

Spring Core Class: on the Reliability of Scripture
“Did early Christian oral tradition reliably pass down truth about Jesus?”
Presented by Jason Tarn to DHBC on May 3rd. 2009

Introduction

I realize the focus on this section needs clarification because terms like “oral tradition” might be new to you. *So what exactly are we asking?* Well our previous question was concerned with the reliability of the translations, manuscript copies, and the original autographs. We offered good reasons to trust that the English Bible in your hands is a good translation of the best, surviving manuscripts AND that their antiquity and vast quantity strengthens our confidence that they closely reflect the wording in the originals documents AND that these autographs were free of error and contradiction because of its unique origin – from the hands and minds of human authors, yet superintended and guided by the Spirit of God.

But there is still a big question mark that could cast doubt on the reliability of Scripture. *Namely, if the Gospels were not written until years after the events of which they speak, then how do we know that the Gospel writers recorded accurate, reliable truth about Jesus?* If the content of all his parables and sermons, if the stories about his unique birth, the miracles he performed, and his unique death and resurrection were passed down by word of mouth for a number of years before they were recorded, then *how can we trust that what was eventually written down in the Gospels is historically reliable?* That’s the big question that still needs to be addressed. *Did early Christian oral tradition reliably pass down truth about Jesus?* Well we first need to define some terms in our question.

Defining Terms

The first term that needs clarification is “early Christian”. *How early is early?* What we’re trying to identify is the time span between the actual events of Jesus’ life and death and the first gospel. It’s within this time span that oral communication was the predominant means of communicating truth about Jesus. *So how early is the NT?* Previously we considered the date of our earliest copy but now we want to know the date of the original books, especially the Gospels. This is important because if that time span is too long, then that allows more time for the oral communication to have been corrupted – thereby decreasing the reliability of the written Gospels.

Now the second term we need to define is “oral tradition”. This refers to the content of what was communicated in that time span. The general understanding is that there were a number of stories about Jesus that were passed down orally from the first disciples to subsequent generations of followers. So there was a story about Jesus healing this blind man named Bartimaeus, and one about his raising a synagogue ruler’s daughter back to life, and another about a sermon he gave while sitting on a mount. These oral stories formed a Jesus tradition that was passed down by mouth between generations of Christians until they were encapsulated in the written Gospels.

An important question is this: *Was there a formal process in place for transmitting oral tradition?* Could anyone simply pass these stories on to others or were their recognised “guardians” of the tradition? And could the stories have been modified or tweaked? *Were their any controls in place to preserve them?*

Attacks Against the Reliability of Early Christian Oral Tradition

ASSUMPTION: ORAL TRANSMISSION WAS LIKE AN ANCIENT GAME OF “TELEPHONE”

Now a common analogy used to explain the transmission of oral tradition is the game “Telephone”. That’s the game where you sit in a circle and somebody starts off by whispering a sentence to the person next to him and that person whispers to the next person and so on. When it gets to the last person, that one says what he or she thinks the original message was, and most often than not, the message has been jumbled into something completely different. So in the same way, those who discount the reliability of the Gospels will compare the transmission of oral tradition about Jesus to an ancient game of “Telephone”.

Now in response to this portrayal of oral transmission, Richard Bauckham has written a book called *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, and in it he argues against this kind of thinking. The methodology that he is opposing is often called form criticism. He explains it like this, “*This is the assumption that the traditions about Jesus, his acts and his words, passed through a long process of oral tradition in the early Christian communities and reached the writers of the Gospels only at a late state of this process.*” (Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 6).

ASSUMPTION: THE TIME SPAN WAS SO LONG THAT CHANGES WERE BOUND TO OCCUR.

Critics of the Bible will claim that the span of time, between the Gospels and the actual events they speak about, was a long, long process. So corruption in the oral traditions was bound to occur. Now the changes in the story could be innocent consequences of human error, or the changes could be intentional, to serve someone’s theological agenda.

ASSUMPTION: THE ORAL TRADITIONS WERE CONSIDERED QUITE FLUID AND FLEXIBLE.

Critics will go on say that intentional changes in the oral tradition was common practice. Stories about Jesus were modified and tweaked as necessary to meet the needs of the Christian communities that embraced them. Now if they’re right, then the Gospels tell us very little about the historical Jesus. Instead, they tell us a lot about the Christian communities from which these Gospels developed. They tell us about the kind of theological and liturgical issues that concerned these communities. And therefore, our Gospels would not be reliable sources for truth about Jesus. Now in order to substantiate all these claims, critics have to insist that the eyewitnesses of these events must have moved out of the picture quickly and quietly. The eyewitnesses simply set the ball rolling in the process of oral transmission, but they did not play an active role in it. Instead, they claim that the oral traditions were passed down in the Christian communities by individuals anonymous to us. They’re compelled to make this kind of arguments because if the surviving eyewitness played a role in the transmission process, then they would have challenged any intentional revisions of the events they witnessed.

Three Responses to These Charges

So how should we respond to these charges – all of which have the potential to cast doubt of the reliability of the original autographs? Now on one hand, we can return to our discussion on inspiration and inerrancy and speak of the role of faith and the inner testimony of the Spirit. That’s a legitimate approach to this issue. But I want to offer some apologetic arguments that you can use to strengthen your own confidence in the Gospels and to incorporate in your discussions with friends who might question their truthfulness.

ORAL TRANSMISSION IS TO “TELEPHONE” AS APPLE IS TO ORANGE

Our first response is to demonstrate why comparing ancient oral transmission to a game of “Telephone” is much like comparing apples to oranges. Yes there are similar, but they are still very much different.

1) Both involve memorizing a message, but first century Christians lived in an oral culture adept at memorizing. The reason why the message never stays the same when we play “Telephone” is because we’re not good at memorizing. We live in a digital culture, not an oral one. We don’t need to memorize anything anymore. We have memory cards and memory sticks. And since everybody has a cell phone, there’s no need to memorize phone numbers. So memorization doesn’t come natural to us anymore, but it is possible to train yourself to memorize. In fact, with enough motivation and practice, the human mind is capable of retaining a large amount of information accurately.

For example, my wife went to China on a missions trip and met Christians in the underground church who survived the Cultural Revolution. Due to the lack of religious freedom, many committed large portions of the Bible to memory - out of devotion but also out of sheer necessity. Well for first century followers of Jesus they lived in an oral culture where books were few and far to come by. Only the wealthy or elite had access to libraries or literature. So since most Christians lacked access to books, they become good memorizers out of necessity.

2) First century Christians had a much greater motivation for accurate memorization. The threat of persecution or the lack of books are good motivations to strength your proficiency to memorize, but early Christians had an even greater motivation. On many occasions, Jesus said things like, *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock”* (Matt 7:24). Or *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”* (Mk 13:31). If Jesus’ followers believed he was the Son of God, if they worshipped him as God and if Jesus speaks so reverently of his own Words, then they have a very good reason to memorize what Jesus did and said with precision. When we play “Telephone”, the secret message is usually something silly or meaningless, and there are no stakes involved if you get the message wrong. But for early Christians, everything was at stake if they got Jesus’ message wrong.

3) First century Christians passed on stories about Jesus openly to the community. Unlike a game of “Telephone” were you secretly whisper the message from one person to another, oral transmissions about Jesus were passed on in public, to whole communities. The community played a function in correcting mistakes and preserving the accuracy of the tradition. So imagine if you played a game of “Telephone” where every player was trained to memorize large chunks of information AND where you were told the message dealt with matters of life and death AND everyone spoke openly for everyone else to hear, then you’d have something like what went on among the early Christians.

THE GOSPELS WERE WRITTEN EARLY ENOUGH TO BE RELIABLE

Our second response is to note that the Gospels were actually written early enough to be considered reliable. Now previously we considered the date of our earliest copies but now we want to know the date of the original books, especially the Gospels. We don’t have time for me

to explain in detail how we determined these dates, so I'll just give you the dates and let you know that I get this information from Paul Barnett's *Is the New Testament Reliable?* and F.F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?*

Now the earliest books in the NT are the writings of Paul. Based on the internal evidence in his letters and what we know from outside sources about the reign of emperors, proconsuls, etc. – we can say with great confidence that Paul wrote his letters between AD 50 to AD 68. Now from internal and external evidence, we also know that Jesus was crucified in AD 33. That means Paul's letters were written as early as 17 years later and as late as 35 years! *Now why does this matter?* It matters because the short time span means Paul wrote about Gospel events well within a time frame when countless eyewitnesses were still alive. I'm talking about friends and foes. So when Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day appearing to many witnesses, there were plenty of surviving witnesses who could either confirm or disprove what he claimed about Jesus.

Now what about the Gospels? Those are the books that communicate the most truth about Jesus. How early are they and were they written when surviving eyewitnesses were around to either confirm or disprove their claims? Well based on modern critical scholarship, the dates of the Gospels are as follows:

- Matthew was written between AD 85-90.
- Mark was written between AD 64-65.
- Luke was written between AD 80-85.
- John was written between AD 90-100.

Again these are the results of modern critical scholarship, meaning Christian tradition and conservative scholars would date the Gospels even earlier. But I'm giving you the latest possible dates - dates even non-Christian scholars would agree with – in order to demonstrate that these Gospels were written during the lifetime of eyewitnesses who were around during Jesus' earthly ministry. So when talk about "early Christian" we're talking about a span 30 to 70 years after the Gospel events. So before the Gospels were finally written, living eyewitnesses were around to verify and preserve the stories about Jesus that were orally passed down.

This is the main point of Bauckham's book. In response to the dubious claim that the writing of the Gospels occurred long after the actual events, he writes, "*The Gospels were written within living memory of the events they recount. Mark's Gospel was written well within the lifetime of many of the eyewitnesses, while the other three canonical Gospels were written in the period when living eyewitnesses were becoming scarce, exactly at the point in time when their testimony would perish with them were it not put in writing*" (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 7).

THE EYEWITNESSES WERE THE AUTHORITATIVE GUARANTORS OF THE TRADITION.

Our third response is to note that eyewitnesses were not only the sources of these stories about Jesus but also the authoritative guarantors of them. Again, this is the main contention of Bauckham's book. It is simply ignorant to claim that the eyewitnesses - the first disciples – simply moved out of the picture once they passed on their testimony about Jesus. There is no evidence to support that theory, in fact there plenty of evidence to the contrary – that the eyewitnesses remained present and played an active role in the transmission of oral tradition.

Just look at Paul's appeal to eyewitnesses concerning the Resurrection in 1 Cor 15. In his book, Bauckham provides a convincing argument that the eyewitness testimony of surviving disciples was highly valued among the early churches and how these individuals played an important role in preserving those stories. So let's end by considering a few arguments from Bauckham's book.

The Preference of Ancient Historians

Bauckham draws from the book of a Swedish scholar Samuel Byrskog on the ancient practice of historiography among Greco-Roman historians. And based on what these historians wrote about writing history we learn that historians like Josephus and Tacitus "*were convinced that true history can only be written while events were still within living memory, and they valued as their sources the oral reports of the direct experience of the events by involved participants in them*" (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 8). That means for Greek and Roman historians, when researching a past event their first step was not to turn to some book that writes about the event, but if possible they sought out an oral testimony from someone who was there. And their ideal witness was not the dispassionate outside observer but the individual who was personally involved in the event itself.

Of course this flies in the face of modern historiography, but that's the point. We have to avoid anachronistic judgments. So what this means is that for the Gospel writers – like their ancient counterparts – when they wrote down their accounts of Jesus' words and deeds, they preferred the oral testimony of living witnesses who actually walked and talked with Jesus, who were highly motivated to retain the accuracy of everything they saw and heard. Naturally the ideal eyewitnesses would have been the first disciples, who carried on a very active role in the early church. This flies in the face of the form critics claim that the traditions about Jesus were passed down by anonymous individuals who were far detached from the actual events.

Papias and His Prologue

Bauckham gives an example of an ancient historian's preference for the oral testimony of living eyewitnesses with a quote from an early church bishop named Papias who wrote the *Exposition of the Logia of the Lord*. He was part of the third generation of Christians, meaning he did not know Jesus personally but he knew the apostles and first disciples. He wrote around AD 110, the quote we'll consider refers back to an earlier period when he was collecting oral reports concerning the words and deeds of Jesus. It was likely around AD 80 so almost fifty years after the events. (Bauckham, 14) The following is found in the prologue to his book, which was dedicated to an individual like Luke's Gospel.

*"I shall not hesitate also to put into properly ordered form for you [singular] everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down well, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else's commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance anyone had been in attendance on the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders – [that is,] what [according to the elders] Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice" (Quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3-4).*

Notice with me four categories of witnesses found in this passage:

- “*Those who had been in attendance on the elders*” – that refers to those living in direct contact with the still living elders.
- “*The elders*” – that refers to the senior church leaders in various cities during the time in which Papias is referring (~ AD 80).
- “*Andrew or Peter . . . or any other of the Lord’s disciples*” – that refers to the twelve apostles who were most likely dead by the time period he’s referring to.
- “*Aristion and the elder John, the Lord’s disciples*” – that refers to the first disciples of Jesus who are still alive (still speaking) at this time period when Papias was collecting his data.

So contrary to the view of form critics, historians like Papias wanted to hear what eyewitnesses said and especially what living eyewitnesses were still saying. When writing a book on the sayings of Jesus he wasn’t content with passed down oral traditions from people detached from the actual events. He preferred a “living and surviving voice” meaning that the oral reports of surviving eyewitnesses were more valuable to Papias than even the words of the late apostles. The testimony of the apostle was passed through two stages – the elders and those attending the elders, but Papias wanted to get back as close to the source as possible. *Now what does this have to do with how the Gospels were written?* Well the Synoptics were actually written around the time Papias is referring to. This was a crucial window in time because it was the last chance to record the words of living eyewitnesses.

The Naming of Eyewitnesses in the Gospels

Another piece of evidence concerns the peculiar instances where minor characters in the Gospels are named – when most others go anonymous. Bauckham’s premise goes like this: These named characters were actually eyewitnesses that were the source of the authoritative guarantors of the particular story. (39) They were named because they were expected to be known by the Gospel’s original audience. By naming these individuals, it is as if the Gospel writer is telling his audience, “If you don’t believe this story is true, then go ask so and so. This is his or her story.”

Some examples include Cleopas, one of the two men the Risen Jesus encounters on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:18). Now the story does not require him to be named since his companion remained unnamed. So the only reason for naming him would be to indicate that he was the source of this tradition. Or consider Simon of Cyrene, the man forced to carry Jesus’ cross when he could do so no longer. In Mark 15:21, he is identified as “*a certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus*”. Now Simon is sufficiently distinguished from other Simons in Mark’s Gospel by reference to his hometown, Cyrene, so why would he include the names of his sons (especially since that was an uncommon practice)? The only plausible reason is because Alexander and Rufus were known to Mark’s audience and they were the source and guarantors of their father’s testimony.

Now all of this runs contrary to what form critics have taught. They assumed that most of these names were added as the traditions were passed down over long periods of time, but a simple comparison of the Gospels (assuming Markan priority) will indicate a tendency by later Gospel

writers to drop names (ie. Matt drops Jarius, both drop Bartimaeus, Alexander, Rufus, Salome) not add them. Bauckham writes, *“These named individuals were likely people who joined the early Christian movement and were well known at least in the circles in which the traditions were first transmitted”* (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 45).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say this: There is good reason to suggest that the early Christians were highly skilled at and motivated to memorize substantial traditions about Jesus. If some Muslims in the world are able to memorize all 80,000 words of the Qur’an (they are highly esteemed and called a *Hafiz*), then surely it’s humanly possible. And there is the added factor that the Gospel is tied up with believing a specific message about what a certain man named Jesus accomplished for sinners on the cross for the forgiveness of their sins, then these early Christians had every reason to get the message right. And there is a mountain of evidence pointing to the fact that these stories about Jesus were based on eyewitness testimony and passed on by word of mouth by authorized teachers who relied on surviving eyewitnesses to verify and preserve those traditions. So we have very good reason to trust that what was originally written in the Bible reflects what really went down.