

## Paul's Ignorance of the Earthly Jesus, Part 1: Prologue and Preliminary Basics

### Prologue

One of the more fascinating inquiries into the New Testament is the question of what Paul knew of the earthly Jesus. As readers should already know, Paul was not, according to the NT, a companion of Jesus during his earthly life and ministry. Paul is clear in his own writings that he converted to Christianity only after Jesus' resurrection, an event which Paul himself never dates or for which he never names a location. Paul's silence on such details is baffling given his determination "not to know any thing..., save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). A comparison of the content of Paul's epistles with what we read in the gospel narratives proves that this is not the only area where Paul is conspicuously silent. For instance, in my blog [Reckless Apologetic Presumptuousness](#), which I posted nearly three years ago to this day, I listed no less than 40 items taken from the gospels at which Paul does not even give a whisper of a hint. These include significant story elements such as Jesus' virgin birth, the Magi, his association with John the Baptist, his teaching in parables, his miraculous wonder-working, his miracle healings, exorcisms, an empty tomb, Doubting Thomas, etc. If we had only Paul to go by in our knowledge of Jesus, we would never learn about any of these things, and Christmas nativity scenes would look altogether different, or simply not exist at all.

A common response from Christians is make the plea that reference to any of these things would be redundant in Paul's case, for his intended audiences would have already known about these things. This assumes knowledge of what was preached to Paul's churches, and one can only wonder where this knowledge comes from. It also ignores numerous opportunities which it has Paul pass up in which he could have drawn from Jesus' example and teachings in order to strengthen his own arguments (e.g., baptism, circumcision, clean vs. unclean food, the law, etc.). And curiously, when we get to the late epistles, including even those outside the NT canon, we do in fact find references to gospel details of Jesus' life. Another common response, which goes against the previous one, is to point out numerous things in Paul's letters which do show his knowledge of the earthly Jesus. This latter approach is one which commenter David, in his [Aug. 16 comment](#) in response to my blog [In Response to David on I Corinthians 15:3-8](#), deployed when he listed 17 items as references in the Pauline epistles to the earthly Jesus we know from the gospels. In my blog [Another Response to David, Part 5: Paul's Knowledge of Jesus](#), I examined each of these 17 references and concluded that they are not instances of Paul drawing from knowledge of the historical Jesus, but are rather symbolic or theological traditions which the later evangelists grafted into their concocted narratives of Jesus' pre-exaltation biography. Then, in [another lengthy comment](#), David interacted with my points in response to 14 of the 17 items he had earlier cited, apparently in an attempt to salvage them on behalf of the view that Paul was in each case drawing from knowledge of the historical Jesus.

In the next couple of blog entries I will interact with David's rejoinders to my points in response to the items he cited. But before proceeding with those, David raised issue with several of my preliminary points about silences in the early epistles, and I will devote the remainder of this log entry to addressing his concerns.

### The Deafening Silence

I wrote:

Since Paul is the earliest writer in the New Testament, a running constant throughout a rational examination of Christian origins is the question: What did Paul know of Jesus? Specifically, what did Paul know of the earthly Jesus, the Jesus before crucifixion. The gospels did not exist yet when Paul was missionizing his churches and writing his letters. The gospels were written well after this time, and a comparison of what Paul writes in his letters with what we read in the gospel narratives raises some fascinating questions. Scholars for over two centuries now have noted the profoundly different views of Jesus which, on the one hand, the early epistles, including but not limited to Paul's, and on the other the gospels give us.

David responded:

I have no problem with asking about what Paul knew of Jesus.

But...

My problem is when we make assertions about his knowledge based solely on lack of evidence.

Yes, I can see that David does have this problem.

I think arguments from silence can be used in tandem with other evidence to support a conclusion, and indeed this is what you have attempted to do.

There's no question that we must be careful when enlisting an argument from silence to support a position. However, as Wells correctly acknowledges:

silence on a topic does not prove ignorance of it; but a writer's silence is surely significant if it extends to matters obviously relevant to what he has chosen to discuss. And if we believe the gospels, there was much in Jesus' biography that would have been relevant to the disputes in which Paul was embroiled. (*The Historical Evidence For Jesus*, p. 31. Wells proceeds to identify a number of areas where Paul's silence is thus significant.)

How are we to determine when "silence on a topic" is "significant"? Wells reiterates his point above with an example of his own:

The silence of the early material about so much of what Jesus (according to the later material) said and did, is widely admitted to be something of a problem. Of course, silence does not always imply ignorance. But a book on transport in Cologne which, though written after 1965, made no reference to an underground railway, might reasonably be presumed to have been written in ignorance of the underground then constructed there. In other words, silence on a topic is significant if this silence extends to matters obviously relevant to what the writer has chosen to discuss. (*Ibid.*, p. 218)

Myself no big fan of Wikipedia, I did look up the article on Cologne there and found that even this general article does include a [reference to an underground railway](#). It even includes a [photograph of one of the subway stations](#). So I'm inclined to suppose Wells' example here is positively demonstrative of his point: if a general article on the city of Cologne includes a reference to its underground railway, a book dedicated to transportation in Cologne which fails to make any reference to it, can reasonably be inferred to have been written in ignorance of it.

The apologist for literalist Christianity, however, seeking to defend its dogmas against the potent threat which Paul's blaring silences pose for them, tends toward the stance that Paul's letters to his budding churches are not analogous in their concern for Jesus to a book on transport systems in a historic German capital. But why wouldn't they be analogous to this? After all, Paul declared that he was "determined not to know anything... save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). And yet, in spite of this determination which Paul stresses, he never gives any indication of *when* Jesus was crucified, *where* he was crucified, or under what circumstances this event had allegedly taken place.

Wells points out:

It is sometimes contended that Paul is silent concerning what the gospels record as Jesus' biography simply because he was writing to people who did not need to be reminded of such matters. But why, then, does he again and again mention his death by crucifixion, with which, in terms of the case, they were equally familiar? And why do his many references to this event nevertheless give no indication of where, when, or under what circumstances it occurred? (*The Historical Evidence For Jesus*, p. 37)

Paul continually refers to Jesus' death and resurrection as the most significant elements in his soteriology. Can we not expect, by the same token on which Paul's silences are dismissed, that his audiences were already familiar with these points?

### My Overall Approach

David then sought to reduce my position to a concise syllogism:

Your argument for the Gospels being legendary expansion can be roughly generalized to these premises:

- P1. The testimony of Paul lacks much of the earthly accounts in the Gospels
- P2. The Gospels show internal signs of legendary development
- P3. Explanatory power can be derived from pagan mythology to explain some of Paul's ideas about Christ (the Lord's Supper for example)

Roughly generalizing in this manner tends to leave out some key facts. Unfortunately the syllogism given here does not adequately reflect my course of reasoning. If I were to encapsulate it within the confined structure presented here, it would be closer to the following:

P1. Not only do the early NT epistles (not just Paul's) fail to corroborate the later narratives' depictions of Jesus' pre-crucifixion biography, the portrait of Jesus given in the early epistles is incompatible with the portrait of the gospels and later NT books. There are also significant points of disagreement between Paul's letters and the book of Acts.

P2. The gospels show many signs of legendary development, both amongst themselves as well as within the larger context of Christian canonical and non-canonical literature.

P3. Sources for Paul's views of Jesus include recast OT motifs, themes and quotations, the Wisdom literature, as well as Hellenistic culture (including mystery religions), but significantly not the biography of a recently living historical individual.

In connection with my P1, we should be careful to note that the gospels speak of a Jesus who

in the opening decades of the first century, taught and worked miracles, conducted his ministry in Galilee and the died in Jerusalem, and at the behest of the Roman governor Pontius Pilate - all this is what the gospels affirm, and presumably what various traditions on which they drew affirm; but none of it is told of him in the extant Christian epistles which are earlier than the gospels, nor in those documents which are more or less contemporaneous with the gospels but clearly independent of them. This is particularly striking when the behaviour or teaching ascribed to him in the gospels has obvious relevance to the concerns being pursued by the writers of these epistles... It is not just that these epistles are silent on such matters, but that they view Jesus in a quite different way, indeed that their Jesus - a supernatural personage only obscurely on Earth as a man at some unspecified period in the past - is not the same person as the itinerant first-century Galilean preacher whose public activity led to some of the traditions on which the gospels (particularly the first three of them) are based. There is good reason to believe that the Jesus of Paul was constructed largely from musing and reflection on a supernatural 'Wisdom' figure (amply documented in earlier Jewish literature), who sought an abode on Earth but was there rejected, rather than from information concerning a recently deceased historical individual. Altogether, musing and reflection on earlier sacred texts has been - and often still is - a very significant factor in the formation and development of religious ideas. (Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, p. xviii)

In connection with my P2, Earl Doherty points out that

we consistently see the basic form [of the narrative of Jesus' earthly life] in Mark, followed by a pattern of ascending order of detail and sophistication which more or less coincides with the order in which the Gospels were written. This is a dead giveaway that later writers are enlarging on earlier ones... we have one story, with multiple reworkings... Mark, in fact, is simplicity personified throughout his entire Gospel, so his passion story simply conforms to his own writing style. Those later flowery narratives are indeed legend-building, but they are legends that built on Mark's precedent... Mark... contains almost nothing which cannot be traced back to verses in scripture... The best explanation for Mark's "simplicity" is that he was the first fashioner of a basic story. Prior to that initial tale, we face a complete void on any details of the passion of Jesus. (*Challenging the Verdict*, pp. 167, 173, 181)

In connection with my P3, I again defer to Wells:

The silences of these early epistles are 'baffling' only if it is assumed that their Jesus is the same person as the Jesus of the gospels. The ministry of the latter is... arguably traceable to the career of an itinerant Galilean preacher of the opening decades of the first century; but the Pauline Jesus seems to have a different origin. He may have been to some extent modelled on gods of pagan mystery religions who died and were resurrected, but he clearly owes much more to a particular early Christian interpretation of Jewish Wisdom traditions... It is not in dispute that many religious ideas among Jews and early Christians originated as a result of musing on and extracting hidden meanings from existing sacred and semi-sacred texts. Paul says that "whatever was written in former days" - he has sacred writings in mind - "was written for our instruction"

(Rom. 15:4). Now there was an ancient Wisdom myth which explained the underlying goodness of creation and also the undeniable evil in it by combining two ideas: that a Wisdom figure stood at God's side and participated as he created the world (Proverbs 8:22-31), and that when Wisdom sought an abode on Earth, mankind refused to accept her, forcing her to wander from one place to another, until finally in despair she returned to heaven:

Wisdom found no place where she might dwell. Then a dwelling place was assigned to her in the heavens. Wisdom went forth to make her dwelling among the children of men, and found no dwelling-place. Wisdom returned to her place and took her seat among the angels. (1 Enoch 42:1-2)

... The influence of Jewish Wisdom literature on Paul is undeniable: statements made about Wisdom in this literature are made of Jesus in the Pauline letters. At 1 Cor. 1:24 Paul actually calls Christ "the power of God and the Wisdom of God"; and Paul's Jesus, like the Jewish Wisdom figure, sought acceptance on Earth, but was rejected, and then returned to heaven. At Coloss. 2:3 we read of "Christ in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge". Like Wisdom, he assisted God in the creation of all things (1 Cor. 8:6). (*The Jesus Myth*, pp. 95-97)

Naturally all these points can be developed, and they have been in the sources which I have cited. Of course (and I know Christians won't like this), the literalist Christian interpretation grants validity to supernaturalism, and not only is there no good reason to do so, there are also numerous reasons why belief in the supernatural is irrational, as I have shown (see for instance my paper [Bahnsen on "Knowing the Supernatural"](#)). This reason alone is sufficient to reject Christianity, but it will take a long time for many people to come to grips with it.

Meanwhile, Christians have told me how improbable Jesus' fulfillment of OT prophecies is. As Christian [Harvey Burnett himself put it](#):

*The chances are 1 in 100,000,000,000,000,000. Which is equivalent to taking as many silver dollars as it would take, and cover the state of Texas with them until it was 2 FEET deep. Then mark ONE Silver Dollar, stir the coins up thoroughly all over the state, put a blindfold on a man, tell him he can travel as far as he wishes within the state but he MUST pick out the ONE marked coin... In other words There's NO CHANCE one man could have fulfilled all of these 8 prophecies yet alone the ADDITIONAL 40 in his lifetime with the percision that was done unless HE IS GOD.*

In response to this, [I stated](#):

By making the matter an issue of probability, Harvey undercuts his own position quite severely. Consider the scenario he uses to illustrate the sheer remoteness of the probability he ascribes to Jesus' fulfillment of OT prophecy. If I told Harvey that, under the conditions he describes, I know someone who found the one marked silver dollar in the 100,000,000,000,000,000 coins that buried the state of Texas on the very first draw, would Harvey believe me? According to Harvey's own statement, apparently not, for he insists that "There's NO CHANCE one man could have" done this - either find that one coin, or that "one man could have fulfilled all of these 8 prophecies." It seems that Harvey himself is telling us that this is not to be believed, given the proportions of the stated improbability. It is just a made up story that the guy I know found the coin on the first try. If we grant the astronomical improbability of this happening that Harvey insists we accept, then other explanations become more probable, such as that the story of the guy finding the one marked coin out of 100,000,000,000,000,000 is either mistaken, false, or simply fabricated.

On the one hand, Christians want their supernaturalism, but then they want to play the numbers racket by inflating the odds so much that they blow up right in their faces.

So there are numerous avenues I can pursue here, including the internal evidence, the philosophical, as well as exposure of apologetic absurdities.

### David's Counterpoints

David's response to the argument scheme which he attributes to me above was:

R1.1 Paul's intended purpose for the letters is incongruent with the assumption that he "would have" included all known information about Jesus' earthly ministry in addressing his original audience

I don't think anyone has argued that Paul "would have included *all* known information about Jesus' earthly ministry" had he known it. Even Wells does not claim this, nor do Doherty or Price as far as I can tell. And I certainly do not. Rather, this seems to be an exaggerated construal of a position intended to disgrace the observation that Paul and other early writers are conspicuously ignorant of significant details of the gospel version of Jesus' biography. The fact that these authors fail to include any of these details is most inexplicable if they did have knowledge of it. For instance, when Paul speaks of Jesus being "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4), he noticeably leaves out the detail, common to both Matthew and Luke, that Jesus was born of a virgin. When Paul speaks about baptism, he does not mention the part about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. When he speaks about circumcision and other points of contention over the Law, he does not mention Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish leadership over observance of the law or his defiance of the Sabbath. I could go on, but these examples are sufficient to secure my point.

As have many others, David errs in assuming that the silences in the early epistles are exclusive to Paul. Wells draws the following point on this:

These overall silences by different authors are significant. If Paul alone had written as he did of Jesus, one might just possibly be able to attribute this to some personal idiosyncrasy, but a consistent silence by numerous independent early writers about matters which, had they known of them, they could not but have regarded as relevant to their purposes, cannot be so explained. This very important point has been ignored by most of my critics, who writes as though I base my whole case on the silences of Paul. Characteristic is Ian Wilson, who calls them the "linchpin" of my arguments, and gives no indication that I show such silence to be pervasive throughout all the earliest Christian documents. Wilson admits to "pro-Christian bias" (*[Jesus: The Evidence]*, p. 7), and it is amply reflected in the tone of his comments ("Professor Wells and like detractors", who writes "scholarly-looking" books and, with his "likes", seizes on a "ready excuse" to discount significant evidence; pp. 41-43). Having narrowed this issue down to the silences of Paul, Wilson thinks them quite easy to explain: Paul never met the pre-crucifixion Jesus, and "it is therefore hardly to be expected that he would be full of chapter and verse on Jesus's biography" (p. 42). To suggest that Paul is merely 'not full' of such biographical allusions is a gross understatement and a facile way of discounting the significance of his silences... Equally significant is that the silences of the earliest documents is not maintained in epistles written sufficiently late for their authors to have been cognizant of at any rate some elements of the synoptic tradition. We saw this apropos of the way they refer to the Passion (above, pp. 57f); and when we come to 2 Peter, we find "for the first time clear [epistolary] reference to a pre-Passion event in Jesus' life", namely the transfiguration (Thompson, *[Clothed With Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12:1-15:13]*, p. 43). Thompson adds that this letter is arguably the very latest NT epistle: scholars are now nearly unanimous that it is pseudepigraphical, and many of them date it in the second century. France allows that today, even among evangelical Christians, few would try to defend its Petrine authorship with any enthusiasm (*[Evangelical Anglicans]*, p. 51). Outside the canon, 1 Clement, probably as late as the turn of the century, did not know the gospels..., yet specifies mercy, forgiveness, and reciprocity as teachings of Jesus, and says that he warned against causing the elect to stumble; and Ignatius of Antioch tells his fellow Christians that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, baptized by John, crucified under Pilate and that after resurrection he ate and drank with his followers as a real body. One would look in vain for such specific information in the early epistles... They appear to be unaware not only of the gospels but also of the basic traditions underlying them. The reasonable inference, then, is: either these traditions are entirely legendary, or they refer to a Jesus figure (probably historical) quite different from the Jesus of the earliest documents. (*The Jesus Myth*, pp. 67-68)

Since some later epistles, including both the canonical (yet pseudepigraphical) 2 Peter and the non-canonical epistles of Ignatius, do in fact contain references to the Jesus of the synoptic tradition, it is futile to argue that inclusion of such information goes against the "authorial intent" of the epistolary genre. Paul, for instance, tells us in I Cor. 2:2 that he was "determined not to know anything..., save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." And yet in all his letters where he is frequently speaking of Jesus and his crucifixion or resurrection, he never once mentions when it took place, where it took place, or the circumstances under which it transpired. It is hard to see how *all* these details would lie outside Paul's "authorial intent," given what he indicates regarding his intent. To explain these silences, David seems to be saying that Paul's purpose for his letters is incongruent with the assumption or possibility that he would have included *any* known information about Jesus' life. In the numerous references in Paul's letters to baptism, would it really have been contrary to his "authorial intent" to deliberately remain silent about Jesus' own baptism at the hands of John the Baptist, which according to the gospels inaugurated Jesus' missionary work? When Paul tries to argue his case regarding the Mosaic Law, would it really have been outside his "authorial intent" to make at least some reference to Jesus' teaching on it, as found, for instance, in Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount (where, incidentally, Jesus affirms the whole law), or

Jesus' conflicts with the chief priests (such as in regard to the keeping of the Sabbath)? And when Paul gives certain moral teachings which the gospels attribute to Jesus (I quoted Wells at length documenting numerous examples of this), would it really have been against his "authorial intent" to credit Jesus for these teachings? I've seen no good reason to suppose any of these things would have been contrary to Paul's purposes in his letters, but this is what the prevailing explanation of these silences requires us to believe.

David's response to what he takes as my argument began with the following point:

R1.2 While focusing on the gaps is certainly valid, we must not forget the long list of things Paul does tell us about Jesus

And I've not forgotten this. Indeed, I dedicated [a whole post](#) to the claim that Paul did know about the earthly Jesus. And below I strengthen my points in regard to these claims by response to David's attempted counterpoints. In fact, Paul tells us precious little about the earthly Jesus, by comparison with the gospels so little that it is widely admitted by scholars to be a significant problem.

David wrote:

R2.1 Thematic differentiation, telescoping, and selective inclusion do not constitute embellishment but merely demonstrates an authorial intent that has its audience in mind.

Embellishments are readily evident in the canonical versions of Jesus' biography, particularly in the passion sequences, precisely because there are several accounts of it. A side-by-side comparison of these accounts reveals some riveting indications of redaction, embellishment, expansion and modification.

In regard to Mark, the earliest gospel, Wells quotes Telford, who concedes that this gospel

is now widely regarded as the product of a more or less creative editorial process upon diverse and discreet oral (and possibly written) traditions which had circulated for a generation within the primitive Christian communities that transmitted them. (*The Interpretation of Mark*, p. 41; quoted in Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, pp. 257-258)

But apologists for literalist Christianity want the gospel of Mark to be the product of Peter's secretary, who allegedly took dictation at the side of an aged fisherman-turned-apostle, whose memory at a later age must have been supple enough to recount speeches, sermons, prayers, parables and other sayings which the gospel puts into Jesus' mouth. It's always curious to me how apologists for Christianity seem to play fast and loose with the propensities of memory as one gets older. Wells (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 16) quotes Mitton (*Jesus: The Fact Behind the Faith*, p. 70):

for a man of sixty, the events of his life thirty years before, especially outstanding ones such as contact with Jesus must have been, stand out as clearly as yesterday's

So according to this, things which one experienced long ago can be remembered as vividly as something he experienced just earlier today, which - if one's memory of something that happened just the day before is indeed vivid - must be quite reliable. Then there's Geisler and Turek, who in their corny book *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist* tell us (p. 244) that

those of us who are "over the hill" can remember some events from 30 years ago better than those from 30 minutes ago!

Suddenly one's memory of the distant past is actually *better* than one's memory of recent things. Apparently these thought experiments are supposed to inform our knowledge of the ability to remember on the part of those who wrote the gospels. We are expected simply to grant that what we are reading is the product of infallible memories, and discouraged to suppose that perhaps there was some literary construction going on. And even though it is implicitly conceded that sufficient time for a legend to have taken root has passed, at no point are we allowed to entertain the possibility that these authors may have confabulated their experiences of two or three or even more decades before. Meanwhile, apologists tell us that the human mind has been infected with "sin" and that it is untrustworthy in its pursuit of truth when unaided by supernatural revelation, a phenomenon which has yet to be explained. It is never to be considered that a profoundly emotionally stirring experience can grow in intensity and proportion over the years in one's mind as he contemplates it and invests it with cosmic significance. Were I to have such an unquestioningly accurate memory at my age today! I suppose we're expected to take for granted that there was zero chance that Peter could have been afflicted with Alzheimer's in his later

years.

Let's get back to reality. The gospels ascribed to Matthew and Luke obviously took the gospel ascribed to Mark as their basic model. Apologetic attempts to dispel this fact quickly encounter their own futility. Observe:

In an appendix in his *The Law* (p. 123), [Christian apologist J.W.] Montgomery quotes an apologist who says that, if the accounts in different gospels of the same transactions were in strict verbal conformity with each other, then "the argument against their credibility would be much stronger", for their testimony would then be exposed as collusive. But any synopsis, where parallel passages are set out in adjacent columns, will show that the first three of the four canonical gospels have passages which are identical, down to the same Greek particles. For instance, Matthew's account, in the material it shares with Mark, is abbreviated and Mark's 11,078 words are represented by 8,555; yet of these 4,230 are identical both in form and in sequence. Goulder gives these figures and adds that the enormous number of identical phrases is not to be explained as being due to the community's good memory of Jesus's teaching, as more than half of such phrases are in the narrative, not the words of Jesus. Goulder and others have also found it significant that the individual pericopes occur very largely in the same order in the synoptics. Wenham (*Redating*, p. 7) notes that within the Galilean ministry there are numerous events and teachings which have no obvious logical or chronological sequence, yet are given in the same order in all three synoptics. As a further example he mentions Mk. 6:14-16:8 and Matthew chapters 14 to 28. Here are seventy items, all in order (except for a minor difference in the way the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree are related), "and this in spite of various omissions and additions by one or other evangelist." It is difficult to believe that such correspondence could have arisen without a literary connection - without, that is, the one writer drawing on the work of the other or on a common source. Wenham's remarks carry particular weight because he is anxious to *minimize* the literary dependence of one evangelist upon another, and to argue that each one "writes in the way he habitually teaches" (p. xxi). But even he does not feel able to regard the synoptics as independent editions of primitive oral material. (*The Jesus Legend*, pp. 95-96).

David wrote:

Each Gospel had a clearly different intended audience, and thus includes different relevant content respectively.

This is misleading. While it may be the case that the authors of the gospels had different intended audiences in mind, it would not follow from this supposition that the *general* intent of their writing was different. It's undeniable that each gospel is intended to depict the public life and passion of the earthly Jesus, while Paul's letters are clearly intended to lay out proper Christian teaching on the topics they address. These are not incompatible intents lacking any and all possibility of overlap. On the contrary, if - as the gospels claim - Jesus during his earthly life spoke on the kinds of things which Paul's letters address in their attempts to settle disputes, why wouldn't Paul cite Jesus' own teachings and example, if he had known of them?

It really beggars belief that Paul, anxious as he was to inculcate numerous ethical principles (such as 'judge not' and 'practise forgiveness'), knew that Jesus had taught them, yet did not appeal to his authority on such matters. Nor is it believable that both Paul and the Christians who strongly opposed him in an ill-tempered quarrel on the question of obeying or ignoring the Jewish food laws knew yet ignored rulings which, according to the gospels, Jesus had given on the matter. Nor is it plausible that Paul's convictions on the second coming left him indifferent to eschatological statements supposedly made by Jesus which eventually came to be recorded in the gospels. Nor can I accept that what Jesus had supposedly said on all such fundamental issues was of no interest to all other earthly writers either, or simply presupposed by them as known to their readers. It will not do to say that allusions to these matters cannot be expected in epistles; for those written late enough to have known traditions which in due course found their way into the gospels do allude to them. (*The Jesus Legend*, pp. 94-95)

Vague appeals to "authorial intent" or "different intended audiences" are unpersuasive, especially if we're expected to understand with these references that Paul and other early epistle writers were familiar with the earthly Jesus depicted in the gospel narratives. If believers find this so difficult to offer more legitimate explanations for these significant disparities and silences (particularly given Paul's intense concern regarding his own validation as an apostle), why not simply concede that Paul, the earliest writer of the NT, did not know of these things? But if this is conceded, we need to ask why wouldn't he have known of these things, if he were divinely inspired. Or, are we to suppose that he knew of these things, but deliberately refrained from mentioning them in his letters, even though citing them could have greatly supported his position on the matters he addressed?



Indeed, it should be borne in mind that campaigners for a position may tailor their message to particular audiences, but the overall intent may remain the same from venue to venue, from speech to speech, from pamphlet to pamphlet.

David wrote:

R3.1 Explanatory power cannot be derived from pagan mythology because evidence for such has not been provided.

Here we have but an open denial taking refuge in an argument from ignorance, thus lacking the force of blow it is intended to deliver. That Paul drew on sources other than gospel-like traditions to inform his view of Jesus has already been established above. Paul constructed his views of Jesus by musing and reflecting on sacred literature, including the OT as well as the Jewish Wisdom literature. That having been said, however,

The pagan environment of earliest Christianity also cannot have been unimportant. The classical scholar Dihle allows that many of the features of the pagan mystery cults found their way into Christianity ([“The Graeco-Roman Background,” in *Jesus in His Time*], p. 13). Some of these cults worshipped a saviour who died a violent death and was then revived or resurrected. Osiris, for instance, is said in very ancient records to have been dismembered, reassembled by Isis and “rejuvenated”, i.e., restored to life. Of course there are differences both between the various mystery religions and between them and Pauline Christianity. Yet the Osiris cult and the Eleusinian mysteries were part of Paul’s background, and one does not expect a new religion to be absolutely identical with its antecedents. The parallels between some of the relevant Christian and pagan rites and doctrines were certainly close enough to have embarrassed second-century Christians. Justin Martyr, for instance, after describing the institution of the Lord’s Supper, as narrated in the gospels, goes on to say: “Which the wicked devils have imitated in the mysteries of Mithra, commanding the same thing to be done. For bread and a cup of water are placed with certain incantation in the mystic rites of one who is being initiated.” (*Apology*, I, 66. The Christian cultic meal sometimes consisted of bread and water: see *The Jesus of the Early Christians*, p. 264.) He is not accusing the Mithraists of simply copying, but supposed that evil spirits anticipated Christian truths, as when he noted (in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, 70): “When I hear that Perseus was begotten of a virgin, I understand that the deceiving serpent counterfeited also this.” Justin’s theory is that the demons knew from the prophets that Christ was to come and what he would be like, and therefore devised such gods as Bacchus, Hercules, Asclepius, and Mithras to resemble him before his time, so that he would seem unimpressive when he did come. That the demons likewise anticipated Christian sacraments (baptism as well as eucharist) is a simple extension of this theory which, as Ramsey notes ([*Beginning to Read the Fathers*], p. 200), was reiterated by later Christian writers. That the Lord’s Supper existed before Christianity is clear from 1 Cor. 10:21, where Paul tells the Corinthian flock that they “cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils”, nor “partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of devils”. Pagan gults, then, had their own ritual of ‘holy communion’, prior to and independent of Christianity. The same is true of the pre-Christian Jews whose views are evidenced in the Dead Sea Scrolls. (*The Jesus Myth*, pp. 99-100)

Denying the existence or influence of cults which centered around worship of Osiris, Mithra and other pagan deities on Christianity simply will not do if we are to conduct a responsible inquiry into Christianity’s origins.

Recall that [I had written](#):

The gospels did not exist yet when Paul was missionizing his churches and writing his letters. The gospels were written well after this time...

David responded:

Also, “well after this time” is assuming a particular dating for the Gospels - of which arguments are absent - while I have presented several for my assumed dating.

Actually, “well after this time” assumes only a *general* (rather than “particular”) dating scheme for the gospels. It is pretty much universally accepted that the earliest gospel (“Mark”) was written after Paul had written his letters. Of course, Paul did not date his letters, but critics are generally agreed that they were written from as early as about AD 50 to as late as about AD 65. As for when the gospels were written, there is obviously considerable disagreement among scholars on this, some preferring an early date while others seeing later dates as more reasonably plausible. Naturally many Christians are going to want to see the composition of the gospels as early as possible. A common argument for a pre-70 AD date for the composition of the gospel of Mark, for



instance, rests on an appeal to Papias, who is the source of the claim that Peter dictated his gospel to a secretary named Mark, an unknown personage which Paul never mentions in any of the authentically Pauline epistles (he is mentioned in II Tim. 4:11, but this epistle is unreliable because of its pseudonymity).

Meanwhile, Wells offers plenty of argumentation for dating the gospels post-70 (and some even as late as 90-100) in his book *The Jesus Myth* (cf. pp. 14-49). I see no reason why I need to regurgitate Wells' arguments here.

I wrote:

if they are in fact primitive rudiments which later narrative-constructors adapted in their growing yarn of Jesus' pre-crucifixion life.

David responded:

Well if they are primitive rudiments not based in fact, I do hope you will humor me with an alternate explanation for where they came from (pagan mythology etc.) and provide some concrete evidence with dates.

First of all, neither David nor other Christians have succeeded in demonstrating that the primitive rudiments in question are based in historic facts about the earthly Jesus' life. Simply affirming that the gospels are genuinely historical accounts only begs the question, for this is what Christians are called to prove. Also, I've pointed to several sources (the OT, the Wisdom literature, Hellenistic culture, including mystery cults) from which Paul and other early Christians drew their portrait of the messiah figure they worshipped. The expectation for a messiah had been there all along. It was just a matter of time until inventive zealots started piecing together the puzzle anew to concoct a "fulfillment" of this expectation.

I wrote:

As for whether or not the gospel writers used Paul as a source, this is unclear. However, as I have shown, many of the teachings which Paul gives as his own or as inspired by his interpretation of 'the scriptures' are put into Jesus' mouth in the gospels. This suggests that later writers were using sources that were influenced by Paul, even if they did not mention or credit Paul.

David responded:

Yes if we simply assert that they were "put into Jesus' mouth" instead of the more rhetorically neutral "alleged sayings of Jesus" we can really make the point sound much more convincing. But alas, why must we use such tactics if the argument itself stands as firm as we claim.

Because this is precisely what the later evangelists did when they were constructing their narratives of the earthly Jesus' life: they took from earlier source material, such as teachings which were current in early Christianity (but which had not been supposed to have originated from the earthly Jesus) and put into Jesus' mouth in the context of those narratives in order to stamp them with supreme authority. The opportunity, the motivation and the need were all present by the time the evangelists got down to writing their portraits of the earthly Jesus.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Legends](#)

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [6:00 AM](#)

**3 Comments:**

[david](#) said...

This post has been removed by the author.

[September 27, 2008 11:27 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

Greetings Dawson, hope all is well. I tried to be as brief as I could but you have once again given much to warrant a clarification or response on my part.

Your misinterpretation of 1 Cor 2:2 is baffling, but I'll get to that in a moment. Also, your list was directly compiled from Wells was it not?

Dawson: *A common response from Christians is make the plea that reference to any of these things would be redundant in Paul's case, for his intended audiences would have already known about these things. This assumes knowledge of what was preached to Paul's churches, and one can only wonder where this knowledge comes from.*

Let's compare two promising assumptions (yet again) and judge which is more feasible:

1) Paul continuously and inexplicably references things which to his readers were unknown or unintelligible

2) Paul's audience had sufficient background knowledge with which to read his letters, as the letters themselves would have been written **with the audience's background knowledge in mind!**

As you compose a letter do you take into consideration your recipient's existing knowledge - perhaps from previous letters, conversations, phone calls and text messages? I would assume so. Would you be displeased if someone later acquired a copy of this letter and began hastily assuming that every single detail you didn't explicate must be unbeknownst to your recipient? How could this person who recovered the letter know about any prior interactions between you and the original recipient? "One can only wonder where this knowledge comes from." Of course the answer is this 3rd party could not know for certain, but can only interpret your letter to the best of their abilities using a consistent hermeneutic - the basic rules used to interpret any written document. Which approach do you think would render the most fair and consistent interpretation?

Perhaps one might object, "Sir, I think the author of this letter is deluded, so why should I benefit him with such fairness?" The answer is simple; if you cannot discard your assumptions long enough to examine the letter from the standpoint of sane authorship, then you should probably discard the letter itself. Your assumption has already negated any further conclusions you could have possibly reached; similarly, a further examination of Christianity would prove fruitless with respect to ascertaining the validity of its truth claims given the assumption that its earliest author was deluded.

Judgments about the content of Paul's knowledge are inseparable from an analysis of Paul's coherence with respect to his intended audience. Yet we are asked to believe this about Paul who was raised in a monotheistic worldview and who constantly encouraged churches to refrain from worldly philosophies.

Now a question which lends itself to our discussion: if atheism is true why campaign against Christianity? What difference does it make? We're all going to hit the dust one day, and after that should it matter whether or not a bunch of highly intelligent mammals finally surmised the futility of their own existence? I honestly don't understand what motivates atheists, what about you? Where could such a moral imperative such as "one ought to pursue the truth" originate?

Dawson: *It also ignores numerous opportunities which it has Paul pass up in which he could have drawn from Jesus' example and teachings in order to strengthen his own arguments (e.g., baptism, circumcision, clean vs. unclean food, the law, etc.)*

Consider what constitutes a strong argument to Paul's audience vis-à-vis what constitutes a strong argument to Dawson - are they the same?

Dawson: *I examined each of these 17 references and concluded that they are not instances of Paul drawing from knowledge of the historical Jesus, but are rather symbolic or theological traditions which the later evangelists grafted into their concocted narratives of Jesus' pre-exaltation biography.*

I think you have overstated your case. What you did for the most part was compile questions (but Paul didn't tell us when, where, or how?!) and then reassert the legend theory in some fashion (exactly what we would expect if this were a legend). I will read over your responses again in preparation of my closing statement and address any conclusions you reached during this process.

Dawson: *In the next couple of blog entries I will interact with David's rejoinders to my points in response to the items he cited.*

I am flattered that you consider my responses to be sharp and witty. ;)

Dawson: *Yes, I can see that David does have this problem.*

What makes you unable to engage in a rational discussion without throwing in little rhetorical jabs at your opponent's expense? Yet when I return the favor you characterize me as being juvenile and threaten to expel me from your blog. Is this fair or does your perspective grant a different interpretation to your behavior? Of course the question stands as to what motive such rhetoric could serve, if indeed your arguments possess the strength you attribute them. I see no need to insult you, because my worldview assigns you inherent value as a creature made in the image of God. Yet from your perspective, I see no reason why should respect me at all. Am I wrong?

Wells said *:silence on a topic does not prove ignorance of it; but a writer's silence is surely significant if it extends to matters obviously relevant to what he has chosen to discuss. And if we believe the gospels, there was much in Jesus' biography that would have been relevant to the disputes in which Paul was embroiled. (The Historical Evidence For Jesus, p. 31. Wells proceeds to identify a number of areas where Paul's silence is thus significant.)*

But remember the other constraint we have previously discussed: Paul's situation when writing the letters. Surely if we expect him to include all the relevant details (even if he knew them) we are assuming that he could have done this, but if he is writing during travel I think this assumption weakened significantly (I have studied a bit on ancient writing and how tedious this process was - nothing compared to the comfort you and I share with our word processors and office chairs). Indeed this point can be applied to Mark as well; may scholars believe that the hostile situation surrounding Mark during his authorship contributed to his brevity.

Dawson : *The apologist for literalist Christianity, however, seeking to defend its dogmas against the potent threat which Paul's blaring silences pose for them, tends toward the stance that Paul's letters to his budding churches are not analogous in their concern for Jesus to a book on transport systems in a historic German capital. But why wouldn't they be analogous to this? After all, Paul declared that he was "determined not to know anything... save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). And yet, in spite of this determination which Paul stresses, he never gives any indication of when Jesus was crucified, where he was crucified, or under what circumstances this event had allegedly taken place.*

I think you have entirely missed the point of "not to know anything...save Jesus Christ, and him crucified". Let's read what Paul has to say in the verse prior:

*1And I, when I came to you , brothers,\*n1.1 did not come proclaiming to you the testimony\*n1.4 of God with lofty speech or wisdom.*

Need I say more about this?

Wells: *It is sometimes contended that Paul is silent concerning what the gospels record as Jesus' biography simply because he was writing to people who did not need to be reminded of such matters. But why, then, does he again and again mention his death by crucifixion, with which, in terms of the case, they were equally familiar? And why do his many references to this event nevertheless give no indication of where, when, or under what circumstances it occurred? (The Historical Evidence For Jesus, p. 37)*

Paul mentions the crucifixion and resurrection because they are the central elements of his proclamation, indeed they provide underlying foundation of all thematic material in the Pauline corpus. Luke is probably the only New Testament writer who purposely sets out to give such a definitive historical context for Jesus' earthly ministry, so I would think this is more of a question about early Jewish literary habits and not Paul himself.

Dawson: *David then sought to reduce my position to a concise syllogism:*

I don't think you are making a deductive argument here Dawson, do you? I merely listed out the general premises which lend themselves to supporting your conclusion. There may be more premises out there, and these certainly do not guarantee the conclusion with 100% certainty, so I see no reason to think a syllogism has been presented - but feel free to provide your definition of syllogism if you feel I have misrepresented you. My point is that you have misrepresented my intentions for presenting those premises - it was merely an aid to understanding the overall meat of the discussion.

Regarding the alleged parallel or dependence between Paul's Christology and the mystery religions, observe

Ronald Nash's on this point:

*"The best way to evaluate the alleged dependence of early Christian beliefs about Christ's death and resurrection on the pagan myths of a dying and rising savior-god is to examine carefully the supposed parallels. The death of Jesus is different from the deaths of the pagan gods in at least six ways. (1) None of the so-called savior gods died for someone else. The notion of the Son of God dying in the place of his creatures is unique to Christianity (see Hegel, Son of God pg 60). (2) Only Jesus died for sin. It is never claimed that any of the pagan deities died for sin. As Wagner observes, to none of the pagan gods "has the intention of helping men been attributed. The sort of death that they died is quite different... (See Wagner, Pauline Baptism pg 284). (3) Jesus died once and for all. In contrast, mystery gods were vegetation deities whose repeated death and resuscitation depict the annual cycle of nature. (4) Jesus' death was an actual event in history [I'm sure Dawson will think this is circular]...The incontestable fact that the early church believed that its proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection was grounded upon what actually happened in history makes absurd any attempt to derive this belief from the mythical, non-historical stories of the pagan cults. (See W.K.C. Guthrie, Orpheus and Greek Religion, 2nd ed., pg 28). (5) Unlike the mystery gods, Jesus died voluntarily...Machen states, "Osiris, Adonis, and Attis were overtaken by their fate; Jesus gave his life freely away. The difference is stupendous; it involves the very heart of the religion of Paul" (Machen, Origin of Paul's Religion, pg 315). (6) And finally, Jesus; death was not a defeat but a triumph. Christianity stands entirely apart from the pagan mysteries in that its report of Jesus' death is a message of triumph. The New Testament's mood of exultation contrasts sharply with that of the mystery religions, whose followers wept and mourned for the terrible fate that overtook their gods (Nock, Early Gentile Christianity, pg 106). - The Gospel and The Greeks, pg 160*

In addition to the above, Nash brings out 8 major weaknesses that he finds in such attempts. I will only summarize them, and if any further discussion is desired I can flesh out the details:

1. The logical fallacy of false cause
2. Many alleged similarities are exaggerated or invented (e.g. trying to transfer semantics between Christian terminology and pagan terminology for words such as savior or baptism)
3. Chronological errors regarding the claims about early Christian syncretism. The alleged influences are very late according to the sources at hand.
4. Paul would not have borrowed from pagan religions. He was trained in strict Judaism (Phil 3:5) and even warned the Colossians against the very things some accuse him of (Col 2:8). Would Paul's enemies (the Judaizers) have quickly attacked him for such compromise?
5. Christianity is a monotheistic religion with a definitive body of doctrine.
6. Early Christianity was an exclusivistic faith.
7. Paul centered his gospel on the factuality of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:14: "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.")
8. Chronologically speaking, it is probable that Christianity may have influences some mystery religions.

Dawson: *On the one hand, Christians want their supernaturalism, but then they want to play the numbers racket by inflating the odds so much that they blow up right in their faces.*

Interesting digression.

*For instance, when Paul speaks of Jesus being "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4), he noticeably leaves out the detail, common to both Matthew and Luke, that Jesus was born of a virgin. When Paul speaks about baptism, he does not mention the part about Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. When he speaks about circumcision and other points of contention over the Law, he does not mention Jesus' conflicts with the Jewish leadership over observance of the law or his defiance of the Sabbath. I could go on, but these examples are sufficient to secure my point.*

The only point that you've secured is that Paul omits details; you have yet to demonstrate why he **would** have known these details or **should** have made them known to his audience. Simply asserting that it would have made his case stronger will not do, nor will pointing out that he should have included material since was relevant....the analogy to the underground railway completely ignores that Paul was writing under different conditions - namely when writing was much more tedious than our present tools afford.

Dawson: *As have many others, David errs in assuming that the silences in the early epistles are exclusive to Paul. Wells draws the following point on this:*

Where have I assumed this? I don't recall any substantive discussion of the other early writers in our exchanges thus far.

Wells: *Outside the canon, 1 Clement, probably as late as the turn of the century, did not know the gospels....,*

Hmm, that seems like a serious error.

“the letter sent to the Corinthians church by Clement, bishop of Rome, about AD 96 - we find fairly certain quotations from the common tradition of the Synoptic Gospels, from Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Titus, Hebrews, 1 Peter...” (F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents, Are They Reliable?*, pg 13)

Some examples of allusion I found just skimming through the first epistle to the Corinthians.

“For it is to the humble-minded that Christ belongs, not to those who exalt themselves above His flock.”

“We all, like sheep, had gone astray; each man had wandered from his path.”

“42. The Apostles preached to us the Gospel received from Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ was God's Ambassador. Christ, in other words, comes with a message from God, and the Apostles with a message from Christ. Both these orderly arrangements, therefore, originate from the will of God. And so, after receiving their instructions and being fully assured through the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, as well as confirmed in faith by the word of God, they went forth, equipped with the fullness of the Holy Spirit, to preach the good news that the Kingdom of God was close at hand.”

“49. He who has love in Christ must observe the commandments of Christ.” (where these commandments found)  
“to Him glory and honor and power and majesty and everlasting dominion, from eternity to eternity. Amen”

*Dawson: Since some later epistles, including both the canonical (yet pseudepigraphical) 2 Peter and the non-canonical epistles of Ignatius, do in fact contain references to the Jesus of the synoptic tradition, it is futile to argue that inclusion of such information goes against the “authorial intent” of the epistolary genre. Paul, for instance, tells us in 1 Cor. 2:2 that he was “determined not to know anything..., save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” And yet in all his letters where he is frequently speaking of Jesus and his crucifixion or resurrection, he never once mentions when it took place, where it took place, or the circumstances under which it transpired. It is hard to see how all these details would lie outside Paul’s “authorial intent,” given what he indicates regarding his intent.*

I think you are confused. An epistle is just a letter. You can't just group all letters together into a genre and insist the authorial intent be homogenous amongst them - once again reckless abandon with respect to an accurate handling of the New Testament documents. I have already shown elsewhere how your use of 1 Cor 2:2 is mistaken.

*Dawson: Let's get back to reality. The gospels ascribed to Matthew and Luke obviously took the gospel ascribed to Mark as their basic model. Apologetic attempts to dispel this fact quickly encounter their own futility.*

Uhh, where did I say anything about Markan priority being invalid? I can always step aside if you wish tirade against apologists other than myself; I hardly find it relevant or surprising that you dislike apologists.

*Dawson: This is misleading. While it may be the case that the authors of the gospels had different intended audiences in mind, it would not follow from this supposition that the general intent of their writing was different.*

No more than an acute unawareness (historically speaking) of the vast lacuna between the cultures of Greek, Roman, Jewish, and other Gentile audiences could persuade one to climb out on such a limb. The **intent** is the audience, and the content and style will differ with respect to that audience. You seem to think that I supposed “that the general intent of their writing was different,” which is not what I said.

*Dawson: It really beggars belief that Paul, anxious as he was to inculcate numerous ethical principles (such as ‘judge not’ and ‘practise forgiveness’), knew that Jesus had taught them, yet did not appeal to his authority on such matters.*

Right so Paul claims to have a direct revelation from Jesus himself and thus claims apostolic authority, yet he should probably stake his claims in what Cephas and James told him of Jesus' ministry, **assuming** they told him something? If Jesus appeared to him why should he dictate an autobiographical sketch to Paul?

*Dawson: But if this is conceded, we need to ask why wouldn't he have known of these things, if he were divinely inspired.*

Does divine inspiration guarantee comprehensive knowledge, or merely that knowledge which God deems sufficient for the task? Seems Paul's letters were pretty sufficient for jump starting the church up, no?

*Dawson: Or, are we to suppose that he knew of these things, but deliberately refrained from mentioning them in*

*his letters, even though citing them could have greatly supported his position on the matters he addressed?*

First we must suppose that his audience would have found such citations compelling - an issue which has yet to be addressed.

*Dawson Indeed, it should be borne in mind that campaigners for a position may tailor their message to particular audiences, but the overall intent may remain the same from venue to venue, from speech to speech, from pamphlet to pamphlet.*

We clearly know the overall intent was different for Paul and the gospel authors; therefore, what is your point in making this statement? Do you think the gospel writers differed with respect to overall intent?

*Dawson Actually, "well after this time" assumes only a general (rather than "particular") dating scheme for the gospels. It is pretty much universally accepted that the earliest gospel ("Mark") was written after Paul had written his letters.*

1. James Crossley, an up and coming New Testament historian has dated Mark anywhere between the [early 30's and late 40's](#). Don't start screaming apologist just yet; actually Crossley recently debated William Lane Craig on the historicity of the resurrection, in which he defended the negation.

2. John Robinson (conservative) in *Redating the New Testament* proposes an early date. He accepts Marcan Priority and dates Luke/Acts no later than 62. Therefore, if Mark was written before Luke/Acts, Robinson dates Mark to the mid fifties

3. Gary Habermas also affirms the consensus commonly held conservative position that Mark was written in the fifties.

Remember that conservative scholarship comprises almost 75% of the vocation; therefore, I think your statement about what is "universally accepted" is a vast overstatement and borderlines on wishful thinking.

[September 27, 2008 11:29 PM](#)

[david](#) said...

Just to clarify, my first question about Wells refers to the 40 discrepancies.

[September 27, 2008 11:30 PM](#)

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