

JESUS AND PAUL

Parallel Lives

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, o.p.



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To K. Ashe
for forty-eight years of friendship

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Abbreviations

- AJ Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*.
- BAGD W. Bauer, W. F. Arntd, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- JW Josephus, *The Jewish War*.
- m. *The Mishnah*, translated by H. Danby, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1933.
- OCD *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Third edition edited by S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996.
- PL J. Migne, *Patrologia latina*.
- TU Texte und Untersuchungen.

Preface

While I owe the subtitle to Plutarch, this little book makes no attempt to emulate his famous series of *Parallel Lives*. Plutarch (ca. 50–ca. 120 c.e.) was one of the most prolific and influential authors of antiquity. Though he traveled widely, he retained his birthplace, Chaeroneia, as his permanent base, even though it had no great library and lacked the intellectual equals who could provide learned discussion. His reason reveals the best side of Plutarch: “I live in a little town, and it pleases me to stay there lest it grow even smaller” (*Life of Demosthenes* 2.2). Such sly humor hints at the quality of insight that made him a great biographer. The *Parallel Lives* are twenty-three volumes, each containing a pair of biographies, first that of an eminent Greek statesman followed by that of a Roman who is in some way comparable; in four, the Roman appears first. Alexander the Great, for example, is paired with Julius Caesar. In each the focus is on character (*êthos*) as it is revealed and molded by political action. Thus, Plutarch says with great perception,

the most outstanding exploits do not always have the property of revealing the goodness or badness of the agent; often in fact, a casual action, the odd phrase, or a jest reveals character better than battles involving the loss of thousands upon thousands of lives . . . just as a painter reproduces his subject’s likeness by concentrating on the face and the expression of the eyes, by means of which character is revealed, and pays hardly any attention to the rest of the body. (*Life of Alexander* 1; trans. Waterfield)¹

Despite this disclaimer Plutarch does not offer snippets but rather complete life-histories. He begins with the family into which the subject is born, then deals with the intellectual and moral influences that formed the character, and treats the victories and failures, the turning points and crises through which the hero lived.

I have attempted this sort of biography for Paul in *Paul: His Story*, but it is manifestly impossible in the case of Jesus. Plutarch, however, justifies my focus on a series of coincidences in the lives of Jesus and Paul. Not only were Jesus and Paul born within a year or so of each other, but as children they suffered the traumatic experience of being forced into exile with their parents. In that new and very different environment they were molded by forces that led them to confront questions that they probably never would have faced had they not been refugees. As young men they freely chose lifestyles that demanded complete obedience to the Law of Moses. Yet at a certain point they both realized that they had made the wrong decision. As a result they rejected the Law completely. Finally both died at the hands of the Romans.

To compare and contrast Jesus and Paul in terms of these events reveals aspects of their personalities and circumstances that have not received the attention they deserve.²

Jerusalem

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, o.p.

9 October 2006

¹ Plutarch, *The Greek Lives. A Selection of Nine Greek Lives*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 312.

² A note about Scripture translation in this book: I generally rely on the Revised Standard Version of Scripture but often make my own translation when necessary.

The Same Age

It is often thought that Jesus and Paul represent different generations. Jesus is seen as the symbol of a Palestinian Aramaic-speaking church, which some ten or so years later gave birth to a Greco-Roman Greek-speaking church best represented by Paul, a diaspora Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. In fact Jesus and Paul were approximately the same age. Absolute precision is impossible, but there is a real convergence.

Jesus

The New Testament offers two accounts of the birth and childhood of Jesus. Even if we leave the details aside, the structures of the two narratives are not only different but contradictory.

For Matthew 1–2, Mary and Joseph are natives of Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. Fear of Herod the Great forced them first to flee to Egypt, and then fear of his son, Archelaus, obliged them to substitute Nazareth for Bethlehem as their new permanent residence.

For Luke 1–2, on the contrary, Mary and Joseph are natives of Nazareth. At a very awkward moment for Mary who is close to term, they were forced to travel to Bethlehem because a census had been ordered by the emperor Augustus. After the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, they make a visit to the Temple in Jerusalem, and then return to Nazareth.

The incompatibility of the two accounts means we are confronted by independent sources with radically different visions of what went on “in the days of Herod the king” (Matt 2:1; Luke 1:5). One does not depend on the other. Hence, what they have in common is important, because one confirms the other. As regards the structure, however, a choice must be made. Both cannot be correct.

The linchpin of Luke's narrative is the census. Without it there would be no journey from Nazareth and no birth in Bethlehem. Is what Luke tells us about this event historically reliable? The majority of scholars will answer in the negative. According to Luke, (1) the census was ordered by the emperor Augustus; (2) it was conducted by Quirinius the governor of the Roman province of Syria; and (3) the key regulation was that males had to return to their father's house to be counted (Luke 2:1-5). Each of these elements is problematic.¹

(1) There is no evidence of a general imperial census in the reign of Augustus. Had there been such a census, it would not have been applicable to Palestine, which was an independent kingdom ruled by Herod the Great and associated with Rome but not part of the Empire. (2) There was a Roman official called Quirinius, and he did supervise a census in Palestine, but this took place in 6 C.E. when Rome dismissed Herod's son, Archelaus, after a reign of ten years, and assumed direct control of Judea and Samaria. This, however, would be the year when Jesus made his visit to the Temple at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41-42), long after his birth. (3) No Roman census regulation required a person to travel far. Registration took place in the place where one lived or, if that was too small, at the chief town of the taxation district. Moreover, wives and children were not required to appear in person. The head of the family answered for them.

Matthew's Narrative

If the linchpin of the census is removed, Luke's artificial framework disappears. His narrative falls apart into its component elements, whose individual historicity is another matter. Thus the only framework of the childhood of Jesus is that of Matthew. What he tells us is internally consistent, but cannot be taken at face value as an eyewitness account of what actually occurred. His narrative is carefully structured in order to serve as a prologue to the Gospel, telling the reader in chapter 1 *who* Jesus is, "He shall be called Emmanuel" (Matt 1:23) and in chapter 2 *whence* he comes, "He shall be called a Nazorean" (Matt 2:23).

Matthew 2 is a highly sophisticated document of which the greater part is due to Matthew's creativity. He had two sources: (1) the Magi Story, and (2) the Flight and Return Story, both of which he accepted as historical. They recounted events in the childhood of Jesus that he believed actually happened. Matthew felt it was his right as a storyteller not merely to retell what had been passed on to him but to make it more

attractive and to give it greater impact by filling out the picture. Thus on the basis of the brief note "Herod is about to seek the child to kill him" Matthew developed the dramatic conspiracy story of Matthew 2:1-12, and the massacre of the children of Bethlehem.

The Magi Story

(1) When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judah in the days of Herod the king, wise men (*magoi*) from the east came, (9b) and the star which they had seen in its rising went before them, till coming it stood over the place where the child (*paidion*) lay. (11) And going into the house they saw the child (*paidion*) with Mary his mother, and falling they worshiped him. Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. (12) Then they departed to their own country.

The Flight and Return

(13b) Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph saying, "Rise, take the child (*paidion*) and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and remain there until I speak to you, for Herod is about to seek the child to kill him." (14) Rising, he took the child (*paidion*) and his mother by night and departed into Egypt. (15) And he was there until the death of Herod [when] (19b) behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph (20) saying, "Rise, take the child (*paidion*) and his mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those seeking the life of the child (*paidion*) have died." (21) Rising, he took the child (*paidion*) and his mother and entered the land of Israel.

I do not believe the Magi Story is historical, but evidence will be furnished in the next chapter that the substance of the Flight and Return Story actually happened. Here, however, we are concerned with only one aspect, namely, the light they throw on the date of the birth of Jesus. In both Jesus is called a *paidion*. In the Flight-Return source he is a *paidion* both before and after the death of Herod the Great that occurred shortly before Passover in 4 B.C.E., which that year fell on 11 April.² Luke also regularly describes Jesus as a *paidion* (1:59, 66, 76, 80; 2:17, 27, 40). Hence, the fundamental question is: what exactly does *paidion* mean?

The standard translations (RSV, NRSV, NJB, NAB) all render *paidion* by "child," but this is a polyvalent term whose value changes according to the way it is used. To say that "X is the child of Y" tells us nothing of

the age of X. Similarly “the children of God” (Heb 2:13) can be of any age. Those whom Jesus affectionately addressed as “children” in John 21:5 were adult fishermen. When age, rather than relationship, is specifically in question, *paidion* is the diminutive of *pais*, “boy, youth” (which is used of the twelve-year-old Jesus in Luke 2:43), and specifically means “a very young child, an infant” without any connotation of gender (BAGD, 604).

Clearly *paidion* can be applied to a newborn child (John 16:21), and to a three-month-old baby (AJ 2.218), but what is the upper limit of its application? In other words, how old does a child have to be for *paidion* to be inappropriate? Philo quotes Pseudo-Hippocrates, who said,

In the nature of man there are seven seasons, which men call ages: infancy, childhood, boyhood and the rest:

He is an infant [*paidion*] until he reaches his seventh year, the age of the shedding of his teeth. He is a child [*pais*] until he arrives at the age of puberty, which takes place in fourteen years. (*De opificio mundi* 105; trans. Yonge)³

Philo approvingly also quotes Solon, the Athenian lawgiver (635–560 B.C.E.) to the effect that the first period of a child’s life lasts seven years (*De opificio mundi* 104). Similarly Shakespeare, for whom schooling began when an infant was seven years old,

All the world’s a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players:
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. As, first the infant,
 Mewing and puking in the nurse’s arms.
 And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
 And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
 Unwillingly to school. (*As You Like It*, II, 7)

Such consistency over such a long period in such varied sources betrays a commonsense observation that a significant change takes place in a child’s seventh year. In the Catholic Church, for example, it is thought to be the age when a child becomes morally responsible (cf. 1 Cor 14:21).

Having established that in antiquity a child could be called a *paidion* from birth to the age of seven, we now come to the next question: is it

possible to narrow down this figure? In other words, what did the evangelists think that *paidion* meant relative to Jesus?

Apropos of John the Baptist Luke wrote, “On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child (*paidion*)” (1:59). And with respect to the shepherds, “They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe (*brephos*) lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child (*peri tou paidiou toutou*)” (2:16-17). John is eight days old, and Jesus even younger, a newborn. Unfortunately, the only reference to an absolute date that Luke gives us is the census (2:1), which we have seen to be completely unreliable.

Matthew is more helpful. His Flight-Return source presents Jesus as a *paidion* both before (2:13) and after the death of Herod the Great (2:20). The story of the massacre of the innocents (2:16-18) is entirely a Matthean creation (see chapter 2). It was developed to underline graphically the danger to Jesus, and the way it is described is highly significant. “Herod sent and killed all the children (*pantas tous paidas*) . . . who were two years old and younger” (2:16). This suggests that for Matthew any child over two was a *pais*, whereas any child under two was a *paidion*. In other words, within the seven-year span covered by *paidion*, Matthew made the commonsense distinction between a child who has to be carried and one that can walk. By the age of two most children are fully mobile.

This distinction was one of the bones of contention between the Pharisaic schools of the strict Shammai and the more liberal Hillel. A “child” was not obligated to make the Passover pilgrimage. Hence the question,

Who is deemed a child? Any that cannot ride on his father’s shoulders and go up from Jerusalem to the Temple Mount. So the School of Shammai. And the School of Hillel says: Any that cannot hold his father’s hand and go up [on his feet] from the Jerusalem to the Temple Mount. (*m. Hagigah* 1.1; trans. Danby)⁴

All that can be said, however, is that Matthew understood the Jesus of his source to be a babe in arms at the time of Herod’s death. It would be going too far to say that this assessment was rooted in a historical recollection of the real age of Jesus.⁵ While this is not impossible, it is not demanded by the evidence.

In another redactional passage Matthew makes the wise men ask “where is he who has been born the king of the Jews?” (2:2). It is possible to see “the king of the Jews” as standing in apposition to “he who has been born,” but commonsense demands that “he who has been born” be understood as attributive, i.e., to function effectively as an adjective.

Hence, one should translate “where is the newborn king of the Jews”⁶ or “where is the infant king of the Jews” (NJB against NRSV). Once again Matthew shows his understanding of *paidion*, but this time in his Magi source. The child was born not long before the wise men sought him.

In conclusion, all that can be said is that Matthew was convinced that Jesus was born in the two years or so preceding the death of Herod that occurred shortly before Passover in 4 B.C.E. That year Passover fell on 11 April.

Paul

The only clue that Paul gives us to the date of his birth is to be found in Philemon 9 where he describes himself as a *presbytês* who is also a prisoner for Christ Jesus. The RSV and NAB translate this term as “ambassador,” whereas the NRSV and NJB render it as “old man.” The Greek word for “ambassador” is usually spelled *presbutês*, but this term does not appear in any manuscript of Philemon. *Presbytês*, however, can mean an “ambassador.” In 2 Maccabees 11:34 we read the beginning of a letter, “Quintus Memmius and Titus Manius, ambassadors of the Romans (*presbytai Rômaiôn*) to the people of the Jews, greetings.” This appears to be the only certain attestation, but there are other passages whose scribes evidently thought the two terms to be interchangeable, e.g., LXX 2 Chronicles 32:31; 1 Maccabees 14:22; 15:17. The association is obvious. Ambassadors were always mature, dignified figures.

The only argument that can be invoked in favor of the meaning “ambassador” in Philemon 9 is the parallel in Ephesians 6:19-20 where Paul is presented as asking for prayers “that utterance be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel for which I am acting as an ambassador in chains (*hyper hou presbeuô en halysei*).” Not only is Ephesians not from the hand of Paul, but the circumstances of the two statements are different. In Ephesians it is a question of a proud boast, whereas in Philemon, Paul makes use of subtle moral blackmail in order to win Philemon’s sympathy, “Not only am I an old man, but also a prisoner for Christ Jesus.” There is little real doubt that *presbytês* in Philemon 9 must be taken as a reference to Paul’s age.

But how old was “old”? What would Paul’s contemporaries have understood by *presbytes*? The theoretical answer to this question is furnished by Philo, who can be fairly taken to represent the voice of antiquity, given the sources he uses. I begin with his second quote, from Pseudo-Hippocrates, because it uses *presbytes*.

He is a man (*anêr*) until he reaches his forty-ninth year, or seven times seven periods. He is an elderly man (*presbytês*) till he is fifty-six, eight times seven years old. And after that he is an old man (*gerôn*). (*De opifico mundi* 105)⁷

Presbytes designates the second last stage of life. This highlights a problem of translation because if “old” is used for the second last age, the final age must be called something like “ancient.” This is less than appropriate. Hence, *presbytes* in Philemon 9 should be rendered “elderly,” which permits us to use “old” for the terminal period of life. “Elderly” we are told explicitly covers the years from fifty to fifty-six.

In the same context, however, Philo quotes another version of the ages of life, that of Solon of Athens (635–560 B.C.E.), which he himself adopts. Against the seven ages of Pseudo-Hippocrates, Solon divides life into ten ages of seven years. Of the last two ages he says,

When nine such periods have passed
His powers, though milder grown, still last;
When God has granted ten times seven,
The aged man prepares for heaven. (*De opifico mundi* 104; trans. Yonge)⁸

From the structure of Solon’s text it is clear that the ninth age is from fifty-six to sixty-three, while the tenth age is from sixty-four to seventy. Philo takes over this structure and gives a personal twist to the interpretation,

In the ninth [age] his passions assume a mildness and gentleness from being to a great degree tamed. In the tenth [age] the desirable end of life comes upon him, while his limbs and organic senses are still unimpaired; for excessive old age is apt to weaken and enfeeble them all. (*De opifico mundi* 103; trans. Yonge 1993, 15)⁹

The underlying assumption both of Solon and of Philo is that the ideal span of life is seventy years. Solon said, “I set the limits of man’s life at 70 years” (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32). Philo would have certainly subscribed to the biblical view, “The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong” (Ps 90:10; *Jubilees* 23:15). Thus, given that the length of the individual stages was traditionally fixed at seven years, they had to produce ten stages to complete the schema. It is not difficult to detect an element of artificiality, compounded by the fact that neither gives a specific name to each stage.

When looked at from this perspective, the schema of Pseudo-Hippocrates is much more realistic. He too was constrained by the seven-year stage, but his development obviously reflects traditional terminology combined with medical insight. Note in particular that the prime of life (*aner* "man") is not divided into meaningless substages.

<i>paidion</i>	"infant"	0–7 years
<i>pais</i>	"child"	8–14
<i>meirakion</i>	"boy"	15–21
<i>neaniskos</i>	"youth"	22–28
<i>aner</i>	"man"	29–49
<i>presbytes</i>	"elderly"	50–56
<i>geron</i>	"old"	57–

Some confirmation of this approach is to be found in Judaism where a significant change takes place at the age of sixty. In terms of his redemption price, the value of a man dropped from fifty silver sanctuary shekels to fifteen shekels when he attained the age of sixty (Lev 27:2-7). Among the Essenes a judge had to retire at that age, and the justification given is that God willed that "man's understanding should decline before their days are fulfilled" (*Damascus Document* 10:7-10). Presumably this was also the reason why the priest who was overseer of the Many should retire at sixty (*Damascus Document* 14:6-7).

The conclusion to be drawn is that after a man had passed sixty he was considered to be "old," that is, in the last stage of life. Jerome, for example, consistently restricts "old" to people of sixty or over.¹⁰ Thus, when Paul thought of himself as "elderly" he must have been approaching sixty. When one considers his lifestyle right up to his death, it is most improbable that Paul suffered from what Hippocrates considered the medical problems of old people (*Aphorisms* 3.36).

The most probable date for Philemon is the summer of 53 c.e.¹¹ If Paul was 58 or 59 when he wrote it, he would have been born in 6 or 5 b.c.e., approximately the date of the birth of Jesus.

Notes

¹ Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* (175 BC–AD 135) (Edinburgh: Clark, 1973–87) 1:399–427.

² Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, 1:327.

³ C. D. Yonge, *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993) 16.

⁴ H. Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933) 211.

⁵ See W. D. Davies, and Dale Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. I. Chs. 1–7*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) 266, as against Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah. A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, New Updated Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1993) 205, 228 n. 42.

⁶ Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, 170; Davies and Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. I. Chs. 1–7*, 233; Ulrich Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, 1 Teilband, Mt 1–7, Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 1/1 (Zurich: Benziger/Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985) 112.

⁷ Yonge, *The Works of Philo*, 16.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Jerome. His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975) 339.

¹¹ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul. A Critical Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 184.