

# ***The Purpose and Preservation of the Jesus Tradition: Moderate Evidence for a Conserving Force in its Transmission***

MICHAEL F. BIRD

*University of Queensland*

*An important preface to historical Jesus research involves formulating a theory of the transmission of the traditions underlying the Gospels. Scholarship frequently exhibits either an inherent skepticism towards trying to uncover how this tradition was handled or else is saturated with multiple proposals concerning the means of its formation. In any event, important questions to be asked include what purpose the Jesus tradition had in early Christian circles and what factors or controls may have enabled that tradition to be effectively preserved. This study addresses such questions and, with careful qualification, contends that the Jesus tradition probably had a variety of functions in the early church and there were several reasons why the words and deeds of Jesus may have been consciously preserved.*

*Key Words: Jesus Tradition, Gospels, Historical Jesus.*

A study of the dynamic process from oral tradition to Gospels text is a necessary prolegomena to Jesus research as conclusions drawn here largely determine one's methodology and the profile of the research project. One immediate dilemma is *suspicion* towards the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels. This suspicion is generated by a perception of the oral tradition as being fluid and vulnerable to unsupervised alteration, the theological creativity of the Evangelists in refashioning the tradition, as well as postmodern misgivings against attempts to uncover history itself. For similar reasons, Harm Hollander advocates that, "the Christian gospels do not give us a historically reliable account of his [Jesus'] life."<sup>1</sup> Such an understanding of the formation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Harm W. Hollander, "The Words of Jesus: From Oral Traditions to Written Record in Paul and Q," *NovT* 42 (2000) 341.

Gospels may effectively derail historical Jesus study before it has scarcely even begun.<sup>2</sup> In which case, one would have to concede to Martin Kähler's claim that historical Jesus research constitutes a "blind alley".<sup>3</sup> Another obstruction is encountered by the *plurality of proposals* available in articulating the formation of the Jesus tradition ranging from models which espouse strong control of the tradition to models which advocate a liquid tradition created out of the life-setting of the early church. The impact of this multiplicity is pointed out by David du Toit who attributes the current diversity in Jesus research to a lack of consensus regarding the formation of the Jesus tradition.

Current reconstructions of the historical Jesus are either based on antiquated form-critical principles or they are constructed without being at all set within the framework of a theory about the processes and the modalities of transmission in early Christianity. The extreme diversity in current Jesus research could therefore be an indication of the urgent need to develop a comprehensive theory of the process of transmission of tradition in early Christianity, which could serve as an alternative to form criticism and provide new analytical tools for the quest for the historical origins of Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> On skepticism towards the Synoptic Gospels in particular, see Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (trans. John Bowden; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 90-121; E. Earle Ellis, "The Synoptic Gospels and History," in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1999) 51-53; Grant R. Osborne, "History and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels," *TrinJ* 24 (2003) 5-22.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* (trans. and ed. Carl E. Braaten; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988 [1896]) 46.

<sup>4</sup> David S. du Toit, "Redefining Jesus: Current Trends in Jesus Research," in *Jesus, Mark and Q: The Teaching of Jesus and its Earliest Records* (eds. Michael Labahn and Andreas Schmidt; JSNTSup 214; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 123-24.

It is in the context of both scholarly suspicion and plurality that it is worthwhile to explore a new answer to this old problem. Martin Dibelius identified long ago the task at hand when he suggested that what is required is a theory explaining both the *motive* for the spreading of the reminiscences of Jesus and the *laws* concerning how they were kept.<sup>5</sup> In fresher terms we might say that we are pursuing the *purpose* and *preservation* of the Jesus tradition. In view of that, it will be the aim of this study to make a positive case for how the Jesus tradition might have been preserved and why it was important for the early church to do so.

## I. THE PURPOSE OF THE JESUS TRADITION

If we can identify the purpose that the Jesus tradition had in the early church, then we have arrived close to a satisfactory explanation for its enduring existence. Several such reasons can be postulated.

### *The Historical Jesus as Properly Basic to Faith*

A central purpose of the Jesus tradition was to provide content to the faith of the early church. The kerygmatic formula that “Jesus died and rose” (e.g. 1 Thess 4:14; 1 Cor

---

<sup>5</sup> Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (trans. Bertram Lee Woolf; Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 1971 [1919]) 11. Cf. C.K. Barrett (*Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* [London: SPCK, 1967] 7): “Why then was historical tradition about the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth preserved, and how did it come to be preserved in the form we have it?” Graham Stanton (*Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* [SNTSMS 27; Cambridge: CUP, 1974] 172): “Why did the early church retain the traditions about Jesus? How did the evangelists use the traditions on which they drew?”

15:3-8; 2 Cor 5:15; Rom 4:25) is one of the most basic and well attested beliefs of the early Christians. Yet this creedal formula either presupposes or at least raises the further question of the identity and life of the one who is proclaimed as crucified and risen. Byrskog writes, “the kerygma, the story of the present Lord, remains, after all, intrinsically linked with the Jesus of the past.”<sup>6</sup> In which case, it is presumptuous to assert that the early church had an entirely kerygmatic faith focused exclusively on the death and resurrection of Jesus divorced from any concern for his earthly life.

Ernst Käsemann, in critique of the Bultmannian approach, argued that the early church never lost interest in the life of Jesus as being properly basic to faith.<sup>7</sup> The canonical Gospels, as faith documents, include their portrayal of the public ministry of Jesus as an important preamble to the passion narratives. The Gospels certainly culminate in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but nonetheless they still spend the vast amount of their limited manuscript space in detailing the mission and message of Jesus in narrative form. In many ways it is the ministry of Jesus that provides the all important context in which the significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection becomes known. If the Gospels were exclusively passion narratives or stories of encounters with the risen Christ one might possibly infer an ahistorical interest in Jesus. However, that is not what one finds.

---

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2000) 6. Cf. Vincent Taylor (*The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* [London: Macmillan & Co., 1949] 173-74) for a balanced assessment of interest in Jesus’ life and passion.

<sup>7</sup> Ernst Käsemann, “The Problem of the Historical Jesus,” in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (trans. W.J. Montague; London: SCM, 1964) 15-47. Cf. Dieter Lührmann (“Jesus: History and Remembrance,” in *Jesus Christ and Human Freedom* [eds. E. Schillebeeckx and B. van Iersel; New York: Herder & Herder, 1974] 46): “if the kerygma was in fact an historical given of this kind, and its substance was Jesus of Nazareth, an historical individual, surely one then must ask what support that kerygma had in that individual and his activity.”

The faith in Jesus that the Evangelists attempt to evoke or affirm is one that seemingly includes both the kerygma about the crucified and risen Jesus as well the span of his public ministry. The “Gospel of Jesus Christ” must also include as a subsection the “gospel of Jesus Christ”.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, if one grants the broadly evangelistic nature of the Gospels and the presence of Jesus’ past in the missionary speeches of Acts, one can discover a *Sitz im Leben* for remembering Jesus in the proclamation of Jesus by the early church.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose then of the Jesus tradition, when remembered, and retold, transmitted and taught, passed on and proclaimed was to provide content to faith.

### *Practical Value of Jesus’ Teachings*

It is quite likely the early Christians were very interested in the words and actions of Jesus if only for their practical significance. That Jesus both acted and was perceived as an oracular prophet, teacher, rabbi and sage is the overall impression one gets from the Gospels. The veneration of Jesus as a teacher and the “echoes” one finds of the Jesus tradition in early Christian literature testifies further to the impact that Jesus had as a teacher.

---

<sup>8</sup> For instance, the opening of Mark’s Gospel commences in 1:1 with “The Gospel of Jesus Christ” and in 1:15 Mark introduces Jesus as proclaiming, “the gospel of God”. If Mark 1:1-15 is taken as a complete introductory unit where the Gospel/gospel functions as an *inclusio*, then Mark has introduced both the objective Gospel about Jesus with the subjective gospel proclaimed by Jesus in his prologue. See further, Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (trans. Hubert Hoskins; London: William Collins & Co., 1979) 108; John Painter, *Mark’s Gospel: World’s in Conflict* (NTR; London: Routledge, 1997) 35; Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970) 29.

<sup>9</sup> On this point see the older studies by C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936) 21-22, 28-29, 56; Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching*, 172-85 (esp. 176-77).

Alternatively, if Jesus did make such a large impact as a teacher then one must ask why there are not a large number of sayings explicitly attributed to him or remembered about him outside the Gospels. There are of course scattered references to Jesus' teachings in the *Agrapha*. Moreover, the paucity of sayings of Jesus cited in early Christian literature is attributable to: (1) the epistolary and situational nature of most of the letters ranging from Galatians to 1 Clement, where even there echoes of the Jesus tradition still abound. (2) The effect of the production of the Gospels as normalizing the Jesus tradition and perhaps gradually eclipsing any continued oral tradition.

In the Pauline corpus, Jesus material occurs in one of two forms, either in direction *citation* of Jesus' words or in passages that *echo* Jesus' teaching.<sup>10</sup> Notably, these citations/echoes of the Jesus tradition occur more frequently in paraenetic sections that discuss practical matters (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7-15; Romans 12-15; Colossians 3; 1 Thessalonians 5). To give a few examples, in 1 Cor 7:10-11 Paul presents Jesus' prohibition on divorce (Mark 10:9-12; Matt 5:31-32; 19:3-9; Luke 16:18). The command to allow those who preach the gospel to make a living out of the gospel in 1 Cor 9:14 is an allusion to words of Jesus in the Lucan missionary discourse (Luke 10:7). The

---

<sup>10</sup> For a list of such sayings see, Seyoon Kim, "Jesus, Sayings of," in *DPL* (eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993) 481. See studies by, Dale C. Allison, "The Pauline Epistles and the Synoptic Gospels: The Pattern of the Parallels," *NTS* 28 (1982) 1-32; Michael Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1-15.13* (JSNTSup 59; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991); Peter Stuhlmacher, "Jesustradition im Römerbrief," *Theologische Beiträge* 14 (1983) 240-50; P. Richardson and P. Gooch, "Logia of Jesus in 1 Corinthians," in *Gospel Perspectives 5: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (ed. David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 39-62; E. Earle Ellis, "Traditions in 1 Corinthians," *NTS* 32 (1986) 481-502; F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1980) 100-12; David Wenham, "Paul's Use of the Jesus Tradition: Three Samples," in *Gospel Perspectives 5: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (ed. David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 7-37; idem, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Ben Witherington, *Paul's Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 151-54; James D. G. Dunn, "Jesus Tradition in Paul," in *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTS 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 155-78; idem, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 189-95; Craig L. Blomberg, *Making Sense of the New Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004) 73-88.

Eucharistic tradition contained in 1 Cor 11:23-25 recalls the words of Jesus at the Last Supper (Mark 14:22-25; Matt 26:25-29; Luke 22:14-23). The remark of Paul in Rom 14:14 where he is persuaded “in/by the Lord Jesus” (ἐὐτῷ κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ)<sup>11</sup> that no foods are unclean, corresponds to Mark 7:15. On the whole, Paul’s employment of the Jesus tradition is best described as a “re-presentation” rather than as a quotation.<sup>12</sup>

The “Q” document is equally illuminating in its use of the Jesus tradition. I remain highly skeptical of all attempts to state the tradition history of Q in terms of sapiential and eschatological editions and reconstructions of some hypothetical Q “community”.<sup>13</sup> I suspect the most that we can say that is that “Q” was a document belonging to a network of Christians probably in Galilee-Syria who possessed a collection of sayings of Jesus written in Greek. In such a document what one finds, though not exclusively, is material that focuses on exhortation: the Sermon on the Mount, the mission discourse, logia on discipleship, halakhic ruling on divorce, etc.

Taken together this suggests that the Jesus material which survived the attrition of time was that which was continually relevant to the primitive Jesus movement in terms of community praxis for the new age. In fact, the more radical and subversive Jesus’ teachings were in terms of going against the grain of the Greco-Roman ethos, the more

---

<sup>11</sup> The dative could be either instrumental “by the Lord” or locative “in the Lord”.

<sup>12</sup> Kim, “Jesus, Sayings of,” 482.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Dennis Ingolfsland, “Kloppenborg’s Stratification of Q and Its Significance for Historical Jesus Studies,” *JETS* 46 (2003) 217-32; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 435-43; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 147-60; Christopher M. Tuckett, *Q and the History of Early Christianity: Studies on Q* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 69-75, 82; idem, “Q and the Historical Jesus,” in *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung* (eds. Jens Schröter und Ralph Brucker; BZNW 114; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002) 213-41; Dale C. Allison, *The Jesus Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg: TPI, 1997) 3-8.

likely they were to be embedded in communal practice as visible affirmations of Christian identity.<sup>14</sup>

*Intra-Jewish polemic and Christian self-definition*

A plausible purpose for retelling the stories that Jesus told or stories about Jesus was because they comprised the foundation of the self understanding of the early church. As Bailey notes, “Those who accepted the new rabbi as the expected Messiah would record and transmit data concerning him as the source of their new identity.”<sup>15</sup> The first believers saw themselves within a meta-narrative of which they were main characters: the *ekklesia*, the elect, the renewed Israel, the rebuilt temple.<sup>16</sup> The retelling of the story of Israel, Jesus, and the beginning of church potentially kept alive the vision and hope of the early church and justified their existence under adverse conditions. For a Jewish sect

---

<sup>14</sup> One cannot escape the genuine possibility that many of the sayings attributed to Jesus or the parallels between the Gospels and Paul are elements of anonymous Christian paraenesis (see Hollander, “The Words of Jesus,” 346, 349). However, I would be prepared to argue that given: (1) the veneration of Jesus as a teacher in early Christianity (indeed “the only teacher” according to Matt 23:8; Ignatius, *Eph.* 15.1; *Magn.* 9.1) and (2) the multiple-attestation of several sayings in non-Gospel sources (e.g. Paul on divorce 1 Cor 7:9-11), that the burden of proof lies on those who would demonstrate that sayings of Jesus in the synoptic tradition arose from anonymous Christian paraenesis. As to how one might demonstrate that this actually occurred rather than merely assuming that it took place, is genuinely problematic for advocates such as Hollander.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal controlled oral tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Them* 20 (1995) 10; idem, “Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *ExpTim* 106 (1995) 367. Cf. James D. G. Dunn (“Can the Third Quest Hope to Succeed?” in *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* [eds. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans; NTTTS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1999] 37): “Here, after all, were small house groups who designated themselves by reference to Jesus the Christ, or Christ Jesus. Sociology teaches us that such groups would almost certainly require founding traditions to explain themselves as well as to others why they had formed distinct social groupings, why they were ‘Christians’. It is unlikely that a bare kerygmatic formula like 1 Cor 15:1-8 would provide sufficient material for self-identification . . . And stories of diverse figures as Jeremiah and Diogenes were preserved by their disciples as part of the legitimation of their own commitment.”

<sup>16</sup> On stories within early Christianity cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 371-443; Ben Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World: The Tapestry of Tragedy and Triumph* (Louisville: John Knox/Westminster, 1994); A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God’s Righteousness* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002).

whose relationship to the synagogue was becoming increasingly strained and simultaneously at odds with the politics and permissiveness of pagan society, the Jesus tradition and its interpretation allowed the messianic community to interpret the significance of its own situation by remembering the past.

The struggle of the early church to remain within the web of Judaism amidst controversial approaches to the Torah, temple and gentiles by its members, probably precipitated conflict between Christians and Jews. A dominant approach in New Testament scholarship has been to regard the controversy stories in the Gospels as reflecting the situation of the church in the post-70 AD and post-Yavneh era. However, Paul himself was engrossed in debate with Jewish Christians and by his own admission had persecuted the church (e.g. Gal 1:23; Phil 3:6). The pogrom against the Hellenist Jewish Christians depicted in Acts 8-9 requires some kind of intra-Jewish conflict. Indeed, the “criterion of execution”,<sup>17</sup> viz., formulating an explanation as to why Jesus was crucified, necessitates some kind of conflict between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the early church did not have to project its contemporary controversies back onto Jesus to vindicate its recalcitrance, but instead remembered similar conflicts that Jesus had with certain Jewish groups culminating in his death.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> On this criterion see, John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 177.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 371-83; cf. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking The Historical Jesus: Companions and Competitors* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 2001); Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and his Contemporaries: Comparative Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Some scholars advocate that there were no Pharisees in Galilee for Jesus to confront implying the Gospel authors have projected their own post-70 A.D. debates with Pharisaic Judaism onto Jesus (cf. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* [London: SCM, 1985] 270-93; idem, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* [London: Penguin, 1993] 205-37; Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* [New York: Vintage, 1999] 10-11). However: (1) Richard A. Horsley (*Galilee: History, Politics, People* [Valley Forge, PA: TPI, 1995] 70, 150-52) concedes that the Pharisees and scribes have a literary function as the agents of Jerusalem authorities in the plot of the Gospels and are also used as the foil for controversy in the pronouncement stories. Still, he writes: “they would have no credibility in either function unless they did, historically, on occasion at least, appear outside of their focus of operations in Jerusalem.” (p. 150). (2) The fact that upon

The sectarians at Qumran could interpret their own *present* situation in view of the *previous* conflict between the Teacher of Righteousness and the Wicked Priest (cf. CD; 1QpHab), but they did not invent the story of the conflict. According to Hengel and Deines:

We would argue, however, that the evangelists have not made up Jesus' controversies with the scribes and Pharisees. Nor can they simply be laid at the door of the later Church (one would then have to ask: which one?). The earliest community of disciples in Jerusalem and Galilee may *also* have experienced such conflicts. Yet the Church did not simply freely invent 'ideal scenes' in the Gospels, but rather formed them on the basis of concrete *memory*.<sup>20</sup>

These memories could be updated or be contextualized so as to fit the situation of the author and audience (e.g. Matt 23:13-36; Mark 7:1-23; John 8:44) but still retain an historical element. The circulation of such stories would have the effect of justifying their continued resistance against efforts to reintegrate them into matrix of Jewish social

---

the outbreak of hostilities in 66 A.D. the Jerusalem authorities sent a Pharisaic delegation to take control of the region renders the portrait of the Pharisees as delegates of the Jerusalem authorities to Galilee entirely plausible (Josephus, *Life* 191-93, 197). (3) Archaeological discoveries of white stone vessels, bone ossuaries, and ritual baths through-out Galilee are tell-tale signs of the adoption of a distinctly Pharisaic halakah in some quarters of the Galilee (see J. F. Strange, 'Galilee,' in *DNTB* [eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000] 396; Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* [Harrisburg: TPI, 2000] 49-51, 125-31). (4) Maurice Casey has argued for the authenticity of two sabbath controversy stories in Mk. 2:23-3:6 on the basis of underlying Aramaic sources (*Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel* [SNTSMS 102; Cambridge: CUP, 1998] 138-92, 257): "The Sitz im Leben of these disputes is in the life of Jesus. Jesus lived in first-century Judaism, where the question of how to observe the Law was a permanent focus of Jewish life . . . These disputes have no Sitz im Leben in the early church, which was concerned about whether Christians, especially Gentile Christians, should observe the Law at all. These detailed disputes do not speak to that major issue." (p. 192). (5) For a balanced critique of Sander's view see, Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 376-83.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Hengel and Roland Deines, "E.P. Sander's 'Common Judaism', Jesus, and the Pharisees," *JTS* 46 (1995) 11. Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 136): "The communities vital interest in affirming its identity by means of telling Jesus-stories, so long regarded within some critical circles as a good reason for reducing the stories to terms of the community, is in fact nothing of the kind."

relationships centered within the synagogue. It would also validate their contentious beliefs and reinforce group boundaries. James Sanders writes:

In fact, it is highly possible, in the realm of canonical criticism, that one reason the teachings of Jesus were so popular in the period after his death, and especially following the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 69, is that reviewed in light of the needs of the struggling Christian community of that time, Jesus' prophetic strictures against his fellow Jews looked like the comfort and support they thought they needed for their own views of themselves as the New Israel.<sup>21</sup>

It is precisely the struggle to define itself, secure the integrity of its message and retain its group identity that may have led the Christians to remember and retell the conflicts that Jesus had with fellow Jews leading up to his death.

### *Jesus as Movement Founder*

One of the sociological categories useful for describing Jesus is that of a "movement founder".

In the first century there were various renewal movements within Israel. The Pharisees arguably attempted to manufacture the conditions for eschatological restoration through obedience to the Torah and strict adherence to ceremonial purity laws. The Jesus movement could be seen in a similar light where Jesus and his followers sought to implement a prophetic program for Israel's eschatological restoration. Gerd Theissen

---

<sup>21</sup> James A. Sanders, "The Ethic of Election in Luke's Great Banquet Parable," in *Essays in Old Testament Ethics* (eds. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis; New York: Ktav, 1974) 253.

declares, “Earliest Christianity began as a renewal movement within Judaism brought into being through Jesus.”<sup>22</sup> It is this setting in motion of a movement, however diverse it became, that represents the most visible impact left by the historical Jesus. One is not thereby entertaining the far flung notion that Jesus himself was a Christian and founded Christianity in the modern sense of the term. Steven Bryan states, “It may be anachronistic to think of Jesus as the ‘founder of Christianity’, but Christianity must in some sense be seen as part of his effective history.”<sup>23</sup> The existence and shape of the early Christian movement is a historical phenomenon perhaps best explained with recourse to a dynamic figure who had a momentous impact upon his closest followers who themselves made a significant impression upon the religious landscape of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>24</sup>

If so, the title of C. H. Dodd’s little book, *The Founder of Christianity*, may not be at all misleading. It is precisely because Jesus was a “movement founder” that the first disciples possibly made concerted efforts to keep his teachings alive in the primitive Christian communities, whether by itinerants/villagers in Palestine or by Hellenistic Jewish Christians in Mediterranean cities. In a comparative sense, the followers of Luther, Calvin and Wesley, founders of respective Christian denominations, had their

---

<sup>22</sup> Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 1. Cf. Horsley, *Galilee*, 72.

<sup>23</sup> Steven M. Bryan, *Jesus and Israel’s Traditions of Judgement and Restoration* (SNTS 117; Cambridge: CUP, 2002) 9. Cf. Dodd (*Founder of Christianity*, 90): Jesus’ aim was “to constitute a community worthy of the name of a people of God.” Morton Smith (*Jesus the Magician* [New York: Harper & Row, 1978] 5): “Whatever else Jesus may or may not have done, he unquestionably started the process that became Christianity.” James D. G. Dunn (*The Living Word* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 27): “We need not become involved in complex christological questions in order to recognize Jesus as the founder of a new religious movement.” Wright (*Jesus and the Victory of God*, 76) identifies Jesus, specifically, as a “movement catalyst”. See also, Christopher Rowland, *Christian Origins* (London: SPCK, 1985) 151-53.

<sup>24</sup> See further, Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Logic of History* (NSBT 3; Leicester: Apollos, 1997) 35; idem, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999) 17.

teachings or “complete works” preserved in print by followers committed to their doctrines.

More analogous to the Jesus movement, the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran as founder or re-founder of the community arguably had his teachings recorded in literary form including his unique interpretation of prophetic literature, laws pertaining to the celebration of festivals and perhaps he even authorized a specific calendar. The Teacher is fondly remembered as one that God “raised up for them a teacher of righteousness to guide them in the way of his heart. He taught to later generations what God did to the generation deserving wrath, a company of traitors.”<sup>25</sup> When due caution is given to the integrity of traditions concerning Hillel and Shammai in rabbinic literature, it still appears that their authentic teachings defined not only their respective houses of Pharisaism but also laid the bedrock for rabbinic Judaism. In each case (Jesus, Teacher of Righteousness, Hillel/Shammai) one observes the deliberate conservation and perpetuation of a religious leader’s message and biography for the reason that the leader has a principal role in the formation of the community; a community that has inherited and consciously maintained the vision and teaching of that leader.

## II. THE PRESERVATION OF THE JESUS TRADITION

It is one thing to establish that the early church had a rationale for remembering Jesus, but it’s quite another issue as to whether or not they were equipped with the means to preserve that memory effectively. Several factors imply that they potentially did so.

---

<sup>25</sup> CD 1.11-12.

*Pedagogical and Rhetorical Devices*

The ability of students to retain the information they receive from a teacher is conditioned upon the utility of the verbal form carrying the instruction as well as the capacity for repetition of the subject content. Riesner contends that up to 80% of material in the Gospels attributed to Jesus contains features of Hebrew poetry such as parallelism and chiasmus which comprise a mnemonic device that renders such teachings quite memorable.<sup>26</sup> Poetry with rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance probably has a greater chance of make a lasting cognitive impact on an audience than plain uninflected discourse. In my own experience I can recite, verbatim, an amusing limerick about the late C.H. Dodd which I learnt from D.A. Carson several years ago.<sup>27</sup> Poetry has that ability to leave deep and enduring impressions upon the depths of psyche due to the power of the imagery it evokes as well as the aural aesthetics experienced through the spoken word.

In the absence of mass media, Jesus probably broadcasted his teachings through repetition from village to village, in Galilee and Judea. Whereas, the existence of multiple-versions of sayings or discourses might give the impression of being a doubled up account by the Gospel authors, in fact they might be the result of Jesus teaching on a

---

<sup>26</sup> Rainer Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. H. Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 202; Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 9.

<sup>27</sup> There once was a man called Dodd  
Who had a name that was exceedingly odd  
He spelt, if you please,  
His name with three D's  
When one is sufficient for God.

topic more than once.<sup>28</sup> For instance, the parable of the mustard seed exists in Mark, Q and Thomas<sup>29</sup> and it could conceivably emanate from three separate oral performances of the same parable by Jesus. The same could be said of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain and the variations of the Lord's Prayer. James Dunn urges that the default setting of trying to explain these variations entirely in terms of literary development needs to be abandoned in favor of a model that permit some degree of deviation emerging from continuing oral tradition.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding the characteristic elements of Jesus' discourse, Dale C. Allison has identified eight "rhetorical strategies" that are prominent in the Jesus tradition including: parables, antithetical parallelism, rhetorical questions, prefatory "amen", divine passives, exaggeration/hyperbole, aphoristic formulations, and paradoxical remarks.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Kelber notes, "the extraordinary degree to which sayings of Jesus have kept faith with heavily patterned speech forms, abounding in alliteration, paronomasia, appositional equivalence, proverbial and aphoristic diction, contrasts and antitheses, synonymous, antithetical, synthetic, and tautologic parallelism and the like."<sup>32</sup>

The presence of a host of verbal devices found consistently in the Jesus tradition is perhaps best explainable as originating from the pedagogical technique of a single teacher who had a considerable impact upon his audience. Where one finds these

---

<sup>28</sup> Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 422-24; idem, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 170-71; cf. Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 334-35.

<sup>29</sup> Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19/Matt 13:31-32; *Gos Thom* 20.

<sup>30</sup> James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *NTS* 49 (2003) 139-75; idem, *The Living Word*, 32; idem, *Jesus Remembered*, 222-23, 237-38.

<sup>31</sup> Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 49-50.

<sup>32</sup> Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 27; cf. C.F. Burney, *The Poetry of Our Lord: An Examination of the Formal Elements of Hebrew Poetry in the Discourses of Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925); Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn; Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 160-79.

characteristic “strategies” in the Jesus tradition, it may be fair to offer the presumption of authenticity in the absence of extenuating factors that point to the contrary. Not discounting, of course, the possibility that the disciples may have deliberately imitated Jesus’ form and style in their own didactic methods. Nevertheless, it appears that Jesus taught and spoke in a manner that laid great emphasis upon mnemonic devices and was designed to leave a powerful impact in the mind of his audience. If the disciples heard such poetry and prose with some degree of frequency as they accompanied Jesus in his itinerant ministry, then their propensity for long term memory retention would increase significantly.

#### *Eyewitnesses as authenticators of the Jesus Tradition*

An underrated factor that may have contributed to a conserving of the Jesus tradition was the presence of eyewitnesses of Jesus amidst the earliest communities in the 30s – 90s CE.

Before appealing to the existence of eyewitnesses as authenticators of the Jesus tradition, it is important to preface such an argument with two observations. First, the role of witnesses in the New Testament (particularly the Johannine corpus and Luke-Acts) is largely a theological motif and not included for purely historical interests. Second, anyone who has been involved with interviewing eyewitnesses to an incident will know that participants don’t always see the same thing; they often have different perspectives and, importantly, sometimes offer conflicting interpretations of what actually transpired. Nonetheless, I wish to assert that there remains sufficient reason for

appealing to eyewitnesses as persons who could possibly transmit and verify elements of the Jesus tradition.

Immediately following Jesus' execution there was in existence the group of the twelve disciples, an outer-rim of followers, general supporters and public spectators to Jesus' ministry. The implication to be drawn is that there were to be found individuals and groups that would be able verbalize the impact Jesus had upon them and offer authentication of the stories circulating about him. The problem for those who argue for widespread variation and drastic inventiveness in the Jesus tradition is that they regularly fail to reckon with the presence of eyewitnesses to the ministry of Jesus in the formative Christian communities in Palestine. As Vincent Taylor quipped, "If the Form Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection."<sup>33</sup> Taylor continues to affirm that the eyewitnesses "did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation they moved among the young Palestinian communities, and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information."<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, "The principal agents who shaped the tradition were eyewitnesses and others who had knowledge of the original facts."<sup>35</sup>

According to Gal 2:9, Paul knew eyewitnesses of Jesus in Peter, James and John, and perhaps even gleaned information about Jesus when he persecuted Christians.<sup>36</sup> The

---

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 41. See in contrast, D. E. Nineham, "Eye-witness Testimony and the Gospel Tradition," *JTS* 9 (1958) 13-25, 243-52.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, *Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 42.

<sup>35</sup> Taylor, *Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 170.

<sup>36</sup> Gal 1:13, 23; 1 Cor 15:9; Phil 3:6; cf. Acts 8:1-3; 9:5; 22:4, 7-8; 26:14-15.

Evangelists were probably not eyewitnesses but were informed by eyewitness accounts.<sup>37</sup>

This is the impression made by Luke's opening prologue:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who were, from the beginning, eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, in order that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.<sup>38</sup>

Several things can be ascertained from Luke's preface. First, the verb *paradi/dwmi* in the New Testament (and similarly in rabbinic and Greco-Roman literature) is a technical term for the transmission of traditions.<sup>39</sup> It makes a reference to the fact of the handing on of the traditions but does not say how or in what setting they were transmitted. Second, the traditions have been passed *kaqw\j pare&dosan h(mi=n* ("just as they were delivered to us") which implies a consciousness of the possibility of false transmission.<sup>40</sup> Third, Luke's preface show signs of what Byrskog defines as "autopsy" which is a visual means of gathering data about a certain object which can

---

<sup>37</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries* (London: SPCK, 1989) 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Luke 1:1-4 (NRSV). See for discussion, Loveday Alexander, "Luke's Preface in the Context of Greek Preface-Writing," *NovT* 28 (1986): 48-74; idem, *The preface to Luke's Gospel* (SNTS 78; Cambridge: CUP, 1993); Jacob Jervell, "The future of the past: Luke's vision of salvation history and its bearing on his writing of history," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington (Cambridge: CUP, 1996) 104-26; David E. Aune, "Luke 1:1-4: Historical or Scientific *Prooimion*?" in *Paul, Luke and the Greco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Alexander J. M. Wedderburn*, ed. A. Christophersen, C. Claussen, J. Frey and B. Longenecker (JSNTSup 217; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 2002) 138-48.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Cor 11:2, 23 (Lord's Supper); 15:3 (Resurrection); Mark 7:13; Acts 6:14; (Pharisees oral tradition); Jude 3 (body of Christian teaching); cf. BDAG, 762-73.

<sup>40</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50* (trans. Christine M. Thomas; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2002) 21.

include means which are either direct (being an eyewitness) or indirect (access to eyewitnesses).<sup>41</sup> Byrskog claims that such autopsy is arguably utilized by Paul (1 Cor 9:1; 15:5-8; Gal 1:16), Luke (Luke 1:1-4, Acts 1:21-22; 10:39-41) and John (19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:1-4).<sup>42</sup> These texts witness to the inclusion of autopsy in the narrativizing process and, furthermore, the paucity of references to eyewitnesses means the inclusion of such a feature cannot be reduced to an apologetic purpose.<sup>43</sup> Fourth, the grouping together in Lk 1:2 of the *autoptoi* with the *phrethoi* under the one definite article as well as the word order indicate that they probably comprise the same group that acted in two stages, viz., as witnesses and then ministers (cf. Acts 1:8), rather than denoting two separate entities. It presupposes the existence and circulation of the first Christian leaders who operated as companions of Jesus and performed the leadership function within the early church. This group is also distinguished from the *polloi* (“many”) who have already made a written account about Jesus. In which case, Luke, as a second or third generation Christian, anchors his Gospel in the initial group who testified, taught and transmitted the message about Jesus to others.

It may be objected that it is precisely because Luke is a second or third generation Christian that his testimony cannot be entirely authentic. Yet this may not be problematic as Martin Hengel provides a fitting analogy.

In the year 1990 I can still remember, sometimes very accurately, the portentous events of the years 1933-45 [in Germany], which I experienced between the ages

---

<sup>41</sup> Byrskog, *Story as History*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Byrskog, *Story as History*, 223-42; see the evaluation of Byrskog’s work in Peter M. Head, “The Role of Eyewitnesses in the Formation of the Gospel Tradition: A Review Article of Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*,” *TynBul* 52 (2001) 275-94.

<sup>43</sup> Byrskog, *Story as History*, 246-49.

of six and eighteen, and I know a good deal more from eye-witness reports. Can we completely deny Luke the use of such old reminiscences by eye-witnesses, even if he has reshaped them in a literary way to suit his bias?<sup>44</sup>

If Luke has access to eyewitness testimony his belonging to a second or third generation of believers should not raise a question mark over either his claim to have access to eyewitness accounts or even the validity of those accounts. E. Earle Ellis writes, “The reference to ‘eyewitnesses’ is a calculated answer to an explicit concern. It reflects the conviction that the Christian faith is rooted not in speculative creation but in historical reality.”<sup>45</sup> One must still be cognizant of the fact that what a first century author like Luke would understand by “historical reality” is perhaps not the same thing that a post-Enlightenment, hermeneutically suspicious, Jesus-Questing New Testament scholar might understand by it. Even so, when Luke’s prologue is milked for all its rhetorical appeal, literary guise and theological significance, it still unpacks the assertion of the author that the Gospel traditions are rooted in eyewitness accounts and arguably anticipates the expectation of his readers that the narrative is duly authorized by those who recounted such things.

Richard Bauckham has recently examined anew the statement by Papias about the relationship of eyewitnesses to the Gospel tradition and the significance of personal names in the Gospels. Bauckham’s contention is that, “eyewitnesses were well-known figures in the Christian movement. Traditions derived from them did not develop

---

<sup>44</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Pre-Christian Paul* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991) 65.

<sup>45</sup> E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke* (NCB; London: Thomas Nelson, 1966) 63; cf. Byrskog (*Story as History*, 232) who contends that Luke’s preface claims that his tradition was “rooted in its entirety in the oral history of persons present at the events themselves.” Cf. Craig A. Evans (*Luke* [NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990] 19) who suggests that Luke may be dealing with an incipient gnosticizing tendency to minimize the importance of Jesus’ earthly and historical life.

independently of them; rather they remained throughout their lifetimes living and authoritative sources of the traditions that were associated with them as individuals, not just as a group.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Bauckham,<sup>47</sup> Papias can be utilized in conjunction with Luke’s preface as evidence of the understanding of the relationship between eyewitnesses and the Jesus tradition at the time the Gospels were composed.<sup>48</sup> Bauckham believes that Papias’ preference for the “living voice” (ζωὸς φωνή) over a written document is repeating an ancient proverb. Following Loveday Alexander, Bauckham cites authors of antiquity including Polybius, Galen, Quintilian and Pliny<sup>49</sup> that made similar remarks about the value of the “living voice” (Greek: ζῶσφι φωνή; Latin: *viva vox*). The reference from Polybius is set in the context of criticism of the work of the historian Timaeus who exclusively used written sources. In contrast, Polybius appeals to eyewitnesses (αὐτοπῆται) and the value of access to direct experience. Bauckham locates Papias’ use of the proverb in a similar historiographical context. Papias urges the superiority of access to direct witness account over written documents, not merely a preference for oral over literary transmission. The historiographical setting for Papias’ statement is supported further by his critical evaluation of the reports he received from the disciples of the elders, “I inquired about the words of the elders’ (τοῦ ἡγουμένου πρεσβυτέρων ἀκούωντων λόγους).” Polybius and Lucian both employ the word

---

<sup>46</sup> Richard Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” *JSHJ* 1 (2003) 30.

<sup>47</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 31-44; cf. Byrskog, *Story as History*, 244-45. For a contrasting view of the value of Papias’ testimony, see E. P. Sanders and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (London: SCM, 1989) 143.

<sup>48</sup> Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3-4.

<sup>49</sup> Polybius, 12.15d.6; Galen, *De comp. med. sec. loc.* 6; Quintilian, *Inst.* 2.2.8; Pliny, *Ep.* 2.3.

one&kri/sij for their interrogation of eyewitnesses.<sup>50</sup> Papias also alters the proverb of the “living voice” by expanding it to the “living and surviving voice” (zw&shj fwnh=j kai\ menou&shj). The use of the verb me&nein (to remain, endure, continue, survive etc.) is highly instructive since it is used elsewhere in the New Testament. Notably, Paul and John use it in conjunction with eyewitnesses. Paul writes of the eyewitnesses to the resurrection in 1 Cor 15:6 of whom “most are still alive” (oi9 plei/onej me&nousin e3wj a!rti). Jesus’ words in John 21:22, 23 about the Beloved Disciple, “If it is my will that he remain (me&nein) until I come . . .” likewise refer to the continued existence of an eyewitness of Jesus. Papias never heard the elder John and Aristion directly, but received their recollections through their respective followers. The elder John and Aristion existed not merely as originators of oral tradition, “but authoritative living sources of the traditions up to their deaths.”<sup>51</sup> The corollary is that oral traditions of the sayings and deeds of Jesus were attached to specifically named eyewitnesses. This strongly diverges from the old form critical assumption that the identity of the eyewitnesses would have been lost in a sea of anonymity during the time the Gospels were written. In effect, Papias does not regard the Jesus traditions as being disengaged from the eyewitnesses who originated them but he assumes that the value of oral tradition emanates from the surviving witnesses who repeat their testimony.

On the significance of names in the Gospel<sup>52</sup> Bauckham maintains the possibility that “in many cases named characters were eyewitnesses who not only originated the traditions to which their names are attached but also continued to tell these stories as

---

<sup>50</sup> Polybius, 12.27.3; 12.4c.3; Lucian, *Hist. Conscr.* 47.

<sup>51</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 35.

<sup>52</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 44-60.

authoritative guarantors of the traditions.”<sup>53</sup> Bauckham questions the view of Bultmann that there was a tendency to increase detail in the oral tradition and add the names of characters. On the contrary, Bauckham notes that the tendency of the synoptic tradition is towards the opposite, that is Matthew and Luke consciously eliminate the names of characters from Mark rather than (in all but a few brief instances) add them. It is in the extra-canonical traditions where one encounters the penchant to add names. One explanation for the inclusion of the characters is that, with a few exceptions (e.g. Jesus’ father Joseph), “all these people joined the early Christian movement and were well known at least in the circles in which these traditions were first transmitted.”<sup>54</sup> The people named in the Gospel in fact are, “the kind of range of people we should expect to have formed these earliest Christian groups: some who had been healed by Jesus, some who had joined Jesus in his itinerant ministry (certainly a larger group than the Twelve), some of Jesus’ relatives, several residents of Jerusalem and its environs who had been sympathetic to Jesus’ movement.”<sup>55</sup> As evidence, Bauckham examines the examples of Cleopas, the women at the cross and the tomb, Simon of Cyrene and his sons, and the recipients of Jesus’ healing miracles which he takes to be indicative of the “genuine possibility that many Gospel pericopes owe their main features not to anonymous community formation but to their formulation by the eyewitnesses from whom they derive.”<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 44.

<sup>54</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 49.

<sup>55</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 50.

<sup>56</sup> Bauckham, “The Eyewitnesses and the Gospel Tradition,” 60.

### *Jesus' Example*

The early Christians may have preserved elements of the Jesus tradition by imitating Jesus. One observes in the New Testament how the example of Jesus is a constituent element of ethics for the believing community (e.g. Rom 13:14; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:5-11; Heb 2:18-3.2; 12:3-4; 1 Pet 2:21).

John Dominic Crossan asserts that a study of mimetics shows how the early church replicated Jesus' deeds and praxis and thus contributed to the preservation of those traditions embodied in such memorable actions.<sup>57</sup> Riley thinks that a greater source for the energy and fuel for the rise of the Christian movement came from Jesus' deeds.<sup>58</sup> The theme of "imitation" in Paul's epistles is telling<sup>59</sup> and requires some detailed knowledge of Jesus' actions.<sup>60</sup> A paradigm shift is required in not seeing the Jesus tradition exclusively in terms of verbal transmission, but also of praxis, deed and behavior delivered onto others which themselves go back to Jesus. This might include the practice of sharing meals, baptizing, healing, prayer, exorcism, itinerant preaching, foot washing and so forth. Such actions have both a history in Jesus' ministry and undoubtedly evoked some kind of symbolic significance when practiced. These practices provided the occasion for the deeds of Jesus to be remembered and interpreted. That is

---

<sup>57</sup> On the positive role of mimetics see, John Dominic Crossan, "Itinerants and Householders in the Earliest Jesus Movement," in *Whose Historical Jesus?* (eds. William E. Arnal and Michel Desjardins; SCJ 7; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997) 15-16.

<sup>58</sup> Gregory J. Riley, "Words and Deeds: Jesus as Teacher Jesus as Pattern of Life," *HTR* 90 (1997) 427-36. It was E.P. Sanders (*Jesus and Judaism*, 3-13) who urged that more emphasis be placed on actions/deeds of Jesus than merely the sayings material. See also, F. Scott Spencer, *What Did Jesus Do? Gospel Profiles of Jesus' Personal Conduct* (Harrisburg, PA: TPI, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> e.g. 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Thess 1:6; implicitly in Rom 13:14; 15:1-6; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 1:21.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. David Stanley, "Imitation in Paul's Letters: Its Significance for His Relationship to Jesus and to His Own Christian Foundations," in *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in Honor of F. W. Beare* (eds. Peter Richardson and J. C. Hurd; Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1984) 127-41.

not to deny that new meanings could not be attached to these acts, but symbol and speech are likely to have been interwoven together.

### *Teachers as Custodians of the Jesus Tradition*

The sayings of Jesus did not comprise solely of short pithy remarks but were, in short, teachings. It makes sense then that within the developing structures of the church that teachers would naturally be assigned the role of preserving the integrity of these teachings.

The office of *didaskaloj* ('teacher') emerged relatively quickly as testified by both the Pauline corpus and Acts.<sup>61</sup> As to what this office would involve, Dunn comments, "These we may presume were responsible for retaining, passing on, and interpreting the congregation's foundation tradition, including interpretation of the prophetic scriptures and the Jesus tradition. What else would teachers teach?"<sup>62</sup> Over the course of time it would be natural for the teachers to also assume catechism and apologetics as part of their vocation perhaps utilizing the Jesus tradition in these activities. As custodians of the traditions of their community the position lends itself to ensuring the veracity of those very teachings either from Jesus or about Jesus. If this is the case, it is altogether unsurprising that a document called the DIDAXH ("Didache") should contain so many echoes of and allusions to the Jesus tradition, arguably

---

<sup>61</sup> Rom 12:7; 1 Cor 12:28-29; Gal 6:6; Eph 4:11; Acts 13:1; cf. Jas 3:1; 1 Tim 2:7.

<sup>62</sup> *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998) 582; cf. idem, *The Living Word*, 28-30; idem, *Jesus Remembered*, 176-77.

independent of the Gospels.<sup>63</sup> This does not imply that the Jesus tradition was exclusively the property of the scribal elite within the church since elsewhere teaching is largely a function of the believing community.

*The Jesus Tradition as Community Possession*

Greater stress needs to be placed upon the Christian communities, rather than merely the Evangelists, as carriers of the tradition. Much scholarship has focused on the theological creativity of the Evangelists and assumed that the audience either naïvely accepted the picture of Jesus as authentic or else were unconcerned with its historical liberties. If the Gospel authors are situated in the context of “communities” or better yet “networks” of Christians spread across Palestine, Syria and the Mediterranean then one cannot assume either an uncritical acceptance of their presentation of Jesus or that they were entirely ignorant of the traditions which the Evangelists had represented.

Accuracy in oral transmission is guaranteed not by verbatim memorization but by habitual repetition in a community context where the community owns and secures the integrity of its traditions. The controlling factor was the community consensus that would

---

<sup>63</sup> On the possibility of independent oral traditions being preserved in the Didache see, R. Glover, “The *Didache*’s Quotations and the Synoptic Gospels,” *NTS* (1958) 12-29; J. S. Kloppenborg, “*Didache* 16:6-8 and Special Matthean Tradition,” *ZNW* (1979) 54-67; Jonathan Draper, “The Jesus Tradition in the *Didache*,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Volume 5: The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (eds. David Wenham; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985) 269-87; idem, “The Jesus Tradition in the *Didache*,” in *The Didache in Modern Research* (ed. Jonathan A. Draper; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 72-91; W. Rordorf, “Does the *Didache* Contain Jesus Tradition Independently of the Synoptic Gospels?” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (ed. H. Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) 394-423; David Flusser and Huub van de Sandt, *The Didache: Its Jewish Sources and its Place in Early Judaism and Christianity* (*Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum Ad Novum Testamentum* 5; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002) 40-49.

stipulate, “Yes, that is how the story goes!”<sup>64</sup> This is in stark contrast to Riesenfeld who denied the role of the community as bearers of the tradition preferring to see it entrusted exclusively to a defined group within the community.<sup>65</sup> That is not to deny that specific teachers can be designated in the church to safeguard the tradition, but the overall responsibility lies with the congregation at large. Graham Hughes states:

for those who lived as contemporaries with the transmission process, there was the genuine possibility of testing the information given by the writer . . . over against the traditions, [that are] the public property of the community within which the traditions have been received . . . But this implies, in turn, that [the] picture of Jesus is not at his beck and call but is subject to some degree of historical scrutiny.<sup>66</sup>

Consideration for the role of the Christian communities in supplying and authenticating the integrity of the Jesus tradition should be taken seriously. Dunn quips:

Where else did the Evangelists find the tradition? Stored up, unused, in an old box at the back of some teacher’s house? Stored up, unrehearsed, in the failing memory of an old apostle? Hardly! On the contrary, it is much more likely that when the Synoptics were first received by the various churches, these churches *already* possessed (in communal oral memory or in written form) their own

---

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Bailey, “Informal controlled oral tradition,” 6; idem, “Middle Eastern Oral Tradition,” 364-65.

<sup>65</sup> Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics: The Epistle to the Hebrews as a New Testament Example of Biblical Interpretation* (SNTSMS 36; Cambridge: CUP, 1979) 92.

versions of much of the material. They would have been able to compare the Evangelist's version of much of the tradition with their own versions.<sup>67</sup>

The role of the community as participants in the teaching and remembering of the Jesus tradition is arguably present in Colossians. In Col 3:16 Paul's audience is urged to "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom." The phrase  $\text{o9 lo\&goj tou= xristou=}$  ("the word of Christ") may be a subjective genitive (words from Christ) or an objective genitive (words about Christ). Neither option should be pressed absolutely as both are likely to be meant, in which case, the Colossians are exhorted to impress upon one another the words of Jesus.<sup>68</sup> This comports neatly with Bailey's notion of "informal and controlled oral tradition" where care is taken to maintain the limits of variation in the transmission of stories and sayings but anyone in the community can participate in the retelling of the tradition. The advent of the office of teacher and the charge for Christians to admonition one another in the Jesus tradition, would provide a possible safeguard that may have exhibited a preserving effect upon the tradition itself.

### *Interest in Jesus*

Interest in Jesus' person may have emitted a preserving effect upon the shape of the tradition. Long ago much was made of 2 Cor 5:16 where Paul refuses to know "Christ

---

<sup>67</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 250.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984) 157; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) 236.

according to the flesh” which was garnered as evidence of the Apostle’s deliberate disinterest in the historical figure of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> On the contrary, Paul states that he formerly viewed Christ from a worldly perspective but now comprehends Christ from the vantage of one who is “in Christ”. Paul may be referring to his former knowledge of Christ which operated with a false notion of messiahship or else acknowledging his prior hostility towards the Jesus movement.<sup>70</sup> On either account there is no deprecating of interest in the historical Jesus.

Moreover, the hypothesis that the early church was not interested in the historical Jesus works best if one assumes that the early church, or at least constituent elements of it, was gnostic. It was the gnostics of the second-century after all who preferred the voice of the risen Jesus to the earthly Jesus. But the gnosticism which is required for this theory to work lies beyond the horizon of the first-century and emerges more fully with its docetic christology in the second-century. Scholars who take the line that the primitive Christian communities evolved out of the kerygma and had only the faintest interest in the life of Jesus, in my mind, retroject their own apparent *disinterest* in the historical Jesus onto the early church.<sup>71</sup> However, as opposed to the gnostics, the early church appears to have maintained a steadfast conviction that history was the theatre of God’s activity and the kerygma was not anchored in the mere fact of Jesus’ existence

---

<sup>69</sup> Cf. e.g. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (trans. W. Montgomery; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1945) 399; Rudolf Bultmann, “The Significance of the Historical Jesus for the Theology of Paul,” in *Faith and Understanding* (London: SCM, 1969) 241-44; H. J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History* (London: Lutterworth, 1961) 55-58, 72.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. F. F. Bruce, “Paul and the Historical Jesus,” *BJRL* 56 (1974) 321-23; W. G. Kümmel, *The Theology of the New Testament* (trans. John E. Steely; London: SCM, 1976) 166; N. T. Wright, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *TynBul* 29 (1978) 72-73; Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1984) 312-13; Witherington, *Paul’s Narrative Thought World*, 153-54; Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 184-85; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001) 76-77.

<sup>71</sup> In all fairness, one must keep in mind that this door swings both ways and it is possible that other scholars project their own *interest* in the historical Jesus onto the early church who did not know of the post-Enlightenment tendency of the criticizing the present by appeal to the past.

coupled with the need for an existential encounter, but instead the proclamation of Jesus as the exalted Lord included with it the tacit assumption of his historical ministry to Israel. A view hinted at in early hymns and creeds (e.g. John 1:1-14; Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 3:16), arguably discernible in Paul's echoes of the Jesus tradition, evident in Luke-Acts which includes both stories of the historical Jesus and sermons proclaiming him as the exalted Lord, and confirmed by the symbol and praxis of the early church where, for instance, the Lord's supper (by redefining the Jewish story) celebrated God's actions in history in the new exodus inaugurated by Jesus and concurrently looked forward to the end of history at the *parousia* of Jesus.

The Gospels themselves make a clear delineation between the historical ministry of Jesus and his post-Easter presence with his disciples. Becker notes, "When the gospels define the time of Jesus as Christianity's normative primeval time, they demonstrate their interest in the historical Jesus and show that they are not simply wanting to write a commentary on the post-Easter confession of faith."<sup>72</sup> It would also be quite surprising that a movement that focused intently on one named Jesus Christ, that constructed creeds around his life and death, that initiated others into their midst through baptism in his name, who took upon themselves the very name of that same individual *xristiano&i* ("Christians")<sup>73</sup> would at the same time be uninterested in his life.<sup>74</sup> Thus, interest in the historical dimension of the person of Jesus was not obliterated by faith in the kerygma,

---

<sup>72</sup> Jürgen Becker, *Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. James E. Crouch; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998) 6.

<sup>73</sup> Acts 11.26; 26:28-29; 1 Pet 4:16; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.96.1-5; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.64; Ignatius, *Rom.* 3.2.

<sup>74</sup> Dunn, *The Theology of the Apostle Paul*, 185; cf. Dunn (*The Living Word*, 34): "In short, the idea that the first Christians were *not* interested in the pre-Easter Jesus is little short of ludicrous." See too Birger Gerhardsson, "The Path of the Gospel Tradition," in *The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. Peter Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991) 77.

not worn away by charismatic enthusiasm for the voice of the risen Lord, but inherent within the praxis of the early Christian movement and epitomized in the Gospels.

If there was a distinct absence of interest in the pre-Easter Jesus, then it begs the question of why the first Christians have retrojected their hopes, debates, conflicts and beliefs onto a historical figure, whom from all accounts, they were not purportedly interested in, but still did so in order to authenticate certain teachings and practices. Moreover, why would they place these new teachings into a pre-Easter narrative? One would be more inclined to think that the voice of the risen Christ speaking through a contemporary prophet would be what such a group needed to hear in order to validate new teachings. My point is, were they interested in the historical figure of Jesus or not? If they were, then it seems unlikely for them to allow large scale creative invention of sizeable amounts of material *ex nihilo* and to allow existing traditions to be thrown into trajectories which they knew to be contrary to its original intent. Similarly, if they were not interested in the details of Jesus' life then what rationale is there for retrojecting material onto a historical Jesus within a historical setting? If I am right, then the standard party line of New Testament scholarship concerning the Gospels appears to rest on a contradictory premise. To the contrary, an examination of the variations strata of traditions about Jesus (Q, Pauline epistles, Synoptics, John) yields a continual ebb of interest in the contours of Jesus' pre-Easter ministry. The members of the Jesus movement in both Palestine and the Hellenistic cities of the Mediterranean, pre- and post-70, testify to an awareness of traditions about Jesus. As Charlesworth writes, "The sheer existence of the Gospels – which include the celebration of the life and teachings of the pre-Easter Jesus – proves that from the earliest decades of the movement associated with

Jesus there must have been *some* historical interest in Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>75</sup> Porter comments similarly, “The quest for the historical Jesus, in fact, clearly began soon after Jesus’ death and is reflected in the writings of the early church.”<sup>76</sup> Going further, interest in Jesus’ person may have begun during the pre-Easter period as people inquired as to who he was, or who he said he was.<sup>77</sup> The older view that the Gospels were written, at the broad level, to preserve the story of Jesus in literary form so as to tell the story for another generation is perhaps more plausible than it has often been thought in contemporary reckoning.<sup>78</sup>

### *Aramaic Sources*

Beneath the Gospels lies a series of sources, oral and literary, some which may have been in Aramaic. Around two centuries ago there was speculation by G.E. Lessing and J.E. Eichhorn that beneath the Gospels there was a proto-Gospel written in Aramaic or Hebrew (Ur-Gospel) which the Evangelists drew on. Others such as J.G. Herder and J.K.L. Giesler contended for a common pool of Aramaic oral tradition which the Evangelist had at their disposal. Such theories may seem naïve in view of the fairly wide

---

<sup>75</sup> Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 13; cf. Henry Wansbrough (“Introduction,” in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, [ed. Henry Wansbrough; JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991] 12): “The evidence we have been examining attests in itself a concern on the part of the earliest Christians to recall the ministry of Jesus, including not least his words and actions, and to preserve and pass on these traditions.”

<sup>76</sup> Stanley E. Porter, “Luke 17.11-19 and the Criteria For Authenticity Revisited,” *JSHJ* 1 (2003) 204.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Stanton (*Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching*, 171): “Interest in the life and character of Jesus was already present *in nuce* in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus’ proclamation drew critical questioning: Who is this Jesus? Why does he behave in this way?”

<sup>78</sup> See e.g. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (4th edn.; Leicester, England: Apollos, 1990) 21-24; Barnett, *Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 392-94; Dunn, *The Living Word*, 27, 30.

acceptance of the two-source theory. Nevertheless, the notion of Aramaic sources undergirding parts of the Gospels is not entirely without merit.<sup>79</sup>

Several scholars such as Burney, Black, Jeremias, Manson, Fitzmyer and Casey have called attention to the presence of Aramaisms, semitic poetry and sections easily retroverted into Aramaic within the Gospels.<sup>80</sup> For example, an ironic word play can be discerned in Matt 23:24, but only in Aramaic, “You blind guides, straining out a gnat (lmq [*qamla*]) and swallowing a camel (lmg [*gamla*]).” This signifies a probable Aramaic layer beneath the Gospel text.

A caveat is required, since there are several problems in trying to use signs of Aramaic as an index to authenticity. To begin with, many of the alleged semitisms may simply result from bad *koine* Greek. A purported semitism might derive from the influence of the Septuagint on the Gospels, or else are products of Aramaic speaking Christians and not necessarily from Jesus.<sup>81</sup> The fact that numerous semitisms are found in the Gospels and large sections are capable of being retroverted back into Aramaic at least hints at the prospect of Aramaic sources as having a place in the Jesus tradition. Without postulating a single Aramaic *Vorlage* one may conclude, with Lindars, that,

---

<sup>79</sup> For a list of semitisms in the Gospels see, Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (trans. John Bowden; London: SCM, 1971) 4-7. For indications of semitisms beneath Greek texts see, G. Mussie, “Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora,” in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (eds. S. Safrai and M. Stern; 2 vols.; Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1974-76) 2.1048-49.

<sup>80</sup> Burney, *The Poetry of our Lord*; Black, *An Aramaic Approach*; Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, 3-29; T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus: Studies in its form and content* (Cambridge: CUP, 1963) 45-56; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Essays* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 1-27; Casey, *Aramaic Sources of Mark's Gospel*, 254-55; see also, M. O. Wise, “Languages of Palestine,” in *DJG* (eds. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1992) 443-44; Maurice Casey, “An Aramaic Approach to the Synoptic Gospels,” *ExpTim* 110 (1999) 275-78; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 225-26.

<sup>81</sup> For recent evaluations of the criterion of semitic language/environment see, Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1.178-80; Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposal* (JSNTSup 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) 89-99; Craig A. Evans, “Life of Jesus,” in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament* (ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 2002) 445-46.

“Careful analysis of the sayings shows again and again that the hypothesis of an Aramaic original leads to the most convincing and illuminating results.”<sup>82</sup> Moreover, if one observes a tradition that contains consistent stylistic features, as many Aramaic specialists contend, then it is more likely (according to Occam’s Razor) to originate from one person than from several. The presence of an Aramaic substratum beneath the Gospels attests to a stage of Aramaic *formulation* and *preservation* of the Jesus tradition that also evidences an attempt to remember Jesus at a primitive stage of the tradition’s development.

### III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the cumulative weight of evidence supports the existence of a tendency in the early church to preserve the Jesus tradition. The memory of Jesus was pertinent and important to the early church and they were equipped with means of conserving it accordingly.

Even so, we have not arrived at a demonstrable blue print outlining exactly how the Jesus tradition originated and metamorphosed into the Gospels. Those in search of apologetic evidence that guarantees the integrity of the Jesus tradition in its pre-literary stages will be mostly disappointed. Furthermore, other problems lay on the horizon such as finding suitable models of oral transmission and the barrier of textuality in retrieving oral tradition. In view of that, I regard the evidence surveyed as constituting *moderate* grounds for identifying a conserving force in the transmission of the Jesus tradition, since the gaps in our knowledge are too vast to assert otherwise. At the end of the day most of

---

<sup>82</sup> Barnabas Lindars, “The Language in Which Jesus Taught,” *Theology* 86 (1983) 364.

what is said about the formation of the Jesus tradition is based on *a priori* assumptions, circumstantial evidence, inference, hypothesis, analogy, conjecture and sheer guess work. We will never arrive at a fool proof theory of the how the oral tradition was handled and developed into the canonical Gospels, but the exercise remains a necessary one as a prolegomena to historical Jesus research.

Granted that qualification, I contend that one is still able to weave together several threads of evidence and excavate enough data to suggest that the Jesus tradition had a definite purpose in the early congregations and there were several factors that enabled the memory of Jesus to be preserved.