

PAUL AND THE WORDS OF JESUS: ON THE INFREQUENCY OF PAUL'S USE OF JESUS'S WORDS

by
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One of the most embarrassing facts for those who see Paul as a follower of Jesus is his failure to refer much to Jesus's life or teaching."²

—David Wenham

INTRODUCTION

David Wenham's statement highlights a problem that nags at many observant Bible readers. Why does Paul not explicitly cite Jesus's words with any level of regularity? This question is a part of a larger issue: what is the relationship between Jesus and Paul? As Wilson has noted, understanding the nature of that relationship is "one of the most complex and intriguing issues facing the historian of early Christianity," and he correctly highlights that such a discussion "has profound theological ramifications which go to the heart of the Christian faith."³

In the most important sense, the relationship is clear, for Scripture clearly describes Paul as a servant of Jesus. Paul met the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9) and was called by Jesus to be an apostle (1 Cor 1:1). Nevertheless, critical scholarship is far from unanimous on the relationship between Jesus and Paul.⁴ Thus, this article will seek to plot the landscape of opinions using categories in-

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²David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3.

³S. G. Wilson, "From Jesus to Paul: The Contours and Consequences of a Debate," in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare*, ed. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 2.

⁴In a 2016 dissertation on the topic, Hiestermann said, "Even after many years of research and discussion on the Jesus-Paul debate, a definite answer on the relationship between Jesus and Paul has not yet been agreed upon" (Heinz Arnold Hiestermann, "Paul's Use of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition" [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2016], 77).

spired by Niebuhr's classic study, *Christ and Culture*.⁵ After doing so, we will look at the problem through one particular lens—the problem of the paucity of references to Jesus in Paul's literature. The article will conclude by showing that even with the limited methods of critical scholars, there are many reasons to believe Paul valued, respected, and built his teaching on the words of Jesus despite the lack of frequent, explicit reference to those words.⁶

CRITICAL OPINIONS ON JESUS AND PAUL

Some scholars maintain a Paul against Jesus position, holding that Paul taught contrary to the earthly Jesus. This can be seen in F. C. Baur, who believed Paul developed his theology in two ways: negatively, he developed it in opposition to Jerusalem and their expression of the Jesus Tradition;⁷ positively, he developed it in light of his dramatic religious experience of the risen Christ.⁸ Thus, on this reading, the lack of explicit reference to Jesus's words is explained by Paul's ideological battle with the Jerusalem apostles and the traditions they maintained.

Rudolph Bultmann took a slightly different approach, one we will call Paul without Jesus. This name is only appropriate if it is understood that Bultmann is speaking of the historical Jesus and not the exalted Lord. According to Bultmann, "The teaching of the historical Jesus plays no role or practically none in Paul."⁹ The context of Paul's life, teaching, and mission work was Hellenistic Christianity, which supplied a Gospel distinct from that of the Palestinian church.¹⁰ Thus Bultmann can say, "The so often and passionately debated question, 'Jesus and Paul,' is at bottom the question: Jesus and Hellenistic Christianity."¹¹ As a result, Paul's religious experience in conversion to the

⁵H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1956).

⁶It is important to note the purpose of this study. I do not share the pre-suppositions of critical scholars who find a distance between Jesus and Paul. Instead, this study attempts to address the issue of the relationship between Jesus and Paul from a vantage-point allowed by many critical scholars. In doing so, the purpose is to show that even from that perspective, the relationship between Paul and Jesus can be ably defended. Further, by considering the reasons Paul does not directly quote from Jesus with any level of frequency, the study attempts to describe a characteristic of Scripture, which many readers may find curious.

⁷*Jesus Tradition* is a technical phrase referring to the traditions in the early church concerning both Jesus's words and life.

⁸Ferdinand Christian Baur, "Die Christus Partei in Der Korinthischen Gemeinde," *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie* 5 (1831): 61–206.

⁹Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1951), 35.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 188.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 189, emphasis added.

“Hellenistic gospel” resulted in Paul becoming “the founder of Christian theology.”¹² Thus, the paucity of Jesus’s words in Paul’s epistles is the product of a lack of interest in the historical Jesus along with a desire to express Paul’s unique experience of the risen Christ.

A third approach may be described as Paul beside Jesus. Proponents of this position argue for some alignment and shared values between Jesus and Paul, but they also believe Paul introduces significant developments not found in Jesus’s historical teaching. Nikolaus Walter is a representative of such a view.¹³ He, in a way similar to Bultmann, suggests that the Hellenistic community with which Paul engaged cultivated only certain aspects of Jesus Tradition, specifically the parts about the law-free gospel and the apostolic rights of missionaries. While Paul may have been exposed to more of the Jesus Tradition, those elements of that tradition pertinent to the Hellenistic church were the most significant to him, and therefore those elements are what Paul embraced and developed.¹⁴ Paul’s continuity with the broader pattern of Jesus’s teaching is an open question, with the most likely conclusion that Paul embraced some, modified some, and neglected some of Jesus’s teaching.¹⁵ Thus, this position explains the lack of frequent, explicit reference to Jesus’s words on the basis that some of that tradition was of little use to Paul, and on the basis that Paul was seeking to move beyond the traditions of Jesus in the establishment of the early church.

Finally, some have maintained a more harmonious assessment, suggesting that a Paul with Jesus position is more accurate. On this account, Paul’s message is consistent with the message of Jesus, even if there is some development of thought. A chief proponent of this view in modern scholarship is James D. G. Dunn, who argues that the broad themes of Jesus’s ministry are matched by the broad themes of Paul’s ministry, despite the difference in terminology and emphasis.¹⁶ Indeed, in Dunn’s estimation, Paul is “one of the truest disciples of Jesus—not simply of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, but also of Jesus of Nazareth.”¹⁷ Dale Allison, in a significant article on this topic, concluded likewise: “The persistent conviction that Paul knew next to nothing of the teaching of Jesus must be rejected. Jesus of Nazareth was not the faceless presupposition of Pauline theology. On the contrary, the tradition stemming from Jesus well served the apostle in his

¹²Ibid., 187.

¹³Nikolaus Walter, “Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition,” in *Paul and Jesus*, ed. A. J. M. Wedderburn (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 74–76.

¹⁴Ibid., 76–78.

¹⁵Ibid., 79–80.

¹⁶James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 95–115.

¹⁷Ibid., 115.

roles as pastor, theologian, and missionary.”¹⁸

This article will seek to defend the Paul with Jesus position in regard to the problem of the lack of frequent, explicit reference to Jesus’s words. To do so, it will first be necessary to argue—in opposition to some—that Paul knew the Jesus Tradition.

PAUL’S KNOWLEDGE OF THE JESUS TRADITION

Clearly, if Paul did not know much of the Jesus Tradition, then it is not surprising that he lacked frequent citation of it. Two reasons for Paul’s supposed ignorance of the Jesus Tradition have been offered. First, Paul may not have cared about it. This is the position of those who make a sharp dichotomy between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ. Because Paul was transformed by a vision of the exalted Christ, “what the earthly Jesus said and did was of very little importance to him.”¹⁹ Second, Paul did not have access to this tradition. Paul knew the Jesus Tradition through the Hellenistic church, which may have embraced only some of the Jesus Tradition or knew only some of the tradition.²⁰

Thus, the two reasons cited for Paul’s ignorance of the Jesus Tradition are Paul’s apparent lack of interest in the tradition and the question of Paul’s access to the tradition.²¹ The following considerations will provide reasons to deny both claims. In other words, I will argue that there are good reasons to believe Paul both desired to know the Jesus Tradition and that he had access to it.

Paul’s Desire to Know the Jesus Tradition

Seyoon Kim notes what, on the surface, appears to be obvious: “For Paul, Jesus was no legendary ancient hero, but a contemporary of his who had been only recently crucified as a false messiah.” Kim continues, “Given this fact, it is impossible to think that Paul did not try to learn of Jesus, his life and teaching.”²² In other words, it is fully natural to believe that Paul would be inclined to learn more about the historical life of the one he now accepted as the Messiah.²³ Further, Paul’s

¹⁸Dale C. Allison, “The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parallels,” *New Testament Studies* 28 (January 1982): 25.

¹⁹Wenham, *Paul*, 5.

²⁰Walter, “Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition.”

²¹See David B. Capes, who also highlights these two factors (*The Routledge Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus*, s.v. “Jesus Tradition in Paul,” 446).

²²*Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, s.v. “Sayings of Jesus,” by Seyoon Kim, 484.

²³Dunn indicates the following verses as indicative of Paul’s personal interest in the historical Jesus: Rom 6:17; 8:15–16; 2 Cor 8:9; 10:1; Gal 1:18; Phil 2:5 (James D. G. Dunn, “Jesus Tradition in Paul,” in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research*, ed. Bruce David Chilton and Craig Alan Evans [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 168).

apostolic task required preaching about a recently crucified Messiah (Matt 28:18–20). Would it be possible to preach about the risen Christ without also developing the life and teaching of this Messiah? Martin Hengel ably argues this point as well:

The assertion that Paul and earliest Greek-speaking Christianity were completely uninterested in the historical Jesus and knew hardly anything of him can be refuted by the simple consideration that in antiquity it was quite impossible to proclaim as Kyrios, Son of God and Redeemer a man who had been crucified a few years before—i.e. an alleged criminal—without saying something about who this man was, what he taught and did and how and why he died.²⁴

Dunn argues along the same lines from a sociological perspective, indicating that it is most probable that the early church was dependent on the core teachings to distinguish their new group from other religious groups. The content of this core teaching must have centered on Jesus, and, as Dunn notes, “It would be surprising if early congregations who placed themselves under the name of Christ were not concerned to learn and cherish what was known about this Christ, to rehearse it in their communal gatherings for worship, to draw on it in instruction of new converts, and to use it in discussion with those outside the group.”²⁵ How then could Paul operate as a Christian missionary if he did not have a basic understanding of what Jesus said and did?²⁶

In light of the above, to argue that Paul was uninterested bears the burden of proof and, in this case, requires substantial evidence. Nevertheless, Wilson makes the surprising claim that “few would now deny that Paul’s interest in the person and teaching of Jesus is minimal.”²⁷ What significant proof is marshalled in favor of such a position? One historically significant reason given in favor of Paul’s disinterest is grounded in Paul’s presumed distinction between the earthly Jesus and the exalted Christ. Bultmann’s comments on 2 Corinthians 5:16 provide a brief window to such a view: “For Paul, Christ has lost his iden-

²⁴Martin Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), 178, n. 73. See also Dunn, who says, “It must surely be considered highly likely that the first Christian communities were interested in, not to say highly fascinated by the figure of Jesus” (Dunn, “Jesus Tradition in Paul,” 156).

²⁵Dunn further makes the case that the textual evidence in Paul’s epistles give ample evidence that Paul communicated such foundational tradition (1 Thess 4:1; 2 Thess 3:6; 1 Cor 11:2; 15:3; Col 2:6; Dunn, “Jesus Tradition in Paul,” 157).

²⁶“A basic stock of traditions about Jesus and his teachings would have been a prerequisite for any missionary seeking to compete with the elaborate lore of pagan cultic religions” (Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13*, The Library of New Testament Studies 59 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991], 65).

²⁷Wilson, “From Jesus to Paul: The Contours and Consequences of a Debate,” 6–7.

tity as an individual human person. He knows him no longer ‘after the flesh’ (2 Cor 5:16). Instead, Jesus has become a cosmic figure, a body to which all belong who have been joined to him through faith and baptism.”²⁸ Few, if any, modern critical scholars find Bultmann’s exegesis of this passage convincing,²⁹ nor have many modern interpreters followed his broader dichotomy between the earthly Jesus and the exalted Lord.

Bultmann’s earthly/exalted dichotomy provided the most stable basis for the position that Paul did not care about the historical Jesus. If this is rejected, as it should be, then the case for Paul’s willful ignorance is severely crippled.³⁰ Of course, another reason to argue that Paul cared little about the Jesus Tradition highlights Paul’s infrequent references to it. This is a serious issue, which we will thoroughly address below. For now, it is enough to say that there are numerous explanations for why Paul infrequently directly references the Jesus Tradition that do not indicate his lack of interest in it.

Paul’s Access to the Jesus Tradition

If we cannot credibly maintain that Paul lacked interest in the Jesus Tradition, then perhaps one could argue that he was simply ignorant of it. Nevertheless, there are very good reasons to believe Paul knew the traditions concerning the life and teaching of Jesus. Of course primary among such reasons is the historical fact that Paul met the glorified Jesus on the Road to Damascus (Acts 9). Without such a meeting, Paul’s insistence that he received the Gospel “by revelation from Jesus Christ” makes no sense (Gal 1:12). As we will note below, the apostles confirmed this message, indicating that it was consistent with the traditions about Jesus being spread by the other apostles.

Second, it is not implausible that Paul met Jesus during Jesus’s earthly ministry. While most modern scholars reject such a meeting, Stanley Porter has challenged this perspective in his recent work, *When Paul Met Jesus*. The book is designed to show that a meeting between Paul and Jesus is both historically and exegetically plausible.³¹ If this is

²⁸Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era* (Fortress Press, 1965), 193.

²⁹Walter speaks of a “widespread agreement today that such disinterest cannot be inferred from 2 Cor 5:16” (Nikolaus Walter, “Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition,” in *Paul and Jesus*, ed. A. J. M. Wedderburn [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], 60; cf. David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1999), 282; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Text Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005], 427–28.).

³⁰For a defense of the unity of the historical and exalted Jesus in Paul, see Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 2:37–45.

³¹Stanley E. Porter, *When Paul Met Jesus: How an Idea Got Lost in History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

accurate, Paul would have had direct access to Jesus's historical teaching.

Third, Paul was a persecutor of the church (Acts 9:13; Gal 1:11–14; Phil 3:6). Accordingly, would it be possible for him to be ignorant of what the church was teaching? Paul ascribes his persecution of the church to his zeal (Gal 1:14), but if so, how did he become zealous except by hearing the testimony of the early church, which at such an early stage must have preached the traditions concerning Jesus's life and teaching? Even if Paul did not hear about the words and works of Jesus prior to the resurrection, it is hard to believe he persecuted the church without coming to know its teaching. Some degree of confirmation that Paul knew the Jesus Tradition at this early date may be gained by considering the account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9. Paul did not need an extended treatise on who Jesus was and what he taught; rather Paul only needed to hear that the historical Jesus was in fact the Christ (Acts 9:5). This suggests that Paul already knew the basic elements of the Jesus Tradition. Paul's three days of waiting (9:9) were presumably for him to connect the teaching he had heard from those he persecuted to his knowledge of his sacred Scriptures (though subsequent visionary experiences were also possible). Subsequently, Luke indicates that Paul "immediately began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God" (9:20). This text suggests that Paul already knew at least the narrative of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection as well as the fundamental teachings of the church.

Fourth, Paul's connection to early Christian churches leads one to believe he had significant access to the Jesus Tradition. After his conversion, he spent some time in Damascus, presumably not only speaking of his experience, but learning from other believers.³² In Antioch, where he spent at least a year, Paul would have joined together with Christians expelled from Jerusalem (Acts 11:19), who would have brought the traditions concerning Jesus with them. Further, Antioch is not a great distance from Jerusalem, and thus "the city's proximity to Palestine and importance as a major centre of trade and travel ensured a flow of Christians bearing further traditions about Jesus."³³ More broadly, the very nature of travel and trade in Roman times would have provided opportunity for believers to share the Jesus Tradition with one another, and since Paul's churches were generally planted in larger, trade-centered cities, such traditions would have made their way to Paul.³⁴

³²"There is no reason to doubt that sharing his own story with fellow Christians in Damascus he listened to theirs as well, joining in their worship, and soaking up traditions conveyed through exhortation and eucharist" (Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 65).

³³Ibid.

³⁴It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the way the Jesus Tradition was handled in the early church. The following resources suggest that the early church was interconnected and that the Jesus Tradition was preserved through eyewitnesses. The

Fifth, though Paul affirms his independence as an apostle of Christ (Gal 1:1), this did not prevent his interaction with the Jerusalem church and its leaders. As Stuhlmaker has rightly noted, "Paul, from his appointment as apostle until his delivery to Rome, was constantly in touch with the chief witnesses of Jesus' tradition in Jerusalem and Antioch."³⁵ Paul spent 15 days with Peter "getting acquainted," which must have included discussion about the ministry and teaching of Jesus (Gal 1:18). At the same time, Paul met James, "the Lord's brother." On another visit, Paul met with Peter, James, and John, recounting his message and receiving approval from the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:6–9). It is hard to believe the Jerusalem apostles would approve a message of one who lacked knowledge of Jesus's teaching and life. When one adds Paul's significant relationships to Jerusalem envoys—Barnabas, John Mark, and Silvanus—it becomes even more difficult to sustain the position that Paul did not have access to Jesus Tradition.

Sixth, Paul does cite Jesus words, even if the number of citations is less than modern readers might expect. Further, his citations sometimes refer to more obscure sayings (e.g., 1 Tim 5:18; Acts 20:35), suggesting he had access to other traditions as well.

In light of the above argumentation, Stuhlmaker is correct when he says, "It is almost impossible that the apostle had no knowledge of the Jesus tradition."³⁶ Since Paul had interest in and had access to Jesus Tradition, why does he cite it with such infrequency? What does the lack of citation indicate about Paul's view of Jesus? The next section will address these questions.

THE PAUCITY OF PAUL'S REFERENCES TO THE JESUS TRADITION

Not everyone agrees that Paul has few citations to the Jesus Tradition. For instance, Alfred Resch is clearly the maximalist in this regard, claiming to have found over a thousand references to Jesus's teaching in

combination of these facts suggests that the early churches would have had access to much if not all of the traditions presently preserved in the Gospels (Michael Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 49–70; Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017]).

³⁵Translated from "Paulus von seiner Berufung zum Apostel an bis zu seiner Überbringung nach Rom (Apg 27,lff) ständig mit den Hauptzeugen und -tradenten der jesusüberlieferung in Jerusalem und Antiochien in Verbindung stand" (Peter Stuhlmacher, "Jesus Tradition Im Römerbrief, Eine Skizze," *Theologische Beiträge* 14 [1983]: 241).

³⁶Translated from "Ist es so gut wie ausgeschlossen, daß der Apostel von der in Jerusalem und vom Stephanuskreis hochgehaltenen Jesusüberlieferung keine Kenntnis gehabt hat; das Gegenteil ist viel wahrscheinlicher!" (ibid).

the thirteen letters of Paul.³⁷ Furnish voiced the agreed scholarly opinion on such a fantastic number, when he noted that Resch “proved that, with imagination and patience, the possibilities can be multiplied like loaves and fishes.”³⁸ Furnish himself suggests that less than a dozen references to the Jesus Tradition are convincing,³⁹ while others have argued that the number may be four or even fewer.⁴⁰ Such wide disagreement is what provoked Thompson to produce more careful criteria to discern when a citation, allusion, or echo from the Jesus Tradition is present in Paul’s writings.⁴¹ But even still, disagreement abounds, for nearly all scholars recognize that discerning allusions is inescapably fraught with elements of subjectivity.⁴²

For the sake of this study, it is not important to determine the precise number of allusions.⁴³ It is enough to recognize that most present scholars, whether conservative or not, recognize relatively few in light of the abundance of Pauline literature. Such a lack becomes more acute in light of Paul’s frequent citation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the broader tendency displayed in Jewish works to cite the words of one’s teacher.

The Breadth of the Issue

Before addressing the reasons for Paul’s paucity of references to Jesus’s words, it is helpful to recognize the true breadth of the issue in the NT. Paul is not alone in his infrequent direct use of the words of Jesus, for the same criticisms applied to Paul’s literature can apply to each of the New Testament authors. Thompson is correct to note that despite the fact that “the general lack of appeal to [Jesus Tradition] in early Christian writings is no secret...surprisingly few have seen its significance for the Jesus-Paul debate.”⁴⁴

There are good reasons to believe Paul’s lack of Jesus Tradition material is less striking than that of his epistolary counterparts. For example, despite having written the Gospel of Luke, the author of Acts infrequently cites from Jesus’s words, even in the record of early preaching. One significant exception is recorded in Paul’s farewell speech to

³⁷Alfred Resch, *Der Paulinismus Und Die Logia Jesus*. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1904).

³⁸Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 59.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Walter, “Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition,” 54.

⁴¹Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 28–36.

⁴²Kim, “Sayings of Jesus,” 483; Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 31.

⁴³For a summary of the most recent work, see Hiestermann, “Paul’s Use of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition.”

⁴⁴Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 62.

the Ephesian elders, where he calls the elders to “μνημονεύειν τε τῶν λόγων τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ” (“remember the words of the Lord Jesus”) and then cites a specific saying (Acts 20: 35). Further, if church history is correct in identifying the author of the Gospel of John as the author of 1 John, it is surely surprising that he does not cite from Jesus’s sayings. Thus, we find two authors of a Gospel who clearly know the sayings of Christ, and yet do not regularly cite them or provide abundant, clear allusions to them.⁴⁵

We should also consider the letters of James and First Peter. As for the former, many have recognized the impact of Jesus’s teaching on James’s letter.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, direct citation is absent. If the author is the half-brother of Jesus, as church history testifies, then the lack of citation is striking.⁴⁷ First Peter, likewise, falls short of modern expectations in this regard.⁴⁸ Thompson points out that when the apostle Peter is recognized as the author of the text, then “the dearth of direct reference to JT has immediate implications for our study of Paul: one could hardly expect more from a man who had never met the earthly Jesus.”⁴⁹

In response to an argument like the one made above, Wilson notes that even if someone proved that Paul cites the Jesus Tradition like other authors, such an argument “would merely broaden the dilemma rather than solve it.”⁵⁰ But the value of the observation is not that it

⁴⁵Kim has made reference to this same point: “Luke in Acts hardly ever refers to the Jesus traditions of his Gospel, and 1 John contains few references to the traditions found in the Gospel of John” (Kim, “Sayings of Jesus,” 488.).

⁴⁶Dean B. Deppe, “The Sayings of Jesus in the Paraenesis of James” (Ph.D. dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Te Amsterdam, 1990); W. H. Wachob and L. T. Johnson, “The Sayings of Jesus in the Letter of James,” in *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (Leiden: Brill, 2002); Alicia J. Batten, “The Jesus Tradition and the Letter of James,” *Review & Expositor* 108 (Summer 2011): 381–390; Patrick Hartin, *James and the “Q” Sayings of Jesus* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁴⁷Moo is representative of those who make a strong case for the historical claim to James, the brother of Jesus as the author (Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2000], 9–22).

⁴⁸The significant debate between Gundry and Best concerning the role of Jesus’s words in First Peter was only possible because that epistle only indirectly references the Jesus Tradition (Robert H. Gundry, “Further Verba on ‘Verba Christi’ in First Peter,” *Biblica* 55 (1974): 211–32; Robert H. Gundry, “‘Verba Christi’ in I Peter: Their Implications Concerning the Authorship of I Peter and the Authenticity of the Gospel Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 13 [July 1967]: 336–50; Ernest Best, “I Peter and the Gospel Tradition,” *New Testament Studies* 16 [January 1970]: 95–113).

⁴⁹He also notes the implications that would apply even for those who do not accept authentic Petrine authorship: “If on the other hand the letter is late, it comes from a community (Rome; 1 Pet. 5.13) which presumably knew the Gospel of Mark and perhaps the Gospel of Luke. In either case, the failure to quote Jesus could not possibly stem from ignorance of the tradition” (Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 40).

⁵⁰Wilson, “From Jesus to Paul: The Contours and Consequences of a Debate,” 19.

solves the problem; rather, it puts the problem in perspective. Stated differently, we should not expect Paul to be vastly different than the other NT authors.⁵¹ Further, the breadth of the issue indicates that the best solutions should indicate not only why Paul treats the Jesus Tradition the way he does but should also provide clues as to why all of the NT authors treat the Jesus Tradition similarly.

Recognizing the broadness of the problem also blunts the edges to some criticisms of Paul in his treatment of the tradition. For instance, consider Schweitzer's criticism of Paul: "If we had been dependent on him for our knowledge, we should not have known that Jesus spoke in parables, preached the Sermon on the Mount, or taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer."⁵² And yet if we replaced "him" with "them" in reference to all non-Gospel New Testament works, a very similar criticism can be leveled.

In light of the above, I agree with Kim: "The only viable solution seems to be one that starts by noticing that Paul's attitude to Jesus tradition is exactly in line with the general phenomenon observable in the NT writings outside the Gospels."⁵³ Further, I believe such considerations should influence what is accepted as reasons for the way Paul uses the Jesus Tradition. Namely, priority should be given to explanations that illuminate the broader pattern.

Proposed Solutions to the Problem

Since this is not a new problem, it is not surprising that answers have been provided to account for Paul's paucity of reference to the Jesus Tradition in his epistles. In this section of the paper, we will examine these reasons, considering the strengths of each.

The Role of Paul's Initial Teaching

One way to explain Paul's lack of broader engagement with the Jesus Tradition in his epistles is by recognizing that Paul would have already grounded his readers in such tradition in person. Such an argument aligns with our previous considerations, which highlighted the necessity of teaching about the person, work, and instruction of the recently crucified and resurrected Messiah. Dunn finds exegetical evidence for Paul's initial handing down of Jesus Tradition in 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 11:2; 15:3; and Colossians 2:6, which show that "Paul saw it as part of his own responsibility in founding a church to bequeath it with the traditions which

⁵¹"If other early Christian writers only rarely cite the teachings and example of Jesus, we should not expect to see something radically different in Paul" (Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 37).

⁵²As quoted in Porter, *When Paul Met Jesus*, 126.

⁵³Kim, "Sayings of Jesus," 488.

belonged to the new movement.”⁵⁴ And since we have already argued that Paul would have both been interested in and had access to the Jesus Tradition, it would be astonishing if he had not passed this tradition on to his converts.

Dunn makes the further argument that these congregations embraced, rehearsed, and saturated themselves with such teaching so that when Paul wrote to them, he did not have to cite the dominical tradition. Instead, mere echoes to the teaching were sufficient and were actually preferred over direct reference. This is because

in communities bonded by such common experience and language there is a whole level of discourse which consists of allusion and echo. It is the very fact that allusions are sufficient for much effective communication which provides and strengthens the bond; recognition of the allusion/echo is what attests effective membership of the group.⁵⁵

In light of this sociological observation, Dunn believes “what we find in the Pauline paraenesis in terms of echoes of/allusions to the Jesus tradition is just what we would expect. It would be surprising were it otherwise.”⁵⁶ If accepted as the reason—or even one of the reasons—for the apparent paucity of reference to the Jesus Tradition, then the standard of measure for recognizing an allusion should be adjusted in light of the ability of a “slight” echo of Jesus’s teaching to result in the audience’s recognition of the indirect reference.

One potential weakness to this argument concerns the book of Romans, which was written to a congregation that Paul had not visited. One might expect more direct citation of Jesus Tradition in this book, since Paul is introducing himself to many of the readers for the first time. It should be recognized, however, that Paul is writing to a church, and therefore to a congregation that had already been grounded in the Jesus Tradition. Therefore, Paul may be alluding to common tradition even there.

Another potential weakness concerns Paul’s preaching in Acts. In these sermons, Paul does not directly appeal to Jesus’s teachings (e.g., Acts 13:16–41; 17:22–35). Nevertheless, the presentation of speeches is clearly not exhaustive; rather, Acts appears to assume much and focus on what is uniquely presented in each speech. Thus, the Jesus material, already presented in the preceding Gospel, did not need explicit development in Acts.

On the whole, the assumption that Paul’s audience had already been grounded in Jesus Tradition is reasonable. It is hard to believe Paul would have failed to teach it, and to believe that Paul’s audience would not have inquired about it. Further, Dunn’s proposals on the

⁵⁴He specifically highlights Paul’s uses of παραδίδωμι and παραλαμβάνω (Dunn, “Jesus Tradition in Paul,” 157).

⁵⁵Ibid., 177.

⁵⁶Ibid.

bonding element of the Jesus Tradition and the way it impacted Paul's epistolary presentation is possible, though ultimately unprovable. We will now turn to some other proposed solutions to see if the case can be strengthened.

The Limitations of Epistolary Literature

Some have appealed to the nature of epistolary literature to explain the paucity of Paul's references to the Jesus Tradition. Allison even suggests a connection with the previous argument when he says that in the epistles "Paul merely refers to the Jesus tradition; he never hands it down. There is a fundamental difference. Tradition was something given during the period when the apostle himself was present with the community." He later notes the contrast: "The epistles, however, presuppose another *Sitz im Leben*. Their context is not initiation into tradition but subsequent affairs."⁵⁷ Paul's purposes in his letters is nearly always occasional, addressing specific problems among the congregations. Even his more general works are topical, addressing certain issues he believes will be useful to the specific church or churches he addresses.⁵⁸

Despite recognizing the occasional nature of Paul's letters, Wedderburn argues that Paul could have addressed many topics in his epistles from the stock of Jesus Tradition. Wedderburn highlights the following examples: when speaking about "virgins" in 1 Corinthians 7:25–28, Paul could have referred to the teaching preserved in Matthew 19:10–12; when Paul taches on government in Romans 13:1–7, he does not reference Jesus's teaching on the subject (e.g., Mark 12:17); more significantly, when dealing with the topic of food purity, Paul does not clearly reference Jesus's teaching on the subject (e.g., Mark 7:15).⁵⁹ And while Kim has responded individually to each of the Wedderburn's passages, Kim's conclusion that "the instances are all naturally understandable" appears overstated.⁶⁰

Some have suggested that the problem is not chiefly with occasional epistolary literature, but rather that the Gospel genre uniquely com-

⁵⁷Like Dunn, Allison sees significance in Paul's use of *παράδιδωμι*, specifically the use of the aorist in 1 Corinthians 11:23 and 15:3, which he says indicates an event that has already past. But while time *may* be implied by tense, the focus of tense forms is aspect. This is not to suggest that Allison's position is wrong, it is merely to indicate that highlighting the aorist case is far from proving his point (Allison, "Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels," 21–22).

⁵⁸Thompson argues similarly: "It was not the authors' purpose to convey a body of traditional material but to address specific problems or to make a point not requiring the use of the tradition (e.g. Hebrews)" (Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 63).

⁵⁹A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Paul and Jesus: Similarity and Continuity," in *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 37 (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1989), 117–18, n. 1.

⁶⁰Kim, "Sayings of Jesus," 488.

municated Jesus Tradition discourse in the early church. For instance, Bird suggests that the paucity of citations in early Christian literature is due partly to "the effect of the production of the Gospels on normalizing the Jesus tradition and perhaps gradually eclipsing any continued oral tradition."⁶¹ Because of the early date of most of Paul's epistles, scholars doubt the Jesus Tradition had been codified into the written Gospels when Paul wrote. Nevertheless, the early oral tradition itself could have taken on a relatively fixed, sacred form.⁶² Kim believes it is possible that "the early church treated Jesus tradition separately as a unique and sacred tradition," and thus may be "the fundamental reason why in Paul's letters, as well as in other NT writings outside the Gospels, the references are fewer in number and more allusive in nature than we might expect."⁶³

Such an argument is attractive because it explains why Paul as well as the other NT authors do not frequently cite the Jesus Tradition. Nevertheless, the argument is weakened in that some of the Jesus Tradition is cited. Is there something special about the citations used that make them able to be abstracted from the Gospel form, while other teachings are not as easily isolated for use?

The Significance of the Acts of Jesus over the Words of Jesus

Some have attributed the lack of extensive use of the Jesus Tradition to the epoch changing event of the resurrection. Thompson eloquently represents this view:

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the eschaton, thus eclipsing in significance all of his words and deeds leading up to the passion. Why should Paul point to an act of love, humility, or compassion during Jesus' ministry when he could cite his example of total commitment on the cross? Why should he cite a healing act of power, when he could refer to the resurrection? Everything Jesus said and did before his death and vindication paled in significance by comparison to the Christ-Event.⁶⁴

According to this perspective, the words and acts of the preglorified Christ are not unimportant, but they are relativized by the significance of the central act of redemption, which is a mountain peak in redemptive world history.

Looked at from another angle, the words of Jesus, though exceed-

⁶¹Michael F. Bird, "The Purpose and Preservation of the Jesus Tradition: Moderate Evidence for a Conserving Force in Its Transmission," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 15 (2005): 164.

⁶²"The Jesus tradition had an integrity or identity of its own and circulated in small blocks which laid claim to embody sayings of Jesus" (Allison, "Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels," 23).

⁶³Kim, "Sayings of Jesus," 489.

⁶⁴Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 73.

ingly significant (Matt 28:18–20), are often overshadowed in early church teaching by the acts of Jesus, which were preached in the early church as the fulfillment of the sacred Scriptures. The book of Hebrews seems to support this position. In the introduction, the writer of Hebrews favorably compares Jesus to the Jewish prophets, noting that in this new epoch God speaks “by His Son” (1:2). Nevertheless, Hebrews never quotes the earthly words of Jesus;⁶⁵ rather the book highlights how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures. Thus, God’s “speaking” through the Son is not primarily communicated via Jesus’s words, but through Jesus’s actions. Similarly, Paul’s sermon to the Jews in Antioch (Acts 13:16–41) does not focus on the historic words of the Lord, but rather the way Jesus’s life fulfilled the promise of God (13:23, 32) and brought to completion what was written (v. 29).

The Shift in Redemptive-Historical Context

Goppelt also believed the epoch-changing nature of the resurrection influences the way Paul and other NT authors interact with the traditions about Jesus. He notes that “the general silence of the epistolary literature receives substantive explanation when one observes that the ministry of the earthly Jesus was tied strictly to its particular eschatological situation.”⁶⁶ But when Jesus died, his ministry “could not be appropriated into the situation of the community that, regardless of various interpretive directions, took as its starting point the Easter event.”⁶⁷ In other words, “The instructions of the earthly Jesus could not be appropriated by Paul into his proclamation directly. They had to be transposed into a not only historically but also salvation-historically different situation!”⁶⁸

Such a transposition of Jesus’s teaching, it is suggested, resulted in a noted lack of direct citation, though it maintained a continuity in theological direction. Therefore, if one looks merely to the citations of Jesus’s words, one may believe Paul is uninterested or ignorant of the Jesus Tradition. But if one is willing to consider that Paul (and other early Christian authors) historically appropriated the Jesus Tradition for the new historical and redemptive situation of his readers, one will find that Jesus’s historic teachings are foundational to Paul’s writings and theology. Thus, Goppelt concludes, “The posture of Paul toward the Jesus tradition can therefore receive adequate resolution only by a study of the degree to which Pauline statements issued forth from such a transformation of the Jesus tradition.”⁶⁹

⁶⁵While it is possible that Hebrews quotes from the tradition of Jesus’s sayings that were not recorded in the Synoptics, the lack of Synoptic quotations leans against this view.

⁶⁶Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:45.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 2:46.

⁶⁹In Goppelt’s opinion, such a study reveals that “the Jesus tradition reworked in

In sum, many have found historical reasons to suggest that the changing climate (dispensationally, politically, sociologically, redemptively, etc.) is responsible for the way the Jesus Tradition is handled by Paul and other early Christian authors. Instead of direct citation, the authors can assume the knowledge of such tradition and seek to build upon that tradition in a different and new context.

Paul's Apostolic Authority

Another reason for the paucity of reference may reside in Paul's identity as an apostle. That is, as an apostle, Paul found little need to refer directly to the Jesus Tradition: "Like other apostles, Paul spoke with the assurance that his message had the guidance and authority of Christ's Spirit."⁷⁰ This would also explain why other early Christian authors felt no need to cite the Jesus Tradition directly, and it appears consistent with the way Paul and the early church viewed the apostolic position (Gal 1:1, 16; Eph 2:20) and the significance placed on communication through the Spirit (Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10). For these reasons, Paul could say to the Thessalonian church, "You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus."⁷¹

Some scholars have even suggested that Paul's lack of engagement with the Jesus Tradition was designed to highlight his apostolic authority. It is possible that, in some limited contexts, Paul refrained from such citation because it would indicate his reliance on the Jerusalem apostles, for they were the original transmitters of that tradition.⁷² By focusing on what the Lord revealed to him (Gal 1:16), Paul showed that his apostleship did not come from men but from God (1:1).⁷³

When considered in light of what we have said above, this explanation becomes more persuasive. The new context Paul was required to

this manner stood behind Pauline theology to an extent rarely recognized until now" (ibid.). Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this article to pursue the connections between Paul's theological formulations and Jesus's teachings. Others have done this, and they suggest that even if language is modified or emphasized differently, the core elements of Paul's teaching and Jesus's teaching are compatible (Dunn, "Jesus Tradition in Paul"; Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels*).

⁷⁰Thompson, *Clothed with Christ*, 71.

⁷¹The NIV rendering helpfully captures the role of authority which is implied in the Greek text: οἴδατε γὰρ τίνας παραγγελίας ἐδόκαμεν ὑμῖν διὰ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ.

⁷²Ibid., 73–76.

⁷³Wedderburn's thesis is tangentially related and should be considered, even if only in a footnote. He suggests that the paucity of Paul's citations to the Jesus Tradition may be explained by the historical circumstance that "the teaching of Jesus was largely, at that time and in Paul's eyes, 'in enemy hands' in the sense that it was being used in a legalistic way by his Judaizing opponents." Wedderburn has been often cited for his view, but scholars have not found his position persuasive, for while it may explain some passages (e.g., Galatians), it does not explain the lack of engagement in non-polemical contexts (A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Paul and Jesus: The Problem of Continuity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 [1985]: 190).

address was different from the context Jesus addressed. Since Jesus spoke through Paul, it was not necessary for Paul to continually find a saying of Jesus to cite; instead, Paul addressed the issues with direct apostolic authority. When the words of the Lord spoken during the earthly ministry were pertinent, Paul alluded to them, but when there was not a saying pertinent to the situation, Paul spoke directly to the issue with apostolic authority. This can be seen in 1 Corinthians 7:10–12, where Paul distinguishes his own commands from the commands of Jesus. In doing so, Paul is not suggesting his authority is less than Jesus's authority.⁷⁴ Instead, Paul is highlighting that there are certain things Jesus directly addressed prior to the ascension, and for these issues Paul can reference the teaching of Jesus (though, even here, he does not quote Jesus). Other matters, however, were not addressed by the pre-ascension teaching of Jesus, and therefore Paul must speak directly to them with the authority granted him by Jesus.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

In summary, many answers have been provided to the “problem” of Paul's relationship to the Jesus Tradition. In light of the above, it is best to see the confluence of various factors to account for the issue. In other words, it may not be helpful to seek a solitary explanation for the phenomenon. Sociologically, it is too incredible to believe that Paul would not have passed on Jesus Tradition to his churches when he first established them. Such teaching would have been precious to the church and would have been deeply inculcated by both Paul and his audience (through recitation, memorization, etc.). It is possible that such communal awareness favored allusiveness instead of direct citation, for the former strengthened the communal bond around the shared tradition.

Further, while there may not have been written Gospels when Paul's first letters were written, the format of Jesus Sayings were probably codified into a specific form, making reference to them more natural through indirect application than citation. Additionally, Paul and the other early Christian writers, wrote occasional epistles to churches already established in the Jesus Tradition, leading naturally to application of that known tradition and not requiring direct recitation of the tradition. Transfer of application was necessary, for the pre-resurrection

⁷⁴Though I would not agree with all of Richardson's interpretation of this passage, he rightly notes that in this text, “Paul assumes a kind of authority for himself—an apostolic authority” (Peter Richardson, “I Say, Not the Lord’: Personal Opinion, Apostolic Authority and the Development of Early Christian Halakah,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 [1980]: 85).

⁷⁵Taylor points to the context change in situation between Paul and Jesus in this text: “Jesus's instructions regarding divorce were directed toward those within Israel. Paul's Gentile mission surely resulted in a different kind of situation for many believers” (Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, New American Commentary [Nashville: B&H, 2014], 174).

teachings of Jesus did not always correlate directly to the new redemptive, ethnic, and sociological situation of the early church in Paul's day. And while some teaching would have been directly applicable, the focus of the epistles is often on the work of Jesus, for that was directly anticipated in the holy Scriptures and is the embodiment of God's eternal redemptive plan. In addition to all of this, Paul was an apostle, called directly by the Lord and given revelation from the Lord. What he spoke through the Spirit were the words of Jesus, for they came from the Spirit of Jesus.

Finally, we must keep in mind that the "problem" is broader than Paul, for others who we would think more likely to directly reference the traditions concerning Jesus do not do so frequently (Acts, James, 1 Peter, 1 John). And while we might expect Paul and others to directly cite the teaching of their Master, as other Jewish authors of their day cited their masters, Jesus is not like other masters. No other master was predicted in the Old Testament Scriptures and was the centerpiece of God's redemptive outworking. No other master was and is the spirit of prophecy (1 Pet 1:11).