

# **Peter Jennings, Jesus and Paul**

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On April 5, 2004, ABC aired a three-hour documentary hosted (and co-written) by Peter Jennings entitled “Jesus and Paul: Word and Witness” (see [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/wnt/World/PJR\\_Paul\\_Jesus\\_subindex.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/wnt/World/PJR_Paul_Jesus_subindex.html)). In this article I shall give a review, noting what Jennings and his scholars got right as well as what they got wrong. For ease of reference, I will review the program segment by segment (there were 13 segments as defined by commercial breaks).

#### **Segment 1: Jesus Grows Up**

The first segment consists almost entirely of narration and interview excerpts shown in Jennings’ previous Jesus documentary, “The Search for Jesus.” Jennings and his experts note that Jesus grew up under Roman rule, with Herod Antipas as a puppet king. Jesus knew of the Jewish hope of a Messiah who would liberate the Jews from Roman oppression and set up the kingdom of God, and he knew of a couple of rebellions that failed to jump start that kingdom. Jennings and his experts opine that Jesus may very well have grown up wondering if perhaps he might become the Messiah.

As with “The Search for Jesus,” the analysis Jennings offers—leaning heavily on Jesus Seminar fellows—is not so much wrong as overly political in emphasis. The facts are correct, but the emphasis is off balance. While we should give serious attention to the political context of Jesus’ life and ministry—something evangelicals have not always done well, though that is changing in evangelical New Testament scholarship—we should also not go to the extreme of viewing early Christianity purely or even predominantly in political terms.

#### **Segment 2: Jesus’ Ministry**

Roughly half of the second segment also repeats material from “The Search for Jesus.” We are again treated to Jennings interviewing clueless American tourists in Israel opining that Jesus was a tall man with blue eyes, a notion easily (and rightly) skewered by biblical scholars. That Jesus was associated with John the Baptist’s movement before launching out on his own is again asserted. His Beatitudes (in the version found in Luke) are said to have been radical and even politically dangerous, since the promise that the well-fed rich would be trading places with the hungry poor might have seemed threatening to the well-fed rich. Jennings then begins to introduce some new material. Jesus was unusual in his inclusiveness, welcoming “sinners” (notably shepherds, assumed to be thieves) into his inner circle. Jesus abrogated the Levitical laws of clean and unclean by touching (and healing) people branded as unclean, especially lepers but also the blind, deaf, lame, and deformed.

The last point is quite right, I think, and is an insight worth picking up and giving some reflection. But most of what Jennings and his experts say here is speculative. The Gospels give no support whatsoever to the notion that Jesus ever traveled with John the Baptist or even spent any time with him beyond their recorded meeting at the Jordan. They flatly contradict the idea that Jesus started off as John's follower. This speculative theory is driven by the need of some scholars to deny that the Gospel accounts of John acknowledging Jesus' divine mission are historically authentic. The only imaginable evidence for this theory is Jesus' baptism at the hands of John, but all of the Gospels agree that John saw Jesus as his superior (e.g., Mark 1:7-8).

It is true that Jesus' Beatitudes might have been viewed as radical by someone like Herod Antipas, but only if he had cared. John got himself in trouble with Herod only when he directly criticized the king's marriage to his brother's wife (Matt. 14:3-4). It goes beyond the evidence to theorize that Jesus' words would have been taken as a threat to the established order. More likely, if Herod had caught wind of what Jesus was saying, he would have laughed it off as wishful thinking. Herod was more interested in Jesus' miracles than his preaching (Matt. 14:1-2).

I find it odd that Jennings would single out shepherds as examples of the "sinners" that Jesus welcomed into his circle. The Gospels do not mention a single shepherd among his apostles or other followers. Moreover, the shepherd is a uniformly positive image whenever used metaphorically in the Gospels, usually of Jesus himself (Matt. 2:6; 9:36; 12:11-12; 18:12; 25:32-33; 26:31; Mark 6:34; 14:27; Luke 15:4-6; 17:7; John 10:1-16, 26-27; 21:16-17). This is just as one would expect, given that Israel's greatest Old Testament king, David, and the Messiah's ancestor, had started off as a shepherd boy.

### **Segment 3: Jesus Goes to Jerusalem**

According to Catholic scholar Jerome Murphy O'Connor, when Jesus entered Jerusalem for Passover he probably had only between ten and twenty followers. Whether he thought of himself as the Messiah is debated among scholars. Ben Witherington III, the token evangelical scholar interviewed for the program (N. T. Wright is also there, but is given little opportunity to make strong points), argues that Jesus' constant self-reference as "the Son of Man" and his frequent teaching about the kingdom of God both derive from the Book of Daniel and support the conclusion that Jesus regarded himself as having a divine, messianic mission. But others, skeptical of the Gospels, of course disagree. What everyone agrees happened is that Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover and within a week had been killed. The role of the Jewish and Roman authorities is particularly disputed. One scholar can describe Annas (who served as high priest, as did six of his relatives) as a kind of "godfather" of the high priesthood. However, the scholars Jennings interviews all seem to agree that because the priestly authorities were installed by the Romans they would have been anxious primarily to keep the peace and keep Rome happy. For that reason, they conclude, the high priest Caiaphas probably intercepted Jesus and turned him over to Pilate at Pilate's request, rather than putting Pilate up to executing Jesus for them as the Gospels indicate.

One can only wonder how a Catholic scholar can fail to acknowledge that Jesus had many more than ten followers. At any one time the contingent of men and women traveling with him in his itinerant ministry may have floated between ten and twenty, but he would surely have left devoted friends behind in many of the places he visited. I see no reason to question the veracity of the report in

Acts 1 that there were 120 persons in Jerusalem in the weeks immediately after Jesus' death and resurrection who gathered together as his followers, and of course there would have been others not in the vicinity.

Witherington should be given a lot of credit for making many points winsomely and forcefully, and his point about Jesus' consciousness as Daniel's "Son of Man" is one of them. To elaborate, the criterion of dissimilarity makes it virtually certain that Jesus used this title of himself, since the NT writers essentially never do so except in statements attributed to Jesus (Acts 7:56 and Rev. 1:13, both in the context of visions, being the only exceptions). Note that I am not arguing the reverse—that if the NT writers themselves used a title for Jesus then he must *not* have used it (an invalid form of the criterion of dissimilarity).

The relationship between the Jewish Temple authorities and Pilate was likely to have been complex. As some of Jennings's scholars noted, Pilate liked to give the Jewish leaders a hard time but also had to be careful not to antagonize them too deeply (see segment 4). It is quite possible that from their varying perspectives, the Temple authorities thought they were using Pilate and vice versa. The Gospel of John gives a very nuanced view of the matter. Caiaphas and at least some of the Sanhedrin privately sought to get rid of Jesus because they feared he would incite a popular uprising that would result in the Romans taking away what little authority they had (John 11:47-50). The reason they first gave Pilate for handing Jesus over was that he was an evildoer who made the political (and treasonous) claim to be the King of the Jews (John 18:29-30, 33, 39; 19:14-15; cf. also Luke 23:1-2, 14). On the other hand, the Sanhedrin found Jesus deserving of death because of his alleged false teachings and blasphemies, specifically his claim to be the Son of God (John 18:19-24; 19:7). The bottom line is that Jesus represented a threat to the Jewish religious and political establishment on more than one level, and this explains the unusual and complex interaction between the high priest's office and Pilate over the disposition of Jesus.

#### **Segment 4: Jesus Is Crucified**

Once again, O'Connor starts off a segment with a baseless bit of speculation. In an excerpt repeated from "The Search for Jesus," O'Connor suggests that when Jesus and his disciples were walking through the Kidron Valley "it suddenly hit him" that he might die that night. No counterpoint to this theory is presented. Jennings then has scholars offering different views on whether Judas's betrayal of Jesus was historical fact. Both Robert Funk (the founder of the Jesus Seminar) and John Shelby Spong express the opinion that this part of the story was probably an anti-Semitic fiction: the name "Judas" is just the Greek form of the name "Judah" or "Jew," and on this view Judas is thus a symbol for the Jews as a whole betraying Christ. In short, Judas probably never existed. Surprisingly, it is the ultra-liberal John Dominic Crossan who is called on to rebut this theory: he points out that the name "Judas" (Judah) was such a common Jewish name that the supposed symbolism would be too weak to be noticed. Crossan states cautiously that there is good evidence that someone very close to Jesus did in fact betray him to the authorities. Jennings then discusses what role the Jewish and Roman authorities had in the execution of Jesus (see also segment 3 above). Marcus Borg states that he and most biblical scholars agree that while the Romans were directly responsible for Jesus' death, since crucifixion was a Roman form of execution, a small group of Jewish establishment elites, especially priests, collaborated with the Romans in getting rid of Jesus. Beyond this consensus, though, deep disagreements emerge.

The Gospels seem to portray Pilate as innocent almost to the point of sainthood, contrary to what we know about him from extrabiblical sources, according to which he could order people to their deaths with no remorse. For that reason, some scholars think that the Gospels shift the blame for the crucifixion from Pilate to the Jewish leadership in order to ingratiate the Christian movement with the Roman authorities in their own day. But as Jennings admits, some scholars disagree. As we have noted, Pilate did on occasion back down under pressure from Jewish leaders when it seemed expedient to do so. As for the notion that the Gospels blame the Jews indiscriminately for Jesus' death, Paul Maier cites Luke 23:27 as evidence that many of the Jews were greatly saddened by Jesus' execution.

Most of the errors in this segment have already been pointed out. To Crossan's observations about the historicity of Judas we may add this point: If the Gospel writers, or even their sources, had used the name Judas as a symbol of the Jews as evil, it is peculiar that they also use the name for one of Jesus' brothers (Matt. 13:55; Mark 6:3) and for one of Jesus' other disciples (Luke 6:16; John 14:22). Regarding Pilate, we have already pointed out that the Gospels give a more nuanced view of his dealings with the Jewish leadership than is often recognized. The Gospels do not portray Pilate as a saint or even as innocent, though Matthew does report Pilate's own claim to be innocent (Matt. 27:24). Rather, the Gospels represent Pilate as a calculating sort concerned only to protect his own power by avoiding a popular uprising at any cost. It is also a mistake to assume that a man will always behave in the same way; and on any account the situation Pilate faced with Jesus was unusual.

### **Segment 5: Jesus' Resurrection and Paul's Emergence**

Jennings makes a real effort in this segment to present a spectrum of scholarly opinion on the resurrection of Jesus. Witherington strongly affirms it as the best explanation for the change in the apostles from cowards hiding in the Upper Room to courageous witnesses risking their lives for the gospel. Crossan rejects the story, seeking (as he is notorious for doing) to attack it at its root by denying that Jesus was even buried. Crucifixion victims, he points out, usually were not buried, adding to the indignity of that form of execution. Regarding the resurrection narratives, he says, "I hear hope there, not history." (What that means is not explained.) Paula Fredriksen offers a mediating assessment: As an historian, she says, she recognizes that the disciples sincerely thought they had seen the risen Jesus and therefore that they must have had some experience that they sincerely understood that way, but she cannot say whether or not it was really Jesus. Wright, another believer, is given the last word: the very fact that the disciples neither abandoned their messianic hope nor went looking for another political messiah makes this particular story very different—and very difficult to explain away. Jennings then introduces the human figure who dominates early Christianity after Jesus: Paul. Call him the co-founder with Jesus of Christianity, or even the founder, his importance for Christianity is great.

In my opinion, Jennings handles the resurrection in a surprisingly even-handed manner. I can't really fault Jennings for reporting on the diversity of views regarding Jesus' resurrection. My only complaint is that I would like to have seen a counterpoint to Crossan's objection that Jesus probably wasn't buried. I agree that crucifixion victims typically were not buried, but the time was not typical (it was the Passover and the Sabbath was coming), and of course neither was the executed man typical. Again, one must resist the temptation to straitjacket history. There is nothing implausible about one of the seventy or so men on the Jewish council quietly asking Pilate for permission to give Jesus a decent burial.

The characterization of Paul as the real founder (or even “co-founder”) of Christianity is, of course, problematic. Arguably this is the overarching issue of the entire documentary. After giving the first hour over to recapping his “Search for Jesus” (with a bit more sensitivity shown to conservative views than the first time around), Jennings goes on to devote the remaining two hours to Paul.

### **Segment 6: Paul’s Conversion**

After introducing Paul as the Jewish rabbi formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, Jennings indulges in more inane interviews: this time we learn about some of the sites claimed by religious organizations as the exact place where Paul had his vision on the road to Damascus. While conversing with the curators of these tourist traps, Jennings asks them what they think of the theory that Paul’s conversion was a gradual process, rather than a sudden, dramatic change as the Bible reports. The responses are about as shallow as one would expect, but then, since no factual basis for the speculation about a gradual conversion is ever offered, so is the question. All we are told is that sociologists have shown that conversion usually is a process. Here again, the statistical norm is turned into an inflexible law of nature, a kind of scholarly game that if played consistently would homogenize history beyond recognition. At the end of this segment, Jennings informs us that after his conversion Paul believed that the end of the world was imminent.

There is so little factual argument or evidence offered in this segment that hardly any rebuttal is needed. We have Paul’s own testimony that his conversion was the result of Christ’s appearance to him during the time that Paul was out persecuting Christians (1 Cor. 15:8-9; Gal. 1:13-24). In the absence of arguments to the contrary, Paul’s testimony is enough to settle the matter.

The claim that Paul thought the world was about to end is repeated throughout the rest of the program but never really explained. The real problem here is a lack of appreciation for the cultural context of Paul’s theology. Paul never expressed the belief that the final judgment on mankind was about to happen or that Christ’s return would take place within a very short period of time. The closest he ever came to using the expression “the end of the world” was in his statement that the events of the Old Testament should be read as examples to instruct us “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11). But notice that here Paul is not speaking about an “end” that is close to happening but about “ends” of “the ages” (both plural) that **have already come**. Paul’s language here reflects his rabbinical theology, adapted to the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah. The rabbis held that the Messiah’s coming would usher in the age to come, including the general resurrection of the dead. Since Jesus was the Messiah and had himself died and risen from the dead, Paul realized that in a sense the “age to come” had already come. The present age, one characterized by evil (Gal. 1:5), was already giving way to the age of righteousness and peace. How long this overlap between the two ages would continue, Paul never says. He leaves open the possibility of the consummation coming in his lifetime, but does not affirm that it will.

### **Segment 7: Paul Goes to the Gentiles**

According to Jennings and the scholars he interviews, when Paul met with the original apostles in Jerusalem they would naturally have been suspicious of him. As a former persecutor of the church, his claim now to be one of them would have been questioned; perhaps Paul was really a spy! But Jennings

goes further: many scholars, he notes, think that the Jerusalem apostles continued to be skeptical of Paul and to disagree with his interpretation of the message of Jesus. According to Jennings, Paul interpreted the Jesus events as evidence that time was running out for the world, and for that reason went out evangelizing in a hurry. The kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated, and people needed to get on board quick. But as Paul sought to win as many people to Christ as he could, he began changing the very character of Christianity. Had it not been for Paul, the Christian movement would have remained a small Jewish sect. In particular, as he went from city to city and found most Jews resistant to his message, he began turning to the Gentiles and inviting them to believe in Jesus. But to make Jesus more accessible to Gentiles, “Paul decided to change the rules” and say that Gentile men didn’t need to be circumcised to be part of the Christian community (since circumcision was a serious stumbling block for uncircumcised adult men). Jennings points out that the Gospels do not report Jesus saying anything about circumcision, and he suggests that Paul was the first of Jesus’ Jewish followers to say that the rite was no longer a requirement.

If Paul had fundamental differences with the Jerusalem apostles over such issues, presumably he would have known about them. However, in his own epistles Paul asserts that he and they agreed on these things. The key epistle in this regard is Galatians. In that epistle Paul argues that he received his commission from Christ to be an apostle independently of the Jerusalem apostles—that he had not even met any of them until some three years after his conversion (Gal. 1:15-20). Yet he attributes the controversy over circumcision, not to those apostles, but to certain unnamed “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4). According to Paul, he and Peter differed not in their message but in their fields of ministry: God was working through Peter primarily to the circumcised, or Jews, while God was also working through Paul primarily to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-9). Paul’s testimony coheres with the narrative in Acts 15, according to which both Peter and James—the leaders of the Jerusalem apostles—agreed with Paul not to impose circumcision on the Gentiles as a precondition for either salvation or church membership (Acts 15:1-29). Paul and Acts both report that the circumcision issue was raised, not by Paul “changing the rules,” but by certain Jewish believers going to Antioch and insisting that Gentiles had to be circumcised (Acts 15:1; Gal. 2:4).

One other element of the Jennings report in this segment may be addressed more briefly. Paul’s view was not that the kingdom of God was about to be inaugurated but that it had already been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus (Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 15:24-25; Eph. 1:20-23; Phil. 2:9; Col. 1:12-14). When that kingdom would be fully realized, Paul did not speculate.

### **Segment 8: Paul and Jesus, Peter and Paul**

Jennings begins this segment with still more pointless interviews, this time with ignorant tourists at the Vatican. These interviews reveal that many such tourists don’t know anything about Paul. (Jay Leno does these kinds of interviews *way* better.) He then poses the question to his experts: Did Paul change or embellish on the teachings of Jesus? Calvin Butts, a black New York City pastor, answers that Paul must have done so, because preachers always do! Jennings accepts this answer and gives no counterpoint to it. According to Jennings, Paul departed not only from what Jesus had taught but also what the other apostles, including James—Paul’s “toughest critic”—taught. Elaine Pagels expresses astonishment: Paul, who had never met Jesus, claimed to know Jesus and to know what Jesus wanted better than Jesus’ own brothers and closest friends. The conflict between Paul and the Jerusalem

apostles focused especially on whether Jews and Gentiles could eat together. According to Paul's account in Galatians, he had criticized Peter for withdrawing from eating meals with Gentiles after Jewish Christians had censured him for doing so. Jennings admits that according to Paul the matter had been resolved, but leaves the impression that Peter and James might not have seen it that way. According to Jennings, by including Gentiles in the church on an equal footing with Jews, Paul had laid the foundation for the separation of Christianity from Judaism.

One should not miss the subtext in the comments by Pagels and others about Paul taking it upon himself to make radical changes to Christianity. If Paul could claim to know "what would Jesus do" better than those who actually knew Jesus, well then, of course we can make the same claim today. Thus Paul, ironically, is viewed as precedent for setting aside the teaching of the New Testament writers, including Paul himself, where we think we know Jesus better. Pastor Butts can embrace Paul as one who went beyond Jesus because this means that Pastor Butts is also free to go beyond Paul.

What these experts are doing is glossing over a crucial distinction between *deviating* from and *developing* the original vision. The apostles, including Paul, did the latter, not the former. If Jesus had treated the ritual clean and unclean laws as *passé*, as Jennings reports; if, as the Gospels also say, Jesus had declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19), announced the end of the era of worship centered in temple and ritual (John 4:20-24), praised the faith of a Roman soldier over that of his own Jewish brethren (Matt. 8:5-13), and ordered disciples to be made of people from all the nations (Matt. 24:14; 28:19-20), then the opening of the community of God's people to the uncircumcised was evidently exactly what Jesus wanted.

The theory that a sharp divide existed between Paul and Peter must be read into the New Testament texts, in contradiction of what they actually say. This theory received its most radical formulation in nineteenth century liberal German scholarship, which posited a kind of Hegelian dialectic in the New Testament (Peter as thesis, Paul as antithesis, Luke as synthesis). Despite the numerous and grave problems with this approach to the New Testament, liberal scholars have been reluctant to give it up entirely.

## **Segment 9: Paul on the Death of Jesus**

Jennings opens with a description of Paul as a short, bald, unattractive man. He then launches into a discussion of how Paul's thought developed as he engaged in his mission to bring people to faith in Jesus. According to Pagels, Paul saw himself "as Christ on earth, in a way." One of the biggest hurdles to making the Christian message palatable was Jesus' crucifixion; the idea of a crucified man as the object of one's faith was a severe liability. Paul, Jennings suggests, was the first Christian to come up with an explanation for Jesus' horrific death that turned it from a liability into an asset. In Jesus' death, Paul proposed, God had identified himself with the oppressed and suffering masses. The crucifixion was a symbol of hope, not of weakness. While the experts that Jennings has address the issue will have nothing to do with the idea of Christ's death as a blood atonement for sin, they express admiration for Paul and his seeing Christ's suffering as a revelation of God's desire to save the poor and suffering people of the world.

The description of Paul as a short, bald, unattractive man does not come from the Bible, but from later tradition—sources that Jennings the investigative reporter would dismiss in a heartbeat as unreliable in another context. (Remember Jennings's almost scornful reporting on the traditions

surrounding popular Nativity sites in Bethlehem and Nazareth in “The Search for Jesus”?) I myself think these descriptions are probably accurate, but wonder at Jennings’ criteria for what traditions he will accept.

While Paul no doubt developed the church’s theological understanding of Christ’s death (under divine inspiration, I would affirm), he cannot be credited with the idea that Christ had died to save mankind. That honor must go to Jesus himself. That Christ had “died for our sins” was part of the church’s original confession, something that Paul said he and the other apostles had all taught and passed down to new believers (1 Cor. 15:3, 11). Moreover, the Synoptic Gospels agree with Paul that Jesus had instituted the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:20) as a reminder of his redemptive death. According to Paul, Jesus had said that the cup of wine represented “the new covenant” in his “blood” (1 Cor. 11:25). The language here recalls the blood of the Passover lamb symbolizing the Israelites’ redemption from bondage in Egypt as well as the sprinkling of blood when God’s covenant with Israel was formalized in the wilderness through Moses as its mediator. Paul is explicit: this was not his theological innovation but the words of Jesus. The Gospels also report that Jesus spoke of his impending death as a “ransom” (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). In these and other ways, Jesus himself laid the groundwork for Paul’s teaching that on the cross Christ had died for our sins.

### **Segment 10: No Normative Christianity**

If Paul was a religious innovator who offered his own interpretation of Jesus, so, Jennings and his experts argue, was everyone else. There was no original Christianity, no original norm or standard of the Christian faith. Paul’s interpretation of Jesus was very different from that of the Gospel of Thomas, for example, in which Jesus appears to be something like a Zen Master. In some ways, Pagels says, Paul’s version of Christianity proved to be the most inclusive and the least demanding. He would be surprised to learn that Christians twenty centuries later would be reading his letters as if they were blueprints to be followed to the letter. He would be surprised, not only because he thought the world was going to end very soon, but also because he had written his letters to address immediate, specific crises. His theology was written on the run and was never meant to be the basis of a doctrinal system.

It is true that there were alternate varieties of belief in the first century that differed significantly from that of Paul. However, none of these alternate forms of Christianity was apostolic or had any direct connection with Christ himself. We have no evidence, for example, of writings by apostles that didn’t make it into the canon and that would provide a different view of early Christian belief. The Gospel of Thomas, probably the earliest noncanonical gospel, is heterodox but is indisputably pseudonymous. Such noncanonical works were excluded because the evidence simply did not win them approval among those who valued adherence to the undisputed apostolic tradition.

Many of Paul’s letters were indeed written on the run—or from prison. However, that doesn’t mean that he didn’t regard them as having divine authority or as relevant beyond their immediate occasion. Paul required his letters to be read in the churches and his instructions obeyed (Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:14). In doing so, Paul was putting his letters on a par with the (Old Testament) Scriptures, which were read aloud in the congregational meetings of the Jews (i.e., in synagogue). From very early on, Paul’s writings were regarded by Christians as Scripture (2 Pet. 3:16). (Even if one does not accept the apostle Peter as the author of 2 Peter, the epistle is a first-century witness to the belief that Paul’s writings were Scripture.) The earliest collections of Christian writings



and the earliest “canons” or lists of authoritative Christian writings had at their core the four Gospels and the writings of Paul.

That Paul’s letters were “occasional,” informal writings produced to address immediate situations, is often overstated in contemporary Pauline scholarship. Such an assessment is only partially correct. Most of Paul’s epistles were indeed prompted by specific situations, such as questions he was asked (see 1 Cor. 7:1) or the threat of false teachings (see Gal. 1:6-9). In these contexts, though, Paul saw himself as giving answers or responses based on the authority of the Scriptures and the revelation of Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. His answers appealed either to the Old Testament, to traditions about what Jesus himself said, or (rarely) to revelations that he had received from the risen Christ. In the course of composing these responses Paul often offered carefully reasoned, deeply theological argument. His exposition of Christ’s relation to the Law in Galatians 3 and his lengthy defense and explanation of the resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15 are notable examples. Moreover, some of Paul’s letters are not focused on specific issues of the moment but are systematic expositions of his understanding of the gospel. Romans (which all biblical scholars agree that Paul wrote) and Ephesians (which some scholars dispute) are standout examples of such systematizing.

### **Segment 11: Paul, Caesar, and Sex**

Having concluded that Paul was the real founder of what we call Christianity, Jennings takes a look at Paul’s teaching as it relates to political, social, and ethical matters. Since the Caesars were called Lord and Savior and King, Jennings and his scholars conclude that Paul’s titles for Jesus were political, not religious, in meaning and that they challenged the fast-growing cult of the Roman emperor. In contrast to the Roman gods, who looked and acted like the rich and powerful (and immoral) nobility, Christ—the “god” whom Paul preached—looked like one of the people, a despised, suffering, marginalized peasant. The gospel that Paul preached was revolutionary in its emphasis on love and community: Christians were like an extended family, caring for its own, reaching out to the unloved. Some of Paul’s converts, though, took their freedom in a direction he disapproved, notably in Corinth. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians reveals his “Puritanical” side as well as his tolerant, inclusive side. Paul not only condemned incest among the Corinthian believers, he advised them that although they were permitted to have sex it would be better if they didn’t. Believing that the end of the world was immanent, Paul saw no point to getting married except to prevent sexual passions from leading Christians into immorality. (Witherington is allowed a soundbite on this subject but it doesn’t offer an effective counterpoint.) Pastor Butts puts Paul’s condemnation of homosexuality alongside his instructions for women to be silent and slaves to obey their masters—and he asserts that these policies came from Paul, not Jesus. Yet this same “Puritanical” apostle was the author of the very moving chapter on love in 1 Corinthians 13. Karen Armstrong resolves the tension for Jennings: Paul was not interested in doctrines and would not want to have his own teachings treated as absolutes today.

Given the many and contentious assertions made in this one segment, our response will have to be longer here than for any other segment.

Jennings’s tendency to put too much stock in a political interpretation of Jesus gets him into trouble here. The titles of Jesus found in Paul’s writings (and in the other New Testament books) derive from the Old Testament and were not chosen to represent Jesus as the anti-Caesar. It is striking that nowhere in Paul’s writings does he ever refer to Jesus as king or emperor. The designations Lord, God,

and Savior were all titles of Yahweh in the Old Testament, and Paul uses them of Jesus in contexts recalling those Old Testament associations (e.g., Rom. 10:9-13; Titus 2:13-14). Naturally, anyone and anything revered in pagan culture as divine would stand in some sort of contrast to the monotheistic God whom Paul said was revealed in Jesus Christ, but this does not mean that the divine designations he used of Jesus were intended as political statements. Paul's message was liberating, but it was not liberation theology.

Jennings's account of Paul's views on sex is based almost entirely on a fractured reading of 1 Corinthians 7. The issue in that chapter is really not sex. It is, rather, whether new Christians should seek to escape from the obligations of ordinary, contractual human relationships. The statement with which the chapter opens, "it is good not to touch a woman," is probably Paul's quoting or reflecting back to the Corinthians a statement they had made in their letter to him (1 Cor. 7:1). He agrees only to a point: while being single definitely has its advantages, Paul does not want anyone using their new status as Christians as a pretext for abandoning their responsibilities to others. Thus husbands and wives are to fulfill their spousal obligations (including sex) to one another (1 Cor. 7:2-5). While in his opinion it would be better not to get married in the first place, he recognizes that some are gifted to be single and others are gifted to be married (1 Cor. 7:6-9). What he expects is that those who are married will not abandon their spouses, though if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave the Christian is freed from that relationship (1 Cor. 7:10-15). In general, he instructs new believers to remain faithful to their relationships: Jews should remain Jews, Gentiles should remain Gentiles, married people should remain married, and single people, he advises, should not go looking to get married (1 Cor. 7:17-20, 25-27). Paul makes one big exception: while those who are free should not indenture themselves as slaves, those who are slaves should, if they can do so legally, become free (1 Cor. 7:21-24). He recommends the single (and chaste) life, not because the world is coming to an end, but because serving the Lord is harder for those who are married (1 Cor. 7:28-35). It is ironic that after drawing attention to the occasional nature of much of Paul's writings, his discussion of Paul's view of sexuality would take statements from this one chapter so badly out of context.

It is unfortunate that Jennings's report gave the impression that Paul viewed women as creatures to be kept silent and subjugated. Several women in Paul's orbit had notable—and vocal—roles in ministry. Priscilla was a vocal partner in teaching ministry with her husband Aquila (Acts 18:18, 24-26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). Phoebe held the church office of deacon in the Corinthian seaport of Cenchræ (Rom. 16:1; cf. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Paul spoke approvingly about women praying and prophesying in church (1 Cor. 11:4-5, 13) and encouraged them along with all believers to seek and exercise spiritual gifts (12:31; 14:1, 5, 31), all of which were used in the public worship of the church (14:3-4, 26). It was Paul who gave the ringing declaration, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 NKJV). Again, Jennings acknowledges the occasional nature of much of Paul's statements and then fails to consider the context of the more controversial comments Paul made about women. For example, in Corinth some women were apparently disrupting church meetings with supposed prophetic revelations giving them independence from their husbands (see 1 Cor. 11:3-5; 14:34-38). Paul's directive in this situation that the women were to be silent was therefore not a general policy prohibiting women from saying anything.

No one should be surprised that Jennings would give a black pastor the one and only comment on Paul's condemnation of homosexual conduct, or that an equivalency would be implied between

Paul's view of homosexuality and his supposed endorsement of slavery. The politically correct constantly seek to draw a moral and political parallel between "gay rights" and the civil rights movement. But Jennings would not have needed to look hard to find black pastors outraged at the comparison.

The thin basis for Butts's claim that the condemnation of homosexuals is attributable to Paul and not Jesus is that in the Gospels there is no mention of Jesus saying anything about homosexual conduct. But this silence, if it proves anything, proves that the subject was not a controversial issue between Jesus and the Jewish leaders—which would imply, in turn, that *he agreed with them that homosexual acts were sinful*. For this same reason the Gospels do not record Jesus commenting on the sinfulness of child sacrifice, bestiality, sex with minors, and various other behaviors. It should be enough to observe that Jesus strongly affirmed the behavioral standards of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17-20), which of course included condemnation of homosexual conduct (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), and never questioned their moral authority. Surely, then, the burden of proof is on those who would maintain that Paul had misrepresented Jesus in his view of such matters.

### **Segment 12: Was Paul Anti-Semitic?**

According to Jennings, there are aspects of Paul's letters that seem anti-Semitic. He singles out the epistle to the Galatians in this regard. Paul criticizes the other apostles, issues harsh warnings against getting circumcised, and refers to his opponents as Judaizers. These elements of Paul have made him a favorite of anti-Semites, including Hitler. But Paul, Jennings and his scholars agree, doesn't deserve the blame. (Jennings has been accused of saying that Paul was anti-Semitic, but this accusation is false.) Paul was a Jew, after all, arguing with his fellow Jews, vigorously disagreeing with them about matters of religion, as Jews (and others) often did. Jennings then begins telling about Paul's last days. When Paul went to Jerusalem with a collection for the poor saints there (hoping with it to patch things up between him and the Jerusalem apostles), he was accused of taking an uncircumcised man into the temple. He was arrested and taken to Caesarea, where he asked to have his case brought before Caesar and was therefore sent to Rome.

Jennings gets some of the facts wrong in this segment. For example, Paul never used the word "Judaizers"; this is a term used by biblical scholars as a label for the unnamed false teachers whom Paul opposed in Galatians. While I am glad that Jennings clears Paul of the charge of being anti-Semitic, he treats the charge more seriously than it deserves. The impression is left that while Paul may not have been anti-Semitic himself, his writings are far too easily taken that way, so modern readers should be cautious in making use of them. Critics argued in much the same way with regard to Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*; almost no one said it was anti-Semitic, but a lot of critics worried about someone else thinking it was.

### **Segment 13: The Death of Paul and the End of the World**

In the final segment of the documentary, Jennings recounts the stories about Paul's death. Once again, he reports that Paul believed that the world was about to come to an end. He wonders what it would have been like for Paul to go to Rome and tell the people there that their mighty empire was about to fall. Jennings expresses astonishment that the little man from a distant province could lay the groundwork for the small Christian movement to become three centuries later the official religion of the

Roman Empire. According to tradition, Peter and Paul were both executed in or near Rome when Nero had Christians in Rome executed for a fire he reportedly started. According to these same traditions, Paul was beheaded. Jennings then visits his last tourist trap, the Church of the Three Fountains, so called because supposedly when Paul's head was cut off it bounced on the ground three times and opened up three fountains. According to Jennings, Paul died mistakenly thinking that the world was about to come to an end. In the last letter we have from Paul, he reports, Paul says that "the end is nearer now than when we first believed." As Paul's expectation proved incorrect, Christianity had to undergo even more changes to accommodate the continued delay in Christ's return.

We have already commented on the condescending nature of Jennings's reporting on tourist traps and the ignorance of the pious. We have also already addressed more than once the more serious matter, the allegation that Paul mistakenly thought the world was about to come to an end. The statement that Jennings attributes to Paul is a misquotation; what Paul says is that "salvation is nearer to us than when we believed" (Rom. 13:11). Nor is this statement from Paul's last known letter. Philippians and Philemon are undisputed letters of Paul written after Romans (about AD 60), and many nonconservative scholars also acknowledge Colossians and Ephesians as also written by Paul around AD 60. (We acknowledge that mainstream scholarship denies the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, though on questionable grounds.) In any case, Paul was not asserting that the Roman Empire was about to fall and the end of the world was about to happen. Again, Paul was speaking about an overlapping of two ages. The "night" of the age of sin and death was passing and the "day" of the age of love and life was approaching (Rom. 13:12). However long it takes—and Paul offers no speculation on the question—from that time on they were living in the receding shadow of the night. While he could not say how close they were, he knew that "salvation is nearer." That is all anyone can know until the day of final salvation actually arrives.

One other point is worth noting: Paul's teaching that the age to come could arrive at any time (like a thief in the night, as he says elsewhere) and that Christ's followers should live in its light has strong affinities and connections with the teaching of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:33-37; Luke 12:35-40; 21:34-36; see also 1 Thess. 5:2-7). Here is another reason to question the attempt to drive a wedge between Jesus and Paul.

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