

Paul, Jesus, and The Relation of the Two
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It is not hard to make a case that no two single persons dominated early Christianity the way that Jesus and Paul did. For Jesus, it was his position as Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, his miracles, his proclamations of the kingdom of God, and ultimately, his death and resurrection. For Paul it was his ministry in Antioch and on his mission journeys, his position as an apostle to the Gentiles, and the writings attributed to him that have influenced centuries of Christian doctrine. David Chidester summed up their importance to early Christianity succinctly when he stated “Jesus might have been identified as the Christ, but Paul was the founder of Christianity.”¹ Yet their relationship, especially when examining their respective teachings, is not a simple one to describe. N.T. Wright, in his book *Paul*, summarized some of the perceived problems, stating:

The problem has been posed in terms of the apparent mismatch between the teaching of Jesus and Paul. One normal way of stating it goes like this: Jesus preached about God but Paul preached about Jesus ... Jesus announced the kingdom of God, Paul announced the Messiahship of Jesus ... Jesus called people to a simple gospel of repentance, belief and the practice of the Sermon on the Mount; Paul developed a complex theology of justification by faith, something Jesus never mentioned ... Some say that Jesus preached a wonderful universal message and that Paul scrunched it back into the small and distorting framework of his Jewish, especially rabbinic, mind. Others say that Jesus preached a pure Jewish message and that Paul falsified it by turning it into a Greek, philosophical and even anti-Jewish construct.²

With these supposed problems becoming apparent, it thus becomes important to examine why Paul and Jesus' messages differed, if they even differed at all.

Jesus In Romans

An interesting starting point when considering the relationship between Jesus and Paul's teachings is the book of Romans. Romans is particularly useful because the Roman Church had never

¹ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History*, (New York: HarperOne, 2000), 30.

² N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 154-155.

been visited by Paul during his missionary journeys and thus “had no memory of Paul's teaching ... [which] disallows one line of argument – that Paul need not have written much about Jesus because he had already shared his knowledge as part of his preaching and teaching.”³ Yet Romans is also interesting because, despite arguably being Paul's most theologically comprehensive writing, it contains “not one direct citation of Jesus' teaching.”⁴

Interestingly though, through some of Paul's references, we are able to create a basic understanding of what he believed himself to have held in common with the Roman Church regarding Jesus. First, we see Paul open the letter with a statement that establishes his Christology. This is a noted deviation from his customary greeting and was likely an attempt to “show that his Christology was consonant with that of his readers.”⁵ We also note from this greeting that Paul “assumed that the Romans had access to additional information about the Davidic descent and the resurrection.”⁶ This is particularly significant as “one can scarcely imagine anyone confessing these things about a person's significance without some sort of narrative context.”⁷ Further, we see in 3:21-26 reference to Jesus that is generally believed to come from a tradition external to Paul.⁸ Here, more notable conclusions on what was common knowledge to Paul and the Romans can be drawn. They are:

1. No explanation of redemption is needed because it is syntactically the means by which justification occurs⁹
2. The significance of Christ's death was construed in a violent, sacrificial manner implying Christ's execution and by not explicitly stating the means of execution though, Paul assumes a narrative context for the crucifixion¹⁰
3. By using language such as “put forth,” Paul assumes the reader to understand the death as God's

3 Leander E. Keck, “Jesus' in Romans,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (Autumn, 1983): 443.

4 Gerd Ludemann, *Paul: The Founder of Christianity*, (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), 209.

5 Keck, 449.

6 Keck, 449-450.

7 Keck, 450.

8 Keck, 450.

9 Keck, 450.

10 Keck, 450.

act, not explicitly needing a narrative to be intelligible but certainly implying a passion narrative¹¹

From Romans to Jesus Traditions

Through these brief points from the introduction to Romans and from 3:21-26 we can infer that there was an established tradition surrounding Jesus that Paul did acknowledge as reliable. It is hard to believe that Paul would have left so many details unexplained, or rather, assumed so many details, regarding the Roman knowledge of Christ had there not been established traditions which Paul both found to be true and knew had propagated into the world. Otherwise, Paul would likely have needed to expand into much greater detail regarding his understanding of Christ, his death, resurrection, redemption through him, and so forth. These allusions and assumptions can lead to the conclusion that Paul did indeed have concern for, and acceptable knowledge of, the historical Jesus and his life. Had he not had this concern, or knowledge of, then Paul would have had much greater freedom to write in his own theological leanings that would have been independent of Jesus' life.

Some who object to this position may cite 2 Corinthians 5:16 which states “So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once knew Christ in this way, we do so no longer.”¹² However, reading the passage in a manner that denies the importance of Christ's life on Earth is simply flawed. A reading such as this is “clearly a misconstrual and a misapplication ... Paul is not denying interest in the real-life Jesus ... What Paul rejects is a relation to Jesus this is limited to empirical, this-worldly cognition ... it is incorrect to say that the man Jesus was of no interest to him.”¹³

So what does this knowledge of a Jesus tradition(s) have to say about the difference in Paul and Jesus' teachings? One thought put forward by Patterson is to consider the variety of Jesus traditions that existed in early Christianity and how these diverged in some areas despite a common source.¹⁴ This is

¹¹ Keck, 450.

¹² 2 Corinthians 5:16 NIV.

¹³ Ludemann, 197.

¹⁴ Stephen J. Patterson, “Paul and the Jesus Tradition: It Is Time For Another Look,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 84 (Jan., 1991): 40.

one possible explanation as to why Paul would have placed differing emphasis on certain areas of Jesus' life and ministry depending on what traditions he had been exposed to. Patterson's thoughts here are not unreasonable, although some may take issue with his reliance on the Gospel of Thomas and sayings traditions of a similar vein, especially when he asserts that these traditions which some would consider heretical did indeed influenced Paul's thoughts.¹⁵

Perhaps just as good a conclusion to draw, if not better, is this: that Paul need not repeat Jesus' initial teachings as these Jesus traditions would have already propagated them. It's almost a naive, overly simplistic conclusion, but it's one that should make sense. We know the original apostles proclaimed Jesus' life, death, miracles,¹⁶ and had received instruction to relay everything Jesus had taught them.¹⁷ To think that these teachings would not have found their way into the various Jesus traditions is absurd. The traditions needed a source for their teachings and these original apostles would have been the primary source drawn upon. This allows fits well with what was noted in Romans, that is, that Paul made assumptions about the understanding the Roman Christians would have of Jesus because of tradition and narrative that had already reached them. Thus, to reiterate, he would not need to labouriously lay out his Christology, the life of Jesus, the meaning that arose from his life, and his teachings when establishing how he viewed Jesus. All Paul needed to do was allude to these established facts to establish that his thought was concurrent with that of the Romans and the teachings of Jesus they had already received.

Addressing Jesus' Jewish Message and Paul's Greek Message

This naive assumption can fail in the face of one criticism, and it is perhaps the greatest criticism levied against Paul when comparing his message to Jesus. That is, that Jesus preached an essentially Jewish message while Paul distorted it into a message suitable for Greeks, taking Christianity outside it's Jewish roots. This charge is especially important when considering Paul's

¹⁵ Patterson, 41.

¹⁶ Acts 2:22-36.

¹⁷ Matthew 28:18-20.

teachings on ethics in comparison to those of Jesus. Moffatt, while referencing Wrede, sums up this charge against Paul stating “‘Before him there was only a sect within Judaism itself; when he died, the Christian church ... was already in existence.’ Paul was unconscious of this change; nevertheless, it is argued he was responsible for it.”¹⁸ There are even accusations from some scholars that assert Jesus would have had an even superior Jewish education to that of Paul and his pharisaic upbringing.¹⁹

To be certain, Paul did appeal to Jesus' own words in certain instances in regards to ethics. One such example is 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 where he appeals to Christ's words regarding divorce.²⁰ However, it has nevertheless been noted that:

Jesus' ethic was inadequate as a moral guide for the church in a Hellenistic society. This point receives unambiguous support in 1 Cor 7:25, where Paul expresses disappointment that, “concerning those who are not married,” no word of the Lord is available to him. Not only that observation, but also the apostle's care to distinguish his own opinion from the charge of the Lord (1 Cor 7:12), demonstrate both the value and importance Paul could ascribe to the sayings of Jesus and his readiness to issue advice and commands on his own authority.²¹

The mention of Jesus' sayings is particularly important, especially given the previous assertion Paul was familiar with Jesus traditions. Wright phrased the question as “If Jesus had taught certain things, why shouldn't Paul have referred to them when they were relevant to his work, as they often were?”²² Wright's answer to this question offers one of the best insights into Paul's methods when teaching ethics. He states:

The key thing which emerges again and again in Paul's writings is that he wants to teach his churches not just how to behave, but *why* to behave like that ... Give someone

18 James Moffatt, “Paul and Jesus,” *The Biblical World* 32 (Sept., 1908): 169.

19 John G. Gager, “Scholarship as Moral Vision: David Flusser on Jesus, Paul, and the Birth of Christianity,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 95 (Winter, 2005): 65.

20 Ludemann, 199.

21 Ludemann, 208.

22 Wright, 160.

a hand-me-down ethical maxim and, provided they bow to its authority, they will steer a straight course on that subject alone. Teach someone to think through, from first principles, what it means to live ... in the power of the Spirit, and you equip them not only for that particular topic, but for every other question they may meet ... Only if we are bent on flattening Jesus and Paul out into 'teachers of religion and ethics' ... will we think otherwise.²³

In Wright's framework the need for a differing message, one that divides Jewish teaching and Greek teaching, is non-existent. In fact, Wright does not even make message to a Jewish-Greek divide in the message with his response. This is because they are the same message, they are just framed in different lights. The fact that Jesus and Paul's messages were brought forth by what appear to be different teaching styles does not preclude these messages from delivering the same principles.

While this settles the ethical portion of the equation, it may not be a totally satisfactory answer to the charge against Paul when considering how often Jesus, and how little Paul, spoke of the kingdom of God. Here, Wright once again offers valuable insight, stating:

Part of the answer must be that Jesus was addressing a Jewish world in which ... the notion that only God must be king, was one of the most exciting and dangerous slogans. People had died in recent memory because of this slogan and the attempt to put it into practice ... Paul knew all about that world, but it was not the world in which he was called to work. This does *not* mean that he swapped a Jewish message for a Gentile or Hellenistic one. Rather, he announced a still very Jewish message, namely, the message that Israel's crucified and risen Messiah was the true Lord of the world, to a world which was not telling, and living by, Jewish-style kingdom-of-God stories.²⁴

Here, Wright more explicitly address the Jewish-Greek divide, and yet here again, Wright states it was very much the same message. The only thing that differed was the style and context by which it was

²³ Wright, 160-161.

²⁴ Wright, 157-158.

delivered.

Of course, the entire notion that Paul had somehow lost his Jewish character while preaching his message is a stretch of the mind to begin with. Between his pharisaic background and intricate knowledge of Jewish scripture, which he did not disown in any way, to say Paul was anything but a Jew will cause problems for the one making the assertion. In relation to Jesus “despite all the differences, the two would have had things in common. Paul and Jesus were committed Jews, devoted to their God ... [who] shared this basic framework of religious convictions with most other Jews.”²⁵

The Cross and Paul

Wrights prior statement also alludes to another fact that cannot be ignored, that is, the centrality of Jesus' death and resurrection to Paul's message. Ludemann states “Paul appeals to Jesus' life and teachings when doing so suits his agenda, but the unchanging focus of his proclamation is Jesus' death and resurrection.”²⁶ While Ludemann uses this statement to frame Paul's lack of explicit reference to Jesus teachings in his letters, however, as we have seen, this lack of reference seems to merely be a stylistic preference of Paul's as the overall message was still very much the same.

Returning to the death and resurrection, the reference to the eminence this held in Paul's message emphasizes another previously mentioned fact, that Paul did indeed have a concern for the life that Jesus had lived. Whether from Jesus traditions he encountered or more personal instruction from other believers, Paul's message was rooted in who Jesus was and his actions while on Earth. To separate Jesus identity as Christ Messiah, his death and resurrection, and his teachings would not provide a complete picture of Jesus and Paul would have come into a definite struggle with other Christian leaders to defend his gospel had it been incomplete in any way. Considering he was offered the right hand of fellowship from James and the other apostles at the Jerusalem council²⁷ it is once again reasonable to assume Paul's teachings were in line with that of the other early Christians.

²⁵ Ludemann, 210.

²⁶ Ludemann, 198.

²⁷ Galatians 2:9.

Conclusion

Paul had a clear understanding of Jesus' life and ministry and thus would have been well aware of Jesus' teachings. In some instances, Paul was perhaps able to avoid explicit references to these teachings because they had been established by other Jesus traditions that had permeated into areas, other times we see Paul delivering a message that, while different in substance, is the same in essence. His context within a Hellenistic world would certainly necessitate a different means to communicating the message of Jesus, but given the support he had from his contemporaries there is no reason to believe this altered the message in a way that was unfaithful to Jesus teaching. This is, of course, all with the understanding that Paul's teaching needed their root in Jesus' life, his sayings (even if not explicitly appealed to), his place as Messiah and Christ, his death, and finally his resurrection. Without these focuses, Paul's message would have indeed been fundamentally different from what it was Jesus delivered to the world. As this was not the case, Paul would have indeed needed a comprehensive understanding and concurrence with Jesus' teachings in order that he may relay this message while preaching in order to ensure a completeness within his message.

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