WORDS OF JESUS IN PAUL:
ON THE THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS OF THE JESUS TRADITION

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1. The Logia of Jesus on the Lips of the Apostle Paul
and of the Christian Prophets

One aspect of the investigation of the relationship between the Easter proclamation and the pre-Easter Jesus tradition is the examination of the role played by the words of Jesus in Paul. For the period before Paul, we can draw only on indirect reconstructions which examine the form and function of the traditional logia which were written down and collected later, and edited to a greater or lesser extent. Our sources here are the reconstructed Q, the synoptic gospels, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of John, and some other extra-canonical texts. The decisive material is contained in those post-Pauline texts; but if we wish to investigate the manner of its earliest tradition, we are obliged to take the Corpus Paulinum into account.

It is well known that although Paul presupposes Jesus in his theology, he appeals almost exclusively to the end of his earthly history: to Jesus’ death on the cross, the factuality of which is proved by his burial, and to the resurrection, to which the apostle himself can bear witness on the basis of his personal experience of the exalted Lord. All that we learn about the life of Jesus is that he was born as a Jew (Gal 4:4) and was a descendant of David (Rom 1:3), that he had brothers (1 Cor 9:5), one of whom was named James (Gal 1:19; cf. 1 Cor 15:7), and that he gathered disciples, one of whom was named Cephas/Peter (Gal 2:14; 1 Cor 9:5, cf. 15:5a) and another John (Gal 2:9).¹

Besides this, Paul cites some individual words of the Lord (κύριος). The context makes it clear that these are words of the risen and exalted Jesus, who is communicating with the apostle. Nevertheless, their contents and to some extent also their vocabulary correspond to the logia which were later written down as words of the earthly Jesus. For

Paul, the κύριος was Jesus, both as the exalted Christ and as the earthly Jesus of Nazareth, whose brother (ὁ ἀδελφὸς τοῦ κυρίου) he came to know personally (cf. Gal 1:19). In connection with the concrete words of the Lord, there is a striking link between these two dimensions of the concept of κύριος in 1 Cor 11:23–26a par., where Paul draws on liturgical tradition and declares that the Lord (most probably: the exalted Lord) who was “handed over” or “betrayed” (παρεδίδετο, v. 23) on the last night of his earthly life has communicated this to him directly (παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου).

Similarly, Paul proclaims two verdicts on questions of church law in the name of the exalted Lord (κύριος παραγγέλει/διέταξεν), both of which are also closely related to the pre-Easter tradition of the logia of Jesus. One of these verdicts forbids divorce (1 Cor 7:10–11; cf. Matt 5:32 par.; Mark 10:11–12 par.); the other concerns the apostles’ right to receive support from those who hear their word (1 Cor 9:14 [9:4]; cf. Matt 10:10b par.). Paul appeals here to words associated with Jesus, which he distinguishes from his own words (7:8, 10, 25) although he believes that he too is a bearer of the Spirit; and these are words which he has received at an earlier date. This unchallengeable piece of evidence is highly significant. Luke attests that such quotations of the words of the Lord Jesus in Christian preaching were common, when he has Paul cite a logion of the Lord (probably an agraphon) in the apostle’s farewell discourse in Miletus (Acts 20:17–38, at v. 35c).

We must however also note that the apostle not only proclaims the words of the Lord with authority and in keeping with the tradition; he also works as a prophet and a bearer of the Spirit who places his own judgment almost on the same level as the words of the Lord (1 Cor 7:7, 8, 12, 17, 25), although he concedes that his opinion is not absolute (νομίζω, 7:26). He both hands on the words of the Lord and works as one who has the gifts of the Spirit. Indeed, he can even speak of his ecstatic voyage to the heavenly sphere (2 Cor 12:2–3), to which there is both a parallel in terms of the phenomenology of religion and a

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