



Paul and Jesus: The True Story. By David Wenham, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002. xi + 195 pp. Paperback \$20.00. ISBN: 0802839835

Review by: Paul Hartog

Wenham's *Paul and Jesus* covers similar material as his earlier *Paul, Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Eerdmans, 1994). However, the two works differ in their intended audience. While the latter volume was written for both the general reader and the scholar, *Paul and Jesus* is explicitly designed for "the ordinary reader and student" (x). Since Wenham deliberately writes this book at a "relatively popular level," he keeps scholarly apparatus such as footnotes and bibliography to "a bare minimum" (vii). There may be times when Wenham's attempt to speak on a popular level may appear to dip into trite colloquialisms, but overall the approach is clear and refreshing. Nevertheless, the serious student will probably want to refer to Wenham's more scholarly volume. *Paul and Jesus* also differs from Wenham's earlier work by assuming a chronological structure which attempts to correlate Acts and Paul's epistles. In line with this format, Part 1 discusses Paul's origins and conversion. Part 2 examines Paul's missionary endeavors and focuses on four epistles (Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and 1 Corinthians). Part 3 briefly summarizes evidence from other Pauline Epistles and concludes the book.

The purpose of *Paul and Jesus* is twofold: to defend the historical reliability of Acts and to demonstrate the continuity of thought between Paul and Jesus (171). In regard to the first purpose, Wenham repeatedly stresses the correlation between Acts with

the Pauline epistles. Examples from the first six pages should suffice: “All of this fits in with what the book of Acts tells us, though Acts fills out the picture much more” (3); “this fits well with what Acts tells us about his background” (4); “this account dovetails very well” (6); and “Acts and Paul’s letters agree” (6). More specifically, chapter 3 is an extended attempt to reconcile the Book of Acts and Pauline materials concerning the period after Paul’s conversion. At the end of the entire volume, Wenham concludes: “Our examination of Acts has strongly confirmed its historical reliability” (179); “Acts gets the history right again and again” (179); “The fact is that the evidence of Acts and of Paul’s letters is strikingly complementary” (180). In regard to the second purpose, Wenham stresses the continuity of teaching between Jesus and Paul. Paul was “an intelligent, caring, flexible and faithful interpreter of Jesus” (186). Wenham further argues that much of Paul’s teaching was directly dependent upon Jesus material.

Along the way, Wenham defends the traditional language of Paul’s “conversion,” since Paul’s views of Jesus, of the law and of how to be right with God, of himself and of the way of salvation, and of Christians and Gentiles were all changed (10-18). Wenham argues for the South Galatian theory of the audience of Galatians (44-46) and identifies the Jerusalem visit of Galatians 2:1-10 with Acts 11:27-30. Throughout the book Wenham also shares various interesting hypotheses that do not affect the main arguments of the book: It is “just possible” that Mark’s abandonment was a result of illness (40). And it is “possible” that Paul and Barnabas went to Pisidian Antioch at the suggestion of Sergius Paulus (40). Wenham further suggests that “the wrath of God” which has come on the Jews in 1 Thessalonians 2:16 refers to Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome in AD 49 (87); that the preaching of the Gospel is the restrainer which holds off the

coming of the lawless one in 2 Thess. 2:7; and that a Greek philosophical view of the relative unimportance of the body lies behind the incestuous sin of 1 Cor. 5 (132).

At times, Wenham glosses over scholarly debates without resolution in this particular, popular work. For example, Wenham leaves open the related question of the origins, interrelations, and datings of the Gospels. He does not clearly state if the borrowing of Jesus material comes from free-floating oral Jesus traditions, an oral gospel-like narrative, or actual written text(s). After listing a passage found in all three synoptics, Wenham cryptically states, “It is not difficult to imagine that the Corinthians knew this text, and claimed it for themselves” (163). Elsewhere Wenham asserts “if Paul and the gospel writers are drawing on early traditions of Jesus and not solely on one common source, then we would expect a complicated pattern of agreement and disagreement, which is precisely what we find” (158). (Compare Wenham’s arguments for an oral “gospel-like narrative” in his *Paul, Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?*, 388ff) In another instance, Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3 that he “received” the gospel. Scholarly debate centers on whether this reception refers to Paul’s miraculous conversion experience or to the human “receiving” and “passing on” of the kerygmatic tradition. Wenham places statements that would lead to both conclusions side-by-side without critical comment (143).

At the end of the work, Wenham categorizes his evidences of continuity between Jesus and Paul as “unmistakable,” “plausible,” and “less strong” (181-182). Paul certainly taught about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the Last Supper and the arrest of Jesus. He was familiar with the apocalyptic teaching of Jesus and the teaching of Jesus on divorce, apostleship, and remuneration for ministry. He was

also dependent upon Jesus' addressing God as "Abba." It also seems probable that Paul passed on such Jesus material as teaching about the kingdom of God, the primacy of the Jews, and the commands to love and serve one another. Wenham makes good cases for all of these examples.

A weakness of Wenham's work might involve the inclusion of other unnecessary examples to bolster his arguments. Wenham acknowledges that "we need to be careful of 'parallelomania', as someone has called it, when scholars find similar things or ideas and think that there must be a significant link" (101). But Wenham also seems pulled by the opposite force of his "cumulative evidence" approach. To Wenham, such an approach results in the "probable" echoes beginning to look "highly probable" and the "possibles" beginning to look "probable" (168). But one wonders if the inclusion of weak evidence may backfire on the overall impression of his case. For example, Wenham wonders whether the story of the penitent thief crucified with Jesus stands behind Galatians 2:20: "it could just conceivably have contributed to his <Paul's> reflections on being 'crucified with Christ' (2.20)." Then Wenham adds, "But there is no evidence of this." Wenham also notes that Galatians calls Peter, James and John the "pillars" and "It is possible that, just as Peter was nicknamed the 'rock' by Jesus according to Matthew 16.18, so he and his companions came to be nicknamed the 'pillars'" (71). Wenham goes on to argue that that the Aramaic word for "pillar" literally means "something like 'standing one,'" and the label "pillars" may ultimately lead back to the Transfiguration account, whether the inner three "stood" with Jesus (71). Wenham himself acknowledges that all this "may seem too ingenious by far," especially since the James of the Transfiguration account is not the same James of Galatians. Wenham later refers to this specific example as "very

uncertain” (76). At times the problem may not be so much the implausibility of the parallels as it is their banality. For example, Wenham lists the reference to loving one another in 2 Thess. 1:3 as a possible link to the teaching of Jesus (119). However, Wenham admits that this specific parallel may prove “little, if anything” (120)--which is understandable, since it is so commonplace.

Yet one should not allow these quibbles to distract from the overarching purposes of the book. All-in-all, Wenham’s “certain” examples and most of his “probable” ones forcefully argue for similarity and theological overlap between Jesus and Paul. And Wenham convincingly builds a case for the possibility of correlation between Acts and the Pauline epistles. Finally, he illustrates that Paul’s preaching in new cities did not only consist of a few creedal statements about the death and resurrection of Jesus, but included a substantial explanation of Jesus’ life and teaching (182-183). “For Paul the sound foundation of God’s church was not just an abstract theological concept of Jesus, but Jesus’ life and teaching, his death and resurrection, his present Lordship and his coming again” (184). In short, “those who say that Paul’s ‘silence’ about Jesus’ life shows his lack of serious interest in Jesus’ earthly ministry are entirely mistaken” (184).

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