

Did Paul Invent Christ? Paul, Jesus, the Christ & salvation

¹⁵ He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; (Colossians 1:15) (NRSV).

Did Paul invent the Christ, and by implication, Christianity? That is a question sometimes asked by those who wish to discredit Christianity.

While it is true that the oldest parts of the Newer Testament were written by Paul and that these include some of the most influential documents of the early Church, to suggest that one man created a religion out of a first century ascetic Jewish teacher whom had been crucified by the Romans is to make a pretty bold claim indeed.

I will give you my answer later, but firstly we will consider Paul's Christology, which means his views on Jesus and the Christ; and his soteriology, which means his views on how we are saved. Perhaps the best starting point for unravelling Paul's thoughts about Jesus is to look at the titles he used. Paul frequently uses titles like "Christ". He often uses the name "Jesus" and the title "Christ" together.

Unfortunately, this is usually rendered as "Jesus Christ"; with the result that many people today probably think that Christ was Jesus' surname, with the implication that Joseph and Mary were Mr and Mrs Christ. This is not an exclusively Pauline construct. The words "Jesus" and "Christ" may be found in juxtaposition in every book of the Newer Testament except the Gospel of Luke and the Third Epistle of John, although many of these occurrences are translated as "Christ Jesus" or "Lord Jesus Christ".

However, "Jesus Christ", or as I prefer to translate it, "Jesus the Christ", was first used by Paul and I would suggest that the original Greek, the two word phrase, *Iesous Christos*, gives a concise summary of Paul's beliefs.

Iesous is the Greek transliteration of Jesus' Hebrew name, *Yeshua* or *Yoshua*, of which the usual English form is Joshua, and which means "YHWH saves". *Christos* is Greek for the "Messiah" or "anointed one" of the Older Testament. Jesus the Christ is the Lord who saves, the anointed one, and his status as the Messiah is an ongoing theme in Paul's writing. Therefore, every time we encounter the phrase "Jesus Christ", we should really read it as "Jesus the Christ", but understand it as "Jesus the Messiah" or "The anointed Lord who saves".

When it comes to the words on their own, "Jesus" is usually taken to mean the Jesus of history and "Christ" to mean the Christ of faith. I will use both terms today, depending on which better fits the context.

In Romans 1:3, Paul describes Jesus as being descended from David, while in Romans 3:2 he writes about how the Jews had been entrusted with "... the

oracles of God". There can be no mistaking the significant place of the Jews in the story. In Romans 9.5, referring to the Israelites, Paul writes:

⁵to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen. (Romans 9:5) (NRSV).

Depending on your Bible translation, *Christos* may be translated as Messiah and/or Christ. Either way, Jesus is clearly linked with the destiny of Israel of the Older Testament, and this theme continues throughout much of Paul's writing, such as in Galatians 3 and 4, where Paul retells the story of Israel and names Jesus as the benefactor of the promises made to Abraham:

¹⁶Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16).

This clearly underscores Paul's view that Jesus is the Messiah, but he also considers Him to be more than the Messiah: He is the Son of God. Paul frequently uses this title for Jesus, such as in Galatians 2:20:

²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20).

Paul also uses the title 'Lord' on numerous occasions. From 1 Corinthians 1:3:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 1:3).

Unlike the other apostles, Paul did not know Jesus before His death and resurrection. His experience of the risen Christ came through revelation. Although not written by Paul, himself, arguably the most well known story about Paul is how he encountered the risen Christ, as told in Acts 9, 22 and 26. However, Paul also writes of this experience himself, such as in 1 Corinthians 9:1, where he states:

¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? (1 Corinthians 9:1).

He reiterates this encounter in 1 Corinthians 15:8. His encounters with the Christ through revelation are significant: they highlight how God is revealed through Jesus, and this is perhaps best stated in Galatians 1:16, where Paul tells how God chose him:

¹⁶to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles," (Galatians 1:16a).

However, if there any doubts about Paul's views of the Christ's divinity, they are quickly removed if we read Colossians 1:15-23. Colossians is one of the disputed books, in that scholars do not agree as to whether it was actually written by Paul. While that topic is beyond the scope of this paper, my position is that Paul more likely wrote Colossians (and for that matter Ephesians) than not, and if he did not, the content is probably compatible with what he would have written.

This particular section of Colossians is one of the most riveting and dramatic parts of all the epistles, and unequivocally describes the cosmic nature of the Christ:

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. ²¹And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, ²²he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him— ²³provided that you continue securely established and steadfast in the faith, without shifting from the hope promised by the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven. I, Paul, became a servant of this gospel. (Colossians 1:15-23).

While the authorship of Colossians is disputed, the themes in this passage occur throughout Paul's writing. The role of the Christ in creation may also be found in the undisputed Pauline corpus, such as 1 Corinthians 8:6:

⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8:6).

Explicit mention of the Christ's resurrection from the dead is a recurring theme in Paul's writing, such as in Romans 1:4, and Galatians 1.1 to give but two of many such occurrences:

¹Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— (Galatians 1:1).

Paul also sees the Christ as one to be worshipped, and clearly states this in 1 Corinthians 1:2:

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:2).

While we can therefore have no doubt that Paul saw the Christ as divine, he also saw Jesus as being human at the same time, a duality perhaps best expressed in Philippians 2:5-8:

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8).

How does Paul reconcile giving Jesus the highest Christological titles with his orthodox Jewish monotheism? Wright answers this question well, by observing that "... when he put Jesus and God in the same bracket he was not intending to add a second god to the pantheon, as in paganism. Nor was he intending that Jesus be seen as somehow absorbed into the being of the one God, without remainder. He was inviting his readers to see Jesus as retaining his full identity as the man Jesus of Nazareth, but within the inner being of the one God, the God of Jewish monotheism." (Wright 1997:65).

Finally, Paul awaits the *Parousia*, or the coming again of Christ in glory. From 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17:

¹⁵For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. ¹⁶For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever. (Thessalonians 4:15-17).

We will discuss the resurrection of others later, but Paul's teachings about the *Parousia* lead nicely onto his soteriology, or his beliefs about how we are saved.

Paul says that we are sinners that needs saving and it is through the Christ that we will be saved. From Romans 6:23:

²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23).

As apostle to the Gentiles, he makes it clear that salvation extends to them as well as to the Jews: In Romans 15:12, he states:

¹²and again Isaiah says,
'The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope. (Romans 15:12).

Paul's soteriology has a number of dimensions. Firstly, he writes of redemption, which means that we had to be redeemed through payment of a price, the price being the death of Jesus on the Cross, and this is spelled out clearly in a number of his letters, such as in 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10. 1 Thessalonians is believed by many to be the oldest book in the Newer Testament, so this is very early Christian belief:

⁹For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. (1 Thessalonians 5:9-10).

Secondly, in both Romans 8 and Galatians 4, he uses the image of adoption as God's children:

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. (Galatians 4:4-5).

While adoption was not formally recognised in Jewish law, it was a common practice in the Greek and Roman worlds. The implication is that adoption into God's family will result in sharing the glory Jesus achieved and sharing in his inheritance. Remember Paul's use of the term "Son of God" in reference to Jesus. While other Newer Testament writers use this term to refer to Jesus alone, Paul suggests that through adoption, we too become the sons and daughters of God.

Thirdly, Paul places considerable emphasis on what we call 'justification through faith'. As Paul clearly states in Romans 5:1-2:

¹Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. (Romans 5:1-2).

Justification by faith is a strong theme in both Romans and Galatians. By "justification" we mean entering into the right relationship with God, and it is

frequently said that one of Paul's fundamental messages is that justification by faith replaced the legalistic view of justification by works found in Judaism. In rejecting the view that Judaism was a legalistic religion based on good works, controversial Pauline scholar E. P. Sanders saw the law as working within the framework of a covenant and that following the law was in fact a human response to covenantal relationship with God. In this regard, Sanders emphasised participation over justification. (Sanders 1977:495). Justification has remained a subject of considerable and ongoing theological debate, and justification through faith alone remains the overwhelming doctrine of salvation in most Protestant denominations, even though Paul also wrote of the importance of good works, such as in Romans 2:6-8:

⁶For he will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. (Romans 2:6-8).

As a slight detour, it is worth noting that while Paul writes of "wrath and fury" awaiting the unsaved, he never once writes of Hell.

I will leave the last words on justification to Wright: "The gospel' is the announcement of Jesus' lordship, which works with power to bring people into the family of Abraham, now redefined around Jesus Christ and characterized solely by faith in him. 'Justification' is the doctrine which insists that all those who have this faith belong as full members of this family, on this basis and no other". (Wright 1997:133).

Fourthly, it must be noted that Paul describes our salvation in terms of the past, the present and the future, thereby adding an eschatological dimension to his soteriology. (Eschatological means pertaining to end times). In Romans 8:24, Paul writes how we await the redemption of our bodies, our salvation has already taken place:

²⁴For in hope we were saved. (Romans 8:24).

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul writes of salvation happening here and now:

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Finally, in Romans 13:11, Paul looks to the future:

¹¹Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

McGrath sums up the situation well, and it is worth quoting him in full. “In dealing with the Christian understanding of salvation, we must therefore appreciate that it has both past, present, and future elements. It is not simply a future hope, nor is it simply a past achievement. It is about a past event which secures the foundation of salvation; the present-day assurance that something has happened which transforms the believer’s relationship to God and to others; and that something remains to be achieved, both in terms of personal transformation and in the consummation of the believer’s hopes in the New Jerusalem. Or, to put this in even more simple terms: the Christian understanding of salvation presupposes that something *has* happened, that something *is now happening*, and that something further *will still happen* to believers”. (McGrath 2004:330).

So what exactly is going to happen? This brings us to the final component of Paul’s soteriology that we shall consider today: resurrection. His views are beautifully encapsulated in 1 Corinthians 15, which is quite possibly the *pièce de résistance* of Pauline theology. He starts with describing the resurrection of the Christ. From 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

We have already noted how it was through Jesus’ death that we are redeemed. The flip side of this is that it is through His resurrection we will enter into a new life, and Paul goes as far as saying denying the resurrection of Christians is denying the resurrection of Christ. Verses 12-13 state:

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; (1 Corinthians 15:12-13).

Paul goes on to say that the resurrection bodies are different from physical bodies. Verses 42-44 state:

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. ⁴⁴It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Then, in verses 51-56:

⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet
will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.
⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body
must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability,
and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be
fulfilled:
'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'
⁵⁵'Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?'
⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to
God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.
(1 Corinthians 15:51-56).

Our ultimate salvation therefore comes from Jesus' victory over death, and for this Paul gives thanks to God.

So, back to our original question, did Paul invent Christ? There have been some quite utterly bizarre claims made, such as that Paul invented a new religion based on the sacrificial pagan practices of Mithraism, replacing the sacrificial bull with Jesus.

However, it is reasonably clear that Paul was a Jew, and a Jew in the Gentile world, to which he brought the good news of Jesus the Christ, who was crucified, died, was buried and rose again. His mission was to extend to all peoples the salvation available through Christ. While Paul certainly added to our understanding of the Christ, he did not invent Him, and as we have seen, his portrayal of the Christ is deeply rooted in the messianic themes of the Older Testament.

In summary, Paul's Christology may be summarised by saying Jesus is the Christ or Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord, the one through whom God is revealed, the image of God, the firstborn of creation through whom all things were made, was raised from the dead, is the one who is to be worshipped, is divine yet was also fully human and will come again in glory.

Paul's soteriology may be summarised by saying we are all sinners who need saving, and in Paul's view, salvation is available to us all Jew and Gentile alike. We are redeemed through the death of Jesus and are adopted as God's children. While we are justified through faith, this has been given a more legalistic interpretation than what Paul may have intended.

Our salvation is taking place here and now, but is anchored in the past and there is more to come. While we are redeemed through Jesus' death, it is by sharing in his resurrection that we will enter into a new life, but in a different type of body to that we know.

Paul did not invent the Christ, but he was his loyal witness. Paul was a faithful Jewish monotheist, who was not the founder of Christianity but a witness of the risen Christ, whom appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and appointed him as the apostle to the Gentiles.

The fact that we are here talking about Paul today suggests that he succeeded in his mission.

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Questions for Discussion

- 1 From what you have heard today, how does Paul's portrayal of the Christ differ from the Jesus you know from the gospels?
- 2 Of the different titles given to Jesus by Paul (e.g. the Christ or Messiah, the Son of God, the Lord, the one through whom God is revealed, the image of God, and the firstborn of creation), with which you most identify with and why? Are there any with which you are uncomfortable? If so, why?
- 3 You are a member of the church in Corinth, and your church receives the letter that we now know as 1 Corinthians. It is being read in church, and you have just heard chapter 15, verses 35-58. You find this teaching quite radical, and you discuss it with some friends from Church afterwards. What ideas might come up in your discussion?
- 4 If we become the sons and daughters of God through adoption, what implications does this have for our relationship with Jesus?