

Overview

James D. G. Dunn. "The Traditions."

Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making.

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Few people assume that the written sources take us back directly to Jesus; behind the written sources are earlier (oral) traditions. "The neo-Liberal quest for new sources seems to be falling into the old trap of thinking in terms only of written sources" (173).

Dunn wants to provide the first steps in developing a theory of the Jesus tradition as orally transmitted (173). By tradition, Dunn means both the content (beliefs and customs thought to be authoritative) and the mode (informal and oral).

8.1 Jesus the Founder of Christianity

a. Sociological Logic

Sociology and social anthropology teach us that groups need a foundational story (or stories) to explain to themselves and others why they formed a distinct group and, in the case of Christians, why they called themselves Nazarenes and Christians.

b. Teachers and Tradition

Passing on Jesus-traditions is what the early church did. Note how many times Paul refers to the tradition he received and passed on (e.g., 1 Cor 11.2, 23; Phil 4.9; 1 Thes 4.1; 2 Thes 3.6). In the NT, teachers are in a prominent position. In an oral society, teachers were walking reference libraries (177). Disciples were those who were taught or learners (Heb *talmidim*; Gk *mathētai*) and the disciples committed themselves to remember their teacher's teaching (177).

c. Witnessing and Remembering

Two NT motifs confirm the importance retelling the traditions of Jesus.

(1) *Bearing witness*. (Gk. *martereo* and *martyres*). E.g., see Acts 1:8 regarding being witnesses to the end of the earth. Attached to bearing witness are two complementary motifs: what is witnessed to is "from the beginning" (1 Jn 1:1) and the continuity of "hearing" from first disciples to converts.

(2) *Remembering*. Paul stresses the importance of remembering him and the traditions he taught them (e.g., 1 Cor 11.2; 2 Thes 2.5). Remembering the traditions and teachings was a central concern of early Christianity (2 Pet 1.15; 3.2). Justin Martyr called the Gospels 'memoirs, recollections' of the apostles (1 *Apol* 66.3; *Dial.* 100.4).

The point: *The earliest Christians stressed teaching and remembering Jesus traditions.*

d. Apostolic custodians

The apostles were to continue all that Jesus began to do and teach (e.g., Acts 1.1). The first mark of the post-Pentecost community was firm attachment to the teaching of the apostles (Act 2:42).

e. How the Jesus tradition was used

The teaching-remembering-bearing witness texts are usually overlooked. They are often overlooked because it is thought the early Christians quickly forgot the traditions of Jesus; e.g., Paul is usually cited as having little interest in remembering what Jesus said and did.

However, Dunn notes that Paul quotes Jesus three times explicitly (1 Cor 7:10-11; 9:14; 11:23-25) and, more importantly, Paul "echoes" Synoptic tradition over and over. See Dunn's footnote chart on page 182. The allusions are not explained; it is assumed the reader will catch it; it is insider-language (183). Thus we must assume a wide knowledge of Jesus-tradition among the recipients of Paul's letters (184).

Dunn's point: Allusions or echoes to Jesus tradition confirm two things. First, the NT letters were not the initial medium of instruction about Jesus and (2) the churches receiving the NT letters had extensive knowledge about Jesus already (184).

f. Gospels as Biographies

The Gospels are not biographies in the modern sense. They are like ancient (Gk *bioi*; L. *vitae*). They were not interested in tracing how individual character developed overtime. The writers of *bioi* assumed that character was fixed and unchanging and their task was to show the subject's character by narrating his words and deeds. *Bioi* were written to provide information about the subject, defend and promote the subjects reputation, and give examples for readers to emulate. Thus, an analysis of *bioi*, of which the Gospels were a type, reveals there was considerable historical interest on the part of the writers of the Gospels (185).

Dunn's summary: "there is substantial circumstantial evidence on two points. First, that the earliest churches would have wanted to remember and actually did remember and refer to Jesus tradition, provided for them as foundational tradition by their founding apostle(s). And second, that the Gospels attest to a lively interest among the first Christians in knowing about Jesus, in preserving, promoting, and defending the memory of his mission and in learning from his example" (186).

8.2 The Influence of Prophecy

Dunn's hypothesis regarding oral transmission is "seriously challenged by the common assumption that prophetic utterances in the early churches were often added to the Jesus tradition" (185). Bultmann and Boring believe that post-Easter, Christian prophets spoke on Jesus behalf and these words were mixed in with the pre-Easter traditions were mixed together by the Gospel writers, who did not discriminate between the two. See Bultmann's quote (186). Boring thinks at least 15 Q sayings and 11 saying-units in Mark are from Christian prophets.

On the one hand, Dunn agrees there was "considerable prophetic vitality in the early churches" and gives the following examples (187):

- Acts 13:2. The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul ..."
- Acts 20:23. [Paul said] "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city ..."
- Acts 21:4. "The Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."
- Acts 21:11. [The prophet Agabus said] "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is the way the Jews....'"
- 1 Thes 4:15 "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord ..."
- Rev 2-3. The risen Christ is the voice addressing the seven churches.
- Odes of Sol 42:6. "And I have arisen and am among them, and I speak through their mouth."
- Matt 18:20. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."
- Matt 11:28-30. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens ..."
- Luke 11:49-51. "Therefore also the Wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets ...'"

On the other hand, Dunn wants to deny that the early Christian prophets spoke on behalf of the exalted Christ (188). Dunn does not think Rev 2-3 is a model. It is surprising, for example, that no prophet in a Pauline church made an utterance regarding circumcision. Furthermore, prophets spoke in their own name—Luke always names the prophet (e.g., Acts 11:27-28; 13:1; 21:9-14). Thus, no NT book is attributed to YHWH. Furthermore, utterances by the Spirit (Acts 13:2) are distinguished from utterances of the exalted Christ (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11). And Paul distinguishes between his own opinions from Jesus tradition (1 Cor 7:10, 25, 40).

Dunn's point: Boring and Bultmann are overeager to find new, post-Easter sayings of Jesus in the Gospels (188). They overlook how oral tradition works at preserving, but also reworking and elaborating, the earlier pre-Easter traditions. They confuse *retellings* of Jesus' sayings with *new prophecy* by Jesus (189).

Prophetic utterances were not accepted at face value. They were tested. Texts from Qumran, Philo, and Josephus show they were concerned about false prophecy and deceivers. Many texts from the NT also show this:

- 1 Thes 5:20-22. Do not despise prophecy, but test everything...
- 1 Cor 12:10. Mentions discernment of spirits as a gift
- 1 Cor 14:29. Two or three prophets should speak and the others should weigh carefully what is said.
- 1 Jn 4:1. Believe not every spirit, but test the spirits...

Dunn asks an important question: How would prophetic utterances be tested? *With established tradition* (190). Paul's own claims to be an apostle were "tested" when he visited James and the other apostles (Gal 1-2).

Dunn draws three important implications (191):

- "Any prophecy claiming to be from the exalted Christ would have been tested by what was already known to be the sort of thing Jesus had said" (his italics).
- "Only prophetic utterances which *cohered* with that assured foundational material were likely to have been accepted as sayings of Jesus" (his italics).
- "Any *distinctive* saying or motif within the Jesus tradition as we now have it is likely to have come from the original teaching of Jesus" (his italics).

Summary: *Negatively*, I think Dunn is making the case, to put it bluntly, that the early Christians did not make up new sayings and put them in the mouth of Jesus. *Positively*, I think Dunn is saying that the traditions preserved in the Gospels can be traced back to Jesus himself and were not, generally speaking, created by later Christians.

8.3 Oral Tradition

Dunn points out there is a "gap in the analysis" of the Jesus traditions. He writes: "I refer to the repeated failure to take seriously the fact that in the initial stages of the traditioning process the tradition must have been oral tradition; and thus also the failure to investigate the character of the tradition in its oral phase" (192).

a. J. G. Herder (1744-1803). First to stress that behind the Gospels was oral tradition. Herder's insights were "lost in the quest for the sources" and I take Dunn to mean *written sources*.

b. Rudolf Bultmann. Focused on form criticism, the study of the history of the oral tradition behind the Gospels. He wrote: "Whenever narratives pass from mouth to mouth the central point of the narrative and general structure are well preserved; but in the incidental details change take place" (193).

Dunn rejects Bultmann's assumption that there were "laws of style" or tendencies of oral transmission; e.g., the notion that traditions went from simple to complex. Dunn also rejects Bultmann's assumption that oral transmission was like written material where one layer is built on another. Bultmann thought he could strip away later (Hellenistic) layers to reveal the original (Palestinian) layers. The image is drawn from the literary process of editing, where each successive edition (layer) has been added to earlier editions (layers) (194-5).

c. C. F. D. Moule. Observed that the Gospels preserved a clear distinction between pre-Easter and post-Easter perceptions of Jesus. "The Synoptic Gospels particularly retain a clear sense of before and after Easter in the *content* of the Jesus tradition which they retell. The *context* of the retelling everywhere implies a post-Easter perspective" (195).

d. Helmut Koester. Emphasized that the Jesus tradition existed in oral streams well into the second century (196). We should not (as most contemporary scholars seem to) assume a purely literary development of the tradition.

e. Birger Gerhardsson (*Memory and Manuscript*, 1961). Gerhardsson argues that "the early Christian traditioning process, like the rabbinic, was a 'rigidly controlled transmission' of words and deeds of Jesus, 'memorized and recited as holy word'" (197). Thus, in Gerhardsson's view, the early Jesus movement that passed on Jesus tradition did not modify the tradition. The tradition was passed on in a *rigid* and *fixed* form. The key word is memorization, which was through constant repetition. In rabbinic tradition, the pupil was responsible for "maintaining his teacher's exact words" (197). Gerhardsson assumed that Jesus had his disciples memorize his sayings the same way later rabbis did. However, Dunn does not think that the rabbinic model can be assumed of Jesus: "Unlike the

rabbinic tradition, the Gospel tradition does not depict Jesus teaching by repetition” (198). Gerhardsson’s view does not explain why there are obvious differences between the different Gospels when they are expressing the same tradition.

f. Werner Kelber (*The Oral and Written Gospel*, 1983). Kelber was first scholar to take seriously the character of oral tradition as illuminated by classicists, folklorists, and social anthropologists. There is a distinction between oral performance and literary transmission. The sayings of Jesus in the Gospels reflect the heavily patterned speech forms of oral story telling, including:

- Mnemonic patterns
- Rhythm
- Balanced patterns
- Repetitions
- Contrasts or antitheses
- Alliterations and assonances
- Formulaic expressions
- Thematic settings

Important point: Kelber argued that oral traditions found in the Gospels reflected set patterns (stability), but also compositional variability (differences). “Typical of oral performances were variations on what nevertheless were recognizable versions of the same story, with some more or less word-for-word repetition in places, both fixed and flexible formulaic elements, and so on” (199).

Additional points: If Jesus said it more than once, then there is no “original.” The oral retelling of Jesus’ words began during Jesus’ lifetime. The Gospels, particularly Mark, contain *frozen orality*. Only with the emergence of written texts can we speak of an editing process.

g. Horsley and Draper. Oral transmission should be seen as oral performances. Each telling of a story (oral tradition) evokes different associations in the mind of hearers. Thus “Q should be seen as the transcript of one performance among many of an oral text” (205).

h. Kenneth Bailey, wrote: “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” 1991. **(Dunn 205-10)**

After thirty years of observing Middle Eastern village life and their oral culture, Bailey proposed that informal, controlled oral tradition is the best explanation for the oral transmission of the Jesus traditions. They were informal (no set teacher or student; anyone can join in) and controlled (the whole community knows the traditions well enough to object to serious innovations).

“In informal controlled tradition the story can be retold in the setting of a gathering of the village by any member of the village present, but usually the elders, and the community itself exercises the ‘control’” (206).

Bailey identifies various types of oral tradition in Middle Eastern village life (206):

- Pithy proverbs: The oral community can create and sustain over 6000 wisdom sayings
- Story riddles: A hero is presented with an unsolvable problem and comes up with a wise answer
- Poetry: Classical and popular
- Parable: “Once there was a ...”
- Well-told accounts: Stories of important figures in the history of the village.

Bailey notes how the community controlled its traditions. There was no flexibility with poems and proverbs; some flexibility with parables and recollections of important people and events—the central threads cannot be changed, but there is flexibility in details; total flexibility with jokes and casual news (206-7).

See Bailey’s two stories that exhibit both *stability and variability* (207-9): The accidental shooting at a wedding and the villagers retelling Bailey’s stories.

8.4 The Synoptic Tradition as Oral Tradition – Narratives

The only evidence we have of the oral traditioning process in the early church is already in literary form (the Gospels) (210). In this section, Dunn looks at seven narratives that shed light on the traditioning process.

- The Accounts of Paul's Conversion (Acts 9:1-22; 22:1-21; 26:9-23).
- The Accounts of the Centurion's Servant (Luke 7:1-10; Matt 8:5-13; cf. Jn 4:46-54).
- The Stilling of the Storm (Matt 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25).
- The Accounts of the Syrophenician Woman (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).
- The Healing of the Possessed Boy (Matt 17:14-18; Mark 9:14-27; Luke 9:37-43).
- The Dispute about Greatness (Matt 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48).
- The Widow's Pence (Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4).

Dunn's main points:

He does not want to deny that Matthew and Luke knew Mark or that they were copied Mark. However, in a number of cases (above), "the more natural explanation for the evidence is not Matthew's or Luke's literary dependence on Mark, but rather their own knowledge of oral retellings of the same stories (or, alternatively, their own oral retelling of the Markan stories) (222).

"Students of the Synoptic tradition really must free themselves from the assumption that variations between parallel accounts can or need be explained only in terms of literary redaction" (222-3).

The stories that we have observed have *variations* – whether due to oral diversity or literary editing – but it is also clear that the main thrust of the story is *consistent* no matter which performance (or version) we look at.

Certainly there were "developments" in the traditions over time – abbreviations, omission, clarifications, explanation, and elaborations -- but there is no radical change in the thrust of the story told. Thus "*the developments in the Jesus tradition were consistent with the earliest traditions of the remembered Jesus*" (his emphasis, 224).

8.5 The Synoptic Tradition as Oral Tradition – Teaching

Now Dunn focuses on the teachings of Jesus (not 'sayings,' which is too casual a term for Dunn). Again, Dunn wants to show that even with the "words" of Jesus, there is confirmation of Bailey's hypothesis that the oral traditioning process was both informal (performance variations are observed) and controlled (the central teaching was consistent) (224).

- Aramaic Tradition
- Lord's Prayer
- Last Supper
- Sermon on the Mount/Plain
- Other Q/q traditions

In the examples above, Dunn believes he has shown that the Gospels reflect the incorporation of oral material and not only literary material. For example, it would be farcical to assume that traditions like the Lord's Prayer and "the words of institution" of the Last Supper were only known in written tradition. These words were repeated frequently by a wide variety of people in a wide variety of circumstances in the early church.

8.6 Oral Transmission

a. In the Beginning

Three features of this initial phase:

1. *The process began with the word and/or act of Jesus* (239). Central features of Jesus' word and/or act would become stable themes in successive retellings or oral performances by Jesus' followers.
2. The process was a *communal process* (240). The impact of Jesus was a shared experience. Even before Jesus' death, the disciples were a "confessing community." At the same time, "The character of the tradition as shared memory means that in many instances we do not know precisely what it was that Jesus did or said" (241). "What we have are examples of oral retelling of that shared tradition, retellings which evince the flexibility and elaboration of oral performances" (241).
3. *The traditioning process began with the pre-Easter Jesus and disciples who knew the pre-Easter Jesus* (242). Jesus taught them what to teach (243). Because Jesus taught the same things many times we can assume he taught with variation. Thus there is no "original" teaching. The traditions were regular and repeated and adjusted to the audience.

b. Tradition Sequences

In the beginning, there may have been units of oral tradition that circulated independently (245). However, we also see that certain units have been gathered into sequences. When these sequences came together is hard to tell. It may go back to Jesus.

- Sequence of Beatitudes
- Sequence of min-parables
- Teachings on the cost of discipleship
- Note the thematic clustering in Mark's Gospel (247).

c. Not Layers, but Performances

The perspective that has dominated the study of the Synoptic Gospels has been "wrongheaded" (248). The field has been dominated by the idea that oral transmission was like literary transmission with successive layers added to previous layers. It is lead to the idea that Jesus is quite remote, beneath the layers, layers that must be excavated or removed before getting to the Jesus.

In contrast to written material, "In the oral transmission a tradition is preformed, not edited.... Performance includes both elements of stability and elements of variability – stability of subject and theme, of key details or core exchanges, variability in the supporting details and the particular emphases to be drawn out" (249).

"Whereas the concept of literary *layers* implies increasing remoteness from an 'original'..... the concept of *performance* allows a directness, even an immediacy of interaction, wit a living themes and core even when variously embroidered in various retellings." (249).

d. Oral Tradition to Written Gospel

Jesus tradition did not cease to circulate in oral form when because written forms began to emerge (249-50).

Dunn challenges two assumptions:

1. Dunn believes that it is wrong to assume that oral tradition was like two or more streams which were absorbed into the Gospels. Too much focus in Gospel research too much focus has been on a handful of sources, rather than on the lively and flexible oral tradition that must have been ongoing in the church when the Gospels were written.
2. Dunn believes that is is wrong to assume that the Gospels were written to only one community. Although a particular community may have the source for the Gospel, Dunn argues that they were written to a more general

audience. And Dunn believes that the boarder church was generally informed about Jesus so that there were not certain churches who thought that Jesus was only a miracle worker or only a wisdom teacher.

8.7 In Summary