

Earliest Stages—Paul and the Oral Tradition

Lecture 6

In the last lecture, we sketched the rapid spread of Christianity ... across the Mediterranean world. ... We first see Christianity as a series of small communities ... scattered ... from Syria to Italy. ... In this presentation, I will ... [try] to show the stages toward Gospel composition as we consider Paul and the oral tradition.

Before the appearance of the Gospels as compositions, the memory of Jesus was transmitted in widely scattered Christian communities in both oral and written segments. The Gospels are not composed by eyewitnesses immediately after the resurrection and used by preachers; by “good news” (= Gospel), Paul means the message of what God had done in Jesus. Rather, the Gospels stand at the end of a complex development of tradition in the common life of churches across a period of some 50 years (30–70); they are crystallizations of shared tradition. In Hellenism and Judaism alike, oral tradition and scribal activity were closely intertwined. Letters, for example, are written and sent to others, but they are often dictated and are read out loud to their recipients. Similarly, an orator or teacher could prepare notes for an oral presentation, and these could be inscribed in writing as notes by hearers.

The main vehicle for transmitting the memory of Jesus over a period of some 40 years was through oral tradition, an activity of *anamnesis* within communities. The scholarly approach called *form criticism* (*Formgeschichte*) devotes itself to the analysis of the oral tradition that precedes the Gospels but is also found within them. Apart from the passion narratives, stories and sayings in the Gospels appear most often in the form of isolated units (*pericopes*). These pericopes appear in different places in the Gospels; thus, they are units that can be moved around. Many of the stories and sayings fall into literary forms that resemble those of the larger culture; they are more typical than unique. Communities and teachers did not each have complete collections of such materials (see 1 Cor. 7:10 and Mark 10:11–12; 1 Cor. 8–10 and Mark 7:19).

The organic process of oral tradition in communities can be imagined by analogy to a family remembering its matriarch at a family reunion.

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The memory is generated by participation in a ritual meal: We “remember Grandma” because we are eating “her” pumpkin pie. The memories are communicated non-systematically and anecdotally, and they tend to fall into natural patterns: Grandma at the grocery, Grandma in controversy. There is considerable variation in detail but remarkable consistency in the central point or

punch line. The point is not to compose an authorized biography correct in every fact (although eyewitnesses can correct attribution) but to capture an identity that is also shared by the narrators: “That’s Grandma!”

The memory of Jesus was similarly passed down in communities gathered for worship or teaching. The form is the anecdote or the saying; there is greater variation in details of circumstance than in the essential point. The memories fall into categories of: “things said” and “things done,” each with subcategories. Things said range from free-floating aphorisms and parables to controversies embedded in specific circumstances. Things done include exorcisms and healings, which possess almost identical forms.

During the same 40-year period of the oral tradition, the memory of Jesus also found its way into the earliest Christian letters. Paul’s letters are usually singled out for what they *don’t* tell us about Jesus, but in fact, they are a valuable repository of Jesus traditions. At the simplest level, Paul refers to the basic facts of Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, though outside a narrative recital. Paul quotes Jesus infrequently but authoritatively (1 Cor. 7:10; 9:14; 11:23–25). Paul alludes to the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) or the “law of Christ” as normative for Christian behavior. The Letter of James may be our earliest Christian composition, and it, too, is remarkable for its many allusions to the sayings of Jesus (James 2:5; 5:12).

There were, in all likelihood, stages of compilation and composition on the way to the full written Gospels. Because it is the “dissonance” that first needs to be dealt with, because we find aspects of it in our earliest letters, and because the sections of the canonical Gospels dealing with the suffering and death of Jesus are the most detailed and consistent in their presentation, the passion account was probably the first part of the Gospel tradition to reach the form of a sustained recital, whether oral or written. Many scholars think that many of Jesus’s sayings reached a written stage before the composition of the first narrative Gospel (Q), and it is possible that some of Jesus’s miracles were organized in the form of *aretologies*. ■

Essential Reading

L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 143–153.

Supplementary Reading

R. E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

E. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Study; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

Questions to Consider

1. How does it affect one’s reading of a Gospel if it is understood not as history but as “witness and interpretation”?
2. What does the rapid formation of the passion story suggest about the importance and difficulty of that memory for the first Christians?