

An oral and written Gospel? Reflections on remembering Jesus



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IN an important recent contribution to the study of the historical Jesus and his fundamental place in the emergence of Christianity,¹ James Dunn makes the important methodological point that our earliest evidence for Jesus testifies not directly to Jesus but to Jesus as he was remembered by those who followed him. It may not be possible to reach back to an objective historical reality that lies behind the portraits of Jesus found in the Gospels, but scholars can reach back to the impact that Jesus made on those who followed him.² ‘The Synoptic tradition provides evidence not so much for what Jesus did and said in itself, but for what Jesus was *remembered* as doing or saying by his first disciples.’³ Our narratives begin not with Jesus but with eyewitnesses to Jesus. ‘From the first we are confronted not so much with Jesus but with how he was perceived.’⁴ Jesus can be perceived only through the impact he made on his first disciples, so their response of faith and its expression in the Gospels is the earliest historical level to which subsequent generations have direct access. This is an important methodological point. ‘What we actually have in the earliest retelling of what is now the Synoptic tradition, then, are the memories of the first disciples – not Jesus himself but the remembered Jesus.’⁵

Dunn is surely correct in so far as he goes. But his emphasis on the importance of oral tradition and collective or communal memories of Jesus needs to be applied also to the transmission of stories about Jesus even after the four Gospels were written,⁶ for the

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). For Dunn’s own summary of his thesis and method, see *ibid.*, 335–36.

² *Ibid.*, 101–11, 882–83.

³ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 130–31.

⁶ Dunn refers to the neglected but important work of Helmut Koester which stresses the importance of oral tradition in the second century (*Jesus Remembered*, 196), but he does not address issues relating to the manuscript traditions of the Gospels. Perhaps they may be included in the third volume of his projected trilogy, *Christianity in the Making*, especially if he should consider extending the period covered to c. 180,

form in which the fourfold Gospel was transmitted is unlikely to be identical to the sum of the forms in which the four gospels may have circulated initially as discrete and separate texts. Thus there are important questions to be asked about the extent to which the Jesus remembered in the collective memory of the church and the fourfold Gospel as it emerges clearly in the late second century is in continuity with the Jesus remembered by those who wrote the Gospels approximately a century earlier.

Dunn suggests that Matthew and Luke will have made use of Mark and of Q under the influence of such other Jesus tradition as they were familiar with already. Similar forces are likely to have been at work also among those who preserved and gave pride of place to the Gospels that came to be considered canonical. They too read accounts of Jesus in the light of what they believed, giving prominence to these texts precisely because they were in accord with the tradition that they had already received. This can be seen in Irenaeus, whose account of the origins and nature of the fourfold Gospel is not only the earliest defence of the fourfold Gospel but also one of the clearest that we possess. According to Irenaeus, Matthew and John wrote on their own apostolic authority, whereas Mark and Luke committed to writing the apostolic teachings of Peter and of Paul. In such writings can be found the power of the Gospel given by the Lord to his apostles, as can be seen in the common teaching that they present:

These have all handed down to us the teaching that there is one God, creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ, the Son of God. If any one does not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord ...⁷

thus including Irenaeus and the clear emergence of the Great Church. On the projected outline and contents of Dunn’s project, see *Jesus Remembered*, 6–7.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.2. The Latin reads: Et omnes isti unum Deum Factorem caeli et terrae a lege et prophetis adnuntiatum, et unum Christum Filium. Dei tradiderunt nobis.

Irenaeus' claim for the continuity of what we might call proto-orthodox testimony to Jesus from the time of those who first encountered him to the period in which the primacy of the fourfold Gospel was established⁸ cannot be dismissed out of hand, even if it begs important questions. But nor can the possibility that the historian's access to the impact made by Jesus may depend on texts that have been shaped by the perceptions not only of those who composed the Gospels but also of those whose perceptions of Jesus may have continued to shape those very texts, even after they were first committed to writing. The fact that we know relatively little about the transmission of the Gospels between their likely date of composition in the second half of the first century and the clear emergence of the fourfold Gospel approximately a century later raises questions about the degree of continuity between the Jesus remembered by the evangelists and their sources and the Jesus remembered by those who subsequently copied and transmitted their writings. Thus it is possible that the historian's access to the impact made by Jesus is constrained by the perceptions not only of those who composed the Gospels but also by those whose perception of Jesus were shaped by the written texts. Those who read, heard and copied the written Gospels may have had a hand in the shaping of those very texts and the form in which they were transmitted,⁹ for their collective memory may have been shaped both by tradition – the emerging rule of faith – and by the fourfold Gospel.

If this is so, then the historical question of the relationship of the one Jesus to the three or four primary accounts of his life and significance is raised not simply by the fact that each portrays him in different ways and for different reasons. It is complicated further by the fact that, in the light of the evidence currently available, most of our access to the earliest forms of those four different accounts can be gained only via texts of the Gospels that are likely to have been shaped by the processes that brought them together in the first place. This raises the question of how substantial such changes may have been, and to what extent such changes might raise further obstacles for the historian over and above those

inherent in the Synoptic Gospels and John as similar but differing witness to the impact of Jesus.¹⁰

All our earliest copies of the Gospels are in the format of the codex, not that of the scroll. Our earliest extant manuscripts that survive in substantial fragments are parts of codices which contained at least two and probably four Gospels.¹¹ P⁷⁵ contained at least Luke and John, and there is growing recognition that P⁴, P⁶⁴ and P⁶⁷ are all part of one codex that contained at least Matthew and Luke. Each might date from the late second or early third century. P⁴⁵, probably early third century, contains all four Gospels and Acts. The use of such four-Gospel codices need not have brought an end to the continuing production and use of single-Gospel codices, and the latter are likely to have been subject to harmonization with each other even if different Gospels were not copied one after the other, for scribes may have harmonized the readings of Gospels that they were copying to those that they knew from knowledge of the Gospels gained from listening to them being read in the course of Christian worship. But it seems reasonable to postulate that a tendency to copy Gospels together on a larger codex may have added further momentum to this process, although I am not aware of detailed studies to show that this was the case.

Two main types of corruption are particularly relevant in the current context. The first consists of adjustments made in order to harmonize these texts more fully with such christological and other doctrinal beliefs as the churches of the second century onwards had come to delineate, not least in the light of the divergent and competing claims about the person and

¹⁰ I assume the primacy of the four Gospels, especially the Synoptics, as sources for the historical Jesus. For a defence of this position, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 112–66; and (with some slight qualifications) James H. Charlesworth and Craig A. Evans, 'Jesus in the Agrapha and the Apocryphal Gospels', in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

¹¹ See Graham N. Stanton, 'The Fourfold Gospel' *NTS* 43 (1997), 317–46; on this point, 326–29. An important exception is P⁵², the earliest extant fragment of John, which is less substantial than the other (later) papyri to which I refer. According to Colin H. Roberts, the size of its pages makes it unlikely that it could have contained more than one gospel. See Roberts, *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel in the John Rylands Library* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 21–22.

⁸ For example, *Against Heresies* 3.1–5, 9–16.

⁹ For a fuller development of this point, see David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

significance of Jesus that were already current. Were such alterations fundamentally to have altered the accounts of Jesus and his significance as they were transmitted in the Gospels, then the Jesus whom the proto-orthodox church had come to remember might be very different from the remembered Jesus whose impact and significance gave rise to the Gospels. Yet there is remarkably little evidence that this appears to have been the case. Thus the conclusions reached by Bart Ehrman are actually quite modest as to the extent of what he has memorably characterized as ‘the orthodox corruption of Scripture’. Only occasionally, he notes, did proto-orthodox scribes modify their texts of Scripture in order to make them coincide with proto-orthodox christological views.¹² Ehrman’s point that scribes did alter their texts to make them ‘say’ what they already known to ‘mean’ is well-made,¹³ but his caution about the extent to which they did so should be noted. Thus Ehrman is clear that scribes acted only to modify or to mollify emphases that were present already in the text of the Gospels, never to embrace only one pole of Christological belief (Jesus as human or as divine) at the expense of the other.¹⁴ Nor does he adduce any evidence to suggest ‘that they strove to make the text say precisely what they knew it did not. Quite to the contrary, it appears that these scribes knew exactly what the text said, or at least they thought they knew . . . , and that the changes they made functioned to make these certain meanings all the more certain’.¹⁵

Ehrman’s scribes, we might note, are doing something not altogether dissimilar to what Dunn argues that Matthew and Luke have done with Mark. Guided by what they knew already from oral tradition – in this later context, the rule of faith – they have rewritten the story of Jesus in order to accentuate certain key points. The later scribes whose writings Ehrman analyses may make such alterations less frequently than did the evangelists, yet there are still points at which what they know already to be true is more important than what is written in the exemplars on which their text is based. Such corruption is certainly orthodox, and there is a sense in which it is fundamentally conservative as well. This is not a point that Ehrman makes explicitly, but others have done

so on the basis of similar evidence. Leon Wright notes that while early evidence may have been obscured by later emendations made both by orthodox and heterodox scribes, ‘Yet, with the exception of heterodox activity, dogmatic emendation is, in the main, consistently devoid of radical departures from canonical norms’.¹⁶ Similarly Peter Head, whose own substantial discussion of this question appears to have been overshadowed by the publication of Ehrman’s treatment in the same year, concludes that scribes did make alterations on dogmatic grounds, but that such alterations appear to have been exceptions rather than the rule; ‘most of them withstood the temptation to “improve” the Gospel texts’.¹⁷ Frederik Wisse puts the point even more strongly: ‘the claims of extensive ideological redaction of the Gospels and other early Christian literature runs counter to all of the textual evidence’.¹⁸ As Ehrman makes clear, and other critics agree, Hort was incorrect to claim that nowhere in the manuscript tradition of the New Testament are there signs of ‘deliberate falsification of the text for dogmatic purposes’.¹⁹ Yet the fundamental point remains that such ‘falsifications’ as there are do not make significant alterations to the portrayal of Jesus that is found elsewhere in those proto-orthodox writings subsequently canonized as the New Testament. Just as such alterations serve to make clearer what scribes already ‘knew’ the text to say, so too these alterations serve to make clearer what was already apparent elsewhere in the New Testament. Thus the Jesus remembered at the time when the fourfold Gospel arose is in substantial continuity with the Jesus remembered by those who wrote the four Gospels in the first place.

This is confirmed by the study of the second type of corruptions, those that are likely to have arisen through harmonizations between the Synoptic Gospels when

¹⁶ Leon E. Wright, *Alterations of the Words of Jesus as quoted in the Literature of the Second Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 116.

¹⁷ Peter M. Head, ‘Christology and Textual transmission: Reverential Alterations in the Synoptic Gospels’, *NovT* 35 (1993), 128–29.

¹⁸ Frederik Wisse, ‘The Nature and Purpose of Redactional Changes in Early Christian Texts: The Canonical Gospels’, in William L. Petersen (ed.), *Gospel Traditions in the Second Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39–53, quotation from 52.

¹⁹ *Orthodox Corruption* 42n94, citing F. J. A. Hort, *Introduction to the New Testament in the Original Greek* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1882), 2.282.

¹² Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 275.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 280.

they were copied together, not least if one scribe copied them one after the other. Such harmonizations offer external textual evidence to support Dunn's call for a fresh approach to the synoptic problem. Just as Dunn's argument that a proper recognition of the importance of oral tradition calls into question the confidence with which many scholars claim to be able to identify the precise extent of sources and the precise nature of tradition-history, so these corruptions remind us of the often ambiguous nature of the textual evidence on which modern critical editions of the Gospels are based. As Keith Elliott observes, 'Scribes were prone to assimilate the gospel they were copying to a parallel text in another gospel'.²⁰ That such harmonizations or assimilations may go back to our earliest extant manuscripts raises problems for those approaching the synoptic problem by means of what we might call redaction criticism on the micro level, for continuing difficulties in determining what was 'original'²⁰ to the text of each Gospel often make it difficult to reach confident decisions, at least at the level of detail, about how one evangelist may have redacted the work of another. Thus there are factors inherent in the transmission of the synoptic tradition which call into question the likelihood that any simple solution to the synoptic problem will ever be satisfactory. This was one of the conclusions that Sanders reached more than thirty years ago on the basis of his painstaking study of early gospel tradition,²² and it is implicit in Dunn's call for a transition from a purely literary approach to the study of the synoptic problem and of synoptic parallels.²³ Just as Dunn's contention that the importance of oral tradition means that scholars are often unable to be confident as to which of two or three parallel pericopae may best preserve the oldest traditions, so the recognition of textual variation in the manuscript tradition means that scholars are often unable to be confident as to which variant readings

(or other potential witnesses, such as possible patristic citation)²⁴ best preserve the earliest form of the written Gospels.

Dunn does not set out to subvert the synoptic problem as such, for he recognizes the interdependence of these texts and he makes use of the dominant hypotheses of Markan priority and of Q. Yet he is clear that his insistence that scholars give sufficient attention to the probable importance of oral tradition in the composition of the synoptic tradition calls into question the way in which much of contemporary Gospel scholarship is conducted. Not only does abandoning the hypothesis of exclusive literary dependence mean that the '*attempt to define the complete scope and limits of Q is doomed to failure*', but so too it means that scholars '*will simply be unable to trace the tradition-history of various sayings and accounts so confidently*' as they have claimed to do in the past.²⁵ This is an important and far-reaching conclusion, so careful attention must be given to the foundations upon which it rests.

Almost by definition, early Christian oral traditions are no longer available today. This may be inconvenient for scholars, but it is hardly a reason to ignore them. Even if we cannot identify or delineate oral traditions with precision, nevertheless it may be both possible and reasonable not only to postulate their existence but also to detect traces of their impact in literary sources in which they may have been incorporated. Thus Dunn finds potential literary evidence for the use of oral tradition in instances of triple and of double tradition where the level of verbatim agreement between the synoptics is quite low. Yet he is careful to remain open to a number of ways in which such parallels may be explained. Just as Matthew and Luke may each have drawn on an oral retelling of a story found also in Mark, so too each may have drawn loosely on Mark, 'retelling it in oral mode'.²⁶ This is a slippery concept. Dunn speaks variously of Matthew's and Luke's 'oral retelling of the Markan stories',²⁷ of following, performing or retelling Mark in oral mode,²⁸ or even of 'writing

²⁰ J. K. Elliott, 'Textual Criticism, Assimilation and the Synoptic Gospels', *NTS* 26 (1980), 231-42, quotation from 231. See also his further treatment, 'The Relevance of Textual Criticism to the Synoptic Problem' in *idem, Essays and Studies in New Testament Textual Criticism* (Cordoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 1992).

²¹ For a discussion of the term 'original text', see E. J. Epp, 'The Multivalence of the Term "Original Text" in New Testament Textual Criticism', *HTR* 92 (1999), 245-81.

²² E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 279.

²³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 335; *idem*, 'Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition', *NTS* 49 (2003), 139-75.

²⁴ See W. L. Petersen, 'What Text can New Testament Textual Criticism Ultimately Reach?' in B. Aland and J. Delobel (eds.), *New Testament Textual Criticism, Exegesis and Church History: a Discussion of Methods* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994).

²⁵ 'Altering', 172.

²⁶ E.g., 'Altering', 163, *Jesus Remembered*, 222.

²⁷ *Jesus Remembered*, 222.

²⁸ *Jesus Remembered*, 220, 221, 222, 223, 236 and *passim*.

the story in oral mode'.²⁹ By this he means that in addition to those instances where Matthew and Luke slavishly copy Mark, there are others where, 'having taken the point of Mark's story they retold it as a story teller would, retaining the constant points which gave the story its identity, and building round the core to bring out their own distinctive emphases'.³⁰ To argue that there were times when Matthew and Luke wrote in this way is one thing; but to conclude that this was a distinctively oral way of doing so may be quite another. There may be times when Matthew and Luke have taken great liberty in the way that they used Mark (or Q), rewriting them with great freedom, but it is difficult to see why such free use of a written source need be construed as oral rather than literary, as an example of secondary orality rather than of a free approach to redaction. Of course the nature of our evidence means that it may often not be possible to decide between the two approaches, and one strength of Dunn's discussion is his refusal to admit certainty on controverted issues, frustrating though this might sometimes appear. Given our difficulties in getting behind the forms of the texts of the Gospels as they are known to us, such caution is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, the danger remains that Dunn's apparently ambiguous understanding of the process that he refers to as 'oral traditioning' risks eliding any meaningful distinction between the free use of a written source and the use of non-written tradition.³¹ One part of the difficulty may lie in the terminology used to describe the compositional practice that is envisaged. Another may lie in the blurring of boundaries that seems inevitable when modern scholars refer to oral sources that, almost by definition, are no longer directly accessible for scholarly examination but are postulated on the basis either of theoretical frameworks and comparative studies of oral cultures elsewhere, or on the basis of particular understandings of how written texts such as the Gospels have been composed, or, indeed, of both. Yet, despite these qualifications, there remains the difficulty that an appeal to oral tradition (usually conceived of as having no written basis) as a source for parallel pericopes in Matthew and in Luke seems quite different from an appeal to the hypothesis that Matthew and Luke have each

independently read, remembered and then loosely rewritten an earlier literary source. Whereas the former scenario emphasizes the use of an oral source, the latter emphasizes the use of a written source, albeit as remembered rather than as read. Either scenario may account for the phenomena of parallel pericopae with little verbatim agreement, but they are not the same,

Pertinent here are insights that might be gained from what we know from ancient sources of the use of memory in contemporary compositional techniques. Addressing the question of how source-critical questions need to be considered alongside the question of compositional procedures in establishing the boundaries of what can be presumed reasonable in the positing of a synoptic model, Sharon Mattila emphasizes the importance of memory in the processes in which classical authors rewrote their sources. Thus Mattila both anticipates Dunn's plea that scholars move away from a purely literary approach to the synoptic problem, and also enhances his argument by providing significant contemporary analogies for the use of sources to which an author has immediate access through memory rather than through visual contact at the point at which he composes his own account of events similar to those recorded in his source. Drawing on recent scholarship on compositional techniques among classical authors, Mattila suggests that ancient authors may have preferred to rely more often on their memory than modern scholars may wish to allow.³² Thus she rejects as anachronistic, and as impossible, given the difficulties inherent in moving backwards and forwards through scrolls, modern assumptions that an ancient author may have worked with direct visual contact with a number of written texts at once. Such a model seems natural to a modern author accustomed to piles of notes and books strewn across the desk on which his word-processor is positioned,³³ but it is out of the question for an

²⁹ *Jesus Remembered*, 214. Dunn is explicit that this is another way of describing his model of 'oral traditioning'.

³⁰ *Jesus Remembered*, 218; cf. 'Altering', 163.

³¹ Cf. 'Altering', 163.

³² On what follows, see S. L. Mattila, 'A Question too often neglected', *NTS* 41 (1995), 199–217, esp. 213–17, and the classical scholarship on which she draws. See also G. F. Downing, 'Compositional Conventions and the Synoptic Problem', *JBL* 107 (1988), 69–85, reprinted in *idem*, *Doing Things with Words in the First Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 152–73, with an additional note responding to Mattila.

³³ For comments on offenders, and an alternative model, see F. G. Downing, 'Word-processing in the Ancient World: The Social Production and Performance of Q', *JSNT* 64 (1996), 29–48, reprinted in *idem*, *Doing Things with Words in the First Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

ancient author either balancing his scroll on his knee as he writes or even dictating his text to a scribe, quite apart from the number of assistants whom he may have had. Mattila's discussion does not fully resolve questions about which elements of the compositional techniques employed in the writing (on the assumption of the two source hypothesis) of Matthew and of Luke are best described as oral and which are best described as literary, but it further substantiates the importance of Dunn's insistence that modern scholars move away from 'a literary, print-dominated mindset'³⁴ and the presumption of purely literary relationships between the synoptic Gospels.

³⁴ *Jesus Remembered*, 883.

Dunn's call for scholars to look beyond assumptions determined by the advent of print is important, and it is to be hoped that it will contribute to renewed research into the likely implications of the preponderance of oral tradition in the formation of the synoptic tradition as it has been preserved for today. But the fact that a once oral gospel is now extant only in written form means that scholars who read this written oral gospel must continue do so in the light of physical factors. Just as the process of oral transformation left its mark upon the text, so the processes of copying and producing books have determined the way in which it was first committed to writing and subsequently transmitted, both before and during the age of print.

DOING DOGMATICS

John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. £13.99. pp. 144. ISBN 0-521-53846-7).

Dogmatics is a lonely business – or so I would imagine, having read this stimulating and thoughtful reflection from John Webster, professor of systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen. Its topic is a dogmatic account of the nature of Holy Scripture. There is currently immense interest in the imagery, language, history, literary characteristics and narrative structure of Scripture, with innumerable studies being added year by year. Yet, as Webster observes, dogmatics lies at the periphery of modern Protestant theology. Nowhere is this more evident than in the virtual absence of theological accounts of the place and purpose of the Bible. Webster, in countering this trend, offers a 'dogmatic ontology of Holy Scripture'. It is not, to judge from Webster's dialogue partners in this work, a particularly fashionable topic. While Barth, Calvin and Ursinus figure prominently in this robust account of the place of Scripture in the life and thought of the church, relatively few living theologians make significant contributions to the dialogue.

It generally runs counter to the trends dominant within contemporary Protestant theology. Many would argue that such approaches to the Bible are locked into an earlier theological age, and are somewhat out of place today. There are certainly many who would agree with his insistence on the need for a dogmatic account of Scripture, particularly within the burgeoning evangelical theological constituency. Yet many evangelicals would find themselves puzzled by Webster's approach, arguing that Scripture itself establishes its own theological validation, thus rendering Webster's more nuanced dogmatic account unnecessary. It could, of course, be argued (as I would argue) that this is a misjudgment, and that Webster's approach is a proper and legitimate outcome of a scripturally-grounded discipleship of the mind. Yet this conclusion is not self-evident to many evangelicals.

Webster's study is important, at times difficult, and invariably rewarding. Among the highlights of the book, I would especially note Webster's critique of the analogy of the incarnation as a means of explicating or illustrating the inspiration of Scripture (pp. 22–23). As Webster points out, this analogy is profoundly misleading, in that it 'may threaten the uniqueness of the Word's becoming flesh by making "incarnation" a general principle or characteristic of divine action'.

This work must be warmly welcomed, and needs to be read by those with both high and low views of the authority of the Bible. They will all find it an unsettling, yet ultimately rewarding, experience.

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