

Ádám Szabados:

The Tradition of the Apostles:

the relationship between apostolic authority and the earliest tradition of the church

Doctoral (PhD) thesis

Thesis Booklet

Summary

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I. Research questions, hypotheses, and goals

I had two questions in mind when I began my research on the relationship between apostolic authority and the earliest tradition of the church: is it historically justified to talk about a normative tradition in the universal church, and if yes, how can we demarcate this normative tradition?

It was my initial hypothesis that the answer to both questions lay in *apostolic authority*: the existence of a normative tradition is both *warranted* and *demarcated* by apostolic authority. According to Athanasius, „the very tradition, teaching, and faith” of the universal church from the beginning is that „which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept” (*Ad Serapion*, 28). The unique role and authority of the apostles demarcates the tradition received from the Lord, which then becomes normative in the life of the universal church *because of* this unique role and authority.

My other initial hypothesis had to do with the *nature* of apostolic authority in its relationship to tradition. I presumed that apostolic authority on the one hand meant an authentic representation and embodiment of the tradition received from Jesus, on the other hand a legitimacy for authoritatively defining this tradition. Apostolic authority is, therefore, a *ministerial* authority (submitted to the earliest tradition given by Jesus) and a *magisterial* authority (the only legitimate definition of this tradition) at the same time.

The goal of my doctoral thesis was a testing of these hypotheses, in order to achieve a deeper understanding of the dynamics between apostolic authority and the earliest tradition of the church.

II. Research methodology

I divided the subject into three parts. First, I researched the origin of the concept of apostle, especially whether it is a tenable view that it originated from Jesus. In this part I survey the research history of the topic, and examine if it is warranted to speak of a uniform apostle concept in the New Testament (or, if it is not a uniform concept, whether it is a result of development or a diversity that existed from the beginning). I also examine if it is possible to demarcate a narrower circle of authoritative apostles in the New Testament, and if yes, who belonged to this circle.

The second part of the thesis is about tradition. The last two centuries of New Testament research have posed a challenge to the traditional view that understood apostolic preaching as a reliable bridge connecting the tradition handed over by Jesus and that preserved by the fathers. Of the two challenges one is the Bauer-hypothesis on the plurality of tradition (and the revisions of Koester, Dunn, and others), the other is the form-critical interpretative tradition originally developed by Bultmann and Dibelius. In this part I examine the arguments for and against the plurality of the earliest tradition, survey the studies behind the recent re-examination of the form-critical approach, and argue that it is key to understand that there existed an authoritative tradition which was inseparably connected to apostolic authority.

In the third part I focus on a closer examination of this authority. After giving an overview of the research history on apostolic authority, I explore the existence of authoritative apostles who could warrant the emergence of a normative tradition out of potential Jesus-traditions. I also examine whether and how these apostles could contribute to the formation of a legitimate, reliable, and normative tradition. Then, through the examples of Peter and Paul, I examine what dynamics characterized the relationship of this apostolic authority to early tradition.

My research is primarily *historical* and, because I approach history through texts, *exegetical*. Its results have theological significance but my own theological convictions only minimally affected the historical research; mainly in that I do not share the Kantian (and Troeltschian) methodological assumptions that limit pure reason to the world of phenomena. I find this methodology, which is often called methodological naturalism, seriously constraining when we explore historical causes, therefore I insisted on my theological conviction that reality is open to supernatural causes. Right methodology in the examination of early Christian tradition cannot exclude the possibility that Jesus did make miracles, that he rose from the dead, and revealed himself after his resurrection. In other words, that the Gospel is true. The rejection of methodological naturalism allowed me to take the historical accounts of the apostles seriously, but my arguments scarcely depend on this principled decision.

The chronological and thematic *liminality* of the thesis was the single greatest difficulty I faced during my research. It was a constant threat of having to write 8-10 or even more theses to cover the entire field. I myself chose this risk because I was interested, from a *chronological* perspective, in the apostolic authority between Jesus and the New Testament canon, and, from a *thematical* perspective, in the dynamics of the relationship between tradition and apostolic authority. My topic was thus situated in the middle of a „busy

crossroads” where every road would eventually lead me far away from my chosen topic. But I was interested exactly in this meeting point so I had to construct my thesis here and defend it from spreading into a hundred different directions.

The triangle of *apostles*, *tradition*, and *authority* staked out the boundaries of the space within which I could examine the dynamics of these three. The correctness of my thesis depends partly on whether I managed to utilize reliable resources in areas that connected to but were beyond my topic, and whether I made the right relationships among those studies that mark out the triangle of my particular examination.

III. Research results and theses

The following theses can be formulated from my research with regard to apostolic authority and its relationship to the earliest tradition of the church.

1. In the primitive church there clearly were authority figures who played a crucial role in the development of an authoritative – legitimate, reliable, and normative – tradition. Irrespective of the diversity of the apostle concept, we should recognise a narrower circle of apostles to which these authority figures belonged. The authoritative tradition of the church is the tradition of this circle, because their remembrance of the words and deeds of Jesus was considered to be more weighty than the teaching of others. It is especially significant that the apostles were viewed as the traditionist „elders” of the universal church.

2. Paradoxically, the other significant implication of my thesis is that the dilemma of where *exactly* the circle of apostles ended is *not* significant. Those authority figures who without question belonged to this circle could demarcate and control the apostolic tradition which they themselves had received from Jesus. Apostolic authority is personal authority but only in the sense that the apostles were legitimate, reliable, and normative witnesses to the gospel tradition of which they were ministers. The focus was not on the persons of the apostles but on the tradition of Jesus of which they were witnesses. That is why it is not apostolic *authority* but apostolic *tradition* that ultimately counts, the tradition of which they could testify with unique authority.

3. If apostolic tradition is more important than the demarcation of the circle of the apostles than it is of little importance that most of the tradition fixed in the New Testament *has not been formulated by the Twelve*, but such people as Mark, Luke, James, Jude, or Paul. If apostolic tradition is more important than people, the real issue is whether the tradition is in harmony with the teachings of the Twelve, not whether they themselves wrote it down.

4. The role of Simon Peter („the Rock” who represents the confessing witness of the Twelve) and that he gave „the right hand of fellowship” to Paul, and that according to the early church he was behind the Gospel of Mark, is crucial in this regard. It is also significant that the early church presumed the authority of Paul behind Luke. The formation of the New Testament Scriptures seem to confirm that the most important thing was not the magisterial authority of the Twelve but the tradition about which credible and authorized people witnessed, people who enjoyed the trust of the apostolic circle, especially Peter and the Twelve.

5. The New Testament canon (the deposit of apostolic tradition) shows the impact of the same four people whom the early church considered to be the most authoritative apostles: the three „pillar-apostles” (Peter, James, and John), and Paul. Their roles in the formation of the New Testament canon could reflect the historical development of the early church, but it can simply demonstrate that the most authoritative apostles of the early church played the most significant roles in the fixation of the apostolic tradition. Whatever the reason, it is a striking fact that behind the New Testament tradition we find the most authoritative figures of the primitive church, people who had received their authority from Jesus himself.

6. The earliest tradition of the church, therefore, does not consist of subjective fragments of memory, or editorial purposes reflecting the interests and life situations of anonymous communities, as many who accepted the form-critical assumptions believed, but it consists of authoritative testimonies. There seems to be no original pluralism out of which one single authoritative tradition would have emerged. Tradition had a backbone that sustained it from the beginning and created continuity between the person of Jesus and the congregations of the fast-growing church. This backbone is the memory-based witness of the apostles.

7. The pillars of tradition are the authoritative eye-witnesses, the personally authorized envoys of Jesus Christ, the unique presbyters of the universal church, the new covenant prophets of Jahve, the interpreters of the „Jesus event”, the *apostles*. The earliest tradition of the church is *their* tradition. That is why it was considered to be a legitimate tradition, a reliable tradition, and was received as a normative tradition. The church is built on the confessing testimony of Simon Peter and the other apostles. This testimony is once for all because it is inseparably connected to the earthly ministry of Jesus and reliably passes on that which was received from him (Mt 28,19).

The results of my study are in harmony with the words of Athanasius. The very tradition, teaching, and faith of the universal church is „that which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept.” (*Ad Serapion*, 28)