

UPGRADE AND REBOOT: A RE-APPRAISAL OF THE DEFAULT

SETTING¹

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Synoptic Gospels

We begin with two points of essential importance for the present discussion:

1) That the followers of Jesus of Nazareth in the first century told and preserved oral accounts of his deeds and teachings is a fact beyond reasonable doubt. The existence of an oral Jesus tradition in the Christian communities of the first century has been almost universally accepted by New Testament scholars for the greater part of two hundred years. The point is assumed in all major studies of the Gospels, of the primitive Church, and of the “historical Jesus.” It is not now, nor has it ever been, a matter of any real dispute.²

¹ This refers to an article by J. D. G. Dunn recently published in *NTS* under the title, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition" [*NTS* 49 (2003): 139-75].

² In the interest of convenience, the terms “early Church,” “oral Jesus tradition,” and cognates will be used occasionally in this paper to describe the early Christian communities and their Jesus-oriented oral-traditional activities in

2) Equally certain is that the oral Jesus tradition had some effect or influence on the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. Again, this point is rarely, if ever, contested. For as long as New Testament scholars have agreed that oral Jesus traditions circulated in the first-century Church, they have also agreed that the Synoptic Gospels are in some measure, and at whatever remove, dependent upon such traditions.

Regrettably, these rather elementary points almost entirely exhaust scholarly unanimity on the subject. Respecting the form of the oral Jesus tradition, the means by which it was propagated, and the nature of its role in the churches there is very little agreement indeed. Concerning the extent to which it has influenced the composition of the Gospels or the other New Testament literature, and whether, or to what degree, any such influence can actually be detected in these texts, there is virtually no agreement at all.

Yet the various positions held by New Testament scholars on these topics are often difficult to evaluate at the level of detailed argument. This is largely because very little detailed argument actually occurs, at least in print, concerning the basic models of early Christian oral tradition which may be supposed to underlie these positions. Early Christian oral tradition has usually been considered

general. The present argument neither assumes nor entails the homogeneity of first-century Christian oral-traditional practices.

something of a specialist subject among New Testament scholars, peripheral to the concerns of mainstream Gospels research, and discussion of its particulars is tacitly deferred to those few authors who are willing to devote time and effort to a topic of such marginal interest.³

This is not, perhaps, an incomprehensible response to what is admittedly a rather thorny historiographical problem. While there is enough evidence to sustain the claim that an oral Jesus tradition existed in the first century, it is not sufficient to support a clear and comprehensive description unaided by historical imagination. Only a few indications of early Christian oral-traditional practices survive in the ancient manuscripts, and many of these derive from authors who lived some decades later than the period with which we are concerned.

³ Recent discussion of the mechanics of the oral Jesus tradition has been almost entirely centered around the models offered by Birger Gerhardsson [especially in his *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (ASNU 22; Uppsala: Gleerup, 1961)], Werner H. Kelber [in *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983)], and Kenneth E. Bailey [in "Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels: Insights from Middle Eastern Culture." *AJT* 5 (1991): 34-54].

But New Testament scholars not only lack sufficient historical data to construct a factual account of the oral-traditional system or systems which operated in the early Church; they often lack a basic understanding of what oral-traditional systems are. Taken as a class, New Testament scholars are not especially well acquainted with many of the practical issues which may be involved in the transmission of oral traditions, or with the methods of classification and analysis of oral traditions and oral-traditional systems which have been developed in those disciplines which more usually attend to such matters. New Testament scholars are thus often poorly equipped to assess the utility of such methods, the conclusions which are drawn from them, the current debates over these methods and conclusions, and similar issues which occupy practitioners of those disciplines.

Nevertheless, these issues cannot be simply ignored. A vague but nagging suspicion of the significance of the oral Jesus tradition as a factor in the composition of and relationships among the Synoptic Gospels has been known to haunt some commentators, goading them to make some allowance, however slight, for its possible effects. Others, perhaps less sensitive to the urgings of conscience, are more inclined simply to defend their areas of specialty from the incursion of oral-traditional dark horses. For a variety of reasons, New Testament scholars are occasionally forced into the unenviable position of having to describe, by reference to ambiguous clues, and frequently with only the foggiest

of notions as to its possible nature, a phenomenon which ceased to exist nearly two thousand years ago. Thus we arrive at our present circumstance, where a bewildering array of disparate, often vaguely expressed accounts of the nature and role of the first-century oral Jesus tradition jostle each other in support of a wide range of historiographical and theological positions.⁴

Expressions of empathy notwithstanding, to the untrained observer it might seem strange, even vaguely suspicious, that the widespread disorder and disagreement which characterizes scholarly discussion of the oral Jesus tradition should have so little visible effect on mainstream study of the Synoptic Gospels. For of course it is the case that, although the oral Jesus tradition is an acknowledged source of Synoptic form and content, scholarly considerations of their composition, redaction, date, theology, and relationships to each other are almost invariably conducted on exclusively literary grounds. This might initially seem to be an unusually evasive policy, an implicit assertion that because the precise impact of the oral tradition of the early Church on the Synoptics is

⁴ As Albert Einstein once complained (in a somewhat different context), “the theories which have gradually been associated with what has been observed have led to an unbearable accumulation of independent assumptions;” Einstein in Abraham Pais, *‘Subtle is the Lord...’ The Science and the Life of Albert Einstein* (Oxford Lives; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982)], 34.

difficult to determine, it probably wasn't important anyway. There is, however, a perfectly reasonable explanation for this apparent prevarication.

As we have already noted, current discussion of the first-century oral Jesus tradition is rife with disagreement and discord, and the prospect of finding a significant consensus of opinion among New Testament scholars on the subject might at first seem so exceedingly dim as to warrant the abandonment of the project. Yet, contrary to all expectation, at least one point of consensus does in fact exist. It stands unaffected by the rampant “confusion and misinformation” that plagues scholarly treatments of the primitive oral Jesus tradition.⁵ It boasts the support of scholars of every theological and methodological persuasion. It is, moreover, the foundation of one of the central doctrines of modern New Testament scholarship. The consensus position is this: *The oral tradition of the*

⁵ The quote is John Dominic Crossan's: “It is hard for me to imagine more confusion and misinformation than accompanies current presuppositions about memory, *orality*, and literacy in connection with the Jesus traditions and the gospel texts”; Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1999), 52 (original emphasis). Crossan's own attempt to describe early Christian *orality* has not entirely escaped these difficulties, as we shall see anon.

early Church could not have produced the similarities of wording and order that may be observed to exist among the Synoptic Gospels.

Anyone having even the most cursory acquaintance with academic discussions of the Synoptic Problem cannot help but be aware of the near universal currency of the consensus view. It is continually asserted, in the most dogmatic of terms, in introductions to the New Testament and commentaries on the Gospels: “the relationship of the Synoptic Gospels to one another cannot be adequately explained unless one assumes that there was a literary dependence”;⁶ “the supposition of oral tradition alone cannot solve the complicated problem of the parallels and contradictions in the Synoptics”;⁷ it “cannot account for the uniformity of substance, order, style, and language among the Gospels”;⁸ and so on *ad infinitum*. If ever there was an assured result of modern critical scholarship, this is surely it.

⁶ Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to its Problems* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), 115.

⁷ Werner Georg Kümmel, Paul Feine, and Johannes Behm, *Introduction to the New Testament*, trans. A. J. Mattill (NTL; London: SCM Press, 1966), 38.

⁸ W. D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament: A Guide to Its Main Witnesses*, (The Biblical Seminar 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 89-90.

From this the apparent negligence with which many New Testament scholars have treated the impact of the oral Jesus tradition on the texts of the Synoptic Gospels follows naturally. If the oral Jesus tradition alone could not have produced the Synoptics, then there must be a literary relationship between them. If there is a literary relationship between the Synoptics, this relationship will obviously be the most productive area of exploration, since there is tangible evidence available for the purpose. And if, as is usually assumed, a literary relationship between the Synoptics can be shown to account for the majority of the phenomena with which Synoptic researchers are concerned, there is little need for hypothetical description of the oral Jesus tradition or its possible effects.

A moment's reflection, however, reveals a number of significant problems with this line of reasoning, which on closer inspection begins to read like one of Zeno's paradoxes. It has already been established that there was, without doubt, an oral Jesus tradition that operated in the first-century Church, and that it had some role in the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. Whatever this role may have been, its effects are complete and irrevocable. They are forever impressed onto the texts as we now have them. This is true even if a theory of literary interdependence might also appear to account for these effects.

Further, we have noted that opinions are not so much divided as altogether disintegrated respecting the nature of the oral Jesus tradition in the early Church, both because there is not enough specific evidence available to support

uncontested pronouncements on the subject, and because New Testament scholars do not know what their options are. But if the nature of the oral Jesus tradition is unknown, and if its particular effects on the composition or redaction of the Synoptic Gospels are unknown—and given that the actual processes of Synoptic composition and redaction are themselves unknown—it would seem *prima facie* that the influence of an oral-traditional process must be at least as probable an explanation of any particular Synoptic agreement or divergence as the influence of an editorial process.

Moreover, to suggest that theories of Synoptic literary interdependence are in some way less hypothetical than theories of Synoptic dependence on oral traditions is to misunderstand the nature of both exercises. The Synoptic Gospels, we know, are not hypothetical. But any theory about their relationship to each other or to any other alleged source, whether oral or literary, is hypothetical. Such theories are invented to fit the available evidence. They may or may not describe a real situation. Thus, the fact that the Synoptic Gospels are written texts does not mean that a “literary” theory of the origins of a given pericope is more likely to be true than an “oral” theory. ‘Literary’ theories of Synoptic interdependence may in some ways be easier for highly literate Western scholars to formulate—they are not, however, easier to test.

Thus, even if it cannot be responsible for all of the similarities in wording and order which may be observed to exist among the Synoptic Gospels, the oral

Jesus tradition cannot be ruled out as a source of some of them, or indeed of any particular instance of Synoptic similarity, apart from careful analysis of the texts in question and cogent arguments to that effect. However, it is not at all clear that the consensus position is as strong as has been supposed. Certainly its adherents are legion; but this in itself is very curious.

In fact, the existence of this particular consensus of opinion is really so remarkable as to require an explanation. It represents a significant claim to shared knowledge about the nature and capacities of the oral-traditional practices of the first Christians, even though its adherents individually espouse widely differing views on these questions. Indeed, the consensus view is so extraordinarily pervasive that it is sometimes held even by scholars whose work seems rather to undermine it.⁹ How is it possible that such uniform certainty can exist among such a diverse group of scholars on such an otherwise contentious topic?

⁹ I am thinking here especially of Birger Gerhardsson, whose work on the oral Gospel tradition (esp. his *Memory and Manuscript*) seems to offer a possible alternative to the consensus view, but who nevertheless considers that “there must be some kind of literary connection. . . between the Synoptics”; Gerhardsson, “The Gospel Tradition,” in *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2001), 111.

The problem may be elaborated as follows. To reasonably assert of a thing, “it cannot have done thus,” one must either suppose 1) that the action in question is simply impossible, or 2) that this particular thing was of such a kind that it was incapable of performing the action in question at a given time and/or in such-and-such set of circumstances. Setting aside the unlikely and alarming possibility that the members of our consensus believe the production of the Synoptic Gospels to have been impossible, we are left to assume that they are motivated to agree by supposition 2, that the particular oral-traditional practices employed by the first Christians were, in the event, incapable of producing Synoptic-type similarities.

At first glance, however, this assumption would seem to be erroneous. The individual representatives of our consensus cannot agree on even a basic description of the specific oral-traditional practices employed by the first Christians. Some have supposed the early Christian storytellers to have transmitted stories about Jesus on analogy with the telling of fairy stories by nineteenth-century German peasants.¹⁰ Others see the oral Jesus tradition as

¹⁰ This is the classical form-critical view; see e.g. Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (FRLANT 29; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957); Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, ed. Günther Bornkamm and Gerhard Iber (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1959).

having been “composed in performance” along the lines of twentieth-century Serbo-Croatian epic poetry.¹¹ Still others assume a Jesus tradition maintained by continued repetition, or even by rote memorization in a pedagogical setting.¹² And a very large proportion of scholars who hold the consensus view seem to have no clear conception of, or interest in, the primitive oral Jesus tradition at all.¹³

It appears, in fact, that what has been agreed is not what the primitive oral Jesus tradition was, but only what it was not. The consensus position, then, could be restated as: *Whatever form the oral tradition of the early Church might have taken, it cannot have produced the level of agreement found in the Synoptics.* This

¹¹ E.g. John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (SAC; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 42-51; Charles H. Lohr, "Oral Techniques in the Gospel of Matthew." *CBQ* 23 (1961): 403-35.

¹² E.g. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making Part 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 1st British ed. (London: Apollos, 1992), 29.

¹³ E.g. Styler, who “finds it impossible to accept ‘oral traditions,’ or even ‘oral tradition,’ as an adequate explanation” for Synoptic agreement in general; G. M. Styler, "The Priority of Mark," in *The Birth of the New Testament* (ed. C. F. D. Moule; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1981), 288-289.

is simply to say, “no matter what kind of camel it was, it cannot have fit through the eye of a needle.” But if there is agreement about the possible relationships that may obtain between camels and needles, there must at least be agreement about what camels and needles are.¹⁴ And if we pursue the matter diligently, we find that there is indeed a shared belief at the root of our scholarly consensus. It is a belief in *orality*.

Orality is that phenomenon wherein persons who live in “oral cultures”—cultures where literacy is unknown, or at least relatively rare—attempt to communicate and preserve unwritten information; but the term may also denote any of the component parts of this phenomenon, either individually or in combination.¹⁵ *Orality* may thus refer to communal illiteracy, the transmission of oral traditions in general, particular instances of speech or orally composed or performed literature, or even a sort of state of mind in which all illiterate persons

¹⁴ I assume throughout that our consensus is not simply arbitrary or accidental.

¹⁵ I wish to emphasize that the almost intolerable vagueness of the definition of ‘orality’ provided here does not derive from the author, but is inherent to the concept. That bastion of clarity, the OED, defines *orality* as “The quality of being oral, or orally communicated. Also, preference for or tendency to use spoken forms of language,” but this does not by any means reflect the breadth of actual uses of the term which may be observed in the relevant literature.

are supposed to live; and the impression is sometimes given that several of these are meant at once. *Orality* is a universal phenomenon, occurring wherever “oral culture” is found. And although it is only observable as adapted to specific local situations, *orality* is a single, discrete phenomenon which possesses certain essential characteristics.

It should be noted that the members of our consensus are not completely agreed as to what these essential characteristics might be. A number of suggestions have been offered: *orality* has been portrayed as subject to the operations of certain definite “laws”; as being inherently “formulaic”; as requiring particular techniques of oral-traditional composition, transmission, or performance; as differing in certain ways from written tradition or literacy in general; and as being inspired and controlled by, or alternatively as inspiring and controlling, a specifically “oral mentality.”¹⁶ However, these proposals have all

¹⁶ E.g. Bultmann, *Geschichte*; Kelber, *Oral and Written Gospe* ; Barry W. Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels: The Problem of Mark 4* (JSNTSup 82; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); the collection of essays on "Orality and Textuality in Early Christian Literature" in J. Dewey, ed. *Semeia* 65 (1994); Crossan, *Birth of Christianity*; Casey Wayne Davis, *Oral Biblical Criticism: The Influence of the Principles of Orality on the Literary Structure of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (JSNTSup 172; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

been criticised by other advocates of the consensus view on grounds that the phenomena which they describe cannot be sufficiently distinguished from similar phenomena observed to occur in the production of written literature; that they do not adequately account for certain features which may be observed to exist in some known oral-traditional systems; or that they are misconstruals of hypotheses originally constructed by folklorists and anthropologists.¹⁷ Nevertheless, there is

¹⁷ For criticisms of this kind see e.g. Thorlief Boman, *Die Jesus-Überlieferung im Lichte der neueren Volkskunde* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967); E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 8-26; Leander E. Keck, "Oral Traditional Literature and the Gospels: The Seminar," in *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. William O. Walker; Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion 5; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978), 108, esp. n.13; Henry Wansbrough, "Introduction," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 12; John Halverson, "Oral and Written Gospel: A Critique of Werner Kelber." *NTS* 40 (1994): 180-95; Birger Gerhardsson, "The Path of the Gospel Tradition," in *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2001), 85, n. 56.

at least one essential characteristic of *orality* which, despite the above objections, is demonstrably accepted by our entire consensus: *orality* is *variable*.

Variability, simply stated, is the tendency of orally transmitted information to change over time. In our context, to describe *orality* as *variable* is to invoke every possible factor which might bring about any kind of change in an orally transmitted tradition, and to claim that all such traditions must eventually be affected by at least one of these factors. Even if an individual reciter of oral traditions should forbear making deliberate changes to his material, change will occur sooner or later whether he will or no. Somewhere in the chain of traditional recitations, someone will forget, or make a mistake, or his hearers will misunderstand. Some commentators have supposed that transmitters of oral traditions are profoundly indifferent toward the attainment of “accuracy” in transmission; others have affirmed the possibility of conscious effort toward transmissional precision—no matter. All agree that *variability* must win out in the end.

But here again we find that the members of our consensus cannot agree on an issue of crucial importance, namely the degree of *variability* which *orality* can be expected to display. For of course change may also attend the production of written documents where these rely on earlier texts, and New Testament scholars have generally supposed that a good many changes of this sort are on view in the Synoptic Gospels. For *variability* to be at all useful in justifying the consensus

position—that the oral-traditional activities of the early Church could not have produced Synoptic-type similarities—*orality* must be supposed to produce more variation than what can be observed among the Synoptics.

However, the members of our consensus do not all think that this is the case. Many of those who allege an 'unstable' oral Jesus tradition take the view that a high degree of *variability* is a necessary consequence of *orality*, but those who depict a very “stable” oral Jesus tradition seem to allow for the possibility of a relatively low degree of *variability*. Some have supposed that while a low degree of *variability* is technically possible, only certain memory-intensive pedagogical techniques could have produced Synoptic-type similarities, and such methods were not used by the early Christians.¹⁸ Others, however, are quite firmly convinced that the first Christians did avail themselves of such techniques, and

¹⁸ E.g. Howard Merle Teeple, "The Oral Tradition That Never Existed." *JBL* 89 (1970): 56-68; Kloppenborg, *Formation of Q*; James A. Sanders, "The Gospels and the Canonical Process: A Response to Lou H. Silberman," in *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (ed. William O. Walker; TUMSR; San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978); Charles K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1967), 8-12.

many are at least open to the suggestion.¹⁹ And some of the members of our

¹⁹ See Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of 'Formgeschichte'* (London: Mowbray, 1957); Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*; Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988); Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History - History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, vol. 123 (WUANT; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000); cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, trans. S. Godman and A. J. B. Higgins (London: SCM Press, 1956). For somewhat more cautious affirmation of the view that the first Christians, or at least the first Jewish Christians, took a very careful and deliberate approach to the oral transmission of Jesus-traditions, see Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 3, n. 3; 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* (JSNTSup; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Graham Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford Bible Series; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171-172; 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; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); cf. Barrett, *Jesus*

consensus have determined that both oral and written literature are subject to much the same kind and degree of variation and change, though these may well be more essential to *orality*.²⁰ Nevertheless, these apparent discrepancies do not affect the solidarity of our consensus, whose position can now be most precisely

and the Gospel Tradition, 12. Note also J. Neusner's foreword to the 1998 Eerdmans reprint of Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript*.

²⁰An instructive example of this can be found in Henry Wansbrough's introduction to the collection of essays in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, where he notes: "We have been unable to deduce or derive any marks which distinguish clearly between an oral and a written transmission process. Each can show a similar degree of fixity and variability. We can, however, say of the Gospel material that the process of transmission has been marked by a combination of fixity and variability." Two pages later he asks, "Given that so much of our material reflects substantial literary interdependence, can the presence of only a few fixed points of verbal agreement between some of these traditions count as evidence of oral transmission?" (Wansbrough, "Introduction," 12, 14). But if one cannot distinguish between an oral and a written transmission process, how does one know that the material reflects substantial literary interdependence?

stated as: *Early Christian orality was too variable to have produced the kinds of similarities which may be observed to exist among the Synoptic Gospels.*

This is all very puzzling. The members of our consensus cannot agree about what *orality* is, but they agree that it could not have produced Synoptic-type similarities. They cannot say how *variable orality* must be, but they can say how *variable* first-century Christian *orality* must have been. If we were once again to wheel out our untrained observer, he might well surmise that the consensus position is being defended for reasons not directly related to its veracity. The truth, of course, is rather more prosaic: the consensus position is arrived at by a simple appeal to common sense.

Since every individual oral-traditional system is just a subset of *orality*, to describe the *variability* of the unobservable oral Jesus tradition one need only refer to the *variability* of some observable form of *orality*. Everyone knows that fairy tales and folk songs are changed and reinterpreted over time, that epic poetry is composed in performance—and the oral Jesus tradition was *orality*, too. An appeal to common sense thus renders the sort of detailed argument that would normally attend the making of these sorts of historical and sociological claims quite unnecessary.²¹

²¹ Thus W. D. Davies: “the [oral] theory cannot account for the uniformity of substance, order, style, and language among the Gospels noted above. If only an

Indeed, most of the argument that actually does occur in support of our scholarly consensus is simply a more or less explicit appeal to common sense. In such cases the argument consists of placing similar Synoptic passages side by side and declaring, “*orality* could not have produced this,” whereupon all opposition to the consensus view is laid waste.²² Under different circumstances it might be very

oral tradition was common to the evangelists, would they have such uniformities?” Davies, *Invitation*, 89-90 (original emphasis).

²² So, for instance, C. M. Tuckett, in his article on the Synoptic Problem in the ABD (Tuckett, “Synoptic Problem,” ABD 6:263-264), briefly examines Matt 7.7-11 = Mark 6.17-29, where the two Evangelists move from an account of Jesus’ somewhat ambivalent reception in Nazareth to an account of the death of John the Baptist, and Matt 9.6 = Mark 2.10 = Luke 5.24, where at the same point in their respective accounts of the healing of the paralytic all three Evangelists interject, “and he says to the paralytic. . .” Tuckett wishes to argue that these are two examples of Synoptic agreement in order which “go beyond anything that could be expected to be memorized in oral tradition,” but offers no actual argument to this effect. Instead, he simply declares, “Dependence on oral tradition can scarcely account for such a phenomenon of interruption of the story of Jesus’ ministry at identical points in [Matt 7.7-11 = Mark 6.17-29],” and, “Dependence on oral tradition. . . cannot really explain a story [such as that recorded in Matt 9.6

difficult to take this sort of argument seriously; here it is possible to do so because the argument is so manifestly founded on common sense. But common sense is not always a secure foundation.

It has occasionally come to pass, in the history of human endeavour, that a belief which has been widely regarded as “common sense” is discovered to be false. This, when it occurs, seems always to generate extreme reactions on the part of some impetuous persons, ranging from heated rhetorical exchange to rioting in the streets to burnings at the stake. We may be confident, however, that the response among New Testament scholars will be suitably philosophical when it becomes clear that there is no such thing as *orality*.

It is no longer possible, in light of the vast amount of empirical comparative research that has been carried out in recent decades, to credibly depict all oral-traditional activity as universally and necessarily similar. Oral traditions take a multitude of forms: epic, lyric, elegiac, and panegyric poetries; ballads, odes, and other types of songs; legends, tales and sagas; parables,

= Mark 2.10 = Luke 5.24] being preserved in such an untidy way and yet in otherwise independent narratives.” I defer for the time being questions related to the existence and sufficiency of any specific evidence which might support these assertions. For the moment I simply wish to point out that both of them are implicit appeals to common sense.

proverbs, aphorisms and riddles; jokes; genealogies; laws and regulations; prayers, hymns, and liturgies; incantations, charms, and curses—all of these genres, and many more besides, are employed in oral-traditional contexts.²³ Oral traditions carry an infinite variety of informational content, including descriptions of family relationships; historical or mythical accounts of persons or events; humorous anecdotes; technical knowledge; moral, ethical, or sapiential beliefs; anything which is sufficiently interesting or important to a community or some of its members might be entered into its oral-traditional repertoire.²⁴ Oral traditions are employed to perform a broad assortment of functions: to entertain or to teach;

²³ More comprehensive lists of oral-traditional genres may be found in Ruth H. Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Alan Dundes, ed., *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 1-3.

²⁴ See e.g. A. R. Tippett, *Oral Tradition and Ethnohistory: The Transmission of Information and Social Values in Early Christian Fiji, 1835-1905* (Canberra: St. Mark's Library, 1980); J. Rykwert, "On the Oral Transmission of Architectural Theory." *Res* 3 (1982); Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 23; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

to praise or to ridicule, to strengthen values, or to subvert them.²⁵ And oral traditions are composed and transmitted by a wide variety of methods as deemed appropriate to their forms, contents, and functions. Poetic traditions may be composed by different methods than prose traditions, and traditions which are designed simply to entertain may be transmitted using different techniques, and in different settings, than traditions which are meant to encourage religious devotion.

Every culture, and each group within a given culture, handles its traditions in the ways that seem most appropriate to the intentions of its members.²⁶ This is not to suggest that every oral-traditional system is completely unique, or that it is not possible to observe similarities between different systems or examples of oral

²⁵ Of course, oral traditions also perform many functions that are not the direct result of anyone's specific intentions.

²⁶ So Lee Haring: "Commonsense anthropology will have to agree that there are no universal or invariant themes, techniques, or devices of literary art, whether oral or written. Each culture operates differently in the realm of verbal art"; Haring, "What Would a True Comparative Literature Look Like?," in *Teaching Oral Traditions* (ed. John Miles Foley; New York: The Modern Language Association, 1998), 37.

literature. But such similarity cannot be simply assumed to exist out of hand.²⁷

Human culture is not reducible to a special “oral” variety with its own set of controlling “laws,” and human intellects are not constrained by a collective “oral mentality” until they acquire a sufficient degree of literacy.²⁸ No feature of one

²⁷ So e.g. John Miles Foley: “there is. . . no reason to suppose that traditional units which take shape under different, tradition-dependent systems must be exactly or even closely comparable” [Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 109]; David Bynum: “So be exceedingly wary of anyone who suggests to you that oral traditional composition in any one genre is in principle the same for any other genre, much less for all genres generally. That would be a very good indication indeed that the person who tells you so really doesn’t know what he is talking about” (Bynum, *Antiquitates vulgares, Folklore, Oral Theory, and What Matters* [cited June 2004]. Online: <http://enargea.org/vulgares/vulgares.html>).

²⁸ See e.g. John Halverson, “Goody and the Implosion of the Literacy Thesis.” *Man, New Series* 27 (1992): 301-17; Ruth H. Finnegan, “What is Orality -- If Anything?” *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 14 (1990): 130-49; Bruce A. Rosenberg, *Folklore and Literature: Rival Siblings* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 25-26; Brian V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*

oral-traditional system or example of oral-traditional literature is universal to all—not even *variability*.

Variability, of course, is not a single, specific feature at all, but only a rather broadly defined set of phenomena that may result from diverse causes. It is true that all sorts of changes may befall an oral text in the process of its transmission; the opportunity for intentional or accidental addition, omission, or alteration is present at every traditional recitation. But change is not an absolute correlate of orally transmitted traditions. It is impossible to predict if, or how much, an oral text might change in transmission apart from a consideration of the motivations and abilities of its particular transmitters.²⁹

It sometimes happens that a group comes to regard some of its oral traditions as so important that they wish to prevent their being changed, and so devises and implements such methods of transmitting them as may satisfactorily

(Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

²⁹ And perhaps not even then. Ruth Finnegan notes that “in performance [oral poems] are all subject at times to variation and adaptation—and perhaps it is this *opportunity* rather than actual variation that is ‘typical’ of oral compositions”; Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 79 (original emphasis). This, I suggest, will also be true of many other orally-transmitted genres.

ward against the ravages of creativity and forgetfulness. In such cases, the actual degree to which a traditional utterance changes depends largely on a given group's understanding of what sort of change is to be avoided. One group will require absolute verbal fidelity in the transmission of a traditional narrative, and will see every word committed to memory. If it is successful, there will be absolutely no change incurred by the narrative over a given period. Another group will be content to maintain only the basic structure and characters of a traditional narrative. If it is successful, there may yet be a great deal of change observed in the narrative over a period of time; only not in respect to its structure and characters. Of course, any given individual or group might be unsuccessful, or partially so, in its efforts toward preservation.

This casts grave doubt on the legitimacy of the consensus view, which seems to have been sustained to this point by a common belief in a universally *variable orality*. Since this belief is no longer tenable, the only means of support for the consensus position—that the oral-traditional practices of the early Church must have been too *variable* to have produced Synoptic-type similarities—is an historical investigation of these practices. But once the available evidence regarding the oral-traditional activities of the first Christians is made the primary grounds for discussion, our consensus evaporates altogether.

In the event, the inadequacy of the consensus position is not really very surprising; it was never going to be easy to explain the relationship between the

oral Jesus tradition and the Synoptic Gospels by a simple analogy with camels and needles. The situation is obviously much more complex: New Testament scholars have for the most part never seen a camel, the only camel we are really interested in anyway has been dead for two thousand years, and we are in joint possession of the only known needle. However, it must be admitted that this is a much less convenient state of affairs than was previously imagined. Whereas heretofore it was possible to describe the oral-traditional activities of the first Christians as representative of a universal phenomenon delimited by certain known characteristics, now the oral Jesus tradition must be considered a particular thing which may have been more or less like other particular things. There is, somewhat paradoxically, no longer enough evidence available to dismiss the first-century oral Jesus tradition as an insignificant or negligible factor in the composition of the Synoptic Gospels.³⁰

The blithe confidence with which literary explanations of Synoptic relationships are typically advanced, as if it were only a matter of discovering the right literary explanation, is thus wholly and conspicuously out of place. The oral

³⁰ A similar view has recently been put forward by J. D. G. Dunn (see Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 173-254); however, Dunn's conception of early Christian "oral traditioning" still largely relies on the concept of a universal and identifiable *orality*.

tradition of the early Church is an undisputed source of Synoptic form and content, and there is every reason to believe that important and illuminating work is yet to be conducted on its role as such. But if New Testament scholars are to contribute to this endeavour, we will have to break our conceptual dependence on a generalized *orality* and think in terms of specific models of early Christian oral tradition that can be explicitly declared and defended.

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