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The Gospel According To Paul

by Allen Cabaniss

Thirty-four years ago the late Archdeacon H. E. Guillebaud contributed an article to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY entitled "Paul's Gospel or Christ's?"—the burden of which was that this title poses a false antithesis, since the gospel that Paul preached was the gospel of Christ. This is something that needs to be repeatedly reaffirmed, and Professor Cabaniss reaffirms it afresh in the following paper. Paul, by his own account, derived his gospel from no human intermediary; it was given to him by direct "revelation of Jesus Christ" in the Damascus-road event when he was simultaneously apprehended by the risen Lord and commissioned to preach Him among the Gentiles. While he began immediately to fulfil that commission without waiting to confer with any other man, yet he later uses the language of oral transmission in telling his converts how he delivered to them what he himself had first received, and insists that the gospel he preached was basically the same as that preached by the Jerusalem apostles and their colleagues: "Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed." The interpretation of his words about not knowing Christ after the flesh in 2 Cor. 5: 16 as though they disparaged such knowledge of the historical Jesus as the Jerusalem apostles could claim has been refuted time and again, but it takes an unconscionable time to die; this makes a study like that of Professor Cabaniss necessary and welcome.

THE earliest documentary evidence concerning Jesus is contained in letters of the Apostle Paul. Nothing remains from the period of two decades after the crucifixion except oral tradition. The latter probably consisted of short accounts of Jesus's life and deeds, fragmentary recollections of His teaching, parts of loose homilies delivered at liturgical assemblies of His followers. Discursive commentaries on pericopes from the Old Testament were also delivered on such occasions, but more often no doubt at gatherings of prospective proselytes. There were brief poetic effusions suitable for singing and simple questions and answers employed at catechetical instruction of converts. Here and there were scattered followers who had their own individual recollections of Jesus and His time which they added to the total picture as they had opportunity. There were also devout souls who had meditated long on their memories, subtly and as it were unconsciously elaborating them. Above all, there were the initiatory ceremonies of baptism and weekly (or more frequent) solemnities of the Eucharist which served as dramatic presentations of the tradition.

Even before his conversion Paul had heard much of the foregoing. Then for an ill-defined period, perhaps about fifteen years (Gal. 2: 1), he attended the liturgy, listened to the teaching, and studied, pondered, meditated. Called from the first to be a herald of the gospel, he is seen gradually emerging as a leader in the Christian community, devoted to expanding its influence (Gal. 1: 11—2: 10). For the remainder of his life he traveled, visited, preached, taught, administered, and wrote, providing thereby primary sources for his own life, for a picture of primitive Christianity, and for earliest records dealing in any way with the life, activities, and teaching of Jesus.

Samuel Sandmel says, in what is in many ways an excellent book, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 163, that "from the Epistles of Paul alone we should know little more about Jesus than that he was crucified and that it was believed that he was resurrected and that subsequent to the resurrection he appeared to his followers, and that he was opposed to divorce." Surely the good rabbi was being flippant, for by reading Pauline correspondence perceptively we can discern far more than what he suggests. Of the four points mentioned by Sandmel, the first two (crucifixion and resurrection) hardly need verification (but see, e.g., Gal. 3: 1; 6: 12, 14; 1: 1, 1 Thess. 2: 15; 1: 10; 4: 14; 2 Cor. 13: 4, to mention only a sampling of Paul's writings). The other two points, however, do not appear in the Apostle's earliest writings (cf. 1 Cor. 15: 5-7; 7: 10, 39).

To maintain accurate perspective it is fitting to note first what Paul records in Galatians, 1 Thessalonians, and our 2 Corinthians. It is significant, therefore, to observe that Paul gives some attention to the fact that, whatever else Jesus may have been, He was a historical person of real flesh and blood. Such a datum is obvious from the Apostle's evidence that Jesus was not a mythological figure nor a figment of imagination, but like all other men a product of human birth, "born of woman" (Gal. 4: 4). It is also possible (I would say probable), but not absolutely certain, that the allusion is to a birth believed by Paul's informants to be virginal.¹ In the same passage the Apostle indicates that Jesus was a Jewish man, "born under the Torah," subject to its requirements. He was also known to be poor, of very humble origin (2 Cor. 8: 9). Confirmation of Paul's awareness of the historicity of Jesus comes from his statement that he had seen Jacob, first bishop of Jerusalem and foster-brother of Jesus (Gal. 1: 19; 2: 12).² Paul thus knew a member

1 Cf. Allen Cabaniss, "Our Lady of the Apocalypse," Oxford Essays, No. 1 (Oxford, Miss., 1954), 2 f.

2 Cf. Allen Cabaniss, "A Note on Jacob's Homily", THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY 47 (1975), 219 ff.

of Jesus's family, to whom he later attributed a special appearance of the risen Jesus (1 Cor. 15: 7). We should recall that Jacob was bishop of Jerusalem during most of Paul's ministry and that he was martyred about A.D. 62, not many years before Paul himself suffered a similar fate. He also knew at least two (three, if the equation Peter-Cephas is accepted) of the original apostles, Jacob (not the bishop) and John (Gal. 2: 9). The former was martyred some time after Paul began his ministry and the latter lived on, according to church tradition, until long after Paul's death. The foregoing references are by no means so meagre as to merit Sandmel's inclination to believe that Paul was deliberately "slighting . . . details of the career of Jesus, as being of no great consequence to him" (*ibid.*).

Close enough to the historical person of Jesus to know of a distinct body of teaching ascribed to Him, Paul did not hesitate to call it a new Torah (Gal. 6: 2). It is possible that the earliest known quotation from Jesus's lips was made by the Apostle, significantly an apocalyptic statement (1 Thess. 4: 16).³ And it is possible that Paul is the first to give evidence of the Lord's Prayer (Gal. 4: 6).⁴ He also shows traces of Old Testament *testimonia* applied to phases of the life of Jesus: to the crucifixion (Gal. 3: 13), to His teaching (2 Cor. 4: 6; 9: 9), possibly to His birth (Gal. 4: 27). Certainly Paul looked upon Jesus as the promised Messiah of Israel, most clearly by his regular use of the Greek form *Christos* in translating the Hebraic *Messiah* as virtually another name for Jesus (Gal. 1: 1; 3: 27; 4: 14; 1 Thess. 1: 1; 5: 23; 2 Cor. 1: 19; 5: 18, etc.). Besides several other passages equally obvious (Gal. 3: 16; 2 Cor. 3: 12-16; 11: 3 f.) are numerous subtle and allusive phrases pointing in the same direction (Gal. 3: 7, 29; 6: 16).

The earliest teaching about Jesus is revealed in Paul's letters, close enough to derive if not from the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus, then from the earliest Christians. Most notable was the teaching that Jesus's death was not that of a martyr, but a vicarious sacrifice (1 Thess. 5: 10) to deliver mankind from sin and the present evil age (Gal. 1: 4), from curse of the Torah (Gal. 3: 13), from wrath to come (1 Thess. 1: 10), for salvation (1 Thess. 5: 9), for freedom (Gal. 5: 1). Justification comes through faith in Jesus (Gal. 2: 16). Reconciliation of God to the world and the world to God is accomplished through Jesus (2 Cor. 5: 18 f.; Gal. 3: 28; 5: 6; 6: 14). Christians are the true Israel (Gal. 3: 9; 6: 16; 2 Cor. 6: 16). Jesus Himself is both an object of prayer (1 Thess. 3: 11) and a mediator through whom prayer is offered to God (2 Cor. 1: 20). He is God's messenger

³ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus*, 2nd Eng. edn. (London: SPCK, 1964), 80-83.

⁴ Cf. Allen Cabaniss, *Liturgy and Literature* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1970), 24 f. and the literature there cited.

as well as Messiah (Gal. 4: 14), God's Son (1 Thess. 1: 10; 2 Cor. 1: 19), God's image (2 Cor. 4: 4) and reflection of His glory (2 Cor. 4: 6). The sinless One (2 Cor. 5: 21), He is Master (1 Thess. 5: 28) and He will come again to earth from heaven (1 Thess. 1: 10; 2: 19) with His holy ones (1 Thess. 3: 19; 4: 14), on a special day (1 Thess. 1: 14), to sit as judge of all (1 Thess. 4: 10). Jesus is coordinate with the Father (Gal. 1: 1, 3; 1 Thess. 1: 1; 3: 11; 2 Cor. 3: 17) and with the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4: 6; 2 Cor. 3: 17), and thus already there is an incipient doctrine of the Trinity (2 Cor. 13: 14). The one who is baptized is clothed with Messiah (Gal. 3: 27) and in the Eucharist there is repeated setting forth of Jesus's death on the cross (1 Cor. 11: 26; cf. Gal. 3: 1).⁵ Since He is not dead, but living in power (2 Cor. 13: 4), He made special revelations to His Apostle (Gal. 1: 12; 2 Cor. 12: 1-9).

Jesus, like Moses, is a lawgiver (Gal. 6: 2). There are many moral and ethical precepts emanating from Him which must be practised as carefully as Jews observed the Torah (Gal. 5: 16-26; 1 Thess. 5: 8-21; 2 Cor. 6: 14; 7: 1; 9: 1, 7; 13: 5). Yet Jesus and His followers have an adversary (Gal. 5: 10 b; 1 Thess. 2: 18; 2 Cor. 2: 11; 6: 15; 11: 14), namely, the Satan and slanderer of Jewish tradition (2 Cor. 11: 3, 14), who acts through false brothers (Gal. 2: 4), desires of the flesh (Gal. 5: 17-21), persecution (2 Cor. 11: 24-27), witchcraft (Gal. 3: 1), even the Torah (2 Cor. 3: 7). But by quiet kindness, by doing one's duty (1 Thess. 4: 11), by faithfulness to the Master and His teachings (1 Thess. 5: 9 f.), by God's miraculous action (Gal. 6: 15; 1 Thess. 4: 16 f.), Paul and his fellow disciples will gain ultimate victory (2 Cor. 2: 14-16) with Jesus (2 Cor. 13: 4; 1 Thess. 5: 9 f.).

There is in fact an extensive amount of material about Jesus that we find in the Apostle's correspondence, long before the gospels were written. His later letters simply amplify data presented in the earlier ones.⁶

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⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ The author reserves all rights to this essay, including the notes.