1. The Data

1.1. Very Probable Traditions

In all of the New Testament letters there are only six instances where stories or sayings of Jesus are clearly and explicitly referred to, four of them (interestingly) in 1 Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul is responding to the view of some in the Corinthian church that Christians should not indulge in sexual intercourse and indeed that married Christians should separate from their partners. Paul has no time for this view, and refers to the teaching of Jesus against divorce and remarriage: “to the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife” (7:10, 11).

In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is speaking about his apostleship and about his own decision to work with his own hands and not to live off what he might earn from his teaching; in the course of that discussion he comments that “the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (v. 14). He is probably referring back to the teaching that Jesus gives to his disciples when he sends them out in mission, according to the gospels, since he tells them that “the labourer is worthy of his hire/food” (Matt 10:10; Luke 10:7). That saying of Jesus is also echoed in 1 Tim 5:18, though there it is found alongside a quotation from the Old Testament and both are introduced, interestingly, by the words “For the Scripture says.”

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is commenting on the disgraceful and selfish behaviour of some in the context of the eucharist, and he reminds them that “I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night that he was betrayed took
bread…” Paul goes on to describe the institution of the Last Supper in a way that is closely parallel to the account of the Supper in the synoptic gospels, and particularly to Luke’s account. (1 Cor 11:23–26, Luke 22:19, 20).

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul addresses the doubts of some of the Corinthians about the resurrection of the dead by reminding them of the gospel which he preached to them: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day…” (vv. 3–8). Paul goes on to list people to whom the risen Jesus appeared, including himself as the last and extraordinary witness (15:1–8). Paul’s list does not correspond exactly to the resurrection appearances in the gospels, but it corresponds partly to the Lukan account (with its reference to Jesus appearing to Peter and to the twelve, Luke 24:34–36).

In the non-Pauline letters the one unambiguous reference to Jesus’ life is 2 Pet 1:16–18 on the transfiguration of Jesus: “We had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying ‘This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’.”

Most scholars (though not quite all) agree that in the four passages from 1 Corinthians and in the verses from 1 Timothy and 2 Peter we have conscious use of traditions of Jesus that were passed down in the early church.

1.2. Relatively Probable Traditions

Many recognize other traditions of Jesus in the letters, whether deliberately alluded to or unconsciously echoed. In the Pauline corpus some of the strongest cases include 1 Cor 13:2 on mountain-moving faith, compare Jesus’ words in Matthew 17:20, also 1 Thess 5:2, where Paul refers to the day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night, compare the parable of Jesus found in Matt 24:43, 44/Luke 12:39, 40 (also 2 Pet 3:10). In Gal 4:6 Paul speaks of God having “sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’”; the use of the Aramaic word Abba in this Greek letter, as also in Rom 8:15, suggests that we have here an echo of Jesus’ own distinctive usage (Mark 14:36). Romans 12 is another strong case, with Paul’s teaching on blessing persecutors and repaying no one evil for evil being strikingly similar.