THE PRE-SYNOPTIC TRADITION IN
1 THESSALONIANS II 13-16

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It is not difficult to name a couple of good reasons for the contribution of this article to a volume written in honour of Professor G. SEVENSTER. Already to cherish an appreciation for traditions is a mark of distinction. In such appreciation for the important scientific and ecclesiastical traditions SEVENSTER set an example for his friends and students. Besides, an investigation of the links in the chain of tradition between Jesus and Paul stands in the line of his conceptions. In many and various ways SEVENSTER discussed in his publications the relationship between Paul and Jesus. We call attention to what he wrote already some time ago in his book about the Christology of the N.T., which had such a good welcome in the world of N.T. scholarship. And we can mention more recent publications, such as his contribution on Christology in one of the weighty volumes of Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart and his article on the historical Jesus in Kerk en Theologie. In these SEVENSTER repeatedly gave evidence of the same insight. Paul unmistakably uses data from the life of Jesus. SEVENSTER cited many instances from Paul’s epistles to prove this. Where else would the apostle have derived such data other than from the traditions as he found them in the primitive church? To the use that he made of one of these tradition-complexes we would like to call your attention.

In the epistle to the Galatians Paul relates, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the tradition of my fathers,” Gal. i 14, cf. Phil. iii 5 ff.; Mark vii 3, 5; Matt. xv 2. After his conversion, he

adds, he did not “confer with flesh and blood,” nor did he “go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before” him, Gal. i 16 f. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he threw the concept of tradition completely overboard. On the contrary, although he as apostle rejects human tradition, Col. ii 8, none of the other authors of the N.T. has placed such an accent on the significance of the Christian tradition as he does 1). He also freely uses rabbinic terminology when he speaks about tradition. Occasionally he uses the word παράδοσις to characterize his own instruction, 1 Cor. xi 2, 2 Thes. ii 15, iii 6. Only in his writings does the verb παραδόνω indicate the delivery of the tradition, 1 Cor. xi 23, xv 3; cf. Rom. vi 17. He is also the only one who treats the verb παραλαμβάνειν as a technical term for the reception of the tradition, 1 Cor. xi 23, xv 1.3; Gal. i 9; Phil. iv 9; Col. ii 6; 1 Thes. ii 13, iv 1; 2 Thes. iii 6, and it is remarkable that he never uses this verb in one of the other meanings which it possesses in the other writings of the N.T. 2).

There are no other epistles of Paul in which the theme of παράδοσις is so frequently under discussion as those which he wrote to the Thessalonians. Already as far as the use of the technical terms is concerned these epistles surpass the others; 5 of the 16 times that Paul uses such a term are found in 1 and 2 Thes. In addition there is the fact that in these epistles also at other points he sometimes reminds them of that which he had prescribed on earlier occasions (“as we charged you,” 1 Thes. iv 11; “For even when we were with you, we gave you this command,” 2 Thes. iii 10) and of that which he had said in his teaching (“Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this?”, 2 Thes. ii 5).

And this is by no means everything that could be said. Nevertheless, it is already enough to furnish somewhat of a background for a plea, which follows shortly, for understanding ἄκοι in 1 Thes. ii 13 as “tradition” and for the idea that in 1 Thes. ii 14-16 Paul is creatively handling a pre-synoptic tradition. Before beginning with these arguments, I will try to throw some more light on this background.

If there is any place in the epistles to the Thessalonians which gives us an impression of the value which Paul attached to the

2) On Col. ii 6, παρελάβετε τὸν χριστὸν Ιησοῦν, as belonging to this series of texts, see G. DELLING, “παραλαμβάνω” in: T.W.N.T. IV, S. 15.