

Presidential Address

THE JESUS IN WHOM THE CHURCHES OF THE APOSTOLIC AGE BELIEVED

The apostolic age of my title is usually taken to be the period within which the books of the New Testament were composed. Their later, slowly achieved canonization was the Church's declaration that they testified authentically to the faith of the apostolic Church. The acceptance of these writings by the slow consensus of the Mediterranean communities was at first a liturgical decision: What Scriptures had particular churches received to read publicly? The unspoken assumption was that they were written under the impulse of God's Holy Spiritas were the books of the First Testament; but this is not to say that only they among the Christian writings were held inspired.

This acceptance represented a widespread agreement that the twenty-seven books contained material that was normative for authentic faith. They were a *kánōn*, a dependable measuring rod of such faith, including faith in who Jesus was and what he achieved. Again, however, their identity as canonical and as twenty-seven, first witnessed to (that we know of) by St. Athanasius in 367 and shortly thereafter in councils held at Hippo (393) and Carthage (III; 397), were not judgments that no other writings could be trusted in the matter of apostolic faith. While canonicity reckoned these books sacred and inspired, it did not limit the books that Christians thought to be sacred and inspired.¹ Such limitation came as late as the early medieval period. The humanist Reformers made it a building block of their espousal of the Bible as the sole safe guide to apostolic faith and practice. Canonicity usually counted certain books as apostolic by identifying a tie that each one had, however tenuous, to one of the Twelve or to Paul; but it did not hold that the apostolic tradition was to be found in no other writings.

The familiar catechetical formula that the apostolic age was defined by "the death of the last apostle" does not mean, as is popularly supposed, the expiry of the last of "the Twelve," a term found in all four Gospels. It means the witness to the apostolic age provided by the canonical books. This fact may lead to some

¹For an essay on the respect accorded the "other Scriptures" that transmitted the tradition along with those approved for liturgical reading see "The Patristic View" in George H. Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959) 3-21. Later chapters consider "The Fifteenth Century Dilemma" and "The Solutions of the Humanists" regarding the force of written, noncanonical tradition.

initial disappointment that this paper proposes to do no more than delineate the various views of Jesus held by the authors of the Second Testament. That would be a daunting task in itself and tedious to the hearers besides, since so many of you teach these matters. You might legitimately hope to hear some speculation on what the Palestinian community believed about him during the lifetimes of the Twelve.² Despite the testimony to that remembrance and belief provided by the New Testament books, marked as it is by various obscurities, I hope to conclude with a clear hypothesis or two on how the *earliest* apostolic age viewed Jesus. For good or ill, all is fated to be hypothetical in this matter.

Back to my earlier delineation of the apostolic churches and their faith in Jesus. We are speaking of a period of roughly one hundred years, 30–130, however uncertain may be the date of the last book to be composed. That designation usually goes to 2 Peter although not by definitive arguments. Does this mean that anything composed within that century or beyond it, other than the canonical twenty-seven, was not apostolic in its rootage? By no means. The attribution to a certain Clement of a letter from the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth and the clear authorship of the letter of Ignatius and of Hermas' *Shepherd* are undoubtedly the factors that told against them. The noncanonical status of *The Shepherd* is a mercy, given its content; the same is true of the so-called *Epistle of Barnabas*. As to the *Didachē* it probably failed of canonicity for lack of clear parentage other than the catchall title, *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*. In any case, it is highly likely that one or more of these noncanonical writings was composed before the latest-written book of the canon. If that is so, then for our purposes the description of Jesus in the *Didachē* as God's "paîs" (Child or Servant)³ and God's "huiós" (Son),⁴ as "cháris" (Grace),⁵ "the holy vine of David"⁶ and "our Lord,"⁷ all fall within the period in which the New Testament was written. The same is true of Ignatius' recurrent phrase, "our God, Jesus Christ."⁸

What do the canonical Scriptures say about the "historical Jesus"? Simply this: that the writings of the one-hundred year period 30–130 by believers in him, canonical and noncanonical alike, are history's record of him on which the

²Thirteen names occur in the "Twelve lists" of Matt 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19a; Luke 6:14-16, plus Levi in Mark 2:14; Luke 5:27, 29. For Lebbaios see the critical apparatus on Mark 3:18; Matt 10:3. The name is found notably in Codex Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D). John nowhere lists Jesus' Twelve (see Jn 6:67,70 for the term) but speaks of Nathanael (1:45-51) and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20) as if they were among Jesus' closest disciples.

³*Did.* 9.3.

⁴16.4.

⁵10.6.

⁶9.2.

⁷10.6.

⁸*Ad Eph.* 18.2; *Ad Rom.* intro; 3.3; 6.3; *Ad Smyrn.* 1.1; 10.1.

Church depends, although the reliance is not identical in all cases. Some parts of those writings contain fragments of his teaching, other aspects of his career up to his death, still others of his risen life. The latter is by definition metahistorical as regards him but historical in that it recounts the history of those who were witnesses to it. John's Gospel is unique in affirming his intimate life with God before his earthly days as Jesus. Various letters in the Pauline corpus and Hebrews speak of his preexistence, if not his timeless preexistence, while Revelation features his glorification as slaughtered Lamb and divine-human Son of God. But the New Testament record of him is all of it history because it is the story of a historical personage believed in. This remains true even though more was believed of him than of the entire rest of humanity.

The historical Jesus I take to be the Jesus Christ whom this history records. This is not history by an Enlightenment standard. History by that standard is what actually happened, elusive as that may be. But what actually happened is a "modern abstraction and construct" laboriously "recovered" and examined "by using the scientific tools of modern research."⁹ We do not—obviously could not—possess such history in the Second Testament writings. That is not the kind of history that came from the pens of Herodotus or Polybius, Josephus, Livy or Tacitus, Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. The histories they wrote were ancient constructs rather than modern ones. They were compounded of the chronicles available to them; where available, the recollections of witnesses to the events or, more accurately, the latest recounting in a chain of witnesses; in the case of the Gospels the recollections of Jesus' sayings and parables, miracles and exorcisms, each told from the faith standpoint of the writer of the history, in the historian's rhetoric and for his purposes. In that sense the New Testament books are as dependable as history as any of the writings of the other ancient authors above named. They contain the legendary, which is easier to dismiss than to interpret; and because they are written from the standpoint of religious conviction their data are considered by many to be tainted in a way that no other outlook or bias taints.

The reasons for the importance to our age of trying to reconstruct Jesus' actual career and teaching have been set out in various papers over the last few days. Such attempts have been carried on differently over the last two hundred years by believers and nonbelievers in him, by creators of their own Jesus, by detractors of him or of his significance, by believers in him on the Church's

⁹John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 26. Meier uses the term "the historical Jesus" in the above sense. It is the only sense, he thinks, that corresponds to modern reality. He finds the term "the earthly Jesus" ambiguous in ways that I do not, supposing that it could equally describe the preexistent and postresurrection Jesus. For me it is a handy designation of Jesus' earthly life, largely inaccessible as it is to us.

terms, and by believers in him on their own terms but not those of the Church.¹⁰ In short, it has proved impossible to view him neutrally no matter how many declare that they (sometimes only they) can do it. All history writing and all reading of history is approached with certain presuppositions. What is true in that matter generally is especially true regarding Jesus of Nazareth because the claims made for him are unique.

A century of critical scholarship has established that the Gospels, including Mark, were written with the aid of sources. The evangelists have been vindicated in the last sixty-odd years as men of literary skill and genius, not merely compilers or editors. In the case of Matthew and Luke we know in part something of their sources by comparing the two with Mark and the two with each other. Even Mark's basic source (or sources), a more difficult matter to establish, has been hazarded by studies of vocabulary and style. These attempt to identify the passages that betray the evangelist Mark's compositional hand as contrasted with the document(s) that lay before him. Some researchers into the Gospels think there is enough indication in John that this Gospel's author had access to a source or sources possessed by Mark. A few even think that, if the first Johannine author did not possess canonical Mark, the final editor of this Gospel did. But most conclude that John was literarily independent of the synoptics.

I am among the many convinced that the Mark we possess existed in its present form before the other three and that it, like them, had a literary history. I also think that to say it preceded them, and encouraged the form we know as "gospel," is the safest and perhaps the only thing we can say about the dating of Matthew, Luke, and John. The Greek language used by all four inclines us to think of them as compositions of the diaspora rather than the Palestinian heartland, although Greek would have been a language common to certain Jews and all non-Jews in northern Galilee. By the time the Gospels were written both ethnic groups would have been the subjects of vigorous evangelization. Northern Galilee is not unthinkable for Matthew and John. Neither one betrays serious ignorance of the land of Israel as Mark does, while Luke transcends geographic specifics and gives reason to doubt his complete grasp of the land's recent

¹⁰See the recent attempt of Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology*, The Edward Cadbury Lectures at the University of Birmingham, 1985-1986 (Cambridge: Clarke; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 166: "We have found these beliefs [viz., in the deity and incarnation of Jesus] only in the Johannine literature, and we must take seriously the obverse of this fact—most New Testament writers did not believe that Jesus of Nazareth was incarnate and divine. Neither did Jesus of Nazareth, nor did the first apostles." "The deity of Jesus is however, inherently unJewish. . . . Hence the deity of Jesus was deliberately expounded in the Johannine community at the point where it took on Gentile self-identification. . . . The Holy Spirit could hardly lead the church into an evaluation of the Jesus of history which Jesus in his revelatory ministry could not hold" (176).

history, even though he tries to reconstruct it as part of reaching a cultured Graeco-Roman audience. John's translation of the simplest terms like *rabbi*, *rabbouni*, and *mashiach* from transliterated Greek into their Greek equivalents *didáskalos* and *christós*, "teacher" and "anointed," betrays a wide cultural gap from Aramaic speech in his intended audience. All in all, Syria is the likeliest locale for the composition of the four Gospels.

Far more important than where they were written is the course of the development of the Gospels as literary products. Composition followed by successive editing takes time. An important, unresolved question is, how much time? You have all heard the theory, going back many centuries, that Matthew was the most historically trustworthy Gospel because it was written first, hence closest to Jesus' lifetime. When the mid-nineteenth century *Leben-Jesu-Forschung* community became convinced, by and large, that Mark preceded Matthew, it snatched the historical-dependability crown from Matthew and placed it on Mark, but only briefly. William Wrede's discovery of the narrative technique that underlay Mark, his misnamed "messianic secret"—actually a Son of God secret—disqualified Mark as dependable history of the sort the entire nineteenth century had craved. Mark's Gospel proved as theologically undergirded as the others. The early twentieth-century form and redaction studies then pinned their hopes on reminiscences of what Jesus had said and done before these were edited, whether in a christological or ecclesiological direction. The Jesus of his earthly days, it was thought, was beginning to come to light. The game was played by any number of historically minded persons, largely of equal skill but often differing widely in their preconceptions.

Faith in Jesus Christ or lack of it quite apart, New Testament critics seem to have in common two assumptions: that the faith positions found in the canonical and extracanonical writings about who Jesus was and is must have taken several decades, in the case of John many decades, to develop; and that when you have identified what appears to be a literary development you have identified a historical development. Neither assumption, it would seem, can be demonstrated. Both are fated to remain assumptions. A series of modifications in the layers of the Gospels took place over a period of time, that much is demonstrable. The question of how much time and what elements went into the various literary developments, with some notable exceptions, is fated to go unanswered. It is illegitimate, I think, to assume that ultimate New Testament faith in him could only have been reached over many decades.

A second question is, why is it right to suppose that christological faith was linear in its development, proceeding slowly from awe and respect for him as a teacher of God's wisdom, to an acceptance of him as a revealer of God, to ultimate faith in him as himself divine? As to the first question, there is much to be said for the possibility, even the likelihood, that once Jesus had been experienced as risen from the dead, a variety of first-generation evangelizers would have proclaimed him much as Paul did in his letters, who claimed the

same experience of him as the Risen One. There is no reason to think of the Ebionite view of Jesus, as first reported by Irenaeus about 190, as having been the view of the primitive Jewish church of Jerusalem.¹¹ We have Paul's proclamation of Christ as he expressed it in the extant letters of the 50s. It can be presumed to be near identical with the way he presented it in Arabia, the Nabatean kingdom of Aretas IV, shortly after he came to believe in the risen Christ in 33 or 34.¹² There is no necessity of a long period of gestation of Paul's belief in Jesus or its expression. It need not be thought of as progressively clothed in gentile categories as he moved about the non-Jewish world. He can be called "un-Jewish" only by the standard of the Mishnah 150 years after Jesus' ascension. We know too little about early first-century Judaism, whether Palestinian or diaspora, to make assured statements about Paul's Judaism or the claimed revelation the Judaism of the time could and could not accept.

Paul's gospel was sufficiently offensive to the first people, presumably but not necessarily Gentiles, with whom he shared it. He does not say in Galatians how long he stayed in the territory of the Nabateans, i.e., Arabia. In another letter he reports his unceremonious ejection from the walled city of Damascus after being threatened by its governor under Aretas.¹³ We cannot deduce how he presented the Risen One from the violence his presence in that region elicited. The factors may have been political: an aggressive Jew in hostile territory. But Paul's brief mention of a two-week visit with Cephas and James three years after this incident can only mean that during that time all three tired the sun with talking about the events in Jerusalem of six years before. It seems most probable that faith in the crucified Jesus become risen Lord developed in Judaea and Galilee with explosive power within a very short time. I am convinced that in the year 35 it very much resembled the written Gospel presentations of him that existed in, say, 85. Since this position is not widely held in the community of learning, although it is far from unique to me, it requires some explanation.

First, though, a word about the commonest theories of development of faith in Jesus—who exactly he was and is, that anyone should believe in him. All such theories, whether held by learned believers in him with the Church's faith, or various adoptionists, or those who do not believe in him on any terms, are marked by a certain theological Darwinism. The progress is always from a simple form of acceptance to an increasingly complex one, much as with organisms or species. Undoubtedly the reason is that the man of Nazareth was perceived as human by his contemporaries—how else?—and that, since it is multiply reported that his family had no faith in him as extraordinary, he could not have been such in his growing-up years. His earliest collected utterances—and about which were the earliest there is no unanimity but many theories—were

¹¹*Adv. Haer.* V.1.3.

¹²Gal 1:17.

¹³See 2 Cor 2:32-33.

those that a holy and wise Jew with a restorationist program for Israel's religion might utter. Gospel research for some time was busy tracking faith in him from one title accorded him to the next marked by increasing awe, culminating in the belief that he possessed deity in its fullness. This pursuit of the faith perception of Jesus via the names or titles he is designated by in the Gospels, always arranged in a theological crescendo, is losing ground but its influence remains. I think it has no future because it is built on unprovable assumptions.

Legendary accretions are identifiable in the Gospel stories, which many—not all—are ready to acknowledge as having a miraculous deed at their core. Just in general, progress is traced from a Didymus-Judas-Thomas-like collection of sayings, which contains few parables and almost no narratives, to a Q-collection, to other such collections like Matthew 5–7, each with its own theology. Next comes canonical Mark which is totally nonreliant on Q in its wording in relaying the same sayings and probably possessing a passion story as the basis of its chapters 14 and 15. Mark knows a Jesus fraught with human limitations as well as miraculous powers. To Matthew he is a totally dependable rabbi in the matter of how to observe Mosaic precepts. Luke sees in Jesus a storyteller nonpareil, compassionate and forgiving in the extreme. The Johannine Jesus is Word and Son of God, every last one of whose utterances is symbolic of who he is. In John's Gospel he has human limits, all in the physical order; but some who see in John God striding the Galilean hills and the Temple porches question whether timid editing has made canonical John conform to a synoptic pattern in Christology and sacraments.¹⁴

What the gnostic phenomenon in second-century Christianity should tell us, coupled with Paul's near total silence on Jesus' career apart from his last hours, is that the process of development may have gone in reverse. Once he was believed in as risen and exalted in glory, he began to be proclaimed that way from the beginning. In light of this marvel, which found an immediate place in Israel's apocalyptic hope, there would have been no need to chronicle his short public life. That career with its teaching and its miracles would have been well known to those of Jesus' contemporaries to whose notice he had come. It would have held no surprises, either for his protagonists or for those who opposed him and his followers. They all knew the record. They simply interpreted it differently on the basis of their acceptance or rejection of the report that he had been raised up from the dead. As to his earthly life, it was a matter of the reformist and restorationist teaching of an apocalyptic-oriented Jew of his age, marked by certain wondrous signs of God's power at work in him. I use the word "apocalyptic" here to describe the substance of Jesus' message, namely God as the vindicator of the just at the end of the age. I do not use it to describe his rhetoric, which

¹⁴For this position, see Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), esp. 9.

is reported as moderate relative to that of most canonical and noncanonical writings of this genre.

Some of you know those writings intimately, available in English through the editorial diligence of James H. Charlesworth in a two-volume update of the R. H. Charles collection.¹⁵ Those who do will realize that early proclaimers of Jesus as risen and glorious Lord needed to have their proclamation scaled back, if anything, not developed. It is entirely unlikely that he was first proclaimed as a great teacher of wisdom who, incidentally, had been raised from the dead. It is, at the same time, entirely likely that he was first proclaimed as God's crucified and glorified Messiah and in a unique sense God's Son. The canonical Gospels, in light of the Jewish apocalyptic writings circulating in Greek—many from Hebrew or Aramaic originals—look like attempts to anchor Jesus to Palestinian soil more than attempts to apotheosize a marginal Jew. They also reflect the results of a period of reflection on what his relation might have been all along with the one he called, on terms of unheard of intimacy, "my Father." Just to read the Coptic Christian writings of third-century Nag Hammadi is to realize the direction in which Jesus was taken as the gnostic, cosmic Christ outside those circles guided by the disciplined prose of the canonical Gospels.¹⁶

You see the argument I am framing. Once the earliest oral evangelizers were convinced that God had raised Jesus from the dead and glorified him in the heavens, they had the problem of not letting their proclamation be obscured by the tenor of apocalyptic hopes abroad at the time. It will not do to say that the Palestinian rabbinic Spirit was so sober, so firmly monotheist, that it could not countenance claims like those made from the beginning on behalf of Jesus. One need only explore the apocalyptic literature, which was widespread and not a hole-and-corner affair, to discover the latitude it allowed concerning a great one whom Israel's God would send at the end of the age. It is post-70, even post-180 Mishnah thinking to put limits on the receptivity of the Christ *kerygma* possible in the early 30s. The apocalyptic Jewish Spirit of the times could absorb quite a lot, as evidenced by the many Palestinian and diaspora Jews who came to believe in Jesus as a result of the primitive preaching. My point will be that in its basic features it much resembled what is presented of Jesus in the canonical Scriptures.

The seven undisputed letters of St. Paul are the best place to look for it, because they are the earliest datable and from the pen of a trustworthy witness. All were written in the decade of the 50s, a full fifteen years after he came to believe. The collection has to be fragmentary. A letter writer like that does not start

¹⁵James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1983 and 1985). Cf. R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913).

¹⁶See James M. Robinson, gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

dictating letters for the first time after an active career of that length. The genuine Pauline corpus is as limited as it is because whoever collected it had access only to these letters—perhaps to the others of disputed authorship as well. They were already conflated, as a critical examination of 2 Corinthians and Philippians shows. The editing process included interpolations, as would appear from the uncharacteristic excoriation of Jews as hostile to the human race and the killers of Jesus in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16; and 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, on women having to keep silent in church, would appear lifted from the trito-Pauline 1 Timothy 2:11-12. It is important to ask whether Paul's thought underwent substantial development within the eight or nine years of the composition of the letters. A few scholars think they have identified such changes of outlook from 1 Thessalonians to Romans but the majority opinion is, "Not proven." At the heart of the debate is whether Paul was influenced by his experience in the Graeco-Roman world to depart from his earlier apocalyptic commitment. The scholars who hold this view tend to think that apocalyptic commitment crude relative to the sophistication of Gentile thought. But apart from this preconception, there is the fact that the apostle thinks apocalyptically, in the sense I have defined, to the very end.

We find in St. Paul's correspondence a Christian Jew who was "very much a man of the Hellenistic age: apparently trained in the subjects that constituted the lower and middle levels of Hellenistic education, . . . clearly both willing and able to engage the religious and intellectual concerns of the non-Jewish world."¹⁷ The Hellenistic Judaism of the period, however, is much more elusive than pagan Hellenism, having as witnesses to it the peripheral information supplied by Josephus, Philo, the pseudepigrapha above-mentioned, and surprisingly to some the New Testament materials, which happen to be more informative on Jewish life than any contemporary Jewish source. Since the earliest career of Paul is confined to a few autobiographical touches, with which the account in Acts does not accord very well, and since the precise lineaments of Jesus' earthly days are equally fragmentary, the view Paul had of the ministry and message of Jesus, at least as it was retained in written form, is a matter of two uncertainties in relation. But Paul's written reference to an exchange over Jesus of only twenty years before his extant writings is of major importance and does exist.

In the letter to believers in Galatia written in 54 or thereabouts, Paul is at pains to set straight his earliest moves as a Jesus-believing Jew. He states emphatically that after three years as a believer he "went up to Jerusalem to get to know Cephas" with whom he stayed for two weeks, and "James, the brother of the Lord."¹⁸ We cannot imagine that he did not press these two for all the information they could give him about the earthly Jesus. Again, when he returned to

¹⁷See Victor Paul Furnish, "On Putting Paul in His Place," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113 (1994) 11, including an extensive bibliographic footnote on Paul and Hellenistic education and several book-length studies on the relation of Jesus and Paul.

¹⁸Gal 1:18-19.

Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus "after fourteen years" to lay out "to the leaders . . . the gospel as he presented it to the Gentiles," it is inconceivable that the preresurrection Jesus would not have been the subject of probing by at least the other two to be sure Paul was presenting it correctly.¹⁹ When the "acknowledged pillars" of the community, James, Cephas and John, gave him and Barnabas a handclasp of common membership in a faith enterprise at their parting, the agreement in the context of the letter was over Paul's not requiring the observance of what Philo calls "the special laws" as he proclaimed the gospel to non-Jews. The Jerusalem leaders could not have strained at this gnat while swallowing the camel of Paul's entirely different view from theirs of who Jesus was and what he came to accomplish.

That Galatian epistle calls Jesus "the Christ" and God his "Father." They are coupled in the opening greeting and thus referred to throughout. The people's life is described as a life of faith in the Son of God "on which God lavishes the Spirit and works wonders in your midst." Similar faith language centered on Jesus is found in the earliest written letter, 1 Thessalonians of 49 or 50. There Jesus is "the Lord,"²⁰ and "Christ."²¹ "Our [the] Lord Jesus Christ" occurs five times²² and "our" or "the Lord Jesus" three times.²³ Exactly what Jesus' Lordship said about what we would call his personhood in his earthly life we cannot be sure but his role of universal dominion, heretofore in Israel confined to God, is clear. He "rescues us from the wrath that is coming."²⁴ We read toward the end of the letter: "through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died";²⁵ they will "meet [this] Lord in the air" and so "we will be with him forever."²⁶ In the Galatian letter Jesus "gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age";²⁷ he is the author of our freedom. Faith in him brings justification.²⁸ He is "the Son of God,"²⁹ a Son able to be sent by God in time,³⁰ he is at the same time an offspring (*spérma*) of Abraham.³¹

In other letters, notably the liturgical doxology incorporated into the salutation in Romans, Jesus is a human descendant of David who, "by resurrection

¹⁹2:1-10. See 1:6, 8, and *passim* on his insistence on his proclamation, which presumably was identical with theirs.

²⁰1 Thess 1:6, 8; 3:12, and *passim*.

²¹3:2; 4:16.

²²1:1, 3; 5:9, 23, 28.

²³3:11, 13; 4:2.

²⁴1:10.

²⁵4:14.

²⁶4:17.

²⁷Gal 1:3.

²⁸See 2:16; 3:24.

²⁹2:20.

³⁰See 4:4.

³¹3:16.

from the dead [was] declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness,"³² and later in the epistle, "[God's] own Son whom God sent in the likeness of sinful flesh."³³ Throughout his correspondence Paul speaks of the death of Christ usually on a cross, once of his birth of a woman as a Law-observant Jew,³⁴ and often of his resurrection from the dead. He couples Christ Jesus with God so frequently in the work of human salvation that he has been accused of having a binitarian rather than a trinitarian outlook. Occasionally, however, there will be three divine names in the doxological triad, as in the ending of 2 Corinthians.³⁵ This leads to the conclusion that Paul's references to the Spirit or Holy Spirit are to one other than the Father God or Christ, who is to be thought of as doing the works of deity equally as they.

The great puzzle, of course, is why Paul, whose lifetime paralleled that of Jesus, is so silent about Jesus' brief public career. Could he have supposed that his churches would not have pressed him on the matter? Or was he himself incurious? Neither explanation seems reasonable. What did he mean when he wrote that he once "knew Christ from a human point of view" (lit., "according to the flesh")?³⁶ Was it that having come to believe in him as "a means of expiating sin for all who have faith"³⁷ he thereupon lost interest in his earthly life and teaching? Almost certainly not. The context requires that *katà sárka* describe "everything old" that has been succeeded by a "new creation."³⁸ Paul is not repudiating knowledge of the earthly Jesus but is affirming a succession of eons, in light of which he views everyone including the one he now calls "Christ"—indeed the whole creation—differently. Remembering that Paul could well have written much about Jesus in circumstances other than those that elicited the letters we have, we must attend seriously to the teaching of "the Lord" he refers to on several occasions.³⁹ When he does so he may be speaking of the Church, which was the Lord in human midst after Jesus' departure. But it is much more likely that he has various remembered sayings of the Lord Jesus in mind, even though he employs them indirectly and allusively and sometimes takes another position on them. At the conclusion of his study *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul*, David Dungan says:

The alleged contrast between Pauline Christianity and that branch of the early Church which preserved the Palestinian Jesus-tradition that finally ended up in the Synoptic Gospels is a figment of the imagination. In fact, they were one

³²Rom 1:3-4.

³³8:3.

³⁴Gal 4:4.

³⁵2 Cor 13:13.

³⁶2 Cor 5:16.

³⁷Rom 3:25.

³⁸2 Cor 5:17.

³⁹See 1 Cor 7:10, 12; 9:14; 10:27.

and the same branch—for precisely in Paul's careful presentation of, and yet selective and discriminating obedience to, the Lord's commands, do we see prefigured the characteristic traits of the Hellenistic Christian Gospel editors.⁴⁰

Paul's oblique references to Jesus' teachings as found in the Synoptics are sufficient to make us think that he had much more of that teaching in his didactic arsenal.

As is well known, the reason most commonly alleged for the sparseness of Paul's direct citation of Jesus' life or teaching is his disinclination to make knowing him in life a test of apostleship. There is enough in his discussion of why he should be considered an apostle on a par with the Jerusalem pillars to sustain the thesis, but it relies heavily on the assumption that we have in his seven epistles the bulk of his views. What public figure active over a thirty-year period would wish to have his or her convictions on every question contained in seven occasional letters? The supposition is unreal. We would very much like to have a record of Paul's initial *kērygma* to the churches he founded; better still, a digest of the instructions he gave during the year and a half in Corinth that Acts reports or the alleged three months of persuasive argument that were part of his two-year stay in Ephesus. Certainly the great themes that he returned to in the epistles would have figured heavily, but they could not have been all that was conveyed in his many hours of teaching. He must have responded to normal curiosity about Jesus' earthly days, even though his greater concern was how Jesus fulfilled all biblical prophecy.

The Gospels are correctly described as a Palestinian phenomenon, in their data if not their composition. There is nothing to say that believers in the diaspora were not interested in the details of Jesus' earthly life and everything in favor of the notion that they were. There is every reason to suppose that Paul was concerned to transmit the reminiscences of Jesus' deeds and words that were first shared with him in Damascus, then Antioch, in all his churches, rather than that he either made it a point of suppressing them in his letters or did not possess them in the first place. His correspondence does establish the high value he placed on a Jesus Christ who fulfilled all biblical hopes, an unjust sufferer who was vindicated by exaltation at God's right hand, all to restore a balance in both human history and the cosmos. But to think that St. Paul's interest in the one he called "our Lord" began no earlier than Jesus' last day on earth and entrance into glory is fanciful. The Church can only regret that this earliest of witnesses to write did not do what the evangelists preceded by their sources did, or did not do it in a form that we now possess. What no one may legitimately say, on the basis of the extremely partial evidence of his letters that testifies to Jesus' teaching, is that he had no interest in the subject.

⁴⁰David L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 150.

Another unwarranted conclusion, it would seem, is that any reconstructed source of Gospel material contains the whole view of the community that compiled it. Take, for example, the few parables of Jesus that Mark opted to use, or the teachings of Jesus in gnomic and more extended form, all of them non-Q by definition. Let us assume that Mark culled them from a source that contained both them and much more. Was this all that the compilers of such collections believed of Jesus? Or again, consider the materials proper to Luke and proper to Matthew, assuming for the moment that one major source contributed much to each evangelist before he put the stamp of his free composition on his materials. Are we warranted to suppose that the compilers of such source materials—add in the author of the hypothetical Markan miracle *catenae*—believed about the prepaschal Jesus only what is contained in these fragments?

I put the question this way because such a claim is increasingly being made for the faith the Q-community had in Jesus. I am firmly committed to the existence of such a sayings collection, although not to the earlier Q and the later Q. I have great respect for the work of men like Schulz, Edwards, Jacobson, Polag, Havener and Kloppenborg. At the same time I hesitate to say that the total faith of Q's compiler and his community is to be found in the 50 to 75 sayings that different scholars assign to the collection.

An example might be the assumption that the sayings source called the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* had no interest in Jesus' death on the cross because it not only had no passion narrative but presented him as one who saved by fidelity to his teaching. Yet *Thomas* contains the Q-saying about taking up one's cross and walking in Jesus' path. That is a *lógion* that is meaningless as a figure of speech unless the knowledge is assumed in the hearer that Jesus died that way and that his going to his tortured death obediently must somehow be replicated in the lives of disciples.⁴¹ The existence of partial collections of Jesus' sayings and other materials that found their way into the Gospels does not mean that those responsible for them knew only this of him and nothing more. They are, by definition, partial. When materials traceable to the canonical Gospels, which may very well describe most of the *Thomas* sayings, prove upon analysis to have been edited in a docetic or other gnostic direction, we know that such collections were made to forward a specific understanding of Jesus. Each of the canonical Gospels was likewise composed with a specific intention. A difference is, the

⁴¹(55) 9.31 (cf. Matt 10:38 = Luke 14:27). *The Gospel According to Thomas*, Coptic Text Established and Translated by A. Guillaumont, H.-Ch. Puech, et al. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1959). The introduction by Helmut Koester to Thomas O. Lambdin's translation in James M. Robinson, gen. ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) assumes that a simpler form of a saying is older and that this collection of sayings is closely related to Q but independent of it and of the canonical Gospels.

canonizing process was the Church's way of saying that the image of Jesus projected in these writings was consonant with its faith in him.

Does this not put the cart before the horse? Did not the teachings and deeds of Jesus as reported in the Gospels, above all, his resurrection, create the Church's faith in him?

No, the faith convictions of the communities existed first, to pass judgments on what was transmitted about what he had said and done. We know from the history of early heresies that many constructions were put on Jesus' person and mission other than those of the consensus of the Church. At an early date, how early we cannot say, some denied human status to him. Others believed in him as Israel's Anointed but not as fully invested by deity or as having existed before his human birth. The spread of conviction about his total intimacy with God in the way described in John 1:1-18 may have been wide in those earliest days but not recorded at the time. The Gospel according to John is impatient to the point of violence with "those Jews who believed in him" but not as the Word of God "close to the Father's heart" in "the beginning." How far back that division among believers in him goes we cannot say. It could have been primitive in some quarters but not recorded in John's way.

Does the trust the Church puts in the canonizing of Scripture make it the arbiter of history? Yes, if by history is meant the first-century type engaged in by believers. The Church passes a favorable judgment on that history. The canonical writings are the arbiter of modern critical history only from a faith standpoint. Having accepted certain writings as authentically apostolic, the Church set a standard by which any later findings concerning the matters they speak of can be judged. The Church is the custodian of a faith understanding of the events. An understanding of them unrelated to faith (viz., the results of a modern, "purely historical" inquiry) can always be subjected to faith's scrutiny, just as modern criticism does not hesitate to submit the faith portrait of Jesus to its scrutiny. It would be rash to say that critical history when engaged in by believers cannot come to conclusions at odds with the believers' history—the *essential* story—found in the Scriptures. We all know of some believers who think they have come to such inescapable conclusions and who are not troubled by that fact.

What I have tried to show is that the case is strong for the witness of Paul to the most primitive convictions held about Jesus, which no other convictions can be shown to precede. I have taken pains to avoid the common assumption that we know all that Paul thought of Jesus from his surviving correspondence, but he believed at least that much. Many early believers in Jesus developed their view of him after much reflection and committed their conclusions to writing. Some simply collected his teachings and parables and miracles. But it would be rash to suppose that we possess a full-blown portrait of him in the selective use made of this material by the various evangelists.

The writings most often turned to for an account of the earthly Jesus are, understandably, the canonical Gospels and cognate fragments. But the Gospels in their present form were composed well after the events described. Paul's written witness goes back to twenty years after the events. His witness in life goes back to only three or four. Can he for a moment be imagined to proclaim a risen Lord and Christ for years, at the peril of his life, if that man's public life was in no way conceivable as the subject of a glorification that would couple him intimately with Israel's God? Whoever thinks that, either has not attended to the character of Paul revealed in his letters, or has not thought deeply about the biblical conception of Israel's God.

Paul is indeed our best witness to the earthly Jesus despite the paradox of his silences. The one thing he is not silent about is his extensive conferring with certain disciples who knew Jesus intimately in his lifetime. If we knew the data Paul possessed that impelled him to persecute the movement so violently we might have our answer to what he earlier thought of Jesus. A distinct possibility was that he knew well Jesus' inattention to oral Torah, which was at the heart of Pharisee commitment. The claims about Jesus made by his followers—claims that Paul himself was to spend a lifetime making—is another possible explanation for what drove him to such fury. I think that these claims must have very much resembled what the Gospels and other New Testament writings tell us were the remembrances and the faith of the earliest apostolic age in Jesus.

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