

# The Importance of Paul for the Historical Jesus

Paul Barnett

For some time now it has been claimed - rightly I think - that a "new quest" for the historical Jesus is under way. [1]

Overwhelmingly, the historical Jesus now sought is Jesus the Jew, Jesus who can be demonstrated to fit into the increasingly well-known environment of first century Judaism.

Such scholars are sociologically aware as well as knowledgeable in the history of the period. They often tend to locate Jesus in one or other of the streams of the Judaism of that period. Jesus is seen as a Pharisee or a zealot or an Essene. [2]

Although, as the following sample shows, unanimity is lacking as to their opinion of Jesus' identity, the "new quest" scholars tend to classify Jesus as some kind of rabbi or prophet. [3] For Vermes (1973) Jesus was a Galilean charismatic rabbi, "Jesus the just man...*zaddik*...helper, healer..teacher and leader." Wilcox (1982) saw Jesus as a *hasid*, a devout rabbi broadly, but not uncritically, part of the Pharisaic movement. E.P. Sanders (1985) determined that Jesus was an eschatological prophet of a soon-to-appear kingdom. Horsley and Hanson (1985), for their part, regarded Jesus as some kind of a prophet - an oracular prophet or a sign prophet. [4]

It can be said that among the "new quest" scholars there is a significant if not dominant weight of opinion which views Jesus in humanistic terms as no more than a "charismatic" figure of first century Judaism and not as the NT confesses him to be, the incarnate Son of God. [5]

Such low views of Jesus' identity are by no means new. In the eighteenth century the German scholar Reimarus reached broadly similar conclusions. [6] Indeed, as early as the third century after Christ, the anti-Christian polemicist Porphyry wrote

Jesus is to be honoured as the wisest of men;  
he is not to be worshipped as God. [7]

In reply, orthodox believers might point to the many confessions of Jesus as the Son of God within the Epistles [8] and also to the Gospels' clear presentation of Jesus to the reader in those terms. [9] The rejoinder - typically - would be that the early church transformed the "Jesus of history" into the "Christ of faith." In effect, this would mean that Jesus as he was is significantly different from the Christ whom believers came to confess and worship. The liberal scholars suggested that there was a ditch or gap between the Jesus of history and the church's Christ.

How was the Jewish Jesus of history transformed into the Christ of the church's faith? The answer the liberal scholars gave could be summed up in just one word: "hellenization." [10] Hellenization means to make a person or a culture "Greek." Since the time of Alexander the Great (died 323 B.C.) Greek culture had permeated the eastern Mediterranean region. Greek religious culture believed in "gods many and lords many," as the Apostle Paul noted (1 Corinthians 8:5). It was by a "hellenizing" process, so these scholars argued, that the historical Jewish Jesus - the charismatic rabbi/prophet - came to be confessed by the church

in exalted and hellenistic terms as "Son of God" and "Lord." This is because the notion of "sons of God" and "Lord" were deemed to be part of "hellenistic" but not Jewish culture of the period in question. [11]

If, in turn, one were to ask by what means or by whom did this process of the "hellenizing" of Jesus take place, the answer given by many would be: just one man - Paul, apostle to the Gentiles. By way of illustration, one recent author has evocatively entitled his book about Paul *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. [12] But this is only to declare - in dramatic terms - what many, scholars and non-scholars alike have believed, namely that Paul was in fact the "mythmaker," the inventor of Christianity in the form in which it came to be received by the western world. This opinion was expressed by the popular medium of Scorsese's movie version of Kazantzakis' novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

These scholars have certainly got one thing right - Paul is indeed critical to our understanding.

I now want to argue exactly the opposite case, however, that Paul's letters - so far from being the bridge from a Jewish to a "hellenistic" Jesus - are, in fact, a roadblock to such ideas.

Here I could develop a case from what Paul himself wrote; his letters are historically the earliest written part of the New testament. Instead, however, I will concentrate not on Paul's own words but to words earlier than his which he quotes within his letters, in particular to words within First Corinthians, words - which says - he "received" from those before him. [13]

First Corinthians, written c. 55 is not the earliest letter to refer to such "received" information, to "traditions." The two Thessalonian letters, written c. 50, use the critical "tradition" vocabulary, suggestive of pre-Pauline material that Paul, in turn, had verbally "handed over" to the Thessalonians (2 Thessalonians 2:15; 3:6; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 4:1). Among this pre-Pauline, un-Pauline [14] material the teaching about the unheralded nature of the parousia clearly originated in the teaching of the Master (1 Thessalonians 5:2; Matthew 24:42; Luke 12:39; [15] cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15).

The most probable moment Paul "received" such information was after his conversion at Damascus in the context of his baptismal instruction.

Before proceeding further, two important related chronological facts should be noted. One is that about seventeen years separated the first Easter A.D. 33 [16] from Paul's arrival in Corinth in A.D. 50. [17] Both these dates are now widely supported through research, the former in particular by two Cambridge astronomical scientists, Humphreys and Waddington. The other chronological fact is that fourteen years separates Paul's conversion from the beginnings of formal mission work among the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1,9). If to this period of fourteen years we add the two or three years it must have taken for Paul to reach Corinth we arrive at approximately the same span as between Jesus' Easter and Paul in Corinth - about 17 years. [18] If we regard Paul in Corinth in A.D. 50 as a fixed point and work back from there we conclude that Paul's conversion occurred very close in time to the first Easter, in all probability within less than a year of it.

Thus, contrary to widespread belief, Paul the Jew, Paul the Pharisee is actually a very early convert to Christ and he was converted on a road between Jerusalem and Damascus, only several days distant. Paul is not a Greek converted many years later at a place geographically and culturally remote from Israel.

This closeness in time between Paul's conversion and the historic Jesus - which is not often given the weight it deserves - has two profound implications for the integrity of those traditions which Paul was to "receive." First, traditions about Jesus formulated within the

Jerusalem church in so brief a period are unlikely to have been distorted precisely because the period was so brief. [19] Second, it would be incredible if such traditions did not reflect the mind of the Master who had been so recently with the disciples.

Turning now to traditions embedded within 1 Corinthians, which - explicitly or implicitly [20] Paul had "received" - we note four teachings:

- i. The husbands and wives among God's holy people should not separate, but if they do, they must remain unmarried or else be reconciled (7:12-13; Mark 10:2-10).
- ii. Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living through the gospel (9:14; Luke 10:7; Matthew 10:10).
- iii. On the night of his betrayal Jesus spoke words and took actions with a loaf and a wine cup which pointed to his death for his disciples, words and actions, he said, they were to "do in remembrance of [him]" (11:23-26; Mark 14:22-25).
- iv. A four-part formula was the basis both of the apostles' proclamation and the church's credo (15:11), namely:  
that Christ had died for the sins of his people according to the scriptures,  
that he had been buried, [21]  
that he had been raised on the third day according to the scriptures  
and that he had appeared to persons listed on a number of occasions (15:3-5).

The closeness in time of these traditions to Jesus makes it probable that they reflect Jesus' own teachings and self-disclosure in the following areas:

1. Jesus saw himself to be the Messiah of Israel whose mission was in fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures.
2. Jesus regarded his death as the instrument by which he dedicated the Twelve forgiven, to God as the seed of the new covenant people of God. Since the "three day" tradition is deeply rooted in the sayings of Jesus it is likely that he foresaw his resurrection after "three days." [22]
3. Jesus envisaged his continuing covenant people "remembering" him in a cultic meal.
4. Jesus foresaw a continuing covenant people whose families would observe a stringent marital code.
5. Jesus anticipated ongoing work of mission and therefore of missionaries and their need to be financially supported through their work.

But these teachings about Jesus from the earliest faith community, the Jerusalem church - which we regard as historically secure because of the brevity factor and which almost certainly reflect or are consistent with Jesus' own view of himself and his mission - are very different from the reconstructions of the scholars within the "new quest" school who diminish Jesus, regarding him as nothing more than a charismatic rabbi or prophet, lacking uniqueness of any kind. [23] Doubtless there were numerous other such teachings "received" by Paul from the Jerusalem church and "handed over" to the Corinthians. It was only because of aberrations regarding the practice of the Lord's Supper and of belief in regard to the resurrection of the dead that caused Paul to rehearse those matters in 1 Corinthians. It is reasonable to argue that there were many other "traditions" about Jesus and from the Jerusalem church which are unmentioned because there was no pastoral need to do so.

In passing, it is worth noting that in the general period of Jesus there were a number of "charismatic" leaders with substantial followings - e.g. Judas the Galilean, Barabbas the revolutionary, Theudas the prophet - in each case their movements ceased with deaths of the leader. By contrast the followers of Jesus continued as a movement after his death. There is no break in continuity between Jesus and the disciples from the ministry period and the birth of the first church in Jerusalem. Our argument here is that the early tradition referred to by Paul corroborates the general picture of Jesus presented in the gospels as opposed to the humanist reconstructions in the minimizing stream of the "new quest."

More could be said. One could point, for example, to the Aramaic words - *abba, mara* [24] - embedded in Paul's letters. These words - because they are in the vernacular Aramaic - reflect the influence of the earliest Jewish faith community on the apostle Paul in critical aspects of Christ's identity ("Son of God" and "Lord") which are supposedly of Hellenistic cultural influence. But these words reflect the Aramaic - not the Hellenistic origin - of Jesus (1) as the "Son" of his *Abba*, Father and (2) as the "Lord" who was invoked *marana tha* "Lord, come [back]." [25] While the dating of Paul's exposure to these aramaisms about Jesus is less secure than the traditions embedded in 1 Corinthians, along with with those traditions they point consistently to a Jewish not a Hellenistic well-spring. That well-spring - almost certainly - was the Jerusalem church, which in turn - because of the brevity factor - must have been sourced by Jesus himself. These words strongly imply that Jesus was invoked as *Mara* and the God of Israel as *Abba*, his Father. Prayer to the Father was through the Son, in whose name the Amen - another Aramaism - was uttered. [26] Reconstructions of Jesus merely as a charismatic rabbi/prophet of first century Judaism cannot explain these pre-Pauline Aramaisms which individually and together imply an early, "high" Christology, which are specifically un-hellenistic, but Jewish, in character.

This line of argument serves to point up the importance of Paul. It should not pass unnoticed that not only are the "received" traditions from and about Jesus very early, going right back to the immediate aftermath of Jesus and beyond that to the ministry of the Master himself, Paul's letters are themselves early. Indeed, their earliness is not in dispute. Whatever the uncertainties of dating the Gospels-Acts, the letters of Paul are almost universally agreed to have been written c. A.D. 48-65. The importance of Paul is that his letters and the non-Pauline, pre-Pauline traditions from and about Jesus which Paul had "received" stand as a roadblock against whatever heterodox views of Jesus may be raised against him.

Notes:

1. See e.g. N.T. Wright, "Jesus, Israel and the Cross," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (1985), 70-95. In the nineteenth century there was considerable interest in the historical Jesus which was, however, severely criticized first by Schweitzer and later by Bultmann. In the post war era there was a mild re-emergence of interest in the historical Jesus by Bultmann's students (e.g. Bornkamm). Thus the present movement has been called the "third quest" for the historical Jesus.

2. E.g. M. Wilcox, "Jesus in the Light of his Jewish Environment," *ANRW* ii (1982), 131-195.

3. See generally P.W. Barnett, *The Two Faces of Jesus* (Sydney: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), also the review in L. Swidler, "Contemporary Implications of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue on Jesus Christ," *Dialogue and Alliance* 2/3 (1988), 95-116.

4. For references to Vermes, Wilcox, Sanders, Horsley/Hanson and others see Barnett, Op. cit.

5. The "new quest" is useful in giving us a clearer understanding of the man Jesus, a Jew in a Jewish culture. The un-Jewish picture of Jesus in children's books and Sunday School halls

with long fair hair and blue eyes is clearly untrue and unhelpful. The insistence that Jesus is both fully human - as a Jew - and fully divine must be upheld. In the earlier centuries the cultural pressure was to minimize his humanity. Since the Enlightenment, however, the cultural pressure is to minimize his deity in favour of his humanity. Just as orthodox believers had to contend for his humanity in the early centuries so believers today need to argue for his deity.

6. See C. Brown, *Jesus in European Thought 1778-1860* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 3-6.

7. Quoted R. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 145.

8. See V. E. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963).

9. See e.g. E. Lemcio, "The Intention of the Evangelist Mark," *NTS* 32/2 (1986) 187-206.

10. For a brief survey of this and related hypotheses see I.H. Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Leicester: IVP, 1977).

11. This notion, which is associated with Bousset and his famous pupil Bultmann, has been challenged by M. Hengel, *The Son of God* (London: SCM, 1976). See also L.W. Hurtado, *One God One Lord* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); R.T. France, "The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate?" in *Christ the Lord* ed. H.H. Rowdon (Leicester: IVP, 1982).

12. H. Maccoby (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986).

13. See A.M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, (London: SCM, 1961); B. Gerhardsson, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (London: SCM, 1979).

14. So Hunter, Op. cit. 129.

15. Revelation 3:3; 16:15; cf. Hunter, Op. cit. 126-127.

16. A.D. 33 is the date favoured here for the crucifixion/resurrection of Jesus. See C.J. Humphreys & W.G. Waddington, *Nature* 306 (1983), 743-746; *Nature* 348 (1990), 684.

17. See C.J. Hemer, "Observations on Pauline Chronology," in *Pauline Studies* ed. D.A. Hagner and M.J. Harris (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), 6-9. For a survey of opinion on Pauline chronology see A.J.M. Wedderburn, "Some Recent Pauline Chronologies," *Expos. Times* 92/4 (1981), 103-108.

18. It is difficult to envisage a period much less than 17 years elapsing between Paul's call/conversion and his arrival in Corinth:

a. Fourteen years separated his call/conversion and the missionary meeting in Jerusalem (assuming Paul is calculating this as from his conversion). At this meeting it was agreed that Barnabas and Saul should "go" to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:1,7-9). Because part years were then counted as full years it is possible that the period may have been not much more than 13 years.

b. An estimated 2-3 years must be allocated for all that happened between that missionary meeting in Jerusalem and his arrival in Corinth: Acts Antioch -> Cyprus & central Anatolia -> Antioch 13-14 Antioch -> Jerusalem -> Antioch 15 Antioch -> central Anatolia -> Mysia -> Macedonia -> Achaia -> Corinth 16-17

19. An observation made long ago by the distinguished historian of religions A.D. Nock

rebutting the reconstructions of Bultmann. See A.D. Nock, "A Note on the Resurrection," in *Essays on the Trinity and Incarnation* ed. A.E.J. Rawlinson (London: Longmans, 1933), 47-50.

20. The absence of the "received" vocabulary in regard to 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 and 9:14 - or 1 Thessalonians 4:15 - is no reason to believe these sayings were "received" at a time later than the traditions in 11:23-26 and 15:3-5 where the "received" vocabulary is used. Most probably the disciples remembered well the Master's distinctive teaching about marriage, the support of the missionary and the sudden nature of the *parousia* so that such teachings were secure within the earliest tradition of the Jerusalem church when Paul the Christian first came to Jerusalem. On the sayings of Jesus in the writings of Paul see generally, D.L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971); D.C. Allison, "The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parallels," *NTS* 28 (1982) 1-31.

21. It is sometimes claimed that Paul knows nothing of the "empty tomb" tradition so prominent in Mark 16 and John 20. It should be noted, however, that the verb translated "buried" really means "en-tombed" (*ejtavfh*). Although each evangelist prefers the word *mnhmei'on* as the location of Jesus' burial (Matthew 27:60; 28:8; Mark 16:2,3,5,8; Lk 24:2,9,12,22,24; John 24:1,2,3,4,6,8,11), the word *tavfo taphos* is also used by Matthew as a synonym (Matthew 27:61,64,66; 28:1). If Christ died and was "entombed," the implication surely is that when he was raised on the third day, the "tomb" was indeed empty. Thus the "received" tradition appears to exclude the notion that the "appearances" of the risen Lord were in some merely visionary or subjective manner. The "entombment" confirms both the reality of the Messiah's death and, when taken the "appearances," confirms the physical reality of his bodily resurrection.

22. John. 2:19; Lk. 13:31-35; Matthew. 12:40-41; Mark. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34. By contrast the "first day" rests in the narrative rather than the sayings' tradition (Mark 16:2; John 20:1; cf. John 20:19,26; 1 Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7).

23. So E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, (London:SCM, 1984), 240, 318,320.

24. Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6; 1 Corinthians 16:22.

25. Revelation 22:20.

26. 2 Corinthians 1:20.