

## Paul's Ignorance of the Earthly Jesus, Part 2: Claims 1-7

Now let's review [David's rejoinders](#) to [my counterpoints](#) in regard to the first seven claims that have been made to the effect that Paul had knowledge of the earthly Jesus.

### Claim #1:

*Jesus was born in human fashion, as a Jew, and had a ministry to the Jews. (Galations 4:4)*

I responded:

Yes, Paul does say that Jesus was born. But where was he born? When was he born? Who were his parents? Paul gives us no indication of these things. Paul mentions that he had a mother, but nowhere suggests that he was born a virgin. This legendary element came later as some communities sought to assimilate motifs from rival religions into their own version of Christianity.

David's rejoinder:

Your response is unrelated to what my statement intended to accomplish, which was merely that Paul did say some things about Jesus. Actually you continue to do this for the rest of the post, but I'll only mention it once.

That "Paul did say some things about Jesus" is not disputed. It has never been something I've disputed. My point has been to show that, even when Paul does speak of Jesus, he is not giving details like we find in the gospels, nor do his references confirm the gospels' specifics. In other words, he is not drawing from history as the gospels portray it. For instance, when Paul affirms that Jesus was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), he does not give her name, he does not in any way suggest that she was a virgin, he does not indicate when Jesus was born, where he was born, or the circumstances surrounding his birth. The when, where and who of Jesus' birth are details which Paul leaves completely unattended. What Paul does give us is completely open-ended; it's not incompatible with the possibility that Jesus was born in Jerusalem or Alexandria or Tyre or in the Macedonian countryside; that his mother's name was Josephine and already had 3 children; that he was born in 316 BCE, etc.

### Claim #2:

*Jesus was referred to as "Son of God". (1 Cor. 1:9)*

I responded:

On this, Wells notes significantly:

Paul characteristically applies to [Jesus] titles such as Lord and Son of God - titles which already existed within Judaism and also in pagan religions (see [H. Braun, 'Der Sinn der NT Christology', *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, 54, pp 350-1) - although Jewish monotheistic influences prevents the earliest Christian writers from calling him God. (*Did Jesus exist?*, p. 18)

If this is true - that the title "Son of God" was already in use "within Judaism and also in pagan religions" - this is another motif which Christianity borrowed from predecessor religions and applied to Jesus. As such, it has theological, but not historical meaning: it does nothing to specify a historical setting to Paul's Jesus.

David's rejoinder:

First the usage in Judaism is vastly different from the usage in pagan religions. I'm assuming he's referring to the passage in Daniel. This phrase in Hebrew is completely different than the pagan concept of gods mating with women to have superhuman offspring. To compare the two is to demonstrate a deficient and surface level understanding of both traditions.

Again, the issue is what did Paul know of the earthly Jesus. As my point demonstrates, Paul need not have had

familiarity with the earthly Jesus described in the gospels to have used these titles in reference to him. Even if one does want to claim that "the usage in Judaism is vastly different from the usage in pagan religions," this would not link Paul's reference to Jesus as "the Son of God" to knowledge of the earthly Jesus. This title was already infused in the existing religions of the day, so Paul's use of it does not indicate familiarity with the earthly Jesus.

### Claim #3:

*Jesus was a direct descendent of King David. (Romans 1:3)*

I responded:

David was highly venerated by the Jews, as the legends about him in the OT indicate. Also, since Paul was drawing on OT themes as the palate for his portrait of Jesus, linking him to David would hardly be surprising. Again Wells poignantly nails it: "There are many centuries between David and Paul, and Paul gives no indication in which of them Jesus' earthly life fell." (*Did Jesus exist?*, p. 18) The reference to Jesus as coming from the seed of David opens the possible timeline for Paul's Jesus significantly.

David's rejoinder:

So you're asserting your conclusions on the data and saying Paul just made it up. All I was saying is Paul mentions it....hmm. Seems like the rhetoric just snowballs lately in these posts. Wells poignantly argues from silence, which is hardly unanticipated given his atheist agenda. Sorry I'm having too much fun, I'll stop. :P

Still in the throes of a meltdown, David characterizes my position as "saying Paul just made it up," which is not what I stated. I'll state it again: Paul was drawing on OT themes to inform his view of Jesus - not from reported history of the earthly Jesus (for instance, Paul gives no genealogy here), so linking him to David should be of no surprise. Again it's important to remember that Paul tells us that he got his knowledge of the gospel by revelation (Gal. 1:11-12) as opposed to historical reports. I have asked David to explain how this works, and unsurprisingly he has chosen not to pursue this question. For Paul, 'revelation' involved reinterpreting OT texts. Also, pointing out that "Paul gives no indication" of which century the earthly Jesus lived, is not an argument from silence. It's simply an observation, and if it were in error one should be able to overturn it by presenting a counter-observation, which David has not supplied. Again, David does not recover the point on behalf of the claim that Paul had any familiarity with the Jesus portrayed in the gospels.

### Claim #4:

*Jesus prayed to God using the term 'abba'. (Galations 4:6)*

I responded:

When does Paul have his Jesus do this, and where? How does Paul know? Is Paul making a historical reference, or is he making a theological point? The context of the Galatians passage suggests the latter rather than the former. This interpretation is only buttressed by its appearance in Mark, the earliest gospel:

David's rejoinder:

The term "abba" is the Aramaic equivalent of "daddy." The fact that Jesus would use such a term to address YHWH, the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is absolutely ludicrous in a Jewish context. What evidence does Vermes present?

David is apparently unwilling to do his own research. But ultimately I don't really see the relevance even if one does dispute Vermes' proposal on the matter, since the claim that Paul has Jesus praying to God using the term 'abba' already misconstrues Gal. 4:6, and this claim could only be relevant as a challenge to my position if it can be shown that Paul is citing this from history - i.e., from knowledge of the earthly Jesus. Take a look at Gal. 4:6. It states:

And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.

Paul makes use of the term 'abba' elsewhere, in Rom. 8:15:

For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption,

whereby we cry, Abba, Father.

None of these quotes suggests that “Jesus prayed to God using the term ‘abba’,” certainly not as we read in the gospels. But even supposing one did get this interpretation from Paul (albeit by reading the gospels into his letters), he gives no indication of time or place or circumstances for this. And how would Paul know if Jesus prayed ‘abba’? The gospels had not been written yet, so he certainly did not get this from them. Did he get it from Peter when he encountered him in Jerusalem or Antioch? Paul nowhere indicates that he did. Also, there are some additional problems regarding this for the historical Jesus side of things, but I’ll get into this soon enough below.

David wrote:

Don’t cite sources to buttress your point if you merely intend to use their assertions and not their arguments.

Um, I’ll do whatever the hell I want. I certainly do not take orders from David.

David went on:

Anyway, this kind of thing is what got him crucified in the first place.

I don’t think even the gospels have Jesus being crucified because he called the father deity “abba” in a private prayer. Indeed, Paul in no way suggests that this is what got Jesus crucified.

David wrote:

If the Jews were comfortable with it, then they sure reacted funny (well I guess I’m assuming they really reacted and you would merely contend the reaction was staged to prove a point by the author).

Since David brings it up, let’s think about the Jews’ reactions to the Jesus of Christianity according to the New Testament for a moment. In the gospels, they want Jesus crucified for breaking their religious laws. But in the book of Acts, Peter is able to convert thousands of Jerusalem’s Jews with a couple sermons not long after the crucifixion. As Wells points out:

Peter’s speeches in the early chapters of Acts go down extraordinarily well. He declares that “God foreshadowed by the mouth of all the prophets that his Christ should suffer” (3:18). One might expect Jews to regard this as stretching their scriptures more than a bit. But no, Peter’s audience accepted it in their thousands (4:4). This speech, and his previous one at Pentecost, have sufficed to Christianize what has been calculated as one fifth of the then population of Jerusalem. (*Can We Trust the New Testament?*, pp. 90-91)

In his speech before a multitude of Jerusalem Jews which served to convert some “three thousand souls” according to Acts 2:41, Peter refers to God as “the Father” (v. 33). Apparently these Jews did not have a problem with this, and in so short a time after their leadership had allegedly delivered Jesus to Pilate to be crucified. Indeed, that the Jerusalem Christians were so prominent and publicly active in the Jewish capital of the time, apparently only three or so months after their god-man had been sentenced to death for capital crimes, seems quite implausible. Wells explains how this commonly overlooked implausibility also works against the view that Jesus had a biological brother:

It is almost universally supposed that James was the brother of Jesus, and thus that Paul, James, and Cephas alike worshipped a Jesus recently executed at the behest of the Jerusalem authorities as a Messianic pretender, as “king of the Jews” according to the gospels. But if the Jerusalem authorities had found Jesus sufficiently dangerous to have eliminated him, is it plausible that they would have left unmolested, for a generation or more, his close followers in the same city who were implicating themselves in all that he had stood for by proclaiming that his resurrection had vindicated him as God’s Messiah, and that he would shortly return and inaugurate his kingdom? Followers who thus proclaimed his persisting power would surely have been recognized as defiant of the authorities who had so recently killed him, and as much a threat to public order as he himself had been. It seems, then, that we must abandon the premises that James and Cephas (any more than Paul) were closely linked - by blood relationship or by personal acquaintance - with a recently active Jesus who had been found worse than merely troublesome. If, however, they and the community they led in Jerusalem constituted no more than an obscure Jewish sect, worshipping, as Paul did, a distant figure who was probably quite unknown to the authorities of the time, then it is understandable that they were allowed to survive untroubled. M.P. Miller has justly noted that this problem of reconciling the gospels’ view of Jesus’s Passion and execution with “the establishment and survival for more than a generation of a Jerusalem church as a Messianic movement in the same city has hardly ever surfaced, let alone been adequately addressed” ([“Beginning from Jerusalem’... Re-examining Canon and Consensus,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 2 (1995)], p. 7). It is, he adds, a problem which

should “make one far less inclined to suppose that the Gospel Passion narratives constitute sources from which one can extract and reconstruct the historical circumstances and reasons for the death of Jesus” (p. 20) (*The Jesus Myth*, p. 69)

The portrait which we find of the Jerusalem church in Acts, makes its leaders larger than life, performing miraculous works left and right and preaching to thousands at a time. In what we are led to believe would be just a matter of weeks after Jesus’ crucifixion by Jerusalem authorities, Jesus’ followers are represented as no quiet bunch, drawing attention to themselves as they preached Jesus resurrected and performed wonders in his name before large crowds. If the Jerusalem authorities found Jesus to be sufficient a threat to have him executed, how can we believe that in so short a time after Jesus’ execution his followers were not only marching on with Jesus’ message, but also preaching to Jerusalem’s masses and converting its citizens by the thousands? As history, this is all most implausible and indicates a later tradition by which time the view of Christian beginnings had grown in grandeur to what we have in Acts, a sort of ‘Golden Age’ picture of the apostles and their adventures as they spread the new religion.

David wrote:

If indeed this isn’t historical (the usage is multiply attested mind you), then some explanation is required.

Why is historical accuracy the only plausible explanation for Paul’s reference to ‘abba’? We saw above that Paul’s references to ‘abba’ do not even suggest that Paul meant that Jesus had used this term in his prayers. Paul was apparently referencing an early Christian prayer practice, but he in no way suggests that this originated from a prayer that Jesus had prayed in his pre-crucifixion life. Indeed, Paul attributes it to “the Spirit.”

David wrote:

You focus on Mark, but there are numerous references elsewhere such as Matt 7:21; 10:32-33; 11:27; 12:50; 16:17; 18:10,14; 20:23; 25:34; 26:39, 42,53; Luke 10:22; 22:29; 24:49; plus 22 other occurrences in John.

The reason why I’ve focused on Mark 14:36 is because it is the only instance in the gospels which put the word ‘abba’ into Jesus’ mouth. All the references which David gives here are to ‘Father’ using the Greek word ‘pater’; they are not instances of the occurrence of ‘abba’ in Jesus’ prayers. Acts would have us believe that Jews had no problem with referring to the creator of the universe as ‘Father’ as public preaching making use of this reference has them converted by the thousands, as we saw above. The claim in question is that Paul knew that Jesus had prayed to God using the term ‘abba’, and Mark 14:36 is the only instance in any of the gospel narratives which does this. Even when Matthew gets to the part in Mark’s gospel where Jesus goes off by himself in the Garden of Gethsemane to pray his hesitation prayer (the gospels have him make this prayer in secret, so who would have witnessed it?), he omits the word ‘abba’ (Mt. 26:39). For some reason the author of Matthew didn’t think it made sense. Clearly the evangelist considered the monologue in Mark to be subject to redaction.

It should be pointed out here that the early Christians’ use of ‘Father’ was not unprecedented in Jewish literature. Even in the OT, we find references to Yahweh as ‘Father’. See for example Isaiah 63:16, 64:8, which explicitly refer to Yahweh as “our Father” and with which Paul would have undoubtedly been familiar. So referring to God as “Father” was not something new, as it had a long heritage in the Judaism of the day.

Besides, Mark 14:36 allows for no witnesses, since it has Jesus praying in private when he utters the formula, “Abba, Father.” This is literature at this point, not history.

David continued:

As Darrell Bock points out: “Source levels here include unique Matthean material, unique Lukan material, and some Matthean-Lukan texts (=Q). The expression is multiple attested.” (*Jesus According to Scripture*, pg 592)

Which expression enjoys multiple attestation here? ‘Abba’? It appears only in Mark and Paul’s epistles. I find no use of it in either Matthew or Luke. The foregoing points clearly indicate that it does not enjoy multiple attestation. Indeed, why does Matthew drop the reference to ‘abba’ in his version of the same hesitation prayer episode? We are talking about the same thing, are we not?

David concluded:

So it looks like this tradition has a much more probable explanation if grounded in historical fact than legend, unless an adequate explanation for the legend being dispersed across all possible source material can be

conjured up, err I mean postulated. :P

Again, are we talking about the same thing here? The question before us is whether Paul's reference to 'abba' came from knowledge he had of the historical Jesus rather than from a traditional formula whose roots lie elsewhere, such as Aramaic-speaking Christian communities. When Paul makes reference to 'Abba, Father' in Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:15, is he suggesting that Jesus prayed this at some point during his life on earth? I find no such suggestion in either passage, and would like to see some explanation for why one might think this. David gives none. Even if Jesus did speak this in his prayers, how would Paul know about it? The gospels were not written yet, so he could not have read about it. Paul never suggests that he learned this from his interaction with other Christians (e.g., Peter), and in fact does not put this word into Jesus' mouth anywhere in his letters. The only time 'abba' appears in the New Testament outside Paul's letters is in Mark 14:36, where Jesus is depicted as praying in private; the episode allows for no witnesses to the prayer Mark puts into Jesus' mouth here, so it appears to be a literary invention, not a historical anecdote. If it were historical, why do *both* Matthew (at 26:39) and Luke (at 22:42) omit it? I surmise that the textual evidence in no way points to a historical chronicle here, but rather to a construction on the part of the evangelists.

#### Claim #5:

*Jesus expressly forbid divorce. (1 Cor. 7:10)*

I wrote:

Does Paul say when, or where, or indicate the circumstances of this delivery? How would Paul know this? That's right, Paul appeals to revelation as the means by which he learned his gospel. Later writers could easily take such references and put them into a portrait of an earthly Jesus purported by some to be historical. How hard would it be to do this?

David's rejoinder:

This is beginning to become quite tiresome. You are assuming that Paul needs to buttress his doctrinal and theological points with historical context...totally unsupported assertion and the counterfactual has been argued quite convincingly by yours truly. In addition, as you've agreed, Paul's audience was already open to the supernatural so why would he write to them as if they were some skeptic? If you wish for Paul to have such intentions in mind, I will insist that you argue for such an unusual exegetical framework.

David has forgotten that the issue is Paul's knowledge of the earthly Jesus, that is, the pre-crucifixion Jesus, whose biography is what the gospel narratives are supposed to portray. It's not whether or not "Paul *needs* to buttress his doctrinal and theological points with historical context," it's that he consistently fails to do this, most noticeably when doing so would help strengthen his arguments. The implication behind the claim in question here is that Paul's reference to Jesus forbidding divorce suggests familiarity with the earthly Jesus. But as we probe this claim, we find no reference to time, place or occasion when Jesus is supposed to have given such a ruling. Look at what the verse in question (1 Cor. 7:10) states:

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband.

Paul seems to be appealing to a revelation from Christ in heaven here, and makes no suggestion that this is a teaching that Jesus had delivered while on earth. Wells points out in relation to this:

Another striking feature of Paul's letters is that one could never gather from them that Jesus had been an ethical teacher. Paul is not indifferent to ethical problems; on the contrary, his epistles abound in ethical admonition. But on only one occasion does he appeal to the authority of Jesus to support an ethical teaching which the gospels also represent Jesus as having delivered; and in this instance it is not necessary to suppose that Paul believed that the doctrine in question had been taught by the historical (as opposed to the risen) Jesus. (*The Historical Evidence For Jesus*, p. 23)

Wells also points out that the instruction "Let not the wife depart from her husband," could make sense in Gentile Christian communities, where Paul issues it. But where Mark gives Jesus' teachings on divorce (10:11-12), Wells rightly points out that such teaching makes no sense for the community which the gospel has Jesus addressing, namely a Jewish community in Palestine:

Some of the sayings Mark ascribes to Jesus were obviously never spoken by a historical Jesus, but were

concocted in a Christian community remote in place in time from the Palestine of AD 30. For instance, in Mk. 10:12 Jesus rules that if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery. Such an utterance would have been meaningless in Palestine, where only men could obtain divorce. It is a ruling for the Gentile Christian readers of *Mark*, which the evangelist put into Jesus' mouth in order to give it authority. This tendency to anchor later customs and institutions to Jesus' supposed lifetime played a considerable role in the building up of his biography. (Ibid., p. 13)

So even here, there are noteworthy incongruities which point, like a smoking gun, to the development of a legend.

In addition, David's comments imply a dichotomy which I have not endorsed, namely: that either Paul would never refer to the historical context in which Jesus gave teachings that he believes he made while in the flesh, or he would be treating the intended audience of his letters, who already accepted supernaturalism, as skeptics. This is quite a stretch. Would Paul necessarily be treating his congregants as skeptics if he made references to Jesus' earthly activities? I don't think so. Were the evangelists treating their intended audiences as skeptics when they penned their narratives of the earthly Jesus' life? Were the later epistle writers who did include references to the earthly Jesus in their writings treating their intended audiences as skeptics? Are preachers today treating their congregations as skeptics when they make references to aspects of Jesus' life as it is portrayed in the gospels? This seems a rather desperate attempt to deflect the point of the matter.

#### Claim #6:

*Jesus taught that 'preachers' should be paid for their preaching. (1 Cor. 9:14)*

I responded:

Another feature that Paul got from the OT. He even quotes Deut. 25:4 in I Cor. 9:9. Paul is not giving evidence of familiarity with an earthly Jesus here; he gives no indication of a historical setting on earth where Jesus would have given such instruction, and attributes the teaching to "the Lord," for Paul, the risen Jesus, not the earthly Jesus. The later writers (i.e., of the gospels) take this reference, which has ecclesiastical significance for Paul, and give it the impression of historical significance by putting the teaching into Jesus' mouth (cf. Mt. 10:10; Lk. 10:7).

David's rejoinder:

Oh I get it so Jesus can't be Jewish and use the Old Testament but Paul clearly does. But you haven't shown where in the OT this teaching (1 Cor 9:14) can be derived from????????? The later writers (i.e., of the gospels) take this reference, which has ecclesiastical significance for Paul, and provide a more in-depth historical context that illuminate Jesus' teachings on the subject (cf. Mt. 10:10; Lk. 10:7).

I have nowhere stated that "Jesus can't be Jewish and use the Old Testament." That "Paul clearly does" is borne out by Paul's own writing, as I have shown. And as I mentioned above, just a few verses prior to I Cor. 9:14, Paul quotes Deut. 25:4 ("Thou shalt not muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn," which a later writer, posing as Paul, quotes to justify the conclusion that "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (I Tim. 5:18). In the I Cor. 9 passage, Paul is actually showing us how he reasons from the quote taken from Deut. 25:4 to secure the conclusion that preachers should be paid for their preaching, a rather self-serving instruction which his own writing shows how he derives it from the OT. He even appeals to common temple practice of the day in v. 13. Is it really so farfetched that a preacher would demand financial support from his congregants and claim this is God's will?

What David does not do is show where Paul gives a historical setting for the earthly Jesus issuing this instruction, which is the point in question here. Paul took a teaching from the OT to its logical conclusion for his context as a preacher, and attributes it to "the Lord." Later writers, concocting historical narratives for the earthly Jesus, then took this reference and inserted it into Jesus' mouth.

#### Claim #7:

*Paul's "Jesus taught about the end-time. (1 Thess. 4:15)*

I responded:

Again, Paul is here appealing to “the Lord” (as opposed to Jesus), which signifies for him the risen savior. Nor Paul does indicate a historical context for the teaching he ascribes to “the Lord.” By referring to “we” here (instead of “they” or some other third person reference), Paul indicates (as he does in other passages) his belief that Jesus’ return was coming soon, probably even within his own expected lifetime. No such luck. But this did not prevent later writers from adapting the gloom and doom eschatology and putting it into Jesus’ mouth.

David's rejoinder:

Well you've not failed to consistently assert that kurios refers to a risen Jesus as opposed to an earthly Jesus. How exactly does one make such a distinction (hint: pointing out that Paul didn't tell us doesn't count). 1 Cor 12:3 “Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.” And don't forget about the most important verse of all! Romans 10: 9 “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

These quotes actually help my position. Let's recall how in Rom. 1:4 Paul makes it clear that Jesus' power came "by the resurrection from the dead." The verses which David quotes here, which state "Jesus is Lord," do not constitute a refutation of Rom. 1:4, nor are they a counterexample disproving Paul's habit of referring to the risen Jesus as Lord. Rather, Rom. 1:4 provides a context by which we can understand these verses. Even in the Rom. 10:9 verse, that the risen Jesus is what Paul has in mind here is obvious.

But again, notice that David does not recover the point for his side, for he does not attempt to counter my observation (namely that Paul gives no historical context for the eschatological pronouncement here which he attributes to “the Lord” here) by citing a historical context given by Paul in which "Jesus taught about the end-time," which is what he would need to do in order to claim this point on behalf of Paul's knowledge of the earthly Jesus. Again, Paul is not drawing from knowledge of the earthly Jesus, rather he is appealing to knowledge revealed to him by the risen Lord.

I will continue with the remaining claims in my next post.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Christian Legends](#)

posted by *Bahnsen Burner* at [11:00 AM](#)

#### 1 Comments:

[david](#) said...

Sorry this is just me using slang that I use in common speech.

I said: Don't cite sources to buttress your point if you merely intend to use their assertions and not their arguments.

Dawson: *Um, I'll do whatever the hell I want. I certainly do not take orders from David.*

I think this is a generation specific thing. Its common for people my age to say "Don't do x if y", but it implies a negative imperative: "You shouldn't do x if y"

Technically I meant to say:

You shouldn't cite sources to buttress your point if you merely intend to use their assertions and not their arguments.

[September 29, 2008 10:44 PM](#)

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