

Paul of Tarsus remains a highly controversial and complicated figure for the early church and the message of Jesus. Some have postulated the idea that Paul did not believe that Jesus was a real person. Critics like David Fitzgerald, Robert Price and Richard Carrier have proposed that the Jesus Paul believed in was not a human Jesus. This tenet is based on some of the biographical and miracle stories found in the gospels that are absent in the Pauline epistles. These scholars have postulated that Paul and the other early Christians fashioned Jesus like some Hellenistic mystery gods. While many of the points raised by these scholars are warranted, recent interdisciplinary studies on oral and written culture, historical methodology and archaeological evidence weaken the claims made by those who deny that Paul believed in an actual human Jesus.

Most New Testament scholars would agree that Paul has very little to say about the words and teachings of Jesus, yet most acknowledge he was a contemporary of his in the first century. However, some scholars have denied this and claim that the Jesus that Paul mentioned did not exist. He died to defeat evil powers in a mythical realm. G.A Wells writes, "Paul's letters have no allusions to the parents of Jesus, let alone to the virgin birth. They give no time or indication of the time or place of his earthly existence" (Wells, 1999). Legendary Jesus theorists like Fitzgerald, Carrier, Doherty, and Price contend that Paul's statement in Gal 1:12 that he "received his revelations from the Lord" argues that Paul did not receive his preaching from the early followers of Jesus. Instead, Paul received his teaching from a spiritual message of Jesus that did not exist in the natural realm (Doherty, 1999). Furthermore, legendary Jesus theorists like Doherty and Carrier argue that if Paul was familiar with the Gospel traditions, he should have mentioned them explicitly in his epistles.

The arguments raised by legendary Jesus theorists like Doherty, Carrier, and Price have a basis to them, but can these points convincingly prove that Paul did not believe in a historical Jesus? First, Paul must be placed within the context of the early Christian movement to analyze these arguments. Paul never claimed to have known Jesus while he was alive, but instead, he was brought to faith in Jesus after seeing him on the road to Damascus. While some of his epistles are disputed, it is accepted by biblical scholarship that either Paul or a close scribe authored the letters attributed to him. Paul's letters comprise 13 of the 27 books that eventually became the canonized New Testament when the list was finalized towards the end of the 4th century (Bruce, 1988). Paul will often begin his letters by stressing his call to apostleship that God gave. His letters addressed different churches in the Mediterranean world, and many of them were designed to settle disputes that the early believers were having (Muir, 2008). This aspect of Paul's letters raises an important question: What evidence do we have that Paul accepted and preached the same message as the other apostles?

The dynamic between the figures of Paul, Peter and James has been an important issue related to Biblical scholarship for many years. Significantly, the epistle of James has been an issue for many biblical scholars. Some scholars see the Epistle of James and the Gospel of Matthew as a form of Christianity more sympathetic to Jewish law. In contrast, Paul and Luke represented a more Hellenistic version of Christianity that opposed Jewish law. The German reformer Martin Luther notoriously characterized James's epistle as "an epistle of straw" (Painter, 1997). His influence over German scholarship continued, and many scholars, such as F.C Baur, argued that Paul taught the gospel was freedom from the law. In contrast, James leads a Judaizing movement in early Christianity. In recent years, James Tabor and Robert Eisenmann promoted some of these views (Bock & Wallace, 2010).

I. Paul's status in the early Christian Movement

What can thus be adduced based on the dissimilarity between Paul and the other leaders of the early Christian movement? It is important to note that there is evidence of diversity in the New Testament. Taking an approach to harmonize all the differences would be challenging, if not impossible. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul argues for a justification by faith apart from observing the law's commandments. (Gal 3:10-12). However, James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, was more comfortable following the law. James believed that righteousness came by performing good deeds and said, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2). He also speaks of the "royal law", which scholars believe refers to the Leviticus commandments (Johnson, 2004). The differences in the thoughts of different authors of the New Testament cannot be denied.

It can be easy to see the differences between James and Paul. However, there are many points of similarity as scholars have continued to analyze. In Acts 15, we see that Paul and James agree about what new Gentile believers must do. Gentile believers would need to "abstain from sexual immorality; meat offered to idols and food polluted by idols". (Acts 15). Paul teaches these ideas elsewhere in his book, showing acceptance of the opinion that Gentiles should not need to follow the Jewish law. (Galatians 2). James. D.G Dunn has also pointed out how "it has been downplayed how Paul showed a very positive attitude toward the law" (Dunn, 2011). Paul also explains in Galatians 5:16 that, "In Christ never circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything but faith operating effectively through love". This statement is very close to Jesus's teaching about loving your neighbour as a way, to sum up, the commandments when he was asked which commandment was the greatest (Mark 12:29-31). The love command is evidence of continuity between Jesus and Paul's teachings on the law, and these teachings are related to James's use of the "royal law" in his epistle. Since scholars believe James's usage of the term

"Royal Law" is related to Leviticus 19, this also relates to the "command to love" in Lev 19:18 (Johnson, 2004).

The episode in Gal 2:11-14 has been baffling for many historians of the early Christian movement. In this event, Paul criticizes Peter for his decision to try to force Gentile believers to follow the Jewish law while he did not, even as a Jew himself. Paul's willingness to critique Peter's hypocrisy reveals two essential details for identifying his place in the early Christian movement. He identifies the "circumcision party" as the delegate sent by James, the leader of the Jerusalem church (Painter, 1997). His identification with James as a "pillar" of the faith shows his connection to James and the other early leaders of the Christian movement (Gal 1:8). Second, this event is specifically significant with the historical criteria of embarrassment applied to it. This criterion argues that any story element potentially harming a figure's cause or purpose is likely authentic because such material could be embarrassing (Johnson, 1997). If Paul's teaching about Jesus were not similar to the other disciples, it would not be very reasonable for him to willfully tell a story of him opposing a significant figure in the early Christian movement. However, the admittance of his criticism of Peter's failure to uphold his established standards would be detrimental to his cause if Paul was trying to create a new religion, not in alignment with the other apostles. Second, this pericope shows that Paul is honouring the tradition established by James and Peter at the Jerusalem council, as mirrored in Acts 15, which suggests that Gentiles need not follow the Jewish law.

II. Oral History and the Jesus Tradition in Paul

To what place was or was Paul not familiar with the oral tradition about the sayings and deeds of Jesus before the composition of his letters and the other epistles in the New Testament canon? Is it possible that the original sayings of Jesus were lost in transmission, which gave Paul

time to corrupt the message of Christ by inserting themes from the Greek mystery religions? While there remain debates amongst scholars about the level of literacy in first-century Palestine, similar to other stories in the ancient world, the traditions of Jesus were first passed on as oral traditions, and then the authors composed the gospels.

In the early 20th century, three German scholars, Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Schmidt, and Martin Dibelius, advanced the "Gospel Form Criticism" field. Form criticism sought to identify the different forms of the oral traditions about Jesus, present in the gospel traditions, and the diverse literary forms in the Gospels. For Rudolf Bultman, the traditions about Jesus were "unsophisticated traditions created by the simple masses responding to sociological needs and operating under the same laws as other folklore traditions (Bultman & Kundzins, 1962).

These views from the early 20th century have become problematic based on new and other emerging interdisciplinary studies on orality involving ethnographic fieldwork and folklore. Fieldwork studies have recently discovered the existence of long oral epics in India, Africa and Oceania traditions. These studies undercut the form-criticism notion that oral history cannot have a coherent narrative. Folklorist Laurie Honko has noted that "the existence of long oral epics can no longer be denied" (Honko, 2011). James D.G Dunn analyzed the evidence of oral transmission from Middle Eastern villages and thus explains that the rules of oral tradition are "The combination of fixity and flexibility of stability and diversity of the same yet different" (Dunn, 2005). Alan Dundes, a folklorist, explains that "multiple existences are a salient characteristic of folklore" (Dundes, 2000).

What can these interdisciplinary studies on folklore and ethnographic fieldwork tell us about the existence of the oral tradition behind the early Christian movement? The concept of multiple existing sayings in folklore is related to the criteria known as "multiple attestations"

related to historical research into Jesus and the Gospels. (Johnson, 1997). This criterion stipulates that the more frequent a saying or deed of Jesus appears, the more likely it is to return to the early Jesus tradition. Within the synoptic tradition, many sayings of Jesus are nearly identical, with changes in the wording and syntax depending on the particular gospel (Dunn, 2005). This agreement between the three synoptic gospels has led many scholars to conclude that the writers of these gospels drew from a common source labelled "Q". Albert Lord, a folklorist and professor of comparative literature, commented on this similarity by stating, "In traditional oral literature some passages may become reasonably stable verbally in the usage of a single narrator or even perhaps a group of narrators" (Outler et al., 1988). Lord's studies on Yugoslavian singers reveal that poets and bards rarely sing or memorize the same song exactly but retain the same message and verbal core of the transmission.

In addition to the variation of the sayings of Jesus, it is crucial to analyze how a specific historical context could have influenced the oral tradition behind that variation. Scholars argue that the Gospel of Matthew was written for a Jewish community in Antioch or Palestine (Harrington, 2007). Matthew's portrayal of Jesus teaching on observing the Jewish law and the alleged fulfilment of Jewish scripture is evidence of this belief. In Matthew's account of the debate about traditions, Jesus is recorded to state that "whatever comes out of a person's mouth will defile them, not what goes into one's mouth".

What can different historical contexts and oral traditions between the canonical gospels tell us about Paul and his connection or disconnection to the early oral Jesus tradition? Despite lacking explicit references to the life and teachings of Christ, many scholars have postulated that various sayings are alluded to in the writings of Paul. Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd write, "Paul uses several vivid and distinctive and apocalyptic images similar to eschatological

teachings found in the Gospels" (Eddy & Boyd, 2007). In addition to these similar images that Paul uses in his letters, there are specific allusions that Paul makes to the teachings of Jesus. The epistle of James has a similar pattern where some of Jesus's sayings in the synoptic gospels echo the sayings of Jesus in the epistle (Painter, 1997).

Another issue that some Jesus mythicists have downplayed is the significance of the 1st Corinthians 15:3 creed. Scholars have dated this creed to within two years of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Paul says he received this from the other followers of Jesus. (Garland, 2003). The allusions to scripture in James and Paul and the early creed Paul received suggest that these two prominent figures in the early church were familiar with the oral traditions of Jesus. It is also essential to understand that the historical context of Paul's letters differs from other writings in the New Testament. Paul's letters were written to specific Christian communities dealing with issues reported back to Paul (Botha & Rhodes, 2012).

In antiquity, besides just reading, ancient texts were to be recited, emphasizing oral performance and memory. This aspect of oral communication is essential because it is crucial to establish Paul's phrases and reception within an oral culture. Applying the Homeric scholar John Miles Foley's "Traditional Referentiality" concept to the world of Pauline churches allows an understanding of how church members received Paul's message. Foley explains that traditional referentiality involves "invoking of a larger and more echoic context than the text itself". (Foley, 1999). This concept could allow the readers to understand the clichés, proverbs and formulaic language about the Hebrew Bible that Paul applied to Jesus in his letters. Therefore, when Paul mentions Jesus in his letters, he most likely understands that the early Christian communities have heard about Jesus due to the oral traditions passed down. That he does not mention the

virgin birth or some particular sayings of Jesus later found in the gospels is not conclusive proof that Paul believed in a mythical Jesus.

III. Paul and the Mystery Religions

Another aspect of the theory that Paul did not believe in a historical Jesus is related to the Hellenistic mystery religions that existed before the advent of Christianity. Critics contend that Judaism had become heavily inflated with Greek ideas in the first century, and it could be highly possible that Paul borrowed some of his ideas from Greek religions. Critics point to the alleged parallels between Christianity and the mystery religions to argue that Paul believed in a Jesus who existed long ago in a celestial realm. Richard Carrier writes, "I think it is more likely that Jesus began in the Christian mind as a celestial being believed or claimed to be revealing divine truths through revelations" (Carrier, 2014). Like Carrier, Robert Price thus believes the similarities between some of the stories in Greco-Roman mystery religions are too similar to be a coincidence (Price et al., 2009). David Fitzgerald contends, "Instead, there are abundant indications that its origins are tied to the pagan mystery faiths" (Tarico, 2017).

The first question to analyze the situation is to locate Paul within the context of first-century Palestine. Is it probable that a former Pharisee and a man who described himself as "zealous for the law" (Acts 22:3) would borrow or adapt Greek religious themes into Christianity? To what extent foreigners influenced first-century Palestine is crucial for examining if foreign influences could have influenced Paul's thought. Martin Hengel's study, *Judaism and Hellenism* in 1966, laid the case for significant Hellenistic influences as early as the third century before Jesus. Hengel proposed that Greek educational schools, Greek writing and the proximity of Gentile cities to Jewish cities prove that Jews in the first century were highly susceptible to Greek influence (Hengel, 1966).

While Hengel's study provided evidence of Greek culture in first-century Palestine, his analysis suffered a few limitations. The evidence he examined mainly investigated the influence of Greek culture concerning lifestyle and cultural practices; it did not provide succinct proof that the Jews would likely embrace the religious views of the Greeks. Scholars now believe Greek writing on inscriptions and ossuaries tells us only about the knowledge of Greek that foreigners knew. Joseph Fitzmeyer explains, "These inscriptions tell us about the use of Greek by foreigners, and they say little about its use by Jews" (Feldman, 1988). Also, due to the Aramaic sayings of Jesus, The Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic texts, most scholars still accept that Aramaic, not Greek, was the "lingua franca" or common language of the time (Chauncey, 2005). The upper class of society primarily used Greek, and the number of Jews who knew it was small. Feldman has also noted that Jewish and Greek thinkers often lived close to each other and ignored them by not mentioning them in their writings (Feldman, 1988). Furthermore, the existence of Greek educational systems that Jews may have participated in is not conclusive evidence that Jews were open to modifying their religious views.

The second issue about the Greek mystery religions is the alleged parallels between the mystery cults and the story of Jesus, as told by Paul. Critics contend that there are too many similarities between the Greek mystery religions and the early Jesus movement for it to be only accidental. Despite not having strong evidence that Jews in the first century adopted foreign religious influences, is it possible that Paul was an anomaly and stole some of these foreign ideas and incorporated them into Christianity?

The first issue is to examine the "mystery" religions of the Greco-Roman world. Scholarship has now discovered that the nature of Greek mystery religions was mistaken in the past. These religions were not as widespread as initially thought, and many did not accept many

converts. Some religions were practised privately and did not allow outsiders to join the faith (Angus, 2013). Also, many mystery religions were prone to keep silent about their beliefs, which was very different from the public proclamation of Jesus by Paul (Clauss, 2017).

Secondly, the alleged parallels between the mystery religions and Christianity are not precisely strong, and the similarity evidence seems vague, problematic, or highly speculative. Critics have read too much into the parallels, examined an alleged parallel, and read Christian terminology. One example comes with the resurrection. Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy have argued that pre-Christian gods like Attis and Adonis were killed and resurrected like Jesus (Freke & Gandy, 2001). However, scholars have denounced the views of Freke and Gandy as evidence has shown that the resurrection of many of these gods was based on the annual vegetation cycle and not related to the Christian story of Jesus's resurrection. Another example is Dionysius's birth as the result of a mortal woman's sexual union with a god, which is not a clear parallel to the virgin birth of Christ (Mettinger, 2001). Secondly, archaeological evidence shows that these cults all postdate Christianity, so the chance that Paul could have stolen its ideas is highly unlikely (Clauss, 2017).

For some critics, the Roman cult of Mithras is the source of Paul's message about Jesus. Payam Nabaraz (2005) contends, "The person that stood at the head of this process of systematic assimilation of Mithraism was Paul of Tarsus." Nabaraz believes that the parallels between Mithraic thought and Paul's are too similar, and therefore, Paul copied these ideas from Mithraism. He also argues that "Mithras was born of a virgin". His claims are another example of reading parallels into Christian theology. Archaeological evidence has revealed that Mithras came to life by being brought up from a rock. This birth narrative is hardly similar to the virgin birth of Christ, and it is an example of Christian theology read into a different context (Clauss,

2017). Nabaraz (2005) also believes that the "armour of God" images that Paul uses in Ephesians 6:7-10 are an example of Paul borrowing Mithraic warrior themes and proof that his thought deviated from the peaceful message of Christ. This argument seems highly strained, ignoring the metaphors Paul uses in his letters and the overall peaceful messages conveyed (Dunn, 2006).

Scholars believe the early Christian movement accepted him despite some differences between Paul and the other early Christians. His letters suggest a familiarity with the oral tradition behind the gospels. The content of his letters also strongly suggests that he believed Jesus was a real person. Recent scholarship on the Greco-Roman mystery religions and archaeology has determined that it is highly unlikely that these cults influenced Christianity. A first-century Jew like Paul would not likely steal ideas from foreign influences when there is no evidence that Jews were influenced in religious matters.

Works Cited

- Angus, S. (2013). *The Mystery Religions and Christianity*. Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, LLC.
- Bock, D. L., & Wallace, D. B. (2010). *Dethroning Jesus*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Thomas Nelson.
- Botha, P. J. J., & Rhoads, D. (2012). *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Adfo Books.
- Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Canon of Scripture*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.
- Bultmann, R. K., & Kundzinš, K. (1962). *Form Criticism*. New York, New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Carrier, R. (2014a, August 3). Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt: Should We Still Be Looking for a Historical Jesus? Retrieved from <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/08/car388028.shtml>
- Carrier, R. (2014b, August 12). The Bible and Interpretation - Why We Might Have Reason for Doubt: Should We Still Be Looking for a Historical Jesus? Retrieved April 16, 2020, from <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/08/car388028.shtml#sdfootnote1sym>
- Chancey, M. (2005). *Greco-Roman Culture and the Galilee of Jesus* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Book 134) ed., Vol. 134). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Clauss, M. (2017). *The Roman Cult of Mithras*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.
- Doherty, E. (1999). *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?* Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Humanist Publications.
- Dundes, A. (2000). *Holy Writ as Oral Lit*. New York, United States: Macmillan Publishers.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (2006). *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing.
- Dunn, J. D. G. (2011). *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing.

Dunn, J. D. G., Evans, C., & McDonald, L. (2005). *A New Perspective on Jesus*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing.

Eddy, P. R., & Boyd, G. A. (2007). *The Jesus Legend*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing.

Feldman, L. (1986). *How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*. Hebrew Union College Annual, 57, 83–111. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23507693>

Freke, T., & Gandy, P. (2001). *The Jesus Mysteries*. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press.

Garland, D. E. (2003). *First Corinthians*. Zaltbommel, Netherlands: Van Haren Publishing.

Harrington, D. J. (2007). *Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of Matthew* (Vol. 1). Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press.

Johnson, L. T. (1997). *The Real Jesus*. HarperSanFrancisco, CA: HarperCollins.

Johnson, L. T. (2004). *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.

Luther H. (Associate Professor of Religion Martin, University of Vermont), Martin, P. R. C. D. L. H., Professor of Religion and Chairman of the Department Luther H Martin, & H, L. (1987). *Hellenistic Religions*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

Muir, J. (2008). *Life and Letters in the Ancient Greek World*. Abingdon, United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.

Nabarz, P. (2005). *The Mysteries of Mithras*. Vermont, United States: Inner Traditions/Bear.

Outler, A. C., Lord, A., Kennedy, G., Kulberman, L. H., Frye, R., & Fitzmeyer, J. (1978). *The Relationship Among the Gospels* (William Walker Jr. ed.). San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press.

Painter, J. (1997). *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

Price, R. M., Crossan, J. D., Johnson, L. T., Dunn, J. D. G., & Bock, D. L. (2009). *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

Tarico, V., & Fitzgerald, D. (2017, April 13). History Writer: Jesus Probably Never Existed. Here's Why. Retrieved April 10, 2020, from <https://www.rawstory.com/2017/04/history-writer-jesus-probably-never-existed-heres-why-christianity-emerged-anyway/>

Wells, G. A. (1999). *The Jesus Myth*. Chicago, Illinois: Open Court.