

If We Only Had Paul, What Would We Know of Jesus?

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Abstract

(A) The Issue

Paul had no contact with the Jesus of history. He never met him and never heard him preach. Moreover, Paul stresses he had minimal contact with Jesus' successors – the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem. From Paul's letters we know he was shadowed throughout his missionary journeys by emissaries from Jerusalem who were convinced that Paul was spreading a deviant message. In addition, Paul rarely quotes or refers to Jesus' teachings when formulating or defending his own point of view against adversaries. In light of these considerations the question is posed: if we only had Paul, what would we know of Jesus? More broadly, what is the connection between Paul's religion and that of Jesus?

(B) The Approach

Four contexts are examined.

1. References to Jesus' life in the writings of Paul. Five are found. Jesus was a Jewish male, human and a descendant of King David who was crucified and died. No mention is made of Jesus' birth, upbringing, extended family or movements in the Galilee and Judea including Jerusalem. No mention is made of the circumstances leading to his crucifixion..

2. Direct references to Jesus' teachings. Six passages are examined. We find that there is only one direct reference to a known saying of Jesus; two to unknown sayings; one to a disputed saying; one to an unlikely teaching and one that contradicts what the gospels indicate Jesus said. There are no references to Jesus' apocalyptic orientation, his parables, miracles, teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, or Lord's Prayer.

3. Allusions to Jesus' teachings in Paul. Four passages are examined. Two are found to be likely allusions; one to allude to a common source behind Paul and Jesus' teachings; and one represents an unlikely allusion.

4. Passages where Paul could have referred to Jesus' teachings when making his own pronouncements on topics Jesus himself had addressed. Two passages are examined. In both instances, Paul is silent. He does not use the teachings of Jesus to bolster his own position or to refute his opponents even when under attack.

(C) The Conclusion

It is concluded that there is only a slim connection between the teachings of Paul and those of the Jesus of history. Either the life and teachings and teachings of the historical Jesus were not of interest to Paul or else they were simply not known. His focus is on the Christ figure, the post-death and post-resurrected Jesus, who communicates directly with him and through him. This reinforces the view that Paul was the founder of a separate religion, one about the Christ, not one centered upon the teachings and mission of Jesus.

1. The Question

If we only had Paul, what would we know of Jesus?

This is not an unreasonable question in light of what we know of the connections between Paul and Jesus.

For one thing, there was no contact between Paul and Jesus. Paul never met Jesus, the historical Jesus of Nazareth who taught in the Galilee, came to Jerusalem around 30 CE and who met his death there. Paul was not one of the original disciples. Paul never heard Jesus teach and was not present at his crucifixion.

Secondly, after his remarkable experience near Damascus, Paul stresses that he had minimal contact with Jesus' successors, the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem. This movement included James (the brother of Jesus) as well as his family members and disciples. These were the people who knew Jesus best. They had been with him throughout his ministry, heard him speak and were present at his death. They knew his character, values, teachings and practices. Yet, according to Paul himself, years went by before he conferred with them, and then only briefly.¹ This represents exceptionally strange behavior for someone who was supposed to be a recent convert. That alone should give us pause and prompt us to wonder if there was more to the Paul-Jesus connection than that of faithful disciple to the master.

The Jesus Movement constantly shadowed Paul in his journeys throughout the Diaspora – modern Turkey, Greece and Italy. Paul refers to them as “rival teachers” or as “super apostles,” people who held quite different views on the correct teachings and practices of the new movement and who regarded Paul’s message as deviant. These included Jesus’ original disciples and his family members. Many of Paul’s letters refer to this opposition.² In particular, Paul deviated from the members of the Jesus Movement in his failure to observe Torah, the Jewish law. The leaders in Jerusalem worshipped in the Temple, kept the Sabbath, observed the dietary laws and practiced circumcision. So, too, did Jesus. In all respects, they were Jewish. Paul, on the other hand, advocated abandoning Torah observance, for Jews as well as for Gentiles.³

Finally – and this is most remarkable – Paul says very little about the historical Jesus. He rarely quotes or refers to Jesus at all in the formulation of his own position and pronouncements. Even when advancing positions on topics Jesus had addressed, Paul is silent. This silence is hardly the practice one would expect of a devoted student of a rabbi.

In light of these considerations, we ask, if we only had Paul, what would we know about Jesus? The answer to this question should shed light on the broader question, what was the linkage between Paul’s movement and Jesus’?

We have seven genuine letters of Paul. The Pauline authorship of three additional writings is disputed by scholars and three others are most likely pseudonymous, that is, falsely attributed to Paul.⁴

Letters of Paul

Letters of Paul		
undisputed Pauline Epistles	Deutero-Pauline (possibly pseudonymous)	Pastoral Epistles (probably pseudonymous)
Romans 1 Corinthians 2 Corinthians Galatians Philippians 1 Thessalonians Philemon	Ephesians Colossians 2 Thessalonians	1 Timothy 2 Timothy Titus

[source: Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 287]

This paper will examine four questions:

1. Does Paul refer to Jesus' life?
2. Does Paul refer to Jesus' teachings directly?⁵
3. Does Paul allude to Jesus' teachings?
4. Does Paul refer to Jesus' teachings when making his own pronouncements on topics Jesus himself had addressed?

In all instances we will confine our analysis to the undisputed Pauline epistles.

Note that we cannot uncritically assume that everyone in Paul's time knew what we know of Jesus from the Gospels. We might get this impression from the way the New Testament is organized: first the four canonical gospels, then the Book of Acts, and then the letters of Paul. This structure is not accidental. It nestles Paul well within the cradle of the Gospels and that is what we are supposed to think. But historically this was not the case. Paul came first; then the Gospels. They were written well after the death of Paul in the mid 60's. Scholars typically date Mark to around 70; Matthew to the 80's; John to the 90's and Luke anywhere from the 90's to the 120's CE – all forty to ninety years after the death of Jesus. So we cannot assume that what we know of the life and teachings of Jesus corresponds to what Paul or his congregants knew of Jesus.⁶

The paper will argue that if we only had Paul, we would know very little of the teachings or practices of the Jesus of history. Paul's focus was not on the life and teachings of Jesus but, as we will discover, his interests lay elsewhere. These findings underscore the importance of viewing Paul's Christ cult as a separate religion from that of Jesus and his followers, the Jesus Movement under James in Jerusalem.

2. Does Paul refer to Jesus' Life?

Paul provides us with only five pieces of information about the historical Jesus.

Information from Paul about Jesus' Life

1. he was “*born of a woman*” (Galatians 4:4)
2. he was Jewish, “*born under the law*” (Galatians 4:4)
3. a biological descendant of David (Romans 1:3)
4. he had brothers (1 Corinthians 9:5)
5. he was crucified (1 Corinthians 1:22) and he died (1 Corinthians 15:3)

First of all, he mentions that Jesus was “born of a woman.” That’s hardly startling! Secondly, he tells us that Jesus was Jewish and, as such, was subject to the Torah. Thirdly, that he was a biological descendant of David. Fourthly, we are told that he had brothers. James is mentioned on occasion as, indeed, are “*the brothers of the Lord.*” The latter appear to be active in the Diaspora and are accompanied, unlike Paul, with their wives (1 Corinthians 9:5). Fifthly, he also tells us that Jesus was crucified and he died.

That’s all we are told. So, for Paul, Jesus is a Jewish male, human and a descendant of King David. His writings, however, fail to tell us anything about other aspects of Jesus’ life. For example, no mention is made of the circumstances of his birth, his upbringing, or the geographical location of Jesus’ ministry. Paul makes no mention of Jesus’ extended family other than his brothers – his parents, sisters, cousin or close associates such as Mary Magdalene who helped fund the Jesus mission.⁷ Nor does he trace Jesus’ movements from the Galilee to Jerusalem, the events of the dramatic last week in Jerusalem or the circumstances surrounding his death.

What Paul does not tell us about Jesus' Life

- the circumstances of his birth
- the geographical location of Jesus’ ministry
- other family members – parents, sisters, cousin (John the Baptist), close associates such as Mary Magdalene
- his movement from Galilee to Jerusalem
- his last week in Jerusalem
- circumstances surrounding his death

So: does Paul refer to Jesus’ life? The verdict is, no, not really. Paul is not interested in what the Jesus of history did or went. He does not share the same agenda as later gospel writers.

3. Does Paul refer to Jesus' Teachings Directly?⁸

It would be natural for us to expect that Paul would refer to the teachings of Jesus in promoting his new religion. Contemporary Christian preachers do that all the time. They refer to the words of Jesus to bolster their positions on current matters pertaining to Christian ethics or to establish a connection between their ideas and those of the founder. Even more importantly, since Paul's credibility and message were constantly in question, we would expect him to authenticate his teachings by reference to the words of Jesus. Paul, however, does not typically do this.

There are six possible direct references to the teachings of Jesus – instances, that is, where Paul explicitly invokes Jesus in presenting his views. Not all of these correspond to what we know from other sources Jesus said.

(a) Sexual Morality

The first one concerns sexual morality. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians:

[S1] *“For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things.”* (1 Thessalonians 4:2-6)⁹

The passage is attributed to *“the Lord Jesus.”* It expresses the view that people abstain from unchastity and that they take a wife, honoring that commitment. Unchastity or *porneia* (πορνεία) refers to a wide range of illicit sexual activities including fornication (casual sex) and adultery. Paul's view appears to be that marriage is preferable to unchaste behavior.

This passage, however, does not correspond easily to any known teaching of Jesus. Presumably Jesus would share the view that people should avoid unchaste behavior but there is no direct parallel for Paul's motive for marriage in the teachings of Jesus in the gospels. Jesus does mention unchastity, however, but in the context of a different topic, that of divorce.

Paul	Jesus
[S1] “For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from <u>unchastity</u> (πορνεία); that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things.” (1 Thessalonians 4:2-6)	“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, <u>except for unchastity</u> (πορνεία), and marries another, commits adultery.” (Matthew 19:9)

According to this passage, Jesus permits the divorce of a wife by a husband in one instance only, namely that of a wife who engages in unchaste behavior.¹⁰ But the context differs from that of Paul – Jesus addresses the topic of divorce rather than the motive or rationale for marriage.

The verdict? This does not correspond to any known teaching of the historical Jesus as reported in the gospels. It is, however, likely Jesus would have agreed with Paul’s position that unchaste behavior is wrong.

(b) Divorce and Remarriage

Another issue concerns divorce and remarriage. Paul advises married couples as follows: *“to the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) – and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”* (1 Corinthians 7:10, 11).

Paul appeals explicitly to “the Lord” and advocates no divorce. In the case of a separation of the wife from her husband, she should either remain single or be reconciled to her husband. So, while separation is permissible, it is regrettable and does not permit divorce or remarriage.

This is not what Jesus said, at least as presented in the later Gospel of Matthew: *“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”* (Matthew 5:32). Here divorce is permitted on the grounds of female unchastity. Moreover, a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Paul	Matthew
[S2] <i>“to the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) – and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”</i> (1 Corinthians 7:10,11).	<i>“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”</i> (Matthew 5:32).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no divorce • if wife separates, she should remain single or else reconcile with her husband 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • divorce permitted only on the ground of female unchastity • a man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. • nothing is said about divorce in the circumstance of male unchastity.

So the verdict here has to be: Paul contradicts Jesus’ teaching with respect to divorce. It is, in fact, a harsher judgment.

(c) The Fate of the Deceased

A pressing problem within the early Pauline community had to do with the fate of members who have died. Paul addresses this important concern by prefacing it with “for this we declare to you by the word of the Lord.”¹¹ Then he goes on to discuss what happens when the Lord reappears (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17). When this event occurs, those who are alive at that time will be transformed; those who are dead will rise.

This teaching is attributed to “the word of the Lord.” It is not evident, however, in any of the canonical gospels.

Paul	Canonical Gospels
[S3] ‘For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord.’ (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17)	---

The death of members of the movement prior to the coming of the Kingdom was not an issue for Jesus. And for good reason. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God was so near that he is reported to have said, “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 9:1). He fully expected that God’s Kingdom would arrive within his lifetime and that of his audience. He may even have thought that, as God’s messiah, he would have a hand in bringing it about. For Paul, however, writing some fifteen or twenty years after the death of Jesus and faced with congregants dying, this was an important problem that he had to address.

Verdict: this saying [S3] does not correspond to any known saying of Jesus.

(d) Validity of Kashrut (Jewish Dietary laws)

A fourth matter concerns the observance of Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut). Paul addresses this in his Letter to the Romans and introduces his point of view as follows: “I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.” (Romans 14:14). The attribution here is to “the Lord Jesus,” but the phraseology is significant – he knows “in the Lord Jesus,” not “from” Jesus. This represents terminology Paul typically uses for his mystical experience of the Christ.

Paul cautions members of the new movement not to offend those who wish to abide by the ancient dietary laws. His point, however, is pastoral, that is, not to give offense to

people holding a different view. It is not as if that the laws of kashrut still apply. For Paul, they don't. As he made clear in his letter to the Galatians, Torah, including the dietary laws, is no longer valid.

In this Paul's views parallel those of the later gospel of Mark (Mark 7: 18,19) which portrays Jesus as declaring all things clean.

Matthew, however, using Mark as a base for his writing, treats Mark's explanatory comment differently (see below). In addition, according to Matthew, Jesus did not abolish any aspect of Torah, dietary laws included (Matthew 15:16- 18) (see below). It is on this basis that he omits Mark's interpretive comment about Jesus abolishing the dietary laws.

Paul	Mark	Matthew
[S4] "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (Romans 14:14)	"And he said to them [his disciples], 'Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a man from outside cannot defile him, since it enters, not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on?' <u>(Thus he declared all foods clean)</u> . (Mark 7:18, 19)	"And he said, 'Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach, and so passes on? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man.'" (Matthew 15:16-18) <i>(Thus he declared all foods clean). This is omitted in Matthew's editing.</i>
		Note also: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." (Matthew 5:17, 18)

Like Matthew, members of the Jesus Movement under James in Jerusalem upheld Torah observance as did Paul's rival teachers in the Diaspora.

So we have a dispute in our sources: Mark has Jesus deny the dietary laws; Paul says he is "persuaded in the Lord Jesus" that they are null and void. However, Matthew, James (Jesus' brother), the Jesus Movement generally and Paul's rival teachers uphold them.¹² Hence we will generously categorize this saying as a disputed teaching of Jesus although the practice of the Jesus Movement and James in keeping Torah would argue that Jesus did the same, including the dietary laws.

(e) Remuneration for Preaching

A fifth matter concerns the right of a teacher to receive payment. Paul cites the example of the Temple priests who share in the offerings made by people to God. Thus they gain sustenance from Temple service. "In the same way," Paul goes on to add, "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:14).

So Paul attributes this saying directly to the “*Lord*.” It parallels a saying of Jesus preserved in the gospel of Luke that “*the worker deserves his wages*” (Luke 10:7) This was uttered in the context of Jesus sending forth seventy followers as an advance guard, into towns and villages he intended to visit. He encouraged them not to take provisions with them, but to accept food and drink from people they would encounter along the way. Thus by ‘worker’ Jesus means a teacher.

Paul	Luke
[S5] “In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14)	“the worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7)

Verdict: selection S5 corresponds to a known saying of Jesus.

(f) The Eucharist

Paul prefaces the following teaching by saying that this is what he had received “from the Lord” and had passed on to them.

“...that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-27) Here Paul equates ‘bread’ with ‘body of the Lord’ and ‘wine’ with the ‘blood of the Lord.’

The canonical gospels, written after Paul and probably with his views of the Eucharist in mind, support this contention. Matthew, for instance, equates the cup of wine with Jesus’ blood: “*this is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:28). The Gospel of John also equates wine with blood – “*he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him*” (John 6:56).

It is highly unlikely that the Jesus of history said anything of the sort, however, especially equating the cup of wine with his blood and encouraging his followers to drink blood.¹³ Jewish prohibitions against the drinking of blood were strict and clear. As the book of Leviticus says, “*If anyone of the house of Israel or of the aliens who reside among them eats any blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut that person off from the people...Therefore I have said to the people of Israel: No person among you shall eat blood, nor shall any alien who resides among you eat blood.*” (Leviticus 17:10-12). If Jesus had said anything of the sort, so clearly contrary to a biblical injunction, it would have sparked furious outrage – perhaps even civil unrest or

Jesus' immediate death.¹⁴ So what Paul attributes to Jesus is not likely to have been made by any Jewish teacher.

Moreover, the Jewish method of slaughtering animals ensures that no blood remains in the meat to be consumed.

Secondly, we have an alternate account of the communal meal of the new movement and it is significantly different from the ritual that Paul describes. The Didache, a late 1st century work, preserves an account of the early Christian thanksgiving meal, one that corresponds to Jewish Sabbath evening prayers. It likely reflects the practices of the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem under James and perhaps even the Jewish Christian group for whom the Gospel of Matthew was written.

There are three significant differences between the Didache and Paul's account. First of all, this meal begins with a blessing over wine and then over bread, unlike Paul's account which has the reverse order. Secondly, it does not equate the wine with blood or the bread with body. Thirdly, the ceremony is not one that commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus but rather his person, his life and his teaching. The communal meal in the Didache provides a very different emphasis.

In Jewish prayer, the wine is blessed as follows: *"Blessed are you, O Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, who brings forth the fruit of the vine."* It's a thanksgiving for the means of enjoyment – the wine. In the Didache, the prayer is similar but builds upon a metaphorical meaning of the vine. The cup of wine is blessed as follows – *"We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the holy Vine of thy servant David, which thou has made known to us through thy servant Jesus."*¹⁵ The wine is the Vine of David, the new community.

In the Jewish prayer, bread is blessed as follows: *"Blessed are you, O Lord our God, sovereign of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."* Here bread is a symbol of life, that which comes from the inanimate and which gives and sustains life. In the Didache, the bread is blessed – *"We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge that thou has made known to us through thy servant, Jesus."*¹⁶ The bread symbolizes life. Both prayers build upon traditional Jewish models.

<i>Paul</i>	<i>the Didache</i>
<p>[S6] "...that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread and</p>	<p>"We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the holy Vine of thy servant David, which thou has made known to us through thy servant Jesus." ➤ Wine = the Vine of David, the new community.</p> <p>"We give thanks to thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge that thou has made known to us through thy servant, Jesus."</p>

drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:23-27) ➤ Bread = body of Jesus ➤ Wine = blood of Jesus	➤ Bread = life.
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Verdict: Paul’s view of the Eucharist is unlikely to have been uttered by the Jesus of history. Shared by members of the Jesus Movement, the version of the communal meal preserved in The Didache more likely reflects the tradition of Jesus than does Paul’s.

Summary: Direct References by Paul to Teachings of Jesus

As the following chart indicates, we have direct references to one teaching for which we have parallels; two unknown teachings, one disputed one; one unlikely saying and one contradicted saying.

Direct References to Sayings attributed to Jesus

known sayings	• remuneration for preaching [S5]
Unknown sayings	• sexual morality [S1] • fate of the deceased [S3]
Disputed sayings	• Validity of Kashrut [S4]
unlikely sayings	• Eucharist [S6]
Contradicted sayings	• Divorce [S2]

The overall verdict: Paul pays scant attention to the teachings of Jesus.

3. Does Paul Allude to Jesus’ Teachings?

There are three possible allusions to the teachings of Jesus, that is, vague references where Paul may be referring to the teachings of Jesus but where he does not attribute these positions directly to him. In fact, he may be quoting others or drawing on the same reservoir of biblical images that Jesus himself used. These allusions group as follows:

(a) Attitudes towards persecutors

Two passages in Paul’s Letter to the Romans illustrate attitudes towards persecutors. In one, Paul says [S7], “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them*” (Romans 12:14). This corresponds to a saying attributed to Jesus, “*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (Matthew 5:44).

Another passage says, [S8] “*if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink*” (Romans 12:20). In his depiction of the Great Judgment Jesus said, “*Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink’*” (Matthew 25:37). Paul may not be making a direct allusion to this

saying of Jesus: Proverbs 25:21, 22 could have provided a common source for both Paul and Jesus' teachings.

(b) The Torah and love

Jewish law identifies 613 commandments. Jesus summarized these as two commandments. Paul reduces them to one and mentions it in two of his letters.

[S9] *"For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Galatians 5:14)*

[S10] *"...for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'you shall not kill,' 'you shall not steal,' 'you shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:9-10).*

The passage – *"love your neighbor as yourself"* -- is from Leviticus 19:18. The Jewish sage, Hillel, slightly before Jesus, had summarized Judaism succinctly. Hillel said, *"That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah; the rest commentary. Go and study it."* (Shab. 31a). Paul's version is similar to this one, only expressed positively.

Jesus' summary of the law is more complex, and more traditional, however, than either Hillel's or Paul's. For Jesus, the summary rests upon two principles. As Mark puts it, a scribe asks Jesus what he would identify as the most important commandment. Jesus replies with the traditional Hebrew prayer, *the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your with all your heart; and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."* Then he adds a second commandment, *"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* (Mark 12:30,31). Here Jesus is quoting from two passages from the Torah, Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18.¹⁷

For Jesus, the most important commandment has to do with obligations towards God, the second, with obligations towards fellow human beings. The two most important laws reflect the structure of the Ten Commandments: the first four expressing obligations towards God; the last six, obligations directed towards other human beings.

Paul is probably referring to the tradition of Hillel rather than the teachings of Jesus. If he had known that Jesus had said there were two main commandments, he would likely not have changed the numbering.¹⁸

(c) Kingdom of God teachings

Paul says that the Kingdom of, [S11] *"For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night."* (1 Thessalonians 5:2).

This phrase is repeated in other canonical writings, in 2 Peter and the Book of Revelation.¹⁹ But Jesus had also said that the transformation will occur soon, within the lifetime of the generation to whom he is speaking – *"Truly I say to you, this generation*

will not pass away till all these things take place” (Matthew 24:34).²⁰ He cautions them, however, to be ready and to focus on this rather than the specific timetable – since no one knows when the day when the Lord will come, comparing it to the sudden appearance of a thief in the night (Matthew 24:43, 44).

Verdict: a likely allusion or, possibly, a stock answer.

Summary: Possible Allusions to Teachings of Jesus

As the following chart indicates, we have two likely allusions to the teachings of Jesus.

Possible Allusions to Teachings attributed to Jesus

<i>Likely Allusions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • blessing persecutors [S7] • time of the end unpredictable [S11]
<i>Common source</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • kindness towards all, including enemies [S8]
<i>Unlikely Allusions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love Your Neighbor as Summary of Torah [S9, S10]

* * *

If we only had Paul, either by way of direct references or by possible allusions, we would not know anything about the following teachings of Jesus. For one thing we would not know of his apocalyptic orientation, that is, his emphasis on the imminence of God’s rule over the whole world (the Kingdom of God message) which he expected to occur within his lifetime. By the Kingdom of God Jesus meant world transformation, with evil eradicated, the righteous rewarded, the dead raised and Israel preeminent over all the world. On that day God would be one and all humanity would come to worship the one God. There is also no mention of Jesus’ parables or his miracles. Nothing from the Sermon on the Mount including the beatitudes and the challenge to Higher Righteous. Nothing on prayer – not even the Lord’s Prayer.

What Paul does not tell us about Jesus’ Teachings

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ his apocalyptic orientation, that is, his emphasis on the imminence of God’s rule over the whole world (the Kingdom of God message) ➤ parables ➤ miracles ➤ Sermon on the Mount teachings ➤ prayer, e.g. Lord’s Prayer |
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4. Does Paul refer to Jesus' teachings when making his own pronouncements on topics Jesus himself had addressed?

Paul occasionally tackles issues Jesus had addressed. Surprisingly, in these contexts, he typically makes pronouncements of his own without any reference to the position of Jesus on the matter.

(a) Torah observance

One of the most important issues within 1st century CE Judaism concerned how to interpret and follow Torah correctly. The Dead Sea Scroll community had separated from mainstream Judaism over this very issue. Following the lead of their inspired Teacher of Righteousness, they contended that they, and they alone, possessed the keys to correct Torah interpretation. Pharisees also debated the interpretation of the law as controversies between the Schools of Hillel and Shammai and with Jesus attest. Sadducees and Zealots had their own views as well. John the Baptist had appeared, urging people to return to Torah, to honoring their obligations towards God and towards humanity, symbolized by a water ritual. So knowing one's stance on Torah was a defining characteristic of every branch of Judaism, the new Christian movement included.

The Jesus Movement under James, Jesus' brother, in Jerusalem was Torah-observant including Temple and Sabbath observances, circumcision and the dietary laws. The Gospel of Matthew reflects this stance in his gospel Jesus is depicted as saying, *"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished"* (Matthew 5:17, 18). Indications from this gospel as well as the practices of his brother argue that Jesus himself was Torah observant and did not see himself abolishing these laws. Indeed, Matthew portrays Jesus as teaching "a Higher Righteousness," that is, one that extends actions to underlying attitudes. This has the effect of making Torah observance much more difficult. Jesus himself recognized this and indicated that his followers needed to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees.

Paul, however, departs from this position. In his Letter to the Galatians he denies the legitimacy of Torah observance. This is a strong claim, for Paul is not just saying that parts of the Torah should be abandoned or that Torah needs to be reinterpreted. His point is that members of his Christ Movement should completely disregard all of Torah.²¹

For Paul, the time of Torah has ended. Its legitimacy extended only from the period of Moses to Christ. It no longer pertains.²² The radical nature of Paul's arguments is often not appreciated, as extending not just to Gentiles but to Jews as well. Paul was widely recognized at the time for teaching precisely this radical view.²³ In addition, Paul does not consider himself to be subject to the Torah (1 Corinthians 9:20), describes his former life in Judaism as *"refuse"* or *"rubbish"* (Philippians 3:8) and dismisses the

practice of circumcision as counting for nothing (1 Corinthians 7:19) Clearly by the end of his life, Paul had left Judaism for something else.

It is exceptionally strange that nowhere in this vitally important discussion does Paul inject any word of Jesus to bolster his abolition of Torah.

(b) Dietary Matters

Paul tells his followers to shun the worship idols. He also adds, however, that it is permissible to “*eat whatever is sold in the meat market*” (1 Corinthians 10:25), even though the animal may have been butchered in honor of some deity or may involve prohibited meat. No where in this discussion does he inject the perspective of Jesus or that of his followers, especially James. It is unlikely that either Jesus or James would have agreed with Paul in this regard.

So does Paul refer to Jesus when making pronouncements on topics Jesus himself had addressed? Again the verdict is: no.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Here is Paul’s score card.

In terms of references to Jesus life we have established that there are only minimal references.

In terms of Jesus’ teachings, Paul makes only one reference to a known saying of Jesus and provides two possible allusions. In terms of putting forward his own positions on topics that Jesus himself addressed, we find Paul silent. He does not refer to Jesus’ teachings to back up contentious points even when his credibility is under attack.

This indicates an exceptionally slim connection between the teachings of Paul and those of the Jesus of history.

Either the life and teachings of the historical Jesus were not of interest to Paul or else they were simply not known. His focus was on the Christ figure, the post-death and post-resurrected Jesus, who communicates directly with him and through him. This reinforces the view that Paul was the founder of a separate religion, one about the Christ, not one centered upon the teachings and mission of Jesus.

APPENDIX: PAUL'S REAL FOCUS

Paul's focus was clearly not only the historical Jesus but rather on who he was and what his death represented. As he interprets the death of Jesus, Paul tells us the following. First of all, for Paul, Jesus was God's Son. He was resurrected from death.

Paul maintains, moreover, that Jesus died for our sins and that the whole purpose of his mission was "...to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5,6) The "we" in "we might receive adoption as sons" refers to those who are not Jewish. So the purpose of Jesus' coming is to incorporate all humanity as children of the one God. Whether Jesus saw his ministry in the terms that Paul describes is highly questionable. In one passage where Jesus hesitated to assist a Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon, he indicates that he has come to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

The Significance of Jesus for Paul

1. Jesus was God's Son (1 Thessalonians 1:10)
2. Jesus was resurrected by God (1 Thessalonians 1:10)
3. Jesus died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3)
4. The purpose of Jesus' ministry was "to redeem those who were under the law" so that all people, including Gentiles, might receive adoption as sons (Galatians 4:5)

For Paul, Jesus or what he calls the Christ or Christ Jesus was a pre-existing being. That is one natural interpretation of a key passage in Philippians. There he describes Christ Jesus being "in the form of God," not counting equality with God as something to be grasped, but "emptied himself...being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:6, 7). Here Paul seems to be describing Christ Jesus as initially having a divine form which assumed a human shape, having been "sent" by God to accomplish a specific task. That mission, Paul says, had to do with redemption. On this view, Christ is a cosmic redeemer, sent to rescue humanity from the clutches of sin and evil. While the Greek *Christos* (Χριστός) translates the Hebrew *Mashiach* (מָשִׁיחַ) there is nothing in this view that approximates the Jewish view of the task of a messiah. A messiah is a political agent who would assist God with world transformation, resulting in the exaltation of the Jewish state, universal peace and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.²⁴

Paul's focus is emphatically not on the Jesus of history. He is not concerned with the contours of his life, the details of his mission, the involvement of his extended family, his political aims or their relationship to Jewish messianic expectations. His focus is solely on a "post-death Jesus" whom he typically calls "Christ" or "Christ Jesus."

Paul's Main Focus

the historical Jesus	the "post-death" Jesus	the returning Jesus
approx. 6,5 BCE – 30 CE	the Christ	
not of interest to Paul	<i>This is Paul's main focus</i>	also a focus for Paul

He makes his main focus abundantly clear in many of his short creedal-like statements in his letters. For example, in 1 Corinthians he maintains that *"We preach Christ crucified"* (1 Corinthians 1:23). Similarly *"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified"* (1 Corinthians 2:2). And again, he says, that he faithfully transmitted to the Corinthians that which he himself had received, the view that Christ died for our sins; was buried; raised on the third day; and appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:5).²⁵ His hope is to identify with Christ "that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Philippians 3:10, 11)

Indeed, his gospel is that of the post-death Christ Jesus. He makes this clear in Romans, saying that he serves *"the gospel of his Son"* (Romans 1:9). Since, according to Paul, Jesus had become God's Son only at or by virtue of his resurrection, it is the post-death resurrected Jesus that Paul shows any interest in. That Jesus he refers to as *"Christ,"* and claims to have a unique relationship with Christ, a privileged pipeline that no other early Christian teacher claimed to have had. He receives information no one else at the time ever received.

To some degree, Paul is also interested in the returning Jesus who will come "like a thief in the night." (1 Thessalonians 5:2)

ENDNOTES

¹ According to Paul, after his remarkable experience near Damascus, he immediately went away “into Arabia,” returning after a while to Damascus. Then three years later he goes to Jerusalem, staying with Cephas (Peter) and visiting with James for a total of fifteen days. Then some fourteen years later he returns to Jerusalem along with Barnabas and Titus. (Galatians 1:16 – 2:1)

² A study of Paul’s opponents represents the focus of a separate paper. We can now reconstruct the views of his “rival teachers” or “super apostles” from what Paul says about them and we can rightfully ask, who best represents the teachings and practices of Jesus? Paul or emissaries from those in the Jesus Movement in Jerusalem who knew the Jesus of history?

³ For a discussion of Paul’s rejection of Torah in Galatians, see my paper “*Taking Paul at His Word*” accessible at my website, www.barriewilson.com. This article was originally presented at the American Academy of Religion meetings, Eastern Division, May 2006, Quebec City, Canada.

⁴ The seven genuine letters of Paul are: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians and Philemon. Those that are probably pseudonymous include 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus. Those that are possibly pseudonymous are: Ephesians, Colossians and 2 Thessalonians. See list and discussion in Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, 3rd edition, p. 287. In addition, there are letters now lost including at least one to the Corinthians and one to the Laodiceans. Paul’s letters to Seneca are considered forgeries.

⁵ The translation of Paul’s letters that I use is from Steve Mason and Tom Robinson, *An Early Christian Reader* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc., 1990).

⁶ Nor can we rule out the possibility that the gospels themselves were either written or edited after being written to reflect the growing acceptance of Paul’s views over his rivals.

⁷ Luke 8:2,3

⁸ There are some methodological issues here relating to the problem of the historical Jesus. That problem raises the question, how can we now know what Jesus said when (a) he wrote nothing, (b) the sources are many decades later and (c) the writings themselves disagree on key points? There is, unfortunately, no way of getting behind these texts, other than perhaps using the principle “as James, so Jesus.” That is, if we can extrapolate from James’ teachings and practices back into Jesus, then perhaps we have a basis for adjudicating what Jesus himself may have held and done, James being

Jesus' brother who was with him throughout his life and who led the early Jesus Movement in Jerusalem. We do not have to solve this problem here in this paper, however. We will simply compare sayings and teachings of Paul in his genuine letters to sayings and teachings **attributed to** Jesus in the four canonical gospels.

⁹ Mason and Robinson note that the passage can also be translated as
“For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity, that each of you know how to gain control of (or procure) his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust like the heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress and defraud his brother in business.”

On this translation, the view is that men abstain from unchastity, that is, that they should practice penis-management, controlling their sexual urges and practices. This sexual injunction is curiously combined with the command not to defraud others in business.

¹⁰ Nothing is said, however, about a wife divorcing a husband because of his unchaste behavior.

¹² Note that the differences between Mark and the later gospel, Matthew, could be accounted for by supposing that Mark reflects Pauline views in a way that Matthew does not.

¹³ See Hyman Maccoby, *The Myth-maker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*, chapter 11.

¹⁴ In this connection it is important to remember that Jesus' arrest, trial and death were made on political grounds, that he was “King of the Jews,” not that he contravened Jewish law, Torah, in any respect.

¹⁵ Mason & Robinson, *op.cit.*, p. 549.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Note that Jesus is singling out *the two most important* commandments, not the *only* commandments. Torah still applies.

¹⁸ Another reason why Paul could not have used Jesus' twofold summary of the law, had he known of it, is that one of the first four commandments – duties towards God – include honoring the Sabbath, to keep it holy. With Paul's rejection of Torah went the abolition of Sabbath observance.

¹⁹ 2 Peter 3:10 (“*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief...*”); Revelation 3:3 (“*I will come like a thief*”); Revelation 16:15 (“*Lo, I am coming like a thief*”). Revised Standard Version translation.

²⁰ If this passage reflects what the historical Jesus said, in the 20’s, then the lifetime of a generation alive at that time would stretch only to 90 CE (20 CE plus average generation life span of 70 years). Matthew’s original readers may have read this differently, thinking that it pertains to their generation (80 CE plus average generation life span of 70 years). In either instance, world transformation was expected to have occurred either by 90 or 150 CE.

²¹ In particular, the practice of circumcision bothered Paul and he rails against it. Although the bible traces the Jewish origins of circumcision to Abraham and describes it as a practice in perpetuity, Paul contends that “*neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God*” (1 Corinthians 7:19). Clearly Paul neglects to note that this was one of the commandments of God and that Jesus himself had been circumcised. In Galatians Paul says that “*if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you,*” pointing out that “*every man who receives circumcision... is bound to keep the whole law*” (Galatians 5:2,3).

²² See my book, *How Jesus Became Christian* for an examination of Paul’s arguments in rejection of Torah observance.

²³ Opposition to Paul, mentioned in most of his letters and also in the Book of Acts, tends to focus mostly on his rejection of Torah.

²⁴ For Jewish expectations of the task of a messiah as well as Paul’s contrasting view, see Barrie Wilson, “*What’s a Messiah to do?*” For a copy of this paper, see www.barriewilson.com, under Publications.

²⁵ The reference to “Cephas and then to the twelve” appears to be shorthand, for Cephas (Peter) was one of the twelve and Judas Iscariot had already betrayed Jesus. This reference also omits reference to Mary Magdalene who according to Matthew 28:1, was also a witness to the resurrection.