

Review of *The Damascus Road: A Novel Of St. Paul* by Jay Parini (2019)

"The world is always ending but the Earth remains."

Richard L. Rose (<https://frameshifts.com/2012/10/>)

Why does a prominent poet, teacher, and literary biographer turn his attention to the life of the first traveling salesman of Christianity, a wandering Jew whose significance has been reduced to proof texts for contradictory claims, and whose outdated opinions are lampooned and reviled? Parini has gone twice before into the unforgiving territory of religious interpretation with *Jesus: The Face of God* (See <https://frameshifts.com/2013/12/> .) and *The Way of Jesus: Living a Spiritual and Ethical Life*, but these were nonfictional works in which he could distinguish sources from personal opinions and generally protect himself against anachronisms. *The Damascus Road* is a more personally vulnerable work. Instead of explaining religious ideas as they historically arose, Parini seeks to engage the reader in a story that embodies the early Christian community. A skilled interviewer, he does this by imagining conversations with two witnesses from the First Century: Paul and Luke.

History is a succession of dynamic situations with ragged edges, the transitions absent or elusive. Stephen Jay Gould, in describing the anomalies and even chimerical forms of the fossils in the Burgess shale, wrote, "The history of life is not a continuum of development, but a record punctuated by brief, sometimes geologically instantaneous, episodes of mass extinction and subsequent diversification." (*Wonderful Life*, p.54). Discontinuity is the rule; loss is routine; absence of some key source is always guaranteed. Full of ourselves and our information-rich age, we find this difficult to accept.

How is it then that a poet and biographer comes to write a novel about an anomalous and almost chimerical First Century founder of the Jesus Movement? Compared to Burgess fossils, the material on Paul of Tarsus may seem rich, but in fact, primary sources are rare and provide nothing of the specificity that even a short scrap of nucleotides might reveal about a fossil. Paul is a transitional figure between the gatherings of early followers of the Way and the later Hellenistic church, about which the primary sources are abundant. They are so abundant that Albert Schweitzer took theologians to task for attributing late First and even Second Century ideas to Paul. (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 1930) Self-deception is enhanced by an abundance of documentation, however irrelevant. Paul may have grown up in Cilicia and learned the Torah from the Septuagint, but in his letters, he does not introduce or modify the practices of the Way, create a mystery cult, or feature himself as a mystagogue.

Within only thirty years after his death, however, the Pauline conviction about the imminent physical return of Christ, or Parousia, had waned; the message had become spiritualized, the ceremonies formalized, the gospel stories compiled, and the messianic Way had become the Church. Like Socrates, Paul had midwived a new tradition, but what was gained and lost in the transition?

Readings of the sayings of Jesus, shared meals, and baptisms were practices of Jewish and Gentile members of the Way in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Damascus well before Paul's conversion. Paul's contribution was a reasoned, conceptual foundation for the existing practices. As a rabbi and Pharisee, Paul was taught to expect a predetermined messianic fulfillment of God's promises for chosen people, a physical resurrection of the dead, and the elimination of the heavenly layers of demonic angelic powers that separated believers from God. After his conversion, his rabbinical training took on a new meaning. The end of history was at hand, as Jesus had taught his followers. The immediacy of this event was underscored by signs and wonders, like Paul's vision on the Damascus Road. Parini retells this event many times, as Paul would have done in his preaching. At each telling, Paul probes more deeply into the meaning. Ecstatic in nature and therefore emptying him of his former life, the vision had left him re-

clothed "in-Christ." It was not God, but Christ who filled him. Christ was the necessary mediator, the virtuoso of divine knowledge and compassion, the "human face of God." To Paul, anyone who joined the elect—woman, slave, Greek, "tax-farmer" for the Empire, centurion, aristocrat, tycoon—was on the same footing with any other member. Because each of them was "in-Christ," their community was the "body of Christ." One joined the elect by beginning a life of continuously dying and rising in Christ. For Paul, this was a physical experience, as concrete as the obstacles on the missionary path or the heavenly beings who put thorns in the flesh, or who appeared as welcome helpers in a prison, or who carried him through the three heavens to the divine realm. These travels and visions were only possible because he was "in-Christ," not because he had found oneness with ultimate reality or Atman, spoken the *logon* prayer of the Mithras cult, or been deified through a cultic practice. Even baptism was not always necessary to be "in-Christ," according to Paul, who often welcomed new members to a community only upon their acceptance of the new life in Christ.

In contrast, the mystery cults of the First Century were available to all, not to a predestined group. Ethical requirements were minimal. Ascent and rebirth into deity was the desired outcome of mystical union. Concern about the end of history was not a feature of these cults, many of them based on agricultural concerns and a cyclical view of time.

In messianic eschatology, time was an arrow whose flight ended in a new world, the Kingdom of God, of which the brief Hasmonean Kingdom had been a very imperfect precursor. History would soon end. For Jesus and for Paul, the Kingdom was at hand. Jesus would return to gather the faithful. In contrast to the ascent of worshippers through the Eleusian or Mithraic rites, Pauline baptism was simply the bonding with Christ in his death and resurrection and the beginning of a life of continual deaths and resurrections for believers, now "in-Christ," including many sufferings and martyrdoms, until the impending end of history; the new life was in Christ, therefore ethical, and the union was with Christ, not God, because YHWH was too removed, holy, and surrounded by heavenly beings to be approached. Jesus's physical resurrection had overcome the angelic powers, in all their height and depth. By suffering and rising with him, the community also would ultimately overcome its adversaries.

Paul's troublesome situation lies at the ragged edge between the Way and the Church, the messianic message and its Hellenistic interpretation. Certainly, his ministry installed the original gospel message, or *kerygma*, and his dominant subtext about being "in-Christ," in many towns and cities of the empire. And his letters and leadership made an international community from hundreds of scattered "house gatherings" (*oukot*). But his rabbinical training in disputation and the physically concrete understanding of his vision and mission were rooted in Pharisaic Judaism. Textual analysis, for example, demonstrates that Paul never wrote about "rebirth" or being one with God. (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, 13-15) The language of the *Gospel of John* comes from a later period. Indeed, both the Gospels and the Talmud were collected only after the writing of Paul's first letters. Undoubtedly, Paul's teaching shaped the composition of the Gospels, even if the biographers were reacting against him, as Parini suggests about John Mark. And Paul's teachings certainly must have shaped the two books by Luke, who, though careful to document the missionary travels, takes liberties with quotations, as was the common practice of Herodotus and other historians of the period.

It is only by accepting questionable quotations, ignoring the absence of references to rebirth, and disregarding Paul's repeated references to the end of history and to being "in-Christ," but not a deity, that it is possible to think of Paul having created a Hellenistic gospel message. In fact, however, the message he preached remained a Jewish eschatological message and his mission, as he saw it, was to facilitate access to the message by Gentiles because he was convinced that God had included some Gentiles within the Elect.

The troublesome nuance about Paul's situation is that, in order to facilitate access to the kerygma, Paul would undoubtedly have spoken to Gentiles *in terms that they understood, but we do not have a record of those conversations*. Would he have spoken about the *Logos*, "soul wisdom," the cult of Mithra, or even have brought up the *Timaeus* or *Phaedrus* to Athenians? All one can say is that it's plausible. As a novelist, however, Parini can say much more.

Like Richard Moulton in the *Modern Reader's Bible* (1946), Parini plots his story by interpolating the authentic Pauline letters with the account of Paul's journeys in *Acts*. But Parini has written a novel, not a harmonization, biography, hagiography, or pious story. Like Paul's own message, the novel is a disruptive story, open to criticism and vulnerable to misunderstandings. Like Schweitzer, Parini reveres "truth, as something that must be a factor in our faith if it is not to degenerate into superstition." (*The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, xxvi) Because Paul's words have been interpreted to support so many contradictory positions, it may seem that he was conflicted or confused, but the consistency and logic of his argument become more evident as Parini allows Luke and Paul to tell the story in their own words.

The early gatherings and simple ceremonies of early followers often took place in the homes of members of synagogues and wealthy supporters such as matrons or businesspeople, whose property included slaves. In fact, women were usually the key supporters to anchor and lead the early Jesus Movement. And not only the poor and disenfranchised but all social classes were represented in the community. Paul visited these assemblies as an enthusiastic new convert, confident that Jesus had personally told him to preach to Gentiles as history sped to the end. Paul was keenly sensitive to the imminence of the end times and therefore disregarded, and encouraged others to disregard, long-term plans of any kind, including marriage.

The teaching of Paul evolved through remarkable experiences and encounters with new audiences. Parini skillfully shows how Paul, Luke, and other early witnesses came to explain their experiences in different ways. As differences in selective perception lead one court witness to claim that the defendant came out of the alley while another insists that she saw him at home, so the different accounts by witnesses of Paul's prison escapes, shipwrecks, and miracles reflect the interests and intentions of the storytellers. In one retelling of the Damascus Road, Paul speaks of talking face-to-face with Jesus, who said, "that I could become like him, part of the Eternal Mind. He told me that time only existed for those who were lost. To be 'found' was to find myself outside of time." Luke mentions that he preferred the earlier version, in which Paul was knocked from a white horse, struck blind by a bright light, and asked, "Why do you persecute me?" Both stories are true. That is, a foolish literalism misses the kind of truth conveyed by fiction. As Luke says, "I quite preferred that version, although I perhaps have combined the details of many versions in my own way. A good story is a running river that never empties itself." (p. 48)

Surely, in the early gatherings, Jesus's followers tried to tell everything they could recall from their experiences with Jesus. They remembered and they misremembered. As twenty-first century readers, we understand that every story, even the one that didn't make it into print, was true, or *aligned with respect to the experience of the storyteller*. No canon existed. Perhaps it would not be needed since history would soon end.

But history hasn't ended yet and during the interregnum, many canons have come and gone. Many kinds of experiences have been accepted or rejected—some considered exaggerations, others, heresies for which many have paid with their lives. And some of the retained versions of stories have been distorted for various applications. Is it possible that the church may have lost or culled a conversation like the one Paul has with Elon, a leader of the synagogue in Thessalonica?

"Only God matters," Elon said.

"And how do you know anything about God?"

"We know him by his actions."

I pressed here. "What might those actions be?"

"The creation of the world!"

"Ah, yes. But that was not a single event in the past," I said. "Creation is an active and continuous process."

This puzzled, even annoyed him.

"The world dawns every day," I said, "and it's always new. The creation overwhelms us with its beauty, its changes." (p.201)

By proposing such conversations, Parini urges us to consider the fluid nature of the received texts. One's experience is never settled. New words and stories are needed even for the life-changing events that will never be forgotten. Such an experience exceeds our ability to capture it in words or images. "Art is an act of attention," Luke writes, "and I was writing down everything at night, making notes while the rest of our company slept. My story of the adventures of Paul would attract readers. How could it not? Someone had to remember everything that had happened, what we did, what Paul had said and accomplished. In his letters, he refused for the most part to talk about himself, addressing problems at hand . . ." (p. 266).

Even so, Luke selects materials with care, omitting some of Paul's more manic utterances and censoring conversations like one about a sexual indiscretion, in which, grateful for Luke's forgiveness and understanding, Paul finally says, "Suddenly I understood in a most visceral way the crooked timber from which God had fashioned us, and knew it was impossible to live in the purity to which I aspired. That had been a fantasy of mine." (p. 228) Indeed, although the statement seems to foresee Kant or Isaiah Berlin, it is primarily a corrective for narrow interpretations of Paul's general teachings, if he had any, about sexual practices. Such interpretations, from the anti-Pauline Encratites to the Shakers and Southern Baptists, could have profited from the correction that Parini offers. Straight and gay men, lesbians, matriarchs, capitalists, marijuana-users, effete aristocrats, noble officers, and temple-prostitutes populate this novel, along with violent mobs and brutal soldiers. Luke says, "we occupied a highly wrought, aggressive, and intensely political world. The Pax Romana persisted, with the imperial 'peace' guaranteed by the use of selective brutality. It would never be simple to follow the Way of Jesus without offending someone . . ." (p.212)

One might even offend someone by writing a novel that suggests that religious language leaps "from metaphor to metaphor," as a poet does, and not by moving "slowly and carefully, amassing evidence, making our deductions. But Paul didn't operate in this manner. His energies poured out freely, touched his listeners in unexpected ways, and the world around them blazed with new meaning. And sometimes he angered those who heard him." (p.206)

One has the sense that this novel is a personal summation by Parini, propelled by a sense of urgency to fulfill obligations to family, to profession, to self, and to a national community that in its

longing, confusion, inequities, violence, and waywardness seems so much like the community of the First Century. If so, I echo his concern:

". . . it seems to me that all traditions say that humans remain unenlightened when they live in a trance and forget three realities: their animal nature, and tree-rootedness in what is given, their limited understanding and scale, and the inter-relationships affected by their self-dazzling control of everything."

(<https://frameshifts.com/2014/05/>)

The compressed energy of Paul's anticipation for the Parousia, like the liquid oxygen of a rocket booster, was needed to lift the Way into flight, to transform it into the Church, and to prevent it from petering out like so many other First Century sects. Once aloft, however, the next stages of the journey had different requirements. The eager cry, "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!" was tempered by cautions, usually ascribed to Jesus:

"The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There! For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'" (Lk 17:20).

The messianic message was spiritualized using Greek language about the *soul* and *Word* and Greek and oriental concepts about gaining secret knowledge of God and ascending through sacred rites into communion with God. Challenges to the concept of the Elect and changes in hermeneutics and textual criticism were evidence that the experiences of the believers of the Way were already fading from memory. The journey of the Church had begun.

Parini guides us through the towns of the First Century Mediterranean world, filling in the details about local cultures and practices, and letting us eavesdrop on conversations that can only be imagined. As conversations and memories faded, the world did end. A new world of understanding had begun. And, as anticipated, when the world as they knew it came to an end, some were prepared for the new journey. May we learn from their example.