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.”1 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).2 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.3 Especially in verses 1-11, the issue of pre-Pauline tradition is addressed. What does this passage reveal to us?

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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.),(5) 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,(6) in Jerusalem or Antioch.(7) 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 catechetic summary.(8)

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.(9)

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 χυριου; F, G, 365 and (probably) D read: απο (του) θεου.

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). 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). 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.).

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.
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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” (Ἀρχη: 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 the ὑπακοή 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 ὑπακοή 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 epexegetic understanding of the genitive pisteōs as “adnominal” 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 3:17ff.) 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.
son who prepares himself (in a mystical sense?) for conformity with Christ (Phil 1-3). Why does Paul shift between different traditions and merge them? Is he willing to hand down and possibly evaluate the rich and manifold heritage of Jewish thinking and writing? To what extent does he actually intend to transform apocalyptic motifs into anthropological or existential thinking (R. Bultmann)?

It seems to me that Paul once more aligns his approach to traditional sources with his strategy of literary communication: in his epistolary teaching, exhortation, consolation, proclamation and various hermeneutical tasks he has to be inventive, flexible, critical, surprising. As a result of this mixture of motifs, traditions and argumentative claims the Pauline letters appear “weighty and strong” in the ears of his audience(s) (2 Cor 10:10).

3. Paul’s literary strategy of selectively merging certain types of traditions can already be found in 1 Thessalonians. Already here, Paul begins “using rhetorical and philosophical traditions, in the process modifying them to suit his immediate purpose” (cf. 1 Thess 1:5). As soon as he leaves the Syro-Palestinian area and moves to Asia Minor, Macedonia and further west, he is increasingly confronted with Hellenistic-Roman moral discourse. In light of the popular ethical debates, Paul could only communicate his message properly if he could demonstrate his ability to master relevant rhetorical and philosophical traditions. In this light, Acts 17:16ff. constitutes a proper, although much later, Lukan attempt to connect the Pauline heritage of arguing to the more general philosophical discourses of his time.

5. Brief conclusion

The investigation of how and why Paul uses various types of traditions has revealed how selective and connective the apostle is as a letter writer. Whenever needed, he refers to post-Easter formulas as much as the Jesus traditions within the context of his letter-writing and authorial perspective. He quotes the Scripture viz. Septuagint in order to shape argumentative evidence of the truth of the gospel message and to express fundamental critique of (Christian) faith and life; he shows his familiarity with prophetic as well as sapiential and apocalyptic traditions in order to demonstrate the plurality of (religious) motifs by which intellectual discourse can develop beyond the simple game of raising and answering controversial questions (cf. περὶ δὲ structure in 1 Corinthians). Furthermore,

24 A. J. Malherbe, Letters, 111.
he uses general Hellenistic rhetorical and philosophical traditions in order to address those readers who are at this stage of affiliation to the ἐκκλησίαι only tentatively sympathizing with observing early Christian missionary activities and the communitarian life.

Paul’s selective and connective way of dealing with traditions can only partly be explained by the circumstances under which his letters were written. In many ways, Paul develops a literary strategy: the apostle does not commit himself to one particular stream of tradition but, rather, frees up space for innovatively shaping the individual profile of his, the Pauline, ministry. It is only at first sight then, that not to be part of the inner circle of the Jerusalem community (στῦλοι) causes authoritative problems. In Paul’s view, his status as a late- or newcomer allows for self-styled apostolic activities that he, nevertheless, has to trace back to his commissioning by God and the previous agreements on missionary politics reached with the “pillars” in Jerusalem (Gal 1-2).

Paul’s argumentative technique is no less than the literary part of his missionary strategy: “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:22f.). As Paul does not “run aimlessly,” nor “box as though beating the air” (1 Cor 9:26), his approach to and use of traditions is always intentional. Paul’s selective and connective use of different sets of traditions might result from his apostolic ambition as much as his hermeneutical pragmatism.

We might today criticize Paul for not being more comprehensive, explicit, precise and distinctive when using and transforming traditional materials. As a result, Paul’s place in intellectual life in the first century CE is hard to define. However, Paul tried hard to transform the stigma of being the “least” into the attribute of being unique and running first (1 Cor 9:24). In order to do so he accessed and arranged traditions in a highly selective and specifically connective manner.

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