

# RELIGION

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## THE HISTORICAL-RELIGIOUS APPROACH AND PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS

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Paul's letters, which are preserved in the New Testament, have always been difficult to analyze because as letters they were written for a particular occasion and because they provide us with only one side of the discussion—Paul's. This general principle is especially true of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. The occasion for this letter occurred in the early 50's C.E. Paul had previously been in Corinth to establish a Christian community. After his departure from Corinth, other wandering Christian missionaries had entered the community in Corinth and proceeded to attack Paul as a false apostle with a false gospel. Paul's side of the discussion is then presented in 2 Corinthians.

Recent research has helped to illuminate the other side of the discussion. Scholars have investigated the history of the religious background of Paul's opponents by taking hints from Paul's refutation of them and pursuing these hints in detail.<sup>1</sup> They have examined these hints in terms of the Greco-Roman world and also in terms of Hellenized Judaism at the time of Paul and thereby have helped to clarify not only the other side of the discussion but also many sections in Paul's own letter.

In this article I should like to discuss first some aspects of the Greco-Roman world, then some aspects of Hellenized Judaism, and finally the implications of these findings for understanding the opponents of Paul and Paul's response to them in 2 Corinthians.

### THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

During the period of the origin of Christianity, the Greco-Roman world saw the spread of many of the Eastern religions throughout the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Cults from Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Persia spread throughout the Mediterranean area. As propagandists for these cults, traveling missionaries journeyed over land and sea to win adherents to their cult.

During this period philosophy was no longer a subject simply for the schoolroom. Philosophers concentrated on the more practical issues and thus brought their concerns to the street-corners where they delivered their orations. They too wandered from street-corner to street-corner, from city to city, spreading their views. Further, at this time philosophy and religion were not separated but were often fused into one.

For many people during this period the truly wise person or the truly religious person somehow participated in the divine. He was a special person or "divine man." As such, he was expected to provide evidence of his status, evidence of his possession of the divine spirit by a demonstration of special knowledge and special miraculous power. Only if such evidence were forthcoming would this "divine man" be accepted as authentic and his way of life be adopted as truly wise or religious.

#### A "DIVINE MAN": APOLLONIUS

One example of such a philosophic/religious missionary of that period was Apollonius of Tyana whose life is recorded by Philostratus, a 2nd century C.E. author. Philostratus gives an example of the special knowledge of Apollonius in the following passage:

As he was going along, escorted by a greater crowd than turns out to see the Governor of Provinces, they met twelve men going on their way to execution, on a charge of robbery. When Apollonius saw them he said, 'Not all: such and such a one has been falsely accused and will get off.' And speaking to the officers of justice under whose charge the criminals were going, he added, 'I command you to slacken the pace, take your time to reach the trench, and to execute this man last. He is absolutely innocent of the charge. And you on your part will be doing a good action in allowing the men a few hours' respite, whom it would have been better not to put to death at all.' He lingered over the words, and spoke with unusual prolixity; the significance of which was presently made plain. When eight of the men had already been beheaded, a horseman rode up to the trench, shouting, 'Spare Pharion!' Pharion, it seems, was no robber, but had falsely accused himself for fear of the rack; and, upon the others being put to the torture, they had confessed that he was an honest man.

I forebear to describe how Egypt leapt for joy, and how huge was the applause. They are at all times an enthusiastic race."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to this passage concerning the special knowledge, Philostratus also recounts a story designed to indicate the miraculous power of Apollonius.<sup>4</sup> He reports that one day while discussing the question of libations with his audience, Apollonius was interrupted by a coarse outburst of laughter from a youth whose reputation for licentiousness was widespread. Apollonius recognized the youth's behavior as that of one possessed by a demon. Gazing at the youth, Apollonius ordered the demon to depart and to manifest by some sign that he had done so.

In response, immediately the devil proclaimed that he would throw down one of the statues in the nearby portico. As the statue started to fall, the excited audience burst into clapping their hands with wonder. Meanwhile, the afflicted youth, now being slowly restored to his senses, reacted as one who had just woken up. Then, no longer enslaved in licentious ways, he began to adopt the austere ways of the philosophers and eventually modelled his life upon that of Apollonius.

#### HELLENIZED JUDAISM

During the period in which Paul lived, Judaism appeared to many as another Eastern religion which had its origin in Palestine and then spread to the countries around the Mediterranean Sea. It too had its wandering missionaries. As these missionaries strove to explain and defend Judaism to the Gentiles, and to convince them of its truth, they adopted the common language of the time (Greek) and interpreted their Jewish heritage in accord with the hopes and aspirations of that era. Thus, they were intent upon showing that God and the divine spirit were active in their history. Further, they were interested in presenting the heroes of their religious tradition as true "divine men" who should be admired and emulated by the Gentiles.

#### "DIVINE MEN": ABRAHAM

In accord with this movement, Philo, a Jewish author of the 1st century, presents Abraham as such a "divine man," favored with the true and special knowledge of God.

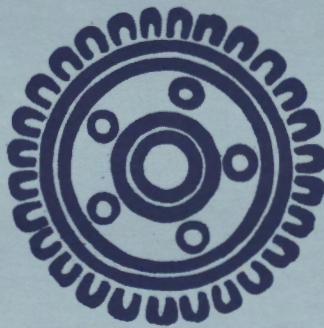
"With these to guide his steps, he went forth never faltering in his ardour to seek for the One, nor did he pause until he received clearer visions, not of His essence, for that is impossible, but of His existence and providence. And, therefore, he is the first person spoken of as believing in God, since he first grasped a firm and unswerving conception of the truth that there is one Cause above all, and that it provided for the world and all that there is therein. And having gained faith, the most sure and certain of the virtues, so that by those among whom he settled he was regarded as a king, not because of the outward state which surrounded him, mere commoner that he was, but because of his greatness of soul, for his spirit was the spirit of a king. Indeed, they continued to treat him with a respect which subjects pay to a ruler, being awe-struck at the all-embracing greatness of nature and its more than human perfection. For the society also which he sought was not the same as they sought, but oftener under inspiration another more august. Thus whenever he was possessed, everything in him changed to something better, eyes, complexion, stature, carriage, movements, voice. For the divine spirit which was breathed upon him from on high made its lodging in his soul, and invested his body with singular beauty, his voice with persuasiveness, and his hearers with understanding . . . He is the standard of nobility for all proselytes."<sup>5</sup>

## MOSES

The biblical stories of the miracles that Moses performed in his contest with Pharaoh before the Exodus from Egypt (cf. Exod 7-12), showed his possession of miraculous power. Josephus, a Jewish author from the end of the 1st century C.E., discusses the special knowledge of Moses and explicitly calls him a "divine man" in this passage:

"But one may well be astonished at the hatred which men have for us and which they have so persistently maintained, from an idea that we slight the divinity whom they themselves profess to venerate. For if one reflects on the construction of the tabernacle and looks at the vestments of the priest and the vessels which we use for the sacred ministry, he will discover that our lawgiver was a man of God (or 'divine man') and that these blasphemous charges brought against us by the rest of men are idle. In fact, every one of these objects is intended to recall and represent the universe, as he will find if he will but consent to examine them without prejudice and with understanding. Thus, to take the tabernacle, thirty cubits long, by dividing this into three parts and giving up two of them to the priests, as a place approachable and open to all, Moses signifies the earth and the sea, since these two are accessible to all; but the third portion he reserved for God alone, because heaven also is inaccessible to men."<sup>6</sup>

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4)



### RELIGION AND WORLD CRISIS: A Traveling Faculty Seminar

A traveling panel on Religion and World Affairs is available for scheduling by interested groups throughout Kansas. Three Religious Studies faculty members are prepared to present brief overviews of three areas of world concern: Timothy Miller will look at religion and politics in America, Daniel Breslauer will analyze Islam and Judaism in the Middle East, and Robert Minor will focus on religions and political life in Asia.

The panel program invites participation and questions from audiences after introductory presentations. Each leader offers expert knowledge and insight into his area of problems of religion and politics. This study of a major concern today is designed for both laity and clergy.

This program is part of the outreach effort prepared by the Department and supported by the Kansas School of Religion.

Address inquiries to: Director of Outreach, Religious Studies, University of Kansas, Lawrence, 66045.

## PAUL AND HIS OPPONENTS

It is clear from the hints that Paul gives in his letter that his opponents drew upon this Hellenized Jewish tradition.<sup>7</sup> As Paul suggests (2 Cor 11:22), they claim to be "Hebrews," "Israelites," and descendants of "Abraham." Evidently they portray Jesus as such a "divine man." Paul alludes to this portrayal when he accuses these opponents of preaching "another Jesus," "another gospel," and "another spirit" (2 Cor 11:4-5) rather than the Christian message which he had preached. In addition, these opponents presented themselves as followers of Jesus ("servants of Christ": 2 Cor 11:23) and thus also as "divine men" in imitation of Jesus. As evidence of their special status, we can infer from Paul's critique of them that they boasted of having a special knowledge based on visions and revelations (2 Cor 12:1) and a special miraculous power demonstrated in "signs and wonders and mighty works": (2 Cor 12:12).

Paul responds to the views of these opponents with a sharp criticism. For him any such boasting is foolish. He is even willing to adopt the role of the fool (2 Cor 11:17) and to make equal claims concerning visions and revelations. But ultimately his judgement is that "there is nothing to be gained" by such boasting (2 Cor 12:1). On behalf of his real self, he will boast only in his weakness (2 Cor 12:5). Further, in response to his opponent's list of their wondrous accomplishments, Paul offers the following catalogue:

"Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:24-29).

Clearly this list provides a striking foil to the record of miraculous accomplishments of his opponents. To some extent the list offered by Paul contains typical elements. Its most specific and climactic element is his "anxiety for all the churches." It is important to realize the basis for Paul's criticism if we are to understand him correctly. For Paul, true knowledge consists in the knowledge of the gospel of Christ crucified. For him the Jesus whom he preaches is not a wonder-working "divine man" but rather a person who suffers, who experiences weakness, and thereby accomplishes salvation. Similarly, according to Paul, the true apostle of Christ is marked by the weakness and suffering which he incurs in the service of his community.

Towards the end of his letter Paul points toward the effects on community life which this type of religious view has; a religious view that focuses merely on the display of one's spiritual talents: "quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder" (2 Cor 12:20). In contrast, he holds forth the example of Christ, the use of one's abilities for the sake of others even to the point of suffering and of sacrifice. From this example he exhorts the Corinthians to form a community built upon mutual love and service rather than upon individual displays of religious gifts. One might add that Paul's emphasis upon common weal rather than self-interest is as valuable today as it was then.

## FOOTNOTES

1. D. Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in 2 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, forthcoming). This translation of the major German monograph on the subject is expected in 1980. Cf. also H. D. Betz, *Der Apostel Paulus und die Sokratische Tradition: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner "Apologie" 2 Korinther 10-13* (Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie 45; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1972).

2. Cf. F. Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism* (New York: Dover, 1956).

3. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 5.24 (trans. J. S. Philimore; Loeb Classical Library, Oxford: Clarendon, 1912) 2.69.

4. Cf. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 4.20 (Loeb Classical Library) 2.18-20.

5. Philo, *On the Virtues* 215-19 (ed. F. H. Colson; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard, 1960) 294-99.

6. Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.7.7 179-81 (ed. H. St. J. Thackeray; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard, 1967) 402-03.

7. Cf. F. Fallon, *2 Corinthians* (New Testament Message 11; Wilmington: Glazier, 1980).





## SPRING/SUMMER EVENTS

### FELLOWSHIP OF MOSES CONSULTATION

On April 7—Executives of area religious bodies will participate with our Fellowship of Moses leaders in a Consultation on Religion and Kansas Education



### ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES AND THE BIBLE CONFERENCE APRIL 20-21

Features "Discoveries of Ebla," "Documents of Nag Ham-madi Egypt," "Recent Greco-Roman Excavations," "Recent Discoveries in the Holy Land." Sunday evening and through Monday, in Woodruff Auditorium, Kansas Union. For further details, write, Francis Fallon, Department of Religious Studies



### BURNING BUSH PROGRAM MAY 16

The 1980 banquet of the Burning Bush Society will be May 16, 6:30. Program will be a simulation exercise on ethics in business.



# TRAVERSE LOG

The recurring of unhooked religious starts suggests our proximity to spiritual emptiness. Egon Mayer counted up 1300 new religions that have appeared in America since 1965. This phenomenon is part of a holy hit parade which includes not just renewal activity in old places, but new cults and transported Eastern faiths. Apparently lots of folks are looking for that haven in meaning where never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all day.

The Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley recently developed a center for the study of new religions, the first of its kind for America. Some departures in religious practice are illustrated by the moving of six million people into TM, of five million espousing yoga, two million practicing oriental religions and three million embracing mysticism—these figures from Gallup Poll estimate. Fine. But while America is a large tent with room for variety, it may also be a floating crap game for trendy religionists. The action moves around and around. Lowell Striker estimated that three fourths of the young people in a cult do not stay with it. They move on in the nebulous no-man's-land of further experimentation.

If any conclusion can be drawn readily from such motion and transiency, it is that we are thirsty. This may sound corny as Kansas in August, but we are spiritually thirsty. Our emptiness and psychic stress make us easy marks for some new founder-prophet pitching up a milk and honey suggestion, a quickie prayer and a pat platitude.

It is easy for a society that shies away from very much commitment to anything to regard the religious quest as simply a tasting party. I've never registered for a wine tasting bash, but I hear that the real pros delete taste without swallowing at all. That is all too clear a cartoon of our emptiness.

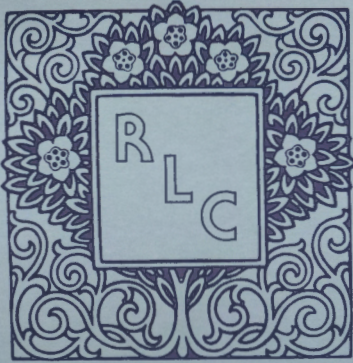
The depth psychologists who produce the advertisements to which we respond, know how to appeal to our need for deeper meaning. A beer company sells, not beer, but gusto; a tire manufacturer peddles peace of mind; a sports goods company makes week-ends. These tinkers can point us toward the essentials.

Your not-so-humble writer has no religious party line to lay on this. But with all the modesty of Mohammed Ali, I insist we could be spared our boredom and vulnerability by drinking deep or not at all, whatever our persuasion. The 18th century poet, Alexander Pope, wrote:

"A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
And drinking largely sobers us again."

-LFT

RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE,  
July 21-25, 1980



The theme of the Conference, to be held at the School of Religion at The University of Kansas is "A Community of More in an Age of Less." Building on this theme, the Conference will quicken religious leaders to the more inclusive, sharing way to carry the whole human community through the age of less which is upon us.

Presentations during the week will include "The Bible Alive" with Professor Richard Jeske, of Philadelphia; "Inclusive Worship" Susan Elkins, Sr. Rose Tomlin, and the Rev. Marjie Bertsch, presentors; Dr. Richard Tombaugh, St. Louis, will lead participants through a varying series of life simulation exercises; and the Rev. Richard Orr focuses on "Community Experiences."

All presentations, lodging, meals, and sessions will be in Gertrude S. Pearson Dormitory on the KU campus. Total cost of the conference is \$90.00; a limited amount of scholarship assistance is available.

For additional information call (913) 843-7257 or write Kansas School of Religion, 1300 Oread, Lawrence, Kansas 66045.

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The 1980  
RELIGION IN PUBLIC EDUCATION  
Workshops for Teachers

The Workshop examines approaches to the proper, legal, and significant study about religion, and includes practical curriculum building using the extensive research and resources of the Kansas Center for Public Education Religion Studies.

June 9-20,                      8:00-12:00 M-F                      Kansas City  
or

June 23-July 3                      1:00-5:00 M-F                      Lawrence

This workshop is part of a course for elementary and secondary public school teachers in service. It carries three hours credit applicable to certificate renewal and to advanced degrees.

Information from KCPERS, 1300 Oread, Lawrence, KS 66045

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