

The Religious Experience of Saint Paul
Percy Gardner
The Princeton Theological Review 11:316-320. [1913]

The author tells us in the Preface that he has prepared this book by way of experiment on the principle of setting aside the books about St. Paul and making use exclusively of his Epistles. The "books about St. Paul" are meant to include the Acts of the Apostles as well as more modern literature on the subject, for Luke "though a delightful personality and to some extent rehabilitated by Harnack, "is by no means fully in sympathy with his hero." This does not hinder the fact that in several instances, where the statements of Luke prove convenient for pressing a point or commending a construction, Dr. Gardner makes free use of them, and that not merely where they are taken from the "we-pieces," but also otherwise cf. pp. 27, 30, 44. The exclusion of extraneous sources of information is not extended to the author's "knowledge of the religious surroundings and religious institutions of the Hellenistic age." In point of fact, so far from being an attempt to interpret the Epistles by themselves, the book could be more properly characterized as an attempt to interpret Paul's faith and experience as largely receiving its form and not a little of its substance from the mystery-cults prevalent in contemporary Hellenism. The whole treatise, the author tells us, "was originally suggested by the discovery that the word 'mystery' and the ideas which it conveys play a much larger part than is generally recognized in the writings and the thought of St. Paul." The discovery is quite in line with similar discoveries made in Germany by *Reitzenstein* and others. For some time to come the interpretation of Paulinism is likely to stand in this sign of the mystery-cults. It is the new fashion that will have its day, just as the other view-points have had theirs in the past. Dr. Gardner makes an effort not merely to place the make-up of important strands of the Apostle's thought in this light of a Christian adaptation of the mystery-religion, but also seeks to apply the principle in question to the Pauline use of the word *μυστηριον* itself. In this, we think, he has small success. The use of the word in the singular in most passages does not favor it. Then there is the all-important fact that the idea of carefully guarded secrecy is entirely absent from the Apostle's use of the term. The Pauline "mystery", to be sure, is something that as a matter of fact *has been* secret, as the divine purpose of salvation which was for ages hidden in God, or *is* recondite as the mystic adumbration of the union between Christ and the Church in the marriage-bond, but it is never something that *should be kept* secret, and this latter feature the word *μυστηριον* in connection with the mystery-cults seems specifically to connote. After the mystery of the divine purpose has been *σεσιγημενον* *χρονοις* *αιωνιοις* it is now at last *φανερωθεν* (Rom. 16:25, 26). Similarly in 1 Cor. 2:7, 10 the divine "wisdom *εν* *μυστηριω*" has been hidden, because contained in the purpose of God, and now has been revealed through the Spirit. And so in the other passages with Paul as well as with other New Testament writers. That after the revelation of the mystery to Christians it must be kept confined to their circle, there is nothing to indicate. It is only through arbitrarily importing this into the Pauline conception that the author makes out a resemblance in this point of usage. The Pauline "mystery" has been a mystery but is so no longer, the Hellenistic "mysteries" are recondite in their very nature and intended to remain so: they are for the initiated, whereas the Apostle publishes the content of his Gospel openly to the world. In a recent article in the *Zeitsch. f. d. Neutestam. Wiss.* (1911, pp. 188-227) Von Soden has convincingly shown, that the New Testament usage of *μυστηριον* is to be explained on eschatological principles and has nothing to do with the technical cult-usage of the word in Hellenism. Of course, this does not settle the larger question as to whether Paul's teaching, apart from the use of the word, was influenced by or indebted to the

“mysteries”. Von Soden, who, as we have seen, denies the linguistic influence so far as the word is concerned, at the same time affirms that there is, materially considered, a real connection between Paul’s trains of thought and the ideas associated with the technical Hellenistic use of *μυστήριον*, as advocated by Reitzenstein (*ibid.*, p. 197, note 2). But here also the question may be raised whether, like the peculiar use of the word, perhaps these ideas in question, do not receive a more natural and more adequate interpretation from the Messianic, eschatological background of Paul’s teaching and that of the New Testament in general. With reference to the *πνεύμα*-doctrine, we believe that this can actually be shown. What, if in other points also the resemblances on which so much stress is laid, proved to be purely apparent and due to the fact that the eschatology of revelation centering in the Person of Christ posits the same questions and brings an authoritative answer to the same problems, which after their own groping and confused fashion the followers of the mystery-cults were perplexed about? Such a parallelism would by no means necessarily involve that in the approach to the problem and in the formulation of the questions far less that in the answers and solutions supplied, there was historical dependence. The line of revelation and the line of pagan religious development might meet at a predestinated point, and yet the antecedents of the two lines might be far different. When Gardner thinks that the dependence of Paul on the mystery-religions can be traced on the three points of rites of purification and tests of entrance—means of communication with some deity as the head of believers—the extension of the view into the world beyond the grave—the question arises, whether Paul in covering these three points in his Gospel, introduces something new that had not been represented in primitive Christianity before him. The author actually asserts this: “In all these ways he moves away from the earliest teaching of Christianity towards the Church of the Roman Empire” (p. 81). But this seems to us in conflict with patent facts. Was there no baptism in pre-Pauline Christianity? Or was not baptism at that time a rite of purification or a test of entrance? Paul hardly makes enough of baptism to warrant the view, that he can have had much to do with its introduction or even interpretation. Was there not an identification with Christ as the head of the disciples before Paul appeared on the scene? Was there no doctrine as to the future life even in the specific sense of an outlook beyond the grave in the late Jewish and early Christian Church? In inclining to a negative answer on these questions the author seems to us to take too little account of the higher, transcendental eschatology, which certainly existed in the teaching of our Lord, and perhaps was not without its representatives in pre-Christian Judaism.

Another question that should be raised is, whether the alleged spiritualization of the mystery-religions, which is supposed to have facilitated the incorporation of their forms of expression into the Christianity of Paul, is not in the main a development of the post-Pauline period. To Reitzenstein’s method the objection has been raised, we think not unjustly, that he works with later texts, whose content by a rather strained and precarious critical reasoning, he seeks to carry back into an older period. If the mystery-cults had not yet undergone this spiritualizing transformation at the time of Paul, but retained their original gross and sensual character, what likelihood is there that Paul would borrow from them or consider their forms fit vehicles for the expression of Christian experience? Gardner himself admits that when Paul speaks of pagan religion, including the mystery-cults, he does so in terms of the greatest dislike and contempt. It was not a field in which he would choose to dig. But the Apostle’s borrowing was an unconscious process. The thing was caught by a sort of infection, without any notion, whence it came (p. 80). This representation does not seem quite in accord with the writer’s earlier attempt to prove that Paul used the word *μυστήριον* in a technical sense. Such a use he certainly could not have fallen into by an unconscious lapse. And, apart from that, the whole

theory of unconscious assimilation of ideas fits ill into the avowed purpose of the Apostle to keep his Gospel pure from all admixtures of a worldly source. Paul was not the unsuspecting, easily-impressed mind that on this theory he would have had to be. We may safely infer from all we know about him that he would be on his guard against contamination of the Gospel at his own hand no less than against its corruption by others.

That not all scholars, even of the liberal type, are prepared to admit any appreciable influence of the mysteries on the thought of Paul, will appear from a paper read by Prof. Clemen at the meeting of the International Congress for the History of Religions recently held at Leiden. According to the report in the *Theol. Literaturz.* of Sept. 28, 1912, col. 618, Prof. Clemen maintains that the oldest Christianity was in no wise affected by the mystery-religions, Paul only in some forms of expression, the post-Pauline development in a few respects was materially affected, but a deeper-going influence they did not exert until the rise of Gnosticism and subsequently to this on the Catholic church itself.

Although the book under review professes to give a comprehensive account of Paul's religious experience, yet as a matter of fact the writer, owing to his partiality to the alleged mystery-aspect of Paulinism, almost entirely neglects another side which in the Epistles attains to equal if not greater prominence. We refer to the Apostle's experience as connected with justification and faith as the means of attaining to it. To treat this as a negligible quantity must needs put the picture badly out of focus. We know that it has become a fashion of late to put all the material in the Epistles connected with this question to the account of controversial exigencies, and to assign to it next to no importance for the center of Paul's own religious life. How such a view can for a moment be entertained in the face of such passages as Rom. 5 and Rom. 8 we have never been able to understand. An inevitable corollary of this one-sided appreciation of the subjective aspect of the Apostle's religion, is that in the objective sphere also the corresponding importance attached by Paul to Christ's death as a means of reconciliation, redemption and propitiation is unduly minimized. Dr. Gardner's book illustrates this. He has very little to say about the place which the death of Christ occupies in Paul's objective soteriology. His own interest is so absorbed by the mysteries—as in his view throughout shaping the subjective side of Paul's experience, that one receives the impression as if for the Apostle himself also all religious interest was swallowed up in this one matter.

In regard to the last chapter of the book entitled "St. Paul and Modernity" we hardly know what to say. Dr. Gardner here presents Paul to us in the light of a theological pragmatist, not, of course, in the conscious sense, but in so far as his disinclination to place the emphasis on formulas and doctrines, and his desire everywhere to place it on facts and experience and religious efficiency and profitableness, put him in line with this modern trend of thought. "To discover that St. Paul was at heart a pragmatist and in deep sympathy with this modern way of regarding religion, is a happy theory" (p. 228). This will be a sufficiently novel point of view to many who have hitherto felt as if the Apostle who could pen such a word as Gal. 1:8 stood at the farthest remove from the standpoint in regard to truth represented by pragmatism. One cannot help thinking that the ease with which the author presents this paradoxical comparison has something to do with the one-sided portrayal of Paul's religious experience above commented upon. If the center of gravity lay entirely on the subjective side, where Christianity could assimilate to itself, the forms and impulse of the mystery-religion, and if this assimilation was so easily and unhesitatingly accomplished, because it was a

mere question, what would help the movement along as a religious force in the world, then it comes somewhat within the range of the conceivable that Paul must have more or less felt in regard to religious truth as the modern pragmatist feels. But if the question paramount in the Apostle's mind was a question of objective relation to and communication with God, if the problem of justification was a real vital concern to him, then it will immediately appear that not merely, had the question been put to him, he could never have for a moment regarded the pragmatist frame of mind as possible or allowable, but that also his whole trend of mind must have moved in the opposite direction. To Paul the possession of objective religious truth as expressive of objective divine reality is of the very essence of religious experience. To call its possibility in doubt is to cut the nerve not merely of theology but of religion itself. The author in taking the opposite ground not merely draws a caricature of the Apostle, but also leaves us in a veritable quagmire so far as the question is concerned in what the imperishable essence of Paul's religion, not to speak of his religious views, consisted. He talks glibly about this or that not being of paramount value or significance, and gives the impression of being in possession of an infallible standard by which such matters can be determined. But we must frankly confess our inability to gather from the writer's statement any positive summary of the abiding substance of Paulinism. The standard in the background seems to be that that is of permanent value which approves itself as beneficial and helpful to the cause of enlightened spiritual religion in the world. This is no doubt an answer that would satisfy the pragmatist. It is, however, subject to the criticism that an objective standard of truth will even so still be required for determining what constitutes an enlightened spiritual religion. There can be no form of progress without a normative goal, and no normative goal without objective cognition. Because religion is the province of the highest goal it is of all domains the least suited to pragmatic treatment. And inasmuch as in Paul this specific character of religion found a most profound appreciation, the attempt to make of him a precursor of modern pragmatism can in our opinion result in nothing else but the de-Paulinizing of Paul.