

Co-workers: Jesus Justus

This is the seventh in a continuing *Ekklesia Then & Now* series on the individuals Paul referred to as ***sunergos sunergos*** (co-workers). Previous installments have been Priscilla and Aquila (*ET&N* 62), Aristarchus (63), Euodia and Syntyche (66), Clement (70), Demas (79), and Epaphroditus (84). The purpose of the series is to examine the biblical and extrabiblical information about these people and their lives to determine what lessons they hold for today's Christian. Additional installments of this series will include Luke, Mark, Philemon, Timothy, Titus, and Urbanus.

Then

For those of you who find my pieces too long, you may expect this one to be a refreshing change. After all, how much can there be to say about a man who received just a single mention in the New Testament? Since there is no other reference to Jesus Justus in the Bible and there are no extant traditions (extrabiblical information) about him, perhaps not much. We should not, however, take this to mean that Jesus Justus played a minor role in the spread of the gospel. Simply being called a "fellow worker" by Paul implies that Jesus Justus is a significant figure.

Note: Matthew Henry suggested that Jesus Justus might be the same person as the Justus (also called Joseph Barsabbas, Acts 1:21-26), who was the unsuccessful candidate to replace Judas Iscariot among the Twelve, but this was pure conjecture that has no evidence.

The reference to Jesus Justus comes near the end of Paul's letter to the church in Colossae, one of three cities (including Laodicea and Hierapolis) in the fertile Lycus River Valley region of Phrygia about one hundred miles west of Ephesus. Phrygia, unlike many of the regions described in Acts, was not a Roman province, but rather an ancient area once ruled by King Midas, comprising much of what is now interior Turkey. In apostolic times, Colossae was one of the major cities of Phrygia.

Traditionally, Colossae (along with his companion letter to Philemon, a leader in the Colossian church) have been ascribed to Paul's Roman imprisonment (60-62 A.D.), but some scholars believe Paul may have written the letters during an unrecorded imprisonment in Ephesus (53-55) following the riot of the silversmiths (see Acts 19:23-41). This conjecture is based on several factors, most notably the presence of Onesimus, the escaped slave on whose behalf Paul appealed to Philemon. Admittedly, it is far less likely for an escaped slave to have fled to Rome - a considerable journey - than to Ephesus. In terms of a discussion of Jesus Justus, however, the locale and date of the Colossian letter is not a major difficulty.

The foundation of the Colossian church is not specifically described in the New Testament, but we do know that Phrygian Jews were in Jerusalem on Pentecost (Acts 2:10), when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples (Acts 2:1-4), Peter preached the first Christian sermon (Acts 2:14-38), and three thousand people were baptized into Christ (Acts 2:41). Phrygians were therefore almost certainly among the earlier converts to Christianity.

At the beginning Paul's second mission trip (ca 49-50), he apparently intended to preach in Phrygia but the Holy Spirit had other plans, sending him through the region to Troas, where he received the Macedonian Call and crossed the Aegean (Acts 16:6-12). During his third trip (ca 53), however, Paul fulfills his earlier intention and "*went from one place to the next through the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples*" (Acts 18:23). That there were churches in Phrygia before a Pauline visit reinforces the likelihood that Jewish pilgrims from there brought the gospel after Pentecost. As one of the major cities of Phrygia, Colossae would almost certainly have heard the message of Christ. Furthermore, the fact that Paul refers to Philemon as his fellow-worker (Philemon 1:1) attests to Paul's visit there since he does not seem to refer to anyone as a fellow-worker who he has not worked aside.

At any rate, Jesus Justus appears in a list of eight men he commends or passes their greetings to the church in Colossae:

*"**Tychicus** will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him **Onesimus**, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. **Aristarchus** my fellow prisoner greets you, and **Mark** the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions--if he comes to you, welcome him), and **Jesus** who is called **Justus**. These are the only men of the circumcision among my fellow workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. **Epaphras**, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. **Luke** the beloved physician greets you, as does **Demas**." (Colossians 4:7-14).*

From the reference to Jesus Justus, we learn only a few things:

1. He is a Jew (a "man of the circumcision"), one of only three (including Aristarchus and Mark) who are laboring alongside Paul at the time.
2. He had both a Jewish (Jesus) and Roman (Justus) name, as did Paul (Saul Paulus). Other dual names in the New Testament include John Mark and Joseph/Barsabbas Justus. It was common for Jews, particularly those residing outside Judea, to carry both Jewish and Roman names.
3. He was a comfort (Greek, **parēgoria**, *comfort, solace, consolation, encouragement, literally, to gather near*) to Paul. This is the only use of **parēgoria** in the New Testament, so it is difficult to know exactly what Paul meant about Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus, but according to Strong's, **parēgoria** is a compound of **para** (near or beside) and a derivative of **agora** (a public gathering place or marketplace), so a better translation may be "these were the only Jews who spoke beside me publicly." If so, this is not a statement about abandonment by others (in Rome), as some commentators suggest, but rather simply a report about who stood by his side in preaching the gospel in public places (in Ephesus or Rome).

We may also be able to learn a little more about Jesus Justus by what is not said about him. Luke never mentions Jesus Justus (in *Acts*) among those who traveled with Paul on his journeys, even though the *Colossians* passage clearly shows that Luke knew Jesus Justus. Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus Justus was a Jewish resident of Ephesus or Rome who, after converting to Christianity,

became an evangelist (one who shares the gospel) in his hometown but did not join Paul's entourage after he left the city.

It also appears that the Colossian church probably did not know Jesus Justus. In Colossians 4:7-14, Paul introduces Tychicus, who he is sending to Colossae along with Onesimus, Philemon's escaped slave/servant (more on this when I get to Philemon in the co-workers series). He then introduces Aristarchus (although he may have been with Paul when the apostle traveled through Galatia and Phrygia at the beginning of his third mission trip), Mark and Jesus Justus. He then adds the greetings of three men the Colossians do know - Epaphras (a Colossian himself), Luke and Demas.

Ancient teachers often traveled from city to city, remaining for a time to expound their philosophies in public meeting places like an agora. Those who were attracted to the teachers' opinions sometimes joined them, forming a small entourage. Others remained in their home cities, where they might continue to spread their message. Paul, who considered Christianity a philosophy (in the sense of a way of life, not simply idle speculations) operated in much the same way, although he was almost certainly far more deliberate in his strategic approach. A notable characteristic of ancient disciples (those who followed a great teacher) was that they not only agreed in principle, but more importantly, attempted to mimic the teacher's way of life. Jesus Justus' designation as a co-worker therefore implies that he not only preached the gospel, but also lived it.

Now

The kind of support Jesus Justus, Aristarchus and Mark displayed is rare - apparently as rare then as it is now. Their's was not an "I'll pray for you" kind of support but a by your side in the trenches kind. I don't sense the tinge of bitterness in Paul that many commentators suggest. His comment is not a criticism of others but a statement of praise and gratitude to his three co-workers. I'm sure he appreciated Tychicus, Onesimus, Epaphras, Luke and Demas, but there is nothing like having "your own" people by your side. While Paul was consistently decisive in opposing the legalism that characterized one strain of first century Judaism, he never abandoned his roots, boldly proclaiming his Jewish and Pharisaic heritage. Singling out Aristarchus, Mark and Jesus Justus demonstrates how much it meant to Paul to be joined by fellow-Jews.

In standing beside Paul, they risked their own lives (whether this occurred in Ephesus or Rome), mirroring Jesus' maxim that "*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*" (John 15:13). For his part, Aristarchus landed in jail with Paul. We don't know the specific dangers Mark and Jesus Justus faced, but it's likely they were ones from which most men would shrink.

Being a modern Jesus Justus means standing beside others in their missions and trials. Of course, we should support all our brothers and sisters, but especially those with whom we have a common history or a particular affinity. We may not face live-threatening situations or incarceration, but opportunities to provide **parēgoria** abound.

One bizarre footnote to the information about Jesus Justus involves the apparently fertile imagination of Barbara Thiering, a former lecturer at the School of Divinity (now Department of Religious Studies) at Sydney (Australia) University. In Thiering's fabrication, Jesus Justus is no less than the son of Jesus Christ! While her supposedly scholarly studies have found no support among biblical scholars, her work gained some popularity in Australia and prompted several "fan-sites." Since she shares the opinion that Christ's miracles are unbelievable and that the supernatural does not exist, it is not surprising that she was invited to be a fellow of the Jesus Seminar. This group, composed primarily of skeptical professors at prestigious universities, is determined to strip Jesus Christ of all divinity.



Barbara Thiering

I do not wish to lend credence to Thiering's method, nor certainly to her findings, so I will neither present them exhaustively nor refute them, but her basic premise is stated in the introduction to her 1995 book, *the Life of Jesus after the Crucifixion*:

"In the gospels and Acts of the New Testament, they produced a masterpiece. The outline of the real history of Jesus was given on the surface, but dressed in so much apparent miracle that he was presented as the kind of divine human being needed by simple faith. But they set up within it, by symbols, images, double meanings, special meanings, the complete history. It was placed within the stories in a way that was subject to decipherment by those in possession of the special knowledge required. Everyone who worked on it with the special knowledge would arrive at the same result. it was like a puzzle with a solution, and there could only be one solution" (pp. x).

In essence, Thiering is just another modern neo-Gnostic, claiming that the correct interpretation of New Testament Scripture (in this case the four gospels, Acts, and Revelation) lies in "special knowledge." Apparently, however, Thiering is the only person with this special knowledge (**gnosis**). According to Geza Vermes, a noted authority on the Dead Sea Scrolls, "Scroll scholars and New Testament experts alike have found the basis of the new theory, Thiering's use of the so-called 'pesher technique' without substance" (reply to Thiering's response to Vermes' New York Times Book Review article, *The War Over the Scrolls* (August 11, 1994).

The "pesher technique" Vermes refers to comes from the Hebrew word for "interpretation" and the writings of the enigmatic Essene community that withdrew from the mainstream Jewish community in the second century before Christ. In 1947, a Bedouin shepherd discovered a cave containing a treasure trove of documents near the ancient town of Qumran. Subsequent investigations revealed a series of caves holding hundred of documents, including the oldest extant copies of many Old Testament books, and thousands of fragments. Many of the documents, which came to be known as the "Dead Sea Scrolls," contained interpretations (**pesharim**) of Scripture, and Thiering claims that the technique the Essenes used with the Old Testament can be used to truly understand the New Testament.

Using her unique technique, Thiering "discovered" that:

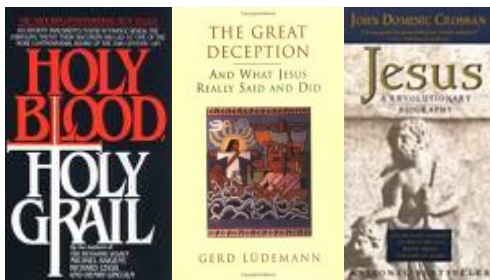
- Jesus married Mary Magdalene (as in *The Da Vinci Code*).
- In 33 A.D., they had their first child, Tamar, who later married Paul in Corinth and subsequently changed her name to Phoebe (the carrier of Paul's Roman letter, Romans 16: 1-2, which was really written by Jesus)!

- In 37, the first son of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene (the heir) was born - **Jesus Justus**.
- A second, unnamed son was born in 44, after which Mary Magdalene divorced Jesus, and he married Lydia (whom Thiering claims to be a female bishop of the Thyatira virgins), by whom he had a second, unnamed daughter.
- John the Baptist was the "Teacher of Righteousness" prominent in the Dead Sea Scrolls, while Jesus was the "Wicked Priest."

Do you get the feeling Thiering fell into the *Alice in Wonderland* rabbit hole and can't find her way out? I have to give Thiering credit, though - I certainly couldn't make this stuff up! On the other hand, a Wikipedia entry about her describes how she conducted her private research "while caring for her three young children," prompting me to wonder (perhaps unkindly) if she suffered from a prolonged postpartum psychosis. Here are just a few more of Thiering private interpretations (see 2 Peter 1:19-20) of Scripture:

- Revelation 19:6-9 tells of Jesus Justus' marriage in 73 A.D. at the "cathedral" in Ephesus.
- The description of Lydia as a seller of purple (Acts 16:14) "meant that she held that women could be bishops wearing purple" (*From Qumran to Rome Narrative 3* at Thiering website).
- Acts 17:10-13 describes the birth of a daughter to Jesus and Lydia in Berea in the year 51 (*ibid*).
- Acts 18:9-11 tells how Jesus instructed Paul to continue teaching Jesus Justus until his sixteenth birthday, when Jesus passed his title, Word of God, to Jesus Justus (*ibid*).
- The three sons of Herod Agrippa I - Herod, Agrippa II and Aristobulus - were Christians who adopted the Greek names Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus (biblical characters).

All of this would be completely laughable if it weren't for the fact that a major U.S. publisher deems such nonsense fit to print just because it might turn a profit! Apparently seeking to capitalize on the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* (see *ET&N* 25 and 75) and the appeal of modern feminist theology, Simon and Schuster has seen fit to distribute Thiering's discredited theories more broadly, recently publishing *Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene* (2006). According to Thiering's website (www.pesheroofchrist.infinitesolutions.com), her previous work, *Jesus the Man* (1992) is about to be reissued by Simon and Schuster.



If you wonder why I spend any time discussing the views of people like Thiering, Michael Baigent (*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*), Gerd Lüdemann (*The Great Deception*), Jesus Seminar fellow John Dominic Crossan (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*), and others who attempt to debunk the divinity of Jesus. For me, the investigation of such theories is a faith-building experience. If there was a single, logical approach that challenged the

divinity of Jesus, it might cause me to have some questions; but the fact that each cynic attacks Jesus from a different direction does two things:

- the existence of so many different theories makes each serve as disproof of all others.
- the sheer number and variety of attacks suggests a desperate conspiracy against the truth by spiritual forces opposed to God.

Until now, Thiering's work has largely been confined to Australia, but now you can expect a chorus uncritical praise from those who are anti-Christ and/or anti-church, similar to these that emanated from down-under after the publication of *Jesus the Man*:

- (Thiering) will be a source of comfort and peace enabling them to live Christian lives without having to accept as fact Jesus's divinity, his miracles, the virgin birth and resurrection." - *The Australian Magazine*
- This massive work of courage and conviction throws much of what the Church teaches out the stained-glass window." - *Sunday Age, Melbourne*.
- "The impact of *Jesus the Man* by Barbara Thiering may turn out to be as profound as that of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* on theories of human evolution." - Peter Ackroyd, *The Times*

Such hyperbolic, gleeful pronouncements reflect the anti-institutional church sentiment of our times. While there is much to be legitimately criticized in many varieties of the institutional church, it is tragic that so many cannot separate the original teaching of Jesus and His apostles of the church (**ekklesia**) as simply the called-out people of God from the ornate buildings, complex hierarchies, and restrictive rules that human beings subsequently imposed. They would strip Christ of His divinity because they don't like the trappings of the institutional church, and in doing so, strip humanity of hope. Every time I run into yet another of these denials of Christ's divinity, I am reminded of 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 and grieve for those who "believe what is false" and therefore reject the free gift of God's grace through Christ Jesus.

Perhaps they seek to relieve themselves of any obligation beyond their own personal view of morality. A real, divine Jesus who died on the cross as a substitution for our guilt requires a response. A human Jesus who was nothing more than a wise teacher or a political opportunist can be ignored. But if God is real, but Jesus is not, our situation is hopeless. And if God is not real, it is pointless.

Discussion (Early Church Fathers: Polycarp)

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Unsure about or don't agree with something in *Ekklesia Then & Now*? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the New Testament: Nicopolis (Dec 12)

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