

PAUL THE STIGMATIC

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Introduction

Within the pages of the Letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul makes a stunning statement in his closing: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Galatians 6:17b). For most, this is understood as a reference to the various tribulations Paul had suffered at the hands of various opponents. The marks are then understood as scars — battle scars — which attest to Paul’s devotion to his cause. But is it not possible that Paul is, in fact, implying something far more profound?

What if Paul is making the claim that he does in fact bear on his body the marks of Jesus — the stigmata? If Paul were indeed meaning exactly what he claims, would this not change our reading of Galatians? Indeed, as shall be demonstrated, Paul is claiming to bear the stigmata. However, it could well be that Paul is making that claim in order to take the next step: Paul is claiming that he is, in fact, the personification and/or incarnation of the Christ.

The Stigmata

Before delving too deeply, we need to examine the stigmata and the traditions surrounding it. The stigmata is a documented phenomenon which, for many, is a deeply powerful manifestation of the wounds of Christ on the body of a devout believer. Generally the stigmata manifests itself in the form of bleeding hands, feet, and side. Typically it is simply bleeding hands. Yet other, less common wounds occur in the feet, side and the brow (from the crown of thorns — see John 20:25; 19:34 and Matthew 27:29).¹ Yet the term stigmata does not necessarily mean just these markings.

¹ Nickell p. 219

The markings with the Five Wounds, accompanied or unaccompanied by the Crown of Thorns, has been designated by some writers "Complete Stigmatization" and the term may be allowed to stand for convenience's sake. Yet other stigmatic imprints are recorded. Such are the weals of scourging; the wound on the shoulder, on the wrists; the livid bruising of the cords; and on the mouth the hyssop mark of the sponge supped with vinegar which was set upon a reed.²

However, generally (and for this work) the 'traditional' stigmata will be understood as that of the hands, feet, and side.

The first recorded stigmatic is Saint Francis of Assisi who, on September 14, 1224, received the marks of Christ upon his body. As related in the work *Fioretti*:

While he was thus inflamed by this contemplation [of Christ], he saw a seraph with six shining, fiery wings descend from heaven. This seraph drew near to Saint Francis in swift flight, so that he could see him clearly and recognize that he had the form of a man crucified. [...] As Saint Francis gazed upon him he was filled with great fear, and at the same time great joy, sorrow and wonder. He felt great joy at the gracious face of Christ, who appeared to him so familiarly and looked on him so kindly; but seeing him nailed to the cross, he felt infinite sorrow and compassion... Then after a long period of secret converse this marvelous vision faded, leaving ... in his body a wonderful image and imprint of the Passion of Christ. For in the hands and feet of Saint Francis forthwith began to appear the marks of the nails in the same manner as he had seen them in the body of Jesus crucified.³

While Saint Francis himself never bragged upon these marks, other members of his order recorded that his clothing was stained with blood.⁴ Since this first recorded instance of stigmata, the Catholic Church has confirmed over three hundred occurrences of this phenomenon around the world.⁵

² Summers, p.118

³ Nickell, p. 220; Panati, p. 510

⁴ Cf. Panati, p. 511

⁵ Ibid.

Galatians 6:17

With that brief introduction to the stigmata, let us return our gaze to the Letter to the Galatians.

Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

In and of itself, this is a remarkable passage in that it is encountered at the very end of the letter, yet it gives no explanation as to its meaning. It does seem to imply a sense of authority, and the impression is made that by simply making this claim, Paul is in some manner silencing some unvoiced criticism. Yet the reference is lost to us.

In dealing with this passage, F. F. Bruce does the most extensive work concerning “the marks of Jesus.”

In contrast to the now irrelevant mark of circumcision, Paul asserts that he has marks on his body which do mean something real – the *στιγματα* or scars which he has acquired as the direct consequence of his service for Jesus. These proclaim whose he is and whom he serves. Among them the most permanent were probably the marks left by his stoning at Lystra (Acts 14:19; cf. 2 Cor. 11:25), and if the church at Lystra was one of those to which this letter was addressed, some at least of his readers would have a vivid recollection of that occasion.⁶

He continues by offering other possibilities: tattoo marks of religious devotion; a mark received at baptism (the mark of an X); and eye trouble resulting from the blinding light of “the divine glory on the Damascus road.” Yet Bruce does not conclude anything more than that the marks of Jesus simply stand for what he has endured for the sake of Christ.

Other interpretations of this passage revolve around a literal marking akin to a tattoo or a brand, much like a slave would endure at the hands of his or her owner. As Williams states:

With the expression “the marks of Jesus” the apostle transforms a slave’s tattoo or brand into a metaphor of his sufferings on behalf of the gospel (perhaps alluded to

⁶ Bruce, p.276

at 4:13-14), thus reminding his hearers that he is a slave of Christ (see 1:10).⁷

Yet Paul, so far as is recorded, was never a slave, nor was he marked by anyone to signify ownership. However, Barclay engages this idea, stating:

Often a master branded his slaves with a mark that showed them to be his. Most likely what Paul means is that the scars of the things he had suffered for Christ are the brands which show him to be Christ's slave.⁸

So it would seem that these marks are more "the scars of experience" rather than some divine emanation. Yet this reading of Paul's words seems to indicate that he could not literally mean what he says and that, in fact, he is making a reference to a symbolic interpretation of marks already upon his body. But it might be argued as well that these marks were taken upon Paul in order to identify and set himself apart.

The term *στιγματα* ("stigmas") originally refers to the marks of religious tattooing which was widely used in the Hellenistic world.⁹

However Betz, in a footnote, also points out that "this concept is unique in the New Testament." Religious tattooing was not a practice endorsed by Paul, nor was the process mentioned anywhere except in Isaiah 44:5, which ironically seems to counter Levitical law (Leviticus 19:28). Betz, however, takes the traditional route and agrees that Paul's marks of Christ indicate his persecutorial stripes.

Picking up on the idea of the symbolic branding that Paul seems to allude to, Guthrie draws this conclusion:

Ramsay has suggested that this is an allusion to the branding of slaves as a sign of ownership, in which case Paul is thinking metaphorically of the badge of Jesus upon him, perhaps in contrast to the badge of circumcision carried by the legalists. But this is not the best interpretation. 2 Corinthians 4:10 supplies a suitable parallel. After speaking of being "persecuted"

⁷ Williams, p 167-8

⁸ Barclay, p. 57

⁹ Betz, p. 324.

and “struck down,” he mentions carrying in the body the death of Jesus, an expression so closely parallel to the present statement that it seems inescapable that Paul meant the same thing in both cases. This being so, the marks of Jesus would be the scars of persecution.¹⁰

Yet this conclusion leaves much to be desired. To begin with, there is always a danger of reaching outside a text for confirmation and understanding, even if the other text is within the canonical bounds. However, the main concern is that the assumption that both the 2 Corinthians passage (“always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies,” 2 Corinthians 4:10) and the Galatians passage are speaking of the same thing. The 2 Corinthians passage seems more of an exhortation to remember the death of Jesus so that Jesus’ example might be manifested in our lives. It seems hard to connect that with Paul’s emphatic claim of he himself having the *marks* of Jesus upon his body. Yet Fung, like Guthrie, concludes:

The “marks” are most widely and most reasonably interpreted as the wounds and scars left in Paul’s body as a result of his sufferings for the gospel.¹¹

Fung also cites the 2 Corinthians passage and Acts 14:19 to demonstrate these wounds might well come from Paul’s stoning at Lystra.¹²

Yet none of these authors ever consider the possibility that the marks of Jesus actually refer to the marks of Jesus. None of them consider the possibility that Paul refers to the stigmata in a quite literal fashion. However, it is not a totally overlooked idea. As Scott describes:

Medieval churchmen believed that these were the scars in the hands, feet, and side of Jesus, and that Paul by sympathetic identification with Him found the same scars appearing on his body.¹³

¹⁰ Guthrie, p.163.

¹¹ Fung, p. 313.

¹² Ibid.; cf. Bruce, p. 276. Baird also offers a remarkably short observation that these were the visible marks of persecution (Baird, p. 1211). This, like Alexander (p. 603), seems to simply gloss over the possibility for any other meanings.

¹³ Stott, p. 181 (cf. Barclay, p. 56).

Yet Scott continues,

It is most unlikely, however, that the stigmata of Jesus which Paul bore on his body were of this kind. Doubtless they were rather wounds, which he had received while being persecuted for Jesus' sake.¹⁴

From here, Stott goes on to cite 2 Corinthians and Acts to demonstrate what the marks Paul refers to had to be.

Galatians Examined

If the letter to the Galatians were to be read literally, what would we conclude? It could be surmised that Paul is indeed claiming to be the revealed Christ. Yet reading Galatians 6:17 in this manner seems to generate a Paul far too mystical for traditional understandings. But would such a claim be as far-fetched as one might think? Perhaps not.

For someone to claim that they had on their body the stigmata (or for someone else to claim that for Paul),¹⁵ it would be implicitly understood that as a recipient of such markings the individual must be demonstrative of remarkable spirituality or piety. Not only this, it would identify the bearer as a true apostle, should that question ever be brought to the foreground. But more to the point, it would be a strong claim for someone to make especially if they themselves had been *identified as Christ* himself. Betz explains:

It is important to see that Paul in his final statement speaks again of himself as the apostle of Christ who was sent by his Lord to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles, and thus also to the Galatians. Not only did he bring the gospel to them, but as a "slave of Christ" (1:10) he represents Christ as in a christophany (4:13-14). Christ lives in him (2:20) and speaks through him (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:3). In making this remark at the end of the letter, Paul reminds the Galatians of the beginning of their existence as Christians, when he came to them (cf. 4:13-14) hoping as he does now that they will not despise him and reject him, but they will again overcome

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 182.

¹⁵ It is conceivable that Paul is, in fact, not the author of Galatians. This will be addressed later.

the temptation and welcome him as “an angel of God, even as Christ himself.”¹⁶

Though not setting out to agree to the point of the literal stigmata, Betz has begun a line of thought that is remarkably relevant to the stigmata. Paul’s reception “even as Christ himself” is underscored by the idea of the stigmata. How else could such an obviously erroneous idea occur unless Paul not only proclaimed the gospel but bore on himself the wounds of Jesus?

So is Paul claiming to be Jesus? Not completely. However, he does seem to be claiming that in some very dynamic way he is revealing Christ to the recipients of the letter to the Galatians. And it takes nothing more than an open eye to see this idea throughout the letter.

To begin with, we find Paul’s “authentication” of his message in 1:12:

For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

He then continues with further explanation in 1:15-16a:

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles...

What is interesting is that the word “to” (“reveal his Son to me”) can be better translated as “in.” This would significantly change the meaning (“reveal his Son *in* me”), and indicate that Paul’s revelation was mystical and ecstatic. The reading “in me” would also coincide with 2:20.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

While this may seem highly allegorical in the sense that all true followers have been “crucified” with Christ, it might well be a very literal reference to the fact that Paul, like Saint Francis, experienced a “mystical crucifixion” and thus bears upon his body the actual marks of the event.

Continuing in 3:1, Paul then reminds his readers that they have lost their way and have abandoned the stories of Christ.

¹⁶ Betz, p. 325.

Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

The implications are also clear. The people knew of Jesus' death on a cross and had either seen an icon attesting to that fact, or they heard it from Paul.¹⁷ Thus, they would know of the marks of the crucifixion.

We then reach the telling line of 4:14.

...and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus.

Could his "condition" be that of bleeding hands and feet? Possibly. But what is surprising is that Paul states that he was received not as a messenger *for* Jesus, but "as Christ Jesus" himself. This is a statement that Paul does not refute, even though the reader might expect him to do so. Betz argues that this statement is not an exaggeration, but an explanation.

The statement is more than a simple exaggeration, since Paul, as the apostle and "imitator" of Christ, represents Christ.¹⁸

However, the term "imitator" which Betz uses does not occur in Galatians. Indeed one might expect that as a response to the claims of his being Christ. But the idea of his imitation occurs in 1 Corinthians 11:1 and 1 Thessalonians 1:6, not in Galatians.

Remarkably enough, Stott takes on the formidable task of explaining why Paul did not refute the notion:

This is an extraordinary expression. It is another plain indication of Paul's self-conscious apostolic authority. He sees nothing incongruous about the Galatians receiving him as if he were one of God's angels, or as if he were Christ Jesus, God's Son. He does not rebuke the Galatians for paying an exaggerated deference to him, as he did when the crowd attempted to worship him in Lystra, one of the Galatian cities (Acts 14:8-18)... Here, however, Paul does not rebuke them for receiving him as if he were God's angel or God's Christ. Although personally he knew that he was only their fellow sinner,

¹⁷ There is some question as to Paul's knowing of the crucifixion and/or the historical Jesus. This issue will be addressed at some length in a later section.

¹⁸ Betz, p. 226.

indeed the “foremost of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15), yet officially he was an apostle of Jesus Christ, invested with the authority of Christ and sent on a mission by Christ. So they were quite right to receive him “as an angel of God,” since he was one of God’s messengers, and “as Christ Jesus,” since he came to them on the authority of Christ and with the message of Christ.¹⁹

Stott seems to succeed only in pointing out that Paul rejects the interpretation that he is actually Jesus in some instances but not others and, while incorrect, that being received as Jesus is not as reprehensible as one might believe. Stott draws the circle to a close when he states:

The apostles of Christ were His [Christ’s] personal delegates. Of such it was said in those days that “the one sent by a person is as this person himself.” Christ Himself anticipated this. Sending out His apostles, He said: “He who receives you receives me” (Matt 10:40). So, in receiving Paul, the Galatians quite rightly received him as Christ, for they recognized him as an apostle or delegate of Christ.²⁰

Yet it should be noted that Paul makes no claims as a delegate, but as the one who proclaims the gospel of Christ as revealed in him.

Finally we reach chapter 6 where we encounter verse 14:

But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Paul glories in nothing but the cross, which bore Christ, whose wounds he too now bears. Thus when we reach 6:17, we should not be surprised at Paul claiming to have the stigmata upon him, for not only does he bring the gospel of Jesus to the Galatians, he *is* the revealed Christ!

As startling as this reading of Galatians may sound, it is not beyond the realm of possibility, nor is it an inconceivable idea. In ancient writings, the traditions of Docetism were strong factors to be accounted for. Could Galatians, in fact, be a docetic work?

¹⁹ Stott p.114-115

²⁰ Ibid p.115

Before we enter that discussion, let us briefly examine what Docetism was.

Docetism

Docetism is a derivative of the Greek word *δοκειν*, which means “to appear” or “to seem.” The term itself is usually associated with Docetic Christologies that denied that Christ was a “fleshly” being. Instead, Christ only seemed or appeared to be human. Likewise, he only appeared to suffer on the cross.²¹ “This kind of teaching presupposed a dualistic view of the world according to which it would have been impossible for a divine being to assume human flesh.”²²

Docetic writings largely portrayed Christ as only having appeared to suffer on the cross, yet not actually doing so. According to Irenaeus, the Docetic heretic Basilides taught that Jesus in fact had not been crucified. Instead, Jesus had switched places with Simon of Cyrene.

And into the nations belonging to them it (intellect) appeared on earth as a man, and he performed deeds of power. Hence he did not suffer. Rather a certain Simon of Cyrene was forced to bear his cross for him, and it was he who was ignorantly and erroneously crucified, being transformed by the other, so he was taken for Jesus; while Jesus, for his part, assumed the form of Simon and stood by, laughing at them.²³

As Lüdemann points out, “[if] we glance at the controversies of Ignatius of Antioch with his docetic opponents which were being fought out at the same time, we can see from them that these opponents dispute the corporeality of Jesus, denying his fleshly resurrection, and emphasize that it was impossible for Jesus to suffer.”²⁴ Yet we often overlook a vital point:

Here it is often forgotten that Paul’s christology sometimes verged on docetism. [...] On the one hand, according to Paul, the Son of God is “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4), while on the other he assumed only

²¹ Ehrman, p. 181; Layton, p. 198 (40.8.2b).

²² *Docetism, Interpreter’s Dictionary (A-D)*.

²³ Layton, p. 423.

²⁴ Lüdemann, p. 177.

the “form of a servant” (Phil. 2:7), merely the “likeness of a human being” (Phil. 2:7) or “the flesh” (Rom. 8:3).²⁵

In fact, it is Paul, as we shall see, who provides the ammunition for the docetics. Indeed Marcion interpreted the writings of Paul as docetic. Even if Galatians is not overtly docetic, it certainly appears that many of Paul’s writings were assumed to be such.

Paul and the Docetic Letter to the Galatians

We begin by tracing a line of heterodox teachings starting from the “father of all heretics,” Simon Magus. “According to Irenaeus, Simon claimed to be God himself, come down to bring salvation to the world.”²⁶ Little is known of Simon Magus from canonical scripture. In fact, the only reference to him comes from Acts 8:9-24, which only refers to him as Simon. Yet the account does refer to Simon as having practiced magic.

But there was a man named Simon who had previously practiced magic in the city and around the nation of Samaria, saying that he himself was somebody great. They all gave heed to him, from the least to the greatest, saying, “This man is that power of God which is called great.”²⁷

As one author records, “Simon appears to have claimed to be divine, and taught that salvation involved knowledge of himself rather than knowledge of one’s self.”²⁸ Yet untangling fact from fantasy is a different task, especially when it comes to one so vilified by the church as Simon Magus. As Andrew Welburn states, “We do know that [Simon] spoke in the name of “the Great Power,” which is a circumlocution for God. In doing so, he was not claiming to be God, nor, as many later Christian writers thought, setting himself up as a rival to Christ. He was speaking in the oriental manner out of consciousness which transcended individuality – in which individual awareness was abandoned and a universal power could speak out of the depths of the soul.”²⁹

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ehrman, p. 184

²⁷ Acts 8:9-10

²⁸ Yamauchi, p. 100

²⁹ Welburn. p. 66.

Yet the tradition attributed to Simon Magus is a large one. Simon allegedly went to Rome “where he lived in association with the Phoenician woman named Helen.”³⁰ From these sources, which were from the writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus of Rome, “we hear that Simon claimed to be the supreme god, with Helen as the primary concept emanating from him. She had appeared in history as Helen of Troy and was reincarnated as Simon’s companion of the same name.... Trust in him — or them — assures salvation. Although the second and third century Christian writers thought that the historical person Simon had taught these claims about himself and his cosmic role, it is much more likely that the stories of Simon and the claims on his behalf were created well after the New Testament period.”³¹ While there is the possibility that these claims were indeed attributed to Simon, there is the distinct possibility that Simon is, in fact, not who we think he is.

Making reference to the work the *Didascalia*, Walter Bauer describes the rampant problem of heretics.

Already at the beginning of the *Didascalia* the problem of heresy is mentioned, and is called to mind repeatedly in what follows. The heresies form a constant danger to the church. Hence, the warning at the start of chapter 23, “guard yourselves against all hateful, reprehensible, and abominable heresies and flee from them as you would a blazing fire,” and the instruction in chapter 25 to have no fellowship with the heretics.³²

Bauer points out that the author “presupposes the existence of a number of heresies.”³³ What emerges from this work (the *Didascalia*) is a rough “schematic” of what “all heresies” are supposed to believe. According to Bauer, the author of the *Didascalia* posits the “beginning of all heresies” with Simon Magus.³⁴ The work then gives its “schematic” account:

³⁰ Kee p. 121.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bauer, p. 252.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

“[All] heresies” are accused of rejecting “the law and the prophets”, blaspheming “God almighty,” and denying the resurrection (202.8-11: 6.10.1).³⁵

This rejection of the law might sound familiar. It brings into the foreground the conflict between the Gentile Christians and the Judaizers. One of the earliest features of Pauline theology was “the doctrine of the nullification of the Jewish/biblical Torah, made superfluous by faith in Christ, the result being that Gentile converts to Christianity need not trouble themselves to adopt the commandments of the Torah, a cultural tradition alien to them.”³⁶ Yet the Jewish Christians would obviously chafe at such an idea, and indeed it seems that they did. “The devotees of Jesus and the Torah wrote Paul off as a false apostle and antichrist. As F. C. Baur argued, Simon Magus seems to have been a kind of satirical vilification of Paul!”³⁷

As outlandish as this may seem, evidence for this comes (primarily) from two sources written around the second-century: the Acts of the Apostles and the Clementine *Homilies* and *Recognitions*. Within the Clementine writings we find at the core a “Jewish Christian or Ebionite” source. As Maccoby describes:

This core shows a staunch adherence to the Torah, and contains an impassioned attack on those who attributed anti-Torah views to Peter. Paul is not mentioned by name, but he is strongly hinted at as the supreme enemy under the disguise of “Simon Magus,” against whom Peter is represented as polemicizing.³⁸

The crux of Peter’s argument against this “lightly disguised Paul is on the grounds that he is a false prophet, that he has spread lies about Peter and, most telling of all, that he knew nothing about the true teachings of Jesus, since he never met him in the flesh and bases his ideas of Jesus on delusive visions.”³⁹ Also, these writings reflect a “Simon” who taught “the suppression of the Torah” which coincides with the Jewish Christian reaction against Paul.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Price, Introduction to *Scroll of Thoth*, p. xix.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Maccoby, p. 180.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Price, p. xix.

So why would Paul be called Simon? Largely, Simon Magus was the 'arch-enemy' to Peter. Thus the positive Simon Peter versus the negative Simon Magus (the rock versus the magician). Just as Superman fought the evil distortion of himself in the gross caricature of Bizarro, so Simon Peter fights the "anti-Simon," Simon Magus.⁴¹

Yet to label Simon Magus the father of heresies is an oversimplification. It stems out of the thinking of such ancient church writers as Eusebius and Irenaeus who portray orthodoxy as the true line of thought with evil, misguided heresies popping up in their wake. Yet as Walter Bauer successfully demonstrates, this was not the case.⁴² As Bauer stated, "It was by no means the rule at that time that heretics were located 'outside'."⁴³

Indeed some Gnostics claimed not Simon Magus as their founder, but Paul! For example, Valentinus "claimed he received his teaching straight from Theodus, a first hand disciple of Paul."⁴⁴ Price continues by explaining:

In reality the formation of the many diverse types of early Christian faith was highly complex and confusing, and there was no place in the emerging sanitized version of church history for the earlier radical Paul.

To be given any place at all, Paul, "the heretics' apostle", had to be split into two literary figures: the Apostle Paul and Simon the Sorcerer. The point was to strip from Paul, whoever he may have been, the interpretations of Marcionites and Gnostics, and to consign these to a scapegoat double, the evil twin of Paul, Simon Magus.⁴⁵

So is the Simon Magus in Acts really Paul? Quite possibly. But it might well be an unwitting maneuver that has included Paul and his 'evil' double into the narrative without realizing that they are contrasting interpretations of the same character. And while this is speculative, it is important to keep the literary division in mind as we examine some of those who did follow the lead of Paul to notable heterodox understandings.

⁴¹ See Price p. xx

⁴² See *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*

⁴³ Bauer p. 131

⁴⁴ Price p. xx

⁴⁵ *Ibid* p. xxi

Saturninus and Marcion

According to Eusebius, Simonian doctrine was the fountain from which sprang all streams of heresies. Simon's teaching reached tremendous heights and, indeed, became the seed planted in the fertile ground of several different individuals. And while the list is extensive, we will briefly examine two in some detail, the first of which is Saturninus. If we were to look at Eusebius' heretical line from Simon to Saturninus, it would have only a few names between them.

Thus it was from Menander — who was mentioned above as successor to Simon — proceeded a power with the two mouths and twin heads of a snake, which set up the originators of two heresies, Saturninus, an Antiochene by birth, and Basilides of Alexandria, who — one in Syria and one in Egypt — established schools of detestable heresies.⁴⁶

Saturninus believed that Christ was indeed the redeemer. Yet he, like other Gnostics, "maintained that Christ was not a material being and only appeared to be a man."⁴⁷ This docetic understanding was nothing new with Saturninus, nor was it unique to him. According to Saturninus, though, "Jesus came to destroy the God of the Jews and to liberate the sparks of the divine from their bodily prisons. He was not actually born and did not have a body, but was only mistakenly supposed to be a material, visible being."⁴⁸ Thus, with Saturninus, the understanding of Christ turns decidedly docetic. Simon Magus, however, had allegedly also taught Docetism. According to Irenaeus, Simon had appeared as Jesus, but in appearance only; as Jesus he had not really been a man, and "had appeared to suffer even though he had not really suffered."⁴⁹

From these docetic teachings, there emerged the infamous frontman, Marcion of Pontus. Marcion's "heretical" line, according to Eusebius (who is citing Irenaeus), stemmed from the heretical Cerdo, whose "notions stemmed from the followers of Simon."⁵⁰ Cerdo was succeeded by Marcion who "inflated his teaching,

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *HE* 4.7

⁴⁷ Yamauchi, p. 100

⁴⁸ Ehrman, p. 184

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Eusebius *HE* 4.2

blaspheming unblushingly.”⁵¹ According to Irenaeus, this teaching involved proclaiming that “the God proclaimed by the Law and the Prophets was not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵²

Whatever may be true about Marcion’s teachings, it was he who proposed the first version of what would later become the canonized New Testament. Marcion proposed that only Luke (his edition, no less) and ten letters of Paul be considered authoritative. “He rejected the Old Testament and purged from Luke any favorable references to it. Christianity became for Marcion, the antithesis of Judaism.”⁵³

Marcion is best understood as a theologian who systematically interpreted Paul’s writings. “His theological system took its cues from the Pauline epistles, especially Romans and Galatians, in which he found a clean and emphatic contrast between the Gospel of Christ and the Law of the Old Testament, a contrast evident above all in Paul’s violent opposition to those who sought to follow the Law after having come to faith in Christ.”⁵⁴ Marcion believed that Christ was not flesh and blood. Yet he did hold the cross and Christ crucified as a central theme of his theology.

Marcion “edited” the ten letters of Paul so that they would not contain positive references to the Hebrew scriptures. Yet regardless of how he ‘corrected’ them, his central understanding was taken from Paul, even though later orthodox apologists would write that Marcion received his heterodox understanding from Simon Magus. Interestingly enough, both charges could well be correct, especially if Paul and Simon were one and the same.

Paul, for Marcion, was definitely not one of the twelve (whom he believed had misunderstood Jesus’ teachings), but a “subsequent convert.” Paul had taught all Marcion came to believe, at least in Marcion’s eyes. “Marcion was Christianity’s first great Paulinist.”⁵⁵ In fact, many other groups from Valentinus to the Basilidean Gnostics took cues from Paul. So much so that the church apologist Tertullian called Paul the “heretics’ apostle.”

So it would seem that Simon Magus, Saturninus, Marcion, and docetic understandings of Christ can take their cues from

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kee, p. 123.

⁵⁴ Ehrman, p. 186.

⁵⁵ Price, p. xviii.

Paul. Indeed, Galatians may very well have been one such a work that inspired, informed, and undergirded heresies for many, many years.

Non-Docetic Docetism?

The idea of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, though central to Paul, has no real basis in Gnosticism. In Gnosticism, "the savior does not come to Earth to act as a sacrifice for mankind, but to bring them knowledge, if they are fit to receive it."⁵⁶ Thus, Pauline Christianity bears a striking difference from most Gnostic understandings. However, the "gnosis which the savior brings is nothing but the knowledge of the saving power of his own death,"⁵⁷ at least for Paul's understanding of Christ. As Maccoby explains, the Christ "functions as a sacrifice, but only if the initiate is aware of his sacrificial power and shares, by 'faith,' in the savior's sacrificial experience."⁵⁸ Thus Paul had to have a truly sacrificial Christ, but this event was indeed one in which the believing individual could share. So while Christ may have physically existed and suffered on the cross, others (by faith in that event) could truly experience this suffering as well — even to the point of bearing the sufferings physically.

So if Galatians is not completely docetic, yet does share in some of the characteristics of docetism, what could be implied by Paul seeming to portray Christ as revealed in him? It could be that Galatians is picking up on the docetic idea of the disciples and/or apostles being earthly avatars of the risen Christ. Like the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, even though they were not always explicitly docetic, the human flesh "merely serves as an occasion for the showing forth of a power which transcends the flesh and must therefore come from the divine sphere."⁵⁹

The Avatars

The Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles contain within many of them the representation of the disciples not only as Christ-like, but even as Christ himself. Indeed in the *Acts of John*, there is a story of John healing a man and wife by bringing them

⁵⁶ Maccoby, p. 195.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Price, p. 169.

both back from the dead (an act attributed to Paul in Acts 20). After performing these miracles, the man, Lycomedes, commissions a painting to be made of John. But when John sees it, he fails to recognize himself and even asks Lycomedes if it is a picture of “one of thy gods that is painted here?”⁶⁰ Finally, with the aid of a mirror, John is persuaded to see that the image is his own. But even then, John calls it “childish and imperfect: thou hast drawn a dead likeness of the dead.”⁶¹ The imperfect likeness of the dead is indeed the fleshly body, not the true inner self.

In another passage, an unnamed elder approaches John and, after a brief discussion, states, “Now I know that God dwells in you, O blessed John! For he who tempts you tempts the one who cannot be tempted.”⁶² Indeed, in section 62 of the *Acts of John*, people are healed by John simply by touching his garments.

The most telling incident in the *Acts of John* is when John recounts when he and his brother James both saw Jesus, but both see a different form. John “sees a man,” a bald man with a thick flowing beard. James however saw “a youth whose beard was newly come.”⁶³ And while the *Acts of John* is one of the best examples of docetic understandings of Jesus (Jesus has no real form, therefore Jesus appears in varying forms) it is not the only example. Nor is it completely necessary to venture outside of canonical bounds to find potential docetic passages. For example, when Jesus is seen walking on water, the disciples do not immediately recognize him (John 6:19). Likewise in the Gospel of Luke, the post-resurrection Jesus is not recognized even after a lengthy conversation (Luke 24:13-29). Indeed, after the Emmaus disciples break bread with Jesus, he “vanished out of their sight” (Luke 24:31). Luke also records Jesus being mistaken for a spirit (Luke 14:36-7). Yet Luke offers a counter to a docetic reading by claiming Jesus ate a piece of fish in front of the disciples. But the message is clear enough — Jesus is not immediately recognized in his “true” or resurrected form.

Actually, if one were to simply look at the resurrection stories from the Gospel of John, one would quickly come to similar conclusions as in Luke. Mary Magdalene does not recognize Jesus (20:14) and once she does, she is instructed not to touch him

⁶⁰ *Acts of John*, 27.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶² This is an account from another version of the *Acts of John*. This story appears in three forms, all centering around John and a partridge.

⁶³ *Acts of John* 89

(20:17). Likewise, the disciples fail to immediately recognize Jesus on the shoreline (21:4). And while docetic counter stories are also contained within these Gospels, it is easy to see how the docetic understanding could be interpreted and applied to Jesus.

With a Jesus who could appear as whomever he wished, we encounter a Jesus who could conceivably be anyone at any time, as well as the possibility that at any time, anyone could be the avatar of the Christ. As A. N. Wilson states:

We read that “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul” [Acts 19:11]. Although Jesus himself was the Christ raised up by God, it should not be forgotten that Paul regarded himself as a figure in whom the Christ was now active and alive. If he had been living in a Hindu or Buddhist culture, Paul might well have regarded himself as an avatar. In his own body he bore the wounds of Jesus; he had the mind of Christ [1 Cor. 2:16, Phil. 2:5]; as a “person in Christ” he had, like Jesus, ascended into heaven and come down again [2 Cor. 12:2].⁶⁴

Among non-canonical works, there is the *Treatise on Resurrection* in which the author writes that the apostle Paul said, “we have suffered with him, and arisen with him and ascended with him.”⁶⁵ In keeping with the two strands of thought — 1) that Christ can take many forms and 2) that the apostles, even any believer, can be “at one with Christ” — we come to the striking realization that Christ is very radically “among us,” quite possibly in the personage of Paul. “One of the most fascinating aspects of the docetic Christology of the [Apocryphal] Acts is the implication that if Christ’s human form was only an illusion, then he is not restricted to any single illusory form. Thus he appears in several.”⁶⁶

Within the work *The Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, Peter goes to visit a physician named Lithargoel who actually finds Peter first, but he (Lithargoel) is disguised. Shortly after the two meet, Lithargoel reveals himself to be Christ! It should come as no real surprise, then, when we encounter the canonical statement, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for

⁶⁴ Wilson p. 184

⁶⁵ Layton p. 321

⁶⁶ Price p. 172

thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”⁶⁷ This idea is not only docetic, it finds its expression most commonly in Greek mythology, where one could never be sure if a person was a god or goddess in disguise or in some other undisclosed form.

Downward [Athena] now glided from the summit of Olympus, to alight on Ithaca before Odysseus' house, by the sill of the main gate. With that war spear in her fist she seemed some traveler seeking hospitality: She had a look of Mentos, a chief in Taphos.⁶⁸

It is not too difficult to see the docetic understanding that Jesus is indeed in the form of Paul, revealed in Paul to the people of Galatia. The idea certainly was not foreign to the contemporary understanding of the day. In fact, as Maccoby points out, it is possible that “Paul is here only claiming for himself what, in his view, is possible for every Christian: an identification and merging with the personality of Jesus as divine savior: Christ, it may be said, is ‘in’ every Christian, just as every Christian is ‘in’ Christ. Even so [in Galatians] Paul is claiming to be the first person in whom this miraculous merging has taken place.”⁶⁹ So in view of the idea of divine beings roaming the earth under assumed names (Athena as Mentos, Jesus as Lithargoel), Paul is indeed claiming that the divine Christ is not disguised as Paul, but revealed in him. “Paul is saying, quite straightforwardly, that he is himself the incarnation of the Son of God.”⁷⁰

This brings us back to the stigmata, which Maccoby addresses:

Even more important for an understanding of Paul's view of his own status is his claim to have special marks or stigmata on his body, showing the depth of his self-identification with the sufferings of Jesus on the cross.... Thus the stigmata of Paul, whether self-inflicted or psychosomatically produced, made him, in his own eyes and those of his followers, the supreme embodiment of the power of the mystery god, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁷¹

⁶⁷ Hebrews 13:2

⁶⁸ *The Odyssey* 1:7

⁶⁹ Maccoby, p. 106.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 107.

But the question remains, what was Paul's understanding of Jesus? Did Paul understand Jesus as a human being crucified? Did Paul only experience Christ in a risen, visionary form? What, indeed, is the relationship between Jesus and Paul?

Jesus and Paul

Jesus the Christ was an important figure for Paul. Indeed Jesus the risen Christ was seemingly far more important than the 'historical' Jesus. In the corpus of the works attributed to Paul, there is little discussion as to Jesus' life or miracles. In fact, so little is said that one might wonder if Paul ever knew of the person Jesus. It is speculated that Paul (then Saul) might have encountered Jesus and/or been at least vaguely aware of the traditions concerning Jesus. Yet there is little to suggest much more than that.

For Paul, it seems that the historical Jesus was of less concern than the risen Christ, which he encountered on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9–10). Yet the encounter seems to slip Paul's mind in the letter to the Galatians when he speaks of his revelation of Christ (Galatians 1:11-17). In fact, if we look only at Galatians, Paul seems to go to tremendous length to show that the message he proclaims comes from the Christ, not from men. This could well be a composition directed against the "Jerusalem twelve," but it could also imply that he heard nothing from an earthly Jesus, only the heavenly, resurrected one.

As Sabatier states, Paul's conversion was "a profound crisis of his soul. The old ego had been done away, and a new ego emerged, whose vital principle is Christ Himself. Paul's conversion was nothing less than the spiritual entrance, the birth of Christ in his soul."⁷² Paul's encounter is nothing short of a radical transformation in which the heavenly Christ, in essence, possesses Paul. This divine possession gives Paul the ground to stand upon when he states "For I did not receive it (the gospel) from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:12). His message is true in that it came from nowhere else but from Christ.

So is there any room for the historical Jesus? Paul does make reference to the "historical" Jesus, though not in Galatians. Paul speaks in First Corinthians of Jesus instituting the Eucharist and that Jesus rose from the dead. Yet even there, Paul claims to have

⁷² Sabatier, p. 72.

received this teaching from Christ, not any one man (such as the disciples). “Whether or not Paul knew the historical Jesus could never be proved; and perhaps it does not matter much, since his Jesus became, in Paul’s writings, an internalized redeemer, offering him love.”⁷³ Yet Wilson does hypothesize that perhaps Paul’s path (still as Saul) did cross with the historical Jesus.⁷⁴

There are traditions that do place Paul within the realm of the historical Jesus, though; they do not necessitate his (Paul’s) being an active participant. Though “the historicity of Jesus became unimportant from the moment Paul had his apocalypse,”⁷⁵ he may have been fully aware of the teachings of this Jesus.⁷⁶ As to Paul’s not mentioning any of these “historical” events, it could be surmised that he does not mention them simply because he knows or assumes that his readers are already aware of them.⁷⁷ But that assumption is a dangerous one, since textual evidence seems to suggest Paul preached only Christ, and him “portrayed as crucified.”⁷⁸ It seems that Paul the prolific would have, at some point, included the traditions ascribed to Jesus. Yet he does not.

It would seem, then, that the historical Jesus and Paul were not close companions. In fact, it seems as if Paul had little to do with the historical Jesus. What is telling is when we encounter the first person narrative — not in the Gospels, but in the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15 verses 3-7.

For I declared to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

⁷³ Wilson, p. 41.

⁷⁴ Wilson proposes that Malchus could be Paul and that the marks of Christ were the slashed ear.

⁷⁵ Wilson, p. 75.

⁷⁶ See Sabatier, pp. 71-94.

⁷⁷ As Sabatier argues, p. 83.

⁷⁸ Gal. 3:1.

Paul never speaks of encountering the “physical” Jesus, only that Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection. The striking point of this particular passage is its irreconcilability with the resurrection accounts in the Gospels. “Paul did not know the Gospel resurrection stories, for the simple reason that they had not yet been invented, and the four evangelists, who wrote twenty to fifty years after Paul, either did not know his list of appearances or chose to ignore it.”⁷⁹ What else is intriguing is the fact that Paul never mentions the empty tomb and indeed, as Helms argues, he probably was unaware of it.⁸⁰ But Paul probably would not have argued the tomb proved anything since he articulates a belief that resurrection is not physical, but spiritual, as when he says, “I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”⁸¹

So does the docetic influence seemingly apparent in Galatians as well as the lack of the historical Jesus place Galatians at a late date? Generally Galatians is dated around 55 AD. William Baird states arguments against an earlier date:

Actually a very early date is excluded, since the letter was not written until at least fourteen years after Paul’s conversion (see 2:1).⁸²

But if it is late, just how late could it be?

According to Philip Comfort, “Of Paul’s epistles, only three (excluding the Pastorals) were written exclusively by Paul – without mentioning another co-author per se, such as Timothy or Silas; the three are Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians. Galatians had to be authored only by Paul because it includes a personal defense; Romans and Ephesians are single authored because each is a magnum opus.”⁸³ Yet these “proofs” are not generally understood as conclusive. In fact, Ephesians is generally understood as a compilation of Pauline theology created by a

⁷⁹ Helms, p. 129.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 15:50. For a more direct argument about Paul not detailing the miracles of Jesus in particular, please reference Theissen and Mertz, p. 299, under the heading “*The miracle tradition in different strata of the tradition.*”

⁸² Baird, p. 1204.

⁸³ Comfort, p. 46.

Paulinist school of thought.⁸⁴ And Romans specifically mentions that someone else co-authored it in 16:22; "I, Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord." This should all be taken into account.

But if it is late, could it be that Paul did not write Galatians at all? Betz argues that Galatians is authored by Paul between 50-55, earlier than Romans, due to Paul's theological position being "different from the later letter to the Romans. As a matter of fact, it closely resembles the "enthusiastic" or even "gnostic" position."⁸⁵ But it is precisely this gnostic tendency that could persuade one to consider Galatians being far later, maybe even closer to the Gospel of John (90-100). This would place Galatians far beyond Paul's time frame, but *not* beyond Marcion. Indeed, "W.C. van Manen argued that Galatians may have been originally a draft by Marcion himself, writing pseudonymously under Paul's name."⁸⁶

Whenever Galatians was written, early or late, what is evident is that the argument put forth resembles a docetic understanding of Christ, or at least an understanding of the avatar of Christ being those in whom Christ is revealed. If Paul wrote Galatians he was making this claim, that he was the incarnation of Christ, for himself. If it was Marcion or a Paulinist school that wrote Galatians, then it could well be that they were making this claim on Paul's behalf.

Paul the Stigmatic

F F. Bruce writes that Paul was eager to absorb in his own person as great a share as possible of the sufferings of Christ in order that his fellow Christians might have less of them to bear.⁸⁷ But bearing the marks of Christ seems to be a total stretch Bruce is unwilling to make. Yet would having the literal marks of Jesus upon his body be entirely out of the question for Paul? Most assuredly not. Paul's claim to bear upon his body the actual wounds seems completely in keeping with the message of Galatians as well as Paul's conviction that Christ was revealed in him.

⁸⁴ For that, I would draw your attention to the discussion in White, pp. 162-165.

⁸⁵ Betz, p. 12.

⁸⁶ Price, p. xviii.

⁸⁷ Bruce, p. 276, citing 2 Corinthians 1:5-7, Colossians 1:24.

Paul's having the marks of Jesus does indeed signify a special relationship not only between himself and God, but also between himself and his readers. Obviously Paul is writing to "reconvert" the people of Galatia.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel. (Gal. 1:6)

Telling enough is the fact that the "him" in this verse is referring to none other than Paul himself. In his attempt to win them back to his gospel, Paul reminds them in 4:14 that he had been received "as Christ Jesus" and to emphasize that fact, he concludes by stating that he bears upon his body the stigmata — the wounds of Christ. Thus, he is not only affirming the gospel he brings, but that Christ, revealed in Paul, brought that message to them. As Maccoby states:

Even more important for an understanding of Paul's view of his own status is his claim to have special marks or stigmata on his body, showing the depth of his self identification with the sufferings of Jesus on the cross.... Thus the stigmata of Paul, whether self-inflicted or psychosomatically produced, made him, in his own eyes, and those of his followers, the supreme embodiment of the power of the mystery god, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁸⁸

Paul is claiming nothing less than the actual stigmata as the capstone for authenticating his message to the Galatians.

Conclusion

Saint Francis was the "first recorded stigmatic" in 1224. Yet within scripture itself is a record of the apostle Paul claiming nothing less than the stigmata of Jesus Christ. His claims may be dually motivated. First, it validates his message to the Galatians as well as heightening the impact that his words might have upon the reader. Second, the stigmata work to further authenticate the claim that Jesus Christ has been made manifest in him. There can be little doubt that Paul means the reader to accept his letter not as Paul speaking on behalf of Christ, but as Paul speaking *as* Christ.

⁸⁸ Maccoby, p. 107.

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