesus nor the Old Testament furnishes any real parallel. We find that the Alexandrian Philo called the Logos "the man according to God's image" (*De conjus. ling.*, 28; *De leg. sacr.*, 3. 31), and Paul speaks of the Son as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15), and defines his relation to the universe in language closely akin to that of Philo when he speaks of the Logos. Thus Paul says that Christ is the "firstborn of all creation," that all things, visible and invisible,[4] were created "through him and unto him," and that "in him all things consist" (Col. 1:16, 17). As all things are here said by Paul to have been created "unto him," so he elsewhere declares that it "was God's good pleasure to sum up all things in Christ," i.e., to bring them all into such a relation to him that he should be manifest as their unifying head (Eph. 1:10). Here belongs also the famous Philippian passage (2:5–11), if indeed it means, as seems to me probable, that the Logos, the divine and eternal ideal of the Messiah, was manifested in the historical Jesus.

This Hellenistic element in Paul's conception of Christ, though relatively unimportant and clearly speculative, has been, as is well known, of immeasurable influence in the history of Christian doctrine.

It is noteworthy, when we pass to Paul's conception of man, that he, like Philo, speaks of man both as a twofold and a threefold being (I Cor. 5:3; II Thess. 5:23), and that the latter view is found in New Testament writers only in the Greek Luke (Luke 1:46) and in the Hellenistic author of Hebrews (4:12). Paul's habitual mode of speaking of man recognizes him as made up of two parts, and in so far has no suggestion of Greek influence. But this cannot be said of the nearer characterization of the constituent elements of man. Thus Paul[5] uses Platonic language when he speaks of the "outward and the inward man" (II Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16), and his conception of the relation of these parts points in the same direction. For the body is thought of as being a burdensome garment of the spirit (II Cor. 5:2–4), which somehow separates the spirit from its true home (II Cor. 5:8)—a conception which he shares with the Hellenistic book of *Wisdom* (9:15) and with Plato (*Phaedo*, I, 391, 411). With

[4] A Platonic classification.

[5] Philo uses the same expression (see Holtzmann, *Neutestamentliche Theologie*, II, 13).

the Platonic doctrine of ideas, which Windelband calls an "inspired conception," Paul probably reveals a kinship when he speaks of a divine and eternal "house" for the spirit, which is to replace the present "earthly house" or body (II Cor. 5:1).

But practically far more important was Paul's introduction into Christian thought of the Greek (Stoic) conception of "conscience" (*συνείδησις*). The term is found in the New Testament only in Paul's letters, in Hebrews, and I Peter. In Paul's use, which "corresponds accurately to that of his Stoic contemporaries," the word has a somewhat wider significance than our "conscience" (e.g., I Cor. 8:8–10; comp. I Cor. 4:4), yet in general it has an ethical sense and denotes the faculty or power of judging the moral quality of actions (Rom. 2:15; I Cor. 10:29). Through this one term Paul has made us heirs of one of the noblest achievements of Greek thought.

With this term we may pass over to the Christian life. And it is to be noted that Hellenistic influence on Paul's thought in this broad field is by no means uniformly apparent. When, for example, he speaks of the way of entering upon the new life, the way of repentance and faith, the personal acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior, his thought is Jewish or Jewish-Christian. It is uninfluenced by Greek ideas. But as we proceed from that which is inner and vital to that which is external and incidental, we come upon a more definite Greek element.

It may be remarked by way of introduction to this section that the language which Paul uses in describing the Christian life is to a considerable extent derived from the Greek world. The Greek theater and stadium with its corruptible crown for the victor, the Graeco-Roman amphitheater and the triumphal processions, the Greek pedagogue leading his charge to school, the Graeco-Roman steward or head slave of the household, Graeco-Roman legal practice, and the Greek "mysteries"[6]—all these features of Greek life and others[7] lent color to Paul's vocabulary of the Christian's course, and through him to ours. They show Paul not only a Hellenist but a Hellenist with cosmopolitan sympathies and outlook. The same is implied in his apparent recognition of certain features of the Stoic

[6] They furnished our sacred writings with this important word, if nothing more.

[7] See Canon Hicks in *Studia Biblica,* Vol. IV.

ideal of the wise man, who practices moderation and takes thought for things honorable, lovely, and of good report (Phil. 4:8–11).

In his use of Scripture Paul seems not to have been wholly uninfluenced by the Alexandrian method. Once he allegorizes a simple historical statement (Gal. 4:24), and he appears to have regarded the Old Testament as containing a strictly predictive element (e.g., I Cor. 15:3–4). Both these principles of interpretation originated with the Greeks.[8]

Paul's doctrine of the last things, from the signs preceding the Parousia to the issues of the final judgment, is mainly Jewish in form, but in rejecting the resurrection of the flesh he was nearer the Greek philosophy than he was to the rabbis of his time.

In his conception of Christianity as an organism and as a cult Paul reveals an even more marked influence of Greek thought. Thus, in the first place, the designation of the Christian body as an *ecclesia* points to Greek history rather than to Jewish. The associations of the word are quite unlike those of the synagogue. It suggests the political status of the free self-governing Greek city, not the rule of hierarchy or of scribes. It meant the assembly of citizens called out to consult or act for the common good. Thus the use and associations of the word in Christian history and at the present are somewhat narrower and more religious than in Paul's time.

In the matter of organization we may regard it as an indication of Paul's consideration for the Greek love of freedom that he laid so little stress upon it. The church at Corinth, of which we have fuller knowledge than of any other of Paul's foundations, seems not to have received any organization whatever from the apostle. Moreover, his letters together speak of but two offices, and neither the letters (exclusive of the pastoral epistles) nor Acts ever refers to a personal participation by him in the appointment of deacons in any church, and his letters never directly refer to an appointment of elders by him or with his co-operation. At Corinth, if not elsewhere, he allowed the fullest play of individualism, only intervening when there was danger of spiritual loss through the exaggeration of individual freedom. This is apparent, for example, in the account of

[8] See my *History of Interpretation*, pp. 81 f., 84 f., 39–41.

religious meetings (I Cor. 14:26), where everyone took such part as he chose and even women participated (I Cor. 11:5).

Here also in the account of these public meetings in Corinth we have a further illustration of the Hellenism of Paul. He says that a man should pray with uncovered head (I Cor. 11:4), which was not the Jewish but the Greek custom, and a little later (I Cor. 11:14), in declaring that "nature itself" teaches certain things about the wearing of long hair, we are perhaps to see a Greek mode of argument (so Jülicher and Cheyne).

It remains to notice Paul's conception of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The practice of baptism for the dead (I Cor. 15:29), which existed among his converts at Corinth and which Paul did not condemn in his letter, suggests that these converts saw a profoundly mysterious value in the rite, analogous to the power supposed to be exercised by sacred acts in their own mysteries.[9]

However this may be, Paul's conception of ordinary baptism offers much that appears to be original, and the question naturally arises whether this conception was developed uninfluenced by his Greek environment. Possibly one can go further and ask whether the very existence of the rite is not suggestive of Greek influence. For Jesus neither baptized nor gave his followers directions to establish such a rite. It is well known that the Gospels, with the exception of Matt. 28:19, have no trace of Christian baptism, and that they represent Jesus as teaching most positively that admission into his kingdom depended only on spiritual conditions. Moreover, Conybeare has advanced textual arguments to show that this passage in Matthew was not a part of the earliest written tradition.

It is true that Jesus himself submitted to baptism, and this fact may well have been of weight in the establishment of the rite in the earliest church. Yet the radical difference between John's baptism and that which was practiced in the Pauline churches is not to be overlooked. John baptized unto the forgiveness of sins and so unto the coming kingdom. His rite was symbolic of preparation for the kingdom of the Messiah. It had no direct personal relation to the

[9] Pfleiderer, *Early Christian Conceptions of Christ*, p. 13, saw a close parallel in the Orphic supplication for the souls of sinful forefathers.

Messiah himself.[10] But baptism in Paul's churches was fundamentally unlike this. It was indeed a mystic symbol, like the earlier baptism, but its content was different. It was not simply a baptism of preparation for something to come, but a rite which recognized the accomplishment of a critical step in the experience of the believer. Again, it was directly and deeply personal. It was "unto" or "into" Christ Jesus. Still further, its significance was in Paul's mind bound up with a particular event in the experience of Christ, viz., his death. The immersion of the believer signified a mystic communion with the burial of Christ, and his return from the water a communion with Christ's resurrection (Rom. 6:3). This mystic communion led Paul to speak of the baptized believer as having "put Christ on" (Gal. 3:27), and so as being bound to live a life wholly to God (Rom. 6:9, 10).

Again, this rite in the Pauline view of it has yet one more element of vast significance. It is accompanied with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:1–7; I Cor. 2:12; II Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:30). This thought is closely related to the view that the believer enters in baptism into vital communion with Christ, for that communion is of course not thinkable apart from the spirit of Christ. What is here to be especially noted is that Paul appears to have regarded the rite somewhat as a condition of the reception of a spiritual gift. Yet it should also be remembered that he sometimes spoke of baptism in an almost disparaging manner, declaring that he had not been sent to baptize but to preach, and giving thanks that those whom he had baptized were few in number (I Cor. 1:14–17). This thanksgiving may possibly imply[11] that baptism was commonly thought to give the administrant of the rite a certain influence over the one baptized somewhat analogous to the power of the mystagogue over those whom he helped to initiate into the mysteries.

Now it is obvious that this general conception of baptism is widely unlike that which John practiced, and also that, in so far as it makes the gift of God's spirit dependent on an outward and material rite, it is foreign to the teaching of Jesus. But there is no particular element

[10] Holtzmann, *Neut. Theol.* II, 180, thinks John's baptism had reference to the birth of the Messiah.

[11] So Heinrici.

in the conception which points clearly to Greek influence. It is not plain that Paul sympathized with the practice of baptism for the benefit of the dead, or that in avoiding the administration of baptism he confessed himself a believer in the view that this ministry gave a man power over the baptized person, or, finally, that he thought of the bestowal of the spirit as absolutely dependent on participation in the rite. But it does seem probable that the existence of the rite throughout a church whose founder had not instituted it, and the profoundly mystical import of it in the Pauline church, are best explained by the assumption that Paul and other Christian leaders were somewhat influenced by their Greek environment.

We have now to ask whether the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, as presented by Paul, shows traces of Greek influence. There is unquestionably a wide difference between the observance as reflected in the Gospel of Mark and that which Paul sought to have at Corinth. Jesus according to Mark gave his disciples pieces of bread which he had just broken, and said, "This is my body," and a cup of wine with the words, "This is my blood of the covenant which is shed for many." There was no spoken command to eat or drink, and no injunction to keep the supper in remembrance of him. It has therefore with some force been questioned on documentary evidence whether Jesus contemplated a permanent memorial observance. Be that as it may, we have not yet touched the most significant departure of Paul's doctrine from the simple observance in Mark. This is contained in a warning to his converts against idolatry (I Cor. 10:14–22). He speaks of the supper by way of illustration, and yet gives us a clear insight into the deep meaning which he attached to the rite. Of the cup he says, "Is it not a communion (or participation) of the blood of Christ?" and of the bread, "Is it not a communion of the body of Christ?" And he continues with a parallel from the cult of the Israelites and from that of the gentiles, saying in substance that the Israelites who ate of the sacrifices had communion with the altar, and that the gentile who ate of his sacrifices had communion with demons. So then as regards the underlying significance of the sacred acts, one and the same word served for the Jew, the Christian, and the gentile. These acts meant in each case a certain fellowship, but they differed in the *objects* of this fellowship. Through the use of

certain materials of food and drink the worshiper confessed that he belonged either to Jehovah, to Christ, or, as Paul would have it, to the demons; through the sacred meal he cultivated fellowship with the object of his worship.

Now two questions arise: first, was this conception implicit in the supper as Jesus observed it with his disciples? and second, if it was not, can we think of it as developed on Jewish ground?

If Paul's parallel involved in his thought that Jesus like Jehovah and the gentile deities was properly the object of worship in the sacred meal—an hypothesis not altogether probable in the light of all that Paul says of Jesus—then, obviously, the original observance cannot be regarded as the germ out of which Paul's conception was developed. Jesus worshiped God, and there is no evidence that in this matter he expected his followers to depart from his example. But further, looking at the synoptic account, it seems clear, in the first place, that any interpretation which makes the two acts identical in meaning is against the words of Jesus. The bread, indeed, was a symbol of the body, but the cup was not in the same way a symbol of the blood. "This," said Jesus, "is my blood of the *covenant*," or my covenant-blood. Here a covenant comes into view, which is obviously, as Matthew and Luke expressly say, a *new* covenant. Thus the primary, if not exclusive, significance of the blood is at once determined; it seals a covenant. Partaking of this cup therefore naturally signifies the personal appropriation of the covenant. Of this significance of the cup Paul's interpretation of the supper in I Cor., chap. 10, has no trace. What he says, moreover, that participation in the cup means fellowship with the blood of Jesus, brings this act into parallelism with the gentile participation in the cup of their gods. Whether Paul in this interpretation of the cup was at all influenced by the everywhere prevailing sacred feasts in honor of the gods, or supposed that he was standing on Old Testament ground, is not clear. The view that the Israelites who ate of the sacrifices had communion with the altar looks like a reading of the fact in the light of the ethnic cults.

But if Paul's conception of the cup is not implicit in the evangelist's record, is his conception of the bread? The bread symbolized the Master's body, and its being broken for the disciples signified that

breaking of his body on the cross which was to be for their benefit. Whether Jesus told his disciples to eat the bread or not, his act in passing it to them of course implied this. But of the *meaning* of this act he said nothing. That it *might* mean, as Paul says, communion with the body of Christ, seems probable; that it *must* mean that we cannot confidently affirm. It may have had in Jesus' thought, as its juxtaposition with the Jewish Passover and as the tradition in Matthew and Luke suggest, simply a memorial significance. And it is to be noted that this significance is recognized in Paul's own account of the institution (I Cor. 11:24, 25), though not in his interpretation in the preceding chapter.

Now this general conception of the act, which makes it a memorial of Jesus' self-sacrificing love, is of course germane to the Lord's fundamental teaching that his disciples were to regard him as the revealer of God. But the idea that eating the bread signified mystic participation in the material body of Christ takes us completely out of the sphere of the simple memorial. To regard this more specific and mystical interpretation as influenced by the ethnic cult with which Paul was familiar is simply to accept the hint of the apostle's own parallel in the Corinthian letter.[12]

We have now completed our survey of the Greek element in Paul's writings. A word only, in conclusion, in reference to the significance of this element. Its existence shows a more or less conscious endeavor to adapt the new faith to the Greek world. These views which we have pointed out as Hellenistic or Greek do not present us a *development* of what the oldest gospel tradition contains. While therefore they are not, in the strict sense of the word, Christian interpretation of the gospel, they are valuable either as containing rays of light from foreign sources or as early attempts to render the gospel intelligible and potent in the midst of a Greek civilization.

[12] Comp. Wendland, *Die Hellenistisch-Römische Kultur*, 1907, p. 127.