

AN EARLY RECENSION OF THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS?

Robert H. Stein*

At the turn of the century a general consensus existed that the synoptic problem had been solved. The dominating view was that the gospel of Mark had been written around 65-70 and that Matthew and Luke used Mark and were written somewhere between 75 and 95. It was thought, however, that "Q" may have been written earlier, perhaps in the 50s. In OT studies Hermann Gunkel, Hugo Gressmann and others began to study the pre-literary history of the OT traditions. Gunkel was particularly influential in his investigation of the oral history of the literary sources of the Pentateuch ("J," "E," "D," "P"). It is not surprising therefore that after the hiatus in Biblical studies created by World War I similar attention was given to the study of the forms of the gospel materials that lay behind the written gospels. This was particularly true in Germany, whereas in England source-critical work was still a dominant concern.¹

Although some scholars such as J. G. Herder (1796), J. C. L. Gieseler (1818) and B. F. Westcott (1888) had earlier referred to the role of oral tradition in the formation of the gospels, it was a triumvirate of German scholars who initiated the form-critical investigation of them. In 1919 K. L. Schmidt's *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesus* and M. Dibelius' *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* both appeared. The former work sought to demonstrate that the Markan framework was due to the construction of the evangelist and that before he wrote his gospel the units of tradition found in it circulated mostly as individual, isolated units. The latter work, which gave the name to the new discipline, was primarily concerned with the classification of the various forms of the gospel tradition. In 1921 a third cardinal work appeared, R. Bultmann's *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, which exerted a great and lasting influence on the new discipline.²

All form-critical investigation is built upon the presupposition that "before the Gospels were written there was a period of oral tradition."³ It can hardly be denied that there existed a period before the gospels in which the Jesus traditions were transmitted orally, for unless the gospels were completed by

*Robert Stein is professor of New Testament at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota.

¹For an excellent description of the milieu out of which form criticism arose see W. G. Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (New York: Abingdon, 1972) 330.

²A fourth work, that of M. Albertz, *Die synoptischen Streitgespräche*, which had been completed earlier and was ready for publication already in 1918, also appeared in 1921 and indicates that form-critical thinking was clearly in the air.

³E. B. Redlich, *Form Criticism* (London: Duckworth, 1939) 34.

the ascension of Jesus (or earlier) there must have been a period when Christians talked about Jesus. In fact we know that this oral period of transmission continued even after the gospels were written, for Papias (c. 130) states: "For I did not suppose that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice."⁴ The basic question is not whether an oral period of transmission existed. Rather, it concerns two related issues. The first involves the length of the period between the writing of the gospels and the events recorded in them, and the second, which is equally important, is whether this period was exclusively oral.

It has now become clear that even during the rabbinic period the rabbinic teaching process was not exclusively oral.⁵ It is also possible that before Mark was written there existed certain pre-Markan collections⁶ as well as other notes and written material. If we take seriously the "many" of Luke 1:1, this would indicate that when Luke wrote his gospel there existed more written material than just Mark and Q. The existence of an oral period before the gospels were written is a fact. One existed even after they were written. It would be incorrect, however, to assume—as some form critics have in the past—that it was an exclusively oral period. Whether it was primarily oral will be debated in the coming years, but it appears probable that in the earliest years of the Church the principal means for transmitting the gospel traditions was oral.

A key issue in the whole discussion involves how the gospel traditions were transmitted from the situation of the historical Jesus (the first *Sitz im Leben*) into the oral period of the Church (the second *Sitz im Leben*). Much has been written on how this took place with regard to the sayings of Jesus, and a certain degree of continuity is assumed by even the more radical critics. The degree to which this is true and the method by which the original sayings of Jesus can be ascertained is, of course, debated,⁷ but all form critics agree that various

⁴Eusebius *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.4 (LCL). A. F. Walls, "Papias and Oral Tradition," *VC* 21 (1967) 137–140, has argued forcefully that we should probably not read into Papias' statement a preference of the apostolic oral tradition over the written gospels, for the latter were also apostolic. What is important for Papias is apostolic origin, and even in his day some of the apostolic oral tradition still existed. This of course raises the interesting issue of whether certain *agrapha* exist outside of the Biblical materials. It is very likely that in fact there are such authentic sayings of Jesus outside of the canonical texts, but whether they are demonstrable is another question. For a discussion of this issue see the classic work of J. Jeremias, *Unknown Sayings of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1957). See also J. Finegan, *Hidden Records of the Life of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1969); M. W. Meyer, *The Secret Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Random House, 1984); *Gospel Perspectives* 5 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984).

⁵See E. E. Ellis, "New Directions in Form Criticism," in *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1975) 304–309; "Gospel Criticism," in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983) 40–41. Cf. also B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961) 335; *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 22–24, and most importantly R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981) 491–498.

⁶See H. W. Kuhn, *Ältere Sammlungen im Markusevangelium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1971).

⁷For a discussion of the various criteria available for assisting in the investigation of the authentic sayings of Jesus see R. H. Stein, "The 'Criteria' for Authenticity," in *Gospel Perspectives* 1 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 247–248.

sayings of Jesus have been passed down from the actual situation in the life of Jesus, through the oral period, and into the writing of the gospels. E. Käsemann stated: "We should also be overlooking the fact that there are still pieces of the Synoptic tradition which the historian has to acknowledge as authentic if he wishes to remain an historian at all."⁸ The "new quest" for the historical Jesus is based upon this very assumption.

As can be imagined, an enormous amount of scholarly activity has been expended in form-critical research. At times, however, the second *Sitz im Leben* has been treated in total isolation from the first. The most notable exceptions in this area involve the attempts of B. Gerhardsson and H. Schürmann to demonstrate a situation in the ministry of Jesus whereby his teachings could have been passed on to his followers. In so doing they have sought to establish a continuity between Jesus and the tradition during the oral period. Far less effort has been spent, however, on seeking to establish how the acts of Jesus passed from the first into the second *Sitz im Leben*. This shall be discussed shortly, but first we must look at how the teachings of Jesus passed from the ministry of Jesus into the oral period.

I. THE ORIGIN AND TRANSMISSION OF THE SAYINGS OF JESUS

The early form critics tended to be quite radical in their estimation of the historical value of the traditions. For many the new discipline served as a means to deny the historical trustworthiness of the gospel materials.⁹ In England the radical nature of the presuppositions underlying much of German form criticism did not go unnoticed. Men like E. B. Redlich, C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, W. Manson and V. Taylor raised serious questions as to whether the new discipline required the presuppositions and conclusions of their more radical German counterparts. An even more serious criticism and challenge, however, came from Sweden, where H. Riesenfeld and his pupil B. Gerhardsson made a head-on attack upon the portrayal of form criticism found in Germany.

Probably no one has done more to popularize the view that the gospel traditions were transmitted according to the methods common to rabbinic Judaism than Gerhardsson. Although others had suggested this earlier,¹⁰ Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript* describes in great detail the rabbinic process for the transmitting of oral tradition. He begins his work with a detailed study of the rabbinic methodology for the passing on of holy tradition and describes how the *tannā'im* carefully passed on tradition to their disciples, who memorized these traditions word for word using constant repetition and mnemonic devices.

⁸E. Käsemann, "The Problem of the Historical Jesus," in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (Naperville: Allenson, 1964) 46.

⁹That such a view is not without justification is seen in the following statement of Käsemann, "Problem" 15: "The work of the Form Critics was designed to show that the message of Jesus as given to us by the Synoptists is, for the most part, not authentic but was minted by the faith of the primitive Christian community in its various stages" (italics his).

¹⁰Cf. W. Manson, *Jesus the Messiah* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944) 27; H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970).

This pattern, Gerhardsson argues, existed among the rabbis of Jesus' day and provides the most immediate parallel for the way Jesus taught his own disciples. Jesus in a similar manner taught his disciples carefully and deliberately to memorize his teachings and used mnemonic devices and repetition to aid them in this. The disciples in turn supervised the passing on of this fixed tradition in like manner to the Church. This did not, however, exclude their making editorial changes in their handling of the texts, but such changes were due to the apostolic formation of the materials, not the anonymous Church.

Gerhardsson's thesis (and that of his teacher H. Riesenfeld) has received a number of serious criticisms. For one thing, the question has been raised as to whether the transmission process described in the rabbinic literature can legitimately be read back into the time of Jesus. M. Smith and J. Neusner have argued that whereas Gerhardsson's portrayal of the transmission process is valid for the tannaitic period it is invalid before A.D. 70—that is, in Jesus' *Sitz im Leben*.¹¹ They argue that the events of 70 produced a totally different situation, so that the rabbinic materials can only be used with great difficulty to describe pre-70 circumstances. After the fall of Jerusalem the content and methodology of the Jewish tradition underwent a radical change. As a result the process of transmission described by Gerhardsson, while true of second- and third-century Judaism, is not true of Jesus' day. Neusner's and Smith's conclusions are themselves not without their critics.¹² Their skepticism seems to be too extreme, for it has not been proven, and it is unlikely that so radical a change in the transmission process would have resulted from the events of 70 as Neusner suggests.¹³

A second objection to the thesis of Gerhardsson is that Jesus was not a rabbi. He had no rabbinical training, so that the analogy of Jesus' teaching like a rabbi is invalid. Sometimes Mark 1:22, which refers to Jesus not teaching like the scribes, is used in support of this contention. But the context of this comparison between Jesus' teachings and that of the scribes does not involve the method of their teaching but the fact that Jesus taught "as one who had authority, and not as the scribes." The difference in this verse between Jesus' teachings and that of the scribes does not involve the mechanics of teaching but rather the fact that Jesus' teaching possessed a unique authority that the scribal teaching lacked. That Jesus was not a trained rabbi goes without saying, although he was certainly a skilled teacher. Yet despite his strong criticism of what the Pharisees and scribes taught, there is no reason why Jesus had to reject their method or how they taught. Nowhere in the gospels does Jesus criticize the Pharisees and scribes for requiring their disciples to memorize or

¹¹M. Smith, "A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition," *JBL* 82 (1963) 169–172; J. Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 3. 146–147; P. S. Alexander, "Rabbinic Judaism and the New Testament," *ZNW* 74 (1983) 237–246. The latter is a most helpful and readable summary; see esp. pp. 241–242, 244–245.

¹²See e.g. S. Zeitlin, "Spurious Interpretations of Rabbinic Sources in the Studies of the Pharisees and Pharisaism," *JQR* 65 (1974) 122–135.

¹³See P. H. Davids, "The Gospels and Jewish Tradition: Twenty Years after Gerhardsson," in *Gospel Perspectives* 1 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980) 76–82.

for using mnemonic devices. Furthermore it is dangerous to argue that Jesus could not have taught in this manner because he lacked rabbinic training. It would have been natural for him to have appropriated any useful and known didactic method to teach and preach his gospel.

Another objection raised against Gerhardsson's thesis is that the gospel materials show too great a divergence to have been the product of such a transmission process. This is a serious problem, but is it possible that the divergence is due at times more to the writing down of the traditions than to the oral process itself?¹⁴ Other objections such as that "belief in the living Lord presumably fostered more creativity than one finds in the Rabbinic material"¹⁵ or that the "unhistorical" nature of the tradition does not permit such a process of transmission¹⁶ can also be mentioned. With regard to the former objection it should be pointed out that we have clear evidence to the contrary. Paul, for example, did not feel free to create dominical material, as the contrast between 1 Cor 7:10 and 7:12 demonstrates. Concerning the latter objection it should be pointed out that if the gospels are grossly unhistorical and simply incredible, then by definition no careful transmission process could have taken place. But such a conclusion is based upon a particular evaluation of the historicity of the gospel accounts, and this in turn is usually based upon an a priori presupposition that denies the supernatural in history.

In evaluating the thesis of Gerhardsson we note that he has struck a nerve of the form critics. It is now clearer than ever before that Jesus was a teacher. In fact the gospels describe him as a teacher forty-five times, and the term "rabbi" is used of him fourteen times. One of his prominent activities was teaching (Matt 4:23). Like the rabbis he proclaimed the divine law (Mark 12:28-34), gathered disciples (1:16-20; 3:13-19),¹⁷ debated with the scribes (7:5-6; 11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27), was asked to settle legal disputes (12:13-

¹⁴The legitimacy of assuming that the oral process of transmission was identical to the written process that produced the gospels is being seriously questioned today. See A. B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1960) 128; E. L. Abel, "The Psychology of Memory and Rumor Transmission and Their Bearing on Theories of Oral Transmission in Early Christianity," *JR* 51 (1971) 275; M. D. Hooker, "On Using the Wrong Tool," *Theology* 75 (1972) 572; Ellis, "New Directions" 305-306; E. Güttgemanns, *Candid Questions concerning Gospel Form Criticism* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1979) 196-211; W. H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 14-32.

¹⁵E. P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) 27-28.

¹⁶Smith, "Comparison" 173-174, 176, clearly reveals the extent to which historical presuppositions and bias play a role in his position when he speaks of the material in the traditions "which, by the standards of common sense, are incredible," as a tradition "which freely multiplied miracles," and as a "mess of contradictory scraps of evidence." When the birth stories and nature miracles are seen as "false accretions to the tradition" there simply cannot be a careful eyewitness transmission process by definition.

¹⁷The historicity of the "twelve" has been challenged by a number of scholars, but the presence of Judas in the group (who in the early Church would create such a group and then make one of them a traitor?) and the account in Acts 1:12-26 of the selection of Judas' replacement argue strongly for the historicity of this group. To this can be added the reference in the pre-Pauline tradition found in 1 Cor 15:5.

17; Luke 12:13–15), and supported his teaching with Scripture (Mark 2:25–26; 4:12; 10:6–8, 19; 12:26, 29–31, 36; Matt 12:40; 18:16).¹⁸ He also used mnemonic devices such as parables, exaggeration, puns, metaphors and similes, proverbs, riddles, parabolic actions, etc., to aid his disciples and audiences in retaining his teachings. Above all he used poetry, *parallelismus membrorum*, for this purpose. Jeremias has listed 138 examples of antithetical parallelism in Jesus' teaching that are found in the synoptic gospels alone,¹⁹ and to these over fifty other examples of synonymous, synthetic, chiasmic and step parallelism can be added.²⁰ In light of all this it is evident that Jesus "carefully thought out and deliberately formulated [his] statements."²¹

There is also evidence in the gospel materials that Jesus "must have required his disciples to memorize."²² In Luke 11:1 Jesus is asked to teach his disciples a prayer that they could memorize that would identify those praying this prayer as his disciples. In addition the disciples were not only to remember his teachings but his actions as well (Mark 8:17–21). It is true that in Matt 10:18–20 the disciples are told not to worry about what they should say, for the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak. Yet this was advice for martyrs in their hour of trial, not for their normal teaching mission.

The high esteem in which Jesus was held by the disciples would also guarantee that the words of Jesus were cherished and carefully remembered by them.²³ Surely Jesus was revered more than even Hillel or Shammai if such passages as Mark 8:34–38, Matt 5:17, 7:21–23, 10:32–33, 11:6, Luke 14:26, etc., have any historical basis. It is furthermore difficult to believe that the disciples to whom Jesus said, "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Luke 10:23–24) would not have exercised great care to memorize and preserve those words of Jesus that the prophets of old longed to hear. Gerhardsson is certainly correct when he says:

All historical probability is in favour of Jesus' disciples, and the whole of early Christianity, having accorded the sayings of the one whom they believed to be

¹⁸See R. H. Stein, *The Method and Message of Jesus' Teachings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 1–2; Riesner, *Jesus* 246–276.

¹⁹J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1971) 15–16.

²⁰See Stein, *Method* 27–32.

²¹Gerhardsson, *Origins* 69.

²²Gerhardsson, *Memory* 328.

²³Cf. J. Neusner, *Development of a Legend* (Leiden: Brill, 1970) 190, who states: "No rabbi was so important to rabbinical Judaism as Jesus was to Christianity. None prophesied as an independent authority. None left a category of 'I' sayings, for none had the prestige to do so."

the Messiah at least the same degree of respect as the pupils of a Rabbi accorded the words of *their* master!²⁴

This is especially evident when we realize that whereas the rabbinic disciples were primarily committed to the interpretation of the Torah that their teachers taught the disciples were primarily committed to the person of Jesus. They were followers not merely of Jesus' teachings but of Jesus himself. As a result, in contrast to the rabbis, Jesus' teachings in the gospels and the early Christian literature stand out in glorious distinction and absolute separation from the teachings of all others.

There are some weaknesses to Gerhardsson's thesis that must be noted. For one thing, although he acknowledges the probable existence of written notes or private memoranda²⁵ he does not place great emphasis on them or discuss their importance. No doubt greater emphasis will be given to the use of such written materials in the future, but the existence of such material is becoming more and more certain.²⁶ The degree of variation existing in the parallel material of the gospels will furthermore always be a problem for Gerhardsson's thesis. But does this variation argue in favor of the view that the gospel traditions were passed down with more freedom than Gerhardsson allows, or is it possible that it was in the writing of the gospels that much of this variation took place? Also Gerhardsson's belief that the gospel materials were transmitted in an independent isolated context raises some additional questions even though it provides some helpful suggestions as to why we find so few sayings of Jesus in the NT epistles. His suggested *Sitze im Leben* of worship, catechetical instruction and Bible study are reasonable, but there remain difficulties in thinking that the gospel tradition stood in splendid isolation from all other traditional materials.

Having said this, we observe that Gerhardsson's main thesis that the teachings of Jesus found in the gospel traditions owe their shape and origin to Jesus himself and that the delivery of those traditions during the oral period was supervised by the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:1-2) is far more convincing than the view that this all took place in the "anonymous community" of the early form critics.²⁷ Gerhardsson furthermore has demon-

²⁴Gerhardsson, *Memory* 258 (italics his). On p. 332 Gerhardsson also states: "Since Jesus was considered to be the Messiah, the 'only' teacher (Matt. 23.10), his sayings must have been accorded even greater authority and sanctity than that accorded by the Rabbis' disciples to the words of their teachers" (italics his). Cf. also W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1966) 466; Riesner, *Jesus* 37.

²⁵See Gerhardsson, *Memory* 335; *Origins* 23.

²⁶In this regard Riesner's *Jesus* is extremely valuable. It is interesting to note here that M. Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (New York: Scribner's, 1935) 242, suggested that Paul had papyrus notes containing the teachings of Jesus available to him when he wrote 1 Corinthians.

²⁷Davies, *Setting* 480, in his critique of Gerhardsson's *Memory* has some serious criticisms of Gerhardsson's thesis, but his conclusion is quite positive: "This means, in our judgment, that they [Gerhardsson and Riesenfeld] have made it far more historically probable and reasonably credible, over against the skepticism of much form criticism, that in the Gospels we are within hearing of the authentic voice and within sight of the authentic activity of Jesus of Nazareth, however much muffled and obscured these may be by the process of transmission."

strated that it is wrong to argue from the paucity of references to the teachings and acts of Jesus in the epistles that their authors were unfamiliar with the gospel traditions. Are we to assume that the author of Acts was ignorant of the Jesus tradition because of the paucity of references to it in Acts? Hardly, for he had just written the gospel of Luke. Likewise to conclude from the paucity of gospel references in 1 John that this writer was ignorant of the Jesus tradition is equally fallacious, for he had either written the gospel of John or knew it well. By analogy therefore it is dangerous to argue that Paul, the writer of Hebrews, etc., did not know the gospel traditions.²⁸

Within the NT we find numerous references that reveal the high regard in which eyewitness testimony was held. One need only read such passages as 1 John 1:1-3, John 19:35, 21:24, 1 Cor 15:6, 1 Pet 5:1, 2 Pet 1:16, Acts 1:21-22, 5:32, 10:39, 41, etc., to see this. Undoubtedly the most important reference in this regard, however, is found in Luke 1:1-2 where Luke refers to the role of eyewitnesses in the transmission process of the gospel traditions. Here "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" were the ones who "delivered" the "things that have been accomplished among us." It was, according to the Lukan prologue, the eyewitnesses who were the ministers of the word. Here it is evident by the use of the one article for both "eyewitnesses" and "ministers of the word" that a single group is meant. It was through these eyewitnesses, Luke tells us, that the gospel traditions were delivered before being written down. Luke's teaching here is clear. During the period between the resurrection/ascension of Jesus and the writing down of the "narratives" (Luke 1:1) the gospel traditions were delivered by the eyewitnesses. To what extent "delivered" is a technical term in Luke 1:2 is uncertain.²⁹ Nevertheless Luke clearly states that the eyewitnesses were intimately involved in the teaching and passing on of these traditions. Whether this involved a memorization process such as we find in later Judaism is not clear. What is clear is that "in the second verse [of the Lukan prologue] a supreme and unique place is accorded to apostolic tradition."³⁰

We have already mentioned that most of the early form critics tended to ignore the presence of eyewitnesses in the early Church and to deny to them any significant role in the transmission of the oral traditions. It is D. E. Nineham who has given the main defense of this form-critical presupposition.³¹ Only a few of the most important of Nineham's arguments can be mentioned:

²⁸See his "Der Weg der Evangelientradition" in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983) 81. In this regard we should also note that if there had not been a problem in Corinth concerning the Lord's supper (1 Cor 11:17-22), concerning divorce (7:1-2), or concerning Paul's apostleship (9:1-2), we would never have known that Paul was acquainted with material from the Jesus tradition on these matters.

²⁹The double use of "delivered" and "received" by Paul in 1 Cor 11:23; 15:3 does suggest that the use of these terms for the passing on and acquiring of tradition possessed at least a quasi-technical meaning for Paul.

³⁰N. B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 127.

³¹This appeared in a series of articles by D. E. Nineham entitled "Eye-Witness Testimony and the Gospel Tradition," *JTS* 9 (1958) 13-25, 243-252; *JTS* 11 (1960) 253-264.

(1) The emphasis on eyewitness testimony in the NT is for the most part late and serves primarily an apologetic function; (2) the rounded pericope form of the tradition rules out the possibility that this is the result of eyewitness testimony;³² (3) form criticism is based upon an a posteriori observation of characteristics within the finished gospels as opposed to the a priori presuppositions held by those who argue that the eyewitnesses must have played an important role in the transmission of these materials.

Nineham has done scholarship a great service by clearly presenting the basic argumentation for a negative assessment of the eyewitnesses' role in the transmission of the gospel materials. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes clear that Nineham's argumentation possesses numerous weaknesses. Some of the NT references, to be sure, are late. But does the lateness of Luke's gospel necessitate that Luke 1:1-4 be unreliable? Are the speeches of Acts purely a Lukan creation, or does Acts 10:39, 41 (cf. 1 Pet 5:1) go back in some way to older tradition and perhaps to Peter himself?³³ Furthermore, even if Luke wrote with an apologetic purpose in mind, does this automatically falsify what he and the other NT writers said on this matter? Surely the term "apologetic" should not be so interpreted as to imply that untruth or deceit is of necessity connected with it. With regard to the rounded pericope form of the accounts Nineham apparently believes that actual eyewitness testimony would result in a nonrounded form, but ironically enough it is the rounded form that some form critics have argued is more historical and the nonrounded or mixed form the least. Actually, why should we assume that an eyewitness testimony must be nonrounded? If we assume for the moment that Peter repeated a pericope every month up to the time that Mark wrote his gospel (c. 65), this would mean that he told the same account 420 times (thirty-five years times twelve). If he told it once every week, he would have repeated it 1820 times (thirty-five times fifty-two). Surely Peter's eyewitness testimony could become quite stereotyped and generalized in such a process. Furthermore, would not the eyewitnesses have intentionally repeated the gospel materials in a rounded form in order to help their hearers remember? Jesus used poetic forms and mnemonic devices to help his hearers retain his teachings. Why would it be strange for the eyewitnesses to have had a similar concern in their recounting the teachings and acts of the Lord of glory? Finally, with regard to the claim that form criticism is based upon a posteriori observations rather a priori presuppositions, it should be noted that the a posteriori observations of the form critics are clearly made in the framework of numerous a priori presuppositions. The fact remains that the clearest empirical evidence available as to how the gospel traditions were transmitted is Luke 1:1-4. Here the eyewitnesses do not just play an important role but the chief role in the tradition process.

No doubt the view of the early Church as an anonymous, charismatic, non-

³²Concerning the gospel of Mark, Nineham states that "no plausible reason can be given why recollection derived directly from the living voice of St. Peter should have been cast in the stereotyped, impersonal form of community tradition" (p. 243).

³³For a positive view of the historicity of the speeches in Acts see W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

organized and leaderless community has played a significant role in the denigration of the role of the apostolic eyewitnesses in the transmission of the gospel materials. Yet the NT portrays the Church as being far from anonymous and nonorganized. Unless the accounts in Acts are grossly inaccurate, the early Church had a center (Jerusalem) and leadership (the apostles). When the Church spread out from Jerusalem to Samaria we read: "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John" (Acts 8:14). When it spread to Antioch we read: "News of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch" (11:22). When the issue of circumcision as a requirement for church membership came to a head, we read that the church in Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas "to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question" (15:2). It was at Jerusalem that the "first church council" passed a decree on this matter (15:23-29). Paul also knew and accepted the importance of the Jerusalem apostles, for he "laid before them . . . the gospel that . . . [he preached] among the Gentiles, lest somehow . . . [he] be running or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2). And it was at Jerusalem that he received "the right hand of fellowship" to go to the Gentiles and preach the gospel (2:9). It should also be noted in this regard that after each of his missionary journeys Paul returned to Jerusalem. To claim that all of this is a pure fabrication of Luke would be wholly unjustified. The early Church was not without leadership. The discovery of the Dead Sea scroll community with its highly developed organizational structure furthermore reveals that, if the Qumran community possessed such careful organization, there is no reason why the early Church had to be structureless. The NT clearly presents a picture of the early Church as centered in Jerusalem with the apostles as leaders. To use the terms of the NT itself, the Church was "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).³⁴

The early Church can also be described as charismatic, if by charismatic we mean that it was uniquely aware of the Spirit's presence in its midst. Yet being charismatic does not of necessity exclude a high view of tradition. Paul in his letters clearly "sees no antithesis between pneumatic piety and the high estimation of tradition."³⁵ The pneumatic character of the early Church therefore does not in any way exclude the conscious and careful transmission of authoritative tradition. The view of the early Church as a primitive, charismatic, free-spirited and pure democracy, which later degenerated into an orthodox early Catholic Church, has a beautiful Rousseau-like simplicity about it. For many, such a romantic description is irresistible. Nevertheless such a description of the early Church is based upon fantasy and not upon what we can learn from the NT.

In an important article, which unfortunately has never been translated into

³⁴See T. Boman, *Die Jesus-Überlieferung im Lichte der neueren Volkskunde* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1967) 34.

³⁵TDNT, 2. 172; cf. Riesner, *Jesus* 424-426.

English, H. Schürmann has pointed out that there existed a clear situation in the life of Jesus in which the gospel materials were transmitted and shaped.³⁶ Schürmann argues convincingly that within the context of the disciple-teacher setting of Jesus' ministry, and above all in his sending out of the disciples to preach and to heal, we have a natural context for passing on the Jesus traditions to the disciples. There seems to be no good reason to deny the historicity of the mission of the disciples. After all they were chosen, according to Mark 3:14 and parallels, in part at least in order to be sent out to preach. Luke records two such missions (Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12), which makes it evident that this event (or events) was firmly anchored in the tradition.³⁷ Furthermore some of the material associated with this mission is so difficult that it is hard to imagine that it was simply a creation of the early Church. An example is Jesus' words to the disciples: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 10:5b-6).

If in the lifetime of Jesus we possess a mission of the disciples to heal and teach (Mark 6:30) we must then ask what it was that they were to teach and preach. If the disciples saw Jesus as greater than John the Baptist (and some of them must have because they left John the Baptist to follow him), if they believed his message possessed a divine authority and was a divine revelation (cf. Matt 5:21-48, 7:24-27, 24:35, etc.), and if they knew that Jesus shaped his teachings in easily memorable forms and that he wanted them to keep his words (Luke 11:28, a verse that should be understood in the light of 1:2; 5:1) and share them with others (Matt 10:27), they must have cherished and preserved the words of their teacher and Lord and used them as the basis of their teaching.³⁸ Furthermore Jesus had stressed the importance of his words. The keeping of them meant life or death (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:47-49; 11:28; Mark 8:38). They would never pass away (Mark 13:31). When therefore the disciples proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of God they possessed their master's "The kingdom of God is like . . ." They could hardly improve on this. Indeed if the disciples went out on their mission in Jesus' name (Luke 10:16) it is inconceivable to think that they did not utter what he had told them and proclaim what he had whispered (Matt 10:27). As a result of their faithful proclamation of Jesus' words, Jesus could say, "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Luke 10:16; cf. Matt 10:40), for the message the disciples proclaimed was none other than the message Jesus taught and gave them.

³⁶H. Schürmann, "Die vorösterlichen Anfänge der Logientradition," in *Der historische Jesus und der kerugmatische Christus: Beiträge zum Christusverständnis in Forschung und Verkündigung* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1960) 342-370.

³⁷Gerhardsson, *Origins* 73, states: "This 'sending' has such a strong anchoring in the tradition that, all things being considered, it cannot be dismissed as a simple backdating of the early Christian missionary activity after Easter." Cf. also T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1949) 73: "The mission of the disciples is one of the best-attested facts in the life of Jesus"; Riesner, *Jesus* 453-454.

³⁸Schürmann, "Anfänge" 356-357, points out that if Jesus' proclamation came as the final and deciding last word of God in this age it must have been significant for his followers.

In this natural *Sitz im Leben* of the pre-Easter community it would seem most probable that memorization played a considerable part in Jesus' instruction. The mnemonic forms that we find in the gospel traditions are not accidental. Parables do not spring out of anonymous communities.³⁹ Good parables and good poetry come from creative genius, and Jesus was clearly such a genius. Their presence indicates that Jesus intended for his teachings to be memorized so that they would be preserved in the hearts and lives of his listeners and be transmitted to others as well. "The only reasonable explanation [for the presence of these forms] is that Jesus sometimes cast his teaching in the forms of Semitic verse in order that it might be memorable."⁴⁰ To what extent rabbinic methods found in the later rabbinic materials played a role in Jesus' teaching will always be debated, but it is certainly wrong to assume that Jesus never repeated anything that he said and that he did not care if his listeners remembered what he taught. The disciples thoroughly believed that it was in Jesus' teachings that "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68) were to be found. One cannot but assume therefore that already before the resurrection the teachings of Jesus and his acts would have formed the sacred core around which the preaching of the disciples centered during their mission. The form of his teaching would therefore serve both as an aid for memory and as a convenient form to repeat to others.⁴¹

It is clear that Schürmann has demonstrated that if form criticism restricts the *Sitz im Leben* of the gospel materials to a post-resurrection setting it has seriously erred. Already in Jesus' ministry we find a clear and extremely important—probably the most important—setting for the preservation, shaping and transmission of the gospel materials. Schürmann's thesis also has the merit of fitting well Luke's description of the disciples as "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:2) whereas the earlier form-critical views do not. This eyewitness ministry of the word by the disciples, Schürmann has demonstrated, began already before Easter, even if its most important period would take place afterward.

Recent research has also pointed out that there is no need to think that the gospel traditions were only memorized by the disciples during their time with Jesus. Some of Jesus' teaching could well have been written down in brief, notebook-like memoranda for use during their mission. There is no reason today to assume that Jesus' words and deeds were never written down until Mark and Q were composed. Jewish children were taught to read and write, and each Palestinian community had a synagogue school where reading and writing was taught. The possible use of notes and written materials by the disciples has been alluded to in the past but will be emphasized to a greater

³⁹Cf. Boman, *Jesus-Überlieferung* 11–13, 29. The fact that we do not find parables in the rest of the NT or in the early Christian tradition reveals this.

⁴⁰G. B. Caird, "The Study of the Gospels: II. Form Criticism," *ExpTim* 87 (1976) 139.

⁴¹Schürmann, "Anfänge" 363. J. Bradshaw, "Oral Transmission and Human Memory," *ExpTim* 92 (1981) 305, points out that because of the mind's ability to memorize poetic form "it would be surprising if Jesus' hearers had less than perfect recall for poetic sayings."

degree in future discussions.⁴² Absolute certainty about the extent to which such notes were used is of course impossible, but it is not at all improbable that during the ministry of Jesus the disciples used notes and written materials in conjunction with their preaching.

We must still, however, ask at this point: How exactly were the gospel traditions transmitted from the first *Sitz im Leben* to the third? Or, to word this another way: How were the things Jesus actually said and did transmitted during the period when our gospels did not exist, and how was the writing of our gospels related to this? For the most part both in their origin and in their form the sayings of Jesus in our gospels come from Jesus himself. Jesus delivered these sayings to the eyewitnesses and disciples in forms easily remembered. Although this group of eyewitnesses was larger than the twelve (Luke 24:9, 13–35, 36–43; Acts 1:21–26; 10:41) the core of the group was the twelve disciples. While it is probable that Gerhardsson's portrayal of Jesus teaching like a second-century rabbi is overstated, it is certain that Jesus intended that his disciples should retain what he said. Jesus was an excellent teacher and used various forms for mnemonic reasons. Parables, poetry, exaggeration, etc., were all used in order to aid retention. Through memory and quite possibly through the use of notes, Jesus' teachings were received and retained by the disciples. In their mission during the ministry of Jesus their proclamation of Jesus' words and deeds would have further helped them retain these holy words, and any uncertainty would have been subsequently cleared up when they returned and shared the results of their mission with Jesus and the others. The fact that they were sent out in pairs would also have helped them to preserve the Jesus traditions, for what one might have forgotten the other could have remembered. After the resurrection of Jesus these teachings became even more important in the minds of the disciples. Now with even more zeal than before they went about proclaiming the teachings of Jesus and delivering them to the converts. Now more than ever they devoted themselves to the "ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4), and the new converts devoted themselves to "the apostles' teaching" (2:42). It is probable that the form in which Jesus had cast many of his teachings became even more stereotyped by the disciples' constant retelling of the teachings of the Lord of glory. During the ministry of Jesus certain pronouncements, as well as the circumstances that had led up to them, had also been memorized. Thus pronouncement stories were part of the disciples' collection of Jesus' sayings both before and after the resurrection.

Yet what about other narrative materials—for example, the miracles and stories about Jesus? How were they passed on? Were they ever standardized? Or were they simply repeated apart from any distinct process of memorization? It is to this issue that we must now turn.

II. THE ORIGIN AND TRANSMISSION OF THE ACTS OF JESUS

During the ministry of Jesus certain healing and nature miracles, as well as other stories about Jesus, were remembered. To a certain extent the healing

⁴²In this area Riesner's work is most thought-provoking.

miracles would by their very nature have shaped themselves, for in telling such a story one must start with the problem or disease, proceed to the resolution or healing, and then show the subsequent result. At times one might also refer to the presence of faith in the healing process. On the other hand, certain stories about Jesus would have lacked any distinct shape. No doubt these too were remembered and shared by the disciples during their mission, and by this retelling they no doubt became even more indelibly engraved in their minds. Relatively little has been written concerning this. Gerhardsson does point out that rabbinic teachers made a conscious effort to conduct their lives in order to provide a pattern their disciples could imitate,⁴³ for it was important for them to incarnate their teachings by their deeds. We also possess various examples in which Jesus sought similarly by his actions to teach certain truths.⁴⁴

With regard to the passion narrative it is generally conceded that a continuous passion narrative circulated within the Church from earliest times. There are some who deny this,⁴⁵ but from the very beginning most form critics have maintained that the passion narrative was transmitted as a totality rather than as individual units.⁴⁶ There are several reasons for this. For one thing, the passion narrative has within it both chronological and topographical details that tie the story together (cf. Mark 14:3, 13, 26, 32, 53, 66; 15:1, 16, 22; etc.). At times the very day and hour are mentioned (cf. 14:1, 12, 17; 15:1, 33, 42; 16:1, etc.). Furthermore it is apparent that the passion narrative is a unity in which event follows event as a matter of course. After every aspect of the passion, one cannot but ask: "Then what happened?" The passion narrative simply cannot be divided into individual self-contained units, for event follows event of necessity. Finally, it should be noted that the account of the Lord's supper in 1 Cor 11:23 refers to "the night when he was betrayed." It is therefore most unlikely that the participants who celebrated that meal together were unaware from the earliest times as to what happened on that day.

Yet whereas the sayings material was shaped and formed by Jesus himself, exactly how did the miracles (especially the nonhealing miracles) and the stories about Jesus receive their shape? We must at this point of course realize that many form critics look at such a question as futile because of various presuppositions. If, as some maintain, the critical-historical method by definition excludes the supernatural, the discussion of the passing down of miracle stories from the first *Sitz im Leben* into the second is absurd since no such events could have occurred in the first *Sitz im Leben*.⁴⁷ How can one refer to

⁴³Gerhardsson, *Memory* 186–187. See *b. Ber.* 24 a, b for several examples.

⁴⁴See Stein, *Method* 25–27.

⁴⁵See e.g. *The Passion in Mark* (ed. W. H. Kelber; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 153–159.

⁴⁶See K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu* (Berlin: Trowitzsch, 1919) 303–304.

⁴⁷At this point it is clear that Nineham's claim that form criticism's neglect of the apostolic eyewitnesses is due to a posteriori observations and not a priori presuppositions is clearly false. Here it is obvious that the rejection of the supernatural by many form critics is an a priori presupposition that predetermines that the miracle stories and the stories about Jesus could not have been passed on by the eyewitnesses. This is clearly not due to a posteriori observations but an a priori presupposition about the nature of reality.

eyewitness traditions of miracle stories if by definition miracles cannot happen? There cannot therefore be any continuity here between the first and second *Sitz im Leben*, for the miraculous acts of Jesus by definition could not have happened. The silence of many form critics on this issue can therefore be readily understood. Since these accounts are "myths" and "legends," one cannot speak of historical continuity. It is here that the "anonymous community" becomes especially helpful. Lacking any actual ground in history (except for some possibly misunderstood events), the origin of such myths and legends can best be understood as arising from anonymous persons who in anonymous places at anonymous times composed such accounts in order to have Jesus fulfill various messianic and OT expectations. On the other hand, even if we allow for the occurrence of actual miraculous events we must still deal with the question of how these accounts were transmitted and shaped from the first into the second *Sitz im Leben*.

Did each eyewitness repeat these stories as he saw fit, with the result that there were numerous forms of these accounts circulating during the oral period? Did the early eyewitnesses as a collegium in committee session produce a standardized form for each such account? It is highly unlikely that Jesus himself was personally responsible for formulating these traditions concerning himself.⁴⁸ At this point it must be mentioned that any reconstruction of what took place is extremely hypothetical. Nevertheless one possibility exists that may help shed light on this process.

III. AN EARLY RECENSION OF THE GOSPEL TRADITIONS?

From the earliest days of the Church there existed in Jerusalem Jewish believers whose native tongue was Greek. It should be remembered that from the beginning the Church was bilingual. Although it is not absolutely certain, it is highly probable that Jesus spoke Aramaic and Greek.⁴⁹ It is also probable that the disciples spoke both languages. Two of the disciples, Andrew and Philip, even had Greek names, and we know that after the resurrection Peter undertook extensive missionary journeys to diaspora Judaism where he would have had to speak Greek. It is also evident from Acts that almost immediately after the resurrection there existed within the early Church in Jerusalem a group called "Hellenists" (Acts 6:1-6). Whatever the reason for this designation (whether because of being "Hellenistically" inclined or not) it is clear that their mother tongue was Greek. Even among the Hellenists, however, there were no doubt those who knew varying amounts of Aramaic. It is quite certain therefore that the translation of the gospel traditions from Aramaic into Greek did not take place decades later in a distant land by people quite isolated from the actual events. On the contrary the translation into Greek took place not decades nor even years but probably only months or weeks after the resurrection. In fact since Jesus had followers in the Decapolis and as far away as the cities of

⁴⁸Gerhardsson, *Memory* 188.

⁴⁹See Stein, *Method* 4-6; J. A. Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 1-56; Riesner, *Jesus* 382-392.

Tyre and Sidon (Mark 7:24–37) as well as Gentile followers in Galilee (Luke 7:1–10), the translation of the gospel materials from Aramaic into Greek may already have begun during the ministry of Jesus.⁵⁰ This translation therefore did not take place in far-off Greece or even Syria but in Jerusalem, for the Hellenistic Christians who attended the Greek-speaking synagogue(s) (note Acts 6:9) would have required a version of the Jesus traditions in their native language.⁵¹ The question remains, then: Who would have made such a translation? Even as the first conflict between this group and the Aramaic-speaking believers was resolved by the “twelve” (Acts 6:2), it is reasonable to assume that the twelve also oversaw the process of translation. They were the leaders of the Church, and the Hellenists acknowledged their leadership.

It should also be noted in this regard that the Lukan prologue states that it was the eyewitnesses and ministers of the word who delivered the gospel traditions from which the written narratives were compiled. Since the narratives that Luke used were in Greek, Luke at least implies that the translation of the gospel traditions from Aramaic into Greek was overseen by the apostolic eyewitnesses. (Luke says that the “eyewitnesses and ministers of the word” delivered the gospel traditions to “us”—that is, to Greek-speaking people like Luke and Theophilus.) It seems reasonable therefore to assume that the translation of the gospel traditions into Greek took place very early in Jerusalem itself and that the eyewitnesses were most responsible for the process. As a result there would have been a natural continuity between the first and second *Sitz im Leben*. There is furthermore no reason why we should assume that a radical change must have taken place in the translation of the gospel traditions from Aramaic into Greek, for there is no reason to expect that the translation of traditions from one language to another requires major theological, philosophical, or cultural changes. This is especially so with regard to the change from Aramaic to Greek, for Judea had been Hellenized long before the time of Jesus.⁵² It was essential for the Hellenistic Christians that the words and deeds of Jesus be translated into Greek. This very process could have resulted in a standardized and apostolic Greek version of both the sayings of Jesus and the story-like materials as well. It may even be that this process would have produced not only a reasonably standardized Greek form of the narratives about Jesus but the existence of such a form in Greek might have even helped standardize the Aramaic form of this material. It is not impossible that this apostolic translation of the gospel traditions from Aramaic into Greek functioned as an early recension of the materials, which would have served as an authoritative pattern from that time on.

⁵⁰R. Riesner, “Der Ursprung der Jesus-überlieferung,” *TZ* 38 (1982) 511, points out that “wenn man die vorösterliche Existenz eines Kreises sesshafter Anhänger Jesus ernst nimmt, dann ist es keine völlig abstruse Frage, ob nicht einzelne Jesus-Traditionen schon vor Ostern schriftlich fixiert wurden.”

⁵¹Whether some of the Hellenists were already followers of Jesus during his ministry cannot be proven, but it is not at all impossible.

⁵²See M. Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974); I. H. Marshall, “Palestinian and Hellenistic Christianity: Some Critical Comments,” *NTS* 19 (1973) 271–287.

IV. CONCLUSION

Whereas all Christians and not just the disciples "went about preaching the word" (Acts 8:41), it was the disciples above all who acted as the authoritative bearers of the Jesus tradition after the resurrection. The teachings that Jesus delivered to them, the pronouncement and miracles stories that they had witnessed and shaped themselves, and the other materials were now supplemented by the passion and resurrection narratives as well as other stories of Jesus. All these were taught by them to the Church. As the Church grew, others were taught and trained to be teachers of the tradition. The early translation of these traditions into Greek by the apostles provided for Greek-speaking Christians in Jerusalem access to an authoritative Jesus tradition in their own language. In the process of translating the Aramaic gospel traditions into Greek the eyewitnesses would no doubt have searched the Greek Scriptures for Scriptural references to the life and teachings of Jesus and may have incorporated them into the traditions. From the beginning of the early Church, possibly even during Jesus' ministry, written notes and memoranda—some for the apostles' personal use, some to aid other teachers in their ministry of the word—would have come into existence. Memory, however, was probably the most common method by which the majority of the Church preserved the Jesus traditions.

A final comment must be made concerning the fact that the Jesus traditions in the canonical gospels are not exact duplicates and often reveal little concern for preserving the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus.⁵³ In the passing on or delivering of the tradition the "eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" as well as the evangelists not only remembered and repeated what Jesus said and did but also shared what the Spirit taught them concerning the meaning and significance of those words and deeds (John 14:26), for he would guide them in all truth (16:13). As a result they felt free to paraphrase and interpret the sayings and deeds of Jesus and did so not as separate footnotes but in the body of the tradition itself. But unlike the notes added at the bottoms of the pages in modern study Bibles their comments possessed in the providence of God canonical authority. It should be emphasized in this regard, however, that throughout this whole process "the preaching of Jesus was interpreted, not invented."⁵⁴

⁵³The lack of the evangelists' concern for the *ipsissima verba* should make us question those attempts that seek to base one's theology upon such reconstructed authentic sayings and reject or see as inferior the canonical message of the evangelists. See for example J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) 12–15, 20–24.

⁵⁴B. D. Chilton, *God in Strength: Jesus' Announcement of the Kingdom* (Freistadt: F. Ploechl, 1979) 279. Cf. here also T. W. Manson, *Sayings* 12–13, and Boman, *Jesus-Überlieferung* 30, who points out that the major problem facing the early Church did not involve the creation of sufficient Jesus traditions but rather the selection of those that were most important out of the Jesus traditions they possessed.