

*Saint Saul*, by Donald Harman Akenson

reviewed by [Wayne A. Holst](#) in the [December 6, 2000](#) issue

Outside the Four Gospels, the New Testament yields precious little about Jesus," writes John P. Meier, a prominent Catholic biblical scholar and author of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. "Since the center of Paul's theology is the death and resurrection of Jesus, the events and sayings of the earthly Jesus simply do not play a large role in his letters." Meier claims that Paul's letters focus on interpreting Jesus's message and do not deal with his person or other details of his life.

Not so, counters another substantive scholar, Donald Harman Akenson, who teaches history at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. Akenson insists that Saul and his work is crucial to our understanding of who Jesus was historically and what Jesus has become in Christian scripture and theology. The author uses Jewish names for his principal characters to "shake us out of our comfortable assumptions." Saul (Paul) worked a revolution in the beliefs and practices of the first followers of Yeshua (Jesus). Through Saul's opportune and creative theologizing, Yeshua of Nazareth (who appeared as a religious teacher during a fermentive period in Jewish history) mutates into a divinity. Saul transformed Yeshua into Jesus Christ. What we now know as Judaism and Christianity were the two forms of pre-70s "Judahism" that prevailed and flourished after the temple disaster. When the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in the war with Rome (70 c.e.) the Judahists were forced to replace their holy sanctuary with sacred texts. The Talmud served those continuing the Jewish observance and the New Testament those who followed the emerging Christian tradition.

Akenson believes that Saul's letters form the heart of the quest for the historical Jesus because they precede the Gospel writings (produced after 70 c.e.) as the first texts of the Yeshua faith. He uses Saul as the key to unlock the essence of the New Testament. Instead of reading the Gospels as history and the epistles as theology, we have a new option. Both contain history as well as theology. The difference is that Saul's writings appear earlier than those of the Gospel writers, providing us with a more authentic view of the man Yeshua. Akenson combines scholarship with gripping narrative as he pursues areas of inquiry that many readers will find intriguing.