

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I've heard people say that Paul was the real founder of Christianity, not Jesus, that Paul transformed the religion of Jesus into a religion about Jesus. Is there any truth to this?

In a word, no. First of all, there was very little time between Jesus and Paul, only 20 years between the crucifixion (Friday, April 7, AD 30) and 1 Thessalonians, the first of Paul's letters to be written (early in 50 AD). The gap between them is even shorter if you count from the crucifixion to Paul's conversion somewhere between 32 and 34 AD (a date arrived at using the chronological information in Gal. 1 and 2). That gives you a gap of only two to four years.

If Paul radically transformed Christianity in the way the question suggests, there would have been plenty of people there from the beginning (including some who had known Jesus personally) to object to a radical revision of Christianity. Yet there are no indications that anyone found fault with what Paul taught about Jesus (his christology). What many did fault him for and what made him enemies

within the Palestinian, Torah-observant church was his position that Gentiles need not convert to Judaism to be Christians, but even that was not an idea original to him (see Acts: 11:19-26).

There were individuals in the early church who had been there from the beginning. There was already a Christianity before Paul, a pre-Pauline Christianity that Paul had no hand in making and that Paul received and learned after his conversion. And in that pre-Pauline Christianity, Jesus already was being worshipped as the Son of God.

The basic features of Christian theology were in place before Paul. Jesus' resurrection and his place as the exalted Lord who will return at Judgment Day go back to the very first few weeks and months after the crucifixion and resurrection.

How do we know Jesus was already exalted in pre-Pauline Christianity? For one,

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scholars agree that in several places in his letters Paul seems to be citing pre-existing doctrinal formulations. (The vocabulary is not his normal vocabulary.) Some of these are Phil. 2:6-8 ("He was in the form of God, but did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself...he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross") and Rom. 1:3-4 ("who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...").

There was a time of great theological reflection and creativity in early Christianity, but it was before Paul in the first weeks and months after the crucifixion and resurrection. That was when the

followers of Jesus had to make sense of their leader's shameful and embarrassing execution and to explain their experience of his continued presence with them. It was in those first few days that they recalled the mysterious suffering servant figure of Isaiah 53 whose suffering and death were somehow for the benefit of others and concluded that although Jesus was the Messiah descended from David, his glory was not to be revealed until he returned from heaven as the son of man with the holy angels on Judgment Day. His first coming was in lowliness and humility to die for the sins of the world; his second coming would be when his glory would be revealed and all would know him for who he was. This was the earliest christology, and Paul was a recipient of it, not its originator.

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