



## Memory and the Gospel Tradition

By W. S. Taylor

If studies in the principles of remembering can throw any light on the formation of the early Gospel tradition, they will make a useful contribution to a difficult field. There does seem to be ground to hope that they can make this contribution, helping us to estimate more accurately the nature of the pre-literary Gospel records.

The oral tradition was a tradition of remembered words and deeds, so that principles of remembering were involved from the very beginning. And we fortunately have available reports of controlled psychological studies of remembering, made in conditions similar enough to those of the oral Gospel period to permit inferences from one to the other with reasonable confidence. I have in mind particularly studies made by F. C. Bartlett.<sup>1</sup> These studies dealt with the remembering of narrative material; the narrative included both narrative of events and narrative of sayings; memory of the material was checked at various intervals of time from a few weeks to several months; and the remembering occurred under normal conditions, without the distorting influence of special incentives. For reasons like these, Bartlett's conclusions may be expected to throw useful light on ways in which the disciples must have remembered the narratives of events and sayings which came to them from Christ.

### I

The conclusions to which we are led by these studies of remembering differ in many ways from the conclusions to which we have been led by the principles of form criticism. Their significance can therefore be brought out most clearly by first recapitulating the principles of form criticism and then setting over against them the principles of remembering.

Form criticism operates on the principle that the materials of the written Gospels can be divided into groups on the basis of differences

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<sup>1</sup> F. C. Bartlett, *Remembering*, Cambridge University Press, 1932.



and structure and form, and that these differences give us clues to the ways in which they developed in the pre-literary period. The differences grew out of the ways in which the elements of the Gospels were used in the day to day life of the Church, as material for preaching, for teaching, and for missionary propaganda. When used in these ways, the elements became progressively modified in the process of establishing a universalism in thought capable of maintaining a movement which had burst the bounds of Judaism and had drawn to itself people of many languages and cultures.

By analogy with the development of pre-literary forms of oral tradition in other societies, form criticism believes, we can learn something of "the laws which operate as formative factors in popular tradition,"<sup>2</sup> "certain definite principles of transformation,"<sup>3</sup> which must also have governed the development of the

oral Gospel tradition. These "laws" or "principles of transformation have a number of specific features. (1) As time goes on, the oral tradition becomes embellished by the elaboration of simple themes and by the addition of new detail. It becomes both longer and more complex. Consequently, it can be taken as virtually axiomatic that "the simpler version represents the original."<sup>4</sup> (2) As time goes on, there is a tendency for the particular to become general, and for a statement with local significance to become a statement with universal significance. In the situation faced by the expanding Church, this tendency was accentuated. (3) As time goes on, the material then changes in form, becoming more dramatic by the addition of fluid detail, by the transformation of indirect, into direct narration. (4) And, as time goes on, concepts are added which would have been unfamiliar and unnatural in the original situation.

It is claimed that in the light of principles like these, one can eliminate subjective influences and discriminate with virtual certainty between primitive and more developed strata in the oral tradition. "Indeed," says Dibelius, "the formal criteria seem to be perfectly to exclude the subjective judgment which easily makes itself a matter of experience in the examination of the historicity of the evangelical narratives. The undoubted impression that more trustworthiness belongs to certain stories than to others can be more

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<sup>2</sup> Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, Ivor, Nicholson, and Watson, 1934, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> J Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, S.C.M., 1954, p. 20,

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* p. 23.



exactly settled. . . . It can be rooted in the nature of tradition and finally become a certainty."<sup>5</sup>

## II

The oral tradition, whatever elaborations it may eventually have undergone, grew out of reminiscence, and remembering has principles of its own which are as definite and reliable as any on which form criticism depends.

Dr. Bartlett's conclusions agree with those of form criticism on one point, namely the pervasive effect of psycho-sociological influences. Dr. Bartlett insists that changes taking place in remembering, are not an individual matter. They are primarily a product of the habits of thinking, attitudes of mind, and emotional patterns created in the individual by the society of which he is a part. They clearly reflect the cultural setting to which he belongs. "The data presented . . . have repeatedly shown that both the manner and the matter of recall are often predominantly determined by social influences."<sup>6</sup> Dr. Bartlett insists also that he is concerned only with normal processes of remembering, so that what he discovers experimentally can be applied with confidence to the explanation of human reminiscence in ordinary life situations. "The long series of experiments which I have described are directed to the observation of normal processes of remembering."<sup>7</sup>

Most of Dr. Bartlett's conclusions, however, contrast sharply in their implications with the principles on which form criticism operates. There is a strong tendency, as indicated by his experiments for remembered material to be changed in the process of remembering to make it progressively more conventional, *i.e.*, to make it conform more closely to the patterns of thinking customary in the group to

which the individual belongs. "Sooner or later all such material tends to assume the form of accepted conventional representations . . . current in the group of subjects concerned." "Whenever material visually presented purports to be representative of some common object, but contains several features which are unfamiliar in the community to which the material is introduced, these features invariably suffer transformation in the direction of the familiar. "The tendency is for the unusual to be transformed or omitted".

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<sup>5</sup> Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> Bartlett, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 178, 137.



This is partly due to the fact that memory tries to make remembered material more easily understandable by assimilating it to accepted patterns of thought, and so giving it readily recognizable meaning. Bartlett uses the term *rationalization* to describe this process, which consists "in changing the relatively unfamiliar into the relatively familiar." Its general function "is in all instances the same. It is to render material acceptable, understandable, comfortable, straightforward; to rob it of all puzzling elements. As such it is a powerful factor in all perceptual and in all reproductive processes. " "It could be said that there is a constant effort to get the maximum possible of meaning into the material presented. So as maximum of meaning is understood to imply an effort to find that connection which puts a subject most at his case in reference to given story, the statement is true." "The reduction of material in a form which can be readily and 'satisfyingly' dealt with is very prominent." "It is denuded of all the elements that left the reader puzzled or uneasy. " <sup>9</sup>

The process of remembering, he says, always tends to produce a shortened and simplified version of the original. "With frequent reproduction, omission of detail, simplification of events and structure. . . may go on almost indefinitely." "When a readily recognizable form is presented, this tends to undergo simplification into genuinely conventionalized representation." When the material presented is not originally in a readily recognizable form, then once memory has reduced it to "some readily recognizable form . . . simplification sets in." <sup>10</sup>

In spite of these dominant tendencies in remembering, details of striking quality which cannot readily be assimilated into conventional patterns of thought, or which have striking meaning in themselves detached from the whole of which they are a part, are often retained for long periods with little change. There are "two general sets of conditions" in which an unusual feature "is likely to be contained. . . . The first is when a novel feature is the single unusual constituent in a relatively commonplace setting; and the second is when the peculiar characteristic is several times repeated." There is a strong tendency to preserve apparently trivial or disconnected detail of a non-representative character or in a non-representative setting." "Any element of imported culture which finds

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89, 84, 94, 86.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 185, 182.



very little background in the culture to which it comes must fail to be assimilated," and may therefore be preserved as such an isolated detail of striking quality. <sup>11</sup>

After the process of conventionalizing and simplifying has proceeded until a simple, acceptable form is well established, a period of some elaboration may set in; but the elaboration tends to be in the direction of conventional forms rather than of novel forms. "Simplification may proceed too far," he says, "when a new process, of elaboration is apt to set in." But in both the earlier simplification and the later importation, "that part of the process which is witting tends to follow the lines of current belief, or the modes of language expression which have been built up into the general communication habits of a community," while even in that part which is "unwitting, the results are extremely likely to display the same character throughout a given community." <sup>12</sup>

The general form or outline of a narrative tends to change very little, though the precise style of narration may show considerable variability. "In a chain of reproductions obtained from a single individual, the general form, or outline, is remarkably persistent once the first version has been given. At the same time style, rhythm, precise mode of construction . . . are very rarely faithfully reproduced." <sup>13</sup>

Finally, in remembering the tendency is to change the general into the particular, and to develop a concrete form wherever possible. "Nearly all the series show a strong tendency to develop a concrete form wherever possible." Even when the remembered material is concrete and particular to begin with, "its concrete character tends to be preserved and even emphasized. . . ." And where the material is not concrete and particular to begin with, "every general opinion, every argument, is speedily transformed and then omitted. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

### III

Even a quick comparison will show how striking are the differences between most of the principles of remembering, as Bartlett demonstrates them, and the principles of the transmission of narrative material which govern the conclusions of form criticism. Ac-

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 185, 125.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 185, 87, 88.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.



ording to the principles of form criticism, "the simpler version represents the original"; <sup>15</sup> according to the principles of remembering, the simpler form represents the end of a process of change. According to the former, unfamiliar material is added in the process of transmission; according to the latter, unfamiliar material is reduced in the process of remembering. According to the former, particular statements tend, with the passage of time, to become general, and local references to become universal; according to the latter, general statements almost invariably tend to become particular. Thus, if a general

statement is found in a remembered narrative, it is likely to belong to an early stage in the process of remembering. These differences in interpretation become clearer when concrete instances are examined.

The universalism of Jesus' teaching was, as Klausner points out, one of the main reasons for his rejection by the Jews. Jesus, he says, abstracted the ethical teachings of Judaism from the highly integrated system of socio-ethical duties in which they belonged, and turned them into general principles of universal applicability. This was one of the really distinctive things about Jesus' teaching, and the reason why the Jews were justified in rejecting him. <sup>16</sup> In emphasizing this universalism, Klausner puts his finger on a significant characteristic of the written Gospel narratives. How would the two approaches we have been considering explain this characteristic? Form criticism argues that as the Church moved out of its strictly Jewish environment into the wider reaches of the Graeco-Roman world, it became necessary to translate early teachings so as to free them from their local references and make them universally applicable. "Dibelius . . . associates these formal narratives with the earliest preaching of the missionaries, and, in the course of his argument, lays down the thesis that they must possess universal application since a social application in a concrete case was of no use in preaching." <sup>17</sup> The universalism, consequently, would be held to be a relatively late achievement, a product of the preaching needs of the Church.

In so far as such statements can be treated as reminiscences, however, the opposite conclusion has to be drawn. The process of remembering reduces generality, it does not increase it. The

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<sup>15</sup> Dibelius, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

<sup>16</sup> J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Macmillan, 1927, Book VIII, Ch. V.

<sup>17</sup> B. Redlich, *Form Criticism*, Duckworth, 1939, p. 55.



universalism of Jesus' teaching, therefore, in so far as it occurs in remembered material, is more likely to be attributable to Jesus himself than to be a later addition, possibly constituting one of those strikingly unusual features which cannot readily be assimilated to the familiar patterns of thinking which memory encourages, and which persist with little change.

Similarly the Gospel tradition, by the time it was reduced to writing, contained words and phrases with theological overtones which anticipated, if they did not actually express, later Christian doctrine with its Trinitarian emphasis. "For a Jew to believe such a thing during the period of the Second Temple is quite inconceivable." <sup>18</sup> From where, then, came these novel interpretations of current words and phrases?

On the principles of form criticism they are explainable as developments of the simple original narrative, added during the period of oral tradition under pressure of the needs experienced in the preaching situation, particularly as the Church faced the problem of interpreting the meaning of the Gospel to increasing numbers of people trained in Gnostic and Hellenistic, rather than Jewish, ways of thought.

Once again the principles of remembering lead to a different conclusion. Recall some of these principles. (1) Remembering always tends to reduce the unusual, where possible, to a form readily assimilable into the patterns of thinking commonly accepted in the culture to which one belongs. (2) Where elaboration takes place after a measure of simplicity has been achieved, features imported into the reminiscence will be of a kind conforming to contemporary culture patterns, rather than diverging

from them. (3) Details of the original which are so strikingly unusual that they cannot be assimilated to current culture patterns may persist in memory along with other features which do undergo change. In the light of these principles it seems clear that novel interpretations which were, in Klausner's phrase, "quite inconceivable" to a Jew, could not have been developed in a Jewish mind by unconscious elaboration during the process of remembering. In so far as they are a part of a remembered tradition, they have to be explained as an original detail which persisted because unassimilable in the ordinary way to contemporary patterns of thought.

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<sup>18</sup> Klausner, *op. cit.*, p. 377.



#### IV

It may be argued that Bartlett's experiments were conducted in a peaceful society, free from tensions and conflicts liable to disrupt the ordinary processes of remembering, and that his conclusions cannot, therefore, be applied to the Jews of Jesus' day, who lived under pressure of constant tension and conflict, due both to the ferment of new Hellenistic ideas and to their continuing hatred of the foreign ruler.

Though the situation in which Bartlett's study was made does differ in these respects from the situation in which the first Christians lived, another study of remembering, based on Bartlett's, was made in a setting very similar to that of the first Christians. The subjects in this study were Hindu students in a college in India in the 1940's. <sup>19</sup> Their background patterns of thought were formed by the orthodox Hindu culture of their home communities, with its twin emphases on courtesy towards the stranger and intolerance towards the outcaste. As college students, however, they were living under the pressure of constant tension and conflict, due both to the ferment of new reform ideas and to their strong antagonism to the foreign rulers of their country. Out of loyalty to Mahatma Gandhi in his championship of the Harijans, and to the political ideals of the civil disobedience movement with its antagonism towards the British, they had adopted as a conscious pattern for living the twin principles of intolerance towards the foreigner and friendliness towards the outcaste virtually the antithesis of the attitudes in which they had been trained by their home environment. This particular study, therefore did take place in a situation of tension roughly analogous to that of the first Christians. The same general principles of remembering were found to be operative in this situation as in Bartlett's study, giving considerable support to the hypothesis that they were also operative in the oral transmission of the Gospel materials.

One further finding of this Indian study is of some significance. In remembering, the remembered material tends to become progressively modified, where possible, to make it conform more closely to patterns of thought which are culturally well established. But the Indian students had two different patterns of thought, both quite well established. It was the tension between these two which created part of their problem. To which of these two patterns of

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<sup>19</sup> W.S. Taylor, "Remembering: Some Effects of Language and Other Factors," *The British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 38, Part 1, September, 1947.



thought would the remembered material tend to conform? To the earlier pattern of thought, formed by home influences, with its emphasis on courtesy to the stranger and intolerance towards the outcaste, which had sunk into the background of their thought under pressure of later loyalties? Or to the later pattern of thought with its emphasis on intolerance of the foreigner and championship of the outcaste, which they consciously maintained with considerable emotional fervor? The results indicated that the remembered material tended to conform more closely to the earlier orthodox pattern of thought, even though the students themselves believed they had outgrown it.

This result is suggestive for our thinking about the formation of the Gospel tradition. If it is legitimate to assume that the principles of remembering discovered in these studies were also operative among the early Christians, then we are driven to conclude that their memories of the actions and words of Jesus Christ would tend to have been steadily modified in the direction of conformity to the patterns of thought belonging to their earlier training, that is, to Jewish patterns of thought. It becomes increasingly difficult to explain the novel elements in the Gospel records as being due to changes taking place during the process of remembering. They require the supposition of an original source too definite to be reduced, in remembering, to more conventional forms.

## V

If, as is generally agreed by students of the methods of form criticism as well as by others, the development of the Gospel traditions rests upon "reminiscences, found in the oldest Churches," and upon "a retentive power of the individual which, as is well known, should not be underestimated," <sup>20</sup> these psychological conclusions about the process of remembering deserve considerable attention for the light they may eventually throw on the formation of the Gospel records. And since the principles governing the remembering of Gospel incidents frequently conflict with the principles used in form criticism to explain the effects of early Christian preaching on the record of these same incidents, the problem will be to evaluate the relative significance of each type of interpretation.

In attempting to do this, there are a few things one should keep in mind. One must give some weight, for instance, to the fact that

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<sup>20</sup> Dibelius, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 39.



remembering had a much more important place in the teaching practices of Jesus' day than it has today. Rote memory was strongly emphasized in the teaching of the rabbis. Jesus' own teaching practices seem to reflect a similar concern with remembering. He "gathered round himself a small group of very intimate disciples, who were trained to become teachers in their turn; such training among the Jews always included *verbatim* memorization of the teacher's most important sayings." <sup>21</sup> And the style of some of Jesus' sayings seems to reflect the forms used by the rabbis as mnemonic devices.

One should also keep in mind the fact that the principles of remembering operate earlier than those with which form criticism is concerned. They would operate decisively within the first few weeks and months

of the period of oral tradition. Though they would overlap to some extent with the processes of form criticism, they would, in general, provide the data with which the latter would operate.

Finally, it is worth noting that "memory was best for statements about whose truth the subject was certain," as a recent study has about which we shown.<sup>22</sup> This does not mean that the memories are the most confident are the ones which are most likely to be reliable, but that statements about whose truth we are most certain when we first learn them, before memory operates on them, are likely to be remembered most correctly. In view of the confidence which the disciples learned to place in the truth of the teachings of Jesus, this fact has a bearing on our estimate of the value to be placed on their reminiscences.

In a sense, therefore, the study of the processes of remembering may take a measure of precedence over the study of the processes with which form criticism deals, since features of the Gospel story which are explicable on the principles of remembering hardly need to be explained again by reference to the later processes dealt with by form criticism. The attempt to differentiate the specific effects of these two diverse processes, and to discover their interactions on each other with reference to specific features of the Gospel narratives, is bound to be a long and difficult task. If the suggestions made in this article have any weight, however, it is a task which may be very rewarding.

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<sup>21</sup> B. S. Easton, *Christ in the Gospels*, Scribner's, 1930 41.

<sup>22</sup> E. C. Poulton, "Previous Knowledge and Memory: *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. Part 4, November, 1957.