

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

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