

Eyewitnesses and the Oral Jesus Tradition

James D.G. Dunn

University of Durham, Durham, UK

j.d.g.dunn@btopenworld.com

Abstract

Dunn responds to critiques by Birger Gerhardsson and Richard Bauckham of his thesis in *Jesus Remembered* (2003) regarding the early oral Jesus tradition. He agrees with Gerhardsson's emphasis on the oral Jesus tradition as *taught*, but questions his unwillingness to recognize the character of the 1st century oral Palestinian culture and of the Jesus tradition. He agrees with Bauckham's emphasis on eyewitnesses to explain especially the beginning of the traditioning process, but questions the extent to which the tradition was explicitly attributed to eyewitnesses, and argues that his own thesis also covers the cases where the oral Jesus tradition was being passed on by teachers at some remove from the eyewitnesses. The starting point remains the character of the Synoptic tradition, as 'same yet different', and the challenge remains to explain that character in the most historically responsible way.

Keywords

eyewitnesses, first disciples, Gospels, Jesus, Jesus' impact, Jesus tradition, memorization, oral tradition, orality, Papias, Q traditions, Synoptic tradition; Birger Gerhardsson, Richard Bauckham

In *Jesus Remembered*¹ I attempted to penetrate the darkness of the period when the only (or almost the only) information about Jesus' Galilean mission and teaching was in oral form. The attempt was necessitated by

¹ *Christianity in the Making*: Vol. 1. *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003). I should perhaps also refer to my briefer, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

the fact that research into the Synoptic tradition had become too dependent on and skewed by a literary mindset which could conceive the functioning of the Jesus tradition and its transmission only in terms of original versions (pure forms, earliest editions), of copying sources conceived as written documents, and of subsequent forms of the tradition produced by deliberate editing of the earlier written material.²

The attempt began from a clearly observable fact: (1) that the Synoptic tradition of Jesus' mission provides *a remarkably consistent and coherent portrayal of Jesus*. Even allowing for all the diversity of the individual compilations and emphases, as of course we must do, the Jesus portrayed is recognizably the same.³ It has always been a primary concern of my study of the Gospel traditions to understand how and why the Synoptic tradition takes the form that it does—what is clearly the same teaching given in varied terms and combinations, what are clearly the same events narrated in varied detail and with differing emphases.

To this initial fact I add the *a priori* probability as the heart of my oral Jesus tradition thesis: (2) that Jesus was a figure whose mission, in its character and its teaching, made a considerable *impact* on his immediate followers; (3) that this impact was expressed more or less from the first by his disciples in stories about Jesus and in forms of his teaching which were integral to the disciples' own identity as disciples and to their preaching and teaching both before Jesus' death and after his resurrection; and (4) that when individuals joined the new sect by baptism 'in the name of Jesus', (soon) accepting the name 'Christian', they would naturally have wanted to know about this Jesus by whose name they were being identified.⁴

² See further my 'Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition', *NTS* 49 (2003), pp. 139-75, reproduced as an appendix (with texts in English) in the *New Perspective* volume.

³ C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Collins, 1971) expressed it well: 'The first three gospels offer a body of sayings on the whole so consistent, so coherent, and withal so distinctive in manner, style and content, that no reasonable critic should doubt, whatever reservations he may have about individual sayings, that we find here reflected the thought of a single, unique teacher' (pp. 21-22).

⁴ For me it is hard to avoid the inference that this was a or principal reason for Paul spending so much time with Peter on his first visit to Jerusalem following his conversion (Gal. 1.18)—'to get to know' Peter precisely in his role of leading disciple of Jesus

My thesis (5) is that we can best see the link between the fact of (1) and the probabilities of (2) through (4) in the oral celebration, reflection on, and transmission of what Jesus did and said, that is in the pattern of *same yet different* which is characteristic of oral tradition and its repeated performance. This suggests in turn (6) that the Synoptic tradition, which has precisely that character, already took that character in the oral period and more or less from the first. Here I should perhaps also point out that my concern, in what was intended to be the first volume of a three-volume analysis of the beginnings of Christianity, was primarily with the *earliest* stage of the traditioning process, with the transition (as we might say) from the impact made by Jesus to the oral tradition which conveyed that impact and which began to take form as an integral feature of the earliest beginnings of the movement which became Christianity. Although I see in the character of the Synoptic tradition as it still is clear evidence of the way the Jesus tradition functioned from the first, I had no intention of discussing the subsequent use and function of the Jesus tradition or its transition to written forms and the written Gospels. That will more naturally be a subject for treatment in the subsequent volumes.

The thesis has been subjected to a good deal of critique, all of it personally helpful in clarifying issues and in clarifying my own thinking. I have already responded to several of these critiques,⁵ and in another context have taken further the discussion, neglected in *Jesus Remembered*, on social memory.⁶ Two of the main criticisms have been that I have not given sufficient weight either to *the teaching process* by which the

and therefore primary source of stories about and teaching of Jesus; see further my *Galatians* (BNTC; London: Black, 1993), pp. 73–74.

⁵ 'On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses: In Response to Bengt Holmberg and Samuel Byrskog', *JSNT* 26 (2004), pp. 473–87; 'On Faith and History, and Living Tradition (In Response to Robert Morgan and Andrew Gregory)', *ExpT* 116 (2004–2005), pp. 13–19.

⁶ 'Social Memory and the Oral Jesus Tradition', in S.C. Barton, L.T. Stuckenbruck and B.G. Wold, eds., *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (WUNT 212; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 179–94. See also A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, eds., *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (SBLSS 52; Atlanta: SBL, 2005); S. Byrskog, 'A New Quest for the *Sitz im Leben*: Social Memory, the Jesus Tradition and the Gospel of Matthew', *NTS* 52 (2006), pp. 319–36.

oral tradition was transmitted⁷ or to the *eyewitness* character of the Jesus tradition.⁸ Since I share much of the motivation and concern of both the principal critics, Birger Gerhardsson and Richard Bauckham, I welcome the opportunity to clarify the issues which have emerged between us and, hopefully, to take the discussion of this important subject forward. Bauckham's is a large monograph on the theme covering many aspects of the subject,⁹ but Gerhardsson's essay is primarily a critique of *Jesus Remembered*, so I will begin with it.

A Response to Birger Gerhardsson

It was Gerhardsson who stimulated the interest I already had in the Gospel tradition as oral tradition when he invited me to join a valuable international seminar on the subject, whose discussions extended across several years.¹⁰ And his work on the Gospel tradition from the perspective of oral rabbinic tradition has been an invaluable correction to the alternative models of the early form critics.¹¹ I regret that in my response to Gerhardsson I over-reacted to his emphasis on *memorization* as the principal characteristic of earliest Christian teaching (how they learned from and about Jesus), without taking sufficient account of the degree to which his model also allows for the degree of variation which is still

⁷ Particularly B. Gerhardsson, 'The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition', *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 1–18.

⁸ R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), building particularly on S. Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁹ I will here focus only on his critique of *Jesus Remembered*; other matters, especially Bauckham's treatment of John's Gospel, will provide an agenda for discussion on another occasion.

¹⁰ See H. Wansbrough, ed., *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (JSNTS 64; Sheffield Academic, 1991).

¹¹ B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961, 1998); *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964); and most recently *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001), which includes two other earlier studies.

evident in the Synoptic tradition.¹² I also accept Bauckham's shrewd observation that I may have allowed myself to follow Kenneth Bailey¹³ too closely in setting Bultmann and Gerhardsson in sharp antithesis—between informal, uncontrolled tradition (Bultmann) on the one hand, and formal, controlled tradition (Gerhardsson) on the other—in order to make more room between them for Bailey's own thesis of informal, controlled tradition.¹⁴ In the event, the difference (as with Bauckham)¹⁵ becomes more one of the relative weight to be given to the 'formal' and 'informal' of the different formulations. Since we all want to affirm the 'reliability' of the Gospel tradition (to use Gerhardsson's term) the difference does not amount to very much.¹⁶

Gerhardsson's *NTS* essay, unfortunately, bears the marks of these differences of emphasis, so I hope in this response to continue rebuilding some of the bridges which link our concerns and our work.

On two of Gerhardsson's initial points of criticism I agree, that Jesus was pre-eminently a teacher, and hardly to be categorized merely as 'a popular teller of tales who captivated disciples and throngs with variable performances'.¹⁷ Nor was he simply passing on the wisdom of others.¹⁸

¹² 'Secret', pp. 15–16, where he observes that he had developed the point about the flexibility of memorized text/tradition too little in *Memory*, but did so in several of his later studies. I hope that subsequent exchanges with Gerhardsson have already clarified and softened the point of disagreement.

¹³ K.E. Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), pp. 34–54; also my *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 205–209. It should be evident from my critique of W.H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) in *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 199–204, that although I found Kelber's interest in 'the oral gospel' stimulating (as also his continuing interest in the subject), it was Bailey's model which has been for me the primary inspiration (*pace* Gerhardsson, 'Secret', p. 6).

¹⁴ *Eyewitnesses*, p. 251.

¹⁵ Like Gerhardsson, Bauckham operates with an understanding of 'memorization' which includes the sort of variation and the extent of variation still visible in the Synoptic tradition (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 285–87).

¹⁶ Gerhardsson ('Secret', p. 17) makes a claim for the 'relative uniformity' of the Jesus traditions similar to my own (above at n. 3).

¹⁷ I am not sure who Gerhardsson thinks he is criticizing when he returns to the point in 'Secret', p. 9. The same confusion is evident in the final summary on p. 17.

¹⁸ 'Secret', p. 7.

I am not sure if this is a criticism directed at me, since I nowhere present Jesus in such terms. On the contrary, central to my thesis regarding the Jesus tradition is the claim that Jesus made a huge impact on his disciples by his mission and teaching, and that it is this impact which is imprinted on the Jesus tradition, in that the tradition was both itself an expression of that impact and transmitted that impact to others. The talk of ‘variable performances’ must refer to the way the Jesus tradition was used, in celebration, teaching and worship, though I also regard it as entirely likely that Jesus did repeat and vary his teaching on the same subjects, and that such variation is wholly in character with oral teaching and transmission.

Gerhardsson seizes on my term ‘impact’—wholly understandably, since I make so much of it. But he plays it off against his own emphasis on Jesus’ teaching: I did not describe Jesus’ teaching methods; and ‘it is presumably rather difficult to explain what an *impact* is’.¹⁹ There is a valid point here. I did not go into Jesus’ teaching methods in any detail as teaching methods; when I treated Jesus as teacher my focus was on what Jesus taught.²⁰ But I use the term ‘impact’ because it is a fuller term than ‘teaching’; it includes the impression made by what Jesus did as well as the teaching he gave. The Synoptic tradition is not made up solely of teaching; it includes narratives as well. The term ‘impact’ I continue to regard as helpful because it describes the *effect* Jesus had on his disciples, by his life and actions as well as by his teaching. But also because the term describes the effect of his teaching, not simply as ‘firm texts’ taught and learned, but as *life shaping lessons* learned both from Jesus’ explicit teaching and from the way in which Jesus lived out his teaching. So ‘impact’ and ‘teaching’ should not be played off against each other.²¹

¹⁹ ‘Secret’, p. 8. I have in mind what Gerhardsson himself observes: ‘Nobody can have had a greater interest than Jesus’ disciples and adherents in his person, his actions, his teachings, and his destiny; and nobody can have had a greater reason for preserving the legacy from him’ (p. 14).

²⁰ *Jesus Remembered*, p. 177, chs. 12–14.

²¹ As Gerhardsson is in danger of doing (‘Secret’, p. 9). Prior to the Gerhardsson’s article in private correspondence with him I had attempted to elaborate the distinction between ‘impact’ and ‘memorization’, and repeat the point in *New Perspective*, pp. 44–45 n. 31.

A further criticism is that I do not think the Jesus tradition was passed on ‘in the form of texts’—tradition, yes, ‘but not one of firm texts’. ‘Dunn believes neither in firm texts nor in proper acts of transmission’.²² I find this criticism somewhat puzzling. My concern from the first, as already indicated, is to make sense of the variability of what are stories of the same events and the same teaching. If Gerhardsson wants to classify this variable tradition as ‘firm texts’, then I am a little surprised, since the variability seems to be somewhat other than the firmness of ‘firm texts’. If however the emphasis is on the fact that the variable texts convey what is in substance the same teaching, the same narrative, then we are at one, though I continue to have reservations as to whether these traditions are most helpfully classified as ‘firm texts’. I think I see what he means by ‘proper acts of transmission’—presumably thinking of teachers and what has more traditionally been designated as catechetical tradition. For my own part I also emphasize the role of teachers, with the obvious implication that they *taught* the tradition for whose retention and transmission they would have had a primary responsibility in the early Christian communities. I would have hoped that it was more obvious than evidently it is that when I speak of ‘performances’ of the Jesus tradition within early Christian communities I of course include the specific role and function of the teachers of the community.²³ True, I may not emphasize Paul’s use of the technical terms for tradition and tradition transmission as much as I might have done.²⁴ But that was because my primary concern was with the tradition as it has actually come down to us. Assuming the Jesus tradition had much the same form and character for Paul as it still has in the Synoptics, the Synoptic tradition can then be said to represent the tradition which he received and its variability the manner

²²) ‘Secret’, pp. 7–8. He also criticizes me for avoiding talk of Jesus’ ‘sayings’ and preferring ‘the softer expression Jesus’ “teaching”’ (p. 8). I am not sure quite what he is after here; for me the term ‘teaching’ is the stronger.

²³) It is true that we have little evidence of ‘celebrations and other performances following Bailey’s rural model’ as customary in the earliest churches (‘Secret’, p. 17), though I think it a fair assumption that the Jesus tradition was not simply ‘taught’ but ‘celebrated’ in different ways (reflection, worship, the delight of story-telling) in the earliest gatherings of believers in Messiah Jesus—as probably reflected in passages like 1 Cor. 14.26 and Col. 3.16.

²⁴) ‘Secret’, p. 9.

in which he transmitted it. And presumably Paul and the teachers narrated stories about Jesus as well as passed on teaching; how else can we envisage the narrative tradition of the Gospels being used and conveyed among the churches otherwise?²⁵

It is true that I did not deal with the Jesus tradition by classifying it into different types, like the early form critics.²⁶ It was more to the point in developing my thesis to be able to highlight how much of the tradition, not only narrative but also the sayings material, was marked by considerable variation in detail, variations which it was more sensible to attribute to the variability of the oral traditioning process than to literary pasting and redaction.²⁷ At the same time I made a specific point of noting that many of the narratives have a constant core element, usually focused in a dialogue with Jesus or a saying of Jesus.²⁸ So far as the sayings material was concerned, it was necessary to focus on such variations in what were evidently recollections of the same teaching of Jesus in order to make the case for an oral rather than a literary-type process of transmission. But of course I could assume the point which Bailey had made in distinguishing the inflexibility in poems and proverbs, from the relative flexibility of parables and traditions important for the identity of the community, from the total flexibility of jokes and casual news.²⁹ And the stability and sameness of the sayings tradition was and remains central to my whole thesis: that it attests the degree of close similarity in the impact Jesus made and that such a unanimity of the diverse impacts assuredly indicates what it was that Jesus had actually said or taught on one or several occasions.

I was surprised, then, that Gerhardsson associates my understanding of community tradition with Durkheim's ideas about the creativity of the collective and the early form critics' arguments that many elements

²⁵) This in response to Gerhardsson's observation that 'nowhere in the NT sources do I get the impression that they [the teachers] were popular narrators' ('Secret', p. 10).

²⁶) 'Dunn has not studied the interesting differences between types of text in the synoptic gospels' ('Secret', p. 13).

²⁷) See *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 210-38; 'Altering the Default Setting', pp. 160-70 = *New Perspective*, pp. 106-20.

²⁸) *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 210-24.

²⁹) *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 206-207.

in the gospels are community creations.³⁰ I have addressed the theories of social memory, associated particularly with Maurice Halbwachs, elsewhere.³¹ Here I should perhaps just say that I find the comment rather astonishing, since it is precisely the concern of my thesis in *Jesus Remembered* to affirm the *stability* of the tradition, that the tradition retains and continues to convey the impact made by Jesus on his first disciples. It was in effect one of my main concerns, to refute the social memory theorists and the early form critics whom Gerhardsson detects lurking behind *Jesus Remembered*.

The principal ground of Gerhardsson's critique, however, focuses on the issue of 'orality'. He begins by criticising a model of oral tradition which is 'supposed to exist here, there, and everywhere in the world' or is drawn from a twentieth century Arab peasant culture (Bailey), instead of a model anchored in the 'concrete historical milieu' of Jesus' own times (referring presumably to the rabbinic model).³² That critique, I think, hardly does justice to a thesis based on the character of oral tradition in a good many communities of the recent past and the present (not just folk stories from ancient Greece and Yugoslavia or twentieth century Arab peasants), as demonstrated by various anthropologists and specialists in oral tradition.³³ What drew me to Bailey's model (I first met him thirty years ago) is the way the examples Bailey gives parallel the Synoptic tradition and the degree to which the model he offers helps to explain the Synoptic tradition's character as 'the same yet different'.

Gerhardsson seems to think of 'verbosity (wordiness with many repetitions)' as characteristic of oral narration and contrasts this with the 'laconicism and brevity' of Jesus' sayings;³⁴ but it is the character of the Jesus tradition as it still is the Synoptic tradition (and always was), in its character as the same despite differences, that we are trying to

³⁰ 'Secret', pp. 8–9.

³¹ See above n. 6.

³² 'Secret', pp. 6–7.

³³ Bauckham (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 271–74) draws very helpfully on some of the same material, particularly J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1985).

³⁴ 'Secret', p. 11; Gerhardsson seems to be focusing on the sayings material and generalizing from it to make his contrast with 'popular narration'.

explain. He insists on taking the model of orality ('tellers of Dunn's orality type') from the 'folkloristic type' made familiar by A.B. Lord, and drawn on by Kelber.³⁵ With this he contrasts the 'didactic, tersely and carefully formulated' Jesus material.³⁶ Here again the conception of orality with which he works is different from the model suggested by Bailey, who makes a point of noting that in the communities to which he refers, proverbs and aphorisms retain a much more fixed and stable form than popular tales of little importance for the life and identity of the community. It is precisely the Bailey model that I follow; 'folkloristic' orality extends across several generations, a quite different situation from that envisaged for the Jesus tradition as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels.³⁷

The most astonishing element in Gerhardsson's critique, for me, is his refusal to accept that 'the Israel of NT times can be characterized as an oral society'.³⁸ It is true, of course, that Israel understood itself in terms of its sacred scriptures—Torah, Prophets and Writings. But how many Torah scrolls were available for public consultation, let alone private ownership? And how many could read such Torah scrolls as they had access to? The most authoritative estimates of literacy levels in first century Israel put them at no higher than 10%, or lower.³⁹ Given the centrality of these scriptures to Israel's identity we should probably allow for higher percentages in cities and larger villages. But most of those who had such skills would be priests, scribes and rabbis; the prominence of a class of 'scribes' in the Gospel tradition is a reminder that the majority of Israelites would have had to depend on such professionals

³⁵ Dunn's 'is a forceful variation of the folkloristic orality approach' ('Secret', p. 17).

³⁶ 'Secret', p. 12; similarly the penultimate summary point: 'The gospel *material* cannot have been narrative material with the character of orality' (p. 18). But apart from anything else, that is to ignore the fact that so much of the gospel tradition is narrative.

³⁷ Bauckham builds on Vansina's discussion of oral tradition in noting that 'oral *history*' is the more appropriate term to describe the process of retaining and recording memories within the lifetime of the individuals who heard the person and witnessed the events, whereas 'oral *tradition*' has customarily been used to denote the transmission of tradition across the generations; Bauckham's whole treatment on the theme (*Eyewitnesses*, chs. 10-13) has many valuable insights.

³⁸ 'Secret', pp. 14, 17.

³⁹ See particularly C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

for reading and writing important documents. And I agree that it is certainly unwise to assume that ‘leading representatives of the gospel tradition were illiterate’,⁴⁰ even when Acts 4.13 is taken into account.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is a much more probably historical scenario to assume that the great majority of Galilee and Judea knew their scriptures only by *hearing* them read and taught, and that the large majority of the first disciples similarly learned by hearing rather than reading. I simply question whether such a society can be denied the epithet ‘oral’. The description does not dispute the centrality of Torah and other written texts with the authority of scripture to Jewish (and earliest Christian) communities. It simply recognizes that by far the most predominant way of passing on teaching and tradition and information in and to these communities was by oral communication, that is, in an oral culture.

Gerhardsson is evidently reacting against an understanding of ‘orality’ which he associates with the retelling of stories, and which he identifies as a ‘folkloristic approach’ and attributes to me. Thus in his final summary he writes, ‘nor is it easy to produce any evidence showing that Jesus or his disciples and other leading adherents were *tellers* of the orality type’.⁴² Of course he cannot and would not deny that Jesus gave his teaching orally, or that his disciples and the earliest tradents passed on their accounts of Jesus and of his teaching orally. Since his own major work was precisely on the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition he can hardly dismiss the term ‘orality’ so completely or confine its reference to a specific folkloristic telling of ancient sagas as he seems to want to do.⁴³ Nor do I infer that he wants to regard the early oral Jesus tradition as already having the character of written text (‘firm texts’ in that sense), since he thinks that

⁴⁰) ‘Secret’, p. 14.

⁴¹) Recent commentators on the letter of James, for example, do not think that the quality of Greek and rhetoric need be counted against the view that the letter was written by a Christian leader of the first generation from Jerusalem.

⁴²) ‘Secret’, pp. 17–18.

⁴³) I presume this is what he means when he claims finally that ‘the orality model, a variable telling of *one and the same kind* during the whole traditioning process, cannot explain the clear differences between different text types within the gospel tradition’ (‘Secret’, p. 18; my emphasis). On the contrary, the value of envisaging the early transmission of the Synoptic tradition in oral terms is that it provides an explanation precisely for the range and character of the differences still evident in the Synoptic tradition.

his own thesis regarding the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition is fully able to explain the variableness still evident in the Synoptic tradition. Gerhardsson seems, unfortunately, to have something of a blind spot here, since by denigrating the concept of 'orality' so completely and without qualification he runs the danger of undermining his own thesis.

In the end, I confess to leaving Gerhardsson's essay feeling rather baffled and wondering what it is we are arguing about since we seem to have such similar concerns and since our views of the origin and early transmission of the Jesus tradition seem to be so close in substance if not in terminology.

A Response to Richard Bauckham

Richard Bauckham's volume is in large part—the only part I interact with here—a critique of an argument introduced by the early form critics which has become a too unquestioned assumption of most study of the Gospel traditions since then:

[T]hat the traditions about Jesus, his acts and his words, passed through a long process of oral tradition in the early Christian communities and reached the writers of the Gospels only at a late stage of this process.⁴⁴ . . . [The assumption] that, whatever the form in which the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus first told their stories or repeated Jesus' teachings, a long process of anonymous transmission in the communities intervened between their testimony and the writings of the Gospels. . . . [The assumption that] however conservative or creative the tradition may have been, the eyewitnesses from whom it originated appear to have nothing significantly to do with it once they have set it going.⁴⁵

Bauckham's counter-thesis is that:

the period between the 'historical' Jesus and the Gospels was actually spanned, not by anonymous community transmission, but by the continuing

⁴⁴) See further *Eyewitnesses*, pp. 241-46.

⁴⁵) *Eyewitnesses*, p. 6.

presence and testimony of the eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative sources of their traditions until their deaths. . . . Gospel traditions did not, for the most part, circulate anonymously but in the name of the eyewitnesses to whom they were due.⁴⁶

It is the contention of this book that, in the period up to the writing of the Gospels, gospel traditions were connected with named and known eyewitnesses, people who had heard the teaching of Jesus from his lips and committed it to memory, people who had witnessed the events of his ministry, death, and resurrection and themselves had formulated the stories about these events that they told. These eyewitnesses did not merely set going a process of oral transmission that soon went its own way without reference to them. They remained throughout their lifetimes the sources and . . . the authoritative guarantors of the stories they continued to tell.⁴⁷

I agree in fact with much of this criticism. A characteristic expression of the prevailing ‘assumption’ is the deduction (from the fact that the NT letter-writers show little interest in attributing echoes of Jesus tradition to Jesus) that early churches’ anonymous Jesus tradition was part of a larger resource of catechetical and paraenetic material from which the Evangelists subsequently drew in composing their Gospels. The consequence being that the Synoptic tradition contains a largely indiscriminate mixture of material, some of it stemming from Jesus, some of it from elsewhere—hence requiring, of course, modern attempts to disentangle genuine Jesus material from material which did not stem from Jesus.⁴⁸ Bauckham, however includes me among those whom he critiques,⁴⁹ so a response is called for, by way partly of clarification and partly in the hope of helping to take the debate on the subject forward. I make a number of points.

⁴⁶) *Eyewitnesses*, p. 8.

⁴⁷) *Eyewitnesses*, p. 93.

⁴⁸) The argument is most recently restated by J. Schröter, ‘Anfänge der Jesusüberlieferung: Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Beobachtungen zu einem Bereich urchristlicher Theologiegeschichte’, *NTS* 50 (2004), pp. 53–76.

⁴⁹) *Eyewitnesses*, p. 34 n. 71, ch. 12.

(1) In *Jesus Remembered* I did not wish to play down the role of the first disciples and apostles, as Bauckham suggests,⁵⁰ though I confess I did not give them so much prominence.⁵¹ It is my own view that the first disciples continued to preach and teach. I fully accept one of Bauckham's main arguments, that the early churches would have wanted to hear first-hand accounts of Jesus from those who had been with him during his mission. And though I also agree that the Jerusalem leadership would have provided a primary reference point for these traditions (as, I strongly believe, Gal. 1.18 attests), I am less sure that they were able to exercise a very extensive monitoring role ('controlled tradition') as the new movement spread more widely.⁵²

(2) In *Jesus Remembered*, however, I thought it important to recognize that the first disciples could not provide an authoritative check on the use made of the Jesus tradition in more than a few churches. Apart from anything else, as soon as the number of congregations grew beyond about 100, there would not have been enough 'first disciples' around to instruct all the new communities and to continue in attendance at their gatherings during the time they received their basic foundation training.⁵³ Within twenty-five to thirty years little churches (house churches,

⁵⁰ In *Jesus Remembered* I refer to 'first disciples' and 'teachers' quite frequently (in ch. 8 particularly).

⁵¹ I have attempted to rectify some of that in subsequent discussion—directly with Byrskog (n. 5 above) and in the essay in n. 6 above. It is perhaps worth noting that I have also been criticized for giving too much weight to the role of the first disciples and apostles, by Schröter in particular, in discussion arising out of his 'Anfänge' (n. 47 above), in 'Kontroverse: Der erinnerte Jesus als Begründer des Christentums?', *ZNT* 20.10 (2007), pp. 46–61.

⁵² Bauckham echoes the argument of Gerhardsson's *Reliability*, though he thinks Gerhardsson's focus on (just) the Twelve is excessive (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 94, 299). He criticizes me for focusing 'on the early transmission of Jesus tradition in Palestinian Jewish villages, ignoring the Jerusalem church' (p. 298). My model did focus on village communities, partly because the model includes a process of Jesus tradition which began before Easter, and partly because it also includes the growth of earliest Christianity beyond Jerusalem, as also very soon beyond Palestine.

⁵³ In responding to a first draft of this section of the paper, Bauckham refers to the more than 500 of 1 Cor. 15.6 ('many of the 500 of 1 Cor 15 must surely have been eyewitnesses of some events in the ministry of Jesus as well as of that resurrection appearance'). It is more likely, in my view, that the majority of the 500 were recruited during the post-Easter preaching. Many of them, no doubt, like the 'all the apostles'

apartment congregations, tenement groups) had spread widely through the north-eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean—and more widely elsewhere, but of that expansion we know too little. Not just in the city centres established by Paul in particular, but spreading from these centres, through Asia, Macedonia and Achaia,⁵⁴ and no doubt elsewhere. The point is that many of these churches at their foundation received their stock of Jesus tradition at second or third hand; Epaphras as the church-founder of the Lycus valley churches (Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis) is a good illustrative example (Col. 1.7; 4.12–13).⁵⁵

(3) For me in *Jesus Remembered* the important point which needed to be made is that the process of oral tradition, both transmission and ongoing celebration and use, retained throughout that process *more or less the character and substance of its earliest telling and use* (by the first disciples). Even when eyewitnesses were not present, in the foundation and establishment of the church, the Jesus tradition retained the same character and substance which we still see in the Synoptic tradition to this day. So I slightly react against part of the opening quotation from Bauckham,⁵⁶ because my point is precisely that ‘the form in which the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus first told their stories or repeated Jesus’ teachings’ had enduring significance—not, let me be clear on this, in fixing a precise combination of material or sequence of words, to be repeated rote-like by subsequent teachers, but in establishing the form and substance of a story or teaching which remained stable,⁵⁷ and often

of the subsequent resurrection appearance (15.7), had a role in establishing and growing new churches, but most of them would have depended on instruction from the original disciples as to the large bulk of the Jesus tradition.

⁵⁴ ‘The assemblies’ (plural) of Galatia (1 Cor. 16.1), Asia (16.19), Macedonia (2 Cor. 8.1) and Achaia (Rom. 15.26; 2 Cor. 9.2).

⁵⁵ Bauckham responds: ‘People travelled a lot between the churches [a claim I strongly agree with]. Travelling teachers who had received their Jesus traditions from eyewitnesses would visit many churches.’ ‘When Epaphras first taught the Colossians, for example, about Jesus, I guess he’d have said: “These are the traditions Paul received from the apostles in Jerusalem, who saw and heard Jesus”.’

⁵⁶ ‘... [W]hatever the form in which the eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus first told their stories or repeated Jesus’ teachings, a long process of anonymous transmission in the communities intervened between their testimony and the writings of the Gospels’.

⁵⁷ Bauckham’s preferred term is ‘gist’ (*Eyewitnesses* particularly pp. 333–34).

a core element of a story and key-note terms which did remain more or less fixed, in the varied retellings of the tradition thereafter, that is, in the manner still evident in the Synoptic tradition.⁵⁸ My concern was not to emphasize the fact of community transmission (certainly not in contrast to the continued teaching role of those who had been earliest disciples), but to observe that even if or when the tradition that has come down to us came through communities without explicit attribution, *that tradition could be and was assumed to retain the character and substance and variability of the tradition as first articulated by the earliest disciples*, 'whose memories already had a degree of stability that severely limited the degree to which they were changed by further interpretative insight'.⁵⁹

(4) Bauckham, of course, is concerned primarily with the tradition which the Evangelists actually incorporated in their Gospels.⁶⁰ His argument is that there are sufficient indicators in the Synoptic tradition both that the Jesus tradition originated with eye-witnesses and that implicit in the Synoptic tradition is the claim that this tradition was authenticated by the eye-witnesses. Now there is certainly something in this. I agree that at least several of the stories included in the Synoptic tradition can and probably should be referred back to those actually involved in the episode narrated.⁶¹ But Bauckham's case is illustrated

⁵⁸) In insisting on the importance of the eyewitness 'source' (*Eyewitnesses*, p. 292), Bauckham may be in danger of lapsing into the literary fallacy of assuming that there was an original version of any story or teaching, so that variations from the original were by definition of lesser value than and a corruption of the original. The same danger is evident in his response: 'Especially importantly, many Jewish Christians from everywhere would have visited Jerusalem and heard the Jerusalem apostles themselves recite their official version of the traditions'. The idea of an 'official version' is close to that of an 'original version', and carries an even stronger implication that any divergence from the 'official version' was less 'official'. A major concern of mine has been to emphasise that integral to the Jesus tradition from the beginning was its diversity and variance of detail and emphasis, and that this should be recognized as simply the character of the oral Jesus tradition and not be regarded as a negative feature. Variation is not degeneration. See further 'Altering', pp. 172-73 = *New Perspective*, p. 123.

⁵⁹) I quote the last clauses from Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, p. 355.

⁶⁰) I should perhaps repeat that my concern in *Jesus Remembered* was primarily with the beginning of the process, not the later stages.

⁶¹) *Eyewitnesses*, ch. 3. The obvious examples are Bartimaeus, Simon of Cyrene and the women at Jesus' tomb. I made similar suggestions myself in *Jesus Remembered*,

most clearly by the narrative tradition.⁶² And the arguments about anonymity have always focused primarily on the sayings or teaching tradition. Here it is much harder for Bauckham to make his case,⁶³ especially when we have to reckon with the Q material behind Matthew and Luke, where no attempt seems to be made to identify particular ear-witnesses as the authority for attributing this teaching to Jesus.⁶⁴ Although it is certainly plausible that Matthew and Luke, familiar as they were with the Q traditions, made a point of checking out each item they used in composing their Gospels with Peter and the others, their seemingly straightforward dependence on the unattributed traditions of Q leaves the issue in some doubt. My alternative proposal is that both Matthew and Luke could be confident that the Q material, however it came to them (but much of it probably familiar from regular

pp. 643, 774 n. 55 and 832–34. I remain puzzled, however, as does Bauckham, at what may be deduced from the fact that Matthew changes the name of the tax collector called by Jesus from Levi to Matthew (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 108–12): if Levi was the one personally involved, why the change to Matthew? or if Matthew was the eyewitness, then why does Mark have him as Levi?

⁶² In interesting contrast to Gerhardsson who focuses on the sayings tradition (the *meshalim*).

⁶³ In our correspondence Bauckham refers me to *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, chs. 5–7, where he argues ‘that the list of the Twelve in all three Synoptics functions to claim the general authority of the Twelve for much of their traditions’, and claims ‘that Mark, Luke (and John) use the “inclusio of eyewitness testimony” to indicate the major eyewitnesses behind their Gospels’.

⁶⁴ The claim made by Luke in the prologue to his Gospel (Luke 1.1–4) is naturally critical for Bauckham’s argument (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 116–24). I have no particular wish to question its bearing on Luke’s own use of the Jesus tradition. But how far can Luke’s claim be applied to the pre-Lukan oral tradition? And does it imply that Luke checked the Q tradition, or that he was able to ‘follow through’ (*parakolouthēō*) everything carefully from the first’ (see BDAG, p. 767) because he knew he could take it for granted that the Q material had derived from eyewitnesses (‘just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word’)? In response to P. Barnett, *The Birth of Christianity: The First Twenty Years* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) and his somewhat dismissive critique (p. 117 n. 27), it should be noted that the key term (at this point), *diēgēsis*, simply refers to ‘an orderly description of facts, events or words’ and can refer to other than a *written* narrative (BDAG, p. 245); see further J.A. Fitzmyer, *Luke I–IX* (AB 28; New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 292.

usage in their congregations), was in character and substance ('gist') teaching that had originated with Jesus himself, and passed on initially (and repeatedly) by Jesus' first disciples.

(5) My primary concern in *Jesus Remembered* was to understand how the Synoptic tradition came to its present form, which, for all its variation and diversity, provides such a remarkably consistent and coherent portrayal of Jesus. My thesis, that Jesus made a major impact on his first disciples which is imprinted in the stories they told about Jesus and the teaching they passed on from Jesus, helps explain that consistent and coherent portrayal. For it indicates a mechanism (the process of oral tradition) whereby that initial impact has been permanently retained in and transmitted through the oral tradition which became the Synoptic tradition. The strength of this thesis, in relation to Bauckham's, is that, even if we have to allow that much of the tradition was transmitted without explicit attribution to first disciples (eye-witnesses), the tradition nevertheless had imprinted upon it the character of the impression made by Jesus on his first disciples.⁶⁵ I am as eager as Bauckham that the role of eye-witnesses in formulating the Jesus tradition be fully recognized, but if he wants *the eye-witnesses themselves* to bridge the gap between initial formulation and transcription in written Gospels, he may be pressing his case beyond the evidence as it has come down to us.⁶⁶ An alternative thesis which recognizes the degree of anonymity that seems to be indicated in the transmission and use of the Jesus tradition, but which can also affirm that such anonymous tradition has nevertheless retained the character and substance of the tradition as initially articulated by the first witnesses, is surely to be welcomed by those who share Bauckham's legitimate concerns.

⁶⁵ Here I welcome Bauckham's helpful analysis of what makes eyewitness *memory* so reliable (*Eyewitnesses*, ch. 13; in reference to 'remembering Jesus', particularly pp. 341-42).

⁶⁶ 'Dunn cannot take seriously a role for the eyewitnesses once their testimony had been absorbed into the oral tradition . . . The alternative . . . is that the traditions as transmitted in the churches *explicitly* acknowledged their sources in the eyewitnesses and the authority of the eyewitnesses for their reliability' (*Eyewitnesses*, p. 292; my emphasis). But it is precisely the 'explicit' acknowledgment of eyewitness sources which is lacking (or has to be deduced—but is it then 'explicit?') in the Q and Synoptic tradition.

(6) A minor, but significant grumble is the way Bauckham uses the Papias tradition.⁶⁷ Papias certainly affirms the importance he attributed to eyewitness testimony. But he did so in antithesis to ‘information from books’, not to ‘a lengthy chain of oral tradition’. It is certainly true that for Papias the ‘living voice’ is ‘first-hand information’, and *not* oral tradition, as many scholars have supposed. But the contrast Papias makes is between first-hand information and information from books; oral tradition is not in view here. To draw from Papias’ statement an inference that Papias distrusted oral tradition is at best tendentious. Rather we should infer, in my view, that what Papias knew about these earlier days he knew through the oral tradition of the communities.⁶⁸ It was entirely natural and understandable that he should cherish the opportunity provided by occasional visits from eye-witnesses or disciples with first-hand experience and information from the first generation—not necessarily because they told him something he had never heard before but because they confirmed what he already knew through the oral tradition. It is the contrast which Bauckham drives between the eyewitness accounts and the oral tradition (never in view in Papias’ statement) which is uncalled for.⁶⁹ What person, who was an eager and well-instructed disciple, would not cherish the opportunity to hear even familiar stories and teaching from such highly regarded disciples of his Lord? Just as anyone today might well want to hear the first-hand account of an encounter with some great historic figure, even though the story itself was well known.

⁶⁷) Particularly *Eyewitnesses*, ch. 2.

⁶⁸) Bauckham justifiably argues that Papias was referring in this statement to an earlier period (c. 90 CE) (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 16–19).

⁶⁹) Repeated in *Eyewitnesses*, p. 294, though he goes on to note: ‘There is no reason, then, why the tradition Papias knew from local transmission should have been any less closely connected with named eyewitnesses than those he collected from his visitors’. Bauckham’s concern is to highlight the difference between oral history and oral tradition. My point is slightly different: that given the beginning of the traditioning process in the eyewitness testimony of the first disciples, the character they gave it in their various retellings and reusings was essentially the same as the character it retained in subsequent retellings and reusings, so that whether the Synoptic tradition (as we now have it) was drawn directly from eyewitnesses themselves or from the subsequent retellings and reusings in one or more churches, the essential character remained the same.

My larger concern here is that the more the emphasis is placed on eyewitness testimony, as a controlling as well as an initiating force in the tradition, the more we actually denigrate the value of the oral tradition. But to how many churches could Bartimaeus, say, have told his first-hand story? And did that mean that the story of Bartimaeus was devalued or distrusted when told in his absence? Bauckham may not want to draw that conclusion, but the thrust of his argument, set up as a contrast between eyewitness testimony and unattributed oral tradition, is in that direction. My own thesis is an attempt to affirm that the quality of the eyewitness testimony was substantially retained through the process which resulted in the Synoptic tradition, whether it was 'authenticated' throughout by eyewitnesses or not.⁷⁰

The extent of disagreement (or difference in emphasis) I have with Bauckham can be summed up by reference to his chapter on 'Anonymous Tradition or Eyewitness Testimony?'⁷¹ He sums up his thesis in effect under four points (the numbering is my own):

1. the traditions were originated and formulated by named eyewitnesses,
2. in whose name they were transmitted
3. and who remained the living and active guarantors of the tradition.
4. In local Christian communities which did not include eyewitnesses among their members, there would probably be recognized teachers who functioned as authorized tradents of the traditions they had received from the eyewitnesses either directly or through very few (authorized) intermediaries.⁷²

⁷⁰ Bauckham comes very close to my own position when he observes that 'there is no reason to postulate that the oral traditions once varied to a much greater extent than they do in the extant versions in the Gospels. . . . We may reasonably suppose that the extent of variation we can observe in the extant records (the canonical Gospels along with the early extracanonical material) is the same—no greater or less—as the extent to which the traditions varied in oral performance. . . . Matthew and Luke varied their Markan written source in the same kinds of ways they would have done had they been performing oral tradition' (*Eyewitnesses*, pp. 285-86; also pp. 309 and 473).

⁷¹ *Eyewitnesses*, ch. 12.

⁷² *Eyewitnesses*, p. 290.

I can correspondingly sum up my response to Bauckham's most valuable monograph by echoing point 1 whole-heartedly, and by affirming that point 3 has much to be said in its favour. Points 2 and 4, however, are more problematic. I do not see much evidence for the view that the Jesus tradition was transmitted in the name of the original eyewitnesses (2). And although I agree in principle with point 4, I also note that many of the small churches outside the main centres of Asia, Macedonia, Achaia and elsewhere must have been at several removes from the eyewitnesses, so that the 'reliability' of their knowledge of Jesus' mission and teaching would have been dependent on the reliability of the oral tradition with which the founding evangelist (Epaphras, etc.) provided for them. It was the concern of *Jesus Remembered* to demonstrate how that 'reliability' would have been maintained and secured.

I close by expressing again my appreciation for the writings of Gerhardsson and Bauckham, and the hope that the above response will help clarify any misunderstandings, will identify issues which require further examination and discussion, and will advance our mutual appreciation both of how the Jesus tradition was handed down and of the extent to which it still provides a reliable testimony to Jesus' mission and teaching.

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