

What did Paul know about Jesus?

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The formative period of earliest Christianity falls between the execution of Jesus in 30 CE and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies in 70 CE. The New Testament would suggest that during those forty years there was no more influential figure than Saul of Tarsus, best known in later Christian tradition as Paul the Apostle.

But what did Paul actually know about Jesus? What part did such information play in his personal understanding of the post-Easter Jesus? Does the historical Paul provide any help for contemporary people wondering to what extent information about the pre-Easter Jesus is relevant to the project of discipleship and faith?

The ‘problem’ of Paul’s knowledge of Jesus

One of the first problems to be faced concerns the definition of Pauline material. Is our inquiry to focus on the historical Paul or the canonical Paul? By canonical Paul, I mean the identikit picture of Paul that is created when all the biblical traditions associated with Paul are simply put together uncritically.

Of the twenty-seven books that finally came to comprise the New Testament, 16 are attributed to Paul or his admirers:

The Pauline corpus includes the seven letters widely accepted as authentic by New Testament scholars: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Not surprisingly, these seven letters were all voted Red in the Spring 1997 Westar meeting.

Then there are the disputed letters of 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. Their claim to authenticity is widely challenged in New Testament scholarship. Again the Westar voting results reflect the wider consensus of scholarship in these questions.

In addition, there is the Letter to the Hebrews, long ascribed to Paul in popular tradition even though it is actually anonymous. Finally, we have the two volumes of Luke-Acts. This influential account of the life of Jesus and of the early church is usually considered to have been written by someone wishing to affirm the validity and the providential character of the Pauline mission.

It is possible that authentic Pauline material has been preserved in some of the disputed letters. However, for our purposes it is better to limit the discussion to the Pauline data that is earliest and has the widest critical acceptance as genuine.

The question of Paul’s access to and influence upon the earliest Jesus traditions has been debated for nearly two hundred years. Was Paul drawing upon a primitive Jesus tradition inherited from the first disciples in Jerusalem, or was he contributing to the formation of an

emerging Jesus legend that would later find literary expression in the gospels?

Much earlier effort has concentrated on seeking passages in Paul's writings that seem to cite, evoke or parallel material known from the canonical gospels. After decades of effort the trenches of that academic battlefield have been dug deeply and reinforced with impressive scholarship, but there is something of an impasse.

Two critical flaws seem to bedevil many attempts at progress.

Lists of possible "echos" of the Jesus tradition in Paul are common, ranging from a few items to several hundred! But what one person recognizes as an allusion to Jesus traditions known by Paul and his readers, another sees simply a parallel phrase that need not presuppose any knowledge of the Jesus traditions.

Further, in their enthusiasm at finding such parallels some people fail to discriminate between the various stages of the gospel traditions. For example, a clear parallel such as Jesus' words at the Last Supper about the bread and wine (1 Cor 11:23–25 and Luke 21:19–20) raises as many questions as it resolves. Did Paul and Luke have independent access to this tradition? Why is it different from the versions in Mark and Matthew? Has the text in Luke been altered to make it conform more closely with the formula in 1 Corinthians?

It is widely agreed that Paul hardly ever makes use of Jesus traditions in his writings. Scholars generally concede that we can learn almost nothing about Jesus' life or teachings from Paul.

If Paul were our only source we would know only that Jesus had been born as a Jewish male, after an apparently natural conception. We would know that his death by official execution was given great theological significance by Paul, but we would not know any details about even that event. We would know that Paul believed Jesus to have been experienced as still alive after his execution, and that Paul expected Jesus to re-appear as a divine being to punish the wicked and reward the righteous, but still we would have no narrative descriptions of the Easter story.

Paul and the early Jesus tradition

Rather than tour the trenches in search of some overlooked key to the stalemate, we can take a fresh approach to this problem thanks to the deliberations of the Jesus Seminar over several years.

The results of the Seminar's work, published in *The Five Gospels* and *The Acts of Jesus*, provide us with a critical database for the Jesus tradition. The authentic Pauline data can be tested against that benchmark.

The sayings and deeds that have been voted either Red or Pink have a strong claim to authenticity. These will provide the control sample for our examination of the Jesus tradition within the Pauline material.

We shall therefore be starting with data relating to Jesus before considering information available from Paul.

In particular, I will use the anthology of materials that was assembled into a "Gospel of Jesus, according to the Jesus Seminar" by Robert Funk for the Spring 1998 Westar meeting. Now published (in a slightly amended form) by Polebridge. That collection of the Jesus data has a minimal narrative framework. Funk's "Gospel" relies upon a thematic presentation of the Jesus

tradition. As such, it is especially suitable for use in our analysis of the Pauline material, as it would be expected that any Jesus material in Paul would typically be thematic rather than sequential narrative. The objective is not so much to find parallels to the earliest Jesus traditions within Paul, let alone explicit citations of Jesus' sayings. Rather, we are testing the extent to which the Pauline material, as represented in the surviving New Testament material, indicates any knowledge of the earliest Jesus tradition—either in content or form.

Preface: Birth, childhood and family of Jesus

The Jewishness of Jesus is assumed throughout Paul's writings, and his descent from Abraham is seen to have theological significance (Gal 3:14–16). However, Paul displays no interest in the childhood of Jesus—or in any other period of Jesus' life.

Paul is aware of the name of Jesus (*Yeshua*), but typically refers to Jesus as “Christ.” He makes no reference to the significance of the name or to any special divine instruction about the naming of the Christ child. Even when affirming that every knee shall bow “at the name of Jesus” (Phil 2:10), Paul makes no use of the symbolism embedded in that name.

Paul has only two passages that could be interpreted as a reference to the birth of Jesus (Gal 4:4; Rom 1:3). Both assume a normal human conception and birth. The phrase “born of a woman” (Gal 4:4) is a well-attested idiom for “human being,” occurring in Jewish literature as diverse as Job (14:1; 15:14; 25:4), the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran (IQS 11.20–21; 1QH 13.14; 18.12–13, 16) and Matthew (11:11). In no way can it be read as excluding human paternity. Similarly, the phrase “descended from David according to the flesh” in Rom 1:3 is best understood as reflecting the tradition that a messianic figure must have Davidic connections. It simply has no relevance to the question of Jesus' paternity.

1. John the Baptist & Jesus

Paul never alludes to the traditions about John the Baptist. The strange episode concerning Paul and the Baptist disciples in Acts 19:1–7 has no parallel in the Pauline writings. The ambivalence about John the Baptist's relationship with Jesus that is attested in the traditions that found their way into the gospels has left no trace in Paul's letters.

2. Jesus announces the good news

While Paul is familiar with the expression the “good news” (*euangelion*) it functions rather differently in his letters than in the earliest Jesus traditions.

For example, there is no use made of the kind of tradition preserved in the Beatitudes. There is no trace that Jesus was remembered as one who congratulates those who seem to have missed out on life's blessings, but denounces those who are enjoying the good things of life now.

Further, in the way that Paul presents his gospel there is nothing like the parables and aphorisms of Jesus about the present reality of God's domain. The good news for Paul is focused on what God did through Jesus on the cross, and on Jesus' imminent appearance as Christ, the exalted one. In Paul, there is little sign of celebration here-and-now of the divine reversal of

human predicament.

It is possible that texts such as Phil 4:13 (“I can do all things in him who strengthens me”) and Rom 8:28 (“in everything God works for good with those who love him”) provide a pale echo of the trust ethic so integral to the good news Jesus proclaimed. However, it is equally possible to see these simply as expressions of a pious wisdom that relies on God’s blessing for those who are faithful.

3. Disciples & discipleship

It is clear that Paul acknowledges a group of people with some claim to status within the earliest Christian communities based on their relationship with Jesus prior to his execution. In particular, Paul names James, Cephas (Peter) and John (Gal 2:9), and refers in a general way to “the twelve” among the witnesses to the resurrection (1 Cor 15:5).

On the other hand, Paul has no use for such claims to status as his dismissive words make clear:

And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; but on the contrary...(those) who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do. —Gal 2:6–10

Those with high esteem in Paul’s eyes only included the males from the original disciples. There is no reference to the many women who were among Jesus’ disciples. No mention of Mary Magdalene. No mention of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In addition, Paul tends to replace Jesus’ calls for personal discipleship with the requirement to “have faith” in Christ (Gal 2:16) or in God (Rom 1:5), and to “wait for his Son from heaven” (1 Thess 1:10). This is far removed from the call to radical discipleship that runs so powerfully through the early Jesus tradition.

4. Teaching with authority

The earliest traditions describe Jesus as a distinctive teacher with a unique sense of personal authority. Paul makes virtually no appeal to Jesus as a teacher, or as an authoritative source of instruction. There are only three occasions that “the Lord” is invoked by Paul as the authority for some opinion (1 Cor 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–26). Paul invokes Christ as a divine authority figure, as the risen Lord, rather than as Jesus, the authoritative teacher of divine wisdom.

Not surprisingly then, Paul’s writings do not draw upon any of the classic parables and aphorisms of Jesus. Even though these seem to have been characteristic and distinctive aspects of Jesus’ activity as a teacher, they have left no trace in the Pauline tradition of the New Testament.

5. Demons by the finger of God

Paul makes no use of the tradition of Jesus as a healer and exorcist. This would appear to be

due to his consistent focus on the post-Easter Jesus, understood as Christ, Lord, and Son. It is not that Paul would have regarded such actions as improbable, they simply were irrelevant to the portrait of Jesus that he worked with.

6. Death of John the Baptist

We have already noted that Paul seems unaware of the part played by John the Baptist in the life of Jesus. It is therefore not surprising to find that Paul does not mention the high regard in which Jesus seems to have held John, nor the critical influence of John's arrest in stimulating Jesus' own public activity.

7. Love & forgiveness

Unconditional generosity to others, including love of one's enemies may be one authentic Jesus tradition that has survived in Paul's writings. While Paul's response to criticism and opposition often seems to fall rather short of unconditional generosity, he does aspire to "be all things to all persons" (1 Cor 9:22) rather than insist on his rights. And Paul does exhort the Roman Christians to bless those who persecute them, rather than respond in kind (Rom 12:14).

8. Jesus at the table

The early traditions preserve the memory of Jesus as one who shared table fellowship with a diverse circle of people, and for whom the shared table was a powerful symbol of God's domain here and now. It is of interest, then, to note that Paul describes his own personal argument with Peter over just such an issue (Gal 2:11–14). In this context, Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians for their diminishment of the Supper of the Lord into an occasion that re-affirmed social distinctions is especially significant (1 Cor 11:17–22). Is it possible that Paul's concern for radically inclusive table rules reflects the influence of Jesus' own practice within the early church?

And yet even on this issue, Paul never cites the example of Jesus' own behavior to support his vehement denunciation of Peter and the Corinthians! Was he unaware of such a tradition? We can hardly fail to note that Paul's words in Rom 14:17 ("the kingdom of God does not consist of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit") seem quite at odds with the earliest Jesus traditions.

9. Celebration

Jesus is remembered in the gospel tradition as having acquired a reputation as a "party animal." The extant form of the argument in Luke 7:31–35 was voted gray by the Seminar, but a case can be made that it preserves an authentic note from the life of Jesus. What of Paul's treatment of extravagant celebration as an appropriate response to the presence of God's domain?

Paul does concede that "all things are lawful" (1 Cor 10:23) "but," he immediately adds, "not all things are helpful." Indeed, the general tenor of Paul's advice to the earnest Christian is to promote sexual abstinence, sobriety of public conduct, and a deference to the tender consciences of others. Paul sounds more like the first puritan than a disciple of Jesus.

10. Sabbath observance

Jesus was known as someone who readily subordinated the observance of Sabbath to the instinctive needs of the human person: whether that be hunger, or sickness (Mark 2:23–3:5). Paul does not directly address such issues, but it would seem that he typically continued the observance of the Sabbath—perhaps coupling it with the gathering of the Christian assembly on the first day of week (1 Cor 16:2). This would appear to be consistent with his continued observance of other Jewish rituals (see §13 below.)

11. Kinship in the kingdom

This thread from the Jesus database reminds us that Jesus experienced estrangement from his biological family on account of his vocation (Mark 3:20–35; Thom 99:1–3). It seems that Jesus subordinated natural kinship ties to the new relationships shared with disciples and companions (Luke 14:25–27).

In keeping with his less celebratory demeanor, Paul relativizes human relationships such as marriage (1 Cor 7:26–27). However, this is because of the nearness of the End, and not because they are displaced by more meaningful relationships within the community. To his credit, Paul seems to have practiced what he preached and remained single (1 Cor 7:8), even though he acknowledged that others acted differently (1 Cor 9:5).

12. In parables

Paul is silent on this core memory concerning the historical Jesus. There is no hint of the tradition that Jesus taught in parables, even though this seems to have been especially characteristic of Jesus' ministry as a teacher. None of the classic parables (e.g. the Samaritan, the Prodigal, the Shrewd Manager or the Corrupt Judge) seem to have left any mark on Paul's tradition. And Paul never uses the genre of parable himself.

13. Public & private piety

As hinted earlier, Paul is seen to observe traditional Jewish piety more scrupulously than Jesus. Not only does Paul invoke his apostolic privations (2 Cor 11:28) and personal spiritual disciplines (1 Cor 10:24–27), he also exhorts people to imitate his behavior (Phil 3:17). This is rather different from Jesus' instruction that acts of charity are not to be publicized (Matt 6:3) and personal devotions are not to be paraded before others (Matt 6:6).

Paul's use of "competitive giving" (2 Cor 9:1–5) to ensure that the Christians of Macedonia contribute at least as much as those in Achaia also seems blissfully untouched by Jesus' emphasis on simple trust and uncomplicated generosity.

Finally, the Lord's Prayer would appear to have left no trace in the tradition that Paul knew. This tends to reinforce the conclusion that Paul's own practice of public piety, and even his understanding of prayer, was informed by sources other than the Jesus tradition.

14. Jesus & purity

Purity rules constituted one of the points where Jesus was in conflict with his Jewish tradition (Mark 7:1–16). Paul has a certain ambivalence here. He affirms in principle that food rules make no difference at all to a person's relationship with God (1 Cor 8:8; Rom 14:20). Yet he also argues that rules about food, like ritual and calendrical requirements, should not be ignored if doing so would cause any spiritual harm to another Christian (Rom 14:1–23).

Paul's position in these matters seems better explained as a compromise of his views in the interests of harmony within a more conservative environment, rather than as the direct legacy of the teachings of Jesus. Certainly Paul never cites Jesus even though the topic had such significance within early Christianity that he had to deal with it in both 1 Corinthians and Romans.

15. Signs of God's imperial rule

Jesus is described as a reluctant miracle worker in the earliest traditions. Typically, Jesus refuses requests for miraculous signs (Mark 8:11–13). Given the occasional nature and epistolary form of Paul's writings, descriptions of such events would not be expected. But there is never a hint in Paul that Jesus may have been remembered as a miracle worker, even though Paul does refer to the "power of signs and wonders" that were characteristic of his own ministry in various places (Rom 15:19). This more positive evaluation of signs and portents seems consistent with a later stage of the Jesus tradition, as well as being a typical element in traditional apocalyptic lore.

16. Five cures

The tradition of Jesus as a healer (Mark 1:32–34) is a variant of the preceding item. This also plays no part in the Pauline tradition.

17. Success, wealth & God's domain

Jesus demonstrated a certain detachment from success and status (Mark 10:1), and described wealth as a major hurdle for those seeking a share in God's domain (Matt 19:23–24). Attachment to material success is precluded by proper single-minded devotion to God (Luke 16:13). And, in any case, human mortality makes such achievements ephemeral (Thom 63:14; Luke 17:33).

Paul seems somewhat confused on these issues. On the one hand, he valued his status as an apostle in the early Christian communities, and would allow no one to gainsay him (1 Cor 9:1–2; 2 Cor 10:7–11:6). Still, he could acknowledge that few of the rich and influential were to be found among the faithful (1 Cor 1:26–31). And Paul could willingly "lose his own life" for the sake of the gospel in order to find life in Christ (Gal 2:20; Phil 3:8–11).

18. Hospitality

In the earliest Jesus tradition, generous hospitality is a hallmark of God's domain (Luke 11:5 8). Like

God, the disciple was to be generous (Matt 5:42). And those active in ministry were to presume upon the hospitality of others (Luke 10:5,7).

Paul lists generosity to needy Christians and the practice of hospitality as key virtues of the life of faith (Rom 12:13). He assumed hospitality for his own travels, and when sending his representatives to various congregations. Even if he waived his right to personal remuneration (1 Cor 9:15), Paul still affirmed the principle that Christian workers should be supported by the faithful, even citing a command of “the Lord” to that effect (1 Cor 9:14).

19. Sight & light

Under this category, Funk’s collection draws together a number of sayings that draw on images of new sight (Mark 10:46–52), prominent cities (Matt 5:14–15), salt with all its zing (Mark 9:50), grapes not growing on thistles (Matt 7:16) and a fig tree without figs (Luke 13:6–9). There is nothing in the writings of Paul that reflects this characteristic material in the earliest Jesus tradition.

20. In Jerusalem

Paul has nothing that alludes to Jesus’ struggle with the Jerusalem authorities (Mark 11:15,17; Thom 10:1–3). There is no hint of Jesus’ critique of the Temple, nor his radical threat to destroy the whole system of religious brokerage that was centered upon it. Indeed, Paul’s views on submission to the civil authorities (Rom 13:1–7) run quite contrary to the teachings of Jesus. Had Jesus followed Paul’s advice there may have been no crucifixion.

21. The passion

It is only when we come to the passion that we find a significant drawing upon the Jesus tradition in the writings of Paul. The primary text is the account of the institution of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 11:23–26), but there are significant references to the death of Jesus elsewhere in Paul (1 Thess 2:14–16; 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2 Cor 13:4a; Phil 2:8; Rom 5:6–11). Here we have come to that aspect of the Jesus tradition that had real importance to Paul. Even so, we do not get a detailed exposition of the circumstances of Jesus’ death or of its theological significance.

From the various passages we can be sure that Paul included the following elements in his understanding of the passion: betrayal to and arrest by the Jewish religious leadership the previous night; the Roman authorities executed Jesus by crucifixion; he was buried. In addition, for Paul, this ghastly event had cosmic significance as an action that provided (in fulfillment of the Scriptures) a sacrificial death through which sins could be forgiven and reconciliation achieved between the estranged elements of the universe.

Epilogue: Pillars & Pioneers

The earliest Jesus tradition included accounts of Jesus appearing to a number of his closest followers. As noted in *The Acts of Jesus*, evidence for the appearances of the risen Jesus occurs in five forms: lists, simple reports, concise stories, developed stories and legends. The more

developed traditions, and especially those with legendary elements, are judged to be later than the simpler forms of the tradition.

Paul is closer to the early appearance traditions. He provides the earliest extant list of appearances (1 Cor 15:4). More than once Paul refers to his own experience of the risen Jesus (1 Cor 15:8; Gal 1:12,16) in the form of simple reports.

There is no mention of an empty tomb in Paul. Unlike Mark, who seems to have created the empty tomb tradition, Paul's descriptions of the risen Jesus lack any narrative or legendary developments. Typical Pauline references to the resurrection are as follows: "the last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45), "but (he) lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4), "designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4), "wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead" (1 Thess 1:10) and "God has highly exalted him" (Phil 2:9).

Paul, Jesus and contemporary Christians

We began with three questions relating to Paul's possible knowledge of Jesus. First, we wanted to identify what Paul may actually have known about Jesus?

It would seem that Paul had little access to the earliest Jesus traditions. Even if Paul knew of the kind of material that has found a place in the Jesus Seminar database, it has rarely influenced his surviving public discourse. Neither the content nor the form of the earliest Jesus tradition seems to have left much of a trace in Paul's writings.

This finding confirms the scholarly consensus that Paul made little use of Jesus traditions in his writings. Scholars generally concede that we can learn almost nothing about Jesus' life or teachings from Paul.

If Paul were our only source we would know that Jesus had been born as a Jewish male—after an apparently natural conception. We would know that his death by official execution was given great theological significance by Paul—but we would not have any description of the events leading to his death. We would know that Paul believed Jesus to have been experienced as still alive after his execution, but we would have no narrative accounts of the Easter tradition.

A second question concerned the part such information might have played in Paul's own understanding of the post-Easter Jesus?

We have seen that Paul's theological and religious focus was more on the exalted Lord who was expected to return from heaven in the near future as the Christ. The one who had pointed people to God's rejuvenating presence in their daily experience had become (in Paul's version of the gospel) the divine agent through whom the power of God could and would be experienced upon his re-appearance.

Paul appears to have been captured by his religious experience of the living Jesus. This Christ became, for Paul, the focal point for the presence and action of God (2 Cor 5:19). The brilliance of that conviction may have over-exposed the historical figure of the man of Nazareth. In doing so, there was little chance that the surviving traditions from Jesus could critique the mystical Christ of Paul's rich theology.

Finally, we indicated an interest in the broader question of how information about the pre-Easter Jesus may be relevant to contemporary Christian faith?

Christians have always derived their information about Jesus from the catechetical and liturgical traditions of the Church. As it happens, through the critical research of generations of biblical scholars—including the Jesus Seminar, today's Christians may actually have access to more reliable traditions about Jesus than even Paul enjoyed.

Christians find that their faith community enables them to name and engage with the Sacred within a living Jesus tradition. That tradition provides the lexicon of faith from which the words are drawn to make sense of life as an encounter with God-in-Christ. Paul played a seminal role in developing the canonical forms of that lexicon.

Like Paul, contemporary Christians stand on this side of Calvary. Unlike the pre-Easter Jesus, they know what happened in Jerusalem in 30 CE—and also the traditions of his continuing influence within the community formed in his name. One inevitable result is that the good news now includes Jesus himself as part of the message, and not simply its first messenger.

Paul appears to have exercised considerable flexibility and creative license in using whatever Jesus traditions may have been known to him and his readers. Christians today can claim that same freedom with respect to the Jesus tradition and the Pauline legacy.

Paul demonstrated that the priority always lies with direct life experience—interpreted within the context of one's faith community and in the light of its tradition. Those who wish to honor the sage of Galilee might do it best by moving beyond veneration to the more challenging project of embracing life with openness and trust here and now.

Suggested Reading

John Dominic Crossan. *The Birth of Christianity*. HarperCollins, 1998.

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