

1

The ancient media situation

What is oral tradition?

Oral tradition is always something spoken, but not everything spoken is oral tradition. To call something oral *tradition* is to imply that it has been handed on over a period of time. It thus implies at least some degree of stability in what is handed on so that one can meaningfully talk of the same tradition at different points in time. The great majority of what is spoken is too ephemeral ever to become oral tradition. Everyday conversation is not oral tradition. Neither is casual rumour or gossip of the sort that is either quickly forgotten or rapidly distorted beyond recognition. Even if occasionally these things may become the starting point of an oral tradition, they are not themselves oral tradition.

Oral tradition is also to be distinguished from oral *history*. According to Jan Vansina, oral tradition is that which is passed down from one generation to another, or persists over a number of generations, while oral history (or reminiscence) is what you get if you ask eyewitnesses (or those whom they have informed within living memory) for their recollections.¹ This sharp dichotomy has been questioned,² and Vansina's requirement that something only counts as oral tradition if it has been passed down between generations is probably too restrictive, but the distinction is nevertheless not without point. To survive, an oral tradition has to be both memorable and significant to the society or group that transmits it, which means among other things that it must be shaped in such a way as to allow it to endure. Personal reminiscences do not operate under the same constraints, and may be relatively shapeless, especially if they are being produced spontaneously from episodic memory (someone's personal recollection of what took place). The distinction is not absolute, however. For one thing, oral history may be in the process of becoming oral tradition. For another, the psychological and social factors that shape oral tradition can also act

¹ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985), 12–13.

² Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture, 22; ed. P. Burke and R. Finnegan; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 85–94.

on individual memories. People tend to relate their memories according to the narrative forms current in their culture. If an eyewitness habitually narrates his or her account of a salient event, it may undergo the same kind of shaping that an oral tradition would. In some cases an eyewitness may deliberately shape an account with the intention of initiating an oral tradition. A teacher might do so to help ensure the survival of his or her words (as, for example, Birger Gerhardsson argues; see Chapter 3).

Oral tradition is closely related to memory. In order to survive as oral tradition it must be memorable, and particular individuals must remember it. It also forms one part of the social or collective memory of the group to which the tradents (people who hand on the tradition) belong. But it is only one aspect of social memory, which can also include monuments, commemorative ceremonies, rituals, beliefs, ways of behaving and, not least, written texts.³ In the context of the first-century Mediterranean, oral tradition is thus far from a purely oral phenomenon uncontaminated by any other medium of communication; it is rather but one factor (albeit often the dominant one) of a complex interplay of memory, orality and scribality (the use of texts in a pre-print culture). In the remainder of the chapter we shall examine the second and third of these factors a little further, returning to the first in Chapter 6.

Some characteristics of orality and oral tradition

Speech and writing may become intertwined in a number of ways (for example someone may write down what was originally spoken or recite what was originally written), but the two media are nevertheless distinct, and at a first approximation one may list the following ways in which speech differs from writing.

First, unlike a written or printed text, speech is an event, not a thing. The speaker speaks, and while he or she speaks, the speech event unfolds in time; when the speaker stops speaking, the sound of his or her voice falls silent, the speech event fades into the past, and there is nothing left to examine (today we could record the speech electronically, but that possibility did not exist in antiquity).

Second, speech is heard, not seen. Even while it is going on, it cannot be examined. Attending to it fully while it is being spoken allows little

³ See, e.g., Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Themes in the Social Sciences; ed. J. Dunn, J. Goody, E. A. Hammel and G. Hawthorn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (tr. David Henry Wilson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–107.

The ancient media situation

time for critical reflection on what is being said. Once it is over, it is no longer directly available for reflection. To the extent that it lives on at all, it lives on only in memory (where, to be sure, it can be critically assessed after the event if it has been sufficiently well remembered).

Third, what is remembered of speech will vary depending on a whole host of factors, but one is most unlikely to remember every word spoken in a lengthy conversation or performance. What may stick in memory is the gist of what was said, or the impression made by the speaker, or particularly striking turns of phrase. In recalling what was said on a future occasion, one will most likely reconstruct it from remembered fragments filled in by one's own imagination and grasp of the speech conventions employed. That said, some kinds of speech are rather easier to remember with reasonable accuracy (for example short poems, witty aphorisms and the like), and oral traditions are typically shaped to be memorable.

Fourth, speech (in a situation devoid of electronic media) always involves immediate face-to-face interaction with an audience of one or more other people. What is said will be influenced to a greater or lesser extent by verbal and visual feedback from that audience (including gestures and facial expressions), and by the manner in which the speaker tailors his or her message to the audience; moreover, what is heard will be filtered through the audience's expectations.

Fifth, a speech act always takes place in a particular social situation, which may be more or less formal (for example, a casual conversation is very different from a lecture), but which will always tend to constrain what can be said and how it can be said. It is obvious, for example, that bawdy limericks or lewd jokes would be quite out of place in a board meeting or Bible study group, just as a lengthy lecture would be out of place in an informal private conversation. Some speech acts, not least those involving the deliberate handing on of oral tradition, take place as performances marked off from everyday speech by a number of factors (such as the social setting and the style of language employed).⁴

Sixth, face-to-face oral communication consists of more than just words; it includes a whole range of more or less subtle cues including gesture, facial expression, bodily deportment, and, of course, the rhythm, pacing, intonation and stress with which the words are spoken. By such means a speaker may make it very clear, for example, when irony is intended,

⁴ Richard Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (reissued 1984 edn; Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1977); John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Voices in Performance and Text; ed. J. M. Foley; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 1–59.

or which point is being emphasized. When the words are reduced to writing, such visual cues are lost, and the message may appear much more ambiguous. Indeed, the message of a speaker can be completely falsified by repeating the same words in subsequent oral performance while totally altering the intonation and facial expression. One only has to think of the different ways in which the single word 'yes' can be uttered in response to a question, and the total misrepresentation that could result from representing a cautious, sceptical, drawn-out 'yes' as a brisk, bold affirmative 'yes'.⁵

The six points just noted apply more or less to our own experience of oral communication, but we should be wary of assuming that the distinctions they imply between orality and writing apply equally well to every kind of oral utterance and every kind of writing. In this book we are particularly concerned with speech acts that form part of an oral tradition. This is an area that has been researched and written about extensively (in the context of folklore studies and cultural anthropology, for example), but we need to be a little cautious about drawing too many sweeping generalizations, first because conclusions drawn from completely non-literate cultures may not be directly applicable to the more complex media situation of the first-century Mediterranean, and second because some of the earlier conclusions (such as those suggesting a 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy) have been challenged by subsequent work. With these caveats we may nevertheless sketch a brief outline of how oral tradition has sometimes been characterized.

Much twentieth-century thinking about oral tradition grew from the seminal work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord on Homeric literature as oral poetry in connection with a study of contemporary Balkan bards. In brief and at the risk of gross oversimplification, Parry's work began from the observation that Homeric verse makes heavy use of a number of set formulas, so that, for example, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* the dawn is frequently rosy-fingered, the sea wine-dark, and Achilles swift-footed, even in situations when he is not actually going anywhere. One advantage of such set formulas is that they neatly fill out one half of a Greek hexameter, and so form a useful stock of phrases for composition in performance, effectively forming the basic units of the poet's vocabulary. For according to Parry and Lord the Homeric poems were composed in performance long before they were written down. They would have been re-performed many times, but no two performances would have been exactly alike;

⁵ For a broader discussion of the 'psychodynamics of orality' see Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New Accents; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 31–76.

instead the poems would have been created afresh in each new performance, calling on the same stock of phrases, the same overall story outline, and the same stock of intermediate elements such as scenes following the same general outline. So, for example, more or less the same order of events is followed in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* every time a banquet occurs or every time a hero dons his armour.⁶

It is knowing the stock of phrases and these intermediate and larger structures that is meant to have enabled the Homeric poets to recreate their epics in multiple performances without the aid of writing; no verbatim memorization was involved. In support of this thesis Parry and Lord carried out extensive fieldwork in Yugoslavia observing illiterate bards compose in performance in much the manner just described, the best of them well able to rival Homer at least in terms of the length of the epics produced.⁷

The oral formulaic theory of Parry and Lord has met with a number of criticisms. Not least, critics have challenged the sharp divide it postulates between orality and literacy. In relation to the study of the New Testament the relevance of the Parry–Lord theory has been questioned on the grounds that the synoptic tradition is plainly not epic poetry. In Chapter 6 we shall briefly describe an attempt to generalize the Parry–Lord theory to other types of oral tradition on the basis of cognitive psychology.

Stemming in part from the work of Parry and Lord, and in part from the conviction that the use of different media (speech, writing, print, electronic devices) could have profound effects both on society and on the way individuals think, the exploration of such media differences was developed by scholars such as Jack Goody, Walter J. Ong and Eric Havelock, and taken up in New Testament studies by Werner Kelber (on whom see Chapter 4).⁸ It is certainly not the case either that all these scholars are in agreement with one another or that their work has gone unchallenged, but as a

⁶ David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-out Rhymes* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 210–20.

⁷ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature, 24; 2nd edn, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1960); John Miles Foley, *The Theory of Oral Composition: History and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁸ E.g. Jack Goody, *The Interface between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Themes in the Social Sciences; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Ong, *Orality and Literacy*; Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Eric A. Havelock, *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986); Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Voices in Performance and Text; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997).

useful first approximation it may be helpful to sketch the characterization of oral tradition that emerges from this kind of approach.

First, it is said, oral tradition (or oral transmission) is generally a series of creative performances, in which oral composition may play as much of a role as faithful recall. Such performances are rarely, if ever, attempts to repeat fixed oral 'texts'. Of course the oral performance of memorized fixed texts can and does occur, but generally only in connection with writing. The notion of a fixed text whose words are to be repeated verbatim scarcely exists except where such texts have first been written down. Indeed, it is hard to see how the notion could exist apart from a written text against which to compare successive oral performances.⁹ It is probably going too far to say that oral tradition *never* allows for verbatim repetition, since there are some kinds of material (songs, short poems, liturgical and magical formulas, particularly striking pithy sayings and the like) that lend themselves to verbatim or near-verbatim repetition, especially where, for example, the efficacy of a magical formula or liturgical ceremony is assumed to depend on getting the wording exactly right, but such cases are the exception rather than the rule, and variability is possible and reasonably common even for relatively memorable metrical material.

Second, oral tradition rarely preserves the past for its own sake, that is, in the sense of retaining information about the past for purely academic, historical or antiquarian purposes. This does not mean that oral tradition never preserves anything from the past, or that it shows no interest in the past, but rather that its interest in the past is nearly always for its practical application in the present. There is a tendency in oral tradition towards what has been termed *homeostasis*, that is for orally transmitted material either to be conformed to the present interests of the social group that is using and transmitting it or to die out altogether when it ceases to be relevant. It should be stressed, however, that this is only a tendency; complete homeostasis is rarely achieved, since oral traditions often preserve archaisms whose meaning is no longer understood (certain nursery rhymes and folk songs provide modern examples of this phenomenon) as well as information about the past that is deemed interesting for its own sake (perhaps due to its very oddity).¹⁰

Third, oral tradition prefers the vivid and the concrete to the abstract and the general. Fourth, along with the preference for the vivid goes a

⁹ Jocelyn Penny Small, *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 5.

¹⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 114–23.

preference for the striking, the unusual, the sharply drawn, for black-and-white contrasts and situations of conflict, for the dramatic rather than the humdrum, presumably because these are more memorable than the everyday and the commonplace. Along with this is a tendency to simplify the characters oral tradition describes, making them one-dimensional heroes and villains, larger-than-life 'heavy' characters, or even caricatures. Any subtleties, complexities and ambiguities tend to get lost.

These generalizations can be helpful if used with caution. They can provide an initial orientation to the characterization of oral tradition, but it should not be assumed that all oral traditions work in the same way and display identical characteristics. Different societies value different kinds of material in different ways and may employ different techniques in handing it on. The four points listed above should be taken as indications of the way an oral tradition is quite likely to work, not as laws governing how all oral traditions must work. For example, the insistence that oral tradition is always composition-in-performance stems from the work of Parry and Lord (the 'oral-formulaic' approach), and while it may offer a good account of the performance of certain kinds of epic poetry, it does not even apply to all oral poetry, let alone all oral tradition.¹¹ Depending on the situation and the type of material transmitted, performances of oral tradition may be creative reworkings of remembered themes, or they may be more or less successful attempts to reproduce memorized texts, or they may be any number of things in-between, and the situation may be greatly complicated by the existence of written texts in the culture in question.¹²

Moreover, one must be wary of pressing the differences between orality and writing too hard. Other studies have tended to regard the 'Great Divide' approach as at best a useful first approximation which now needs to be nuanced and corrected. Indeed, more recent scholarship on oral tradition has tended to qualify the distinction between orality and literacy, and indeed, to question whether such broad-brush categories as 'orality' and 'literacy' have any analytical utility at all. The more recent tendency has been to stress the interpenetration of speech and writing, particularly in manuscript cultures, and also to suggest a greater gradation of cultural situations than just 'oral' and 'literate'.¹³ Vernon K. Robbins, for example,

¹¹ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 152; cf. John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 1–21.

¹² Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 152.

¹³ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, 18–19, 22–4, 160–8, 258–60, 272–3; Foley, *Singer*, 66, 79, 210–11; Foley, *Oral Poem*, 26, 36–9, 66–9.

The ancient media situation

has suggested a classification into oral, scribal, rhetorical, reading, literary, print and hypertext cultures, locating the Gospels in the third category.¹⁴ Lest one should think that this places the greatest divide between ancient oral cultures and modern digital cultures, Bruce Lionel Mason uses the oral characteristics of internet newsgroup postings to challenge the oral–literacy divide, and points out conversely that oral rhetoric can sometimes employ literate strategies.¹⁵

How exactly one should characterize the oral tradition that gave rise to the Gospels will be the subject of the chapters that follow. The general characteristics of speech and oral tradition just reviewed should be regarded not as a set of firm conclusions but rather as a provisional starting point. Yet even allowing for the complex interaction of speech and writing in antiquity, an awareness of the differences between the two media is a better starting point than simply treating them as equivalent. But in order not to misunderstand the difference between them, we next need to consider how ancient writing differs from modern print.

Writing in antiquity

Earlier we emphasized the oral/aural nature of speech in contrast to the visual nature of writing. This contrast is, however, potentially misleading in relation to ancient texts. Ancient texts were designed, not primarily to be scanned by the eye, but to be read aloud and heard. Indeed, it has been suggested that silent reading was virtually unknown in antiquity and that the most famous exception proves the rule: St Augustine expressing surprise at coming across Bishop Ambrose reading to himself without uttering a sound (Augustine, *Conf.* 6.3). The interpretation of this passage as implying that Augustine was unfamiliar with silent reading has, however, been challenged on the grounds that it was not so much the silent reading as its occasion that Augustine found noteworthy.¹⁶ Yet even if silent reading was not wholly unknown in antiquity, it seems to have been more common for people either to read aloud to themselves, or get someone else (often a slave) to read to them, or to form part of an audience listening to a work being read aloud (authors often gave public readings of their

¹⁴ Vernon K. Robbins, 'Oral, Rhetorical and Literary Cultures: A Response' in Joanna Dewey (ed.), *Orality and Textuality in Early Christian Literature* (Semeia, 65; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 1995), 75–91.

¹⁵ Bruce Lionel Mason, 'E-Texts: The Orality and Literacy Issue Revisited', *OT* 13.2 (1998), 306–29.

¹⁶ Small, *Wax Tablets*, 52–3; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (2nd edn; Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 212–15.

The ancient media situation

own works, for example). Writing was also often done aloud. The normal practice was to dictate to a scribe, and while some authors preferred to do their own writing they frequently dictated aloud to themselves, as did copyists. In sum, ancient texts often functioned in a thoroughly oral way.¹⁷

The difference between the ancient and modern use of texts becomes even more apparent when we consider the physical nature of ancient texts. Although a manuscript penned by a professional scribe often had a pleasingly neat appearance in which the individual letters were well formed and easily legible, ancient Greek manuscripts lacked virtually all the other visual indicators of the modern printed book. The typical manuscript had no punctuation, no paragraphing, no distinction between upper and lower case letters, and no space between words, with words generally broken at the end of a line to achieve an even right margin regardless of where in the word the break came. To read such a manuscript from beginning to end required skill enough (though the habit of reading aloud probably helped make sense of writing presented in this way); to find a particular passage in the middle of the text would have been a matter of considerable difficulty, to the extent that virtually no one would have attempted it just to check a reference to something they more or less remembered. Moreover, an ancient manuscript would have been totally devoid of any visual clues concerning the organization and structure of the text it contained. Backtracking in a text to reread a passage just read would be possible for a manuscript one was reading to oneself, or having read to oneself by one's own slave; skipping backwards and forwards, or randomly accessing particular passages elsewhere in the text would have been far more difficult. It would have been made even more difficult by the fact that books were normally in the form of scrolls.

To be sure, the early Christian Church seems to have been something of a pioneer in the adoption of the codex (the book in the page format we now take for granted), but while turning pages would have been a great deal easier than winding and unwinding a scroll, all the other visual cues were still lacking. In sum, it would not have been feasible to use an ancient manuscript text in many of the ways we use modern printed books.¹⁸

¹⁷ Paul Achtemeier, 'Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity', *JBL* 109 (1990), 3–27 (12–17); Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (WUNT, 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 130–41.

¹⁸ Achtemeier, 'Omne verbum sonat', 10–11; Small, *Wax Tablets*, 11–25.

The ancient media situation

Once pointed out, the physical limitations of ancient manuscripts are not too hard to understand. It is also not too hard to grasp how they may have prompted a greater reliance on the spoken word and on memory than we are used to in our culture. Thereafter, the ancient media situation becomes harder to grasp. The difficulty stems in part from the seeming paradox that the first-century Mediterranean world was both one in which texts proliferated and played a highly significant role, and also one in which oral habits still predominated. Writing appeared on public monuments, coins, published scrolls, private notebooks, letters and ostraca (pottery fragments used as writing surfaces). While papyrus was the preferred material and fairly readily available, one could also write on parchment (leather), notebooks made of wooden sheets, or wax tablets (the preferred medium for temporary notes, since a wax tablet was easy to erase). Both the number of various kinds of texts surviving from antiquity and the variety of surfaces used to write on suggests the great popularity of writing among those able to use it, and yet much everyday interaction continued to be oral (even more so than today).

This is partly explained by the fact that the diffusion of texts was greatly limited by the absence of printing. The only way texts could be duplicated (apart from those on coins) was to copy them by hand, a time-consuming and thus expensive procedure limiting the ownership of books in any quantity to the very wealthy. There was also a certain ambivalence towards writing; while its usefulness was clearly recognized, so were its limitations. A piece of writing could not be cross-examined in the way the oral account of an eyewitness could. Texts lacked the immediacy of face-to-face contact. Writing needed to be decoded by a reasonably competent reader able to deliver a decent oral performance despite the lack of visual aids. In addition much greater reliance was placed on memory than would be the case today, especially among the educated elites for whom high levels of memory competence could be regarded as a point of honour. In this situation, writing tended to be regarded as an aid to memory, not as a substitute for it as in our modern situation.

Estimates of ancient literacy have tended to vary, but the recent trend is to set them quite low, perhaps around 5 per cent in the population as a whole, rising to 15 per cent among urban males. It used to be thought that the Jews formed an exception, with their devotion to Scripture causing them to have a much higher literacy rate, perhaps through a system of near universal elementary education. Again more recent studies question this, suggesting that literacy rates among Jews were no higher than those

among other peoples.¹⁹ In any case, without the technology of the printing press, it is hard to see how mass literacy could have been achieved; there would not have been enough manuscript copies to go round.

In any case, 'literacy' is not an all-or-nothing term.²⁰ Some people could probably read short texts without being able to write. The ability to give an adequate public reading from a scroll would demand a far higher level of literacy. The ability to scratch a short list of names or items on a potsherd would have been one level of writing ability; that of being able to write at someone else's dictation another; that of being able to compose a book up to elite literary standards quite another.²¹

Be that as it may, the fact that only a minority of people could read or write would necessitate an oral approach to most of everyday living. Communication to or among the masses could only be by word of mouth. While prolific note-taking among the literary elites was far from uncommon, and the ability to write shorthand not unknown, the modern impulse to commit the noteworthy to writing could hardly exist among the population at large. Again, while the advantages of writing as an aid to memory were clearly recognized, even highly literate people were much more inclined to rely on their memories than modern people are, and those who were illiterate had no other choice. We should not, however, assume that this automatically gave everyone prodigious memories compared to people today. Memorization was a skill taught to the educated classes (those at the top of the social scale), but is a skill that modern people can equally well acquire if they choose. The difference is that memorization was much more central to ancient education than it is to modern.²² Whether ordinary people in antiquity in fact had better memories than ordinary people today is less clear; they presumably relied on their memories far more, and that *may* have helped train their memories to be more reliable, but the fact that they were unable to check their memories against written references as we often tend to do may just as easily mean that they were less aware of their mistakes than we are.

Another seeming paradox of the ancient situation is that one did not need to be literate to become reasonably familiar with the content of

¹⁹ Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (LNTS, 413; ed. M. Goodacre; New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2011), 71–85; Richard A. Horsley with Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 125–7.

²⁰ Tonkin, *Narrating*, 13.

²¹ Keith, *Jesus' Literacy*, 85–114; L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 94–6.

²² See, e.g., Small, *Wax Tablets*; Carruthers, *Book of Memory*; and David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablets of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The ancient media situation

written texts. Since nearly everyone apprehended the content of texts through hearing them read, those who could not read them for themselves were not necessarily at such a great disadvantage as might be supposed, provided they had access to a performance. To be sure, the wealthy and well-educated in centres of culture would have had much greater access to performances than peasants in a Galilean village. Nevertheless it seems likely that there would be some performances of texts open to all, particularly in cities. It also seems plausible that knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures would have extended well beyond those able to read them for themselves, since many people would gain some knowledge of the Scriptures through hearing them read. While we may doubt that every first-century Galilean village had a synagogue building housing a complete set of Torah scrolls (let alone a complete set of the Hebrew Scriptures), it is certainly possible that some towns and larger villages possessed at least some scriptural scrolls which villagers could hear read to them (this is suggested, for example, by Josephus, *J.W.* 2.229, which describes a Roman soldier burning a Torah scroll he found in a Judaeon village). Scriptural knowledge was probably much more widespread among the Jewish people than the ability to read, and it may be that it was the confusion of the one with the other that in part motivated older overestimates of first-century Jewish literacy. That said, we should not be too quick to assume that popular knowledge of Israelite traditions was necessarily knowledge of the contents of any particular written texts; it may be more appropriate to regard such knowledge as more akin to folklore, or to the ‘little tradition’ of the peasants (on which see Chapter 7).

The interaction between speech and writing in antiquity is thus complex. Some scholars maximize the media differences between the oral and the written.²³ Others tend to minimize them by emphasizing the oral functioning of ancient written texts.²⁴ While the truth probably lies somewhere in-between, it is hard for us to envisage since we lack any appropriate analogue in our own experience to the ancients’ use of texts.

Perhaps the closest modern analogy to an ancient text is a written (or printed) musical score.²⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that many musically trained people can profitably peruse a musical score by eye, the primary purpose of musical scores is performance intended for the ear, and the way in which the vast majority of people appreciate music is through

²³ E.g. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, partially in dependence on Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

²⁴ E.g. Horsley and Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me*, 128–44.

²⁵ Small, *Wax Tablets*, 23.

hearing it performed. One can be familiar with a great deal of music, be able to recognize a substantial repertoire, and able to hum or sing a wide range of melodies oneself without being able to read a note of printed music. For the vast majority of people, knowledge and appreciation of music comes through hearing it performed. It is in no way dependent on access to printed scores or the ability to read them for oneself; it is dependent only on one's access to musical performances. The ability to compose and perform one's own music is not and never has been restricted to those who can write down formal musical notation. Folk music, popular songs, ballads, religious chants, various forms of dance music and so on can all be composed, performed, learned and passed on without any recourse to writing. But there is a limitation to the sophistication of such music, especially when compared with the Western classical tradition. Music composed without the aid of writing seems unable to achieve much harmonic, contrapuntal or structural sophistication. It is perfectly possible to think up a great melody without going near pen and ink, but the ability to compose a four-movement symphony for full orchestra is hard to imagine without the ability to write out the score.

The analogy with verbal communication is only partial, since listening to a Beethoven symphony is very different from reading Plato, but the difference does tend to diminish at the other end of the scale. Reciting a folk poem and singing a folk song may be much the same thing, especially as recitals of oral tradition are often as much sung as spoken, and the public reading of texts in antiquity frequently employed a vocal technique somewhere between full-blooded singing and ordinary speech.

Consequences for the oral Jesus tradition

It should be stressed again that the present chapter is anything but the last word on oral tradition or its relation to written texts. What has been offered here is simply an initial orientation which will need to be refined and corrected in the light of the chapters to follow. Two further preliminary remarks may nevertheless be in order.

The first point concerns the possible extent of writing in the pre-Gospel tradition. As has been noted, the tendency has been to emphasize that ancient literacy was confined to the educated elites, and that few if any people from that class belonged to the primitive Church. This needs some qualification. The fact that the educated elites sometimes had their slaves read to them or take dictation implies the existence of literate slaves. There was, moreover, a measure of craft literacy. Some people earned their living

The ancient media situation

as scribes, just as some earned their living as carpenters or stonemasons. Scribes might be employed by the elite (and others) but did not themselves belong to the elite. Some other people might have possessed at least rudimentary reading and writing skills that were useful in their principal trade. Physicians and engineers might typically be literate. Retainers employed to perform clerical duties for the government or for wealthy landowners would certainly have been literate. Once the Church took hold in urban settings and began to attract more than a handful of recruits, it is more probable than not that it would have some literate persons among its number, even if it had not done so before.

The significance of this is not so easy to determine, however. We should not automatically assume that people wrote Jesus traditions down simply because they could, just in order to preserve them. That would be to project the modern record-keeping habits of the present onto a much more oral past. On the other hand, given the ubiquity of note-taking in antiquity, it would not be at all surprising if literate preachers and teachers made some private notes of material they thought would be useful in their preaching and teaching. The effect of such notes is hard to gauge. While they remained little more than an aide-memoire for the oral use of the material, the fact that they were written down may not have been very significant, except insofar as papyrus may have been able to fix a little more material in a more stable form than human memory. The extent of such a practice in any case remains entirely conjectural. The possibility nevertheless reinforces the warning that models of orality drawn completely from preliterate societies need to be used with caution. If notes written in 30 CE were available to Mark in 70 CE, 40 years of oral transmission could in theory have been totally bypassed, but there is no way of knowing *a priori* whether this happened or not.

The second point is that if oral tradition is to be taken seriously as oral, it must not be treated as if it were a kind of writing. However closely writing and speech may have been intertwined in antiquity, they remained separate media with their own distinctive qualities. In particular, oral tradition is not a thing to be investigated or an artefact to be excavated. It existed in speech acts long since lapsed into silence, and in the memories of people long since turned to dust. We have no direct access to it at all, but only to its traces in the written documents that survive. How those documents can be used in the attempt to reconstruct it will form the subject of the chapters to come.