

# The Problem with Paul

by Sven Nilsen, 2024

*In this essay I put forward a problem of taking Paul's letters in the New Testament as describing historical events. In particular, I think it is worth investigating whether Early Christianity starts with Paul from his letters on a more general background of syncretizing Hellenistic culture and Jewish Apocalypticism. Jesus might have been a possible historical person, but perhaps not the origin of the surrounding Christian sect. The argument is that the Christian sect originates with Paul's letters and was not previously an organized religion and stayed disorganized. If Jesus had Jewish followers, then they might have been largely decoupled from the later Christian movement.*

When historians puzzle together pieces of scientific evidence to reconstruct history, they rely heavily on the interpretation of the evidence. Therefore, it is important to be skeptical about the credibility of sources, not just because there are incentives to forge history, but also that the motivations of an author influences the text and critical judgement is hindered by cultural baggage that comes with the later historical influence of the same text.

There is no more important person in the history of Christianity than the apostle Paul. This is likely because Paul claimed that gentiles do not have to perform circumcision in order to convert. There is no other historical source that discusses circumcision of Christians at the time. This could mean that the idea originates with Paul and all later sources are depending on Paul's teachings.

When people belonging to a particular movement within Christianity seek historical sources, they are likely to interpret them with the motivation of justifying their own movement in a historical context. Since such people often come from a background of organized religion, they might perceive the evidence as suggesting an organized form of religion.

Similarly, when Paul advocates his take on circumcision of gentiles, he talks about people gathering together as a sect. However, we do not have any historical evidence of a such sect besides Paul's letters. Paul might perceive gatherings as evidence of a sect, but the people gathering might be largely not consisting of devoted Christians. Paul is likely to brag up the numbers, exaggerate events which the reader has not directly witnesses themselves and claim close friendship with people who are in high status. From a such perspective, it can falsely give an impression that there is already an organized movement at the time of Paul's writings.

The biggest hint of a such situation is that there are no other sources of people who discuss circumcision of Christians besides Paul. The later sects seem to treat this topic as settled by Paul. This is the major problem with Paul, because if his influence can bring about a such great change, then it is possible to interpret the historical context of his writings as de facto origin of Christianity.

The references of Paul to historical people must be interpreted in the context of Paul's motivation of syncretizing Hellenistic culture with Jewish Apocalypticism. There is none evidence outside the letters that there is a concrete Christian sect within the general movement of both Hellenistic culture and Jewish Apocalypticism as widespread cultural phenomena. If Jesus had Jewish followers, then they might not consider themselves as part of the movement that Paul describes. The only reason one could claim this comes from Paul's letters.

Every later Christian sect claims their own origin and doctrine using Paul's letters and no other source. All historical evidence about an existing Jewish sect with Jesus as leader is based on the same source, which also happens to introduce new large reforms. Paul creates Christianity.