

Oral Tradition in New Testament Times

by Donald Guthrie

It has always been recognized in studies on Gospel origins that provision must be made for a period during which traditions were passed on by oral methods. The rise of Form Criticism has brought this to the fore as attempts have been made to analyse the methods by which the traditions were transmitted. But the proposition that the traditions were preserved in units, which is basic to all Form Criticism, raises problems. A thorough investigation of contemporary methods of oral tradition is essential for a balanced approach to these problems and Birger Gerhardsson has applied himself to such an investigation in his book *Memory and Manuscript*¹. He concentrates on oral tradition and written transmission in rabbinic Judaism as a background for the Gospel tradition in early Christianity. This study raises many interesting issues and is an important contribution to the

This article discusses a recent Scandinavian work which brings heavy fire to bear upon the presuppositions of Form Criticism. The author, who lectures in New Testament at London Bible College, has not long completed a trilogy which may well become the standard *New Testament Introduction*.

study of Gospel origins. An account will be given of Gerhardsson's main arguments and then some assessment will be made of the value of the whole contribution.

Torah, written and oral

He begins with a discussion of the relationship between the written and the oral Torah, showing that there was a distinction between them both in principle and in practice. In rabbinic Judaism there was a firm conviction that both written and oral law came originally from Moses, in which case the oral law was as binding as the written law. Yet a definite distinction was made between the two in the technical method of transmission. In all public contexts the written law could be passed on only as it was read, not cited from memory, whereas the oral law could be transmitted only as it

was learned by heart and repeated. The distinction was not hard and fast for the written law was certainly learned by heart, and notes were sometimes used to assist in the transmission of the oral law. Yet the distinction is of importance when Jewish methods of transmission are considered. In all probability the difference in method between the written and oral law was heightened by the difference of opinion between the Pharisees and Sadducees with regard to the oral law. The Sadducees' refusal to place the oral law on the same basis as the written law led to a difference in approach to the respective texts, especially as the Sadducees possessed a book of law which was placed in the archives of the Temple. This would certainly conflict with the Pharisaical view that the traditions must not be written. Gerhardsson recognizes that the sanctity of these traditions for the Pharisees guaranteed great care in their transmission and it is on this feature that he concentrates in his study.

In the section of his book dealing with rabbinic Judaism, he studies the transmission of both the written and the oral law. In the former case he draws upon the recent evidence from the Dead Sea caves to show that variant texts existed in pre-Christian times. He traces two concurrent tendencies in rabbinic tradition; the preservation of the text and the interpretation of that text to bring out its true meaning. The need to use the text meant that the text must be reproduced, and Gerhardsson studies three main situations which led to its reproduction. First, he examines the deliberate and method-

ical preservation of the text, then the importance of elementary teaching, and thirdly the importance of public worship for the preservation of the text. In all of these situations oral transmission played some role, although to a limited extent. In the first the text to be copied had to be read aloud by the scribe and thus in this way the *Qere* tradition was preserved. In the second, memorization of the text was insisted on and became purely mechanical. In elementary education the accurate reproduction of the text was more important than its interpretation, which was reserved until later. Public reading of the text was an essential part of synagogue worship and was carried out in a traditional way, thus again preserving the *Qere*, which was clearly distinguished from any comments upon the text.

Transmission of oral traditions

Gerhardsson's study of the processes of transmission of the written Torah is important as an introduction to the study of the oral Torah, which in itself is more germane to his study of the transmission of traditions. The oral tradition was passed on in four important centres: the home, the synagogue (and Temple), schools and court houses. Great importance is attached to the specialists (Rabbis and their disciples) who were responsible for the transmission. The most important section of Gerhardsson's work is his discussion of the methodical study of the oral Torah, and of particular significance is the evidence which he brings to illustrate the methods of transmission within the various schools which

existed for this purpose. In the higher schools midrash and mishnah were learned and the main emphasis was upon the mechanical reproduction of the text, so that this might lead to interpretative understanding. The methods employed in these schools are carefully studied from incidental references in the rabbinical literature. The traditionists were required to be able to reproduce orally material needed by a teacher or a college, and this they did even when they themselves did not understand the content of the traditions transmitted. The practice draws attention to the supreme importance of the oral text, although as Gerhardsson points out not all the traditionists were equally precise. The Rabbis themselves recognized the traditionists as only half-educated because of their lack of understanding. Yet from the point of view of the study of oral tradition these teachers provide valuable evidence. If the methods were mechanical, they were nevertheless effective. Constant repetition was used to ensure accurate reproduction.

Memorization

Gerhardsson enumerates several details which throw light on the procedure followed. The basic principle was to learn first and to understand afterwards. It was believed that penetration into the meaning would follow from a thorough knowledge of the text. It was further maintained that a teacher's statements should be preserved in the *ipsissima verba* of the teacher, a principle which has obvious relevance to the question of our Lord's teaching. In view of this,

great importance is attached to condensation and abridgement in order to facilitate memory. Both in the sphere of doctrine and of jurisprudence summary statements were highly valued and verbosity was at a discount. There were various mnemonic techniques to assist the pupil to recall his texts, especially where these contained details which might readily slip from his mind. Although the Rabbis were emphatic that the traditions must be delivered orally, yet there appears to be some evidence that written notes were sometimes used by pupils, although these were never authorized and, indeed, were officially regarded as illegitimate. As a further aid to memorization, the repetition aloud of traditional texts was done in a sonorous and rhythmical manner. Certain measures were taken by those responsible for the transmission of oral material to counteract forgetfulness. Periodic revision was essential and Rabbis would at fixed intervals go through the whole of their oral traditions.

All this evidence shows that the principles of the Jewish traditionists encouraged the development of extraordinary powers of memory, and that these powers were not outside the grasp of those engaged in the transmission of the law. The bearing of this on Christian traditions is at once relevant and forms the basis of the second part of Gerhardsson's book.

Christian methods compared with Jewish

Proceeding from the statement by Papias of his preference for oral tradition rather than for the written word, he deduces that the general

Christian approach was akin to the Jewish. He therefore considers that it is reasonable to suppose that memorization played a part in the instruction of catechumens. The development of scholarly foundations in such places as Alexandria would further support the connection between Jewish and Christian practice.

Gerhardsson next examines the testimony of Luke, drawing his evidence from both the Gospel and Acts. He makes an interesting comparison between the teaching of Jesus in the Temple and the apostolic teaching in the same place in order to show the connection between the methods. The apostles, who were essentially witnesses to Christ, are portrayed by Luke as servants of the Word of the Lord. This Word of the Lord, which included both *kerygma* and *didache*, is regarded as a direct continuation of the teaching of the Scriptures, which must therefore have exerted an influence on the tradition. In Luke's preface, the eyewitnesses and servants of the Word are, in Gerhardsson's view, apostles, and this draws attention to one of the major apostolic functions, i.e. to interpret the Word (cf. also Acts 6:1 ff.). A further similarity which he finds between the rabbinic procedure and that of the early Church is the use of general sessions of the community, for in the assembly of Acts 15 a similar session is seen. In this connection, Gerhardsson suggests that the methods followed by both rabbinic and Christian sessions in deciding important questions were similar. These consisted of (a) an interpretation or use of Scripture; (b) an appeal to an authoritative oral decision; and (c) a rejection of purely

rational arguments. In Christian assemblies the appeal to any authoritative pronouncement of Christ Himself would clearly take precedence.

Paul and the Jerusalem tradition

The next consideration is the evidence of Paul. Here Gerhardsson finds a close resemblance between the apostles of Peter and Paul as far as their origin and purpose and even the phraseology used in the description of their appointment. It is important to recognize the continuity between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles if a true account of early Christian tradition is to be maintained. Although Paul in writing to the Galatians claimed that he had received his gospel from the Lord and not from men, yet in the same letter he is at pains to establish the connections he had had with the Jerusalem apostles. Following up this point Gerhardsson emphasizes that the apostles were essentially eyewitnesses and expounders of Scripture. It is when he considers Paul's relationship to the early Christian tradition that he finds most points of contact with the rabbinic approach to oral tradition. It is evident that Paul not only several times refers to a body of tradition which he has received and which he also passed on, but also assumes in most of his epistles that the people have already received much teaching orally from himself. He adopts an authoritative approach towards his churches, and this personal authentication of his message appears to Gerhardsson to be akin to the rabbinic 'traditionists'. He admits, nevertheless, that it is difficult to be

sure of the content of the tradition. One passage of great importance in this connection is I Cor. 15:3 ff., and here Gerhardsson is inclined to see each statement as a link with some passage from the Gospel tradition. Using terms drawn from rabbinic circles, he calls this Gospel tradition *Mishnah* and the apostolic teaching (*didache*) *talmud*, which consisted of three sections – doctrinal, ethical and ecclesiastical. Examples of doctrinal sections are I Cor. 15 on resurrection, or Gal. 5:6 and 6:15 on circumcision; an example of an ethical section is I Thess. 4:1 ff.; and of an ecclesiastical section, the record of the institution of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11:34).

In the fact that Paul claims doctrinal authority over his churches, Gerhardsson sees a connection between Paul the Christian apostle and the position of an authorized teacher among the Pharisees. Paul undoubtedly inherited much from his former connection with the Pharisees, but the greatest heritage of all was from Jesus Himself. In harmony with the school of Hillel, Paul was 'mild' in his legislative functions. It is noteworthy that on some occasions Paul distinguishes his own opinion from the Lord's command (cf. I Cor. 7:7), after the pattern of rabbinic teachers who distinguished their own advice from halakic commandments. Gerhardsson draws out many other features in which Paul's approach echoes the methods of Jewish teachers, and this is emphasized to support his main contention that Jewish methods of oral transmission exerted considerable influence on Christian tradition.

The Gospel tradition

In his concluding chapter he deals with the origins and transmission of the Gospel tradition. First, he maintains that Jesus Himself stood in direct line with the Torah tradition, although he admits that Jesus' own attitude towards the Torah is extremely complicated. He not only interpreted but fulfilled it. In His synagogue teaching, Gerhardsson believes, Jesus would have conformed to the normal procedure in his comments on the Torah, i.e. text plus interpretation.

The position of the 'twelve' in the early Church is important since few of them stand out as individuals. Rather they are a '*collegium*'. 'Against the background of the Jewish milieu, it is evident that the early Christian apostles were *compelled* to present their message as an eyewitness account, "as that which we have seen and heard", and in connection with the Holy Scriptures – even supported by a convincing exposition of the Scriptures' (p. 330). It is important to recognize that Jesus as a teacher would command much greater authority in the Christian Church than any Rabbi, because He was also the Messiah.

In considering the methods by which the traditions about Jesus were grouped, Gerhardsson mentions two, the midrashic and mishnaic. Under the former would be placed traditions based on some consecutive text of Scripture (*testimonia*), and under the latter blocks of tradition in the form of tractates (e.g. Mt. 10). The latter would have been more practical and comprehensive than the former.

From this Gerhardsson comes to the

conclusion that many of the variations in the Gospel tradition of the teaching of Jesus may be accounted for by the teaching method He adopted, after the pattern of Jewish methods with 'theme and variations'. He distinguishes between the transmission of the text and the use of the text, and maintains that due to the particular sanctity of the teaching of Jesus, a fixed tradition would have been developed.

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It has been necessary to state in some detail Gerhardsson's thesis in order properly to assess its importance. There is no denying that this careful study of Jewish oral teaching supplies a real lack and we must be grateful to the author for his industrious investigations. The real significance of the study is more difficult to assess. If Jesus and His disciples followed rabbinic methods of instruction, an explanation would be forthcoming of the various forms in the tradition. The theory would do much to show that the more radical current Form-critical theories are completely untenable. It would further provide a specific structure for the transmission of the oral traditions which would ensure a close connection between the tradition and the actual teaching of Jesus. In view of the evidence which Gerhardsson has produced for the meticulous care exercised in the Jewish transmission of the oral law, it cannot be supposed that the earliest Christian catechists would have followed a radically different method. But the real problem is to decide the precise nature of the connection between Jewish and

Christian oral methods. It is on this score that Gerhardsson's theory has been most criticized.

Teaching methods of Jesus

To what extent does Jesus fit into the category of a Jewish Rabbi? Is it possible to maintain that He systematically instructed His disciples until they could repeat from memory His teaching? The Gospels do not immediately give that impression. Rather they bring out the indisputable and authoritative nature of His teaching work, without giving much indication of His precise methods. He was certainly not a conventional Rabbi, but this may not exclude His use of some of the conventional rabbinical methods. The itinerant nature of His ministry would clearly make it difficult to resort to the repetitive techniques used by Jewish Rabbis. But there is no good reason to suppose that Jesus would never have used mnemonic methods to assist memory.

There are, of course, vital differences between the Jewish oral law and Christian oral tradition in both form and content. A. N. Wilder (article in *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, edited W. C. van Unnik, 1962, pp. 3-13) criticized Gerhardsson's theory on the ground that early Christian speech forms were too creative and therefore too novel to be transmitted in the same manner as Jewish traditions. W. D. Davies (article in *Neotestamentica et Patristica*, pp. 14-34) has called attention to the fact that in Christian tradition Christ has replaced the centrality of the law, and this is a factor to which considerable weight must be given.

There was a strong personal aspect in the content of the Christian tradition which was not present in the same manner in Jewish oral tradition. For Christians the basis of authority was in Christ Himself, not merely as a Teacher, but more fundamentally as Messiah.

Whereas these criticisms have led to some caution in accepting Gerhardsson's evidence, they do not dispense with it, for no serious approach can be made to the study of early Christian origins without taking full account of the Jewish background. Further caution may be necessary in that much of Gerhardsson's evidence is drawn from Jewish sources later than the New Testament period. This procedure may well be justified on the ground that the rabbinic writings have clearly preserved much earlier material. There is no doubt that, as in rabbinic traditions, the Old Testament Scriptures played an important part in the preservation of the oral Christian tradition, wherever any events in the life of Jesus showed connection with some Old Testament passage. The idea of fulfilment is strongly emphasized by most New Testament writers.

Activity of the Holy Spirit

It remains to be considered to what extent our Lord's promise to His disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them all things and bring to their remembrance all that Jesus had said to them (John 14:26) bears upon Gerhardsson's theory. This introduces a most important consideration which has no counterpart in the methods of Jewish oral transmission. In the Christian Church both the

authorized teachers and the catechumens were men of the Spirit. There was not merely an external authority but an inner witness. Whatever organizational method was used to ensure accuracy in the traditions which were to be passed on, it was the specific work of the Spirit to recall the Lord's teaching to mind. If among the Jews the memory techniques were developed to such an extent that amazing quantities of traditions could be recalled with accuracy, it is reasonable to suppose that no less a standard would be set by those in the Christian Church who were guided by the Spirit of God. This appeal to the Spirit does not, however, mean that transmission techniques may be disregarded. It does mean that the traditions were not regarded as stereotyped but as dynamic. What was transmitted was under the control of the Spirit, and if the basic oral material was so controlled, the fact that this material was used in the written Gospels by men equally possessed by the Spirit draws attention to the fundamental unifying factor. If Gerhardsson's theory is considered against this background, it is seen to make a significant advance out of the realm of speculation or of the minutiae of literary criticism into a more wholesome approach to Gospel origins.

NOTES

1) *Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis*, XXII; Uppsala, 1961, and Copenhagen, 1964; 379 pp. The author has replied to some criticisms of this thesis in *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (*Coniectanea Neotestamentica*, XX); Lund, 1964; 47 pp.