

## Book Reviews

**Eve, Eric.** 2014. *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress. ISBN 978-1-4514-6940-0. Pp. 206. \$25.

Eric Eve, fellow and tutor in theology at Harris Manchester College, Oxford, presents a comprehensive, yet very accessible introduction to the multifaceted subject of “oral tradition” as it pertains to the NT Gospels. In ten well-conceived chapters, he offers a general theoretical discussion of the contextualised nature of oral tradition in relation to written text transmission on the one hand, and “social memory” on the other—providing a systematic critical survey of the field, beginning with classical form criticism and proceeding to contemporary “performance” oriented approaches.

Starting from the premise that NT scholarship has “not yet fully exorcised the form-critical ghost from the scholarly mindset,” Eve aims to make “one more attempt to do so” by categorising, describing, and assessing “the various proposals currently on offer” (xiii, all page references to the book being reviewed), in roughly chronological order. He does this with reference to five general approaches (several of which have sub-branches): the *rabbinic* model, the *media contrast* model, the model of *informal controlled oral tradition*, the *memory* model, and the *eye-witness* model. Each chapter-unit ends with Eve’s “conclusion,” in which he quite fairly and succinctly reviews the various pros and cons of the approach being discussed in relation to those previously considered, at times also pointing forward to those yet to come. During the course of his insightful exposition and evaluation, Eve subtly critiques his own book title by developing the argument that the notion of social, or collective “memory” is “a more helpful category” than “oral tradition,” and the preposition “behind” (the Gospels) gives a “questionable” perspective on the complex compositional and transmissive process that was taking place in early Christian communities nearly two millennia ago (xiv).

In chapter one, Eve provides some essential background for his primary subject by surveying “the ancient media situation,” placing “oral tradition” within the broader setting of the “social or collective memory of the group to which the tradents . . . belong” (2). Two informative sections then delineate “some characteristics of orality and oral tradition” in relation to “writing in antiquity,” with special reference to the influential formulaic theories of Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Several important

caveats emerge, for example: “conclusions drawn from completely non-literate cultures may not be directly applicable to the more complex media situation of the first-century Mediterranean” (4), and “one must be wary of pressing the differences between orality and writing too hard” (7), “the closest modern analogy to an ancient text [being] a written (or printed) musical score” (12). This opening chapter concludes with some preliminary reflections on “consequences for the oral Jesus tradition,” with an emphasis on the complex, interactive relationship between oral and written discourse in the world of communication of that age and locale (14).<sup>1</sup>

Chapter two overviews classical “form criticism” (15) through a description of the works of Martin Dibelius, “the pioneer in developing the form criticism of the Synoptic Gospels” (16), and his contemporary, Rudolph Bultmann. “Where Bultmann departed most strikingly from Dibelius was in his decision to start with an ‘analytic’ as opposed to a ‘constructive’ approach, that is to start by analyzing the Gospel material and deduce life-settings from the analysis rather than doing it the other way around...” (21). Eve concludes that due to an inadequate conception of oral tradition, the crucial media differences between speech and writing, and the complex interaction of speech forms with setting, form criticism “fails both as a method for investigating the traditions behind the Gospels and in supplying an adequate model for those traditions” (32).<sup>2</sup>

Chapter three presents “the rabbinic model” (33) of Harald Riesenfeld and his student, Birger Gerhardsson, whose work is featured. These scholars based their theory on the careful text-transmission practice

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<sup>1</sup> I will restrict my occasional disagreements with Eve’s assertions or conclusions to footnoted comments: I find it rather difficult to agree with the notion that written texts in antiquity (e.g., ubiquitous “note-taking”) “remained *little more than* an aide-memoire for the oral use of the material,” and “the fact that they were written down may *not* have been *very significant*” (14, added italics). Surely the cost of the writing materials involved and the effort required to produce written texts would have motivated a higher purpose, e.g., to control the flexibility that a strictly oral mode of transmission might allow for a sacred, authoritative textual (Gospel) tradition.

<sup>2</sup> While it may be true to say that “the notion of an ‘original’ or ‘pure’ form that can be recovered by tracing the history of the tradition is highly problematic,” to my mind it does not necessarily follow in each and every case, say, of the didactic discourses of Christ, that “material transmitted orally is likely to have been multiform from the start” (28). The degree of multiformity manifested at any stage of transmission would presumably depend on certain limiting factors, such as the size of the text being considered and whether or not it is/was in fact singular in origin.

of later rabbis, which is assumed to have developed in NT times, if not earlier. This involved “the highly controlled handing on of a fixed body of material, which the teacher ensured was memorised by his students . . . [and then transmitted] by certain individuals who were particularly qualified to do so” (33)—in the case of the Gospel traditions, by the close disciples of Christ and their associates. Supporting evidence for this position includes: the recognised Messianic source (Jesus) and consequent sacred, authoritative character of this material; its memorable-memorisable compositional character; the likelihood that writing (e.g., on tablets) was also employed in the preservation and passing on of the tradition; and similar educational practices in the contemporary Graeco-Roman world (34–39). Eve then lists a number of objections to Gerhardsson’s hypotheses, such as, the variability displayed in parallel Gospel accounts of the same incident or discourse; the alleged lack of education of Christ’s disciples; the anachronistic, overly scribal, writing-oriented nature of this approach; and the seeming lack of evidence for it in the NT generally (39–45). In Eve’s opinion, Gerhardsson “has not provided a convincing account of the oral tradition behind the Gospels” (46); however, the overview of this chapter led me to the opposite conclusion,<sup>3</sup> and so do the many references to this influential “rabbinic” theory in subsequent chapters, especially 7–8.

Chapter four appears to document a rather artificial category, “the media contrast model” (47), in order to overview the work primarily of Werner Kelber (previewed by Erhardt Güttgemanns, 48–51). “The central thesis of Kelber’s important work, *The Oral and Written Gospel*, was the radical discontinuity between the Gospel of Mark as a written text and the oral tradition that preceded it” (51). Kelber made good use of an interdisciplinary argument against “the typographical bias of much of modern biblical scholarship” (51), drawing on the work of classicists, folklorists, social anthropologists, and ancient media experts. Eve proceeds to summarise Kelber’s ideas in some detail, including his notion of “the technique of oral transmission” (53), formal categories of traditional material found in Mark (54–56), the distinctive Passion narrative (57), “his thesis of the essential textual, written nature of Mark’s Gospel” (58),

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<sup>3</sup> The obvious verbal variability in parallel Gospel pericopes, for example, could be accounted for “partly as a result of translation from Aramaic into Greek,” or to certain “interpretive adaptations of the material” when placed within the broader didactic context of a larger, unified composition (38) and “designed to bring out the meaning of the transmitted texts” (42) for distinct audiences.

which nevertheless, “was probably written for oral performance” (59), and his view of supposed contrasts in media preference between Mark and both “Q” and Paul (60). In his evaluation, Eve notes the major criticism of Kelber’s work, namely, “that he had overdrawn the ‘Great Divide’ between textuality and orality in an ancient context” (63), but points out that Kelber has since moved on to adopt a “social memory approach” (65),<sup>4</sup> which takes into consideration some current theories and models that more satisfactorily explain the interactive dynamics of orality and writing in the Gospels (cf. 132–133).<sup>5</sup>

Chapter five surveys the “informal controlled oral tradition” model of Kenneth Bailey (66), which is based on his long experience as a missionary and teacher in the Middle East. Bailey distinguishes his approach to ancient text transmission from the “informal uncontrolled type” (e.g., rumour diffusion) and the “formal controlled type” (e.g., Qur’an memorisation) (66). Thus, “a certain amount of flexibility is allowed, particularly in matters of style and dramatic detail, but the reciter is expected to preserve the basic shape and point of the story” (67). Eve then gives a rather lengthy summary of some of Bailey’s data, based on a corpus of anecdotal stories (68–78). Though interesting, I found this material rather irrelevant to the larger theoretical discussion. The “Evaluation” section offers a critique of Bailey’s work by Theodore Weeden, in interaction with James Dunn, but concludes that Bailey’s data does reveal the essential operation of oral tradition in “preserving and faithfully articulating stories which are congruent with and validate the social identity of an oral society at any given point of time” (83). This involves a process of “reshaped” textual transmission which incorporates a good deal of “reinterpretation, combination and idealization” (83). The question is: to what extent can the informal, fictive, secular oral tradition of any society (whether in the Middle East or in Africa) serve as an accurate model for understanding a formal, factual, sacred tradition such as we have represented in the NT Gospels?

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<sup>4</sup> As collected, for example, in *Imprints, Voiceprints, & Footprints of Memory: Collected Essays of Werner H. Kelber* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> This includes Kelber’s concept of the “biosphere,” that is, “an invisible nexus of references and identities from which people draw sustenance, in which they live, and in relation to which they make sense of their lives” (132). However, an application of this notion to the diverse metonymic cognitive resonances evoked by verbal texts (oral and/or written) to the entire sociolinguistic tradition in which they are embedded is better termed a “logosphere.”

Chapter six, “memory and tradition,” begins with a helpful survey of the salient differences between “individual memory (the psychology of memory) and collective memory (the sociology of memory)” (86). *Individual* memory, in turn, may be differentiated into personal, semantic, and habitual memory—that is, the recollection of experiences, facts, and procedures (88). In any case, people tend to store and retrieve events and related knowledge in terms of “pre-existent patterns of understanding, or *schemata*” (89), which are generalised frames or cognitive prototypes that facilitate one’s inevitably interpretive, personal remembrances (90). Individual memory multiplied becomes *social*, or collective memory, which is used in three different senses, with reference to “the processes by which a group maintains, rehearses, transmits and shapes memories that are of significance to that group; second, the content of such memories; and third, what happens to the content of such memories, both in terms of stability and change and in terms of the types of shaping they might typically undergo” (92). Eve then considers social memory as it is manifested in oral tradition, with special reference to how “such material needs to be cast in special memorable form” (99), through the use of “a series of multiple constraints or cues” (100), such as standard verbal scripts, vivid imagery, rhyme, rhythm, patterned discourse structures, and the like.<sup>6</sup> The chapter ends with a review of how studies in “tradition and performance” have developed since the theories of Parry and Lord, in particular, through the work of the late John Miles Foley and his notion of “metonymic” memory (103), or “traditional referentiality,” in which a particular formula or theme alludes, “not to another specific text, but to the way that formula or theme operates in the tradition as a whole” (104).<sup>7</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> Eve apparently agrees with the view that, to the extent that elements of “oral tradition” were involved as a “source” in the composition of the Gospels, their relative historical credibility is correspondingly vitiated. This is because “once ripped from their original context such ‘facts’ tend to become a mere jumble of data, deprived of the meaning given them by their original narrative contexts” (99). Again, it is important to make a distinction between secular and sacred “tradition” and the associated significance of the “facts” being reported in relation to their inscribed narrative setting, which need not necessarily be greatly removed temporally from their oral “original contexts.”

<sup>7</sup> In addition to Foley, Eve mentions the work of Richard Bauman (104–105), but makes no reference to recent significant studies by David Rhoads and the “Biblical Performance Criticism Series” (Cascade Books) that Rhoads edits (currently 7 vols. in print, including books by Pieter J. J. Botha and J. A. [Bobby] Loubser; cf. [biblicalperformancecriticism.org](http://biblicalperformancecriticism.org)).

applied relevance of this rather theoretical discussion might, for example, “involve trying to reconstruct the performance situation of the historical Jesus and making some assumptions about existing traditions his words presupposed, which would most likely be Israelite traditions partly reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures (and quite possibly some intertestamental literature as well)” (107).

Chapter seven, “memory and orality in the Jesus tradition” (108), highlights the work of four scholars in the field (others might have been considered here since the categories for chapters 6–7 are quite general). First is James Dunn in relation to his major work, *Jesus Remembered* (2003), which develops the work of Kenneth Bailey (cf. ch. 5). Basing his approach on the prominence of the notion of “remembering” in the NT, Dunn argues that the oral accounts regarding Jesus were still “an active, living tradition at the time the Gospels were written” and played a major role in their composition (111). Richard Horsley (and Jonathan Draper)<sup>8</sup> focuses on the significance of the hypothetical “Q” text in the composition of Mark’s Gospel. Eve correctly criticises Horsley’s various reconstructions of text in context and suggests that “in his anxiety to avoid the theological reductionism of which he accuses many other scholars, Horsley has over-corrected to the extent of producing interpretations of Mark and Q from which theology has been all but banished” (122). Eve has a much more positive opinion with regard to Rafael Rodriguez and his book *Structuring Early Christian Memory* (2010), who builds on various aspects of Foley’s work (cf. ch. 6). Rodriguez suggests that “historical Jesus research has tended to underestimate the stability of memory in social change,” which is coupled with an inadequate “social theory of reputation” (i.e., of Jesus) in an ANE context (125).<sup>9</sup> Thus, greater appreciation is needed for the vital role of the ancient audience in oral performance, which was able to “fill in” the cognitive gaps during a given transmission of the Gospel tradition, thus creating a certain “continuity of reception across oral performances and the written text” (127).

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Draper is apparently put into parentheses in the sectional heading on p. 115 since Eve focuses his discussion on the, to my mind, radical theories of Horsley, for example: “In Horsley’s view the Markan Jesus is represented as the prophetic leader of a covenant renewal movement and . . . as a popular messianic figure” (118).

<sup>9</sup> Given this perspective on the transmitted text (cf. Luke 1:1-4), one might question Rodriguez’ conclusion that a passage like Luke 4:16–20, “which depicts Jesus reading from a scroll of Isaiah, can hardly be an accurate account of an actual historical occurrence” (129).

Accordingly, parallel accounts of similar Gospel material may be viewed “in terms of variant instantiations of the ambient tradition in oral-dynamic mode,” rather than as products of literary editing, or “redaction” (129). Finally, any manifestation of “the complex interplay of stability and flexibility in the Jesus tradition” (133), whether weaker or stronger in either direction with regard to a particular text or pericope, would appear to be dependent on a host of situational factors, such as, when, where, by whom, and for what purpose—and we cannot discount here the deliberate attempt to “transmit” a Gospel tradition in the most accurate, authoritative way possible (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:1, 3; Gal. 1:9; Phil. 4:9; 1 Thess. 2:13, 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:15, 3:6).<sup>10</sup>

In chapter eight, “the role of eyewitnesses” (135), Eve considers the position of two major proponents of this approach, Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham. In *Story as History—History as Story*, Byrskog underscores the importance of “eyewitness testimony [autopsy] in ancient historiography” (135). He surveys ancient historiographical techniques in order to “demonstrate the environment in which the New Testament documents were written . . . there was concern for historical accuracy . . . [and] autopsy (direct or indirect) was the preferred means of arriving at it” (138). Thus, prominence is given to the role of the authoritative individuals as attestors and tradents over against “the anonymous collective” (140). Byrskog supports his argument by exploring a number of NT passages “in which claims to autopsy are incorporated” into the account, e.g., 2 Pet 1:16–18 (138),<sup>11</sup> as well as the significance of Papias’ reference to Mark being the reliable interpreter of Peter (139). Eve then turns to “a more radical thesis about the place of eyewitnesses in the composition of the Gospels” (143), namely, that of Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006). He argues “not only that eyewitnesses played a major role in transmitting and controlling the Jesus tradition, but that the canonical Gospels are based on direct eyewitness testimony” (143)—“a particular kind of historiography that embodies the unique insider

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<sup>10</sup> This emphasis on verbal precision in transmitting the sacred Gospel tradition would be analogous to the manner in which the Hebrew authoritative religious texts were presumably viewed and conscientiously conveyed in the first century C.E., at least within the precincts of the Jerusalem Temple.

<sup>11</sup> I do not share the opinion that 2 Peter is a questionable example of “pseudonymous legitimation” (138). Neither do I concur with Eve’s opinion that Byrskog’s reasoning that the Epistle of James was written by Jesus’ brother “feels forced and unconvincing” (140).

perspective on extraordinary events” (144). Eve summarises Bauckham’s case for the involvement of eyewitness testimony in the Gospel of Mark (144–145) and then offers his own rather lengthy argument against this evidence (146–149).<sup>12</sup> This chapter concludes with an overview of Bauckham’s critique of three of the theories of oral tradition in relation to NT text transmission already considered above: form criticism (ch. 2), Gerhardsson’s rabbinic model (ch. 3), and Bailey’s notion of informal controlled tradition (ch. 5). This is again followed by Eve’s rather detailed counter-argumentation (154–157), which agrees with certain fundamental aspects of Bauckham’s position, namely, the importance of eyewitnesses in the formation, transmission, and control of the Gospel tradition. However, Eve feels that Bauckham “has tried to push [his theory of transmission] too far” and has in effect “insulated it too much from the wider social memory which surely would have influenced it in one way or another” (158).

In chapter nine, “probing the tradition,” Eve seeks to investigate the Gospel account itself in an effort to “gauge both the extent of the tradition and the kinds of transformation and constraint it was subject to” (159). This would have required a full-length study on its own, so Eve restricts himself to Mark’s “witness to the Gospel tradition” in comparison with two other, quite different witnesses: Paul and Josephus. Eve presents an interesting textual comparison of some Gospel traditions that are seemingly common to Mark and some of Paul’s epistles (164–166), including the contrastive opinions of Jens Schröter and James Dunn regarding the nature of such materials (161–163),<sup>13</sup> and he proceeds to a consideration of the notion of “tradition” in the Pauline writings (166–168). His conservative conclusion is that “Paul is a possible witness to a tradition that stems from Apostles based in Jerusalem, and that this tradition has elements in common with that employed by Mark” (169). Eve then briefly considers Josephus and references to the Jesus tradition in

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<sup>12</sup> Some of Eve’s reasoning is sound, but certain points may be countered in turn. For example, why would Mark seemingly “go out of his way to discredit his principal eyewitness source [Peter] by repeatedly emphasizing the disciples’ failure to understand” (146)? One might respond by saying that such honesty of factual reporting simply demonstrates the credibility of the writer and the specialised character (genre) of this sacred Gospel testimony.

<sup>13</sup> In an effort to lend a modicum of support to Schröter’s speculative minimalist position, Eve gratuitously suggests that “it is not impossible that the early Church contained gifted wordsmiths who could cast paraenetic material into more memorable form when putting it on the lips of Jesus” (163).



*Testimonium Flavianum* (Ant. 18.63–64), which unfortunately “has certainly been tampered with by a Christian hand” (170), thus rendering it unusable. He then turns to a comparative study of Josephus and Mark with respect to what they say about John the Baptist. His conclusion is that “the portraits of John the Baptist presented by these two authors owes at least as much to their different ideological and narrative concerns as it does to the constraints of the tradition” (175). More generally, Eve suggests that his comparative study in this chapter reveals a Jesus tradition that exhibits the typical “mix of stability and variability” that is characteristic of social memory and oral transmission, a communicative process not “necessarily being controlled for historical accuracy” (176). My interpretation of the evidence produced led me to a rather different conclusion, one more in accord with the NT’s own self-testimony concerning its overall credibility (e.g., John 20:30–31, 21:24–25).

In chapter ten, “conclusion,” Eve offers a concise summary of the main findings of his progressively developed, comparative study, fully recognising its speculative (184), potentially circular nature (177). He proposes “three theses about oral tradition and memory that flow from [his] study: (1) oral tradition typically exhibits both stability and change; (2) collective memory reflects both the impact of the past and the needs of the present; and (3) individual memory . . . is both generally reliable and *capable of being seriously misleading*” (178, italics added). I was quite surprised by this final characterisation, for I do not feel that it is well-supported by the extensive and varied evidence that Eve himself provides in this book (except perhaps with reference to Josephus).

Perhaps in this respect one must distinguish between the evidence offered and the diverse, often contradictory conclusions that scholars may arrive at on the basis of it. These interpretations and conclusions will naturally be influenced by one’s presuppositions concerning the nature of the Gospel accounts (i.e., “Scripture”).<sup>14</sup> To what extent is it *sui generis* (divinely initiated, inspired, influenced, etc.) or *profane* in a humanised, secular compositional sense? Such a hermeneutical (including theological) frame of reference will in turn influence one’s assessment of the various arguments offered by the different scholars included in such a wide-ranging study.<sup>15</sup> This will also affect one’s estimation of the potential

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<sup>14</sup> And that of course includes the evaluative opinions of this reviewer.

<sup>15</sup> For example, to what extent did the corporate social memory of the Jesus traditions “interpretively reshape” (178) or even purposefully “distort” them (182), possibly away from some originally framed “eyewitness” formulation, in order to serve immediate

relevance for one's understanding of the oral tradition, written tradition, social memory, individual (eyewitness) memory and their complex interaction "behind the Gospels" that eventually were recorded in the inscribed form that has come down to us, for example, with regard to the issue of "stability, change and the role of individuals" (178), the pertinent "implications for historical Jesus research" (181), and the primary "implications for source criticism and Gospel interpretation" (183).

In addition to a complete Bibliography (186), this book includes three helpful indices of "ancient and biblical texts" (195), "modern authors" (197), and "subjects" (201). Prior to the book's summary "introduction" (xiii), Eve adds a "note to the reader" (x), in which he briefly explains his use of the terms "Palestine" and "Palestinian" in preference to "Israel." Eve writes in a clear, virtually errorless style that is easy to follow, with footnotes being reserved primarily for scholarly references. I can highly recommend *Behind the Gospels* as a primary reference text for any university/seminary-level course dealing with the compositional history of the four Gospels, with specific reference to the "social memory" and "oral tradition" that was involved in their formulation and early transmission. All NT scholars would also benefit from this well-organised theoretical introduction to the subject and Eve's survey of a field of study that is rapidly growing in importance.

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