Oral Tradition in New Testament Studies

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New Testament studies, and Biblical studies more generally, is a conservative field when it comes to oral tradition. The field developed as part of Christian theology in order to interpret the Scripture, the sacred text that contains or mediates the holy word of God. Within this field of study, the term “oral tradition” has a very distinctive and confined reference to the transmission of the sayings of and stories about Jesus prior to the composition (simply presumed to be in writing) of the Gospels. Because the written text is deemed sacred, however, it may be understandable that oral tradition in the broader sense assumed in other fields poses a considerable threat to New Testament (Biblical) scholars. That in turn may explain why the limited work that has been done is heavily derivative from work in other fields.

Despite considerable resistance, recent research and explorations in several connections are conspiring to challenge standard assumptions and procedures in the field, bringing comparative work on oral tradition in the broader sense to bear on the “oral tradition” of Jesus in the distinctively New Testament studies sense. First, careful and extensive recent examinations of the evidence indicate clearly that literacy was extremely limited in Mediterranean antiquity. The exhaustive survey by Catherine Hezser (2001) makes it unavoidable that the Jews were not an exception. Obviously the field must come to grips with the dominant importance of oral communication in the formative period of what became New Testament literature.

Second, increasing awareness of work in other fields indicating that literacy and orality should not be understood in terms of a Great Divide, but rather were engaged in close interaction, is opening up recognition that even after a text was written, it was still “read” or “recited” orally to a whole community of people, not read silently by a solitary individual. It is much easier, moreover, to imagine the possible oral composition and regular performance of a “text” such the Gospel of Mark. Martin Jaffee’s recent analysis of the close interrelationship of oral recitation and interpretation and
written text in the Qumran community and among the rabbis will surely help
show the way to New Testament scholars.

Third, the meticulous study of the multiple scrolls of the books of the
Torah and Prophets (the Hebrew Scriptures) found among the Dead Sea
Scrolls (by scholars such as Eugene Ulrich and Emanuel Tov) indicates not
only that several textual traditions existed simultaneously in the same scribal
community, but that those textual traditions were still developing, as scribes
made interpretive changes as they inscribed new manuscripts. Such research
makes questionable the standard older concept of an “original” text. And it
suggests the likelihood that the text of the Gospel of Mark, for instance, also
underwent a process of development.

Fourth, all of the previous developments should open at least some
receptivity toward recent analyses of the differences between the scribal
culture and tradition cultivated in Jerusalem and the popular culture and
tradition cultivated in Judean and Galilean villages (what anthropologists
would call “great tradition” and “little tradition”). The peasant villagers
among whom the oral tradition (now in the broad as well as the distinctive
sense) assumed communicative forms in speeches and story-cycles involved
regional as well as class distinctions from the scribal culture that is contested
in that oral tradition. This sensitivity to the popular Israelite tradition offers
the possibility of revisiting the comparison made by earlier “form-criticism”
between the “oral tradition” of Jesus teachings and stories and other folk-
traditions.

Fifth, pulling together significant implications of the previous points,
is the recent use of John Miles Foley’s combination of the performance
theory of Richard Bauman (and others), the ethnopoetics of Dell Hymes and
Dennis Tedlock, and his own theory of immanent art to explore the oral-
derived speeches of Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (often called
“Q,” after the German Quelle) as performance. In contrast to previous
“aphoristic” isolation of Jesus-sayings from all meaning-context, an
informed historical imagination can, at least in minimal ways, imagine how
these speeches focused on key concerns of a Jesus-movement were
repeatedly performed by prophetic spokespersons for Jesus in the
performance arenas indicated by key terms and phrases so that they
resonated metonymically with local audiences against the Israelite popular
tradition (Kelber 1994; Horsley and Draper 1999). Such analysis can thus
also draw upon and make connections with the distinctive historical social
context of these speeches in Roman Galilee and Syria, thus bringing together what are usually separate tracks of “literary” and “social” analyses in the field.

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**References**

Foley 2002  

Hezser 2001  

Horsley and Draper 1999  

Jaffee 2001  

Kelber 1994  