



05

BEFORE THE GOSPELS

JESUS IN ORAL TRADITION

Behind all this talk of multiple written sources is a more fundamental idea that has to be considered when assessing the historical data about Jesus Christ. Much of the material drawn together in the Gospels (sometime after about AD 65) was preserved initially in what is called ‘oral tradition’.

Why were the Gospels written so late?

I have often been asked: Why did it take so long for the stories about Jesus to be written down (in the Gospels)? Part of the answer is: actually, it did not take long at all. In ancient terms, a gap of 40 years between an event and the first full written account is not considered lengthy, so long as the account is discernibly based on earlier sources.

To offer three sacred comparisons: (1) the earliest biography of the founder of Islam, Muhammad (AD 570–632), was composed around AD 760, 125 years after his death, and continued to be edited for another 50 years; (2) the first written

records of the life and sermons of Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha: 448–368 BC) appeared 350 years after his death; (3) the most famous of ancient Israel's rabbis was a great scholar named Hillel, who died early in the first century AD. His teachings and stories appear in writing for the first time in the Mishnah, composed about AD 200. Nevertheless, scholars still treat these writings as serious historical texts.

The Gospels were written within 40–60 years of Jesus' death. The sources they rely on date from the decade or two before that. And, as I said previously, Paul's letters were written earlier still. These establish beyond doubt that Jesus' teachings, death and resurrection, together with his status as Messiah-Christ, were being taught by missionaries and committed to memory by Christians in the early 30s AD.

The question nevertheless remains: if the news about Jesus was being broadcast so early on, why did it take three decades or more before it was formally *written down*? The question and its answer reveal a fundamental difference between modern society and ancient society.

Today, we think of *writing* as the best way to preserve and disseminate important information—we produce textbooks, publish newspapers, and post web pages online. If you want to broadcast something, you put it on paper or in a computer file for others to *read*. We are a 'literary' society: that is the way we think.

For most of world history this was simply *not* the case. Before the invention of the printing press (15th century) and the explosion of literacy it ignited, human societies were principally *aural* societies. This means they learnt important material not by reading it but by *hearing* it. Keep in mind that only about 10–15 percent of people in the first century Mediterranean world

could read.³⁵ Before our print culture, and especially in first century Palestine, people published and preserved their traditions using centuries-old techniques of *verbal* transmission and memorisation. Scholars call this ‘oral tradition’.

The term ‘oral tradition’ can be used of both the *process* and *content* of the transmission. In talking about early Christianity, then, scholars will often say things like, ‘Teachers in early Christianity played a central role in the community’s *oral tradition*,’ that is, the process of passing on reports about Jesus. Or they will say, ‘The first Christian communities regularly rehearsed their *oral tradition*,’ that is, the content of reports about Jesus. To make it more confusing, the content of the oral tradition is sometimes called the ‘Jesus tradition’. This is a catch-all term for the *whole body of fixed recollections about Jesus* passed on in the first Christian communities. You will come across the expression *Jesus tradition* many more times in this book.

The important point is that in a period when few people could read (and even fewer owned books), writing things down was *not* the most effective way to preserve and promote material intended for the masses. The most practical and trusted means was through oral tradition.

Jesus remembered

How did recollections about Jesus become *fixed* in the memories of the early Christians? Were they simply retold the way we

³⁵ The literacy levels of ancient Mediterranean societies are fully explored in William V. Harris’ *Ancient Literacy* (Harvard University Press, 1989). His conclusions for the period we are discussing can be found in chapter 7 of his book (pages 175–284).

might spin a yarn in the pub or spread a rumour around the office? Not quite.

Some scholars argue that Christians borrowed the methods of ancient Jewish synagogue schools.³⁶ Here, students were required to learn (aurally) huge amounts of legal and moral teaching. To achieve this, quite sophisticated memorisation devices were used (called mnemonics), as well as good old-fashioned repetition. It was not unlike the way primary school students used to learn their times tables—I can still hear my classmates chanting ‘five nines are 45, six nines are 54 ...’.

Was this how the Christians remembered the Jesus tradition? The first Christians were all Jews so, on the face of it, it is extremely likely they inherited much of this Jewish commitment to reciting oral tradition. Most scholars, however, suspect the Jesus tradition was passed on less formally. Christianity was a grassroots movement between AD 30–60, so it is difficult to imagine ‘Christian schools’ with the same level of infrastructure as their Jewish counterparts. In any case, the Jesus tradition was tiny compared with the oral tradition of Jewish schools. While Christians were preserving material concerning just one rabbi, Jews in this period were trying to remember traditions relating to more than 150 rabbis from 50 BC–AD 200.

Interestingly, just as the Jesus tradition was written down in due course (in the Gospels), so this vast oral tradition of the

³⁶ The big name here is Professor Birger Gerhardsson from the University of Lund (Sweden). See his book *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001). For the very interested (and serious) reader, an important collection of essays on the topic by fourteen international scholars can be found in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* edited by Henry Wansbrough, (Sheffield Academic Press, 1991).

Jews was eventually compiled in a book. Around AD 200 the leader of the Jews of Palestine, Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi, decided to bring into one volume all of the ‘traditions of the elders’ as they were preserved in the memories of his fellow rabbis. The end result of his collection of oral tradition was a book known as the Mishnah, which means ‘repetition’—repetition was a principal means of memorising and passing on the traditions. About 150 rabbis are quoted in the Mishnah. My copy runs to 1100 pages. To this day, Orthodox Jews regard the Mishnah as a sacred text, second only to the Tanakh (or what Christians call the Old Testament).³⁷ In any case, the point is worth pondering: while the first Christians probably did not have the formal schools of the Jews, they would not have needed them since the size of their oral tradition was tiny compared to that compiled in the Mishnah. The Jesus tradition, you could say, did not need quite so much hard disc space or R.A.M.

So, how *did* the Christian oral tradition work? Leading the charge in the modern study of ancient oral tradition as it relates to the study of Jesus is Professor James Dunn of the University of Durham (UK). Dunn has recently published a 1000 page volume aptly titled *Jesus Remembered*.³⁸ Here, he sets forth an impressive case for what he calls ‘informal, controlled oral tradition’. Drawing on both biblical scholarship and modern studies into ‘orality’ (how spoken traditions are maintained by cultures) Dunn emphasises that, while the Jesus tradition was probably not passed on in the manner of formal Jewish schools,

37 A good English version of the Mishnah is Jacob Neusner’s *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (Yale University Press, 1988).

38 James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, 2003).

it does show all the signs of having been strictly controlled in its central content.

From the very beginning—even during Jesus’ lifetime—Christians were devoted to preserving and proclaiming everything they could take in of the stories and teachings of their leader. They continually repeated these traditions, and celebrated, discussed and obeyed them. The very word ‘disciple’, the key term for a follower of Jesus in the Gospels, literally means *learner*. It implies a commitment to studying the words and deeds of the master.

In addition, certain individuals from among the disciples were charged with particular responsibility for protecting and passing on the Jesus tradition. These were called the ‘teachers’. To quote Dunn:

Teachers, indeed, seem to have been the first regularly paid ministry within the earliest Christian movement. Why teachers? Why else than to serve as the congregation’s repository of oral tradition? ... We should pause at this point to recall just how crucial teachers were to ancient communities. All who read these pages will have been bred to a society long accustomed to being able to rely on textbooks, encyclopaedias, and other reference works. But an ancient oral society had few if any such resources and had to rely instead on individuals whose role in their community was to function ... as ‘a walking reference library’ (*Jesus Remembered*, pages 176–177).

Perhaps an analogy will help. The closest thing to *oral tradition* in modern culture would have to be pop music. If you are anything like me, you know by heart the words to a great many songs. We learnt these over the years, not by poring over the lyric sheet printed on the CD sleeve, but by listening to the songs over and over, singing along to them, performing them

in the shower and maybe even crooning them with friends late at night. These songs lodged in our heads without us even trying. We are preservers of an ‘oral tradition’.

I realise the analogy is not perfect: for one thing, the Jesus tradition was not set to music, and it certainly had more content than the Top 20 hits. But what the Jesus tradition lacked in tunefulness and brevity, is more than made up for by the fact that it was first passed on in a truly *aural* culture. Those who preserved the stories and teachings of Jesus were well used to hearing important information and committing it to memory. It was the air they breathed, and we catch a whiff of this in the modern love for pop music. Illustrative of the aural environment in which Jesus taught and his disciples learnt is the fact that many of the stories and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels contain ancient memory devices (called ‘mnemonics’) designed to enhance oral transmission. These include keyword repetition, punch lines, parallelism, humour, hyperbole and even rhyme.

For accuracy’s sake, I should probably extend my pop music analogy a little more. Imagine that when we first heard our Top 20 songs we sincerely believed they were the keys to life—both now and forever. How much more eagerly do you think we might have committed them to memory? Imagine further that our closest friends and family all shared the same Top 20 and that we regularly got together to sing the songs and discuss their meaning—all the time being coached by our local maestro, our ‘teacher’. I suspect we would be able to expand our collective repertoire to 50 or 100 songs, all maintained aurally without needing to write down the lyrics.

Something similar to this has to be imagined in order to understand what went on in the earliest gatherings of

Christians. They cherished and rehearsed the message of Jesus and regularly listened to the explanations of the teachers, believing this material to be the key to eternal life.

Another analogy to oral tradition is modern joke telling. Very few of us ever *read* jokes out of a book; we hear and retell them and that is how they lodge in our memories. Imagine belonging to a joke-telling club that met regularly to rehearse everyone's all-time favourite gags (not my thing really but hopefully you can see the point). For the first Christians living in an aural culture, the stories and teachings of Jesus had *at least* the memorability of a good modern joke.

The imperfections of memory

No one argues (on historical grounds) that the Jesus tradition was preserved word perfect. It was not. The Gospels themselves provide evidence for 'informal, controlled oral tradition'. Let me offer two examples of where oral tradition has left us with strikingly similar, yet obviously different, accounts of particular events in Jesus' life.

In the following example, Matthew and Luke describe a Roman centurion's request for Jesus' assistance.³⁹ The differences as well as the similarities are fascinating:

³⁹ The story is often said to belong to Q, the written source used by Matthew and Luke. However, as James Dunn points out, Q was a collection of Jesus' *teachings* not narratives about him such as we find here. Also, the significant differences between the accounts suggest Matthew and Luke are not working from a written source (Q); rather, they are retelling (now in written form) a story from their collection of oral tradition.

MATTHEW 8:5-13.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. ‘Lord,’ he said, ‘my servant lies at home paralysed and in terrible suffering.’ Jesus said to him, ‘I will go and heal him.’ The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, ‘I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ Then Jesus said to the centurion, ‘Go! It will be done just as you believed it would.’ And his servant was healed at that very hour.

LUKE 7:1-10.

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. There a centurion’s servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, ‘This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.’ So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: “Lord, don’t trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, ‘I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.’ Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

In Matthew's account the centurion comes to Jesus personally; in Luke's, some delegates are sent on his behalf. While the two accounts may be reconciled,⁴⁰ the point is this: oral tradition is capable of either *forgetting* a detail (such as the sending of delegates) or deliberately *removing* it, with the result that when the story is next passed on certain (extraneous) elements have disappeared altogether.

But the differences are only part of the story, and a minor part at that. More obvious by far in the above accounts is the way the central elements of the narrative have been kept perfectly intact in Luke's and Matthew's retelling. As James Dunn explains:

Here I would suggest is a fine example of oral traditioning, or if it is preferred, of Evangelists [the Gospel writers] writing the story in oral mode [i.e. as if speaking it to an audience]. The story was no doubt one which belonged to several communities' store of Jesus tradition. The story's point hangs entirely on the central exchange between Jesus and the centurion; that is maintained with care and accuracy. (*Jesus Remembered*, pages 214–215)

Another good example is found in the descriptions of the so-called Last Supper. Here the Gospel of Luke and a letter of Paul *independently* record their own renditions of the same oral tradition:

⁴⁰ Many have pointed out that, because official delegates in the ancient world were accorded the status of the one sending them, Matthew could have easily known the detail recorded in Luke but decided for simplicity's sake to exclude it, reasoning that the presence of delegates was equal to the presence of the centurion himself.

LUKE 22:19–21.

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.’

I CORINTHIANS 11:23–25.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’

Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians in about AD 55; Luke wrote his Gospel two decades later (and neither had access to the writings of the other). And, yet, apart from a few minor variations, the same tradition about Jesus’ final meal has been independently preserved with a high degree of accuracy. This was the task of oral tradition.

For the historian, then, the question *Why wasn’t the Jesus tradition fully written down until the AD 60s–70s?* does not have quite the urgency it does in popular discussions. It would be like asking *Why wasn’t the Sydney Morning Herald published on the Internet until 1995?* Nowadays, publishing online is the obvious thing to do. In the 1980s, however, the Internet was accessible only to a small minority of the population (mainly the US government and military). Back then it did not make sense to publish things online. Similarly,

in the first century *written documents* were accessible to only a tiny portion of the Greco-Roman world. If you wanted to communicate with the masses, you did not publish books; you broadcast oral tradition, just as your forefathers had done for millennia.

The importance of *oral* tradition is underlined in an intriguing comment made by a Christian leader from the early second century. Papias lived from about AD 60–130 and was the Christian bishop of an area in western Turkey known as Hierapolis (modern Pamukkale). Writing 40–50 years after the first Gospels were published, Papias explains his ongoing preference for official *oral* recollections about Jesus over the *written* ones:

If anyone ever came who had followed the elders [those who knew the original apostles] I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said ... For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4).

As strange as it sounds to modern ears, oral tradition was the preferred means of preserving and passing on important information in the ancient world. For Papias, a literate leader of early Christianity, it even trumped the written Gospels.

Why were the Gospels written so soon?

Curiously, I was explaining all this to a group of sceptical friends one evening when one of them wryly asked, 'Okay, so let me turn the question around: why, if oral tradition was so widely

trusted, was the Jesus tradition written down *so soon*?’ Everyone laughed, including me. Suddenly, the supposedly *long* time gap between Jesus and the Gospels was looking suspiciously *short*. No one had ever asked me that question before and for a moment it threw me. Probably a simple reason the Jesus tradition started to be written down within just two decades of his death was the rapid expansion of the Christian church.

Written documents had one clear advantage over oral tradition: they could easily transmit information over long distances. Once a ‘retelling’ of Christ’s life was on paper, you could transport it, say, from Rome to Jerusalem or the other way around, without having to send teachers or church members to rehearse the traditions for the new recipients. All you needed was a courier—which was how correspondence usually got around in the first century—and someone at the other end who could read aloud to the waiting congregation.

By about AD 50–60 Christianity was fast becoming a truly international movement with centres in Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. If churches in these far flung places wanted to share their Jesus traditions with each other, there was no better way to do it than to write them down and send them off. Producing printed renditions of the Jesus tradition seemed sensible. It was certainly more efficient. This probably explains why between AD 50 and 90 the previously *oral* Jesus tradition began to be written down.⁴¹ Official collections of Jesus’ sayings were compiled in Aramaic

41 On this point, see not only Dunn’s volume referred to above but also Richard Bauckham’s ‘For Whom Were the Gospels Written’, pages 13–22 of the book *The Gospels for All Christians* (Eerdmans, 1998).

and Greek (for example, Q). The personal recollections of the apostle Peter were recorded (Mark's Gospel). Additional reports of Jesus' miracles were brought together (for example, SQ), as were some further accounts of his parables and dealings with sinners (L and possibly M). These were then assessed, edited and incorporated in different ways by different authors to produce the four Gospels of the New Testament. Once these were written, entire retellings of the life of Jesus could be passed onto distant communities easily and speedily. We learn from Eusebius (AD 260–340), the bishop of Caesarea, that second century evangelists used the Gospels for just this purpose—to instruct people quickly across distant lands.

Starting on their journey, they took up the work of evangelists and were zealous to preach to all who had not yet heard the word of the faith, and to transmit the writing of the divine Gospels. As soon as they had no more than laid the foundations of the faith in some strange place, they appointed others as shepherds and committed to them the task of tending those who had been just brought in, but they themselves passed on again to other lands and peoples (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.37.2).

In short, the Gospels were written down *so soon* because Christianity spread so rapidly.