X  How and why Paul deals with traditions

1.  Paul and the gospel “tradition”

Paul, the apostle, does not claim to be the founder of Christianity but maintains that he mediates, facilitates and transmits the gospel as εὐαγγέλιον. At the same time, he develops crucial elements of early Christ believing, thinking and communicating by, for instance, shaping moral discourse and transforming the Jesus story “into a metaphorical complex.” Phil 2:6-11 might be an important example of how Paul – in the context of ethical teaching (Phil 2:1ff.) provided by epistolary means – (re)shapes kerygmatic traditions (see Phil 2:11). As an epistolary activist, Paul might be called the founder of early Christian literacy. The Corinthian correspondence impressively documents how the apostle as a missionary, founder and leader of communities, moral teacher, letter writer and theologian constantly reacts to gospel interpretation at a time when Christian discourse was nascent and “Christianity” was in the making. We will take 1 Corinthians 15 as a point of departure for exploring how, within the framework of various early Christian discourses and approaches, Paul applies and transforms traditions that had so far only been passed on to him.

2.  1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and 11:23-25

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul takes an explicit stand on his mediating role as apostle. 1 Corinthians 15 is a central, if not the most important Pauline text, not only with regard to the topic of my essay: it shows us how Paul is literally “forced” to deal with traditions and how he addresses this task and appears to be the argumentative “climax” of the whole letter. Especially in verses 1-11, the issue of pre-Pauline tradition is addressed. What does this passage reveal to us?

1  W. A. Meeks, Origins, 86.
3  W. Schrage, Brief, 72.
a) In 1 Corinthians 15:8-11 the apostle concedes that he is the last witness of the Easter epiphanies. Paul makes a confession here, but clearly intends to transform the obvious deficiency of his apostleship into a strength. In Paul’s words,

“Last of all, as to one untimely born, he [Christ] appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain […]” (vv. 8-10a).

In what follows, Paul defends his apostleship, which his opponents in Corinth constantly treat with hostility. Thus, Paul claims in a competitive and self-confident manner: “[…] I worked harder than any of them [= the apostles]” (v. 10b). It is not only in this Pauline passage that personal confessions and competitive claims go hand in hand. Paul constantly wishes to reinforce the power of his apostolic ministry.

b) As Paul portrays himself as the last of the apostles and as a mediator: even though he has founded the Corinthian congregation by preaching the gospel (v. 1), and thus in his later letter-writing only needs to remind his addressees “of the good news that I proclaimed to you” (v. 1), he himself has only proclaimed (παρέδωκα) to the Corinthians orally “what I in turn had received” (v. 3a: παρέλαβον). Paul acknowledges that he is aware of his role as mediator: he is among the last of the first generation Christians and thus confronted with the stigma of being the “least.”

c) Between his reminder about the beginnings of the gospel proclamation in Corinth (vv. 1-3a) and confessing that he is the “last” or even “least” apostle (vv. 8-11), Paul refers to the paradosis of the gospel’s content:

“What I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (vv. 3b-5).

Whether at this point Paul accurately quotes the early Christian message (kerygma) as a formula, or rephrases or formulates ad hoc what the kerygma, which he had earlier preached in Corinth, actually is about, continues to be a matter of debate in Pauline studies. The question to be examined is whether Paul deals with a specific pre-Pauline tradition here and, if so, what that looks like.4 On the basis of linguistics (tradition terminology), word order, structure and motifs in vv. 3-5, Catholic (e.g., J. A. Fitzmyer; D. Zeller)

4 Cf. the discussion in, C. Wolff, Brief, 355-361.
and Protestant (e.g., C. Wolff; W. Schrage; already: J. Weiß) exegetes tend to see a tradition and, in particular, a paradosis (even though not necessarily the oldest version of the Easter kerygma viz. earliest Christian creeds, cf.: 1 Thess 4:14; Rom 4:25; 8:34; 14:9; 2 Cor 5:14f.), at least behind v. 3b-5a, which Paul himself might have received in his earlier career. At the time, he was travelling around the Syro-Palestinian area. Scholars assume that Paul probably came into contact with this formula/kerygma as a tradition in the context of Jewish-Hellenistic communities located around Damascus, in Jerusalem or Antioch. It is a matter of scholarly debate how to define the so-called Sitz im Leben of this paradosis as, for instance, a creed, a homology, or a catechetical summary.

d) Let us go one step further and ask, What does Paul do with this tradition which, as far as we can see, at this point has only been mediated in his oral proclamation and letters? In chapter 15, Paul uses the paradosis within the argumentative frame of discussing the reality or facticity of the resurrection. In 1 Corinthians 15:12 we read about the actual matter of controversy in Corinth. The question, “[…] how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (v. 12b), reflects one of the most urgent challenges that Paul has to deal with: the ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν might turn out to become the litmus test in Corinthian affairs.

Paul refutes those who doubt the reality of the resurrection by imagining, if “Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (v. 14).

As a result, Paul broadens his argument by moving toward using the paradosis. The resurrection of Christ is now as much a matter of belief or disbelief as the Corinthians’ belief and his own apostolic preaching: Paul creates no less than a direct interdependence between (Christ’s) resurrection, belief and kerygma. In conclusion, Paul must insist on sharing, mediating and furthermore passing on that particular gospel tradition. In communitarian discourses, the facticity of resurrection directly relates to the proper mediation of the gospel paradosis and its apostolic carrier.

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e) Once more, we have to go a step further. Paul does not only use the gospel tradition in order to authorize himself; nor does he reveal its legitimizing function for proving the truth of Christ’s resurrection. Something more is going on here. It is striking that Paul quotes the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15 with the same intention as he cites the Lord’s Supper paradosis in 1 Corinthians 11:23-25. Here, he says: “For I received (παρέλαβον) from the Lord what I also handed (παρέδωκα) on to you […]” (v. 23). There are only minor differences behind the structure of 1 Corinthians 15:3 and 11:23: the sequence of παρέλαβον-παρέδωκα is turned around; in 1 Corinthians 11:23 Paul also identifies the source of this paradosis as “from the Lord” (ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου) – a phrase which in terms of textual criticism is philologically debatable.10

But why does Paul, in his letter-writing, more or less balance 1 Corinthians 11:23-25, a tradition that dates back to a historical scene in Jesus’ life just before the passion, and 15:3-5, a post-Easter kerygmatic tradition? Clearly, he intends to authorize his apostolic ministry. Even though or rather because he is the “last” and possibly “least” of all the apostles he needs to prove that he has had access to the kerygmatic as much as to the ritual origins of the belief in Christ. As a result, those Corinthians who might wish to count themselves among the “party of Peter” (1 Cor 1:12) and thus claim a more privileged admission to Jesus, are unmasked as pure pretenders.

But what is the theological consequence of Paul’s standardization of the different Jesus traditions? Within the framework of Paul’s letter-writing in 1 Corinthians 11-15, why are both traditions – although initially quite different (historical event/Jesus tradition, 1 Cor 11; post-Easter kerygma, 1 Cor 15) – described in a similar manner? Within the basic structure of Paul’s letters both become part of an early Christian complex of traditions that Paul has to mediate. For him, both traditions have equal status. By combining and standardizing different traditions in his epistolary argumentation, Paul prepares for a merging of a post-Easter formula and a Jesus tradition: he thus combines kerygma and history.11

10 Codex D as well as the Latin tradition and Ambrosiaster read: παρακ κυρίου; F, G, 365 and (probably) D read: απο (του) θεου.