

THE FORMATION OF THE GOSPELS IN THE SETTING OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY: THE JESUS TRADITION AS CORPORATE MEMORY *

1. Introduction

In twentieth-century New Testament studies the advent of several new forms of criticism has furthered the state of research. Redaction criticism led to a heightened awareness of the theological significance of the Gospels. More recently, narrative criticism has provided insights into the story-world that the Gospel authors create. This appreciation of the Gospels as *theology* and *story* is something to be celebrated in the New Testament academy and it represents a corrective to form criticism that was so atomistic in its scrutinizing of individual units, attempting to peel back layer after layer of tradition instead of seeing how meaning is distributed across the horizon of the text.

Whatever the benefits of these approaches, and they are many, one cannot help but feel that something has been lost in the avalanche of modern scholarship. Regardless of what the text achieves theologically, or of what the Gospels create through an intricate narrative, or of what they evoke in readers, one must remain cognizant of the fact that the Gospel texts have an extra-textual referent beyond themselves in the historical figure of Jesus.¹ The purpose of the peculiar Gospel genre is to proclaim good news about a

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¹ Sean Freyne (*Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988], 27) writes: “A purely literary approach to Jesus the Galilean as he emerges

historical figure. Thus, whatever attraction theological and literary approaches hold, it would be to one's detriment to ignore the historical context surrounding the Gospels. My concern is to situate the Gospels in relation to the early Christian communities and in connection to the Jesus tradition underlying the Gospels. If this concern is translated into questions, one may ask: (1) Do the Gospels aim to *reflect* or to *inform* the situation of the early Christian communities? (2) What model of oral tradition best accounts for the transmission of the Jesus tradition leading towards the composition of the Gospels? It is my aim to examine these two questions in order to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between the Gospels and the early Christian communities, as well as to understand the connection between the Gospels and the historical Jesus. Furthermore, the answers given may go some way towards explaining what the Gospels writers are trying to achieve.

2. The Gospels and the Early Christian Communities

Any theory of the formation of the Gospels needs to account for three particular aspects said to have influenced their composition: (1) The hypothesis of various communities that stand behind the Gospels; (2) the role of prophets in shaping the tradition; and (3) the theological interests of the early church.

in the various gospel portraits would be not be adequate, because it would lack a critical awareness in light of our modern historical self-consciousness, namely that as historical beings we make history, and cannot therefore ignore issues in evaluating our foundational texts and their extra-textual referent.”

The first issue I wish to address is the widely held assumption that the Gospels are an anachronistic reflection of the debates and controversies of various Christian communities which have projected their circumstances onto Jesus. Alternatively, there is the view that the Gospels try to inform the situation of certain ecclesiastical groups by (re-)telling the Jesus tradition. The choice is whether to regard the Gospels as a mirror of the early church or as the story of Jesus written to instruct the early church, or perhaps as a bit of both.

The form-critical assumption about the formation of the Gospels was that, “The form of the gospel traditions is [a] narrative about Jesus but their substance is the earliest church’s expression of its own self-understanding and concerns.”² That would mean that the Gospels tell us more about the situation and disputes of the primitive church than they do about the historical Jesus. However, many of the debates within the early Christian movement (particularly stemming from the Pauline circle) are entirely absent from the Gospels: e.g. justification by faith, circumcision, tongues, baptism, status of Gentiles, criteria of apostleship, and food sacrificed to idols. All of these topics are candidates for

² Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 82. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann (*Jesus and The Word* [trans. Louise Pettibone Smith; London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1935], 12): “What the sources offer us is first of all, the message of the early Christian community, which for the most part the Church freely attributed to Jesus.” Helmut Koester (“Written Gospels or Oral Tradition?” *HTR* 113 [1994]: 297): “Form criticism begins with the presupposition that the beginning and the continuation of the tradition were the early Christian community and that therefore the oral use of materials from and about Jesus in ritual, instruction, and missionary activity of this community was the congenial life situation of everything that was remembered from and about Jesus.”

being written onto the lips of Jesus, but they are significantly missing from the Gospels.

Wright notes:

The synoptic tradition shows a steadfast refusal to import ‘dominical’ answers to or comments on those issues into the retelling of the stories about Jesus. This should put us firmly on our guard against ideas that the stories we do find in the synoptic tradition were invented to address current needs in the 40s, 50s, 60s or even later in the first century.³

Wright’s judgment is confirmed by Acts, Galatians, and 1 Peter where one observes a distinct reluctance to produce texts attributable to Jesus to resolve recurring problems.⁴ It is in a gnostic document like *Gos. Thom.* 53 where one finds a statement about circumcision placed on the lips of Jesus.⁵

A second proposition often pressed is that the Gospel writers represent the views, debates and self-understanding of their own “communities” which are read back into

³ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (COQG 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 422; cf. C. F. D. Moule, *The Phenomenon of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1967), 43-81; Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 104-6.

⁴ E.P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989), 132; W. A. Strange, “The Jesus-Tradition in Acts,” *NTS* 46 (2000): 59-74.

⁵ It seems unlikely that these disputes were resolved by the time the Gospels were written. This is evidenced by the apostolic fathers and Justin Martyr who demonstrate that Jewish-Christian interaction continued to be volatile and the developing church continued to wrestle with the implications of its Jewish heritage; cf. Ign. *Magn.* 8:1; 10:3; *Phld.* 6:1; Justin Martyr, *Dial. Tryph.*

Jesus' life. The old form-critical view of Hellenistic and Jewish strands of tradition has been swapped for Marcan, Matthean, Lucan, Johannine, and even Q and Thomasine communities. These communities are conjured up by use of a variety of tools including redaction criticism, narrative criticism, and socio-scientific studies. However, the entire enterprise remains debatable as Bauckham declares:

It is difficult to avoid supposing that those who no longer think it possible to use the Gospels to reconstruct the historical Jesus compensate for this loss by using them to reconstruct the communities that produced the Gospels. All the historical specificity for which historical critics long is transferred from the historical Jesus to the evangelist's community. The principle that the Gospel informs us not about Jesus but about the church is taken so literally that the narrative, ostensibly about Jesus, has to be understood as an allegory in which the community actually tells its own story.⁶

Bauckham proceeds to question the assumption that the Gospels characterize the life and praxis of isolated and introspective communities. If Mark's Gospel was written largely for a Marcan community, how was it that Matthew and Luke have come to

⁶ Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospel for All Christians* (ed. Richard Bauckham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 20. Cf. N. T. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [COQG 2; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 136): "The community's vital interest in affirming its identity by means of telling Jesus-stories, so long regarded within some critical circles as a good reason for reducing the stories to terms of the community, is in fact nothing of the kind." Note also the study by Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 2000), 106-15.

possess a copy of Mark relatively quickly (i.e. AD 70-85)? Did Matthew and Luke think that their Gospels would circulate as widely as Mark's had done?⁷ The genre of the Gospels, if analogous to Bi/oj, might potentially include a wider audience than a small house church. Yet unlike the Greco-Roman Bi/oj, the Gospels do not appear simply to extol the virtues of the protagonist, but rather they are exhortatory and evangelistic as well. Bauckham adds that the most obvious function of writing is to communicate with readers when the author is unable to be present.⁸ He goes on to argue that the early Christian movement did not consist of scattered and self-sufficient clusters of believers, but comprised a network of communities in constant and close communication with each other.⁹ Bauckham combs through the New Testament and early Christian literature and presents a portrait of the early Christian movement as highly mobile, where different churches knew and interacted with one another, Christian leaders moved around frequently, and churches exchanged letters and messengers. He concludes:

[T]he early Christian movement was a network of communities in constant communication with each other, by messengers, letters, and movements of leaders and teachers – moreover, a network around which Christian literature circulated easily, quickly, and widely – surely the idea of writing a Gospel purely for the

⁷ Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" 12-13.

⁸ Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" 28-29.

⁹ Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" 30.

members of the writer's own church or even for a few neighboring churches is unlikely to have occurred to anyone.¹⁰

I would add that if one is attempting to validate a certain teaching, enforce a particular vision of community, marginalize an opposing faction, or dictate a theological agenda, then writing a Gospel (i.e. a connected narrative about Jesus) appears to be a rather convoluted way of doing it and is highly susceptible to being misunderstood. Why not write a list of community rules (1QS, CD, 4QMMT), quote the Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly in an epistle (1 Clement, Hebrews), compose a list of sapiential sayings of Jesus (e.g. Gospel of Thomas, Q), make some creative exegetical notes (Targums, Peshet, Midrash, Allegory), appeal to episcopal authority (Clement, Ignatius), or even refer to sayings of venerated leaders (Mishnah)? One would be more inclined to think that oral instruction or an epistle would be a far more direct and effective medium. Goodman dismisses large-scale creativity in the Gospels due to “the oddness of biography as a vehicle for theological didacticism.”¹¹ In other words, the Gospels are a poor choice of medium for generating sectarian dogmatics.

¹⁰ Bauckham, “For Whom Were the Gospels Written?” 44. For a critique of Bauckham’s view see, Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 25-28; David C. Sim, “The Gospels for All Christians? A Response to Richard Bauckham,” *JSNT* 84 (2001): 3-27; Brian J. Incigneri, *The Gospel to the Romans: The Setting and Rhetoric of Mark’s Gospel* (BIS 65; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 32-34; Philip F. Esler, “Community and Gospel in Early Christianity: A Response to Richard Bauckham’s Gospels for All Christians,” *SJT* 51 (1998): 235-48; and Bauckham’s counter response to Esler in, “Response to Philip Esler,” *SJT* 51 (1998): 249-253.

¹¹ Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea* (1987), 22-23, cited in Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 3.

There is also a feeling of circularity to the arguments that many passages in the Gospels are allegories of a church's *Sitz im Leben*. To give one example, Matt 10:5-6 ("Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, nor enter a city of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel") is often seen as a creation by a Jewish Christian group opposed to the Gentile mission.¹² Sanders acknowledges that no primitive Christian group opposed the Gentile mission; only the basis of the Gentiles' entry into the church was disputed. Yet in the very next sentence Sanders remarks that behind Matt 10:5-6 stands a group, not mentioned in Galatians or Acts, which did oppose the Gentile mission.¹³ Furthermore, we are asked to postulate the existence of such a group based exclusively upon the evidence of the text itself.¹⁴ This hypothetical and unattested Jewish

¹² Rudolf Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; 2d ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 155-56, 163; Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament* (trans. Frank Clarke; London: SCM, 1965), 54-56; Martin Hengel, "The Origins of the Christian Mission," in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1983), 62; Charles H. H. Scobie, "Jesus or Paul? The Origin of the Universal Mission of the Christian Church," in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honour of Francis Wright Beare* (eds. Peter Richardson and John C. Hurd; Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1984), 56; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 220; C. K. Barrett, "The Gentile Mission as an Eschatological Phenomenon," in *Eschatology and the New Testament: Essays in Honor of George Raymond Beasley-Murray* (ed. W. Hulitt Gloer; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson 1988), 68; John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus: Companions and Competitors* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 542-44; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; trans. James E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 2001), 72, n. 15.

¹³ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 220.

¹⁴ Richard Bauckham (writing the forward in James LaGrand, *The Earliest Christian Mission to 'All Nations' in the Light of Matthew's Gospel* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999]) comments: "it has also become reasonably clear in recent scholarship that there is no evidence for a group in the early church

group which was resolutely opposed to the inclusion of the Gentiles becomes a rather convenient source to which all the particularistic tendencies of the Jesus tradition can be attributed. In addition, one is still stuck with explaining why Matthew, who is clearly in favour of a Gentile mission, has retained such an ethnocentric logion.

Arguments for the provenance of the Gospels are also far more problematic than many are willing to admit. For example, scholars frequently debate whether Mark was written in Rome or Syria, but the truth of the matter is that it could have been composed almost anywhere in the Roman Empire.¹⁵ If Mark's origin can be construed as being as broad as this, could the same be said of his intended readership? For these reasons, anyone who wishes to the term "Marcan community" in inverted commas is perhaps wise to do so.

which opposed taking the Christian gospel to the nations. Not even the most conservative Jewish Christians are elsewhere represented as saying what Matthew 10:5-6 says, while even those in the Jerusalem church who insisted that converts be circumcised and obey the whole Torah (a crucially different policy from Matthew 10:5-6) were only briefly influential at all. We are left hypothesizing a Jewish Christian group who could plausibly have originated the saying of Jesus in Matthew 10:5-6 solely on the evidence of this text itself." I would argue, with Borg, that the Jewishness of early Christianity was not devotion to a continued particularism but that it expressed a hope that Israel might yet respond. Cf. Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (2d ed.; Harrisburg, PA: TPI, 1998), 230; Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (trans. Frank Clarke; London: SCM, 1959), 260, 263-64.

¹⁵ Cf. Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1991), 8. Alexander J. M. Wedderburn (*A History of the First Christians* [UBW; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004], 6) writes: "The theories with regard to the regions in which the communities of the various evangelists are to be located are too varied to allow us to assign their traditions with confidence to a particular area."

A second matter is that of Christian prophets who are often said to have added to the dominical tradition by speaking oracles on behalf of the risen Jesus, oracles which then became intermingled with sayings of the historical Jesus.¹⁶ There are indeed several passages in the New Testament such as 1 Thess 4:15-17, which comprise a prophetic “word of the Lord”. Likewise, in Rev 16:15 it looks as if a saying of the historical Jesus has been prophetically expanded (cf. Matt 24:43-44). The idea that prophetic material has accidentally become fused with sayings of the historical Jesus must remain a genuine possibility, but proving that it took place is highly problematic.

Bultmann argued that the assimilation of oracles of the risen Christ with sayings of the Jesus tradition occurred “gradually,”¹⁷ and according to Boring it occurred “finally”.¹⁸ Similarly, Hawthorne thinks that the mingling of the two materials happened at times “unconsciously”.¹⁹ This implies that a demarcation between the words of the

¹⁶ Cf. Rudolf Bultmann (*History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 127-28): “The Church drew no distinction between such utterances by Christian prophets and the sayings of Jesus in the tradition, for the reason that even the dominical sayings in the tradition were not the pronouncements of a past authority, but the sayings of the risen Lord, who is always a contemporary for the Church.” See more recently, M. Eugene Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 7-10.

¹⁷ Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 127.

¹⁸ Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus*, 31.

¹⁹ G. F. Hawthorne, “Christian Prophets and the Sayings of Jesus: Evidence of and Criteria for,” in *SBL Seminar Papers*, 8 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), 117.

risen Lord and the sayings of the historical Jesus did *originally* exist.²⁰ Boring concedes that by the time of the book of Revelation a distinction was made between the pre- and post-Easter sayings of Jesus.²¹ This probably occurred even earlier, and was facilitated by the writing of the Gospels, which set forever a distinction between the historical and prophetic sayings of Jesus. This implies that at both the commencement of the Christian movement (ca. AD 30) and by the time of the Gospel of Mark (ca. AD 70), a distinction was made between the prophetic voice of the risen Christ and the sayings of Jesus. If so, within the interim period of 40 years what is envisaged is a shift from a differentiation between prophetic utterances and historical Jesus sayings, to no differentiation between prophetic utterances and historical Jesus sayings, and then back again to a differentiation between prophetic utterances and the Jesus tradition. Such radical changes within so short a timeframe, occurring simultaneously in a variety of Christian settings, seem improbable.

Dunn has argued that the New Testament, Jewish literature, and later Christian writings show a healthy degree of skepticism towards prophecy.²² Luke is always careful

²⁰ Hawthorne, "Christian Prophets and the Sayings of Jesus," 110; David Hill, *New Testament Prophecy* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 162; David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), 234.

²¹ Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus*, 112-13.

²² James D. G. Dunn, "Prophetic 'I'- Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity," *NTS* 24 (1977-78): 179. Dunn states on the same page, "*Wherever we look in the comparative material of the time the distinctive character of the prophetic utterances as the saying of a prophet, or as the words of the exalted Christ is maintained, and some sort of distinction between the words of the earthly Jesus and the prophetic inspiration of the present is implicit or explicit.*" (Italics original).

to name the prophet who utters an oracle (cf. Luke 1:67-79; Acts 11:27-28; 13:1-2; 21:9-12). This should lead us to question the notion that there ever was a period when a collection of “the sayings of the risen Christ circulated without reference to who gave utterance to them”.²³ Additionally, despite the plea for a stalemate by Boring,²⁴ many scholars still assert that in 1 Cor 7:10, 12, 25, 40, Paul clearly distinguishes his own inspired utterances from sayings of Jesus.²⁵ A satisfactory reconstruction of the development of the Jesus tradition must account for both the Jewish context of the transmission of religious traditions and the charismatic dimension of early Christianity.²⁶

A third issue that warrants examination is the function of the theological interests of the Evangelists in shaping the Gospels. Perrin stated: “we must take as our starting point the assumption that the Gospel writers offer directly information about the theology of the early church and not about the teaching of the historical Jesus”.²⁷

Since the Enlightenment, history and theology have not enjoyed a cordial relationship. Osborne offers a useful description of the history versus theology debate

²³ Dunn, “Prophetic ‘I’- Sayings and the Jesus Tradition,” 179.

²⁴ Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus*, 28-29.

²⁵ Cf. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 74; Ben Witherington, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 325. For other cautious assessments of the function of Christian prophets in shaping the tradition see, Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 110-11; Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (London: SPCK, 1985), 131. Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (CBNT 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994), 360.

²⁶ E. Earle Ellis, “The Synoptic Gospels and History,” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTT 28; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 56.

²⁷ Norman Perrin, *What is Redaction Criticism?* (London: SPCK, 1970), 69.

which has largely influenced twentieth-century Gospel research.²⁸ He identifies 1900-1970 as being the period of *history or theology*, where it was attempted to reach Jesus by getting beyond the theology of the Evangelists. Kähler cultivated this dichotomy by drawing a distinction between the historical Jesus and the historic biblical Christ.²⁹ Historical research is not just a matter of finding the earliest sources and basing reconstructions on them because, as Wrede argued, Mark's Gospel is laden with the theological construct of the "Messianic Secret". The problem then is not with uncovering the earliest of the sources, but with the theological nature of the sources. It was during this period that the criterion of dissimilarity came to dominate, since it was thought necessary to regard as authentic only those sayings of Jesus that cannot be explained either by reference to the tenets of Judaism or the theology of the early church. The rise of redaction criticism followed, in which theologically laden passages were regarded as having no historical basis. Osborne characterizes the era 1970-1985 as *history and theology*, since the Gospel authors came to be seen as both historians and theologians respectively. The trend was to not regard history and theology as mutually exclusive, but as partnered together in the Gospel's composition. The third stage which Osborne identifies runs from 1985 to the present and is labeled *history through theology*. Here theology becomes the path into history. Osborne attributes this trend to the onset of the Third Quest for the historical Jesus. This "Third Quest" permits a greater role for the

²⁸ Grant R. Osborne, "History and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels," *TrinJ* 24 (2003): 7-19.

²⁹ Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ* (trans. Carl E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964).

interaction of history and theology since there is no such thing as uninterpreted history.³⁰ Josephus' interpretation of the fall of the Jewish temple as signifying that God had gone over to the side of the Romans does not mean that the event never transpired. The corollary emerging from recent scholarship is that the theological nature of the Gospels does not necessarily negate their historical value. The Gospels are not pure history with quotations marks and video footage, but neither are they the theology of the Evangelists projected onto Jesus. We have access to Jesus through the Gospels, which comprise the interpretation of the memory of Jesus. Furthermore, it is likely that the history and theological interpretations of the Jesus tradition were transmitted side by side rather than abandoned one for another at a later date by the Evangelists. The interpretative dimension embedded in the Jesus tradition does not grate against its historical character. Marshall writes:

It is clear that the basic tradition of the sayings of Jesus was *modified* both in the tradition and by the Evangelists in order to re-express its significance for new situations; it is by no means obvious that this basic tradition was *created* by the early church. Similarly, it is unlikely that the stories about Jesus and the narrative settings for his teachings are the products of the church's *Sitz im Leben*. The fact that such material was found to be congenial for use in the church's situation is no proof that it was created for this purpose.³¹ [smaller type]

³⁰ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 94-96; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 87-89; James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (New York: Doubleday 1989), 166.

³¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978), 33.

In sum, the theory that the Gospels were written about events within hypothetical “communities” rests on highly disputable grounds and is in urgent need of re-evaluation. The role of prophets in adding to the dominical tradition, though quite possible, has been largely overstated. The division between history and theology rests on a false dichotomy. Thus, *prima facie*, it appears that the Gospels endeavor to inform rather than to reflect their own social and religious setting. However, every attempt to tell a story about Jesus (ancient and modern) inevitably entails some element of autobiography.³² The Gospels write unabashedly from such a faith perspective, and not the perspective of disinterested historians. Furthermore, the selection and interpretation of the Jesus tradition as well as its literary arrangement may tell us something of the author’s concerns and the struggle and strife of Christians in the Greco-Roman world. Even so, communal needs may have colored the tradition, but did not create it.³³

3. Models of Oral Tradition

Developing a working hypothesis of how the Jesus tradition originated and was transmitted is fraught with significant problems. Indeed, the gap in our historical knowledge about the precise details of the transmission of the Jesus tradition is roughly analogous to those medieval ocean maps which marked uncharted regions as, “And here,

³² Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1945), 396-401.

³³ Birger Gerhardsson, *The Origin of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 46.

there be dragons!” We simply cannot know with any degree of certainty what is out there beyond and before the Gospels. E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies comment, “We are left with questions which we cannot precisely answer: how was the material transmitted? Why were the diverse types either preserved or created?”³⁴ Yet these problems, dragons and all may not be quite so perplexing. Such caveats are necessary, but many scholars still feel confident enough to posit some hypothesis about the formation of the tradition that has left its imprint on the Gospels.³⁵ There are of course various models on offer and the question remains as to which one has the most explanatory power.

Irretrievably Lost

³⁴ Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 136. Rowland (*Christian Origins*, 130-31): “We have to face the fact that we are very much in the dark about the origin and development of the gospel tradition.” James D. G. Dunn (*Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making Volume 1* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003], 210): “We certainly do not know enough about oral traditioning in the ancient world to draw from that knowledge clear guidelines for our understanding of how the Jesus tradition was passed down in its oral stage.”

³⁵ Cf. Rowland, *Christian Origins*, 131; Sanders (*The Historical Figure of Jesus* [London: Penguin, 1993], 60) posits a four step process accounting for the development of the Gospels: (1) units used in pedagogical contexts; (2) collection of related units into groups of pericopes; (3) proto-gospels; and (4) Gospels. John Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991], xxxi) identifies three layers to the Jesus tradition: (1) retention, recording the essential core of words, deeds, events; (2) the development of applying the pre-Gospel data to new situations and circumstances; and (3) creation of new sayings, new stories and large complexes that changed the contents in that very process.

Some scholars believe that the entire enterprise of trying to postulate a theory of the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition is a dead end. Henaut asserts that:

the oral phase is now lost, hidden behind a series of Gospel texts and pre-Gospel sources that are full-fledged textuality – a textuality that does not intend to preserve an accurate account of the oral tradition but rather to convey a theological response to a new sociological situation. The oral phase is lost because after we employ form and redaction criticism we are left with a tradition that still bears the stamp of the post-resurrection church and which cannot be traced back through its prior oral transmission.³⁶ [smaller type]

According to Henaut the problem is a textuality which forms an unassailable barrier to recovering anything of the oral tradition.³⁷ In response, Henaut's contention that the Gospels and their sources attempt to express a theological response to a sociological situation falls under the criticism raised by Bauckham. The "theological" therefore "not historical" dichotomy is unnecessary. Once more, it raises the question as to why the Gospel writers and their sources would superimpose their beliefs and aspirations onto a historical figure in whom they were not purportedly interested. Moreover, whatever problems textuality poses in terms of uncovering orality, it should be borne in mind that the intentionality of the texts is to signify an extra-textual referent in the historical ministry of Jesus. Whereas Henaut is skeptical of being able to reconstruct

³⁶ Barry W. Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels: The Problem of Mark 4* (JSNTSup 82; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 14.

³⁷ Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels*, 15, 190-91.

the oral tradition behind the Gospels, he displays very little uncertainty about his capacity to isolate Marcan sources from Marcan redaction, which strikes me as an equally formidable task. The complaint of Dunn should also be heeded. The default mindset of thinking solely in terms of literary relationships between the Gospels needs to be seriously re-examined, and allowance needs to be made for the continuing effect of oral tradition upon the composition of the Gospels.³⁸

Fluid, Free and Flexible

The form-critical school claimed that the transmission process was largely fluid.³⁹ The most recent exponents of this view come from the Jesus Seminar. According to Robert Funk, suspicion towards the Gospels is warranted on the grounds that the Evangelists expanded or overlaid sayings with interpretative comment, forced sayings to conform to their own viewpoint, borrowed from common sayings or the Septuagint and placed them on the lips of Jesus, attributed their own statements to Jesus, lessened the force of difficult sayings, reflect the struggles of the Christian community, frequently engaged in a “Christianizing of Jesus”, and projected onto him knowledge of events after his death.⁴⁰ The end product is that the “Jesus of the gospels is an imaginative

³⁸ James D. G. Dunn, “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition,” *NTS* 49 (2003): 139-75; *Jesus Remembered*, 222-23, 237-38.

³⁹ Cf. e.g. Rudolf Bultmann, “The Study of the Synoptic Gospels,” in *Form Criticism: A New Method of New Testament Research* (ed. F. C. Grant; New York: Harper, 1962), 7-75.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), 21-25.

theological construct, into which has been woven traces of that enigmatic sage from Nazareth – traces that cry out for recognition and liberation from the firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories.”⁴¹ In terms of analogy for oral transmission, Funk supposes that “Passing oral lore along is much like telling and retelling a joke,”⁴² which is never retold the same. Funk also gives the example of the emergence of the urban myth of the alien landings at Roswell as indicative of how legends arise.⁴³ Both examples are given to underscore how quickly oral reports can either develop or become distorted. Even so, Funk thinks that there is a core of authentic material in the Gospels which consists of sayings and anecdotes that are short, pithy, provocative and memorable, viz., aphorisms and parables.⁴⁴

The primary strength of this approach is that it accounts for the variation that is contained in the Jesus tradition. For example, there is a band of variation in the feeding narratives of Mark and John.⁴⁵ The form-critics and the participants of the Jesus Seminar may also be correct in pointing out the overwhelming bias of the Evangelists in the Gospels and the theological nature of their work. But one still wonders if some scholars have gone too far. For instance, I would be prepared to argue that the Septuagint

⁴¹ Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 4.

⁴² Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 27.

⁴³ Robert W. Funk, *The Acts of Jesus: The Search for the Authentic Deeds of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 5-6.

⁴⁴ Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 28; Robert W. Funk, *Honest to Jesus: Jesus for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 40.

⁴⁵ On which, see James D. G. Dunn, “John and the Oral Gospel Tradition,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansborough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 363-64.

functioned as the *interpretive grid* rather than the *creative pool* for the Evangelist's handling of the Jesus tradition, particularly in the passion narratives.⁴⁶ Funk's appeal to party jokes and Roswell as analogies of the transmission process is spurious. The earliest Christians attached more weight and authority to Jesus' words than Funk envisages. For case in point, the reference to Jesus as "the only teacher" (Matt 23:8; cf. John 13:13), statements of the necessity of putting Jesus' teachings into practice (Luke 6:47-49/Matt 7:24-27; John 14:15-24; 15:7), and warnings about being ashamed of Jesus' words (Mark 8:38; 13:31) accentuate the authority of his teachings.

Rabbinic Parallels

Another approach to the oral tradition has emerged from a number of Scandinavian (and German) scholars who argue for the fixation of the tradition according to rabbinic models of pupils memorizing the teachings of their instructor.⁴⁷ According to

⁴⁶ Cf. J. B. Green, "Passion Narrative," in *DJG* (eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992), 602-3; Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 60-61; Craig A. Evans, "The Passion of Jesus: History Remembered or Prophecy Historicized?" *BBR* 6 (1996): 159-65; Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 106-8. Contra Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, 372.

⁴⁷ Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970); Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity: With Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998); *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979); *The Gospel Tradition* (Lund: Gleerup, 1986); "The Path of the Gospel Tradition," in *The Gospels and the Gospel* (ed. Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 75-96; *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2001); Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*

Riesenfeld, the teaching of Jesus was a “holy word” that was passed on like halachic material in the Mishnah through “rigidly controlled transmission,” and it was “regulated by firmly established laws”.⁴⁸ Riesenfeld admits that transformations and additions did transpire in the tradition, but he surmises that, “The essential point is that the outlines, that is, the beginnings of the proper genus of the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, were memorized and recited as holy word. We should be inclined to trace these outlines back to Jesus’ activity as a teacher in the circle of his disciples.”⁴⁹

Gerhardsson attempted to draw a correlation between transmission of the Jesus tradition and proto-rabbinic methods of teaching which laid strong emphasis upon memorization. He asserts that memorization was a general feature of rabbinic and Hellenistic education, “The general attitude was that words and items of knowledge must be memorized: *tantum scimus, quantum memoria tenemus!*”⁵⁰ Memorization preceded

(WUNT 2.7; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1981); “Jesus as Preacher and Teacher,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 185-210; Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (CBNT 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994). Cf. Peter H. Davids, “The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition: Twenty Years After Gerhardsson,” in *Gospel Perspectives Volume 1: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (eds. R. T. France and David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 75-99; Ben F. Meyer, “Some Consequences of Birger Gerhardsson’s Account of the Origins of the Gospel Tradition,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 424-40.

⁴⁸ Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, 15-16.

⁴⁹ Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, 26.

⁵⁰ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 123-24.

comprehension in rabbinic pedagogy.⁵¹ Repetition, condensation, and use of mnemonic techniques were all part of the didactic tool box.⁵² Gerhardsson goes on to argue that Jesus taught like a rabbi, and that “He must have made his disciples learn certain sayings off by heart; if he taught, he must have required his disciples to memorize.”⁵³

The appeal to rabbinic parallels as providing the model for the transmission of the Jesus tradition has drawn severe criticism.⁵⁴ First, Martin Hengel has effectively argued that the rabbi-pupil model cannot be projected on to Jesus and his summons to discipleship. Jesus’ leadership style is firmly oriented towards that of a charismatic prophet rather than that of a rabbi or scribe.⁵⁵ In fact, Mark 1:22; Matt 7:29 say that Jesus did not teach as the scribes did.⁵⁶ Second, a stringent and formally controlled tradition

⁵¹ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 126-27.

⁵² Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 136-70; *Tradition and Transmission*, 17; *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition*, 19-20.

⁵³ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 328; “The Path of the Gospel Tradition,” 85.

⁵⁴ Moreton Smith, “A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition,” *JBL* 82 (1963): 169-76; W. D. Davies, “Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach to the ‘Gospel Tradition’,” in *Neotestamentica et patristica: eine Freundesgabe, Herrn Professor Dr. Oscar Cullmann zu seinem 60. Geburtstag uberreicht* (NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962), 14-34; Jacob Neusner, “The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before A.D. 70: The Problem of Oral Transmission,” in *The Origins of Judaism, Volume II. The Pharisees and Other Sects* (New York: Garland, 1990), 160-62; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 15; Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 129-32, Henaut, *Oral Traditions and the Gospels*, 41-53; Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 8-14, 17.

⁵⁵ Martin Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (trans. James C.G. Greig; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 42-57; C. K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1967), 9-10.

⁵⁶ Smith, “A Comparison,” 172.

does not adequately explain the breadth of variation that has emerged in the Jesus tradition. Gerhardsson and company are aware of this charge, but explaining these variations the way they do (e.g. apostolic redaction or derivation from various schools)⁵⁷ is not entirely convincing. Third, there is little evidence of a setting in which such systematic memorization occurred.⁵⁸ Riesenfeld's suggestion that Paul spent his three years in Arabia committing the Jesus tradition to memory seems far-fetched.⁵⁹ The same could be said of Riesner's suggestion that the reference to Jesus' house in Mark 2:1; 3:20; 9:33 refers to Jesus' school of teaching.⁶⁰ Byrskog posits a Matthean school that focused on Jesus as teacher and applied his teachings to their community life with the result that the transmission was careful and controlled.⁶¹ Although some memorization probably occurred during Jesus' teaching ministry, the itinerant and urgent nature of Jesus' mission meant that there was no time to be wasted on systematic impartation of encyclopedic knowledge when other villages desperately had to hear the gospel of the kingdom.⁶²

⁵⁷ See Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 334-35; *Tradition and Transmission*, 37-40; "The Path of the Gospel Tradition," 78-79.

⁵⁸ Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*, 9-10; Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, 142.

⁵⁹ Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, 17-18.

⁶⁰ Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, 437-39.

⁶¹ Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 235, 329, 401.

⁶² Crossan (*The Historical Jesus*, xxxi): "Jesus left behind him thinkers not memorizers, disciples not reciters, people not parrots."

Fourth, the notion that the post-resurrection apostles formed a *collegium* and controlled the tradition is clearly contestable.⁶³

Nevertheless, this perspective has been dismissed somewhat prematurely. Many have wrongly criticized Gerhardsson for reading later rabbinic perspectives back into the pre-AD 70 period.⁶⁴ Gerhardsson acknowledges that at the time he wrote there was a more optimistic view of how far back the rabbinic traditions go. Even so, he maintained that the rabbinic methods of transmission in their mature form could *not* be traced back earlier than the destruction of Jerusalem (AD 135) or even to the destruction of the Temple (AD 70). He always distinguished between Tannaitic and Amoraic rabbis, mentioned the name of a rabbi to whom a text was attributed, and saw Rabbi Aqiba as a definite marker in the transitional period.⁶⁵ Gerhardsson's point is that although the

⁶³ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 214-25, 329-33; *Tradition and Transmission*, 35-36; cf. Davies, "Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach", 25-27; Davids, "The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition," 87; Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 17.

⁶⁴ See Smith, "A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition," who has been (unfortunately) highly influential in attacking Gerhardsson's thesis. Note also the penitent apology of Neusner for misrepresenting Gerhardsson in his initial review of *Memory and Manuscript*, as well as Neusner's scathing attack on Smith in the preface to the 1998 edition of *Memory and Manuscript*. Gerhardsson ("The Path of the Gospel Tradition," 85) pleads: "I never pictured two four-cornered blocks, one rabbinical and the other early Christian, and said: these two are twins. I have never said that Jesus was only a rabbi, still less that he was a rabbi of the late Tannaitic type; that the disciples built a rabbinic academy in Jerusalem and that the gospel tradition was a ready-made entity which Jesus drilled into the disciples' memories and which they only had to repeat and to explicate."

⁶⁵ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, xii, 77-78; *Tradition and Transmission*, 14; "The Path of the Gospel Tradition," 85.

pedagogical techniques were refined after AD 70 and 135, the essentials of the rabbinic method are traceable to an earlier period.⁶⁶ He urges that the “basic elements of pedagogics” were not broken between the revolutionary period of AD 65-135. Aqiba did not invent memorization.⁶⁷

One also observes rabbinic-like terminology in the New Testament with the references to *para&dosij* (“tradition”). Similarly, the use of *paradi/dwmi* (“I deliver”) and *paralamba&nw* (“I receive”)⁶⁸ in relation to teachings and instructions corresponds somewhat to the rabbinic terms *rsm* (*māsar*) and *lbq* (*qibbēl*). This provides at least one significant point of contact between the transmission of traditions in early Christianity

⁶⁶ Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 76-78; *Tradition and Transmission*, 16-21.

⁶⁷ Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission*, 14, 18; “The Path of the Gospel Tradition,” 84-85.

⁶⁸ *paradi/dwmi*: Mark 7:13 (traditions of elders); Luke 1:2 (Jesus tradition); Acts 6:14 (Pharisees and oral tradition); Rom 6:17 (pattern of teaching); 1 Cor: 11.2, 23 (Lord’s Supper); 15:3-4 (account of the resurrection); 2 Pet 2:21 (holy commandments); Jude 3 (body of Christian teaching); cf. BDAG, 762-73. *para&dosij*: Matt 15:2, 3, 6; Mark 7:3, 5, 8, 9, 13 (traditions of the elders); 1 Cor 11:2 (Lord’s Supper); Gal 1:14 (traditions of the fathers); Col 2:8 (traditions of men); 2 Thess 2:15; 3:6 (traditions taught to Christians); cf. BDAG, 763. *paralamba&nw*: Mark 7.4 (traditions of the elders); 1 Cor 11:23 (Lord’s Supper); 15:1-3 (account of the resurrection); Phil 4:9 (teachings from Paul); 1 Thess 2:13 (word of God); 4:1-2 (Christian instruction); 2 Thess 3:6 (traditions from Paul); cf. BDAG, 768. Note also the verbal connections between: (1) *paradi/dwmi* and *para&dosij* in Mark 7:13; 1 Cor 11:2. (2) *paradi/dwmi/para&dosij* and *paralamba&nw* in 2 Thess 3:6; 1 Cor 11:23; 1 Cor 15:3. See also, Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, 16; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 290-91; *Tradition and Transmission*, 7.

and rabbinic Judaism.⁶⁹ In addition, the most frequent form of address for Jesus in the Gospels is r(abbi/ (“rabbi”), and although Jesus transcends this category and fits partly into other leadership models (e.g. sage, healer, prophet, teacher), it is still an apt designation for his didactic ministry.⁷⁰ The Gospels affirm that Jesus used his disciples to transmit his teachings to others during his lifetime (Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-16; Matt 9:36-10:15), which would have required his teaching to be retained and replicated by his closest followers.⁷¹ Memorization as an instructive tool was not limited to second or third-century rabbinic practice, but was well known in the Greco-Roman world.⁷² The Gospels (Mark 7:1-15) and Josephus (*Ant.* 13.297-98) attest that the Pharisees did indeed have an oral tradition independent of Scripture. Gerhardsson and Riesner plausibly argue that its transmission possessed sufficient continuity with later rabbinic pedagogy. In support, Neusner has noted some mnemonic structures in pre-AD 70 rabbinic materials.⁷³ Consequently many scholars are taking seriously the view that, although the rabbinic didactic method belongs to a post-AD 135 era, core elements of it probably existed in the

⁶⁹ Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 12; Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (NSBT 3; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1997), 142-44.

⁷⁰ Cf. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. Irene McLuskey, Fraser McLuskey & James M. Robinson; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), 57, 83, 96-97; Bruce D. Chilton, *Profiles of a Rabbi* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); *Rabbi Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

⁷¹ Davids, “The Gospels and Jewish Tradition,” 84.

⁷² Cf. e.g. Quintilian, *Inst. Orat.* 1.3.1; 2.4.15; Seneca, *Contr.* 1. pref. 2; Plutarch, *Lib. Educ.* 13; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1.48; Xenophon, *Symp.* 3.5-6; Diogenes Laertius, *Vit.* 10.1.12; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 28; *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 1:57-62.

⁷³ Neusner, “The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before A.D. 70,” 155-56.

pre-AD 70 period.⁷⁴ Theissen comments, “Despite reservations concerning a direct transfer of rabbinic techniques of transmission to early Christianity, we must recognize that we have here a historical analogy to the process of tradition in Christianity’s earliest phase.”⁷⁵

Orality and Textuality

Werner Kelber has attempted to demonstrate the relevance of folklore and anthropological studies for study of the Jesus tradition. He asserts a radical difference between oral and written communication. In written texts the author exercises exclusive hegemony over the communicative act.⁷⁶ Unlike written texts, oral/aural communication

⁷⁴ Davids, “The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition?”; W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964), 464-80; “Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach,” 10, 33-34; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 14; Philip S. Alexander, “Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism at the Turn of the Eras,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 159-84.

⁷⁵ Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 3, n. 3. Cf. Alexander (“Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism at the Turn of the Eras,” 184): “Rabbinic models may be particularly relevant to elucidating how the early Christian groups elaborated and passed on their traditions. Comparison of the later rabbinic schools with the New Testament is, perhaps, all the more plausible because . . . rabbinic schools are not, broadly speaking, a distinctively rabbinic institution: they are an example of a cultural phenomenon widespread through the whole of the Middle East and the Mediterranean, a phenomenon established well before the rise of Christianity.”

⁷⁶ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 14-15.

results in an “oral synthesis” between speaker and audience.⁷⁷ In oral tradition the audience affects the oral performance and thereby participates in the construction of the message. This social process means, against Bultmann, that oral tradition about Jesus commenced during his life and is not strictly a post-Easter phenomenon.⁷⁸ Conversely, against Gerhardsson, Kelber maintains that “oral transmission is controlled by the law of *social identification* rather than by the technique of verbatim memorization.”⁷⁹ The oral transmission which Kelber theorizes includes both formulaic stability and compositional variability. He notes “the extraordinary degree to which sayings of Jesus have kept faith with heavily patterned speech forms, abounding in alliteration, paronomasia, appositional equivalence, proverbial and aphoristic diction, contrasts and antitheses, synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, and tautologic parallelism and the like.”⁸⁰

Kelber’s primary concern, however, is to argue for a sharp disjunction between the nature of oral performance and written texts. This leads him to postulate separate hermeneutics for both forms of communication. Kelber supposes that “the very genre of the written gospel may be linked with the intent to provide a radical alternative to a preceding tradition”.⁸¹ In criticism, many have responded that Kelber posits too great a chasm between oral and written media.⁸² It raises the question as to why and how Mark

⁷⁷ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 19.

⁷⁸ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 20-21.

⁷⁹ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 24, 21.

⁸⁰ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 27.

⁸¹ Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, xvii.

⁸² Gerhardsson, *The Gospel Tradition*, 32-57; Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels*, 73; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 202-3. See also John Halverson, “Oral and Written Gospel: A Critique of Werner Kelber,”

has retained features of oral communication in his text if the two mediums were so incompatible. In other places one gets the impression that the Gospel writers have written their accounts in oral mode. Regardless of how significant Mark was in textualizing the Jesus tradition, we should not suppose that the composition of the Marcan Gospel led to a moratorium on oral performance of the Jesus tradition, nor that the appearance of Mark necessarily domesticated and froze the Jesus tradition as a comparison of Mark with Matthew, Luke and John indicates. The bifurcation between oral and textual transmission is also needless, since any given pericope or logion may have switched back and forth from oral and written form at various stages in its transmission and amidst multiple streams of its preservation. There remains also the question of applying folklore, epics and socio-anthropological studies to the Jesus tradition. More appropriate parallels for the emergence and handling of the Jesus tradition are to be discovered in second-temple Jewish and Greco-Roman sources.⁸³

NTS 40 (1994): 180-95; L. W. Hurtado, "Greco-Roman Textuality and the Gospel of Mark: A Critical Assessment of Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel*," *BBR* 7 (1997): 91-106. H. Gamble (*Books and Readers in the Early Church* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995], 30) writes that "a strong distinction between the oral and the written modes is anachronistic to the extent that it presupposes both the modern notion of fixity of a text and modern habits of reading."

⁸³ Shemaryahu Talmon, "Oral Tradition and Written Transmission, or the Heard and the Seen Word in Judaism of the Second Temple Period," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 121-158; Philip S. Alexander, "Orality in Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism at the Turn of the Eras", 159-184; David E. Aune, "Prolegomena to the Study of Oral Tradition in the Hellenistic World," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 59-106.

Informal Controlled Oral Tradition

More recently, Kenneth Bailey has made his own contribution to the forum by proposing an alternative theory of the transmission process.⁸⁴ Bailey rejects the view of Bultmann about a radical kerygmaticizing of the tradition (informal uncontrolled tradition) and also the Scandinavian view of a rabbinic pedagogy (formal controlled tradition). Instead, he advocates a model that he labels “*informal controlled oral tradition*”.⁸⁵ On this model the tradition is transmitted informally, that is, anyone in the community can theoretically participate in the telling. It is also controlled, however, since the traditions are owned by the community. The type of material transmitted in this setting includes proverbs, story-riddles, poetry, parables, and stories of important figures in the history of the village. Allowance is made for varieties of flexibility in the tradition, ranging from “no flexibility” for poems and proverbs, to “some flexibility” for parables and recollections of historical figures where the “central threads” of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed. Finally “total flexibility” for jokes and casual news that is “irrelevant to the identity of the community and is not judged wise or valuable.”⁸⁶ This is close to Andersen’s view of oral transmission occurring in a setting

⁸⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *AJT* 5 (1991): 34-54; reprinted in *Them* 20 (1995): 4-11 [all further references are from the *Themelios* edition]; Kenneth E.

Bailey, “Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *ExpTim* 106 (1995): 363-67.

⁸⁵ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” 4; “Middle Eastern Oral Tradition,” 364.

⁸⁶ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” 7-8; “Middle Eastern Oral Tradition,” 366.

that is “structured but open”.⁸⁷ Bailey produces a wonderful range of anecdotes and illustrations (ancient and modern) drawn from his own exposure to village life in 30 years of teaching in the Middle East. When applied to Synoptic studies, he suggests that his model functioned in the villages of Palestine up to the Jewish-Roman war. Based on Luke 1:2, it appears that the carriers of the tradition were specifically authorized witnesses who assured the authenticity of the tradition until the end of the first century. What is more, the types of material that appear in the Synoptic Gospels includes those forms preserved by informal controlled oral tradition, such as proverbs, parables, poems, dialogues, conflict stories and historical narratives. Bailey concludes that “the *informal* yet *controlled* oral tradition of the settled Middle Eastern village can provide a methodological framework within which to perceive and interpret the bulk of the material before us.”⁸⁸

Several factors count against Bailey’s thesis: (1) Bailey’s analogies drawn from modern village life are no more than analogies. A more rigorous socio-anthropological study is required to substantiate Bailey’s theory. (2) For Bailey’s hypothesis to work we must assume a continuity between the transmitters or “functionaries”, “kinds of material”, “controls exercised by the community”, “techniques for introducing new material”⁸⁹ used in Middle Eastern communities and those of the early church. Yet knowledge of such variables is not certain. (3) Even if Bailey’s theory holds its own in a Palestinian environment, we still have the problem of what transpired when the tradition

⁸⁷ Øivind Andersen, “Oral Tradition,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough ; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 19.

⁸⁸ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” 10.

⁸⁹ Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition,” 6.

moved abroad to Syria and Rome where, most probably, the Gospels were written. (4) As Bailey admits, both *informal uncontrolled* and *formal controlled* models are extant in Middle Eastern settings.⁹⁰ By analogy, this may be true also in first-century Palestine, in which case the Jesus tradition could potentially have been preserved by *different models* in *different settings*, depending on the context of the author and his attitude towards the tradition.

These drawbacks should not blind us to the relative strengths of Bailey's proposal: (1) The model is far more analogous to Middle Eastern village life than compared to other models which depend upon studies of Homeric epics or folklore from Eastern Europe. (2) The type of material found in the Gospels resonates with the kind of material transmitted in an informal controlled environment. (3) Bailey also accounts for continuity and flexibility in the Jesus tradition, whereas the form-critical and Scandinavian models tend to emphasize one over the other. (4) The proposal accentuates the role of "community" in handling the tradition. (5) Bailey's model is also garnering assent among Jesus scholars who have found in it a suitable paradigm for oral transmission.⁹¹

4. A New Paradigm: Jesus in Corporate Memory

⁹⁰ Bailey, "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition," 6; "Middle Eastern Oral Tradition," 364.

⁹¹ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 135-36; Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1997), 84; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 205-10; somewhat ambivalent is Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 73 n. 280.

Whatever the potential of “informal controlled” oral tradition in explaining the shape of the Jesus tradition, this model needs to be supplemented with a theory that accounts for the subjectivity involved in passing on the tradition. The model I am espousing here, which I have labeled “Jesus in Corporate Memory,” takes its cue from Dunn’s recent work *Jesus Remembered*. Dunn attempts to establish a hermeneutic for study of the historical Jesus that avoids the futile pursuit of objective history and evades the jaws of postmodern skepticism. He states, “What we actually have in the earliest retellings of what is now the Synoptic tradition, then, are the memories of the first disciples – not Jesus himself, but the remembered Jesus.”⁹²

What validates this approach is the frequent reference to the Jesus tradition as *memory* or the description of Jesus being *remembered* in early Christianity.⁹³ This suggests that a key function of the early church was to remember faithfully the words and

⁹² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 130-31; *The Living Word* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 27-44. Note Dahl’s similar comment (“Anamnesis: Memory and Commemoration in Early Christianity,” in *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976], 28-29): “The historical critic will conclude from this that what is to be sought in the gospels is first of all the disciples’ memory of Jesus, not the life of Jesus.” See also, N. A. Dahl, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Jesus the Christ: The Historical Origins of Christological Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 94; Jens Schröter, *Erinnerung an Jesu Worte. Studien zur Rezeption der Logienüberlieferung in Markus, Q und Thomas* (WMANT 76; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1997), 1-5, 462-66, 482-86; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1999), 125-55; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 329-33; *Tradition and Transmission*, 43; *The Origin of the Gospel Tradition*, 46.

⁹³ Mark 14:9; 14:72; Luke 22:19 (= 1 Cor 11:25-26); 24:6, 8; John 2:17, 22; 12:16; 14:26; 15:20; 16:4; Acts 11:16; 20:35; 2 Tim 2:8; 2 Pet 3:2; 1 Clem 13:1-2; 46:7-8; Polycarp, *Phil.* 2:3; Justin, *Apol.* I.66.3, I.67.3; *Dial. Tryph.* 100.4; 103.8; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15. Cf. Dahl, “Anamnesis,” 25-29.

deeds of Jesus.⁹⁴ The Gospels “seek to remember in order to make Christian identity in the present possible.”⁹⁵ If this is the case then the goal of tradition-criticism needs to be overhauled. It can no longer be defined in terms of separating history from theology or identifying layers of tradition, but should be conceived as tracing the impact of a memory in the formation of early Christianity. Chilton writes:

An exegesis of the Gospels must be generative exegesis. We need to trace how things Jesus did and said generated a movement and produced a memory. That movement and memory then generated successive phases, each with its own social context, until the time the Gospels were written.⁹⁶

A further qualification should be made to Dunn’s approach, since the remembering of Jesus never happened in a vacuum. What was transmitted was more than the memory, but the act of remembering itself. The memory of Jesus was cultivated in a community context in which key individuals and the group consensus determined the veracity and continuity of the memory against prior acts of remembering and in

⁹⁴ Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 20. Cf. Henry Wansbrough (“Introduction,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* [ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991], 12): “The evidence we have been examining attests in itself a concern on the part of the earliest Christians to recall the ministry of Jesus, including not least his words and actions, and to preserve and pass on these traditions.”

⁹⁵ Theissen and Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 104.

⁹⁶ Bruce D. Chilton, *Pure Kingdom: Jesus’ Vision of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 51.

comparison with other memories of Jesus. Hence, our model is best defined as *Jesus in corporate memory*.

This view diverges from the Scandinavian approach since no appeal is made to systematic memorization. The memory is repeated informally and the control is located in community itself. Transmission is attributable to the impact of the memory upon Jesus' followers, rather than to a perception of Jesus' teaching as holy word or to memorization. The memory of Jesus is never replayed in entirely fixed or fluid form, but is performed in order to (re)produce a dramatic effect in the audience.⁹⁷

A further methodological implication is what Patterson calls the *criterion of memorability*.⁹⁸ If one grants the veracity of the description of the Jesus tradition as a living memory, perhaps initially disseminated by eyewitnesses,⁹⁹ then it is perfectly plausible that the memory of Jesus would be stamped with some kind of memorability in order to survive the attrition of time. A problem, of course, is that what is memorable may differ significantly from person to person or group to group. Nonetheless,

⁹⁷ Cf. Kelber (*The Oral and Written Gospel*, 24, 27): "Remembrance and transmission depended on the ability to articulate a message in such a way that it found an echo in people's hearts and minds." The Jesus tradition "is typecast in a fashion that lends itself to habitual, not verbatim, memorization."

⁹⁸ Stephen J. Patterson (*The God of Jesus: The Historical Jesus and the Search for Meaning* [Harrisburg: TPI, 1998]: 269): "This criterion takes into account the fact that all of what we have from Jesus would have circulated for many years orally and before (and after) it was included in an early Christian document. *That means special attention should be given to sayings, stories (or versions thereof) which appear to have certain memorable qualities: they are brief, clever, structures in threes, use catch-phrases, etc.*"

⁹⁹ On which see recently, Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History-History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2000); Richard Bauckham, "The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Traditions," *JSHJ* 1 (2003): 28-60.

Patterson's suggestion of a new index of authenticity is worthy of consideration, given the model of corporate remembrance being espoused.

Alternatively, doubts about whether the disciples or the early church accurately remembered Jesus have been raised by Funk and Crossan. According to Funk, "Much of the lore recorded in the gospels and elsewhere in the Bible is folklore, which means that it is wrapped in memories that have been edited, deleted, augmented, and combined many times over many years."¹⁰⁰ Although Crossan does not doubt that people can remember things accurately, he is at pains to emphasize that memory is not always a reliable mechanism. He states, "Memory is as much or more creative reconstruction as accurate recollection, and, unfortunately, it is often impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins."¹⁰¹ Crossan adds, "fact and fiction, memory and fantasy, recollection and fabrication are intertwined in remembering. And how nobody, including ourselves, can be absolutely certain which is which, apart from independent and documented verification."¹⁰² Crossan goes on to cite several psychological case studies which underscore the inadequacies of memory.

It should be conceded to Crossan and Funk that experience alone teaches us that people are inclined to remember outlines or frameworks rather than details. Memory is not an infallible guide and one cannot romanticize the effectiveness of oriental memory as a fall back. There are, however, several cogent reasons for dismissing the thesis that the early Christians did not "accurately" remember Jesus:

¹⁰⁰ Funk, *The Acts of Jesus*, 6; cf. Funk and Hoover, *The Five Gospels*, 28-29.

¹⁰¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 59.

¹⁰² Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 60.

(1) The examples that Crossan cites as indications of the failure of memory (e.g. someone wrongly remembering where he/she was when the Challenger shuttle crashed) pertain to events which for the individuals in question are incidental and are not tied to their beliefs and identity.¹⁰³ These events are not linked to personal or community formation. The sayings and deeds of Jesus comprised the bedrock for the self-understanding of the early Christian communities. The faith, ethics, symbols and praxis of early Christian communities were all defined and orientated around the impact that Jesus had upon them.

(2) If one envisages the closest disciples, other followers, and supporters attempting to conjure up recollections of Jesus independent of one another then the analogy with psychological studies arguably stands. To the contrary, we know that the Jesus movement formed networks and clusters of believers together in Galilee, Jerusalem, Judea, Syria, and Asia Minor, and that their memories of Jesus were retrieved in a communal context. These groups of Christians remembered Jesus not as individuals but as a community. It is the community context that provides certain controls and parameters for the extent to which memories can be augmented or developed.

(3) Nor should we think that these memories were retrieved only once or twice since the events took place. Instead, in didactic, apologetic, liturgical and polemical contexts, those memories would have been constantly recalled, not merely by an

¹⁰³ See Ernest L. Abel ("The Psychology of Memory and Rumor Transmission and Their Bearing on Theories of Oral Transmission in Early Christianity," *JR* 51 [1971]: 280), who noted a study by Schacter and Burdick which demonstrated that rumors are only remembered when the information was of interest and relevance to the subject observed.

individual, but by a community, and not merely by one community, but by many communities spread across Palestine and the Mediterranean cities.

(4) The memories of Jesus are more likely to be preserved effectively if their recall possesses a certain utility (e.g. providing content to faith, possessing practical value, providing Christian self-definition), and if several mechanisms facilitated or guided the act of remembering (eyewitnesses, imitation of Jesus, instruction in the Jesus tradition, interest in Jesus' person, literary digests). This, I would be prepared to argue, is indeed the case.¹⁰⁴

(5) Wright's contention that Jesus taught and said things in multiple instances in various locations means that acts of remembering Jesus in a communal setting already began at a pre-Easter stage by his closest followers and audience. Jesus' itinerant ministry would require that much of the same thing be said from place to place as he urgently broadcast the message of the kingdom to the string of villages he entered.¹⁰⁵

(6) Those who suggest that the disciples either forgot or falsified the picture of Jesus may effectively give fantasy free reign and conjure up all sorts of trajectories in early Christianity.¹⁰⁶ Skepticism fosters a convenient vacuum in which to invent theories of hypothetical groups who are then played off against one another. Yet, if one author's

¹⁰⁴ See further, Michael F. Bird, "The Purpose and Preservation of the Jesus Tradition: Moderate Evidence for a Conserving Force in Its Transmission," *BBR* 15 (forthcoming 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 422-24; *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 51, 170-71; Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 30; Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 334-35.

¹⁰⁶ Dahl, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," 94.

perspective contradicts that of the Gospel writer, then the onus is surely on the author to demonstrate how the Gospel writer's view came to be so thoroughly misguided.¹⁰⁷

In sum, I conclude that the model of "Jesus in corporate memory" represents a viable option in understanding the rise of the Jesus tradition. The alternative is to suppose that the earliest followers of Jesus suffered from some kind of "radical amnesia".¹⁰⁸

5. Conclusion

This study has endeavored, firstly, to understand the Gospels *horizontally* in the setting of early Christianity by examining the effect of the early church in shaping the tradition. Secondly, it has attempted to investigate the Gospels *vertically* by delving into the transmission process underlying the Gospels.

The Gospels do not appear to be purely community formulations or utterly ridden with theological impositions making access to the historical Jesus impossible. Of course, the Gospels have indeed arisen out of networks of Christians who were facing certain issues, and the Gospels are highly theological documents in their own right, stamped with the faith of the Evangelists. Essential to understanding the function of the Gospels, then, is the fact that the intentionality of the texts is to tell the story of Jesus for readers spread through-out the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, after examining all the proposed

¹⁰⁷ Stephen Fowl, "Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Quest of the Historical Jesus," *SJT* 42 (1989): 327.

¹⁰⁸ Witherington, *Christology of Jesus*, 14.

models for the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition, I have argued that the model that possesses the most explanatory power is Bailey's "informal controlled oral tradition". Yet this model needs to be supplemented with a theory of corporate remembrance, viz., a theory which characterizes the Gospels as the memory of Jesus interpreted and applied to the context of the early Christians. The term "Jesus in corporate memory" is useful as a categorization since it enables one to unify the diverse elements of bias and biography. What the Gospels produce is not the Christ of faith superimposed on to the historical Jesus; rather, they offer a dramatic representation, much like a docu-drama, of Jesus' actions in the past and his voice for the present available through the public memory of Jesus. Consequently, the memory of Jesus deposited in the Gospels bequeaths to us both authenticity and artistry, fact and faith, history and hermeneutic. The objective of the Evangelists is not to write a life of Jesus to satisfy a positivistic epistemology, but nor is it to offer an image of Jesus concocted out of thin air to be used a weapon of intra-Christian or inter-Jewish polemics. The Gospels intend to narrate a story and to evoke the significance of one called Jesus, Israel's Messiah and the world's rightful Lord.