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BEHIND THE GOSPELS

Understanding the oral tradition

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Note to the reader

The area bounded by the Negev to the south, Lebanon to the north, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, and the land on either side of the River Jordan to the east has gone under many names in the course of its history. In many parts of the Bible it is referred to as the land of Israel, but as a geographical term 'Israel' is ambiguous since it could refer either to the kingdom of David and Solomon or to the northern kingdom that subsequently split away from the southern kingdom of Judah. In a first-century context, which is what this book is concerned with, 'Israel' can scarcely be used as a geographical term at all, since there was no such political entity and the term 'Israel' tended to be used to refer to the covenant people as a whole. Nevertheless there were still a significant number of Jews living in what their Scriptures referred to as the Promised Land, and some term is needed, as both a noun and an adjective, to refer to this area (as opposed to other parts of the Roman Empire where mainly Greek-speaking diaspora Jews lived). In first-century terms, the area in question is roughly that covered by Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, and possibly parts of Peraea, Idumaea and the Decapolis, but this is an impossibly clumsy locution (and would become even more so as an adjective). In this book I therefore follow well-established scholarly convention and use the terms 'Palestine' and 'Palestinian' as the noun and adjective for this geographical area, without intending any implications thereby for the present-day Middle East. Although the Romans did not give the name 'Syria Palaestina' to a province covering this area until after the second Jewish revolt in 135 CE, Greek and Roman authors were already using the name 'Palestine' in the first century. Moreover, the first-century Jewish authors Philo and Josephus both use the Greek name 'Palaistinē' of the region (see, for example, Josephus, *Against Apion*, 168–71, where Josephus is commenting on Herodotus' much earlier use of the name). The scholarly convention adopted here is thus consistent with the usage of the time period to which it refers, and in no way derivative of the name 'Palestine' used of the state that existed as a British Protectorate between 1922 and 1948.

Abbreviations

||	Synoptic or other parallel text
AJT	*Asia Journal of Theology*
Ant.	Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
Conf.	Augustine, *Confessions*
ETL	*Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses*
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
Hist. eccl.	Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSHJ	*Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus*
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
J.W.	Josephus, *Jewish War*
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
OT	*Oral Tradition*
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersungen zum Neuen Testament

Introduction

New Testament scholars have long supposed that between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels, Jesus' words and deeds were handed down by word of mouth in something called 'oral tradition'. This has never been to deny a possible role for written documents as well; hypothetical texts such as Q, miracle-story collections and sayings collections have long been proposed. The point is rather that the transmission of Jesus material by word of mouth is assumed to have played a major role in the formative stages of the Jesus tradition, and that this 'oral tradition' can be invoked as a full or partial explanation of the material available to the Evangelists (the people who wrote the Gospels).

While it is likely that the Evangelists also had written sources available to them, this book is not concerned with the question of source criticism, nor with that of the literary relationship between the Gospels, otherwise known as the Synoptic Problem. For the purposes of this book we shall assume the priority of Mark (i.e. that Mark was the first to write a Gospel and that both Matthew and Luke used his Gospel as a source) and leave open the question of 'Q' (the other source supposedly used by Matthew and Luke for the material they have in common that does not appear in Mark), except to the extent that other scholars refer to it.

For much of the last century the dominant model of oral tradition among New Testament scholars was that supplied by form criticism. As will be argued in Chapter 2 (and subsequently), it is a model that has several flaws, but it nevertheless continues to supply many New Testament scholars with their default assumptions about oral tradition, even when they have abandoned form criticism as a method. It is not as if no alternative models are available, however; the study of oral tradition has moved on a long way since form criticism represented the cutting edge of New Testament scholarship, and quite a few New Testament scholars have engaged with these developments, as we shall see. It is rather that even after all this time their collective efforts have not yet fully exorcised the form-critical ghost from the scholarly mindset. The present book represents one more attempt to do so. It also aims to inform readers who may not be all that familiar with developments in thinking about the oral tradition behind the Gospels about the various proposals currently on offer.

At a first approximation these may be classified into five approaches: the rabbinic model (associated particularly with Birger Gerhardsson; see Chapter 3), the media contrast model (Werner Kelber, Chapter 4), the model of informal controlled oral tradition (Kenneth Bailey, Chapter 5), the memory model (several contemporary scholars; see Chapters 6 and 7), and the eyewitness model (Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham, Chapter 8). On closer examination, however, three of these models (the media contrast model, the informal controlled tradition model and the memory model) will be found, with some adjustment, to converge on a broadly similar approach.

As should soon become apparent, however, 'oral tradition' is a blanket term covering a wide variety of phenomena. It would be a mistake to suppose that 'oral tradition' refers to some kind of monolithic process that operates everywhere and at all times in exactly the same way. It may also be a mistake to assume that the same model of oral tradition applies equally well to all phases of the transmission of the Jesus material; this is quite unlikely to have been the case, and since we lack any direct access to what took place we certainly cannot know it to have been the case. This is a further reason for considering several models of oral tradition in this book; even if one approach turns out to be the most promising overall, it is important to be aware of other approaches and likely that each approach can contribute something towards our overall understanding.

The main task of this book is thus to present its readers with the principal lines of thinking about the oral tradition behind the Gospels (although it may turn out that 'memory' proves to be a more helpful category than 'oral tradition' and that the use of the preposition 'behind' is questionable in this context). Chapter 9 will attempt a couple of probes into the tradition as a way of testing the models on offer, and Chapter 10 will round off the discussion with a number of conclusions. But before launching into a discussion of the various models of oral tradition on offer, it will be helpful to provide the reader with some general orientation. This the first chapter will attempt to do by sketching what 'oral tradition' might mean in the context of the media situation of the first-century Roman Empire.

1

The ancient media situation

What is oral tradition?

Oral tradition is always something spoken, but not everything spoken is oral tradition. To call something oral *tradition* is to imply that it has been handed on over a period of time. It thus implies at least some degree of stability in what is handed on so that one can meaningfully talk of the same tradition at different points in time. The great majority of what is spoken is too ephemeral ever to become oral tradition. Everyday conversation is not oral tradition. Neither is casual rumour or gossip of the sort that is either quickly forgotten or rapidly distorted beyond recognition. Even if occasionally these things may become the starting point of an oral tradition, they are not themselves oral tradition.

Oral tradition is also to be distinguished from oral *history*. According to Jan Vansina, oral tradition is that which is passed down from one generation to another, or persists over a number of generations, while oral history (or reminiscence) is what you get if you ask eyewitnesses (or those whom they have informed within living memory) for their recollections.[1] This sharp dichotomy has been questioned,[2] and Vansina's requirement that something only counts as oral tradition if it has been passed down between generations is probably too restrictive, but the distinction is nevertheless not without point. To survive, an oral tradition has to be both memorable and significant to the society or group that transmits it, which means among other things that it must be shaped in such a way as to allow it to endure. Personal reminiscences do not operate under the same constraints, and may be relatively shapeless, especially if they are being produced spontaneously from episodic memory (someone's personal recollection of what took place). The distinction is not absolute, however. For one thing, oral history may be in the process of becoming oral tradition. For another, the psychological and social factors that shape oral tradition can also act

[1] Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985), 12–13.

[2] Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, 22; ed. P. Burke and R. Finnegan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85–94.

on individual memories. People tend to relate their memories according to the narrative forms current in their culture. If an eyewitness habitually narrates his or her account of a salient event, it may undergo the same kind of shaping that an oral tradition would. In some cases an eyewitness may deliberately shape an account with the intention of initiating an oral tradition. A teacher might do so to help ensure the survival of his or her words (as, for example, Birger Gerhardsson argues; see Chapter 3).

Oral tradition is closely related to memory. In order to survive as oral tradition it must be memorable, and particular individuals must remember it. It also forms one part of the social or collective memory of the group to which the tradents (people who hand on the tradition) belong. But it is only one aspect of social memory, which can also include monuments, commemorative ceremonies, rituals, beliefs, ways of behaving and, not least, written texts.[3] In the context of the first-century Mediterranean, oral tradition is thus far from a purely oral phenomenon uncontaminated by any other medium of communication; it is rather but one factor (albeit often the dominant one) of a complex interplay of memory, orality and scribality (the use of texts in a pre-print culture). In the remainder of the chapter we shall examine the second and third of these factors a little further, returning to the first in Chapter 6.

Some characteristics of orality and oral tradition

Speech and writing may become intertwined in a number of ways (for example someone may write down what was originally spoken or recite what was originally written), but the two media are nevertheless distinct, and at a first approximation one may list the following ways in which speech differs from writing.

First, unlike a written or printed text, speech is an event, not a thing. The speaker speaks, and while he or she speaks, the speech event unfolds in time; when the speaker stops speaking, the sound of his or her voice falls silent, the speech event fades into the past, and there is nothing left to examine (today we could record the speech electronically, but that possibility did not exist in antiquity).

Second, speech is heard, not seen. Even while it is going on, it cannot be examined. Attending to it fully while it is being spoken allows little

[3] See, e.g., Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Themes in the Social Sciences; ed. J. Dunn, J. Goody, E. A. Hammel and G. Hawthorn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (tr. David Henry Wilson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–107.

time for critical reflection on what is being said. Once it is over, it is no longer directly available for reflection. To the extent that it lives on at all, it lives on only in memory (where, to be sure, it can be critically assessed after the event if it has been sufficiently well remembered).

Third, what is remembered of speech will vary depending on a whole host of factors, but one is most unlikely to remember every word spoken in a lengthy conversation or performance. What may stick in memory is the gist of what was said, or the impression made by the speaker, or particularly striking turns of phrase. In recalling what was said on a future occasion, one will most likely reconstruct it from remembered fragments filled in by one's own imagination and grasp of the speech conventions employed. That said, some kinds of speech are rather easier to remember with reasonable accuracy (for example short poems, witty aphorisms and the like), and oral traditions are typically shaped to be memorable.

Fourth, speech (in a situation devoid of electronic media) always involves immediate face-to-face interaction with an audience of one or more other people. What is said will be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by verbal and visual feedback from that audience (including gestures and facial expressions), and by the manner in which the speaker tailors his or her message to the audience; moreover, what is heard will be filtered through the audience's expectations.

Fifth, a speech act always takes place in a particular social situation, which may be more or less formal (for example, a casual conversation is very different from a lecture), but which will always tend to constrain what can be said and how it can be said. It is obvious, for example, that bawdy limericks or lewd jokes would be quite out of place in a board meeting or Bible study group, just as a lengthy lecture would be out of place in an informal private conversation. Some speech acts, not least those involving the deliberate handing on of oral tradition, take place as performances marked off from everyday speech by a number of factors (such as the social setting and the style of language employed).[4]

Sixth, face-to-face oral communication consists of more than just words; it includes a whole range of more or less subtle cues including gesture, facial expression, bodily deportment, and, of course, the rhythm, pacing, intonation and stress with which the words are spoken. By such means a speaker may make it very clear, for example, when irony is intended,

[4] Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (reissued 1984 edn; Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1977); John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Voices in Performance and Text; ed. J. M. Foley; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–59.

or which point is being emphasized. When the words are reduced to writing, such visual cues are lost, and the message may appear much more ambiguous. Indeed, the message of a speaker can be completely falsified by repeating the same words in subsequent oral performance while totally altering the intonation and facial expression. One only has to think of the different ways in which the single word 'yes' can be uttered in response to a question, and the total misrepresentation that could result from representing a cautious, sceptical, drawn-out 'yes' as a brisk, bold affirmative 'yes'.[5]

The six points just noted apply more or less to our own experience of oral communication, but we should be wary of assuming that the distinctions they imply between orality and writing apply equally well to every kind of oral utterance and every kind of writing. In this book we are particularly concerned with speech acts that form part of an oral tradition. This is an area that has been researched and written about extensively (in the context of folklore studies and cultural anthropology, for example), but we need to be a little cautious about drawing too many sweeping generalizations, first because conclusions drawn from completely non-literate cultures may not be directly applicable to the more complex media situation of the first-century Mediterranean, and second because some of the earlier conclusions (such as those suggesting a 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy) have been challenged by subsequent work. With these caveats we may nevertheless sketch a brief outline of how oral tradition has sometimes been characterized.

Much twentieth-century thinking about oral tradition grew from the seminal work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on Homeric literature as oral poetry in connection with a study of contemporary Balkan bards. In brief and at the risk of gross oversimplification, Parry's work began from the observation that Homeric verse makes heavy use of a number of set formulas, so that, for example, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the dawn is frequently rosy-fingered, the sea wine-dark, and Achilles swift-footed, even in situations when he is not actually going anywhere. One advantage of such set formulas is that they neatly fill out one half of a Greek hexameter, and so form a useful stock of phrases for composition in performance, effectively forming the basic units of the poet's vocabulary. For according to Parry and Lord the Homeric poems were composed in performance long before they were written down. They would have been re-performed many times, but no two performances would have been exactly alike;

[5] For a broader discussion of the 'psychodynamics of orality' see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New Accents; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 31–76.

instead the poems would have been created afresh in each new performance, calling on the same stock of phrases, the same overall story outline, and the same stock of intermediate elements such as scenes following the same general outline. So, for example, more or less the same order of events is followed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* every time a banquet occurs or every time a hero dons his armour.[6]

It is knowing the stock of phrases and these intermediate and larger structures that is meant to have enabled the Homeric poets to recreate their epics in multiple performances without the aid of writing; no verbatim memorization was involved. In support of this thesis Parry and Lord carried out extensive fieldwork in Yugoslavia observing illiterate bards compose in performance in much the manner just described, the best of them well able to rival Homer at least in terms of the length of the epics produced.[7]

The oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord has met with a number of criticisms. Not least, critics have challenged the sharp divide it postulates between orality and literacy. In relation to the study of the New Testament the relevance of the Parry–Lord theory has been questioned on the grounds that the synoptic tradition is plainly not epic poetry. In Chapter 6 we shall briefly describe an attempt to generalize the Parry–Lord theory to other types of oral tradition on the basis of cognitive psychology.

Stemming in part from the work of Parry and Lord, and in part from the conviction that the use of different media (speech, writing, print, electronic devices) could have profound effects both on society and on the way individuals think, the exploration of such media differences was developed by scholars such as Jack Goody, Walter J. Ong and Eric Havelock, and taken up in New Testament studies by Werner Kelber (on whom see Chapter 4).[8] It is certainly not the case either that all these scholars are in agreement with one another or that their work has gone unchallenged, but as a

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[6] David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 210–20.

[7] Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24; 2nd edn, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1960); John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

[8] E.g. Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Themes in the Social Sciences; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986); Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Voices in Performance and Text; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

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