

Reckless Apologetic Presumptuousness

It may seem that bible-believers should be well-informed as to what is actually written in the bible. But firsthand experience often suggests that we should not be so ready to make such assumptions. Defenders of the Christian faith may be amply rehearsed on certain doctrines they're expected to believe and protect from criticism. But such knowledge is often a far cry from the record found in the bible itself. All too typically, believers tend to depend on extrabiblical sources to spec out their "doctrines." This is because the bible's own treatment of the positions which inform those doctrines is frequently ambiguous, insufficiently explained, and even inconsistent. The New Testament, for instance, nowhere explicitly identifies its god as a "trinity" - a god that is "one" but has "three persons" in which each person is equal to the others. And with statements attributed to Jesus, supposedly a member of this three-headed deity, like "my Father is greater than I" (Jn. 14:28), it is hard to see how one could believe that the New Testament is in uniform agreement with such a doctrine. To defend the belief that it is uniform, apologists turn to extrabiblical sources - to council rulings and the work of theologians. By turning to an Augustine, a Calvin, a Hodge or a Van Til to defend Christian doctrines, apologists performatively admit that appealing to the bible itself is not sufficient to support and defend them. And by leaning on such sources, believers are easily lulled into the habit of assuming that the bible is not only wholly uniform throughout, but also that it says more than it really does.

A glaring example of apologetic inflating of the the biblical record beyond what it actually says, is one that even many critics are prone to miss. The issue here has to do with what the apostle Paul knew or did not know of the Jesus portrayed in the gospels. Most believers and non-believers commonly assume that the apostle knew the same details as those which we find in the four gospels of the New Testament canon. Even the order in which the books of the New Testament are arranged seems to encourage this common erroneous assumption - that the apostle Paul preached the same Jesus as the one found in the four gospels. The order of the books in the New Testament, with the four gospels appearing first, then the book of Acts, then the many epistles of Paul and other Christian writers, and concluding with the Apocalypse, actually does not reflect the order in which these documents were written. In actuality, the first writings on the scene were the Pauline epistles. Only later did the biographical accounts contained in the gospels come to be written. In fact, it may very well be the case that the apostle Paul was not aware of the gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, or the book of Acts, for the available evidence strongly suggests that Paul was already dead by the time the gospels, as they currently stand, were composed, let alone disseminated

Facts such as this, however, do nothing to prevent apologists who are anxious to defend their faith-beliefs from exxagerating Paul's knowledge of Jesus to include what we find only in the gospels. In his "A Study of Apologetic Preaching," Christian apologist and devoted Bahnsenite Roger Wagner writes,

In Lystra, Paul and Barnabas encountered a man who had been crippled from birth (Acts 14:8). As Paul began to preach the Gospel of Christ, this man responded by faith. We are not told by Luke what Paul was saying at this early stage in his proclamation, *but presumably he was telling the people of this town about the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the many wonders that He performed* (cf. Acts 2:22). (1)

Elsewhere Wagner writes:

In this earlier preaching *the full outline of the life, death, and resurrection was do doubt covered*, so much so that the crippled man was able to put his faith in Christ as one who could heal him at Paul's word. (2)

Wagner is basing his assumption of what Paul might have known about the gospel Jesus by interpolating what he reads in Acts into his view of Paul, even though the book of Acts was written possibly as late as CE 90, whereas Paul probably met his doom in the 60's. (3) In spite of his far-reaching assumptions, Wagner admits on top of this that, due to Paul's and Barnabus' alleged protestations to a group of Greeks who mistook them as gods and an ensuing uprising, "Paul did not have time to prepare a careful message for the people of Lystra under these conditions." (4) Wagner also confesses that "We cannot know on the basis of Luke's summary of the message (probably received secondhand from Paul) just how much the apostle actually said." (5) Given these admissions, on what basis would Wagner suppose that the apostle Paul "was telling the people of this town about the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth" and that he had preached a "full outline" of Jesus' life? This is something apologists usually prefer to gloss over so that such assumptions ride unchallenged.

Wagner's own statements indicate that he can only "presume" this. But by making such presumptions, apologists show how much they take completely for granted even though the writings in the New Testament in no way justify such

overstatement. Below I have listed significant gospel details of Jesus' alleged earthly visit which are nowhere mentioned in the apostle Paul's copious letters. In his letters, the apostle Paul nowhere mentions:

- Bethlehem (Jesus' supposed birthplace)
- a place called 'Nazareth' (as in "Jesus of Nazareth")
- a Roman census (6)
- parents named Mary and Joseph
- angelic visitations to both Mary and Joseph
- the Virgin Birth (7)
- the Slaughter of the Innocents
- the Magi (they were magically summoned to meet the baby Jesus)
- John the Baptist (8)
- Jesus' baptism
- Jesus' career as a carpenter (9)
- Galilee (10)
- Jesus' itinerant preaching ministry in Judea (didn't the apostle know about this?!)
- that Jesus was a teacher of morals (11)
- that Jesus taught in parables
- Jesus' prayers
- Jesus' many miracles (Paul nowhere has his Jesus turn water into wine, stilling storms, feeding 5,000 or walking on lakes)
- Jesus' healings and cures (no mention of the blind receiving their sight, for example, after Jesus spits into dysfunctional eyes)
- Jesus' exorcisms
- Jesus' temptation in the wilderness
- Mary Magdalene
- Nicodemus (mentioned only in the gospel of John)
- Judas Iscariot (a key player in the lead-up to the passion story)
- Gethsemane (and Jesus' hesitation there)
- a trial before Pilate
- Peter's repeated denials
- Jesus' flogging (12)
- Jesus' crucifixion outside the walls of Jerusalem (13)
- a place called "Calvary" (mentioned only in Luke 23:33)
- the two malefactors condemned with Jesus
- Jesus' words from the cross
- the spear thrust in Jesus' side
- the darkness over the earth

- the earthquake
- the rising of the saints mentioned only in Matthew 27:52-53 (14)
- Joseph of Arimathea
- Golgotha
- female witnesses
- an empty tomb (Paul never even mentions an empty tomb!)
- Doubting Thomas

As anyone at all familiar with Christianity can clearly see, this is quite a list. So the problem here is simply way too big to be casually swept under the rug with the kind of insouciant presumptuousness that Wagner's statement typifies of modern apologetics. For instance, on what basis can someone say that the apostle Paul taught "Jesus of Nazareth" when he *nowhere* even refers to a "Nazareth" in any of his many letters? Similarly, on what basis can one say that the apostle Paul taught about Jesus' earthly ministry, when his letters make no reference to such a thing? The "basis" that allows believers to make such reckless assumptions amounts to nothing more than "simply a reading of the epistles through Gospel-colored glasses" (15), that is, by baselessly assuming that Paul and the gospels are talking about the same "Jesus."

What's very striking is the fact that in two places in his letters, the apostle Paul warned his intended audience about being seduced by competing versions of the gospel. In his letters,

Paul was addressing people who had accepted the supreme importance of Jesus, but were nevertheless in danger of falling victim to what he regarded as an erroneous Christology - 'another Jesus' (2 Cor. 11:4), and not what he preached (Gal. 1:6-9). (16)

The apostle himself tell us,

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:6-7)

If it is the case that, during the time of Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, competing Christologies were circulating among the converted (and Paul's own statements attest to the fact that there were), what would have prevented those rival views of Jesus from being merged with the views expressed in Paul's epistles to create an amalgamated Jesus story? The list above demonstrates a dramatic distinction between Paul's Jesus and the gospels' Jesus. On what basis could we rule out the possibility that the Jesus of the gospels is the product of fusing Paul's views, which present none of the specifics which are crucial to the Jesus of the gospels, with conceptions of Jesus foreign to the Pauline Jesus which included descriptions of time and place of events in a recent earthly life of Jesus and which grew in legend as they circulated? Given what we can find in the New Testament record, a comparison of the gospels with the Pauline epistles shows a very wide variance between their respective portraits of Jesus. All four gospels build up to and climax with Jesus' crucifixion, which the apostle Paul clearly thought was important. But Paul gives no setting for this supposed event. Wells points out that

from Paul's premiss of the supreme importance of knowing 'Christ crucified' (I Cor. 1:23 and 2:2) one would expect him to be explicit about the Passion and at least to specify the when and where. He is so imprecise about it that he may well have thought that it occurred one or two centuries before his time of writing. We know from Josephus that at these earlier dates holy men had been crucified alive in Palestine and not, as was the usual Jewish custom, only after they had been executed by other means. (17)

We know from the history of Christianity that wide divergences in belief have been very difficult for the church to contain and prevent. Many casually assume that earliest Christianity was a completely homogenous, uniform and monolithic movement, with all believers everywhere being "of one accord." Surely the book of Acts would like us to believe this of the post-Easter Christians. But Paul's letters suggest that quite the opposite was the case: that the influence of non-Christian ideas and teachings were constantly making intrusions among the converted, and that disputes between himself and the Jerusalem Council gave Christianity a rocky start from its earliest days.

Doherty explains why the book of Acts is of central concern at this point:

Joined to the Gospel of Luke, the Acts of the Apostles followed as a means of accomplishing two things: one, to demonstrate that Paul belonged with the orthodox camp, that he had subordinated himself to the Jerusalem

apostles' direction and was in no way a teacher of gnostic doctrines as Marcion had claimed; and two, to paint a Golden Age picture of the early church and Christian community, supposedly before heresy had reared its ugly head. It also served to symbolize the (perceived) progression of the Christian movement from a Jewish sect to a gentile universal religion, inheritor of God's promises when the Jews had forfeited them by their unbelief in Jesus. (18)

In this way, the fusion of Paul's depiction of a spiritual personage and the gospels' portrait of an earthly god-man was sealed. But what is interesting here is that the author of Acts "never suggests that Paul had written any letters at all" (19), and yet half of the document is devoted to detailing the famed apostle's missionary adventures.

All of this points to a fallible beginning for Christianity in which early traditions of a vague and nondescript Suffering Servant figure underwent dramatic legendary transformation that resulted in the gospel stories that today's Christians take for granted. These facts, needless to say, pose insurmountable problems for today's believer, whose spokesmen, as we have seen, are more than happy to keep uninformed. Moreover, apologists should think twice if they think they can outrun the implications of the early Christian record. Since presuppositionalists are eager to rest their case on what they call "the impossibility of the contrary" (another Christian myth that I have [already debunked](#)), they would, at minimum, have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that it is *impossible* that the Jesus we read about in Paul's letters is not the very same Jesus we read about in the gospels. The only way apologists could go about assembling such a proof is by interpreting statements in Paul's letters according to details found only in the gospels, and that's precisely what's at issue here.

Notes:

- (1) *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*, edited by Steven M. Schlissel, p. 442. Emphasis added.
- (2) *Ibid.*, p. 449. Emphasis added.
- (3) I find G.A. Wells' historical ordering of the writing of the New Testament books to be the most informed, based on recent scholarship, that I have seen yet. This timeline puts the composition of the gospel of Mark between CE 70 and 90, and the composition of Matthew, Luke, John and the book of Acts in the 90's. See p. xi of Wells' *Can We Trust the New Testament? Thoughts on the Reliability of Early Christian Testimony*.
- (4) *The Standard Bearer*, p. 443.
- (5) *Ibid.*, p. 444.
- (6) For details of the problem this detail causes for the gospel of Luke, see Richard Carrier's [The Date of the Nativity in Luke](#).
- (7) For clues indicating that the idea of a virgin birth for baby Jesus was borrowed from pagan religions predating Christianity, see James Still's [The Virgin Birth and Childhood Mysteries of Jesus](#).
- (8) In [The Sound of Silence: Top 20](#), Doherty asks:

And where is the Baptist? In Christian mythology there is hardly a more commanding figure short of Jesus himself. The forerunner, the herald, the scourge of the unrepentant, the voice crying aloud in the wilderness. Until the Gospels appear, John is truly lost in the wilderness, for no Christian writer ever refers to him.
- (9) Interestingly, Mark 6:3 reads: "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary..." while Matthew 13:55 reads "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary?" Apologists will rush to say that both Jesus and Joseph were carpenters, even though no single author ever makes such a statement. Besides, isn't Jesus supposed to be "the Son of God"? One could be forgiven for supposing that Matthew's statement makes God a carpenter by trade.
- (10) Both Galilee and Jerusalem figure prominently throughout the gospels, and yet the apostle Paul never associates these places with Jesus' pre-crucifixion life.
- (11) For moral teachings attributed to Jesus in the gospels but which the apostle Paul gives as his own, see Wells, *The Historical Evidence for Jesus*, p. 33.
- (12) In *Challenging the Verdict: A Cross-Examination of Lee Strobel's 'The Case for Christ'*, Doherty points out that Paul "himself, as he tells us in 2 Corinthians 11:23-24, was flogged severely many times. Does he draw a parallel with Christ's own flogging?" (p. 158)

(13) In fact, the apostle Paul gives no time, place or circumstance to his Jesus' crucifixion.

(14) On this most curious gospel tale, see Ed Babinski's [What Happened to the Resurrected Saints?](#)

(15) Dogherty, *Challenging the Verdict*, p. 171.

(16) Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, p. 74.

(17) Wells, *The Jesus Myth*, p. 57.

(18) *Challenging the Verdict*, p. 252n.83.

(19) Wells, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* p. 77.

by Dawson Bethrick

posted by Bahnsen Burner at [3:00 PM](#)

3 Comments:

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Looks like its time to turn on the old verification option!

Very interesting article Dawson. Honetly, I'd never before considered what a shaky foundation Christianity really stood on...in regards to Paul and his utter lack of referring to the Jesus we all know and, well, know of.

Like most believers, I was brought up with the idea that the Gospels were 'in order' and Paul's letters came next...not realizing that Paul's letters came first...and then the gospel story evolved later.

Nice compilation of information, and definitely a perspective that Christians should consider, even if they already have their minds made up.

[September 26, 2005 7:46 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

VTG: "Looks like its time to turn on the old verification option!"

Yes, you're certainly right! As soon as I saved my blog, the nasty things were posted in the comments. Time to damn the spam.

VTG: "Like most believers, I was brought up with the idea that the Gospels were 'in order' and Paul's letters came next...not realizing that Paul's letters came first...and then the gospel story evolved later."

You're not alone. I sure didn't learn details like this from Sunday School. It's surely not a detail that apologists are very well prepared to deal with. Typically you'll just get responses like "Paul didn't need to mention all those things in his letters! It was common knowledge!" Well, several points bring such responses into question. For one, why did later writers find it necessary to include references to gospel details in their writings? St. Ignatius, for instance, in his [letter to the Ephesians](#), mentions a virginal mother of Jesus named Mary, and says that Jesus was baptized, details that Paul never mentions in his letters. This indicates that by the time he was writing, these details had become part of the growing Jesus legend.

Imagine a Christian preacher who never mentions in any of his sermons details like Nazareth, John the Baptist, the temptation, the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' moral teachings (such as his hardline teachings on the law in Matt. 5, which go totally against Paul's insistence that the law be relaxed), his healings, his exorcisms, Jesus' hesitation in the garden of Gethsemane, a trial before Pilate, the two thieves crucified next to Jesus, the women visiting the tomb, etc., etc. Wouldn't today's congregants ask this preacher, "Pastor Smith, why don't you ever mention the gospel details in your sermons?"? Now consider the audiences of Paul's letters. They read about the

majesty and triumph of this descending and ascending suffering servant, but no details about his life on earth are given. Wouldn't these churchgoers wonder what his life was like? Paul never gives a time or place to the crucifixion, even though he made it his point that this was the only thing he knew (1 Cor. 2:2). Why then doesn't he give us the relevant details? Was Paul "suppressing" this knowledge? Congregants probably started musing about the when, where and how of Jesus' earthly life. And since the primary vehicle for transmitting their religious ideas to one another was allegory and maxim rather than actual history, they would not have thought it wrong to invent these details and assemble them in episodic biographies, which are now the gospels.

Also, how would the apologist know that the intended audiences of Paul's letters already knew all these details? Like Wagner, believers simply assume that these early Christians knew the same things about Jesus that they themselves read in the bible. But that's precisely what's at issue here. So the claim that these early churchgoers were already familiar with the gospel traditions not only speaks well beyond the available facts, it begs the question (a favorite presuppositionalist charge).

VTG: "Nice compilation of information, and definitely a perspective that Christians should consider, even if they already have their minds made up."

Thanks for the kind words on my work. I think this is a huge issue for Christianity, and I see that no Christians have commented on it so far. Perhaps they're taking a break from apologetics?

Regards,
Dawson

[September 27, 2005 5:40 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Pardon me, Not Reformed, for some reason I thought I was responding to comments by Vantilsghost. The VTGs in my comment should be replaced by NR.

Dawson

[September 27, 2005 5:47 PM](#)