

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

Jesus Remembered. Christianity in the Making.

Volume 1. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pages 174-254.

### 8.1 Jesus the Founder of Christianity

- a. Sociological Logic
- b. Teachers and Tradition
- c. Witnessing and Remembering
- d. Apostolic custodians
- e. How the Jesus tradition was used
- f. Gospels as Biographies

### 8.2 The Influence of Prophecy

On the one hand, 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 also wants to deny that the early Christian prophets spoke on behalf of the exalted Christ (188). Prophetic utterances were not accepted at face value.

- 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...

### 8.3 Oral Tradition

**a. J. G. Herder** (1744-1803). First to stress that behind the Gospels was oral tradition.

**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).

**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). “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, 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).

**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, Formulary expressions, and Thematic settings

**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**. 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). Bailey notes how Middle Eastern communities 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).

#### 8.4 The Synoptic Tradition as Oral Tradition – Narratives

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).

#### 8.5 The Synoptic Tradition as Oral Tradition – Teaching

#### 8.6 Oral Transmission

##### a. In the Beginning

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.”
3. *The traditioning process began with the pre-Easter Jesus and disciples who knew the pre-Easter Jesus* (242).

##### b. Tradition Sequences

- Sequence of Beatitudes
- Sequence of min-parables

- Teachings on the cost of discipleship
- Note the thematic clustering in Mark's Gospel

**c. Not Layers, but Performances**

**d. Oral Tradition to Written Gospel**

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 it 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 broader 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**