

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM.

### A NEGLECTED FACTOR IN ITS SOLUTION.

SPEAKING generally it is a fault of many solutions of the synoptic problem that they smell of the lamp. They make of our evangelists modern scholars, sitting at their ease in their study, with their books at hand. Matthew consults alternately the writing of Mark, his predecessor, and Q; and Luke has a great number of booklets to refer to!

Of late, the German *Formgeschichtler* have emphasised another point. They have drawn attention to what the folklore teaches, and, according to their opinion, the Gospels are composed of little parts: the original words, and narratives. The frame, which keeps the parts together, is not original, and is of no worth. It is the work of a redactor in a later period, and we have to consider only the single words and narratives, which were, from the beginning, the argument of the preaching.

Undoubtedly this way is better than the pure historical literary method. But, not to speak of the difficulty of not being able to find the time for a process which has made Q and the Gospel of Mark from the disjointed pieces; and, again, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke from Mark and Q, the *Formgeschichtler* do not reckon enough with the historical data, whereas they ought to be considered as of primary importance.

It is my plan to pay some attention to this historical data, in order to show that they are too much neglected in the solution of the synoptic problem.

It is an unquestionable fact, that there is no trace of any written account of the life and words of Jesus, older than our canonical Gospels. The Gospels themselves do not cite any anterior report. Paul does not. Paul often cites the Old Testament, and, now and then, a word of Jesus, but never a book relating His deeds. In the writings of the Fathers, we have not found any quotations from a work more ancient than the New Testament. Nobody can produce a sentence of our Lord taken from a Gospel before our Gospels. Nobody can, otherwise than by hypothesis, mention the contents of these supposed books. History does not speak of them. There is, in the same way, no

trace of the little narratives wanted by the *Formgeschichtler* for their hypothesis. It is all supposition, writes Paul Wendland in his *Urchristliche Literaturforme*, p. 265 *sqq.*, supposition without ground in the tradition. Eusebius speaks freely about the origin of the Gospels (*H.E.*, III, 24 *sqq.*). Also Irenæus (*Adv. Hær.*, III, 1). But they mention nothing of any written sources, either booklets or little pieces. All we want is facts.

But there are facts one will say. We have the exordium of the Gospel according to Luke, and there he writes expressly that he used the writings of his predecessors, at least that he had many predecessors. But I do not believe this is the correct interpretation of the words of Luke.

It is not easy to give an explanation of the prologue of Luke. I confine myself to such remarks as are necessary for my purpose. The clear intention of Luke is to say that he could not use for Theophilus what existed before him. We ask, Why could he not use it? Was it not good enough and why not fit for Theophilus? Could Theophilus not come into possession of it? We do not know. It is permissible to suppose that Theophilus could not get it, because it was not written down. Then, the meaning of Luke is: many have tried to give the history of Jesus, but they did not write down their report. Their attempts encourage me to do as they did, but I will put my account in writing. We shall see there is ground for this supposition.

If Luke writes, as he does, πολλοί (many), it is impossible to understand the term as meaning Mark and Q only. It is impossible also to believe that there was a great number of written Gospels before Luke. Therefore it is better to understand πολλοί as referring to the many persons who gave an oral report. There was, even in ancient times, a difference of opinion concerning the signification of ἐπεχείρησαν. The meaning cannot be that many *tried* to give an account, but did not succeed with their intention. In that case, it had not been necessary to remember their endeavours. The καί before ἐμοί makes it difficult also to give that interpretation of ἐπεχείρησαν. It is better to suppose the meaning, the ἀπατάξασθαι διήγησιν is such a troublesome work, according to Luke, that he will speak only of a trial made. What the πολλοί tried to perform, is ἀπατάξασθαι διήγησιν. Again the words are difficult. But in either case it is not necessary to understand them as referring to the *writing* of a Gospel. I do not say the words cannot

indicate a written Gospel. I only say they do not require to be explained in this way. One may object that it is not possible to try to compose an oral account. But I answer, the *ἀνατάξασθαι* speaks of *arrangement* firstly. Arrangement is not an easy thing. It takes many efforts to arrange well.

Hitherto we have found that we can understand the words of Luke as well of oral as of written traditions. But now *ἔδοξε καὶ μοί . . . γράψαι* appears to be decisive. Does this express Luke's intention to write just as his predecessors have written? It is not so. One cannot connect the *καί* with *γράφαι*. Firstly, *ἀνατάξασθαι διήγησιν* and *καθεξῆς γράψαι* are too different to be compared by such a word as *καί*. In *ἀνατάξασθαι* the stress is laid upon the ordering, in *γράφαι* upon the writing. Secondly, Luke does not put the *καί* before *γράφαι*, but before *ἐμοί*. And he had his reasons for so doing. There is a connection between *ἀπ' ἀρχῆς αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρέται* and *παρηκολουθηκότες ἄνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς*. The *πολλοί* told their story *καθὼς παρέδωκαν*, Luke wrote his report *παρηκολουθηκώς*. That is to say, Luke did the same as his predecessors; only he did more. Thirdly, the *καί* before *γράφαι* forbids us to connect *καί* with *γράφαι*. The *πολλοί* did not direct themselves to Theophilus. They had not written at all, otherwise Luke could have sent their Gospels. Fourthly, we know that Luke did not incorporate all the words and deeds of Jesus that he knew into his Gospel. That is demonstrated by Acts xx. 35, where we find a *logion* of Jesus which does not appear in the Gospel. Also we have to distinguish well between the *παρακολουθεῖν* and the *γράφειν*. The content of the two is not the same. This is another reason why it is better to connect *καί* with *παρηκολουθηκότες* rather than with *γράφαι*.

So we come to the conclusion that Luke intended to express a double difference between his predecessors and himself: (1) He had made an accurate investigation, (2) he wrote down his report. There are two arguments which corroborate our opinion: (1) If there existed a great number of written Gospels, it was not necessary for Luke to make accurate investigation. And (2) Theophilus was taught already, that is to say, he had received oral instruction, but he wanted a written Gospel such as Luke gave to him.

We may say also, that although the prologue of Luke does not declare *ipsissimis verbis* that there did not exist any written

Gospel, it is most probable that Luke speaks of oral tradition : (1) on account of πολλοὶ and παρηκολουθηκότι, while (2) all the stress is laid upon γράψαι, even by the place it has in the sentence.

There are other arguments for the opinion that Luke did not hint at written sources. Eusebius (*H.E.*, III, 4, 6) understands the words of Luke to refer to oral traditions, for by contrast he writes of the Acts : οὐκέτι δι' ἀκοῆς. And if Luke who had such a great regard for the preaching of Christ (Acts i. 1 sq.) had a booklet, Q, for his use, containing words of Jesus, how is it possible that he omitted the saying about the ἐγγικέναι of the kingdom of God ? He knew it very well (see Luke x. 9, 11).

But still another argument is used to support the thesis that there existed an ancient written account of the words of Jesus. We have a Q, a book of *logia*. Grenfell and Hunt found fragments of it at Oxyrhynchus. Did they indeed ? No, they did not. For what they found was not a book, a composition. It was fragments of a *florilegium* of sayings of Jesus. Nearly each saying is preceded by : λέγει Ἰησοῦς. Therefore these sayings cannot be fragments of Q.

Now it happens that the *patres* cite *agrapha* with the formula γέγραπται (A. Resch, *Agrapha*, p. 106). This phenomenon, however, is not an argument by which can be demonstrated, that the *patres* took their citations from a book of *logia*. For, according as the time went on, the formula γέγραπται became more and more identical with ὁ κύριος λέγει. The *written* Gospels were the source, κατ' ἐξόχην, of the *logia* of the Lord. Besides, we know that there are codices, e.g., D, and W, which have *agrapha* in their text. It is possible that the *patres* who cite an *agraphon* with γέγραπται, really borrowed it from a codex. A single γέγραπται before an *agraphon* never demonstrates the existence of a book of *logia*.

Finally, Papias. Papias writes : Ματθαῖος μὲν οὖν Ἐβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ τὰ λόγια συνεγράψατο. But it is impossible to find Q here. For Eusebius who saved this information of Papias for us and who had the book of Papias before him (*H.E.*, III, 39, 2 and 16), understands the communication clearly of our Gospel of Matthew. So must we. And it is not at all difficult to do so. Firstly, because the Greek word λόγιον is used not alone of words in the proper sense, but also of historical parts of the Scripture. So already Rom. iii. 2 ; Heb. v. 12 ; but especially in later times.

See J. Donovan, *The Logia in Ancient and Recent Literature, passim*. Secondly, the Gospel of Matthew was well known already in the days of Papias, cf. Didache, XV, 3; XVI, 5. If people read τὰ λόγια συνεγράφατο Ματθαῖος, they must think of our first Gospel. Finally, the same Papias writes of the Gospel of Mark, which, of course, is briefer: οὐχ ὡς περ σύνταξιν τῶν κυριακῶν λογίων ποιούμενος. In what he says about Matthew Papias does not make a contrast between words and deeds, but he will lay all stress upon the language of the first Gospel. Σύνταξις τῶν λογίων κυριακῶν (otherwise than Mark), suits very well, even while Matthew in his Gospel gives five great *compositions* of *logia* of the Lord. And these compositions must have been of great interest to Papias, whose intention it was to give an exposition, not of the deeds, but of the words of Jesus.

These all are negative arguments, now we turn to the positive.

What are the facts we have to reckon with? What was it that Jesus, the apostles, the evangelists did? They all *preached*. They gave their kerygma, their martyrion. A text as John xiv. 26 supposes a long time of oral tradition (ὑπομνήσει).

The epistles of the apostles are the first Christian writings we know. There is nothing before these letters. And even the epistles suppose a preaching of the gospel by Jesus and the apostles. Paul does not know anything but an oral tradition of the facts and words of Jesus. More than once he cites *logia* of the Lord. He asks his readers to *remember* what he preached to them. Only 1 Tim. v. 8 is doubtful. But it is not likely that Paul means here to cite two words from the γραφή. To Paul the γραφή is the Old Testament.

There are typical words which speak of an oral tradition of the gospel. So παραδίδόναι and its correlate παραλαμβάνειν. See especially 1 Cor. xv. 1, sqq. Also μνημονεύειν. The apostles never exhort the churches to read anything but their epistles. One could read the Old Testament also. But the churches had no Christian writings but the letters of the apostles. All they had was an oral tradition. Paul therefore summons the Christians to guard the gospel τίνι λόγῳ, i.e. just so, in the same words as he preached it, 1 Cor. xv. 2. If Papias calls Mark the ἐρμηνευτῆς Πέτρον, who ὅσα ἐμνημόνευσεν ἀκριβῶς ἔγραψεν, he says implicitly, that there was but an oral preaching till Mark wrote his Gospel. And it is not improbable, that some of the epistles,

e.g., that of James and especially that to the Hebrews, were sermons originally.

It is remarkable that in his prologue Luke also uses the word *παρέδοσαν*, the specific word for oral tradition. Even in much later times there is a veneration of the oral traditions. Papias declares that, according to his opinion, the living and remaining voice was of more use than the content of books. Justin Martyr, who knew our Gospels, writes nevertheless, *Apol. I, 42, 4*: *καὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς παρ' αὐτοῦ* (sc. Ἰησοῦ) *διὰ τῶν ἀποστόλων ἐν τοῖς πᾶσιν ἔθνεσι κηρυχθεῖσιν εὐφροσύνη ἐστίν.* Hegesippus borrowed ἐξ Ἰουδαϊκῆς ἀγράφου παραδόσεως (Euseb., *H.E.*, IV, 22, 8). And of the same Hegesippus we read that he τὴν ἀπλανῆ παράδοσιν τοῦ ἀποστολικοῦ κηρύγματος ἀπλουστάτη συντάξει γραφῆς (*ὑπεμνηματίσατο*) (*o.c.*, IV, 8, 2). On the contrary, Eusebius writes of the Evangelists of the days of Quadratus that they handed over τὴν τῶν θείων εὐαγγελίων γραφήν (*o.c.*, III, 37). It is apparently the intention of Eusebius to tell this fact as something new. Before these times there was no tradition of written Gospels. Writings were scarce. It was the times in which Polycarp taught ἃ καὶ παρὰ τῶν ἀποστόλων ἔμαθεν, ἃ καὶ ἡ ἐκκλησία παραδίδωσιν (*Iren., Adv. Hær.*, III, 3, 4).

We are entitled to conclude that oral tradition was a power in the old Christian times, and that even when the written Gospels were known and used, it was esteemed as a source of great moment for the knowledge of the apostolic period.

But can we say something more about the character, especially about the form, of this old oral tradition? Indeed we can. The written Gospels themselves allow us to do so. The Gospels inform us that the old oral tradition had two peculiarities: (1) It was the custom of the preachers to repeat their teachings, especially the sentences in which the greater part of their instruction was given. (2) Their teaching assumed a stereotyped form, the words were almost always the same.

The proof of this theses is furnished, as already said, by the Gospels themselves. Sir John Hawkins, *Horæ Synopticæ*, p. 64 *sqq.*, has gathered what he calls the doublets in the Gospels. We learn, e.g., that there are twenty-two doublets in the Gospel of Matthew, fourteen of which are sayings of Jesus. Even in the Greek the conformity in the words is very great, and we may suppose it was still greater in the Aramaic. There are also some historical doublets, and identities of sayings of Jesus and John

the Baptist. In Mark and Luke the number of the doublets is not so great, but nevertheless in these Gospels too, they do appear. W. Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 2nd ed., p. 9, draws attention to the stereotyped form of the announcements of the suffering, Mk. VIII, 31; IX, 31; X, 33.

If we compare the Gospel of Matthew with that of Luke we find the remarkable phenomenon, that the same saying of Jesus is spoken on another occasion. The dominical prayer is a good example. Again, Matthew xxiii. 12 = Luke xviii. 14. That is also an argument for the opinion that Jesus had spoken the same word more than once. Jesus did not deliver any writing to His apostles. But He promised the Holy Ghost to lead them into all truth, and to remind them of what He preached, John xiv. 26; xvi. 13. He called His apostles to be *μάρτυρες* of what they had heard and seen, Acts i. 8.

We cannot give full details in this paper. But we believe there is but one good interpretation of the facts we have named, and it is: Jesus had the habit of teaching in a stereotyped form.

We, in our times, do not like stereotypes. We are fond of something fresh. To our taste a minister must not use the same words always. Nevertheless, we have our stereotypes. We have them in the liturgy. But the first century was replete with stereotypes. Therefore it was not strange Jesus (and also the apostles) used them.

Firstly, we have stereotypes in the New Testament besides the Gospels. Alfred Seeberg has exaggerated when he assumed a formulated catechism, and a formulated ethic, in the old Christian period. But one cannot deny that there are in the epistles of Paul such striking parallels that there must have been something that can at least in some degree, be regarded as stereotyped preaching. Striking examples can be found in the epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians—striking, for the letter to the Ephesians must also be read at Colossæ (Col. iv. 16). I believe the riddle of 2 Peter and Jude can be solved, if we adopt the view that Peter and Jude both came from the church at Jerusalem, and wrote to churches of the same kind. Their letters contain what they used to preach. It is no wonder that there are several scholars in our days to whom it is clear that there was a somehow stereotyped preaching in the first Christian period. There are stereotypes in the examples the writers choose, in the vices they rebuke, in the composition and the content of their speeches,



in the words they use, etc. See, e.g. M. Dibelius on James ii. 26 (p. 156, *sqq.*); E. von Dobschütz, *Z.N.T.W.*, 1928, p. 342; J. Kögel, *Das Evang. d. Matth.*, p. 12 *sq.*; E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos*, *passim*; G. Resch, *Das Aposteldecret*, p. 93 *sqq.* If it is true that the addresses inserted in the Acts are examples of the manner of preaching, they give a good proof that the manner of preaching was the same, if the circumstances were the same. It is not my intention to discuss the theory of *Testimonies* as proposed by J. Rendel Harris, but perhaps it contains a little argument for my thesis in each case.

So we have this result. In the days of the apostles there existed a stereotyped preaching (Aramaic and Greek, as we shall see) of the deeds and words of Jesus and it is this preaching, this oral tradition, which is the main source of our synoptic Gospels.

It is not possible to give the full proof of this thesis here. We are obliged to confine ourselves to adducing only two arguments.

The first is, that the world was replete with stereotypes in the days of the apostles. So it was with the Pharisees. The Pharisees were accustomed to repeat their teaching in a stereotyped form. In the olden times they did not use any writings. This is a thing known to every man and it is not necessary to adduce arguments. The disciples of Christ were in some instances formerly disciples of the Pharisees, and they were accustomed to oral preaching in stereotyped terms. It was not strange for them that the Gospel came to them in the same form. We all know that there is much likeness in the manner of preaching between Jesus and the Pharisees. Fiebig, Gerhard Kittel, Strack have given many examples of this. Only Jesus taught with *ἐξουσία*!

But there was also a love of stereotypes in the religious speech of the Græco-Roman world. Perhaps this is a less known fact. In this connection we have to name Albrecht Dieterich in the first place. In his book, *Nekyia*, 2nd ed. (ed. Wünsch) he treats the *Revelation of Peter*, found in a tomb at Akhmim. This Apocalypse is a Christian writing without doubt, but, as Dieterich showed, it pictures the punishments of hell and the blessedness of heaven in terms, a great part of which are not of Christian origin. Dieterich examines these terms and he states that many of them are old stereotypes. We have already spoken of the book of Eduard Norden, *Agnostos Theos*. This book treats a much greater subject. Especially in the missionary preaching, Norden has demonstrated much stereotyped material (contents and words).

He writes, p. 133: Denn die Macht der Tradition ist auf formalem. Gebiete im Altertum unberechenbar gross gewesen; so blieb auch dieser Typus religiöser Rede durch die Jahrhunderte bewahrt. Man darf sagen, dass wer um Christi Geburt seine Stimme erhob zum Zwecke religiöser Propaganda sich durch die alten feierlichen Formen gebunden erachtete, ganz gleichgültig, welche Art der Wahrheit von Gott und von dessen Verehrung er empfahl.

If we turn to the old Christians we meet the same thing. The Epistle of Barnabas contains the well-known exposition of the *Two Ways* as well as the *Didache*. And if you descend into the Roman catacombs, you find the same pictures (persons and manner of representing them) again and again. There is no variety, the types remain immutable. See H. Leclercq, *Manuel d'Archéologie Chrétienne*, I, p. 110 sqq.

We think that should suffice. There was a great love of stereotypes in the ancient world. And that is not a strange thing, for it exists still in our days. The Indian Saddhus, who can be compared with the wandering preachers of the Græco-Roman world, have the method of preaching which repeats the same sentences in a stereotyped form. See W. Michaelis, *Sadhu Ueberlieferung und Jesu Ueberlieferung*, *Theol. Blätter*, 32, 12, Dec., 1922.

Now we have this idea. In the beginning there was an Aramaic preaching of the deeds and words of Jesus. This Aramaic preaching became a stereotyped form. It had its own character. Because the apostles were the witnesses of the deeds of Christ, saw the same miracles, heard the same words, they preached the same gospel. And so they did ever and again. But it was indeed quite a matter of course in that age. Further, this Aramaic preaching was to be translated into the Greek form. The Acts inform us that already at Jerusalem a great part of the church consisted of Hellenists. Peter must have already preached in the Greek language to Cornelius, perhaps also on the day of Pentecost. Just so did Paul in the churches of Asia Minor. According to Acts xxii. the multitude expected a speech in the Greek language, and they would have understood it also. Here we are at Jerusalem. The epistle of James is written in Greek and it has many allusions to the sermon on the mount. The same persons, the apostles themselves, preached a stereotyped gospel in Aramaic and in Greek. Of course, if one

has to preach the same gospel always, in whatever language it be, there exists a stereotyped form. The disciples of the apostles continued the work of their masters, and transferred what they had heard, quite as the apostles did.

I remark that this oral, stereotyped tradition of the gospel was the fittest for the people. Even if the people could read, they had no books. Books were scarce, and too expensive. The people were accustomed to a stereotyped form of preaching. And in these times one set himself to retain in memory what he had heard. Cf. Strack-Billerbeck, ad James i. 25; Joachim Jeremias, *Theol. Lit. Blätt*, 47, 18, 27 Aug., 1926, col. 272.

But, nevertheless, in course of time it became necessary to have a written Gospel. It was not difficult to get one. For it was not an arduous task to give a written report of the stereotyped oral preaching. Matthew did that in the Aramaic language in connection with the Aramaic preaching. Mark wrote down the preaching of Peter in the Greek language. Luke had a great number of sources, for the stereotyped preaching must have dispersed over a great surface, in any case from Jerusalem to Rome.

If this stereotyped oral preaching is the main source of our synoptic Gospels, we can explain the two things that are to be explained. Firstly, the great agreement between the three Gospels. For if one writes down a stereotyped preaching, the result must be agreement. But this also accounts for the differences between the Gospels. For a stereotyped preaching is not so unchangeable as a writing, even if the latter is copied again and again. A preaching allows and will show little differences according to the state of things. That is exactly what we find in our synoptic Gospels. If we accept a stereotyped preaching as the main sources of the Gospels, we can explain the well-known difficulties concerning one or two blind men, one or two demoniacs, etc. We can explain how it is possible that there is such a difference between Matthew and Luke in relating the history of the temptation in the wilderness. This history was not an object of the preaching at first. See McNeile on Matt. vii. 8.

Finally, I believe it is possible to explain textual varieties by assuming a great oral tradition which influenced the existing writings. The oral tradition did not come to an end of a sudden. It existed a long time alongside the Gospels. There was a reciprocal influence. The text of the Gospels in our manuscripts

shows the consequences of this. See also Robert Dunkerley, *Early Christian Reminiscences of Jesus*, *Expositor*, IX, II, Nov., 1924.

And now my conclusion. It is this: The old tradition-hypothesis deserves a far better place in the republic of letters than it has had in our days, for

(1) It suits well the circumstances of the time in which our Gospels were written ;

(2) It explains the things which are to be explained.

F. W. GROSHEIDE.

Free University, Amsterdam.