THE USE OF THE STORY AND THE WORDS OF JESUS
IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL

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This contribution\(^1\) sets out to explain that the study of the material attributable to Jesus himself, detectible in the letters of Paul, does not provide enough on its own for Jesus to be found in the gospel of Paul. It is necessary to go a step further and consider the itinerary that the figure of Jesus has in the writings of Paul. This “story of Jesus,” which not only includes the earthly Jesus, but also the heavenly one, produces a wide-reaching and global view that characterizes Pauline theology and all Christian theology.

1. The Story of Jesus

1.1. The Received Tradition and Development of Kerygma

The life of Paul is not that of a sharpshooter, but that of an apostle who did not want to “run in vain” (Gal 2:2). He would have “run in vain” had he worked on the Gospel away from those “considered as pillars” (v. 9), the leaders of the community of Jerusalem (James, Peter and John). Moreover, in the communities founded by him in Macedonia and Asia, Paul engenders a feeling of debt towards the community of Jerusalem, and promotes a collection for the poor—a collection which will indirectly bring him lasting captivity. Thus, from the first moment after the episode of Damascus, the period that M. Hengel named “the unknown years,”\(^2\) Paul, despite feeling profoundly the call to be an apostle (Rom 1:1), considered himself “the smallest of the apostles,” a persecutor of the Church of God (1 Cor 15:9), and recognized those who were apostles “before him” (Gal 1:17).

\(^1\) I dedicate this offering to Prof. Martin de Boer, a great scholar of the work of the Apostle Paul, in token of my acknowledgement and thanks.

It is precisely in this latter context that he states that his kerygma is the kerygma of the Christian community: “whether it is me or them (the other apostles), this is what we (all of us) preach (κηρύσσομεν)” (1 Cor 15:11). So there are not as many Gospels as there are apostles, but one Gospel, a unique kerygma, that is preached by all of them and, therefore, also by Paul. This Gospel is identified with the person of Jesus both dead and resurrected and with his earthly-heavenly itinerary. Paul knows this directly from a “revelation” (Gal 1:16) or, as he calls it in 1 Cor 15:8, from an “apparition” which he puts on a par with the previous occasions when the resurrected Jesus appeared, starting with Peter (1 Cor 15:5–7). This precedence that Peter has in relation to the appearances of the risen Christ is clearly the result of the choice of the same Jesus, and, most likely for this reason, it can be traced to Paul’s first stay in Jerusalem, which lasted only fifteen days, and was aimed at getting to “know (ἰστορῆσαι) Peter” (Gal 1:18).

Another item to consider is the weight of tradition in Paul’s thought. It is clear that Pauline theology often manifests how much it owes to tradition, sometimes because Paul himself explicitly recognizes as much, and sometimes because part of the significant material that he includes in his letters has to be attributed to an earlier tradition. Texts such as 1 Cor 15:3 (“first of all I submit the teaching that I [also] have received”) or 11:23 (“the tradition that I have received and have conveyed to you”), relating, respectively, to the death-burial-resurrection appearances (confession of faith), and the story of the last supper (Eucharist), show the importance of the reception-transmission sequence in the formation of Paul’s thought and theology. As to pre-Pauline tradition, the study of the materials confirms that Paul assimilates, integrates, and re-elaborates at least four major lines of tradition, intertwined axes around the soteriological value of Jesus’ death and resurrection—what we may call the “soteriological” unit that characterizes his figure. We can therefore talk about baptis-

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3 Few verb forms in the NT have used up more ink than the aorist infinitive ἱστορῆσαι. Paul’s visit has an obvious intent, is not in passing or casual. Whilst on the second visit to Jerusalem, fourteen years after the first, Paul looks to legitimize his own missionary choice in favour of the pagans or the uncircumcised (Gal 2:1–10). On the first visit, he seeks the testimony of Peter about Jesus dead and resurrected. Interestingly, 1 Cor 15:3–4 contains Paul’s fundamental text on the kerygma, described as “that which I also received” (ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον) (v. 3). Paul also “saw” (ἐἶδον) James, the brother of the Lord, who, with Peter, is the only other person mentioned in 1 Cor 15:7 as having been the subject of an appearance of the risen Jesus. It is difficult not to connect Paul’s visit to Jerusalem, described in Gal 1:18–19, with the list of appearances mentioned in 1 Cor 15:7, and even the kerygma formulated in 1 Cor 15:3–4.