3. Paul’s use of the Jesus traditions

It is debatable whether in 1 Corinthians 11 and 15 Paul is forced to approach both traditions on equal terms because he himself only joined the group of Jesus’ followers post-Easter, or whether he takes his specific type of apostleship as an opportunity to combine kerygma and history. The question that remains is to what extent Paul can convincingly claim initially to be familiar with the so-called Jesus traditions? And to what extent is he willing to engage in the process of further transmitting and distributing the proclamation and teaching of (the historical) Jesus?

The fact that besides 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 there are only two further instances where Paul explicitly refers to Jesus traditions or λόγοι κυρίου has remained a riddle in New Testament studies. How do we best make sense of this? Not accidentally, since both instances are again to be found in 1 Corinthians (7:10f. and 9:14).12 It seems that, especially in his first letters to the Corinthian community, Paul is continuously under pressure to prove his apostolic authority with regard to its genuine roots in the “inner circle” of Easter witnesses and/or followers of Jesus. In 50 CE, Peter might have become a determined competitor of Paul in Achaia.

Regarding Paul’s use of Jesus logia we have to distinguish more precisely between three types of references to the Jesus traditions: (i) explicit references to the “words of the Lord”; (ii) formulistic claims of Jesuanic authority (cf. 1 Cor 14:37); or (iii) analogies to the synoptic Jesus traditions (1 Thess 2:12; 5:2, 15; Gal 5:21; 1 Cor 13:2; Rom 12:14, 17, 20; 14:14, 17) – the latter occurs frequently in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 4:20; 6:9f.; 15:24, 50).13 In my view, the third group of more vague allusions to the Jesus traditions can even be expanded further: in 2 Corinthians 3, for instance, Paul’s interpretation of Christ as the one unveiling the faces of all believers cannot only be seen as a contrastive analysis of the story of Moses in Exodus 34 but, rather, as a fundamental critique of how Peter might have claimed an exclusive and thus more authoritative witnessing of Jesus’ transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2ff.).14

However, even if we further develop the reconstruction of unspecific material of the Jesus traditions in the Pauline letters, we have to recognize how little attention Paul in general pays to Jesus and the transmission of the Jesus traditions. The most obvious reason for him must relate to his understanding of his apostolic ministry and the task of letter-writing: he sees himself to be “called to be

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13 Cf. J. Schröter, ibid., 283.