

"New, Unfounded, Unworkable, and Unnecessary":
Thomas Brodie's Critique of Oral Tradition

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The analysis indicates that in the question of the composition of the New Testament, the idea of oral tradition is new, unfounded, unworkable, and unnecessary. --Thomas Brodie¹

Biblical scholars generally date the gospels to around 30 to 60 years after Jesus was gone. Yet these texts contain a vast assortment of very detailed stories about Jesus, in many cases complete with extensive verbatim dialogue, and even commentary on what individuals were thinking or feeling at the time. How did all this material survive in such detail for so many decades before getting written down? There is no evidence that any significant amount of this material was written down before the evangelists got out their parchment. Many of Paul's epistles are considered to be earlier, but even the earliest of them date to roughly two decades after the crucifixion, and in any case they contain virtually nothing about Jesus' life and sayings.²

The postulated lost document Q doesn't help.³ Even if one assumes the existence of Q, its reconstructed text has mostly sayings, the total volume of which comprises but a small portion of the material contained in the gospels. And even Q's advocates do not assume it was written down during Jesus' lifetime or soon thereafter. In any case, Q itself is controversial: many scholars persuasively argue against the hypothesis.⁴

The remnants of non-canonical Gospels that have been found, such as the Gospel of Thomas, also do not help, since none of the surviving manuscripts can be dated earlier than around the middle of the second century, and none appear to come from documents originally written much earlier than that. Some scholars assign a first-century date to the original version of Thomas, but here too even the most optimistic do not push that date back to anywhere near Jesus' lifetime.⁵

Even the possibility that people who participated in some of the stories survived until the writing of the gospels does not help: memories would grow dim and lose detail after six months, let alone 30-plus years. But New Testament scholars have advanced a theory about an alternative source for the evangelists, a source that seems to solve the problem: "oral tradition." What this implies is succinctly expressed by William Telford in his description of the Gospel of Mark:

¹ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 50.

² For a complete list of everything in Paul's epistles that cites sayings of Jesus or can be interpreted as alluding to such sayings, see Nikolaus Walter, "Paul and the Early Christian Jesus-Tradition," in A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Paul and Jesus: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 51-80.

³ According to this hypothesis, Q and Mark were first, and Matthew and Luke used Mark and Q as their sources. The text of Q is generally reconstructed from areas where Matthew and Luke have identical text without a counterpart in Mark. For an in-depth explanation of the Q hypothesis, see James M. Robinson, *Jesus: According to the Earliest Witness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

⁴ See Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 2002); and Mark Goodacre and Nicholas Perrin, eds., *Questioning Q: A Multidimensional Critique* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

⁵ For an introduction to the Gospel of Thomas, see Norman Perrin, *Thomas, The Other Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).

The Gospel is the compilation of a number of single, isolated, easily memorized traditions or pericopae (or small clusters of such pericopae) which circulated in oral form before being written down.⁶

There is a great deal of disagreement among scholars about where those traditions came from, and what happened to them while they were circulating. Some believe the traditions were composed out of thin air to serve specific purposes in the life of a community. Others believe the traditions resulted from people memorizing events and conversations they participated in. Some believe the traditions changed radically as they were passed along from person to person. Others believe that people passing on oral traditions were careful to avoid changing anything in them.

What all of these disparate views have in common is the belief that the material used by the evangelist to compose his gospel came primarily by word of mouth. That is what Thomas Brodie attacks in his book *The Birthing of the New Testament: The Intertextual Development of the New Testament Writings*. Brodie's thesis is that the evangelists' sources were literary texts. They borrowed from and reworked other texts such as the Old Testament and Paul's epistles, and there is no need to see any more of an oral component in the process than the general sense in which any author's ideas are influenced by the people he or she talks to.

Brodie devotes a chapter in this book to exposing the weaknesses of the oral tradition hypothesis, because oral tradition is frequently cited to deny the very literary relationships that his book seeks to substantiate. His attack is four-fold: he asserts that the idea of oral tradition as the source for the gospels is new (recently devised by modern scholarship, and thus questionable), unfounded (the arguments that created the hypothesis are weak), unworkable (the hypothesis doesn't explain the actual evidence in the text), and unnecessary (alternative explanations are credible). In this article I will review these arguments, assess their validity, and augment them with observations of my own.

New

Until the late nineteenth century, the traditional Christian view of the evangelists' sources relied in part on a concept of "oral tradition" quite different from how modern scholarship uses the term. The prescribed belief was that the evangelists were either writing from memory as disciples of the Lord (Matthew and John), or they relied upon eyewitness accounts told to them as they were composing their narratives (Mark and Luke). Eusebius quotes the second century bishop Papias of Hierapolis in support of this latter view with respect to Mark:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things said or done by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses.⁷

⁶ William R Telford, *The Theology of the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 153.

⁷ Eusebius, *Church History* 39:15 (NPNF2 1:172-3).

One of the Papias passages is also frequently cited to explain why so much time elapsed before someone wrote down the gospel story. In this view, "oral tradition" was valued even higher than a written record:

If then, anyone came, who had been a follower of the elders, I questioned him in regard to the words of the elders, -- what Andrew or what Peter said, or what was said by Philip, or by Thomas, or by James, or by John, or by Matthew, or by any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what things Aristion and the Presbyter John, the disciples of the Lord, say. For I did not think that what was to be gotten from the books would profit me as much as what came from the living and abiding voice.⁸

However, when historical-critical investigation of the Bible picked up momentum in the nineteenth century, these uncritical views fell out of favor and a new view of oral tradition began to develop.

In the early years of the twentieth century Hermann Gunkel devised a new method for analyzing the book of Genesis. Gunkel proposed that Genesis was composed of stories that were developed and passed on orally within communities for specific purposes in the life of the community. An individual story's reason for being, and the key to its intended message or meaning was determined by its original *Sitz im Leben* (situation in life), not necessarily its ultimate context in the book it eventually got written into. The modern scholar would attempt to determine the original situation in life and thus the original meaning using the methodology of *Gattungsgeschichte* (genre history), which in English has come to be known as form criticism.

Gunkel did not limit this approach to Genesis but rather considered ancient literature in general to be fundamentally different in this way from modern literature. Ancient literature involved committing to writing stories that were invented and preserved orally as folk traditions. The creative genius came not from individual authors but impersonally from *communities*. Modern literature, on the other hand, involves the genius of individual creativity. It is the product of *authors*. To make a long story short, this view made the leap from Old Testament to New Testament, took the world of biblical scholarship by storm, and remains today one of the most firmly entrenched paradigms among biblical scholars.⁹

This paradigm for the most part rejects the view of the evangelists as authors, reducing them instead to scribes who wrote down what they received, with minimal editing to arrange isolated traditions into continuous narratives. Inseparable from this conception is the methodology of form criticism, which provides tools for deconstructing a gospel into those originally independent parts.

⁸ Eusebius, *Church History* 39:4 (NPNF2 1:171).

⁹ For a concise yet complete account of the rise of how the modern conception of oral tradition and form criticism, developed, see Robert C. Culley, "Oral Tradition and Biblical Studies," *Oral Tradition* 1:1(1986):30-65. The theory's status as a paradigm is shown by the way it is not only widely accepted but typically is treated as unquestionable. For example, well-known names in the field, such as James D. G. Dunn and Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, freely use phrases like "without doubt" and "certain conclusion" when discussing this conception of oral tradition. See Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *NTS* 49:139-175; and Murphy-O'Connor, *Jesus and Paul: Parallel Lives* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 88. The article by Dunn was written specifically to assert that the author of Mark depended heavily on oral tradition.

Because the "scribe's" or "redactor's" contribution is relatively insignificant, the parts can be taken out of context and reconstituted as independent units in order to determine what milieu they came from, what purpose they served, and consequently what meaning or message they were intended to convey.

Today scholars use other methodologies in addition to form criticism, but few go outside the oral tradition and form criticism paradigm. Redaction criticism, for instance, builds upon the form criticism paradigm as its foundation, since its goal is to determine what the evangelists had in mind as they stitched together the various pieces of tradition into a single narrative. The evangelist is considered to be not so much a scribe as an editor or redactor, but still less than an author.

More recently, narrative criticism does take a radically different approach by analyzing the gospels as cohesive narratives in which each part must be understood in its current context within the entire gospel narrative. However, this too typically remains within the framework of the oral tradition and form criticism paradigm, for the idea remains that the authors used separate and independent traditions that came to them orally as building blocks to craft their narratives.¹⁰ As a result, this paradigm severely limits the degree to which literary context provides the interpretive framework for the words of a written text.¹¹ The form critic looks at individual Gospel stories in isolation out of context. The narrative critic looks at a gospel as a whole, but still substantially in isolation, out of context from the rest of the New Testament. What the paradigm effectively prevents is precisely what Thomas Brodie advocates in *The Birthing of the New Testament*: a cohesive view of the New Testament as an overarching literary creation in which each part must be understood within the overall context of the whole. In other words, the point is that you lose something every time you look at a piece of literature out of context: a pericope (individual story in a gospel) makes sense only within the overall gospel story; the gospel makes sense only within the overall New Testament story; the New Testament makes sense only within the overall Bible story, and the Bible as a whole makes sense only within the context of other literature from the contemporary culture.

The world of historical scholarship does not deal in blacks and whites: it is possible, of course, that oral tradition, literary borrowing, and authorial creativity were all at work in the creation of the gospels. But if Brodie's view is correct, oral tradition and form criticism must be essentially and substantially incorrect. Brodie's argument is that the vast majority of the text in the gospels can be shown to be the result of authors creatively and self-consciously reworking other literary texts, to the extent that any aspect of writing down oral remembrances is confined to the rare exception.

¹⁰ For a survey of various methodologies that have been applied to the gospels in recent scholarship, see Janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore, *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008).

¹¹ As Brodie observes elsewhere, "if two passages do not show fairly obvious parallelism they are either not compared, or their complex relationship, instead of being set in literary context, is usually accounted for on the basis of evidence which is missing and uncontrollable - oral tradition and lost documents." Qtd. in Dennis R MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 2000), 171. An extreme example of this is Benjamin Bacon, who chronicles a vast assortment of remarkably clear correspondences between passages in Mark and Paul's epistles, but then concludes there cannot have been literary borrowing because "the transfer of Pauline terms is too free for literary dependence. The relation is close, but still traditional and oral rather than literary." *The Gospel of Mark: Its Composition and Date* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1925), 270-271.

Paradigms fall hard even in the hard sciences when researchers can display irrefutable experimental evidence against them. In the humanities, paradigms are all but invincible once established, because concrete evidence that unambiguously refutes the paradigm is typically impossible to get. And as a general rule, the older a paradigm has been continuously accepted, the more unassailable it seems, so Brodie begins his attempt to undermine the paradigm by pointing out the relative newness of the idea of oral tradition. "Oral tradition" has the aura of antiquity among many New Testament scholars because, well, sources from antiquity like Papias seem to talk about it. Some concept of "oral tradition" has been with us nearly from the beginning, and thus its apparently evident antiquity and universal acceptance understandably makes many people reluctant to openly challenge it. For that reason it is important to clarify that the theory Gunkel created in the early twentieth century, and which Julius Wellhausen later applied to the New Testament, was something fundamentally new in the history of interpreting the gospels.

The idea is not that something "new" is automatically suspect but that a relatively recent paradigm is more susceptible to re-thinking than one that has been around for millennia. This is a valid point. The next step is to ask how strong were the arguments that established it so recently.

Unfounded

By "unfounded," Brodie means that the arguments advanced to develop the oral tradition and form criticism paradigm, and apply it to the New Testament, are not compelling. Gunkel did not create the modern idea of oral conception out of thin air but borrowed it from anthropological studies of pre-literate societies. His primary basis for attributing the Genesis material to anthropological oral tradition was that he did not consider it to be "history." In his view there were only two possible genres for an ancient work of narrative literature: saga or history. And since saga was by definition an oral production, the conclusion was clear:

Are the accounts (*Erzählungen*) of Genesis stories or sagas (*Geschichte oder Sage*)? For the modern historian this question is no longer a question, yet it is important to make clear the grounds for this modern position. History writing (*Geschichtsschreibung*) is no innate art of the human spirit, but has emerged in the course of human history, at a particular point of development (*an einem bestimmten Punkte der Entwicklung*). Uncultured peoples (*Die uncultivierten Völker*) do not write history.¹²

It is not difficult to see that this is an "unreal dilemma": the conception of "history" among ancient people might well be different from the modern conception. Gunkel's reasoning amounts to an assertion that the mere fact that an ancient literary work contains things that we know cannot possibly be "historical" in our sense of the word means it must have been an oral production.

Actually, as Meir Sternberg demonstrates at length, if one understands the basic idea behind even the modern conception of the literary genre of "history," the Old Testament narratives, specifically including Genesis, are absolutely historical:

¹² Qtd. in Brodie, *Birthing*, 54.

Whatever the truth value of the references and explanations made, their very making strengthens the truth claim by anchoring the discourse in public and accessible features of reality. ... Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results. The shape of time, the rationale of monotheism, the foundations of conduct, the national sense of identity, the very right to the land of Israel and the hope of deliverance to come: all hang in the generic balance. Hence the Bible's determination to sanctify and compel literal belief in the past. It claims not just the status of history but, as Erich Auerbach rightly maintains, of *the* history -- the one and only truth that, like god himself, brooks no rival."¹³

Gunkel may have thought Genesis was not history because it included legendary material, but whoever created that narrative deliberately presented it as historical. This intention actually makes Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament radically different from Gunkel's own conception of "saga." On this flawed basis, Gunkel proceeded to point out some similarities between the Genesis text and "sagas" from oral cultures, such as the inclusion within Genesis of apparently self-contained short stories. But this amounts to an unsubstantiated assumption that the mere presence of short, apparently independent stories in an ancient literary work amounts to definitive proof that such stories originally circulated independently and orally. It also requires an unsubstantiated assumption that the culture that produced the sagas and the culture of Israel were fundamentally similar. This was feasible for Gunkel because of his belief that cultures were essentially "cultured" or "uncultured." For Gunkel, the brevity of many of the stories found in Genesis substantiated such an assumption because early Judaic society was "uncultured":

[The brevity of the stories] corresponds to the art of the story-teller and the hearer's ability to absorb. The oldest storytellers were not able to set forth complex works of art ... Rather, the old times (*die alte Zeit*) were satisfied with giving very small products (*ganz kleinen Produkten*) that would fill something less than half an hour. And when the story was ended, the hearer's fantasy was fully satisfied and his ability to absorb exhausted.

But the condescending European attitude toward ancient society as "uncultured" is itself not well-founded, and the belief that people a few millennia ago had limited mental capacity is yet another unsubstantiated assumption. Gunkel found other similarities between saga and Genesis, but in such a large body of literature it is not difficult to find whatever one is looking for. This Gunkel did.

And so the fateful path was taken: on the fortieth page of his commentary, Gunkel starts talking about the foundational role of oral tradition. And behind the oral tradition were, not authors, but communities.¹⁴

Shortly thereafter New Testament scholarship picked up the torch, and ultimately "The first half of the 20th c. surrendered to his influence."¹⁵

¹³ *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 31-32.

¹⁴ Brodie, *Birthing*, 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

Today scholars are more inclined to recognize the complex literary artistry of books such as Genesis, so Gunkel's basis for ascribing its content to oral tradition seems fundamentally flawed. But more recently others have attempted to build on his foundation, citing additional reasons for believing a Gunkel-like anthropological oral tradition is behind the text of the gospels. Werner Kelber and Albert Lord argue that the gospels are influenced by oral culture and rhythms and that "some of the patterns of oral literature also occur in biblical texts such as the Gospels."¹⁶ But one could make such an assertion about nearly all ancient literature, and oral forms do not automatically mean the content had to come from oral tradition. Such patterns are evidence that the *form* of the text was influenced by oral culture, not that the *content* originated from oral tradition. In any case, first-century religious texts such as the gospels were written for oral performance and so oral speech patterns are to be expected. Indeed, making a text sound like oral speech is itself a literary convention:

In other words, the patterns which Lord claims are oral, are in fact literary, and found in genuine literature. More of what Lord attributes to oral influence can be more fully accounted for by what R. Alter (1981: 51-52) calls 'literary conventions'. And the fact that the gospels largely consist of episodes fits into a literary pattern 'the cult of the episode.'¹⁷

In addition, patterns that appear to reflect oral culture can be found in literature from any period. A modern author as well as an ancient one may write with a view to oral delivery, as any speech-writer must. An author may intend to portray rustic, rural, life in a largely oral culture without being a part of that culture.

One pattern these scholars sometimes cite is minor variations in the wording of the same story in separate texts: this is taken to be evidence of oral tradition.¹⁸ But the same kinds of variations can occur in an exclusively literary environment.¹⁹ An author may freely alter a text that he borrows from in ways that result in minor variations. As Dennis MacDonald points out, "Ancient authors seldom retained verbal affinities with their literary models; they sought rather to adapt characterizations, plot strategies, type-scenes, and motifs."²⁰ Thus, minor variations in similar stories may point to literary artifice as well as to oral tradition. Actually, in oral transmission those variations are random in nature, but in literary transmission one can often detect behind them the purposes of the author, and this is precisely what scholars can do very frequently in the gospel texts.

Birger Gerhardsson and James D. G. Dunn take a somewhat different tack in the quest to

¹⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jerome Murphy O'Connor offers a succinct expression of this view: "... identity in essentials and divergence in marginals points to one certain conclusion. We are dealing with a foundational narrative that not only began in oral tradition, but that continued to preserve its salient features." (*Jesus and Paul*, 88).

¹⁹ Numerous studies of ancient literature have shown that the ways in which ancient authors borrowed from literary texts were incredibly varied and included precisely this pattern. See Thomas L. Brodie, Dennis Ronald MacDonald, and Stanely E. Porter, eds., *The Intertextuality of the Epistles: Explorations of Theory and Practice* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

²⁰ MacDonald, *Homeric Epics*, 171.

substantiate the oral tradition theory: their argument is that Jesus and his disciples taught orally and so it is to be expected that such would be the initial mode of transmission of the gospel materials. However, this argument is based on the portrayal of Jesus and the disciples in the gospels and so presupposes the gospels' essential historicity. The gospels do tell the story that way, but the degree to which that story or that aspect of the story is historically accurate is an open question. Thus, this is not so much an evidence-based argument in favor of oral tradition as it is simply an assumption:

[Dunn] makes an impassioned plea for attention to oral tradition, but his case is based on a presumption: 'We simply cannot escape from a presumption of orality for the first stage of the Jesus tradition' (2003a: 157). Dunn does not discuss how ancient writers composed their texts. His leading example of a text allegedly shaped by oral tradition (Lk. 7.1-10; cf. Mt. 8.1-13; Jn 4.46-54) is in fact heavily dependent on the text of the Elijah-Elisha narrative.²¹

Dunn's argument is to some extent circular: he assumes that the gospels are historical, based in part on the reliability of oral tradition; and he assumes the reliability of oral tradition based in part on the historicity of the gospels.

Helmut Koester takes a different approach. His argument for oral tradition is based on data outside of the gospels: from some passages in Paul's epistles he supposes that the tradition was transmitted orally to Paul and thus was created and transmitted by a community:

Christianity began as a religious movement that established its distinctive interior structures by the creation of a ritual and a story . . . Paul . . . received a tradition of an oral version . . . (1 Cor. 11.23b). The organization of the new communities was accomplished . . . by sayings . . . transmitted in the oral tradition . . . Writings that were later called 'gospels' came into existence as alternative forms of the continuing oral tradition . . .²²

However, the idea of the central role of "communities" in passing on the tradition is a questionable presupposition of form criticism methodology, and it is far from clear that Koester is correctly interpreting the Pauline passages in question. The key passages are 1 Corinthians 11:23 and 15:3:

For I received (παρέδωκα) from the Lord what I also delivered (παρεδίδοτε) to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread ...

For I delivered (παρέδωκα) to you as of first importance what I also received (παρέλαβον), that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures ...

As Brodie cautions, these statements most likely do not refer to what modern scholars mean by the term oral tradition:

²¹ Brodie, *Birthing*, 57.

²² Qtd. in Brodie, *Birthing*, 58.

... when Paul invokes tradition going back to the Lord, one cannot be sure whether this call is an appeal to a historical tradition related to Jesus and a community, or whether, as his language suggests, he is using and adapting the general Jewish idea about tradition going back to Moses and God. Paul's language is itself general; he gives no details about the source and workings of the tradition.²³

In other words, Paul is asserting that he is firmly within authentic Jewish tradition; he does not explicitly say that he received the tradition orally.

Indeed, one could well take this observation a step further to point out that if Paul did admit to receiving the tradition orally it would undermine virtually all of the arguments he so forcefully advanced in behalf of his own unique apostolic authority. Throughout his epistles he insists on his absolute authority as an apostle personally commissioned by the Lord to preach the gospel and determine for others what it is and isn't; if he admitted to receiving the tradition orally from "the community," such a claim to authority would fall flat.

Brodie also points out that even in the unlikely event that in 1 Corinthians Paul admits to being secondary to community-based oral tradition, the statement might not actually be literally true. The epistles are carefully crafted literary creations just as the gospels are, and their historical veracity is just as subject to questioning and verification:

If the gospels are so suspect historically, then on what basis is one so sure of the historical reliability of a particular reading of an epistle? It is not only the gospels which are artistic, rhetorical. Evidence grows that, to some degree, something similar is true of the epistles.²⁴

Ultimately, Brodie accomplishes his purpose in this section of the chapter. He effectively shows that proponents of oral tradition have amassed arguments that are only sufficiently forceful to convince those who are inclined to be convinced. But an unfounded theory may still be at least plausible. And so he goes on from there to make the case that this theory is also "unworkable."

Unworkable

By "unworkable" Brodie means that however the oral tradition theory has been formulated, it does not fit the evidence. Either it is couched in such vague terms that there is no way to test it against the evidence, or it can be tested against the evidence and fails the test. Many conceptions of how oral tradition works are as vague as Rudolf Bultmann's blithe statement that in oral cultures "The literature ... springs out [*entspringt*] of definite conditions and wants of life." As Brodie observes, "Bultmann never explained how this springing process works."²⁵ As presented by Bultmann and many others, oral tradition is little more than a way to assert a phenomenon exists without actually having evidence for it, and to explain it without actually explaining it.

It has been said that a troop of monkeys armed with typewriters could produce the Encyclopedia

²³ Ibid., 57.

²⁴ Ibid., 58.

²⁵ Ibid.

Brittanica given enough time. If so, perhaps the "springing" explanation works for Genesis since one can extend the "springing" process almost indefinitely far back into the distant past. But it doesn't work quite as well for the New Testament, where the time frame is just thirty years or so.

Charles H. Dodd recognized that the theory didn't work so well for the New Testament due to the limited time-frame, so he rose to the challenge by changing the theory. He proposed that oral tradition was not a process of "springing" as in the creation of new stories from scratch, but rather it was a process of passing on historical memories:

The materials ... were already in existence as an unarticulated wealth of recollections and reminiscences of the words and deeds of Jesus -- mixed, it may be, with the reflections and interpretations of his followers.²⁶

This change in the theory was not based on any evidence but was simply an attempt to make the idea of oral tradition in the New Testament plausible. Of course, if one allows for enough "reflections and interpretations," pretty soon "oral tradition" in the technical sense becomes little different from "oral tradition" in the general sense. It's easy to conjure up the image of the childhood game where a group of kids sits in a circle, and a story is passed privately from one to another until it gets back to the starting point, by which time it is unrecognizable.

Martin Hengel took Dodd's idea and pushed it a bit further by denying the "reflections and interpretations" part: oral tradition involved no changes over time. This too was a case of revising the theory to make it fit his presuppositions. Like Bultmann's it offered no explanation of how the process worked, and like Dodd's no evidence to back it up was or could have been offered.

Gerhardsson did attempt an explanation that drew on indirect evidence. He suggested that Jesus engaged in meticulous methods of rabbinical teaching that guaranteed whatever he said and did would be firmly implanted in his disciples' memory, resulting in "fixed and permanent impressions." However, the gospels make no suggestion that Jesus used such methods, and both Hengel's and Gerhardsson's "fixed traditions" approach fails to explain the wide variety of readings for the same and similar stories throughout the gospels. If the methods were so meticulous and the traditions so fixed, why did they end up so radically different in so many ways? Moreover, if anyone would have been aware of and used such methods, it would have been Paul. Yet we have direct evidence in Paul's epistles that even if they were tried, they didn't work. He was constantly trying to correct followers who strayed from his teachings. Indeed, the epistle to the Galatians bears witness to the development of "oral tradition" directly contradicting the gospel that Paul preached in Galatia, and the tradition in Galatia metamorphosed so drastically within a very short time after he left:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel -- not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed. (Gal 1:6-8)

²⁶ Ibid., 58.

If Paul had to write the epistle to the Galatians specifically to correct "oral tradition" that had already gone drastically wrong within weeks or months of his presence there, how can modern scholars reasonably suppose that "oral tradition" remained reliable after 30 years?

Joseph Fitzmyer recognized some of the difficulties and tried to rescue the theory of oral tradition by revising it yet again. He envisioned a three-stage process: the first stage was the teaching of Jesus, the second stage was oral transmission which could involve "embellishment and modification," and finally the in the third stage the evangelists took in the modified traditions and further modified them with their own "theological formulation." Besides the fact that, as we've seen in Galatians, "embellishment and modification" might involve drastic and fundamental rather than superficial changes, the literary character and literary unity of the gospels make Fitzmyer's revision of the theory unworkable. The problem is that if Fitzmyer's scenario were accurate, a gospel would be a patchwork quilt of ill-fitting individual pieces stitched together with all-too-visible seams between them. One could further revise Fitzmyer's revision of the theory in order to fit the evidence of literary unity by adding "literary formulation" to the third stage and allowing that stage to expand its role to the degree that it could overshadow the others. But then you are left with little or no recognizable remnants of "oral tradition" in the text.

Brodie focuses here on the gospels he has studied most closely – Luke and John – but the same principle applies equally to Mark. In her study of Mark, Mary Ann Tolbert discusses the difficulty in ascribing to oral tradition something that fits so perfectly into the literary fabric of the gospel:

It is possible that these parables or some variation of them existed in Christian oral tradition prior to Mark. Yet they are so crucial to the organization of the Gospel and to the molding of so much other material that it is hard to believe the author did not shape them to fit his requirements. The interpretation of the parable of the Sower, with its point-by-point expansion and repetition of the parable, is especially likely to have come from the author's own hand.²⁷

Tolbert concludes that recognizing the literary unity of Mark means that "if an oral tradition prior to Mark is to be discovered – and that may well be an impossibility," we will never be able to say with any certainty what parts he received versus what he changed or invented.²⁸

One could easily adduce any number of other literary features of the gospel that make it appear that the third stage of "theological formulation" might rather be called "literary formulation," and that it often completely overshadows or bypasses the supposed earlier two stages of Fitzmyer's scenario. For example, much of Luke very clearly amounts to a reworking of Old Testament stories.²⁹ And the parables unique to Matthew all have a remarkably similar character, while the parables unique to Luke all have a remarkably similar character – suggesting that Matthew and Luke made up the parables themselves.³⁰ One could amass a great deal of such evidence of

²⁷ Mary Ann Tolbert, *Sowing the Gospel: Mark's Work in Literary-Historical Perspective* (Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 306.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁹ Besides the rest of Brodie's *Birthing*, see Michael D. Goulder, *Luke: A New Paradigm* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989).

³⁰ See Michael D. Goulder, *Five Stones and a Sling: Memoirs of a Biblical Scholar* (Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd,

authorial license, evidence that simply doesn't fit the "reflections and interpretations" oral tradition model or the "fixed and permanent impressions" oral tradition model or the "three stage" oral tradition model.³¹

Perhaps recognizing that endless revision to the oral tradition theory was a dead-end, Werner Kelber came up with a radically new suggestion with regard to the second gospel in particular: Mark did not like and did not trust oral tradition precisely because of its changeability. He wanted in effect to put an end to oral tradition by establishing a fixed written tradition to take its place. As with the other theories devoid of direct evidence, it is easy to propose and just as easy for others to call it a "house of cards."³² Still others can read the same evidence and draw the exact opposite conclusion: C. H. Giblin proposes that the whole purpose of Mark was to deflect attention away from the written gospel of Mark itself and toward the oral tradition: this, he asserts, is the purpose of the apparently inconclusive ending of Mark which leaves hearers to seek the final resolution of the story in oral tradition.³³

Others try to salvage oral tradition by making less all-encompassing theories. Thus, Pieter J. J. Botha finds the "dynamics of rumor" in "parts" of the Gospels. But this pulls back so far from ideas of oral tradition as something fixed and reliable and pervasively behind the gospel content as to render the theory of little use. In addition, anything that relies for evidence on "parts" of a gospel is suspect: in such a large body of literature one can find so many parts and such variety that that any given set of parts could correspond to any given theory, be it oral tradition or monkeys banging on typewriters:

That is why so many diverse models -- Bultmann, Dodd, Gerhardsson, Fitzmyer, Botha – can appear credible. The theories really do correspond to data. But not to all the data.³⁴

Brodie concludes this section of the chapter with a brief and tantalizing reference to the Gospel of Mark as a crux for the whole scholarly enterprise of finding oral tradition behind Gospel content:

Mark, generally regarded as the first gospel, is the crucial testing ground for tracing tradition (including oral tradition), but the tracing process does not work. Major efforts to distinguish tradition from redaction have been at such odds with one another as to suggest that, on the tradition question at least, Markan research sometimes seemed to be in a cul-de-sac (Luz 1980).³⁵

In other words, if oral tradition is to be found at all, it must be found at least in Mark; but at the same time, the oral tradition theories are manifestly unworkable when applied to Mark.

2009), 58-62.

³¹ As one more example, see also David Gowler, "The *Chreia*," in Amy-Jill Levine, Dale C. Allison, and John Dominic Crossan, eds., *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 132-48.

³² Quoting Halversen. *Ibid.*, 60.

³³ "The Beginning of the Ongoing Gospel (Mk 1:2-16:8)," in Frans, Van Segbroeck, et al, eds., *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck* (Leuven: Leuven University Press., 1992), 975-986.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

The text of Mark poses a serious problem for anyone who makes a serious attempt to envision a realistic memorization-at-the-source historical scenario for the creation of oral tradition. The story we actually read in the second gospel is one in which no one understood Jesus' significance during his earthly ministry. Throughout the story, the obtuse disciples fail Jesus in every way. They do not understand who he is or why he is there, and to a man they desert him in his hour of need at the beginning of his passion. If we assume some degree of historical veracity for the story as related in Mark, it is extraordinarily difficult to imagine these same disciples stopping and memorizing each dialogue as it happened -- or even the gist of each dialogue -- from the moment Jesus summoned them.

To get a feel for the implausibility of such scenarios one must think seriously about the actual stories that are related in Mark and what must have happened if they occasioned the creation of "permanent and fixed impressions." Consider, for example, the story of the woman with a 12-year hemorrhage (5:25-34). The disciples were not aware anything was happening until they heard Jesus tell a woman that her faith healed her. They then would have had to quickly memorize not only Jesus' words but the whole story recounted by the woman. Something like that would have to have been done on the spot by disciples who had no idea what was going on ("You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you say, 'Who touched me?']"). Or consider the stories of Jesus disputing with his enemies in the temple: if this came from memorized-at-the-source oral tradition, these same obtuse disciples would have had to memorize not only Jesus' words but those of his opponents, some of which were spoken not even to Jesus but privately among the opponents themselves *about* Jesus. (11:31-33; 12:14-15, 19-23) The source of the entire passion story becomes similarly incomprehensible, for the disciples would have had to find surrogate investigators for things they didn't personally witness, which means the entire story after Jesus' arrest. According to Mark, the moment Jesus was taken into custody "they all forsook him and fled" (14:50).

The disciples never get a clue in Mark; they might have come around after the story ends in 16:8, but how would they then remember so many details from the period when they were in a perpetual fog? Indeed, much of the dialogue in Mark consists of Jesus castigating his disciples for being slow-witted, slothful, and even disobedient. Did these slow-witted and slothful disciples make it a point to memorize even embarrassing stories about themselves and the very words with which Jesus castigated them?

"Then are you also without understanding?" (7:18)

"Do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear? And do you not remember? . . . Do you not yet understand?" (8:17-21)

"Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men." (8:33)

But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God." (10:14)

And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?" . . . And he came the third time, and said

to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest?" (14:37-41)

In other words, for memorized-at-the-source oral tradition to be behind the earliest gospel, the disciples had to be perceptive and diligent and self-effacing in actual fact, yet take part in creating an oral tradition that inaccurately portrayed them as obtuse and slothful and self-aggrandizing.³⁶

Unnecessary

As Brodie observes, showing that a theory is unfounded and unworkable may not be enough to cause its rejection:

Even if a hypothesis is unclear in its foundation, and even if in practice there are serious difficulties with getting it to work, perhaps in some way it is still the only apparent response to a real need.³⁷

This is indeed a pervasive feeling among scholars. Even a critical scholar such as Mark Goodacre, who has led the charge to debunk Q, assumes that the only real alternative to explaining the synoptic problem is to rely more heavily on oral tradition.³⁸ Brodie lists several reasons why people tend to think this way, followed by explanations why they are not as compelling in reality as they may seem.

First, much of the text in the gospels follows the rhythms of oral speech. But in fact any writer can impart such rhythms to a text, and it would be especially appropriate for the evangelists to do that if the gospels were written for oral performance, as is likely.

Second, minor variations between similar stories in the gospels seem to correspond to the minor variations that occur in oral communication. But in oral communication such differences occur randomly; in the gospels they can frequently be shown to be systematic. Where Matthew borrows from Mark, the differences fit the literary strategy of Matthew and were clearly done for a literary purpose. Moreover, recent studies of literary relationships, sometimes called mimesis or intertextuality, have shown the remarkably broad variety of ways in which ancient writers borrowed and reworked other texts as they wrote their own. Borrowing from another text did not necessarily mean copying word-for-word; it could involve re-wording and re-organizing, which is what we see in the gospels.

Third, the gospel stories themselves depict an obviously oral culture: Jesus and his disciples go around speaking to crowds and individuals. They speak off the cuff and naturally, without the artifice that goes into literary productions. It would be natural for such people to pass on their teachings orally. But the fact that a writer portrays such an environment does not necessarily mean his writing actually arose in such an environment or even that the depiction corresponds accurately to historical reality. Brodie offers several reasons why the image of rusticity may itself be artifice.

³⁶ For an example of the latter theme, see Mark 10:35-45.

³⁷ Brodie, *Birth*, 60.

³⁸ See Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2002), 187-89; *The Synoptic Problem: A Way Through the Maze (Understanding the Bible and its World)* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 62, 166-67.

The gospels' literary heritage is from both Greco-Roman and Jewish culture, both of which to some extent idealize oral culture. A whole genre of Greco-Roman literature idealized pastoral simplicity of life, and first-century Jews idealized the concept of oral tradition which they traced back to Moses. On the other hand these same Jews were ambivalent toward writing, along with many other religious cultures then and now. They venerated the written word but were wary of its becoming a calcification of the past: temple priests acted as guardians of the Torah but were constantly corrected by prophets who spoke directly from Yahweh. Portraying an oral culture within a written document could be a way to incorporate this tension within a written document.³⁹ Finally, many of the literary models for the gospels -- such stories as the Elijah-Elisha cycle -- tend to portray the same pastoral simplicity of the itinerant prophet.

The fourth and fifth reasons why oral tradition is often deemed necessary are closely interrelated. On the one hand, oral tradition is so embedded in the paradigm of modern biblical scholarship that people tend to believe there is no alternative. On the other hand, modern biblical scholarship has increasingly concluded that the gospels are not historically reliable, and those who find this disconcerting recognize that the oral tradition paradigm is the last chance to plausibly set a limit to that trend. Oral tradition seems to be the only way to keep biblical scholarship from "dislodging the Gospel from its historical moorings."⁴⁰

The problem here is that the oral tradition theory actually does not function in that way very effectively, certainly far less so than is commonly realized or acknowledged. Out of many variants of the theory that scholars have proposed, only the one that is the least well founded and the most unworkable holds out much promise for supporting a view of the gospels as historically reliable sources.

When scholars first devised the very idea of oral tradition, it was deemed fundamentally a matter of communities making up stories to suit their purposes. By its very nature oral tradition of this sort would not be and was not considered a historical source. Only later when it was applied to the New Testament, did some scholars introduce the ideas of memorization-at-the-source and fixed transmission. Each of those ideas was introduced as an unsubstantiated assumption, and no one has been able to propose plausible concrete scenarios for them. And then, even if a few "fixed and permanent impressions" here and there did somehow survive until they got delivered into the ear of the evangelist, there is ample evidence that what ended up on parchment could have been radically different.

³⁹ Thus, Giblin's theory that the inconclusive ending of Mark was intended to impel the reader into oral tradition could be reformulated slightly to suggest that the intention was to get people to seek "oral tradition" in the sense of listening to their community leaders. However, the Markan story as a whole could also lead people to seek out and venerate written tradition from the Apostle Paul who, unlike the disciples, did not betray Jesus throughout Jesus' ministry. I develop this idea at greater length in my forthcoming article, "From Volkmar to Tarazi and Beyond: Mark as an Allegorical Presentation of the Pauline Gospel," to be published in a festschrift for Paul Nadim Tarazi in 2011.

⁴⁰ Frank Matera, quoted in Daniel J Harrington, *What are they Saying About Mark?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 7.

Unhelpful

The desire to attribute as much historical accuracy as possible to the gospels is understandable but has been unhelpful in the quest for understanding them, because that desire has helped to perpetuate a deeply flawed paradigm in modern biblical scholarship. Under the influence of the oral tradition and form criticism paradigm, scholars studying the gospels have considered it necessary to rip apart these carefully constructed literary masterpieces and examine pieces of them out of context as if that were the best way to understand the text.

Abandoning the flawed paradigm would open the way to appreciating the gospels as cohesive literary works in which each part was carefully and deliberately crafted and organized to serve the author's purpose. This would also open the way to appreciating the authors as literary craftsmen who came from and worked within a literary culture even as they wrote for oral presentation.

Whether we look at the narrower culture of Christian and Jewish literate society or the broader society of antiquity, we know that in these cultures, borrowing from and reworking earlier texts was the way authors normally worked. With that in mind, it is crucial to realize that moving from form criticism to narrative criticism is a necessary first step toward understanding the gospels, but it is only a first step. To understand what the text meant in its original cultural context, we must also be cognizant of the literary relationships between the text and other texts used by and known to the author and his intended audience.

Elucidating as many of those relationships as possible is what *Birth of the New Testament* is all about. Some of its proposals seem more helpful and enlightening than others, but the main point here is that this approach is on the right track if the goal is to discover what the evangelists as authors had in mind.

An Example

An example may help to illustrate how form critical deconstruction of a text based on the oral tradition paradigm is unhelpful, compared to searching out and recognizing literary relationships.⁴¹ Early in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus explains why he speaks in parables all the time:

And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." (Mark 4:11-12)

For centuries scholars have struggled with this passage's apparent message that Jesus' purpose in speaking was to keep people from understanding and being forgiven.⁴² Form criticism methodology has been unable to point the way to a plausible *Sitz im Leben* for such a tradition, either by itself or as part of the parable of the sower to which it is attached. The best modern scholars can do is represented by Mary Ann Tolbert, who offers a fairly typical way of making the text more acceptable: she suggests it means that the way people respond determines whether they

⁴¹ This example is taken from and developed at greater length in my "From Volkmar to Tarazi and Beyond: Mark as an Allegorical Presentation of the Pauline Gospel."

⁴² For comprehensive coverage of interpretations that have been offered, see R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 195-204.

are "outside" or not: by definition if one hears and understands, one is an insider, and vice versa.⁴³ However, that is not what the text says.

If one keeps to what the text actually says, and looks for meaning in context and from literary relationships, a plausible solution becomes possible. The hard saying makes sense when one recognizes that it comes directly from Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Romans Paul is grappling with the fact that the Jews have rejected Jesus while the Gentiles are accepting him. In 11:7-14 he asserts that this is part of God's plan: the Jews were offered the gospel first but were foreordained to reject it, so that the Gentiles could accept it, which would in turn make the Jews jealous so that in the end both Jews and Gentiles would be "saved." In v.8 Paul writes about the Jews: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see, and ears that should not hear, down to this very day." The similarity to Mark 4:12 is clear and is even stronger than is immediately apparent. The Old Testament text typically seen as behind Mark 4:12 is Isaiah 6:9, but the order there is "hearing" followed by "seeing," while the order in Mark is the reverse -- which corresponds to what we have in Rom 11:8.⁴⁴

Taking this into account makes sense of another stumbling block for exegetes in Mark 4:11: what does "for those outside" (ἐκείνοις δὲ τοῖς ἔξω) mean? In 3:31-32 - just before the sower parable – it is Jesus' relatives who stand "outside" (ἔξω). Michael Goulder has an answer to this that fits well the rest of the Pauline themes in this passage. He asserts that in 4:11, "ἐκείνοις has its normal demonstrative force, and means the family who have just been twice spoken of as ἐξω [in 3:31, 32] . . ." ⁴⁵ In other words, it is Jesus relatives' in particular, and by extension the Jews, who are destined not to understand.⁴⁶ This interpretation fits perfectly with the fact that Jesus' relatives are said to be "outside," since they are there precisely because they do not understand Jesus; and it fits perfectly with the link to Romans.

In a literary work, context is what determines meaning. Mark 4:11-12 comes between the sower parable and its interpretation, a context which is all about various positive and negative responses to "the word." This context in turn makes sense only within the broader context of the entire book, since the parable and its interpretation use terminology that links them to way the rest of the book portrays Peter and the disciples and their negative responses to the word.⁴⁷ Such allusions are what literary unity is all about, and this brief example barely begins to scratch the surface of what one can learn about Mark when one takes context into account – within the gospel and within the literary world of the evangelist which included Paul's epistles.

⁴³ Tolbert, *Sowing*, 160.

⁴⁴ K. Romaniuk acknowledges Romans as a source but does not specify details. "Le Problème des Paulinismes dans l'Évangile de Marc," *NTS* 23:266-274..

⁴⁵ For a thorough examination of the connection between these passages, see Michael D Goulder, "Those Outside (Mark 4.10-12)," *NovT* 33(1991):289-302.

⁴⁶ Donahue refers also to 14:68-71 and suggests that "outside" is where those scandalized by the cross are found. See John R Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 44.

⁴⁷ The correspondence between "rocky" (πετρῶδες) and Peter's name (Πέτρος) is too clear to miss. In addition, the very name "Peter" is assigned to Simon in close proximity to the parable, and the word σκανδαλισθήσονται in Peter's ill-fated promise of fidelity (even if others "fall away," he would not) recalls the same word σκανδαλιζονται in the interpretation of rocky ground in 4:17.

The oral tradition and form criticism paradigm has effectively hindered that kind of discovery of the gospel texts' meaning for a century. Oral tradition is used as a basis for denying that the evangelists even knew the epistles, and form criticism has been used as a basis for ignoring the fundamental principle that context is the determinant of meaning in a literary work.

Conclusion

Another scholar who has openly attacked a paradigm of modern biblical studies is Michael Goulder, and his approach to the task points out the only serious shortcoming of Brodie's chapter on oral tradition. One of Goulder's goals was to undermine the Q theory, which is another theory that has become so prevalent as to merit the word "paradigm." Goulder wrote his book *Luke: A New Paradigm*,⁴⁸ which consists of two large volumes, primarily to call into question just one of the supporting arguments of the Q paradigm: the idea that the order of Luke's text is evidence showing he used Mark and Q as his sources. Goulder was well aware that assaulting a paradigm is like assaulting the walled city of Jerusalem in 70 AD. You can't just shoot arrows at the defenders on the walls (think 12-page chapters in books), you have to bring out your biggest siege engines and repeatedly hit the weakest spot in the walls (multi-volume books that hit a specific point exhaustively). Even then you aren't going to breach the walls until you've been hammering for a very long time.

Brodie has struck a blow against oral tradition, and it's well-done, but it's a well-aimed arrow where a fully-staffed siege engine is needed. For example, where Brodie dismisses Gunkel's criteria for identifying oral tradition by saying "Warner's conclusions (1979: 327, 335) seem warranted" a thorough examination of those criteria would be helpful. Where Brodie notes that "the patterns which Lord claims are oral, are in fact literary, and found in genuine literature," a thorough review of those patterns that shows how they can also be literary conventions would be helpful. Likewise where Brodie notes the difference between random and deliberate minor variations in texts:

At first sight, some correspondence indeed exists between the variations that occur in oral communication and those that occur in the gospels. But when one looks more closely, one finds that the variations are much more deliberate; they are not haphazard as in oral communication. Matthew's variations on Mark, for instance, are not accidental. They are the result of the coherent strategy and theology of a scribe, a writer.⁴⁹

For this argument to carry weight with someone who isn't already convinced, a thorough review of such differences and the extent to which they can be deemed random or deliberate is needed. Biblical scholarship would be well served if someone would follow up this arrow-over-the-wall with some more substantial siege engines. The goal is a worthwhile one: helping all of biblical scholarship abandon a methodology that prevents understanding accurately the message that the gospels were actually written to convey.

⁴⁸ Goulder laments that the present paradigm in biblical studies "consists largely of hypothetical lost documents and hypothetical lost bodies of oral tradition. It is almost infinitely elastic, and is virtually unfalsifiable. It is also ... riddled with contradiction, error, muddle, and circular argument." Goulder 1989 1:5

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.