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978-1-107-12796-8 - When Paul Met Jesus: How an Idea Got Lost in History

Stanley E. Porter

Excerpt

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Introduction

This book is an exercise in both biblical exegesis and intellectual history. Both are important for what I am doing, and I do not think that in this instance we can separate the one from the other.

As an exercise in biblical exegesis, I am examining the New Testament evidence for the notion that Paul might have seen, met, or even engaged in personal contact with Jesus before his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road (I will examine the level of possible engagement in the chapters that follow). I have come to believe that, while the case is not an unproblematic certainty, there is significant, even if admittedly minimal, evidence from the Gospels, Acts, and especially Paul's letters that indicate that Paul may well have met Jesus during their common time together in Palestine, so that, when Paul encountered the risen Jesus on the way to Damascus, he recognized the person and voice and knew who was calling him, and he then subsequently refers to his having seen Jesus in at least two places in his letters. I have also come to believe that the encounter or encounters with Jesus that Paul had before the Damascus road experience had a positive formative influence upon Paul and his thinking. Such need not have been the case, as I will discuss further, but I believe and will argue that the influence was significant enough so that when Paul embarked upon his own Christian missionary and teaching ventures, there was a much stronger line of continuity between the teaching of Jesus and that of Paul than many, especially highly critical, scholars wish to admit. I intend to explore the various dimensions of this hypothesis throughout this book.

As an exercise in intellectual history, this book is about how what was once a relatively widespread suggestion among some mainstream New Testament scholars over the course of a relatively short amount of time virtually disappeared from serious consideration, so that today, when one examines almost any book on Paul, rarely is the matter of his knowing Jesus before his Damascus road conversion even suggested as a realistic possibility. Such, however, has not always been the case. Just a hundred

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years ago, major scholars such as the Englishman James Hope Moulton, the Scotsman William Ramsay, and the German Johannes Weiss argued for the idea that Paul had met Jesus before their encounter on the road to Damascus. This may come as a surprise to many contemporary scholars, as it has become a lost chapter in the history of Pauline and Jesus scholarship. Even after the advent of the New Perspective on Paul, the situation remains the same, because the fundamental opposition between Jesus and Paul remains in most New Testament study. That is why this book is also, perhaps even primarily, an exercise in intellectual history – I wish to return to what was once an explicitly and publicly argued hypothesis and explore why and how it faded so quickly from the collective scholarly memory and consciousness, to the point where broaching such a topic runs the risk of it being immediately dismissed as overly speculative. The evidence is still the same – we have the same New Testament texts as the basis of our exploration. However, something has transpired in the course of scholarly debate over the last one hundred years that has rendered such a hypothesis, at least in the minds of a good many scholars, as virtually unthinkable. As a result, the current perspective, in which Paul encountered the unknown and unrecognizable Jesus for the first time on the road to Damascus, also has significant implications for the study of the relationship between the teachings of Jesus and Paul. It has led to various levels of bifurcation, so that in extreme cases, Paul is seen to be at odds with Jesus, to the point of Paul being described as a second founder of Christianity, one who perhaps carved out his own way, not necessarily anchored to the teachings of Jesus. Even among more conservative scholars, their paradigm for thinking about this issue has assumed some degree of lack of continuity between the two figures, so that, even where they wish to argue for Paul developing Jesus' thought in conformity with his own, the lines of connection are, of necessity, more tenuous and less firmly established and hence meriting justification and argumentation.

I do not contend that it will be easy to convince those who have been born and bred on the now standard hypothesis that Paul encountered Jesus for the first time on the road to Damascus that Paul had in fact met Jesus before that time. I realize that. I also realize that my hypothesis may well remain speculative to many. However, I will give it my best effort. I believe that if we are open to reading some passages in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul's letters in ways that we have perhaps not read them before – in fact, I would argue that we have been specifically conditioned by the history of New Testament scholarship to read them in another way – then we can see that there is much more evidence for their possible meeting and perhaps

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even engaging each other more closely than we are taught to think today. There may be some who will simply dismiss such an argument with name-calling, labeling it as so-much fundamentalist or literalist claptrap. I would ask such readers to consider (if they are able) the fact that the proposal I am making can hardly be accused of being literalistic or fundamentalistic, as I recognize that nowhere in the New Testament is such an encounter unequivocally depicted. In any case, once one considers some of the scholars who have entertained this viewpoint, one can hardly dismiss it with simple name-calling, without revealing something unpleasant about oneself. Some will respond to my argument by simply asserting that the major stumbling block to holding such belief is that Paul is not depicted either explicitly or implicitly anywhere in the Gospels as personally meeting Jesus while Jesus was engaging in his teaching ministry throughout Palestine and especially in Jerusalem. I would ask readers to hold this thought in abeyance until I have had a chance to make my case. Further, there are those who would contend that, if Paul had met Jesus, he would have explicitly said so, as that would have helped to establish his own credentials as an Apostle, on the same ground and having the same status as the twelve disciples. Again, I would ask my readers to hold that thought in abeyance until I have had a chance to make my case. I believe that in all instances, if we are willing to examine through new eyes, passages that we believe we already understand, being open to new interpretive possibilities (not far-fetched ones, but those grounded in sound interpretation), we may find it otherwise.

In response to this suggestion, some might wish to ask the question, “So what?” This question, it seems to me, is antithetical to all that good scholarship is about. As scholars, we often do not know the implications of our research, but that should not be taken to mean that we should not undertake and publish the research, even if we must allow others to pursue all of the various implications. It is commonly noted that at the time of Einstein’s publication of his theory of special relativity, only a handful of scientists, at the most, understood what he was saying. I imagine that a good number of people who did not understand the theory probably asked the question “So what?” We are still attempting to understand the implications of theories of relativity. I am in no way equating investigation of whether Paul met Jesus with the theory of relativity – except to say that the “So what?” question can only legitimately be asked after we have asked the previous question of whether they did or did not meet.

In that respect, the full implications of such a re-orientation to the relationship between Jesus and Paul can only be hinted at in a book of this

nature. My effort here is to get the hypothesis that Paul had met Jesus back on the table for serious debate. Nevertheless, I also wish to explore in a select number of specific instances what it would mean for our understanding of the New Testament if Paul had met Jesus, perhaps even heard him teach, during the course of Jesus' earthly ministry. I believe that there are a number of important implications here. These implications primarily include the relationship between the teachings of Paul and Jesus. Rather than seeing Paul as the second founder or re-inventor of Christianity or even representing the uniquely Gentile branch of Christianity, this connection may well indicate that Paul's teaching was, at least in his mind, seen to be in conformity with and a continuation of the teaching of Jesus – the very teaching that he may have heard from Jesus himself as he publicly taught and interacted with both friends and foes during the time of his earthly ministry. This of course does not necessarily follow, but I believe it can be shown on the basis of the extended use that Paul makes of Jesus' teaching, as discussed in Chapter 4. A further implication is that Paul's own teachings in a number of significant places, rather than these places being only casually connected to the teachings of Jesus or, more tentatively still, their being Paul's own theological variations on a distant theme, are direct developments of the specific teachings of Jesus. Paul perhaps witnessed one or more of the occasions when Jesus expatiated upon a particular topic, and Paul takes that idea, even to the point of using some of the very language of Jesus, and develops it further in continuity with Jesus' thought for the readers of his letters.

At the end of the day, I realize that my hypothesis will be subject to close critical scrutiny by other scholars (probably much closer critical scrutiny than they would subject some other theories to, such as the standard theory regarding Paul and Jesus having never met). I wish for this to be so. I cannot pretend that I have covered every topic to everyone's satisfaction. I would simply ask that the case that I make be judged, not simply on the basis of the reigning paradigm regarding the relationship of Paul to Jesus – a paradigm, as we shall see, driven as much, perhaps, by a history of prejudice against a Jewish Jesus and the desire to exalt a Gentile Paul, as by any other factor – but on the basis of being open to examine the arguments on their own and in their own regard.

This monograph proceeds in four simple steps. As I have said earlier, there is perhaps more that can and should be said at each point, but I have attempted to make a simple and straightforward case for the hypothesis that Paul had met and even possibly engaged with Jesus during the course of Jesus' earthly ministry. The first step is to examine what scholars have

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said in the past. That is, I examine the view that was held by a number of mainstream critical scholars of a previous generation around one hundred years ago who believed that there was evidence – at least enough evidence to convince them – that Paul had met Jesus during his earthly ministry. I present the evidence that was marshaled at that time, and examine it within the context in which it was presented. Then, in the second chapter, I examine what a second line of scholarship that wishes to separate Jesus from Paul has said on this topic. This represents the viewpoint of what scholars generally say today. It is not that they usually explicitly reject the notion that Paul met Jesus, but more that they simply do not entertain this as a possibility or likelihood on the basis of a different conception of who Jesus and Paul were. In this chapter, I try to trace briefly how it is that we arrived at this position. In the third chapter, I examine the most important evidence in more detail. There are a number of crucial passages that merit further examination, and I look at those with fresh exegetical and interpretive eyes. By examining these passages, I issue an exegetical challenge to scholars who doubt – or perhaps have never actually considered – that Paul met Jesus to offer better explanations of these passages, rather than simply uncritically invoking the current understanding. Finally, in the fourth chapter, on the basis that I have made my case at least sufficiently well to proceed further, I examine the implications of such a hypothesis, especially in relation to several major passages where Paul claims to invoke the words of Jesus and that I believe we can understand more fully if we believe that Paul actually heard Jesus teach regarding these topics on various occasions. Not only do I attempt to establish a line of continuity between Paul and Jesus but I also explore in more detail how Paul could have had direct access to Jesus and how such a line of pedagogical continuity has direct influence upon Paul's own teaching on various occasions in his letters.

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CHAPTER I

*What Scholars Have Said in the Past about Paul
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Imagine the following. Jesus has already entered the environs of Jerusalem for the final time, as indicated by his so-called triumphal entry (Matt 21:1–9//Mark 11:1–10//Luke 19:28–40; cf. John 12:12–19), and he is engaged in a week of teaching activity before his betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection. His final activities prove to be the last straw and incite the chief priests and others to plot against him (Mark 11:18–19//Luke 19:47–48). During that time, he cleanses the temple (Matt 21:10–17//Mark 11:15–17//Luke 19:45–46);¹ establishes his authority to do what he does (Matt 21:23–27//Mark 11:27–33//Luke 20:1–8); tells several parables;² and engages in other teaching on such topics as paying tribute to Caesar (Matt 22:15–22//Mark 12:13–17//Luke 20:20–26), the resurrection (Matt 22:23–33//Mark 12:18–27//Luke 20:27–40), and who the Christ is (Matt 22:41–46//Mark 12:35–37a//Luke 20:41–44), before uttering his last discourse about final things (Matthew 24, with supporting parables in ch. 25//Mark 13:5–37//Luke 21:5–36) – after which the events of the passion story and resurrection unfold (Matthew 26–28//Mark 14–16//Luke 22–24).

During the course of this teaching in Jerusalem, Jesus was beginning to bother the Sadducees and Pharisees, some of the most important Jewish leaders. Throughout his teaching, these Jewish leaders had been unable to catch Jesus in any indictable inconsistencies or theological snares, and so they came together to see what they could do about this continuing source of annoyance (Matt 22:34; see Matt 22:34–40//Mark 12:28–34). One

¹ I realize that there is critical discussion regarding the Synoptic temple cleansing and its relationship to John's Gospel, a subject beyond my study here. See Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 295–97.

² The following parables are reportedly told: the parable of the two sons (Matt 21:28–32), the wicked husbandmen (Matt 21:33–46//Mark 12:1–12//Luke 20:9–19), and the great supper (Matt 22:1–14//Luke 14:15–24). Here is not the place to engage in Synoptic source criticism.

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of these Pharisees, a lawyer or scribe of some obvious ability and renown (Matt 22:35 has lawyer, Mark 12:28, scribe),³ recognizes that Jesus was a sharp debater, as he was able to give persuasive answers to his interlocutors on many occasions. Apparently, lawyers back then were much as they are today; they made their mark through their ability to engage in disputation. This one thought that he also would test Jesus (Matt 22:35). So he asks Jesus a question that seems particularly innocent but contains the seeds of this man's own argumentative undoing. "Which commandment is the most important?"⁴ This seems like a legitimate question, except that the lawyer is engaging in a rhetorical ploy called "framing the question." He is hoping by his question to limit Jesus' possible answers to one that helps the interrogator by requiring Jesus to select one of the Ten Commandments. If Jesus succumbs to his ploy, then the lawyer can retort that Jesus has divided the law into more and less important parts and thereby has been unfair to the law as a whole.⁵ Without apparent hesitation, however, Jesus answers immediately: "The most important commandment is this one: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:29–30; cf. Matt 22:37),⁶ citing Deut 6:4–5, the *Shema*, the most important declaration of faith in Judaism. The *Shema* to

³ There is a somewhat similar passage in Luke 10:25–37. Some scholars believe that this is a parallel to the episode in Matthew and Mark. However, the number of similarities is minimal. The one who enquires of Jesus is admittedly "a lawyer" (Luke 10:25), but the other similarities are few. E.g., the lawyer is not intending to test Jesus but already knows the answer and so answers his own question with quotation of Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18. Jesus then goes on to tell the parable of the Good Samaritan. Even though the episode is not specifically located in Luke, it is presented within Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51–18:14), not within Jerusalem. As I discuss later in this chapter, it is also possible that Paul participated in this episode as the lawyer or another onlooker, while Jesus was teaching on his way to Jerusalem. For the major statement on this as an independent unit, see T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1937/1949), 259–61.

⁴ The translations are my own, unless otherwise stated. I acknowledge cross-referencing the RSV and the NIV in the course of preparing them.

⁵ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 710; contra Craig A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20*, WBC 34B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), 262.

⁶ I recognize that there are some interesting textual differences between the Markan and Matthean (and Lukan) quotations. The best explanation is that Mark cites the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, begun in the third century B.C.), with the third element added, and that Matthew does the same as Mark, but only cites the first, second, and fourth elements (Matthew also abbreviates the quotation to only Deut 6:5). This raises several questions – such as whether Jesus himself spoke Greek on this occasion (as he is cited as quoting the Greek Old Testament) and whether the Septuagint version used (whether by Jesus or Mark) had the third element. On some of the possibilities, see W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988–97), 3:240–43, with chart on 242 for all the texts. On whether Jesus spoke Greek, and may have used it in his teaching, see Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus*

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this day is written on parchment and placed in *mezuzahs* on doorposts and carried in phylacteries by orthodox Jews, as a constant reminder of who God is.⁷ But Jesus is not done. He continues: “This [commandment] is the second: You will love your neighbor as yourself. There is no greater commandment than these” (Mark 12:31; cf. Matt 22:39–40). Mark continues the account, with the scribe stating that indeed Jesus – he calls him “teacher” – has answered correctly that God is one and that there is none other than him, and that to love him with all your heart, understanding, strength, and one’s neighbor as oneself is more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices (Mark 12:32–33). Jesus sees that this scribe has answered wisely and tells him that he is not far from the kingdom of God. The lawyer/scribe stands there silently, without retort, contemplating the fact that Jesus has avoided his trap and passed the test. More than that, Jesus has offered a profound answer to his all-but-innocent question.⁸ A deafening silence falls upon all of the others as well. After that encounter, Mark tells us that no one dared to ask Jesus any more questions (Mark 12:34).⁹

This is an intriguing and interesting episode, and it is highly suggestive for my thesis regarding Paul and Jesus. Before exploring these possibilities, let me note first that there is much critical discussion about the Pharisees.¹⁰ Scholars disagree regarding how important they were and what kind of authority they had within the Judaism of the first century. This might seem surprising, considering how often they are mentioned by the

Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals, JSNTSup 191 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 126–80.

⁷ Nicholas de Lange, *Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 39.

⁸ The use of Deut 6:4–5 and Lev 19:18 is probably best attributed to originating with Jesus. See Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:237–38.

⁹ Luke 10:29–37 records further conversation, with the lawyer wishing to justify himself. Jesus then tells the parable of the Good Samaritan.

¹⁰ Important discussions of the Pharisees (and Sadducees) include: Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols., rev. and eds. Geza Vermes et al. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979 [1885]), 2:388–403 (2:404–14 on the Sadducees); George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of Tannaim*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:56–82; Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period*, trans. F. H. Cave and C. H. Cave (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 246–67 (228–32 on Sadducees); Martin McNamara, *Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 16–68; Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism in the First Century* (London: Sheldon Press, 1989), 1–15; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 380–451 (317–40 on Sadducees); Michelle Lee-Barnewall, “Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes,” in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 217–28, esp. 218–21 (221–23 on Sadducees).

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first-century Jewish historian Josephus and by the New Testament.¹¹ Nevertheless, it appears that the Pharisees were an important force within the life of the Jewish people (especially the laity), even if they did not have the kind of overt positions of authority that were held by the Sadducees (e.g., priests). Within the Pharisaic sect, there were probably other groups, such as the sages or scribes.¹² There is also much critical discussion regarding how these groups or subgroups were related to each other, because the evidence we have for them is limited outside of the New Testament. However, on the basis of the description in the New Testament of the scribes and the Pharisees, we may infer that they were groups that overlapped, with the scribes being a subset within the Pharisees who had achieved even higher renown for their legal prowess. In other words, not all Pharisees were scribes, but virtually all scribes were Pharisees (Sadducean scribes had virtually disappeared by this time). The Pharisees were known for their practical wisdom regarding the Jewish law. The traditional view concerning the Pharisees is that they were simply legalists (though they, no doubt, were concerned with interpretation of the law), who were intent on restricting behavior in the first century by appealing to the strict code of the law. Their intentions, however, were probably noble and wise, insofar as they were attempting to prevent people in the course of life from breaking the written law by ensuring that they did not break the oral law that formed a protective layer of prescription around the greater law.¹³ Regardless of what one thinks the practical outworkings of their strictures were, they were experts in the law and its demands. That is the definition of what it meant to be a “lawyer” in the ancient Jewish world of the Gospels – these were Pharisees who were expert in reading, interpreting, and at least attempting to enforce the Jewish law. Therefore, whether the person who came to Jesus was called a lawyer or a scribe, he was probably the same person, one of the members of the group called the Pharisees who knew the law and tried to enforce its obedience.

Who was this expert in the law who came to try to trip Jesus up? Let me suggest for the sake of discussion that this lawyer/scribe may well have been Saul of Tarsus, who later became Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. This encounter between Jesus and possibly Saul, at least according to Matthew and Mark, took place in Jerusalem and involved Jesus and an apparently

¹¹ See note 10 for numerous references to the Pharisees within Josephus. They are mentioned about sixty-five times in the Synoptic Gospels alone.

¹² On the scribes, see Schürer, *History*, 2:322–36; Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, 233–45; Moore, *Judaism*, 1:37–47; McNamara, *Palestinian Judaism*, 169–73; Maccoby, *Judaism*, 6.

¹³ Maccoby, *Judaism*, 6.

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very competent Pharisee who was also a lawyer/scribe, one of the smaller groups of legal specialists within the Pharisees. Besides Josephus, there is only one other person that we know from ancient times and sources who has explicitly identified himself as a Pharisee, and that is Saul of Tarsus, or Paul (Phil 3:5).¹⁴ Paul gives a compressed autobiography of himself in Phil 3:4–6, where he notes that he was circumcised on the eighth day, just as the Torah prescribed (Gen 17:12), was by descent an Israelite, from the tribe of Benjamin, and a speaker of Hebrew (Hebrew of Hebrews).¹⁵ When he identifies the particular type of Jew that he was, he states that, according to law, he was a Pharisee, according to zeal, a persecutor of the church, and according to righteousness with respect to law, one who was blameless. In other words, when Paul singles out the characteristics that defined him in his life in Judaism, he chose his being a Pharisee, and more particularly, that his being a Pharisee was related to the Jewish law. That certainly involved “adherence to the Pharisaic mode of interpreting the law.”¹⁶ When the lawyer confronts Jesus in this Gospel account, he does not appear as the angry persecutor depicted in Acts 8:3, but neither do we find Paul describing himself in Phil 3:4–6 in such vitriolic terms. We do not know the exact course of Paul’s developing antagonism for Christianity, but what may have begun with a single encounter or observation of Jesus before his death could easily have grown into the hateful vengeance depicted in Gal 1:13 when the dead Jesus’ followers continued to grow in number and began to pose a threat. This progression could well have “led him to attack a group which had mounted a major challenge to the Pharisaic way of life.” But before that, that allegiance could also have meant that “Paul kept the law as one who was supposed to and achieved the righteousness from law which was proper to it,”¹⁷ perhaps even to the point of becoming such an expert in its interpretation as to challenge the leader and teacher of an upstart oppositional group. Paul defines himself before his conversion as a Pharisee oriented to and expert in the law, and so it is entirely possible that the Pharisee expert in the law that confronted Jesus was himself Saul before he became the persecutor Saul (and later Paul). Of course, the Synoptic passages do not say that the expert in the law was Saul or Paul, but there are enough elements to the situation to make us wonder whether this might have been the case.

¹⁴ Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 134. There are of course others identified as Pharisees, e.g., Nicodemus in John 3, but these are the only two for whom we have first-person reference.

¹⁵ See Martin Hengel with Roland Deines, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1991), 25–37.

¹⁶ Saldarini, *Pharisees*, 135. ¹⁷ Saldarini, *Pharisees*, 136.