

The Origin of Paul's Religion

Paul and Jesus (Part 4)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

The Pauline Epistles contain not the slightest trace of any conflict with regard to the person of Christ. About other things there was debate, but about this point Paul appears to have been in harmony with all Palestinian Christians. Even the Judaizers seem to have had no objection to the heavenly Christ of Paul. But if the Judaizers, who were Paul's bitter opponents, had no objection to Paul's view of Christ, it could only have been because the original apostles on this point gave them not even that slight color of support which may have been found with regard to the way of salvation in the apostles' observance of the Law. The fact is of enormous importance. The heavenly Christ of Paul was also the Christ of those who had walked and talked with Jesus of Nazareth. Let it not be said that this conclusion involves an undue employment of the argument from silence; let it not be said that although the original apostles did not share Paul's conception of the heavenly Christ, Paul did not find it necessary to enter into the debate in his Epistles. For on this matter Paul could not possibly have kept silent. He was not in the habit of keeping silent when the essential things of his gospel were called in question—the anathemas which he pronounced against the Judaizers in Galatia and the sharp rebuke which he administered to the chief of the apostles at Antioch are sufficient proof of his fearlessness.

But what can possibly be regarded as essential to his gospel if it was not his doctrine of Christ as divine Redeemer? That doctrine was the very warp and woof of his being; without it he was less than nothing. Yet the historian is asked to believe that Paul submitted tamely, without a word of protest, to the presentation of a purely human Jesus. The thing is unthinkable. Paul would not have submitted to the preaching of such a Jesus if the preachers had all been angels from heaven.

What is really most significant in the Pauline Epistles therefore, is the complete absence of any defense of the Pauline doctrine of Christ, the complete absence, indeed, of any systematic presentation of that doctrine. The Pauline view of Christ is everywhere presupposed, but nowhere defended. The phenomenon is very strange if the modern naturalistic account of Jesus be correct. According to that account, the historical Jesus, a great and good man, came after His death to be regarded as a divine Redeemer; one conception of Jesus gave place to a very different conception. Yet the surprising thing is that the mighty transition has left not the slightest trace in the primary sources of information. The chief witness to the transcendent conception of Jesus as divine Redeemer is quite unconscious

of introducing anything new; indeed he expressly calls attention to the harmony of his proclamation with that of the intimate friends of Jesus. There is only one possible conclusion-the heavenly Christ of Paul was also the Christ of those who had lived with Jesus of Nazareth. They had seen Jesus subject to all the petty limitations of human life; they had seen Him hungry and thirsty and weary; they had toiled with Him over the hills of Galilee; yet they gave the right hand of fellowship to one who regarded Him as the divine Redeemer seated on the throne of all being, and they were quite unconscious of any conflict between their view and his.

Thus Paul was not regarded as an innovator with respect to Jesus by Jesus' intimate friends. He was not regarded as an innovator even with regard to those elements in his message -such as freedom from the Law-about which no definite guidance was to be found in the teaching or example of Jesus. Still less was he regarded as an innovator in his account of Jesus' person. With regard to that matter even the Judaizers did not venture to disagree.

But if Paul regarded himself, and was regarded by the original apostles, as a true disciple of Jesus, how did he obtain the necessary knowledge of Jesus' life? Was his knowledge limited to intuition or remote hearsay; or had he opportunities for authentic information?

That question has really been answered by the outline of Paul's life in Chapters II and III. It has been shown that even before his conversion, in Palestine, Paul must have become acquainted with the facts about Jesus' life and death. The facts were common property; even indifference could not have made a man completely ignorant of them. But far from being indifferent, Paul was deeply interested in Jesus, since he was an active persecutor of Jesus' disciples. After the conversion, Paul was undoubtedly baptized and undoubtedly came into some contact with Christians in Damascus. The presumption is strongly in favor of the presence there of some who had known Jesus in the days of His flesh; the independence of which Paul is speaking in Galatians is independence over against the Jerusalem apostles, not over against humble disciples in Damascus, and it does not relate to information about details. Three years after the conversion Paul visited Peter at Jerusalem, and also met James the brother of Jesus. It is quite inconceivable that the three men avoided the subject of Jesus' words and deeds. The fifteen days spent with Peter at Jerusalem brought Paul into contact with the most intimate possible source of information about Jesus.

According to the Book of Acts, Paul came into contact with Barnabas at the time of his first Jerusalem visit. Whatever may be thought of this detail, the later association of Barnabas with Paul, at Antioch and on the first missionary journey, is generally or universally recognized as historical. It is confirmed by the association of the two men at the time of the conference with the Jerusalem pillars (Gal. ii. 1). Thus Paul spent several years in the most intimate association with Barnabas. Who then was Barnabas? According to Acts iv. 36, 37, he was a

man of Cyprus by descent, but he was also a member of the primitive Jerusalem Church. The kind of information contained in this passage represents just that element in the early chapters of Acts which is being generally accepted by recent criticism. With regard to the community of goods in the early Jerusalem Church, it is sometimes supposed that the author of Acts has erred in generalizing and exalting to the position of a principle what was really done in many cases by generous individuals. But in order that there might be unhistorical generalization, there must have been something to generalize. Details, therefore, like the generous act of Barnabas in selling a field and devoting the proceeds to the needs of the brethren, are thought to constitute the solid tradition with which the author of Acts is operating. Objections in plenty may be raised against this treatment of the narrative as a whole, but certainly the concreteness of the little detached note about Barnabas makes a specially favorable impression. It will probably be admitted to-day by the majority of scholars that Barnabas really had a place in the primitive Jerusalem Church. But if so, his close connection with Paul is of the utmost importance. How could Paul possibly have been for years intimately associated with Barnabas in the proclamation of the gospel without becoming acquainted with the facts about Jesus? Is it to be supposed that Barnabas, who had lived at Jerusalem, proclaimed Jesus as Saviour without telling in detail what sort of person Jesus had been, and what He had said and done? Or is it to be supposed that Paul closed his ears to what his brother missionary said?

At the beginning of the first missionary journey, Barnabas and Paul were accompanied by John Mark, and Mark appears again in the company of Paul, as one of Paul's trusted helpers, in Col. iv. 10 and Philem. 24. This John Mark certainly came from the Jerusalem Church; for the house of his mother is mentioned as a meeting-place for the Jerusalem disciples in the incomparably vivid account in Acts xii. 1-17 of the escape of Peter from prison. Whatever may be thought of the Book of Acts as a whole, the twelfth chapter is recognized as embodying primitive tradition. Even Wellhausen was somewhat impressed with the lifelike detail of this narrative; the chapter, Wellhausen admitted, contains elements of high historical value.¹ Certainly, then, the mother of John Mark and presumably Mark himself were members of the primitive Jerusalem Church. Tradition, moreover, as preserved by Papias of Hierapolis, connects Mark with Peter and represents the Second Gospel (attributed to Mark) as based upon Peter's preaching.² The connection of Mark with Peter is confirmed by 1 Peter v. 13. In general, recent criticism is favorably disposed toward the Papias tradition about the Second Gospel; that tradition is often admitted to have some basis in fact. Of course the words of Papias about Mark's connection with Peter naturally refer, at least in part, to a time later than the formative period of Paul's life. But no doubt the later relationship was at least prepared for in the early days when Mark

¹ Wellhausen, *Kritische Analyse der Apostelgeschichte*, 1914, pp. 22f.

² In Eusebius. *Hist. Eccl.* iii, 39, 15.

and Peter were together in Jerusalem.³ John Mark, therefore, constitutes an important link, not only between Paul and the Jerusalem Church, but also between Paul and one of the most intimate friends of Jesus. Paul would have been able to learn the facts about Jesus' life from Mark if he had not learned them elsewhere.

The conference between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders, described in Gal. ii. 1-10, whether or not it was identical with the Apostolic Council of Acts xv. 1-29, would naturally bring an enrichment in Paul's knowledge of Jesus' earthly ministry. It is hardly to be supposed that at the conference any more than at the first visit of Paul to Jerusalem the subject of the words and deeds of Jesus was carefully avoided. Such avoidance would have been possible only if the Jerusalem Church itself had been indifferent to its own reminiscences of Jesus' earthly ministry. But that the Jerusalem Church was not indifferent to its own reminiscences is proved by the preservation (evidently at Jerusalem) of the tradition contained in the Gospels. The existence of the Gospels shows that the memory of Jesus' words and deeds was carefully treasured up in the Jerusalem Church from the earliest times. Paul could hardly have come into contact with such a church without obtaining information about Jesus. He could not have failed to obtain information even if he had been anxious to avoid it. But as a matter of fact he was not anxious to avoid it; his apostolic independence, as will be observed below, does not really presuppose any such absurd attitude on his part.

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³ B. W. Bacon (*Jesus and Paul*, 1921, pp. 15f.) believes that the connection between Peter and Mark is probably to be placed only in the early years, principally before the first association of Mark with Paul. This view, which is insufficiently grounded, involves a rejection of the common view, attested, for example, by 1 Peter v. 13, according to which Mark was also with Peter at a later time.