In order to trace the beginnings of the apostolic office as it is documented in early Christian literature, we have to travel far back into the past. At least if we should believe the Swedish scholar Geo Widengren who suggests that in this respect too, in the words of the title of a well-known book, ‘History begins at Sumer’.1 The oldest predecessor of the apostle would then be the divine priest-king who, like the early Christian apostle, is sent from heaven, entrusted with a divine secret, sometimes in the form of a heavenly book, to be a shepherd to the people and to establish a reign of justice on earth.2 In the same vein, the figure of Moses is portrayed in the literature of the ancient Samaritans,3 while in a Jewish document like the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs Levi also appears as a kind of priest-king, who is transported to heaven and there receives a divine commission to be a minister (leitourgos) of the Lord, announce his secrets (must ria) among mankind and be a herald (k ruxeis) of the redemption of Israel.4 This is again reminiscent of the apostle Paul when he describes himself in his Epistle to the Romans 15.16 as ‘minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving the Gospel of God as a priest’.5 This Gospel of God is of course often characterized as the revelation of a divine secret or mystery and on several occasions

1 S. N. Kramer, History Begins at Sumer (New York 1956).
2 G. Widengren, The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book (Uppsala and Leipzig 1950). A summary of this and several later studies of the same subject can be found in G. Widengren, Religionsphänomenologie (Berlin 1969) 626–9 and index in voce ‘Apostel’ and ‘Ausgesandter’.
4 T. Lev. 2.10.
5 Although J. D. G. Dunn, Romans 9–16 (Dallas 1988) 860 considers St Paul’s transformation of this cultic imagery by applying it to his missionary work to be very striking, the only consequence he derives from it is that in this way the division between cultic and secular, and thus between Jew and Gentile, has been broken down. Obviously he cannot imagine that St Paul really conceived of his ministry within a cultic setting!
St Paul makes it very clear that he had received his Gospel not by way of human tradition but directly from heaven.

In addition to this vertical dimension, however, which seems to dominate St Paul’s self-consciousness and is excellently accounted for by a theory such as that of Widengren and, more or less in his wake, the German scholars Walter Schmithals and Hans Dieter Betz,\(^6\) there is also a much more horizontal approach to be found in those texts where the apostles (in many cases numbering twelve) appear together as the historical founders of the Church, its Creed, its canon and its several traditions and institutions. From the second century onwards, this concept, which is often connected with the writings of St Luke and the phenomenon of so-called ‘early Catholicism’,\(^7\) has become by far the most common, in fact so common that it is still difficult for us to imagine an apostle other than as a disciple of Jesus, sent by him from Jerusalem to preach the Gospel and to found the worldwide Christian Church. This may, for example, partly explain how even as recently as 1994 the Dutch scholar J. Ysebaert could try to prove that in the earliest Christian documents, i.e. the epistles of St Paul, the word ‘apostle’ already functions as a \textit{terminus technicus} indicating a member of the Twelve. That St Paul can also speak of ‘apostles of the churches’ charged with organizing the great collection for the Church of Jerusalem is then seen as a kind of allusion to the official title of the Twelve, which would already have become ‘so technical that there was no more fear of misunderstanding.’\(^8\)

Now, it is obvious that St Paul, although he unmistakably uses the words ‘apostle’ and ‘apostolate’ with reference to both St Peter and to himself,\(^9\) nowhere clearly identifies the apostles with the Twelve as such. Dr Ysebaert is of course quite aware of this too. But in his opinion, St Paul’s usage, when it is not clear in itself, has to be explained according to that of roughly contemporary sources like the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles and there the identification is


\(^7\) Here, of course, one has to mention the influential book by G. Klein, \textit{Die Zwölf Apostel: Ursprung und Gehalt einer Idee} (Göttingen 1961).


\(^9\) Gal. 2.8.