How and why Paul deals with traditions

an apostle” (Rom 1:1) in order “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name” (Rom 1:5). This explains why, especially in his early career (cf. Gal 1-2), Paul hesitated to transmit the bulk of the Jesus traditions for their own sake and the way in which he approached the literary task of letter-writing, which he started around fifteen years later, and how his approach varies from Christian literary activity fifteen to twenty years later. Contrary to how between 70 and 90 CE the later gospel writers considered it to be their literary task to inform contemporary and later readers about the “beginning” (Ἀρχή: Mk 1:1) or the “truth” (ἀσφάλεια: Lk 1:4) as much as the content of the gospel story as proclaimed by Jesus, Paul, a first-generation literary activist, is particularly in charge of ὑπακοὴ πίστεως (cf. also Rom 16:26). This expression that is unique in the “entirety of ancient literature, […] was most likely coined by Paul.”15 As Robert Jewett argues, “Paul speaks here of the special sort of obedience produced by the gospel,” which reflects both Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian concerns in Rome, since “obedience to the gospel leads to walking by the spirit and to the fulfillment of the law’s demands to love and care for the neighbour.”16 In Paul’s view, all transmission of traditions has finally to be subordinated to the purpose of enforcing the ὑπακοὴ πίστεως.

4. Other types of “traditions”

So far we have explored to what extent Pauline thinking and writing depends to a surprisingly small extent on post-Easter formulas and Jesus traditions. Paul refers only rarely to this latter group of traditions, which could illuminate Jesus’ life and mission. In contrast, Paul is primarily concerned with communitarian life and apostolic missionary duties – the pragmatism and style of his letter-writing has thus to be adjusted to the communitarian queries. At the same time, the apostle regularly indicates (especially in 1 Corinthians) that, whenever needed, he can well meet the standards of remembering, delivering and applying Jesus’ sayings to current debates. We could therefore argue that, for Paul, the hermeneutical criterion for delivering the Jesus traditions as well as the post-Easter formulas was their relevance for contemporary communitarian needs.

There might be another reason why Paul does not pay complete attention to the pure transmission of the Jesus traditions (as the representatives of the Jeru-

15 R. Jewett, Romans, 110.
16 Ibid. R. Jewett rejects an objective, a subjective or an epexegetical understanding of the genitive pisteōs as “abdominal” interpretations and instead sees the genitive in its limiting function of “the substantive on which it depends”; he reads the syntagm as “obedience produced by the gospel.”
salem community, Peter, James and John, the στῦλοι, did). Paul is inspired and influenced by other traditions, which are part of his religious and intellectual profile. In particular, we have to think of complexes of traditions such as the Septuagint, various Hellenistic-Jewish beliefs and traditions as much as common Hellenistic rhetorical and argumentative tools. When looking critically at how Paul approaches these sets of traditions we will find only little consistency.

1. Scholars tend to argue that Paul – influenced by diaspora Jewish thinking (cf. Acts 22:3) as much as Palestinian pharisaic education (cf. Phil 3:5; Acts 23:6) – was closely affiliated to the language of the Psalms. It is obvious that he was familiar with different techniques of contemporary Jewish scriptural interpretation (as was practiced by the Pharisees; cf. later rabbinic texts). Jörg Frey identifies especially the “Seven Middot Hillels” (e.g., Rom 5:9ff.; 11:2, 24; Rom 4:1-12), Midrash-like argumentations (Gal 3:6-14), typological interpretation (1 Cor 10:1-13; Rom 5:12-14) and allegory (cf. Gal 4:21-31) as techniques of scriptural interpretation practiced by Paul. We can distinguish between “explicit” and “implicit” ways in which Paul refers to the LXX. However, in neither is Paul concerned with scriptural interpretation as such. His task does not entail commentating Scripture(s).

Paul basically approaches Scripture in order to reveal its meaning and evidence for proclaiming and interpreting the gospel message (e.g., 1 Cor 9:10; 10:11). His usage of Scripture is therefore selective. The basic hermeneutical criteria are: (i) relevance for contemporary communitarian discourse; (ii) legitimizing evidence for the gospel proclamation (cf. 1 Cor 15:3-5) and its messenger; and (iii) the exploration of Scripture’s manifold immanent hermeneutical potential. Paul does not only refer to Scripture in order to affirm the gospel message (affirmation), but also in terms of revealing its critical potential for disclosing pre-Christian and Christ-believing existence coram Deo (critique, e.g., 1 Cor 10:12-13).

2. Paul’s letter-writing is influenced by the apocalyptic (e.g., parousia, resurrection, new creation) and sapiential (e.g., Christ as incarnation of God: 2 Cor 3:17f.) traditions, possibly communicated to him by his pharisaic education. Besides, Paul can also communicate in prophetic images (Gal 1) or as a per-

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18 This grouping is frequently described as a “Torah-based movement for sanctification”: R. Deines, “Pharisees,” 1061-1063, here 1062.
21 Cf. ibid., 490.