

The Place of Jesus' Death Among First-Generation Believers in Christ:  
Evidence From Paul's Letters  
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**Prolegomena**

One of the ironies of studies of the earliest church is that they usually look askance at the evidence of our earliest documents, the authentic Pauline letters. Even though the earliest Gospel was written twice as long after the death of Jesus as the earliest Pauline letters, interpreters commonly mine those later documents for the views of the first believers and assert that Paul's letters contain later developments. Even when they find earlier traditions embedded within these letters, these are often said to be later products of the church's reflection or distorted by Paul. Clearly, Paul gives his own take to many elements of the tradition, but (as we will see) he also claims to rely on and be consistent with the faith that existed before he joined the church.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one of the first things we must do to give proper weight to the Pauline evidence is to give full recognition to the short time that seems to have elapsed between Jesus' death and Paul's Damascus experience. Though all chronologies of Paul's life are problematic, his timetable in Galatians 1-2 allows little time between those two events. If Paul's account indicates that the Jerusalem Conference occurred 17 years after his entrance into the church, it means that Paul must have joined the believers no more than three years after Jesus' death.<sup>2</sup> In that brief period he came to know enough about the church and its teaching to think it posed a serious danger to the Jewish community. So they had developed a body of teachings and/or practices that he thought needed to be eradicated to preserve the integrity of Judaism. Since these beliefs and practices developed before Paul joined the church, the basic tenets and assertions obviously developed very quickly—even as the church would continue to elaborate and explicate those basic claims.

We must also acknowledge afresh that Paul did not create Christian doctrine *ex nihilo*; rather, he joined a community that already affirmed certain things about Jesus—things he had formerly found objectionable. His turn to join this community of faith required him to accept at least the basic affirmations about and interpretations of Jesus that this group proclaimed, including its understanding of the meaning of Jesus' death. Still, it is clear that he reflects on that tradition and finds new ways to express it in thought and life. But this does not necessarily mean that he moves in radically new directions. Both the romantic view of Paul as the Lone Ranger of truth among those who

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<sup>1</sup> Part of the impetus for this move to seek alternative types of adherents to Jesus seems to be a kind of primitivist inclination, that is, the idea that if an idea or perspective existed in the earliest time after the death of Jesus that shows that it has some kind of validity not only for the first century but also today.

<sup>2</sup> This calculation assumes that the Council took place no later than 51 and the crucifixion no earlier than 30. If the Council was a year earlier and the crucifixion as late as 33, the church was in existence for only a few months before Paul joined the movement. So the estimate of three years seems to be a maximum, unless one understands the Galatian text to suggest that the total amount of time between Paul's experience and his second trip to Jerusalem was only 14 years.

would pervert the gospel and that which sees him as the demonic deifier of the simple yet profound teacher, the Man from Nazareth, lose sight of the way he was anchored in the thought of the broader church. We see this not least in his work as a missionary of the Antioch church. That congregation and its leaders have enough confidence in him and the coherence of his theology with theirs that they sponsor him as a junior partner of Barnabas on a mission tour. We have no indication that his eventual break with that congregation caused him to reassess all the understandings of Jesus he had garnered while there. In fact, his later references to Barnabas (e.g., 1 Cor 9) suggest that his beliefs remained mostly consistent with what he participated in and learned at Antioch.<sup>3</sup> (And apparently, the Antioch church assumed that the faith of the believers in Damascus was close enough to theirs that they were willing to recruit Paul in the first place.) So too does Paul's desire to maintain relations with the Jerusalem church indicate that he believes he maintains a significant consistency with their understanding of the new faith.

This does not, of course, cast doubt on the existence of diversity among believers in Christ in the early church. As we will see below, there were significant differences that involved crucial issues about the shape of the community, the proper ways to express faith in Christ, and models of leadership. These differences were deep and of theological importance. But when parties invest such energy in defending their understanding of a community, it indicates that they also share significant elements that neither party questions. A central question of this SBL working group is whether part of that shared material includes substantive attention to and interpretation of the death of Jesus.

#### **Evidence for the Views of Other Believers in Paul's letters**

At least two kinds of evidence appear in Paul's letters that allow us to see how others in the church approached the faith and what they found to be important. Paul's opposition to some beliefs that members of his churches adopt or are thinking about accepting point us to some of the diversity that existed within the early church. As we will note, some of this diversity springs from within the churches he founded and some comes to those cells of believers from outside. Some differences Paul finds compatible with the gospel, others he rejects vigorously. But each difference provides some glimpse of the diversity within the churches.

The second source of information from which we may glean information about others in the church derives from the places Paul cites traditions known within and beyond his churches. These traditional formulations provide evidence for the beliefs of the church both contemporaneous with Paul and those formulated prior to his joining the movement. We will begin our search for beliefs and practices of others within the church by looking at beliefs Paul opposes in his letters.

#### **Those Opposed and Otherwise Described by Paul**

I have given attention to those Paul opposes in his letters elsewhere and so will not repeat all the arguments I have marshaled in those places for the views of them I

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, if Acts is reliable in locating Barnabas as a member of the Jerusalem community before going to Antioch (and Luke thinks this is at least plausible to his readers), it secures important ties between the theology of the Antioch church and that of the original church in Jerusalem.

express here.<sup>4</sup> I will note views of others that may bear on our topic here and give some reasons for not adopting those views. I will begin with Paul's earliest letter and move through the collection in something resembling chronological order.<sup>5</sup>

### *1 Thessalonians*

Some interpreters think Paul opposes Pneumatics in 1 Thessalonians. Jewett and Harnisch add that these teachers claim this superior measure of possession of the Spirit because of their overrealized eschatology, which also leads them to be antinomians.<sup>6</sup> Donfried and Lambrecht find no doctrinal controversy, but only personal attacks against Paul.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the largest number of interpreters finds no intruding group of teachers, but only a controversy aroused because some in the church have quit their jobs to simply await the imminent parousia.<sup>8</sup> None of these hypotheses envisions a controversy that involves questions about the centrality of the death of Jesus. Neither its importance nor its meaning is a topic of discussion. When the subject comes up, it is only spoken of in passing (2:15) or to support another point (4:14). Thus knowledge of it is assumed and Jesus' death and resurrection serve as the paradigm for the way God will deal with those who die before the parousia (4:14). There is no evidence for any controversy about the meaning of the death of Jesus, but Paul does explicate its meaning so that it addresses concerns the readers have about those who have died.

### *1 Corinthians*

First Corinthians is testimony to the difficulty believers had integrating their new beliefs into their communal and social lives. This letter serves as the foundation of

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<sup>4</sup> See my *Servants of Satan, False Brothers, and Other Opponents of Paul*, JSNTSS 188 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) and "Studying Paul's Opponents: Advances and Challenges," pp. 7-58 in *Paul and His Opponents*, Pauline Studies 2 (ed. S. E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2005). I will draw heavily on these writings throughout this section of the paper.

<sup>5</sup> I will not treat Philemon here since Paul does not oppose any teaching or practice there.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Harnisch, *Eschatologische Existenz; Ein exegetischer Beitrag zum Sachanliegen von 1 Thessalonicher 4:13-5:11* (FRLANT 110; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1973), 27-37; Robert Jewett, *The Thessalonian Correspondence: Pauline Rhetoric and Millinarian Piety* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 94-106.

<sup>7</sup> Karl P. Donfried, "The Cults of Thessalonica and the Thessalonian Correspondence," *NTS* 31 (1985): 350-351; Jan Lambrecht, "Thanksgivings in 1 Thessalonians 1-3," in *The Thessalonian Correspondence* (ed. R. Collins, BETL 87; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990) 200.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Beda Rigaux, *Saint Paul Les Epitres aux Thessaloniens* (EB; Paris: Gabalda, 1956) 59; Charles Masson, *Les Deux Epitres de Saint Paul aux Thessaloniens* (Neuchatel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1957) 32; Abraham Malherbe, "'Gentle as a Nurse': The Cynic Background to 1 Thessalonians 2," *NovT* 12 (1970): 203-17; Raymond F. Collins, "Paul as Seen Through His Own Eyes," in *Studies on the First Epistle to the Thessalonians* (BETL 66; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1984) 184; Sumney, *Servants of Satan*, 214-28.

Walter Schmithals' thesis that Gnostics are the opponents Paul faces in all his letters.<sup>9</sup> Most interpreters now recognize that Gnosticism did not developed into the kind of system or movement Schmithals presupposes in his work until some time in the second century. Yet there is some emphasis on acquiring wisdom and knowledge through the Spirit that some interpreters think has a connection with the wisdom traditions in Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>10</sup> Though some connections can be drawn between the outlook Paul opposes and some particulars of some strands of Jewish wisdom traditions, the evidence is insufficient to assert that teachers at Corinth want the congregation to adopt a dramatically different understanding of Christ. A number of interpreters follow F. C. Baur in finding teachers who demand that Gentile believers undergo circumcision and begin to observe the law as a condition for church membership or salvation. Barrett and Lüdemann (among others) argue that these teachers have some connection with the Jerusalem church.<sup>11</sup> Evidence for this hypothesis is limited to the mention of Cephas in 1:12; there is no discussion of whether Torah observance is necessary for Gentiles in the letter. Thus, this view rests primarily on the broader reconstruction that sees Torah observance for Gentiles as the primary issue Paul must confront everywhere throughout most of his ministry—a hypothesis that is not sustainable. Most interpreters, however, see the basic problem as one that involves a spirit of competitiveness among the Corinthians that expresses itself in various ways,<sup>12</sup> perhaps through their claims about possession of the Spirit that they say authorizes the various stances they take.

If there is some teaching of (later) Gnosticism or an attachment to wisdom thought, these theologies might (Gnosticism's certainly would) entail a Christology that is different from Paul's that would interpret the death of Jesus in ways Paul would find objectionable. But 1 Corinthians contains no refutation of an alternative Christology and no defense of a particular understanding of the death of Jesus. Indeed, as we will see when looking at traditions Paul quotes, he assumes that the Corinthian church agrees with

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<sup>9</sup> *Gnosticism in Corinth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); *Paul and the Gnostics*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972). He continues to hold this basic position in his more recent *The Theology of the First Christians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), a translation of his *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994)

<sup>10</sup> Birger A. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos-Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians*, (SBLDS 12; Missoula: SBL, 1973); Richard A. Horsley, "Gnosis in Corinth: 1 Cor. 8.1-6," *NTS* 27 (1979): 32-51; Gerhard Sellin, "Das 'Geheimnis' der Weisheit und das Rätsel der 'Christuspartei' (zu 1 Kor 1-4)," *ZNW* 73 (1982): 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> Gerd Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 69-80; C. K. Barrett, "Deuteropauline Ethics: Some Observations," p. 172 in *Theology and Ethics in Paul and His Interpreters; Essays in Honor of Victor Paul Furnish* (ed. Eugene Lovering and J. L. Sumney; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> This view follows Nils Dahl, "Paul and the Church at Corinth According to 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21," pp. 313-35 in *Christian History and Interpretation* (ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, R. Niebuhr; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967). See also Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 297-302.

the basic understanding of Jesus' death that Paul asserts is the view he was taught and that he taught them.

### *2 Corinthians*

However many letters an editor used to compose 2 Corinthians, interpreters are generally agreed that the situation they address has a basic continuity—at least they all address the same opponents. Following Baur, many interpreters have found opponents who demand Torah observance of Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> Given the absence of explicit attention to this matter (chapter 3 hardly constitutes a response to such teaching), this seems unlikely. Schmithals finds Gnostics here just as he does in 1 Corinthians. Georgi, however, finds traveling Hellenistic Jewish wonder-workers, divine men, as the opponents in this text.<sup>14</sup> The serious questions that have been raised about the prevalence of that sort of movement call this reconstruction into question.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, his connections between his reconstruction and the issues in 2 Corinthians are insufficient to support his thesis. He does, however, see clearly that the issues revolve around how God acts through those whom God commissions. The more likely view is that a group of traveling preachers has come to Corinth making claims about their possession of the Spirit that Paul finds unacceptable and incompatible with the gospel. They assert that the Spirit gives them a commanding presence, the power to perform mighty acts, and the right to be apostles. Furthermore, the Spirit authorizes them to tell of their powers and exercise them to make demands on the church. They also actively oppose Paul's apostleship.

Whichever view one takes of the opponents of 2 Corinthians, the only theological issues Paul discusses at length involve the proper understanding of apostleship and leadership in the church. The cross is an important element in Paul's argument, but he assumes the church already recognizes the cross as a central part of the church's message. He engages in no polemic against the other teachers' understanding of the centrality of Jesus' death and the implicit differences in their conceptions of it concern only how it should shape one's view of leadership in the community.<sup>16</sup>

### *Galatians*

Perhaps the most likely place to look for arguments about the meaning of Jesus' death is Galatians, where Paul is engaged in fierce polemic about the meaning of the gospel and even speaks of "another gospel." This letter clearly engages teachers who

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<sup>13</sup> C. K. Barrett, "Paul's Opponents in 2 Corinthians," *NTS* 17 (1971): 233-254; idem, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 28-36; Lüdemann, *Opposition to Paul*; Scott Hafemann, *Suffering and the spirit: an exegetical study of II Cor. 2:14-3:3 within the context of the Corinthian correspondence* (WUNT; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> See Carl Holladay, *Theios aner in Hellenistic-Judaism: a critique of the use of this category in New Testament Christology*, SBLDS 40 (Missoula: Scholars, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> Even if David Horrell is correct that Paul's mention of another Jesus in 11:4 signals that there is a controversy about Christology ("No Longer Jew or Greek"; Paul's Corporate Christology and the Construction of Christian Identity," Pp. 321-44, here pp. 331-32 in *Christology, Controversy and Community; New Testament Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (eds. David G. Horrell and Christopher M., Tuckett; NovTSup99; Leiden: Brill, 2000), he finds no disagreement about the importance of the death of Jesus.

want Gentiles to accept circumcision. Unfortunately, it is less clear why this is the case. Most interpreters think these teachers are believers in Christ who argue that Gentiles must convert to Judaism to be full members of the people of God or to be saved. Many think they are representative of the Jerusalem church or members of an anti-Pauline movement who oppose not only Paul's teaching about Torah observance for Gentiles but also reject his claim to be an apostle.<sup>17</sup> Some interpreters modify this view significantly, arguing that the matter of Torah observance is more about how Jews should receive Gentiles in the eschatological period than about whether they can be saved without circumcision.<sup>18</sup> Though Galatians contains much autobiographical material, it seems unlikely that the people who disturb this church attack Paul's apostleship because they seem to claim that he agrees with their position (5:11). Furthermore, Paul never takes up charges against his apostleship directly, as he does in 2 Corinthians when he knows it is being questioned.

The above hypotheses all assume that those Paul rejects are fellow believers in Christ. But some interpreters of Galatians argue that they are non-Christ-believing Jews who view these Gentile church members as possible candidates for full conversion to Judaism. According to this view, such Jews still consider the church to be fully within Judaism, so their interaction with its members is not surprising.<sup>19</sup> If the problem Galatians addresses comes from people who claim no attachment to Jesus, they obviously have a different view of his death than Paul or others within the church. Even so, they would not contribute to our present search because they claim no connection to Jesus. Thus they will not help us understand how adherents to Jesus understood his death.

Galatians, however, seems to assume that the opponents are believers in Christ. Paul apparently feels no need to argue that Christ's death imparts soteriological benefits on believers. He assumes all in his audience are convinced of this central matter. He does, on the other hand, set out dire soteriological consequences of Gentiles taking up Torah observance (they will be cut off from Christ; 5:2). Despite giving arguments that involve soteriology and proper behavior for believers, the importance of the death of Jesus is not an issue. Paul's arguments all assume that the readers, including those he

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<sup>17</sup> E.g., Ernest deWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) liv-lv; Pierre Bonnard, "L'Épître de Saint Paul aux Philippiens," *Commentaire du Nouveau Testament*, 10 (Paris: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950) 12-14. Franz Mussner thinks the opponents require Torah observance for salvation but does not think they are connected with Jerusalem (*Der Galaterbrief* [HTKNT 9; Freiburg: Herder, 1974] 12-26).

<sup>18</sup> E.g., James D. G. Dunn, "The Theology of Galatians: The Issue of Covenantal Nomism," in *Pauline Theology; Volume 1* (ed. J. M. Bassler; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 128-31; Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, (SNTSMS 56; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 49, 49-61.. Similarly, John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth; A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Studies of the New Testament and its World; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988) 54-60.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002); idem, "Intruding 'Spies' and 'Pseudo-Brethren': The Jewish Intra-Group Politics of Paul's Jerusalem Meeting (Gal 2:1-10)," pp. 59-97 in *Paul and His Opponents*, Pauline Studies 2 (ed. S. E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

opposes, believe that death to be foundational for the church. Indeed, even though he calls this other teaching “another gospel” and says they proclaim “another Christ,” there is no indication that this other gospel leaves out or diminishes the importance of Jesus’ death. Indeed, his statements in 3:19 (“I have been crucified with Christ”) and 21 (“If righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died for nothing;” cf. 5:11) assume that all agree that the death of Jesus is crucial and has soteriological efficacy. Then in 6:12 he says they want to avoid persecution on account of “the cross of Christ.” This statement also assumes that Jesus’ death plays a significant part in their theology.

Furthermore, Paul’s relating of his trips to Jerusalem indicates that he and the Jerusalem church agree on the core elements of the gospel—however much independence he may want to claim. The meaning of the death of Jesus was clearly part of that core for Paul, and his argument assumes that all of his readers and the church in Jerusalem agree about this. Paul builds arguments from his view of the meaning of Jesus’ death, but does not seem to expect anyone to question that premise.

### *Philippians*

If Philippians is a composite text, the letters that make it up may address multiple types of teaching and practice that Paul rejects. Many interpreters, however, see a single type of opponent. Some find an over-realized eschatology that claims a fuller measure of the Spirit than other believers possess.<sup>20</sup> Some say the teachers of this view assert that God will give this gift to those who adopt Torah observance.<sup>21</sup> Of course, some find Gnostics as the enemy here. A number of interpreters have found multiple types of opponents in Philippians. Some find Gnostic libertines along with people who demand Torah observance for Gentiles.<sup>22</sup>

Jewett argues that Paul’s comment in 3:18 indicates that these opponents are Gnostics because they are “enemies of the cross of Christ.” This comment, he contends, shows that they have no place for the cross in their soteriology.<sup>23</sup> The context, flow of the argument, and nature of the comment, however, suggest otherwise.

The context of this accusation is clearly opposition to the view that Gentiles must adopt Torah observance. Paul argues throughout chapter 3 that he gave up any privilege associated with Torah observance for the richer blessings gained through identification with Christ. Verses 12-16 make it clear that the wealth of blessings he possesses does not obviate the need to strive to live up to what he has received in Christ. Verse 17 then calls the readers to imitate him in such striving. Throughout Philippians Paul supports his arguments by alternating between good and bad examples. So here, Paul tells his readers to imitate him and others who live as he does. Thus, in v. 18 he raises the specter of bad

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<sup>20</sup> E.g., Joachim Gnilka, *Der Philipperbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1968) 197; John Reumann, “Philippians 3:20-21—A Hymnic Fragment?” *NTS* 30 (1984): 593-609.

<sup>21</sup> Helmut Koester, “The Purpose of the Polemic of a Pauline Fragment (Philippians III),” *NTS* 8 (1961/2): 317-32.

<sup>22</sup> Josef Ernst, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, an Philemon, an die Kolosser, an die Epheser* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1974) 25.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Jewett, “The Epistolary Thanksgiving and the Integrity of Philippians,” *NovT* 12 (1970): 45-46; “Conflicting Movements in the Early Church as Reflected in Philippians,” *NovT* 12 (1970): 378-380.

examples: some people live as enemies of the cross. It is not clear that these people claim any attachment to Jesus and they may even be persecutors; Paul is, after all, in prison for his preaching when he writes this letter. Indeed, Paul could easily describe himself as a former enemy of the cross.

Furthermore, this statement is not straightforwardly descriptive. It is a polemical caricature designed to distinguish dramatically the manner of life he advocates from an ambiguous alternative. The stark alternatives he sets out are: Paul and those whose god is their belly. Describing them as enemies of the cross is the same type of caricature as saying they worship their belly and exalt in shameful behavior. The function of the contrast becomes clear in v. 20; the enemies of the cross whose end is destruction and who worship their belly and love shameful behavior have earthly minds in contrast to “us.” Our citizenship is in heaven, not on the earth, so “our” behavior must be completely different from those mentioned in vv. 18-19. In dramatic terms, Paul asserts that the church is radically different from everything around it—the church belongs to a different realm—and must live out that difference in its conduct.

Given this function of the descriptions in vv. 18-19, it seems unlikely that Paul is speaking of other people who claim a connection to Jesus but have a different understanding of his death. If he does intend to oppose such a view, he provides no reasons for rejecting their teaching: he offers no defense of his position (which the Philippians already knew) and no argument against theirs. Given his willingness to engage various issues in this and other letters, it seems unlikely that he would pass over this matter with just a few disparaging descriptors of its bearers’ character. More direct engagement with the issue would have been forthcoming if Paul had thought his church was encountering a significantly different understanding of Jesus’ death.

Chapter 3 does suggest that Paul knows of a movement that travels to his churches and advocates Torah observance for Gentiles. He warns the Philippians about this movement that he perhaps assumes will get there, if they have not already arrived, but the text does not indicate that they are having success in Philippi when he writes.

#### *Romans*

Paul’s letter to the Romans is not primarily a response to teaching that he finds unacceptable, though he probably tries to dispel some ideas about what he teaches that have reached Rome.<sup>24</sup> While debate continues about the purposes of *Romans*, Paul’s explication of his own understanding of the work of Christ dominates; albeit with some responses to views others might attribute to him or claim are consequences of his views (e.g., 6:1-2). In his search for signs of opposition to Paul in *Romans*, Stanley Porter finds five questions that have been raised about Paul in Rome: 1) they wonder why he has not come sooner, 2) they question his understanding of spiritual gifts, 3) they wonder if he has been avoiding visiting them, 4) some are concerned that he has abandoned Judaism, and 5) there may be questions about his apostolic status.<sup>25</sup>

None of these issues directly focuses attention on the death of Jesus or its meaning. Paul does seem to acknowledge some dispute about the meaning of belief in

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<sup>24</sup> See Stanley Porter, “Did Paul Have Opponents in Rome and What Were They Opposing?” pp. 149-68 in *Paul and His Opponents*, PAST 2 (ed. S. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Christ for Torah observance among Gentile believers, and even for Jewish believers (chapters 3-4 and 14 perhaps reflect this dispute). Paul's discussion of the place of Israel could be an aspect of some dispute about the meaning of Jesus' death. If so, Paul gives no indication that the argument involves any positions that doubt the importance of that death—the argument would be about its meaning in relation to God's covenant with Israel, not about whether it is important. But if this issue involves interpretation of Jesus' death, Paul gives no indication that it does. As we will see below, Paul cites some traditional material about Jesus' death in Romans that he seems to assume they know and that he assumes will bolster his position.

#### *Summary*

The evidence of Paul's letters suggests that there are two anti-Pauline movements; one advocates Torah observance for Gentiles and the other questions Paul's apostleship and the way the Spirit empowers apostles. It is important to note that the disputes with these groups do not involve Christological issues or questions about the relationship between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ or even the assumption that the death of Jesus is important for understanding his person or work. There is not even an argument about whether the ministry, death, and resurrection constitute an eschatological event that brings Gentiles into the people of God; there is a question about how to admit them, but not about whether to admit them. So Paul's presentations of the people he opposes in his letters offers no evidence of the existence of adherents to Jesus who do not make the death of Jesus a central element of their faith. Indeed, he assumes that they all believe it is salvific.

#### **Paul's Citations of Earlier Material**

Paul's use of preformed materials may provide another way for us to discover something about adherents to Jesus who are different from and even predate Paul's entrance into the church. In a few places (e.g., 1 Cor 15:1-5), Paul explicitly says he is quoting a tradition. In other places, however, he seems to recite a part of a known tradition to support his argument without directly noting that he is inserting it. Since such a move usually assumes the readers will recognize the piece, he does not need to call attention to its presence for it to bolster his argument. But such citations are more difficult for us to identify.

Ellis lists four criteria for identifying preformed material in Paul's letters: 1) the presence of an introductory formula that indicates a tradition is being cited, 2) the passage has a kind of "self-contained" character, 3) the vocabulary of a passage is different from the author's, and 4) a similar piece appears in another author who is independent of the text at hand.<sup>26</sup> Earlier, Neufeld listed further criteria that he saw being used by others and that he employed in his search for confessional material. These include: 1) use of *hoti*, double accusatives, and infinitives as introductions, 2) use of *homologia*, its cognates, synonyms, and antonyms, and 3) presence of relative clauses

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<sup>26</sup> E. Earle Ellis, "Preformed Traditions and Their Implications for Pline Xology," Pages 303-320, here p. 309 in *Christology, Controversy and Community; NT Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (eds. David G. Horrell and Christopher M., Tuckett; NovTSup99; Leiden: Brill, 2000).

and participial phrases introducing the creedal material.<sup>27</sup> Using these criteria will help us identify where Paul is citing a preformed tradition. We will look primarily at passages about which there is wide agreement about the presence of such material.

*1 Corinthians 15:3-5*

One of the clearest places where Paul cites a tradition is 1 Cor 15:3-5. Interpreters disagree about where the citation ends, but all agree that it includes vv. 3b-5. Not only does Paul introduce this citation with language used of passing on tradition, but he also speaks of sin in the plural, mentions “the Twelve,” and uses “according to the Scriptures” multiple times.<sup>28</sup> These are all unusual for Paul.

Paul’s introduction of this confession asserts that this is the tradition he had been given and that he passed to them. Moreover, he says it contains the heart of the faith. This foundational statement not only sets out the centrality of the death of J, but also gives it an expiatory function. Although a number of interpreters in the early and middle 20<sup>th</sup> century argued that this confession originated in Hellenistic churches<sup>29</sup> and so was not known in Jerusalem, most now acknowledge that it arose within Palestinian circles of the earliest church.<sup>30</sup>

Borgen, Gerhardsson, and Hurtado argue that the earliest Jerusalem church needed an interpretation of Jesus’ death that countered and opposed the common meanings of crucifixion, including that Jesus was a false messiah or that he died because

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<sup>27</sup> Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, NTTS 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 12

<sup>28</sup> For reasons to identify this passage as a tradition see A. M. Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1961) 15-16; Birger Gerhardsson, “Evidence for X’s Resurrection According to P: 1 Cor 15:1-11,” Pp 73-91, here p. 70 in *Neotestamentica et Philonica; Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, NovTSup 106 eds. D. Aune, T. Seland, J. H. Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors*, 16-17 (though he changed his mind when he revised the book in 1961, see pp. 117-18); H. Conzelmann, “On the Analysis of the Confessional Formula in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5,” *Int* 20 (1965): 15-25 and *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975, translation of his 1969 work), 252-54 where he denies Jeremias’ claims that the passage has signs of an Aramaic origin. While he does not give attention to 1 Cor 15, Sam K. Williams (*Jesus’ Death as Saving Event; The Background and Origin of the Concept*, HDR 2 [Missoula: Scholars, 1975] 231) argues that the Palestinian church had no need for the idea of an expiatory death to explain Jesus’ death.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Birger Gerhardsson, “Evidence for Christ’s Resurrection According to Paul: 1 Cor 15:1-11,” Pp 73-91, here 79-82 in *Neotestamentica et Philonica; Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, NovTSup 106 eds. D. Aune, T. Seland, J. H. Ulrichsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995) 11; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ; Devotion to Jesus in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 101. Cf. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness; Essays in Biblical Theology* (transl. E. Kalin; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997) 52.

of his own sin.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps the martyrdom traditions within Judaism (e.g., those in 4 Macc) supplied materials that helped them develop this tradition. Hurtado notes that this passage shows that the Jerusalem church already identifies Jesus as the messiah (because it refers to Jesus as Christ with no qualification) and gives a messianic interpretation to his death and resurrection.<sup>32</sup> This confessional piece also indicates that the earliest church interpreted the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus through the lens of Scripture. Thus, it was a community that gave attention to interpretation of Scripture.<sup>33</sup> A number of scholars also assert that this confession requires a passion narrative to explain how these events occurred.<sup>34</sup>

Paul's clearest reference to views of believers beyond his circle and before his admission to the church points to a community that give sustained attention and emphasis to the death of Jesus—and this within the earliest decade of the Jerusalem church. This suggests that attention to the death of Jesus as salvific is neither a creation of Paul nor of the influence of paganism beyond Palestine. But we need to look to other passages before drawing such a conclusion.

*1 Corinthians 11: 23-26*

Paul also identifies his account of the words at the Last Supper as a tradition he had received and has passed on to the Corinthians (v. 23).<sup>35</sup> The recitation of this account

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<sup>31</sup> Peder Borgen, "Crucified for His Own Sins—Crucified for Our Sins: Observations on a Pline Perspective," pp. 17-35, here p. 18 in *The NT and Early Xn Literature in Greco-Roman Context*, NovTSup 122 (ed. J. Fotopoulos; Leiden: Brill, 2006); idem. "Openly Portrayed as Crucified: Some Observations on Gal 3:1-14," pp. 345-353, here 346, in *Christology, Controversy and Community; NT Essays in Honour of David R. Catchpole* (eds David G. Horrell and Christopher M., Tuckett; NovTSup99; Leiden: Brill, 2000); Gerhardsson, "Evidence," 81-82; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 131. So also Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (London: Lutterworth, 1949) 32 and Nils Dahl, *The Crucified Messiah and Other Essays* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 34-35.

<sup>32</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* 101. Such an interpretation also shows that they gave these actions an eschatological meaning. See the comments of Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), Vol. 1:44 and Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale, 2000), 136-38. Similarly, Conzelmann ("On the Analysis of the Confessional Formula," 22) argues that the selection of Twelve as the leaders shows that the community has an eschatological outlook.

<sup>33</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 76 asserts that this tradition is an interpretation of Isa 53 and its suffering servant. This is probably more specific than the evidence allows. The references to interpretation of Scripture in this confession count powerfully against the characterizations of various Jesus admirers Crossan gives (see below).

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Gerhardsson, "Evidence," 89-90.

<sup>35</sup> Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 196 says that v. 23 shows that Paul "classifies himself as a link in a chain of tradition." There has been some debate about whether this is a tradition Paul received or whether he is

of a tradition may have been prepared for by the earlier reference to tradition in 11:2, a passage which indicates that Paul sees part of his apostolic task to be passing on traditions of the church that had been passed to him.<sup>36</sup> Beyond these direct statements that identify vv. 24-25(26) as traditional material, the passage contains vocabulary that appears only here in Paul.<sup>37</sup>

There is some debate about whether this tradition is older than that in Mark and whether this form goes back to Palestine or the Hellenistic church in Antioch or Damascus. In either case, this is a tradition that probably pre-dates Paul's entrance into the church; it at least goes back to his time in Syria and Cilicia.<sup>38</sup> Its early development suggests that the church did not need to draw on non-Jewish ideas of cult meals to develop the understanding of Jesus' death found in this tradition. The church may have drawn on the Jewish tradition of having meals that commemorate important events (e.g., the Passover).<sup>39</sup> As Conzelmann notes, there is no evidence that the early disciples saw their meals together as a continuation of their fellowship at table with Jesus.<sup>40</sup> It is more probable that this tradition developed in connection with a memorial or commemorative meal—which would have fit well with many ideas in the broader Greco-Roman world when the church spread beyond having mostly Jews as members.

This tradition clearly proclaims that Jesus' death was for the benefit of his disciples. It says explicitly that his body is broken "for you" and gives the shedding of his blood the function of creating a new covenant between them and God. Furthermore, this tradition not only serves to remind the hearers of Jesus' death, it directly interprets the rite as such a reminder and includes an exhortation to remember it.

Although we cannot reconstruct the exact form of the tradition (there was probably not just one version of it in circulation)<sup>41</sup> and cannot know whether or how much of it might go back to Jesus, we can be confident that this understanding of the death of Jesus predates Paul's entrance into the church.<sup>42</sup> If it is correct that this form of the tradition developed in Syria or Arabia, it shows that the church in that area understood Jesus' death as a covenant sacrifice and therefore in some way vicarious. They thus understand their relationship with God to be grounded in their attachment to

claiming to have received this by revelation. Most interpreters now accept that it is traditional material. The language Paul uses to introduce it fits this view much better, as does the unusual vocabulary.

<sup>36</sup> So Victor P. Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 27-28; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 186.

<sup>37</sup> Among them: *deipne*, *hosakis*, *anamn*\_sis. See Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> So Hengel, *Early Christology* 43.

<sup>39</sup> So Hunter, *Paul and His Predecessors* 21, following Lohmeyer.

<sup>40</sup> Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* 200-201.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* Fee (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 547), for example, thinks Paul alters the tradition to emphasize remembrance.

<sup>42</sup> This may well have been one of the things about the church's understanding of Jesus that led Paul to oppose it.

Jesus and his death. Moreover, Carroll and Green seem correct when they assert that this tradition assumes a passion narrative.<sup>43</sup> This passage indicates that churches in regions outside Palestine understood Jesus' death as central to the faith and as vicarious (in some sense) in the years that immediately follow that death. This is not a novel idea Paul applies to that death, but a part of its interpretation that the Syrian or Arabian church already holds.<sup>44</sup> Such a celebration coheres well with the emphasis on Jesus death seen in 1 Cor 15:3-5.

*Romans 3:24-26*

Most interpreters find Paul citing a tradition in Rom 3:24-26, though a number of recent commentators reject this idea.<sup>45</sup> The number of Pauline *hapax legomena*<sup>46</sup> and difficult structure of the sentence count in favor of Paul's use of a tradition. Those who see traditional material here are divided over where to locate Pauline insertions, but all agree that the tradition includes reference to the death of Jesus as a *hilast\_ rion*, to God's *par\_ sis* of previously committed sin, and to God's forbearance.

Interpreters are also divided over whether this tradition comes from the Hellenistic or Palestinian church. Sam Williams has argued extensively that the citation is from the Hellenistic church and addresses the issue of God's lack of action against the nations for their sins.<sup>47</sup> He contends that the tradition's use of *hilast\_ rion* confirms this arena for its development because its only contemporaneous use to mean expiation is found in 4 Maccabees, a document of fully Hellenized Judaism. Most interpreters, however, continue to believe it originated in "Jewish Christianity,"<sup>48</sup> often because they

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<sup>43</sup> John Carroll and Joel Green, *The Death of Jesus in Early Christianity* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995) 120. So also G. Francois Wessels, "The Historical Jesus and the Letters of Paul," Pages 27-51, here 33, in *The NT Interpreted; Essays in Honour of Bernard C. Latagan*, NovTSup 124; eds. Cilliers Breytenbach, Johan C. Thom, Jeremy Punt (Leiden: Brill, 2006), following Neiryck.

<sup>44</sup> If the traditions goes back to the Jerusalem church, then it is further evidence of a sustained focus on Jesus death in the earliest days of the church.

<sup>45</sup> E.g., C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), Vol. 1: 200n1; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 220; N. T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," in *NIB* 10: 466-67.

<sup>46</sup> The three are *hilast\_ rion*, *paresis*, and *progegonota hamart\_ mata* (with "sins in the plural) and the unusual reference (for Paul) to Jesus' blood rather than cross. See Jewett, *Romans 270-71* for a summary of reasons for finding a citation here.

<sup>47</sup> Sam K. Williams, *Jesus' Death as Saving Event; The Background and Origin of the Concept*, HDR 2 (Missoula: Scholars, 1975) 32-34, *passim*.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Bultmann, *Theology* 47; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 95, Dahl, *Crucified Messiah* 155; James D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Understanding of the Death of Jesus as a Sacrifice," pp. 35-56, here pp. 41-43 in *Sacrifice and Redemption; Durham Essays in Theology* (ed. S. W. Sykes; Cambridge: CUP, 1991); J. Louis Martyn (*Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1997] 142.

understand the *hilast\_rión* to be a reference to the lid of the ark of the covenant.<sup>49</sup> Among these who identify “Jewish Christianity” as its sources, Meyer and Stuhlmacher assert that it comes from the Stephen circle because of their critique of the temple.<sup>50</sup>

We do not need to settle the contested issues about whether various phrases are Pauline insertions for our purposes since all agree that the tradition focuses attention on the death of Jesus as a means of expiating sin. If it originates among believers who critique the temple, they still find its symbols meaningful. If, as Williams argues, this formula developed in the face of the conversion of Gentiles, it must have its roots in the first years after Jesus’ death because there were already Gentiles in the church when Paul joins it.<sup>51</sup> This may point us to Antioch or perhaps Damascus. Whether it originates in Palestine or Syria, Paul assumes it is a known and accepted formulation of the faith. He perhaps includes it here to emphasize “the common foundation of belief he shares with the Christians in Rome.”<sup>52</sup>

*Romans 4:25*

Most interpreters think Paul cites another tradition to describe the work of Christ in Rom 4:25.<sup>53</sup> Its introduction with a relative pronoun, its parallel clauses, its use of language known to be in the tradition (particularly *paradid\_mi*), and the substitution of the preposition *hyper* (Paul’s usual choice) with *dia* all suggest that it comes from the tradition.<sup>54</sup> Bultmann identifies this as a formula that existed before Paul came into the

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<sup>49</sup> Dahl (*Crucified Messiah* 155), however, argues the tradition alludes to the Akedah as well.

<sup>50</sup> Ben F. Meyer, “The Pre-Pauline Formula in Rom. 3.25-26a,” *NTS* 29 (1983): 198-208; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Reconciliation, Law, and Righteousness; Essays in Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 99-104. This position is very similar to that of Williams.

<sup>51</sup> Fredriksen *From Jesus to Christ* 135 asserts that the message about Jesus was in Diaspora synagogues within two years of Jesus’ death. It may even have happened within the first year.

<sup>52</sup> Hengel, *Early Christology* 140.

<sup>53</sup> So e.g., Käsemann, *Romans* 128; Cranfield, *Romans* 251; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1988) 224; Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* 128; Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* 142. Dunn (*Romans* 224) calls it a “well established formulation in earliest Christianity.” Moo (*Romans* 288) is less certain but acknowledges this as a possibility. Robert Jewett (*Romans; A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007] 342) thinks that the language is from the tradition, but that the style is Paul’s.

<sup>54</sup> See Hunter, *Paul’s Predecessors* 30-31 and Käsemann, *Romans* 128, who adds that v. 24 provides a “solemn introduction.” Vernon H. Neufeld (*The Earliest Christian Confessions*, *NTTS* 5 [Leiden: Brill, 1963] 45-47) adds that the antithesis of death and resurrection is also a common sign of traditional material.

church and as evidence that the earliest church saw Jesus' death as expiatory.<sup>55</sup> Stuhlmacher argues on linguistic grounds that this formula comes from Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup>

Interpreters are unanimous in holding that the language of being "handed over" comes from Isa 53:12.<sup>57</sup> This passage is clear evidence that the originators of this confession drew on Isaiah 53 to interpret Jesus' death. Thus, the idea that Jesus' death was expiatory arose among the earliest believers perhaps in Palestine and they made sense of the idea with their interpretations of Scripture.

It is also interesting to note that this passage uses the noun *dikai\_sis* to describe the effect of Jesus' resurrection (or better the single event of his death and resurrection). Surprisingly, this noun appears only one other time in Paul (Rom 5:18).<sup>58</sup> This provides further evidence that Paul is citing a tradition and that the tradition before Paul interpreted Jesus' death as providing "justification."<sup>59</sup> Thus, as important as justification is to Paul's exposition of the gospel in Romans and Galatians, it is an element he has taken over from the tradition—though he does of course develop it in his own way.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Philippians 2:6-11*

Most interpreters continue to identify Phil 2:6-11 as a preformed liturgical piece that Paul adopts and adapts to use in his letter.<sup>61</sup> Its elevated style, beginning with a relative pronoun, and non-Pauline vocabulary all support this conclusion.<sup>62</sup> We need not occupy ourselves here with concerns about its structure. Verse 8 of this poetic liturgy focuses attention on Jesus' death as the central feature of his earthly life. No other element of his life or ministry receives mention. Granting the assertion of various

<sup>55</sup> *Theology*, 1:46, 82. Dahl, *Crucified Christ* 157, 188 sees another allusion to the Aqedah here.

<sup>56</sup> *Reconciliation* 55. In this he accepts as evidence the Semiticisms Jeremias identifies.

<sup>57</sup> Cranfield (*Romans* 251-52) asserts that the language of "justification" also comes from Isa 53:11.

<sup>58</sup> This is noted by Hunter, *Paul's Predecessors* 32 and Wright, "Romans," 503n162.

<sup>59</sup> J. Louis Martyn (*Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* 141), commenting on Paul's citation of a tradition Gal 2:16, identifies the theme of justification as one that was accepted by all Jewish Christians. See his discussion of evidence for this theme in the Jewish church's tradition and how justification could be understood within the context of Judaism. *Ibid.*, 141-153.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Leander Keck (*Romans*, ANTC [Nashville: Abingdon, 2005] 132) who mentions this possibility.

<sup>61</sup> E.g., Ulrich B. Müller, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Philipper*, THNT (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1993) 90; Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) 56-57. However, Gordon Fee ("Philippians 2:5-11: Hymn or Exalted Pauline Prose?" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 2 [1992]: 29-46 and Adela Collins have recently argued that Paul is the author of this material ("Psalms, Philippians 2:6-11, and the origins of Christology," *Biblical Interpretation* 11 (2003): 361-72.

<sup>62</sup> See Ralph Martin, *Carmen Christi; Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

interpreters that “even death on a cross” is a Pauline insertion<sup>63</sup> does not diminish the pivotal role this tradition gives to Jesus’ death. Although the original setting may have dictated this emphasis (if it was developed for use at the Eucharist or baptisms as some have thought), this liturgy still demonstrates how important this event was in the life and theology of the church that used it. We should also note that this piece associates Jesus’ death and his exaltation (v. 9) through its use of Ps. 110, the psalm quoted most often in the New Testament.<sup>64</sup>

If this passage is preformed material, it may go back to the Aramaic speaking church. Martin notes that Lohmeyer argues on the basis of its language and style that it is the product of a an author whose first language is Semitic (though he thinks it is the product of Hellenistic Christianity).<sup>65</sup> Following this lead, Fitzmyer has produced an Aramaic version of the material.<sup>66</sup> If it has an Aramaic *Vorlage* or an author with that as his first language, this liturgy probably indicates that the earliest Jerusalem church had the death of Jesus as a central focus of their understanding of Jesus. Others, however, think it was composed within Hellenistic Christianity<sup>67</sup> and draws on pagan or Gnostic ideas. That it is an adaptation of an earlier hymn or was first composed from a Gnostic outlook are the least likely options. As Hooker comments, the idea that it has a Gnostic origin “has almost nothing to be said for it.”<sup>68</sup> If those who argue that Paul composed this material for this letter are correct, then it shows us only Paul’s teaching which he expects his church to affirm before the arrival of this letter. Perhaps it is best, with Deichgräber, to acknowledge that we know too little about the early church to identify the original *Sitz im Leben* of this piece.<sup>69</sup> Its various parts seem to point to elements that we often attribute to different specific groups within the early church. Perhaps this by itself should caution us about making those distinctions too large and too firm.

*Romans 8:32, 34*

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<sup>63</sup> So e.g., Müller, *Philipper* 105; Reinhard Deichgraber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zur Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen*, SUNT (Göttingen : Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1967) 125 who identifies this as the dominant view. However, a number of recent commentators reject this, e.g., Bonnie Thurston, “Philippians,” in *Philippians and Philemon*, SP (Collegeville, Minn. : Liturgical Press, 2005) 83 and Morna Hooker, “Philippians,” *NIB* 11:509. Both see the mention of the cross as something of a climax for the first part of the piece.

<sup>64</sup> See the work of David Hay on the importance of this psalm for the early church (*Glory at the Right Hand; Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, SBLMS 18 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

<sup>65</sup> Martin, *Carmen Christi* 27-28.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Aramaic Background of *CBQ* 50 (1988): 470-483.

<sup>67</sup> E.g., J.-F. Collange, *The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Philippians* (London : Epworth Press, 1979) 92.

<sup>68</sup> Hooker, “Philippians,” 501.

<sup>69</sup> Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus* 132.

A number of interpreters find at least fragments of liturgical or confession material in Romans 8:32 and 34.<sup>70</sup> The language of *paradid\_mi* and *hyper* support this identification. Dunn comments that the use of *paradid\_mi* echoes “a well-established Christian theological understanding of Christ’s death.”<sup>71</sup> Still, the extent of the quoted material is debated. Käsemann asserts that the phrase “handed him over for us all” is certainly a liturgical fragment,<sup>72</sup> but Jewett argues that Paul has added “for us all” out of his concern to include Gentiles.<sup>73</sup> Our decision about this could affect our view of the piece’s provenance. A number of interpreters also find an allusion to the Akedah in v. 32<sup>74</sup> and v. 34 certainly alludes to Ps. 110.

The short nature of the expressions Paul takes up here do not allow us to identify what part of the church produced these expressions. This passage does, however, demonstrate that believers other than Paul connected Christ’s death and exaltation while maintaining a view of that death that makes it atoning. The possible reference to the Akedah and the certain allusion to Ps 110 point to believers who are familiar with Scripture and think it is important to understand Jesus’ death through Scripture. This suggests that the formulators were Jewish. This may be particularly the case if Jewett is correct about the Pauline addition of “for us all.” Whether Paul added it or not, Jewett may correctly discern that its intention is to include Gentiles into the sphere of those for whom Christ’s death is effective. If so, the formulation points to a time when Gentiles are being brought into the church.

*Romans 5:8; 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:11; 2 Corinthians 5:14; 1 Thessalonians 5:9-10*

These texts all contain statements about Christ’s death for others. The all use a form of *apethane\_* (three of them the aorist third person singular) with *hyper* and with the subject of the verb being the name Christ. These are commonly understood as citations of a confession or to draw on formulaic language.<sup>75</sup> These citations seem to be

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<sup>70</sup> E.g., Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ* 129; Hengel, *Early Christology* 139-40; Neufeld 45-47; Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand* 59; 131; Dunn, *Christology* 35.

<sup>71</sup> Dunn, *Romans* 497

<sup>72</sup> Käsemann, *Romans* 247.

<sup>73</sup> Jewett, *Romans* 538.

<sup>74</sup> E.g., Moo, *Romans* 540n18; Wright, “Romans,” 610. Jewett (*Romans* 537), however, finds this unlikely because the evidence is insufficient to assert that the Akedah had been interpreted as an atoning event in the first century.

<sup>75</sup> See Jewett, *Romans* 361-62. Others who identify the material in these passages as traditional include: for Rom 5:8, Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul* 12-13; Käsemann, *Romans* 137-38; for 14:15, Käsemann, *Romans* 376; for 1 Cor 8:11, Anders Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof; Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corinthians*, CB (Stockholm: Alqvist and Wiksell, 1998) 159-66; for 2 Cor 5:14, Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul* 12-13, 34-35; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1986) 130-31 (where he ties this formulation to a baptismal liturgy); for 1 Thess 5:9-10, Ernest Best, *A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, BNTC (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1972) 218. While rejecting the idea that v. 9 draws on a baptism liturgy, Abraham J. Malherbe (*The Letters to the Thessalonians*, AB [New York: Doubleday, 2000] 298-99) acknowledges that the “for us” participial phrase draws on “the earliest strata of Christian tradition.”

abbreviated versions of the same tradition Paul quotes in 1 Cor 15:3-5. While the citation is too brief in the passages outside 1 Corinthians 15 to speculate about a provenance, their presence in three letters suggests that the formula was used widely. This is particularly the case for the Romans occurrences because this is a church in which Paul has not taught, yet he seems to expect them to recognize the allusion.<sup>76</sup> Jewett agrees with Kertelge's assessment that the repeated appearance of this formula shows that on this point there was "broad terminological and substantial agreement between Paul and pre-Pauline traditions in interpreting Jesus' death."<sup>77</sup>

*2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13*

Interpreters often find elements of an early confession in 2 Cor 5:21<sup>78</sup> and Gal 3:13,<sup>79</sup> both passages which interpret the work of Jesus as an event that brings reconciliation with God by having Christ take up the sins of others. Though neither mentions the death of Jesus directly, it is undoubtedly in view. This is particularly clear in Galatians where a reference to the crucifixion immediately follows. The death of Jesus is also in the context of 2 Corinthians 5.

Betz argues that the tradition cited in Gal 3:13 goes back to pre-Pauline Jewish Christianity. He contends that the church drew on ideas of sacrificial and meritorious death that already existed within Judaism as it tried to understand Jesus' death. When Paul uses it in this context, Betz comments, he may be the only one that understands the vicarious death of Jesus to also mean the end of the Law.<sup>80</sup> Betz mentions 2 Cor 5:21 in relation to this Gal passage, noting that the sinless nature of Christ's sacrifice made it "uniquely meritorious" within the thought of Judaism.<sup>81</sup> While this generalization about Judaism is too broad, it may well substantially capture the thought of early believers in Christ who were influenced by both the sacrificial system in Jerusalem and martyrdom traditions within Judaism.

Once again we should note that these formulas indicate that the earliest believers gave significant attention to interpreting the death of Jesus. It provided a way to

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<sup>76</sup> This assertion would not hold if Francis Watson is correct in asserting that the Roman congregation is already a Pauline church, even though Paul had not been there. See his *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles; Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

<sup>77</sup> Jewett, *Romans* 362, citing Karl Kertelge, "Das Verständnis des Todes Jesu bei Paulus," pp. 114-36, here 123-24 in *Der Tod Jesu. Deutungen im Neuen Testament*. Ed. J. Beutler et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1976).

<sup>78</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making; A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 121; Victor P. Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 340; and Martin, *2 Corinthians* 156-57 assert that Paul is quoting traditional material here. Among the reasons for seeing a citation of traditional material are the use of *hyper* in the expression "for us" and its unusual use of *hamartia*, which may include punishment here.

<sup>79</sup> Dunn, *Christology* 121 and Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 150-51 see traditional material in this verse.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

understand the community's relationship to the Torah through using Torah to interpret the event.

#### *Other Passages*

A number of other passages contain what many interpreters think are fragments of formulaic traditions that refer to Jesus' death. Some of these citations will receive brief attention here. Romans 6:3 and 1 Cor 6:11 both cite traditions that relate the death of Jesus to baptism.<sup>82</sup> Paul even introduces the Romans 6 citation with a recitative *hoti*. The passages show that a pre-Pauline (or at least other than Paul) view of baptism understood it as a rite that identified the baptized as taken into the death of Christ. Furthermore, this interpretation of baptism assumes that Jesus' death is "for us" and has a salvific effect.

Romans 14:9<sup>83</sup> and 1 Thess 4:14<sup>84</sup> both refer to the death and resurrection of Christ as ways to focus attention on the parousia. In the former, Paul establishes Christ's place as judge of all; in the latter, he assures the readers that the deceased will participate in the resurrection through their association with Christ. These Pauline interpretations seem to rest on a known tradition that assigns Jesus' death a meaning, an eschatological meaning, by associating it with his resurrection.

Second Corinthians 1:7b also may contain an early tradition.<sup>85</sup> If so, this passage indicates that the church had begun to interpret the difficulties its members endured because of their new faith as a way they were identified with the death of Jesus. This might suggest that even the thoroughly Pauline theme of suffering as a part of identification with Christ and his application of the liturgy in Philippians 2 both have significant predecessors in the tradition rather than being uniquely or originally Paul's ideas.

Finally, "Jesus Christ crucified" may be a preformed encapsulation of the Gospel that Paul takes up from the early church.<sup>86</sup> If this is a pre-Pauline formula, its form may

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<sup>82</sup> Lars Hartman (*'Into the Name of the Lord Jesus'; Baptism in the Early Church*, SNTW [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997] 71) and David Hellholm ("The Impact of the Situational Contexts for Paul's Use of Baptismal Traditions in His Letters," Pp. 147-75, here 155-59 in *Neotestamentica et Philonica; Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, NovTSup 106 eds. D. Aune, T. Seland, J. H. Ulrichsen [Leiden: Brill, 2003]) find a tradition in these passages. 1 Cor 6:11 is one of the passages Martyn cites as evidence that Jewish Christianity developed the theme of justification before Paul took it up (*Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* 143).

<sup>83</sup> Schmithals, *Theology* 54 identifies tradition in this verse and Neufeld, *Early Christian Confessions* 62 thinks it may contain such material.

<sup>84</sup> Best, *Thessalonians* 186-87; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, WBC (Waco: Word, 1982) 97. Malherbe, *Thessalonians* 265 acknowledges that it contains "traditional Christian language" but rejects the view that it quotes a creedal formula.

<sup>85</sup> So Ellis, "Preformed Traditions," 309.

<sup>86</sup> Furnish (*Jesus According to Paul* 24) finds Paul's use of the phrase in 1 Cor 2:2 and Gal 3:1 to be uses of a tradition. Betz (*Galatians* 132n40) calls "Jesus Christ crucified" an "abbreviated form of the 'kerygma'" and notes the parallels in 1 Cor 1:23 and 2:2. Other passages he seems to think make use of this tradition include: 1 Cor 1:13, 17, 18; 2:8; 2 Cor 13:4; Gal 5:11, 24; 6:12, 14, 17; Phil 2:8; 3:18.

suggest that it arose as the earliest believers had to make sense of the very paradox to which this formula gives expression: a crucified messiah. At the same time it makes this seemingly absurd claim, it identifies that messiah as Jesus. These believers would have formulated this statement in a context where other interpretations of Jesus' death were more common.<sup>87</sup> Thus, if it is a previously formed proclamation, it may take us to the earliest times after Jesus' death as those who experienced the resurrection brought the paradox of their faith to expression.

*Summary*

Our examination of allusions to traditions Paul cites in his letters offers no evidence that there were branches of the church (or even of people favorable disposed to Jesus but outside the church) that did not give a central place to their interpretation of the death of Jesus. On the contrary, they indicate that the church developed clear lines of interpretation for Jesus' death in its earliest days. Paul's citation in 1 Cor 15:3-5 shows that the Jerusalem church made Jesus' death a prominent feature of its message and saw that death as expiatory. These seem to have happened in the face of alternative interpretations of that death and in conjunction with the claim that Jesus was the messiah. It also indicates that these ideas were developed through the church's interpretation of Scripture. If Paul is being honest about his reception of this tradition, then it was formulated within the first five, perhaps two, years of the church's existence.

The traditions Paul cites in 1 Cor 11 and Rom 3 provide clear evidence that the death of Jesus was central in the pre-Pauline church. The Passover meal tradition has Jesus interpret his own death as vicarious and as a covenant sacrifice. Without considering whether Jesus actually did this, the early tradition attributes this meaning to his death. The importance of Jesus' death and this interpretation can be seen in that church focuses one of its primary rituals on those meanings of Jesus' death. If Paul's form of this tradition derives from Syria/Damascus, it shows that the church there already sees Jesus' death as a covenant sacrifice and as vicarious. And since it probably formed this tradition on the basis of an earlier telling of the passion story that assumes a similar interpretation, it probably indicates that both Syria and Jerusalem give Jesus' death these meanings.

Paul's citations of baptismal traditions that view that initiatory rite as a participation in Jesus' death also suggests that the pre-Pauline church saw Jesus' death as the foundation of the believer's relationship with God and means of life in the eschatological present and future. Wherever the specific traditions we have examined originated, discussion of the meaning of baptism, particularly how it was different from John the Baptist's, had to begin in the earliest days after the experience of the resurrection. The traditions we have seen, tie that difference to Christian baptism's relationship to the death of Jesus. Paul's further assumption in Roman 6 that receiving baptism entails reception of the Spirit, signals a connection between Jesus' death and the blessings of the new age.

When the tradition in Romans 3 interprets Jesus' death as a *hilasterion*, it clearly points to Jewish believers because of the way this term is used in the LXX for the lid of the ark. Whether from Palestine or Syria, it comes from a community in which temple

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<sup>87</sup> Ernst Käsemann (*Perspectives on Paul* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969] 35) describes a "theology of the cross" as a necessarily polemical formulation.

imagery is meaningful. Further, if part of the traditions function is to explain the admission of Gentiles (though this remains less secure), then it was probably formulated within months of their entering the church. That would imply that this image and formulation make their way into the church within two or three years of its founding.

Even the liturgical material of Philippians 2 provides evidence of the pivotal role of Jesus' death in the thought of the early church. In a recitation of the exalted place of Jesus before the incarnation and after his resurrection, the only part of his ministry that receives mention is his death.

The allusions to Isaiah 53 in the tradition Paul cites in Romans 4 confirms what we saw in 1 Cor 15, that at least some who made Jesus' death a central element of their interpretation of him also were among those who gave extended attention to understanding him through Scripture. Indeed, Scripture (at least as remembered by the disciples) may have been one of the most important resources for the earliest church as it came to terms with the death of Jesus.

We have seen that some traditions Paul cites about Jesus' death as a sacrifice (particularly as a covenant initiating sacrifice) fit well within Jewish thought of the time. The hypothesis that the church had to move out of Palestine or beyond Jewish thought to Hellenistic thought before such understandings of Jesus' death were possible finds no support in the evidence we have found. Just the opposite, the church's interpretations of Jesus' death grow out of ideas associated with the temple and Passover. The possibility that such ideas were enabled by martyrdom theologies seems likely. And even though there is no Palestinian evidence for the interpretations of martyr's deaths in 4 Maccabees, it seems unlikely that those ideas had no currency in the Palestine of Roman occupation.

If "Jesus Christ crucified" is a formulation that Paul adopts, such a shorthand of the kerygma assumes that this event is a focal point of the church's message. If the inclusion of the name Jesus suggests that this formulation developed in Palestine, it provides further evidence of the importance they give that form of death in their interpretation of Jesus. But if Paul formulated this expression, it shows only what his churches know as the core of his preaching.

It may be important to observe that many of Paul's citations of traditions about Jesus' death appear in Romans. Here he is writing to a church he did not found and which he has never visited. His citations may serve to ground the content of his message to a church that has less reason to trust him than his own churches have.<sup>88</sup> If the members of this church do recognize these allusions and citations, which Paul's use of them assumes, they are evidence that this emphasis on, and these interpretations of, Jesus' death are widespread, if not universal, within the church. If they are not so widespread or well known, Paul thinks they are and so thinks he stands well within the church's tradition on this matter.

## **CONCLUSION**

Neither Paul's responses to those with whom he disagrees nor his citations of traditions that involve Jesus' death suggest that he is encountering believers who give less place to Jesus' death than he does. Indeed, they suggest that there existed a broad

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<sup>88</sup> Even if, as Watson proposes, we should consider the Roman church a Pauline church, they still may need assurances about his grounding in the tradition they received from his emissaries.

agreement about the centrality of and the vicarious and salvific effect of Jesus' death. It seems to be Paul's expectation that all who identify themselves with the church agree about this matter, at least in these general ways. His arguments in Galatians presume that both the teachers he opposes and the letter's recipients think it is plausible that Paul remains in substantial theological agreement with the leaders of the Jerusalem church on these issues. Even though he mentions "another gospel" there is no suggestion that what makes it "other" is a diminution of the importance of Jesus' death or an alternative interpretation of it.

What Paul reveals about the anti-Pauline movements to which he responds give no indication that the members of those movements fail to give Jesus' death a salvific meaning. Paul nowhere gives any indication that he knows of people favorably disposed to Jesus, his life or his teachings, who do not give his death a fundamental and salvific role in their understanding of him. If such movements existed, Paul never acknowledges their existence in his extant letters.

When present day scholars envision communities favorable disposed toward Jesus but not giving extended attention to the meaning of his death by crucifixion, they fail to grasp the effects such a death has on a community. Alan Kirk argues from social memory studies that violence brings such social disruption that communities must institute commemorative activities to retain social identity.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, he argues, violence "poses a particularly difficult challenge to the hermeneutical impulse" because it "generates a sense of fragmentation, of the disintegration of a moral and social order previously experienced as stable and routine."<sup>90</sup> This would particularly be the case if the acknowledged leaders of your own religion initiated the violence that was carried out by the overlord who claimed to sustain peace and order. As Kirk says,

The death of Jesus, through political violence, would bring about the sort of radically altered situation, dissolution of previous group frameworks, and discontinuity from all that had gone before such that if the community were to survive it would need to reconstitute its memory, and with the same stroke the coherence of its own social and moral identity, in the context of intense commemorative activities.<sup>91</sup>

All who remained favorably disposed toward Jesus to such an extent that they preserved his teaching or viewed him as a messenger from God would have had to give this kind of attention to the dramatic form of his death.

Beyond the internal necessity of interpreting Jesus' death, anyone who would continue to value his life or teaching had to develop responses to outsiders who interpreted the death of Jesus by giving crucifixion one of its usual meanings. We have noted above that the Jerusalem church would have had to explicitly reject those meanings (e.g., that Jesus was a criminal or a false messiah) and provide alternative meanings. Any

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<sup>89</sup> Alan Kirk, *The Memory of Violence and the Death of J in Q*, pp. 191-206, here 191, in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Xty*, ed Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher; Semeia 52 (Atlanta: SBL, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 206. Notably, Kirk argues that the Q community gave extensive attention to interpreting and commemorating Jesus' death.

kind of adherence to Jesus after his crucifixion would have entailed the same demand.<sup>92</sup> Such a death demands an apology to outsiders.

Our examination of those Paul opposes and of the traditions about the death of Jesus that he cites gives no indications that any wing of the church that Paul interacts with questioned the importance of Jesus' death in the formation of their life as a community or for their relationship with God. Neither do we see evidence that he knows of people who try to follow Jesus' teachings or are favorably disposed toward any aspect of his life or ministry that do not give prominence to Jesus' death as a salvific event.

Francois Wessels reports that in a 2002 presentation at the University of Stellenbosch Dominic Crossan asserted that there were four types of early Christianity: Thomas Christianity that cared only for the teaching of Jesus and opposed apocalyptic views, Pauline Christianity that made the death and resurrection of Jesus central, Q Christianity that cared only about Jesus' sayings and emphasized the wisdom aspect of his teaching, and Exegetical Christianity that manipulated Scripture for apologetic purposes. Crossan added that these groups were so different they would not recognize that they belong to the same religious group.<sup>93</sup> (If this is truly the case, it seems inappropriate for us to force them into a single group or identify them all as [legitimate?] ancestors of the developing church.<sup>94</sup>) His identification of these groups draws on work with both canonical and non-canonical texts, but our examination of what Paul knows about other adherents to Jesus suggests that Crossan arrives at an unlikely reconstruction.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> The books in the Nag Hammadi library demonstrate that even docetic Gnostics had to give Jesus' death a meaning and assign it a significance—even if that was radically different from what we have seen in the evidence of Paul's letters. It seems more likely that they came to give it the meanings we find there in response to the meanings we have seen evidence for in the earlier time than that the Gnostic meaning developed immediately following Jesus' death. This is particularly the case since Gnosticism was probably not a developed system in the first century.

<sup>93</sup> These statements are reported by Wessels in "The Historical Jesus and the Letters of P," pp. 27-51, here 29n1, in *The NT Interpreted; Essays in Honour of Bernard C. Latagan*, NovTSup 124; eds. Cilliers Breytenbach, Johan C. Thom, Jeremy Punt (Leiden: Brill, 2006). Crossan mentions three of these kinds of "Christianity" together in his *The Birth of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1998) 409-411. ("Exegetical Christianity" is the one he does not mention.)

<sup>94</sup> It seems a strange use of the term church if these four groups are so different that they would not recognize one another. The choice of that term seems to be another attempt to legitimate their interpretation of Jesus.

<sup>95</sup> If Crossan's point is that different people interpreted the words and deeds of Jesus differently, we should grant this point immediately. After all, that is why some urged that he be crucified and others claimed that he was bringing the Kingdom of God. But Crossan seems to work with something of the primitivist notion that thinks that if an idea was early, it has validity as an interpretation of Jesus. (Of course, this creates the problem that many understood him to be a false messiah. Is that an equally valid interpretation because it is early?) However, at one point Crossan seems to veer away from that primitivist inclination, claiming that narrative accounts of Jesus give a fuller

As we have seen, any group that would carry forward the teaching of Jesus would be required to give significant attention to the form of his death. If we give full weight to the devastation brought on Jesus' followers by his death, we must acknowledge that any group that remained positively disposed toward Jesus had to give that event a meaning that allowed the community to interpret Jesus in ways contrary to what his death apparently indicated. Such adherents might use Jesus' death to accuse others of sin or ignorance, but they could not ignore it.<sup>96</sup> A hundred years or perhaps even a few decades after the event, some kinds of adherence to the teaching of Jesus that gave little attention to his death could emerge. By then the shocking nature of his death had been muted by both distance and interpretation. But in the wake of the actual events, no such distance was possible because the experience was still fresh in the minds of both believers and non-believers. Jesus' death demanded sustained attention from all who wanted to maintain some attachment to him or his teaching.

Even Crossan's separation of "Exegetical Christianity" from "Pauline Christianity" seems to miss the essential links Paul makes with reading Scripture and the claim of the earliest confession of any length we have, that of 1 Corinthians 15. Here we see the pre-Pauline church, the church of the 30s and 40s, using Scripture to interpret the event that is most difficult to explain, Jesus' violent death as a political criminal. The group that uses Scripture to defend its adherence to Jesus is not separate from the group that emphasizes the death and resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, our study suggests that the view we find in Paul is not "his" in the sense that he originated it. Rather, he constantly draws on earlier traditions, including some that reach back into the Jerusalem church of the first few years of the church's existence.

Perhaps some reticence to acknowledge how important discussion and explanation of Jesus' death had to be in the context of any favorable view of Jesus stems from our culture limitation on the meaning of dying for others. Outside biblical materials there is a significant body of material that demonstrates that the Greco-Roman world possessed various ways to interpret a person's death so that the person became a martyr for some cause or institution (one's city, a philosophy, etc.).<sup>97</sup> For example, adherents to Socrates' teaching had to interpret his death in a way that allowed them to continue following his philosophy after his death as a criminal. Such a death could not simply be ignored. Some (e.g., Epictetus *Disc.* 4.1.168-69) who interpreted Socrates' death (and

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picture than a discourse gospel (*Four Other Gospels; Shadows on the Contours of Canon* [Chicago: Winston Press, 1985] 186).

<sup>96</sup> That a single document (e.g., the Gospel of Thomas) does not give attention to Jesus' death is not sufficient evidence to claim that his death had no place in the community's theology. If we only had 1 Thessalonians or 2 Corinthians (or both) from Paul, we would never know that justification by faith had an important place in Paul's theology.

<sup>97</sup> See Jeffrey B. Gibson, "Paul's 'Dying Formula'" Prolegomena to an Understanding of Its Import and Significance," Pp 20-41 in *Celebrating Romans; Template for Pauline Theology; Essays in Honor of Robert Jewett*, ed. Sheila E. McGinn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); David Seeley, *The Noble Death: Graeco-Roman Martyrology and Paul's Concept of Salvation* (JSNTSup 28; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990).

the deaths of other philosophers, warriors, and others) saw it as vicarious, though not expiatory. The point here is simply that such deaths could not be ignored and were often seen as vicarious without any implication that they were expiatory. There was so much attention to such deaths that Seneca can say they are “droned to death in all the schools” (*Ep.* 24.6).<sup>98</sup> If we recognize that the ancient definition of vicarious was broader than expiation, we open ourselves to more historically credible reconstructions of what sense various kinds of followers of Jesus made of his violent death as a political criminal. But in no case could they ignore it.

We have by no means made reference to all the places Paul makes use of preexisting formulations of the faith. Yet even the limitation of examining solely his statements about Jesus’ death highlights his dependence on teaching about Jesus that existed before he joined the church. His surprisingly numerous citations of earlier tradition indicate that he expects his churches to recognize these statements as allusions to the tradition and suggest that he belongs within the mainstream of the first-century church in much that he teaches. Such extensive dependence discredits any claim that Paul was the founder of Christianity or the one who invented the Christ-cult idea or the idea that Jesus’ death was vicarious. The various reasons we have seen for tracing some of the traditions to the Palestinian church also suggest that it was not even the “Hellenistic church”<sup>99</sup> that made the vicarious nature of Christ’s death central in the church’s teaching. Rather, such interpretations of Jesus’ death emerge in the earliest moments of the church’s existence that we can see.

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<sup>98</sup> See Seeley, *The Noble Death* 124-29. He cites this Epictetus passage and other writers,

<sup>99</sup> The standard category “Hellenistic church” now seems problematic because we recognize that the division between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism has been exaggerated. It seems equally unwise to make too big of a distinction between the church in Jerusalem and that in Antioch in the 30s.