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New Testament Epistles as a Source for Historical Jesus Studies

Surprisingly, the letters of Paul preserved in the New Testament tell us little more about Jesus than the non-Christian writings. The great Christian missionary did not know the earthly Jesus but says the risen Christ appeared to him (1 Cor. 15:8). Paul's thoughts are clearly guided by the belief that he and other Christians remain in a dynamic relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, who lives now in heaven with God but interacts with his followers on earth and will someday return to consummate their salvation. Most of Paul's references to Jesus are couched in present or future tenses. When he does use the past tense to refer to what we are calling the Jesus of history, he almost always refers to what he regards as the final events of that life—Jesus's death and resurrection. Once he also describes Jesus's last meal with his followers (1 Cor. 11:23–25).

Even though Paul does not explicitly relate stories about the life or ministry of Jesus or pass on much of his teaching, he may at times allude to sayings of Jesus.¹ The command of the Lord prohibiting divorce that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 7:10 might be a reference to the historical teaching of Jesus (cf. Mark 10:2–9). Likewise, Paul's claim that "the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14) may recall a

saying of Jesus such as that reported in Matthew 10:10.

Occasionally, Paul offers moral advice that may reflect the influence of words attributed elsewhere to Jesus without actually citing Jesus as his source (e.g., the exhortation to love one's enemies in Rom. 12:14,17–20; cf. Matt. 5:38–48). In other instances, however, Paul claims authority to give instructions “through the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess. 4:2), which may indicate that he believes he has received revelations from the risen Lord, and that people are to regard these words as similar to those spoken by Jesus when he was on earth. Whether or not this is the case, historians are cautious about taking everything Paul presents as “words of the Lord” as representative of the actual teaching of the historical Jesus.

Nevertheless, Paul's letters are regarded as an important source for what little they do reveal. This is primarily true because the letters are dated so early. By most estimates, Paul's letters were written some twenty to thirty years before the Gospels. Furthermore, despite the apparent lack of interest in Jesus's earthly life and ministry, details sometimes turn up almost by accident. For instance, Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 15:5 to “the twelve,” confirming the (later) report in the Gospels that some of Jesus's disciples were known by this designation. Elsewhere, Paul mentions that Jesus was of Davidic descent (Rom. 1:3).

Other New Testament letters offer even less information. Again, scholars note passages that may be reworked sayings of Jesus,

such as the prohibition of oaths in James 5:12 (cf. Matt. 5:34–37), but the epistles themselves do not attribute these sayings to Jesus. The anonymous letter to the Hebrews mentions that Jesus was of the tribe of Judah (7:14) and refers to an agonized prayer reminiscent of that which the Synoptic Gospels say he offered in Gethsemane (Heb. 5:7–8; see Mark 14:32–42). These letters, however, are probably not as early as Paul's, and may even depend on the Gospel traditions. Even the meager information they offer about Jesus is not deemed very valuable.

A few scholars have advocated for a much greater use of epistles in historical Jesus studies, albeit in a somewhat different manner. Apart from explicit references to the life or teachings of the man Jesus, the epistles bear robust witness to what people believed about Jesus. Sometimes, in the case of certain letters attributed to Paul, this testimony may be regarded as historical evidence of the early influence of Jesus, revealing how he was regarded by people just two or three decades after his death. Paul Barnett starts with the historical fact (evident in Paul's letters and other early Christian literature) that the first generation of Christians worshiped Jesus and proclaimed him to be both the long-awaited Messiah and the divine Son of God. Barnett argues on logical grounds that it would be historically unlikely for Christians to have come up with these things completely on their own—even if they believed he had been raised from the dead.

A more likely scenario would be for Christians who believed Jesus had been raised from the dead to conclude that claims he had made about himself had now been vindicated. Thus the early beliefs about Jesus evident in the epistles (and, for Barnett, in missionary speeches contained in the book of Acts) should be regarded as suggestive of claims the historical person made regarding his own identity and mission: the so-called Christ of faith is at least an indicator of the “Jesus of history.”²

1. One study of Paul’s possible use of quotations of Jesus is David L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic Tradition in the Regulation of Early Church Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1971).

2. See Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Paul Barnett, *Finding the Historical Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). Likewise, but operating with a very different methodology, Bas van Os believes he can demonstrate that certain core beliefs in the undisputed letters of Paul “cannot be easily explained on the basis of contemporary Jewish or Hellenistic thinking” and so “could conceivably go back to Jesus” (*Psychological Analyses and the Historical Jesus: New Ways to Explore Christian Origins*, Library of New Testament Studies 432 [London: T&T Clark, 2011], 187).