

PAUL AND THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Paul wrote his letters within the period A.D. 50–65(?).¹ So far as we know, the written Gospels were not in existence when he began writing. What can we learn from Paul about the historical Jesus? How much would we know about Jesus if the Gospels did not exist and we were solely dependent on Paul?

REVELATION AND TRADITION

Paul's knowledge of Jesus can be summed up in two Greek words: *apokalypsis* and *paradosis*. The first word is related to the verb "to veil" (*kalyptein*). When *apo* is prefixed it means "unveil" or "reveal." Thus the noun *apokalypsis* signifies "unveiling" or "revelation." Paul wrote to the Galatians:

The gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel.... It came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:11–12)

It was on the road near Damascus that God "was pleased to reveal his Son" to him (Gal 1:16). Paul's life as a Christian and also as an apostle began at the moment of that remarkable event. Moreover, what God revealed to Paul in Christ in that instant became the framework of Paul's thinking about Christ. Henceforth, Paul would speak about Jesus as "the Son of God" (Gal 1:16; Acts 9:20; cf. 1 Thess 1:10; 2 Cor 1:19; Rom 1:4); as the "highly exalted ... Lord" (Acts 9:5; 22:10; 26:15; Phil 2:9, 11; 2 Cor 4:5); as "the image of God" (2 Cor 3:18; 4:4); as "glorious" (Acts 22:11; 9:3; 22:6; 2 Cor 4:4, 6); and as "the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49).

To say that the Damascus road event radically changed the direction of Paul's life is to tell only part of the story; his view of who Christ was entered into and became a permanent part of his thinking at that point. While for Paul the focus of interest was always the heavenly Lord, he knew certain things about the historical Lord. It is those historical details that concern us in this chapter.

We turn to the second word, *paradosis* ("tradition"). *Paradosis* means "a handing over," as of a prisoner from one jailer to another or of a piece of information from a teacher to a pupil. It was used in this latter sense of a lesson or teaching which a rabbi would impart to his disciple. Thus the rabbis handed over their teachings intact, generation by generation, to their pupils, who would in turn become rabbis. The usual English translation "traditions," a word that is often taken to mean "old things," fails to capture the dynamic "handing over" idea that is intrinsic to *paradosis*.

THE TRADITIONS: FROM WHOM DID PAUL RECEIVE THEM?

In the course of time Paul would, like a rabbi, hand over important pieces of information (*paradoseis*) about Jesus to the churches. First, however, he had to receive them from those who

¹ Possibly from A.D. 48 if Galatians is Paul's first letter.

were Christian teachers before him. In writing to the Corinthians Paul mentions both the “receiving” and the “delivering” of the *paradosis* about the gospel:

I delivered to you ... what I also received. (1 Cor 15:3)

Earlier in this letter he repeated what he “delivered” to the Corinthians about the Last Supper, having previously “received” it from the Lord.

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread. (1 Cor 11:23)

This passage is striking. It refers both to the heavenly Lord (“the Lord”) from whom Paul received the *paradosis* and also the historical Lord (“the Lord Jesus”). The heavenly Lord is seen as the one from whom Paul received the *paradosis*, even though it originated in history with the historical Lord who “on the night he was betrayed took bread.”

What Paul omits to tell us is through whom he received that *paradosis*. I assume it to be the same person(s) from whom Paul received the *paradosis* about the gospel, mentioned above. When did Paul receive these *paradoseis* and from whom?

Paul’s first contact as a Christian with other Christians was in Damascus immediately following his momentous encounter with Christ on the way there (Acts 9 and 22). Ananias told Paul to “be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).²

Paul was thrust straight away into a new world in which he had to learn about baptism, forgiveness, the name of Jesus (his deity), faith and doubtless many other things as well. Most likely it was in Damascus that Paul received the *paradoseis* about the gospel and the Lord’s Supper since it was from that time he began to preach Jesus as the Son of God and as the Christ (Acts 9:20–22).

From whom, then, did Paul receive further information about the historical Jesus? So far as we can see, Paul himself had neither seen nor heard Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless he was converted soon after the resurrection, most likely within a year.³ Therefore, his contact with Christians in Damascus (Acts 9:19) was very close in time to Jesus of Nazareth. Paul was an early convert to Christianity.

Within three years of his conversion (Gal 1:18 = Acts 9:26), he came to Jerusalem where he “visited” Peter and “saw” James. This is not to suggest that the stories and sayings of Jesus had all been systematically collected by the time of Paul’s first visit to Jerusalem.

His second visit was made fourteen years after his conversion (Gal 2:1 = Acts 21:17), that is, in c. 47. It is reasonable to assume that some of the sources referred to by Luke (1:2) and found within Luke’s and Matthew’s Gospels were finalized by that time. It may also be assumed that Paul came to be aware of these sources on this and subsequent visits to Jerusalem (c. 49—Acts 15:4; c. 52—18:22).

If one bridge from Paul to the historical Jesus was his contact with the Jerusalem church through visits in c. 36, 47, 49 and 52, another was through his association outside Jerusalem with

² Galatians 1:19 perhaps refers to an initial, private consultation. See Acts 9:27–28, where Paul met a wider group in Jerusalem.

³ The list of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:4–8 suggests that they occurred within a limited period of time.

Barnabas, whose membership in the Jerusalem church went back to the earliest times (Acts 4:36–37). Barnabas was in daily contact with Paul for four or five years (Acts 11:25, 30; 12:25; 13:1–14:28; 15:2, 4, 12, 36–39). Barnabas, whose conversion was closer in time to Christ than Paul's and who had been for a decade and a half in the fellowship of the original companions of Jesus, must have talked often to Paul about the historical Lord.

In sum, Paul had many opportunities to receive the *paradoxeis* of the Jerusalem church and to learn about the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth.

It has been shown that the close correlation between certain well-defined sections in Paul's writings, for example Romans 12–14, with the reports of the teaching of Jesus, from the common source which lies behind Luke 6:27–38 and Matthew 5:38–48, is evidence that Paul had access to such teachings and passed them on to the Gentile churches.⁴ Paul's prayer to God as "Abba" (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6) clearly derives from Jesus (see Mk 14:36), as does a probable reference to the Lord's Prayer in the expression "Forbearing one another and ... forgiving each other" (Col 3:13). Some scholars believe that Paul refers to the rural imagery of Jesus, as well as to the parables.⁵

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: HIS BIRTH AND DEATH

Birth and death are fundamental to human experience. A modern biographer is interested in the details surrounding the birth and death of his chief character. While only two Evangelists describe the birth of Jesus, all four enter into great detail about his death. The apostle Paul, however, supplies no historical details about either the birth or the death of Jesus.

What Paul dwells on is the fact and the meaning of the birth and death of Jesus, which are all of a piece in this famous sentence:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)

Here we see the fact of his incarnation and death ("he became poor") and its meaning ("the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ"), but no historical details are given.

In Paul's thought the coming of Jesus into the world was necessary so that he might die. Thus, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of [a] woman, born under the law, to redeem" (Gal 4:4–5). Paul knew that Jesus was brought up as a strict Jew ("born under the law"). The absence of reference to Jesus' father may mean that Paul knew of the virgin birth of Christ.

The fact and meaning of the death of the historical Lord are set out powerfully in the statement:

For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)

⁴ Dale C. Allison, "The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parables," *New Testament Studies*, 28 (1982): 1–32.

⁵ David Michael Stanley, *The Apostolic Church in the New Testament* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1967), pp. 34–37, 364–69.

Notice that although no historical details are supplied in these statements about Jesus' birth and death, they appear to be known by the writer.

Thus, "he became poor" (2 Cor 8:9) is entirely consistent with the details in the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke. The general comment "born of a woman" implies that the writer knew specifically which woman. In relation to the death of Jesus, the apostle often refers to crucifixion as the mode of execution (Gal 3:1), and many have seen in the words "[God] made [Jesus] to be sin" an allusion to Jesus' cry from the cross (Mk 15:34). The way Paul speaks of the fact and the meaning of the birth and death of Jesus implies some knowledge of historical details, which, however, he does not supply.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: HIS LIFE

Paul gives only a few details from the life of Jesus:

1. He descended from Abraham (Gal 3:16).
2. He was a Son of David (Rom 1:3).
3. He was naturally born but [perhaps?] supernaturally conceived (Gal 4:4).
4. He was born and lived under the Jewish law (Gal 4:4).
5. He welcomed people (Rom 15:5, 7).
6. His lifestyle was one of humility and service (Phil 2:7–8).
7. He was abused and insulted during his life (Rom 15:3).
8. He had a brother named James (Gal 1:19) and other brothers (1 Cor 9:5).
9. His disciple Peter was married (1 Cor 9:5; cf. Mk 1:30).
10. He instituted a memorial meal on the night of his betrayal (1 Cor 11:23–25).
11. He was betrayed (1 Cor 11:23).
12. He gave testimony before Pontius Pilate (1 Tim 6:13).
13. He was killed by Jews of Judea (1 Thess 2:14–15).
14. He was buried, rose on the third day and was thereafter seen alive on a number of occasions by many witnesses (1 Cor 15:4–8).

Although the information is limited, it is noteworthy in two ways.

First, the details are conveyed incidentally and innocently. It seems that if another theological point were to be made, the author was capable of introducing further historical facts. The implication is that Paul the apostle knew more about the historical Jesus than he says; presumably he saw no need to give further information.

Second, the Gospel narratives confirm every detail Paul gives, without exception. His statements are free of exaggeration or distortion. This is all the more impressive because Paul's chief focus was not the historical, but the heavenly, Lord.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: HIS TEACHINGS

The apostle Paul reproduces relatively few of the teachings of Jesus in full. On the other hand, there are numerous snippets of teachings that will appear in the final versions of the Gospels; Paul was quoting from collections of teachings then in circulation.

The Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:23–25; cf. Mark 14:22–25

Divorce and remarriage

1 Corinthians 7:10–11; cf. Mark 10:1–12

The laborer deserves wages	1 Corinthians 9:14; cf. Matthew 10:10; Luke 10:7
Eat what is set before you	1 Corinthians 10:27; cf. Luke 10:7
Tribute to whom due	Romans 13:7; cf. Mark 12:13–17
Thief in the night	1 Thessalonians 5:2–5; cf. Luke 12:39, 40

In addition to these more direct sayings, Paul makes numerous indirect allusions to the teachings of Jesus. For example:

Practical ethics	Romans 12:9–13:10; cf. Matthew 5–7
The return of Jesus	1–2 Thessalonians; cf. Matthew 24

It is beyond the scope of this work to enter into details at this point. The interested reader is referred to F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit*, pages 100–112. The comments made about the life of the historical Jesus are true here also. First, Paul is able to give information as the need arises. Apparently what is listed above does not exhaust Paul’s knowledge of the teachings of Jesus. Second, what we read in Paul of the words of Jesus is confirmed in the Gospels. At points where we can check him, Paul proves trustworthy, as the reader will observe as he examines the comparative references.

THE HISTORICAL JESUS: HIS ATTRIBUTES

The apostle Paul was aware of the personal attributes of the historical Jesus. As need arose, he exhorted his readers to live and act according to the example of Jesus. Let us consider how Paul used the known character of Jesus in his ministry to four groups of readers.

The Roman Christians. The Roman Christians were divided into ethnic groups each of which was divided against the other groups. Paul therefore wrote, “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good.... For Christ did not please himself” (Rom 15:2–3). Paul’s reference to the obedient behavior of Christ (he “did not please himself”), reminds us of the statement of Christ, “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (Jn 5:30).

Paul, therefore, told those racially segregated Romans, “Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you” (Rom 15:7). Christ often used words of welcome, particularly to people in need; for instance: “Come to me ... and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).

The Philippians. A second group, the Philippians, were behaving proudly in their dealings with one another. Paul encouraged them to “have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.... He humbled himself” (Phil 2:5, 8).

Once more we see Paul putting to people the example of Jesus. In the famous invitation “come to me,” quoted above, Jesus went on to say, “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). Paul’s “he humbled himself” is from the same Greek word-group as Jesus’ disclosure “I am lowly.”

The Corinthians. A third group of readers, the Corinthians, spurned Paul's style of ministry as weak. In reply he states: "I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (2 Cor 10:1).

The word "meekness" is basically the same as "gentle," the other word in Matthew 11:29 quoted above. Thus Jesus' words about himself being "gentle" and "lowly," as quoted in Matthew 11:29, are twice drawn upon by Paul, yet in such an inconspicuous way that the point is easily missed.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul urges the readers to "seek" the good of their neighbors, "that they may be saved." Again, Christ is given as the example: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). These words remind us of Jesus' important statement to the tax collector, Zacchaeus: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost" (Lk 19:10). In using the words "seek" and "save," Paul has echoed the sense of purpose we find in these words of Jesus.

The Galatians. The apostle told a fourth group of readers, the Galatians, about the love of Christ, "the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20; cf. 2 Cor 5:14).

It was the fourth Evangelist who drew particular attention to the love of Jesus in his death for sinners. On the evening before the crucifixion Jesus acted out the meaning of love by washing the feet of the disciples. John commented: "having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Had Paul discussed these matters with John at the missionary "summit" in Jerusalem c. 47 (cf. Gal 2:7-9)? While the apostle Paul apparently wrote before the Gospels were completed, it is quite possible that in his several visits to Jerusalem he became aware of sources that would in time become part of the finished Gospels. Paul displays comprehensive understanding of the character of the historical Jesus—his obedience, his gracious welcome, his meekness and humility, his love for sinners and his desire to save them. Everything Paul affirms about the attributes of Jesus can be confirmed from the Gospels.

In speaking of the character of the historical Jesus, however, the apostle is not referring to a figure of the remote past. The historical Lord through death and resurrection is now the heavenly Lord who has taken his spiritual and emotional personality intact with him to the right hand of the Father. Sometimes Christians find it difficult to imagine what their Lord is like and they do not know how to approach him. The one who is now our heavenly Lord was once the historical Lord. He reacted to suffering with compassion and to injustice with anger. Jesus displayed a wide range of human emotions; and he was both meek and majestic. The point is, as he was, so he is; he is now what he was then. We relate to him now as if we were relating to him then. The heavenly Lord has the same personal attributes as the historical Lord.

Although primarily interested in Jesus as his contemporary, heavenly Lord, the apostle Paul was by no means unaware of the career of the historical Lord. Through the *paradoseis* or "traditions" about Jesus, received from those who had been eyewitnesses of the Lord, Paul supplies information about the birth, life, death, personal attributes and sayings of Christ. Paul's facts, while not extensive, when checked against the Gospels prove to be correct in every case. It is clear that Paul did not manufacture details about Jesus or exaggerate what details he had. Paul's use of historical evidence was, it appears, both careful and sober.

FURTHER READING

- F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).
W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

Archibald M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* (London: SCM Press, 1961).
Seyoon Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).¹

¹ Paul Barnett, *Is the New Testament Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 136-44.