

Fort Bend Christian Academy – Honors Apologetics

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Ephemerality and Continuity

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Introduction

All human knowledge for well over a hundred thousand years was conveyed solely through oral tradition. Yet in the modern age, phrases such as ‘old wives tale’ and ‘word on the street’ convey spurious undertones. Many modern Christians persist in the belief that the writers of the Gospel diligently followed Jesus around with a quill and parchment and magically recorded every word he said and deed he did ‘inerrantly’, wildly oblivious to the fact that the primarily oral mindset did not think in such anachronistic, scientific terms. These same Christians are shocked and distraught to learn a period of at least twenty or thirty years had elapsed from the death of Jesus until the first Gospel was composed. They, in turn with skeptics, subject such a period of oral transmission to their expectations of truth founded upon their literate mindset and assert it does the Bible discredit when it does not. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to establish the feasibility of the accurate oral transmission of the Christ narratives into the written Gospels. To do this, the exclusively oral mindset and the literate mindset will be developed through comparison of the oral poetic tradition, as well as through an evaluation of the transition between orality and literacy and the consequences of this transition. This mindset will be used as a lens through which to view early Christianity, in order to develop an understanding of how stories about Jesus were formulated, proliferated, and evaluated.

Of vital importance to understanding the oral mindset is its definition of truth. In a completely oral society, there exists no fixed textual version of anything for word-by-word comparison, and in fact, the concept of words is shaky at best, so exact quotations and figures are not considered important, as well as chronological order. Someone with an oral mindset is concerned with the gist of a story, the main idea, and not with frivolous details.

Milman Parry:

In order to even ask the question as to whether or not the Christian oral tradition accurately conveyed the Gospel message to texts, the very nature of oral tradition itself must be examined. Any modern, scholarly understanding of oral tradition traces back to work of Milman Parry on ancient Homeric epics. What distinguishes Parry and lends credence to his thesis is his extensive work in the field, his study of the work of modern Slavic oral poets, which he applied to the understanding of Homer. For this reason, Homer, the most well known oral poet of antiquity will be discussed first.

The use of a fixed verse, typically hexameter, is indispensable to the oral poet as an aid in composition. The oral poet also depends totally upon ‘word-groups’ to comprise his or her verses. These phrases are the collective product of generations of poets, with each contributing only a small number of them, if any. “[T]he kind of oral composition that the Greeks [such as Homer] indulged in, and we may say perfected, must have had a millennial history stretching back into the experience of all preliterate but civilized societies, and its fundamental rules are rooted in this history.”¹ Thus, the composition of the oral poem resembles the composition of a modern ransom note made from the cutout words of newspapers: the poet uses existing phrases as raw materials, molding them to fit his or her particular verse. This method also explains the ease with which a poem could survive through generations of poets, as each particular poet would be familiar with most of the phrases used in the poem before even hearing it, easily internalizing the few new ones.²

Homer employs sorts of ‘formulas’ in his poetry in which he uses the same word-group numerous times to express the same idea under the same metrical conditions, for the sake of

¹ Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution and Its Cultural Consequences*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 6

² Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987, 270-1

sheer convenience of composition and memory, over 25,000 times in 28,000 lines of verse. For instance, he utilizes one such phrase fifty times³, and employs another use of ‘noun-epithet’ structures to nominate heroes and gods, throughout his work.⁴ In order for such a formula to be adopted by the community of poets into the tradition, the phrase must be “good poetically and so useful metrically that it becomes in time the best way to express a certain idea in a given length of the verse, and as such...has won a place for itself in the oral diction as a formula.”⁵

Parry demonstrates such a technique of exhaustive repetition to be exclusive and necessary to the oral medium. Homer decides the best way to phrase something and sticks with it throughout his work, which allows the focus of the listener to be placed upon the events of the narrative as a whole and not upon any particularly striking passage or phrasing of words that would divert his or her attention from those events.⁶ He is ‘telling the old tales in words which his hearers scarcely heeded as they followed the story, for those were the only ones which could be used, and they knew them far too well to think about them.’⁷

However, the written poet strives for optimal dramatic effect of each line, “choosing in a way that is his alone from the grand words of poetry.”⁸ His work “must be seen as well as heard, so that one may go over it again and again to appreciate its subtleties.”⁹ Take for instance a line from Eliot’s *Prufrock*, “I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.”¹⁰ Such a line of written poetry, while still containing a repetition of sorts, is

³ Ibid., 272

⁴ Ibid., 277

⁵ Ibid., 330

⁶ Ibid., 306

⁷ Ibid., 284

⁸ Ibid., 284

⁹ Albert Bates Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 18

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Arthur M. Eastman (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970), 998.

anything but ‘formulaic’ or traditional in composition and effect.¹¹ It is so unlike anything the reader has ever heard before that one cannot subsume it easily into a past encounter with an identical or similar phrase. Eliot carefully picked out each word, crafting the original phrases from scratch and delicately extracting the phrases of others to insert within his own work. Also, instead of being listened to once and grasped like a line from an oral epic, it is meant to be meditated upon thoroughly, even haunt the reader, before revealing its secrets, if in fact it ever truly does.

This distinction holds true between the epic poets and the dramatists as well. Almost all of the repeated expressions of Euripides “are extremely forceful, and, rarely used more than once, they are always sure of their effect. They are, then, not a regular means of expressing the idea [as in the formulas of Homer] but a body of outstanding dramatic artifices.”¹² Whereas the epic poet relies upon repetition for its utility, to aid in the composition of his or her poems, the writer, such as Voltaire or Euripides, repeats phrases that ‘had struck him by their high emotional and dramatic quality’, for purely aesthetic motives.¹³

Now, while it may appeal to one to apply anachronistic accusations of plagiarism to the oral poets for their great usage of verbatim repetitions of the work of other poets, Parry holds that, “plagiarism is not possible in traditional literature. One oral poet is better than another not because he has himself found a more striking way of expressing his own thought but because he has been better able to make use of the tradition.”¹⁴

The existence of such complex and multifarious formulas in an oral tradition precludes the invention of any significant portion of them by any single poet. “The epithets, the

¹¹ The repetition is the phrase ‘silent seas,’ which is lifted from and alluding to Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”: “We were the first that ever burst/Into that silent sea” (lines 105-6).

¹² Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1987, 290

¹³ Ibid., 291

¹⁴ Ibid., 334

metaphorical expressions, the phrases for the binding of clauses, the formulas for running the sentence over from one verse into another, the grouping of words and phrases within the clause and within the verse, all this is many times beyond whatever supreme creative genius for words one could imagine...”. Thus, one must posit an established tradition in which such formulas developed over long periods of time.

This longstanding tradition also explains the use of many dialectic phrases that had already been abandoned by everyday Greek speech by the time Homer’s poems were composed.¹⁵ As language naturally changes over time, the singer of an oral poem would be likely to include changes in pronunciation in his songs but would be wary to accommodate more distinct changes, such as those of the forms of words that would disrupt the metrical value of a formula. This is due to the fact that the surrounding verses would be composed of formulas dependent upon the existing metrical structure of the dated phrase and would too have to be altered to impose a change in the first formula, causing a great disruption in the song and the abandonment of phrases that would have spanned the lifetimes of a number poets, causing the new poet to have to internalize a new and unfamiliar set of formulas.¹⁶ Such are the concerns that make oral poets reluctant to abandon archaic phrases. However, eventually, such phrases are likely to be replaced, though how soon is dependent upon the general linguistic conservatism of the culture of the poets, which is itself dependent upon the complexity of the verse (how much it is ‘enjambé’ with the formulas around it), the propensity of the people for romanticizing the past at the expense of the present, and the existence or lack thereof of a professional class of singers.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 315-6

¹⁶ Ibid., 331-2

¹⁷ Ibid., 333

Despite this high level of conservatism, having no written and authoritative version of a tale to compare against subsequent renditions, each oral poem “even in the mouth of the same singer is ever in a state of change.” Without fail some verses will be left out, others added or changed.¹⁸ If this is not the case, if a verbatim recitation is preserved of an old master, than the ones presenting it “are no longer singers but rhapsodes, their task is not that of creation but only of memory...”¹⁹ Thus, while singers of oral poetry sought much to preserve the generalities of the poems they had heard from the singers preceding them, to strive to repeat it exactly, in essence, would preclude them from even being considered singers of oral poetry. Thus, to be an oral poet, one had to compose “by an ever varying use of what he had sung and heard other sing.”²⁰

The above section provides insight as to some basic characteristics of the oral tradition as distinct from the literary tradition. Most noteworthy is the distinction between literary and oral mindsets: the singer’s saturation in traditional phrases and spontaneous arrangement of those phrases. Furthermore, analysis of the incidence of formulas could theoretically be used to test whether supposed statements of Jesus were more likely to be composed by him or by authors that attributed those words to him.

A.B. Lord:

Lord, Parry’s disciple, conducted much research with his teacher and continued his work once he died. His extensive credentials of gathering data in the field lend merit to his claims about oral theory.

¹⁸ Ibid., 336

¹⁹ Ibid., 337

²⁰ Ibid., 337

What differentiates oral poetry from written “is not the oral performance but rather the composition *during* the oral performance.”²¹ While the written poet has time to deliberate optimal diction, the singer must compose his work quickly enough to keep up with the song.²² The oral poet interacts with his audience during the composition of his poems, and that audience is, in a large part, unstable and variable. Depending upon the receptiveness of a particular audience to a song, the poet will lengthen or shorten it to accommodate them.²³

Lord describes the training of a typical modern oral singer in Yugoslavia. In this culture each singer, and every audience member for that matter, is male, and he accompanies his singing with a one-stringed instrument called a ‘gusle’. First, around the age of fifteen, the boy will listen to others sing as often as possible. In this period he learns the stories, characters, themes, and settings of the local oral tradition.²⁴ Next, he will begin to sing for himself or his peers, other youths of the village, and begin to learn to play along with the gusle and fix his thoughts to a specific rhythmic measure of ten syllables.²⁵ Finally, he will gain the skill to perform a complete song in front of a proper audience, composed of adults and elders.²⁶ When an oral poet learns a song, “this does not involve memorizing a text, but practicing until he can compose, or recompose it, himself.”²⁷

It is interesting to note that, in addition to never repeating a song twice word for word and line for line, illiterate singers do not even understand the concepts of words and lines, only that

²¹ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (New York City: Atheneum, 1974), 5

²² Ibid., 22

²³ Ibid., 16-7

²⁴ Ibid., 21

²⁵ Ibid., 21

²⁶ Ibid., 24

²⁷ Ibid., 25

of ‘sound groups’ or ‘utterances’. However, the singer will undergo strict efforts to preserve the narrative ‘essence’ of the song.²⁸

Lord now nominates another aspect of the song, ‘theme’, which he describes as a sort of recurring premise with which to develop characters, introduce conflicts and action, provide ornamentation, and generate dialogue. Examples of such a device include an assembly of wedding guests, the amassing of armies, the calling of councils, the appearance of messengers, the writing of letters, and the arming of heroes.²⁹ Many of these themes occur in established groups, such as that of a character disguising himself, deceiving others with a story, and then being recognized. While formulas give the singer the phrases with which to build his song, the themes act as a sort of blueprint that guides the arranging of those formulas in a logical, narrative fashion.

Lord also commentates on the concept of ‘fixity’ or ‘stability’ in the oral tradition. As oral singers lack the ability to read and write or to record and listen to a song, his concept of accuracy revolves, not around using the same words in the same places as a modern, Western listener would contend, but in the ‘essence of the story itself’.³⁰ Furthermore, as the oral poet remains an avid listener of songs for the entirety of his career, the tradition as a whole can correct erring individuals. Lord mentions an instance in which the same singer singing the same song had been recorded twice with different endings: a sad one the first time and a happy one the second time, positing his hearing of the correct version of the song in between the two performances as the impetus for such a change.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 25, 28

²⁹ Ibid., 68, 80-1

³⁰ Ibid., 99

³¹ Ibid., 118

Lord mentions some of the changes a song is likely to undergo, such as ‘elaboration or simplification’ and different-ordered series.³² Songs also are susceptible to substitution of different variants of the same theme, such as one disguise for another, and to a change in ending, resulting either from a composite of the endings of two different songs, which is frowned upon, or from an artistic desire for a more complete narrative.³³ Finally, sometimes one hero replaces another as the protagonist, as “with some tales at least the *type* of the hero is more significant to their specific story than the *specific* hero.”³⁴

However, the song is susceptible to mild, willful corruption, not in overall narrative but in detail. Lord notes an instance in which the same singer in two performances is guilty of this. In the first a messenger seeks out one the characters at a mosque. In the second he seeks out the same character in a town. Lord believes this corruption in the second to be due to the fact that the president of a political party, who would likely respond negatively to the inclusion of a mosque, was in the audience.³⁵ However, instead of scrapping the scene totally, the singer did faithfully modify it so that the overall narrative would be faithfully preserved.

To the literate, modern thinker, there is some tangible thing that exists that is the song, as a recording or a set of lyrics, to compare subsequent renditions of a song. To the oral singer, the song never exists tangibly, and only exists at all in the instant in which one sings it and in his mind as a general narrative. What matters to him or her is the accuracy of the story, not its structure or diction. For example, consider two witnesses giving a police report. One may contain details the other wholly omits, or the two may use different adjectives or verbs to describe the same action, but they both give the same picture of what happened. The oral poet

³² Ibid., 119

³³ Ibid., 119-20

³⁴ Ibid., 120

³⁵ Ibid., 118

would call them both the same report, while the modern person would call them different reports. This model of the oral poet's understanding of the song is confirmed by an instance in which a contemporary Slavic oral poet was asked how long it took him to learn a song. He boasted that he could repeat any song after only hearing it once, set to a gusle.³⁶ Another poet, possibly the best of his day, Avdo, actually succeeded in this challenge. Parry arranged for a fellow singer to perform a song Avdo had never heard before. After the performance, Parry asked the Avdo if he could perform the song he had just heard for the first time. Immediately, he produced a version triple the length of the one he had just heard.³⁷

Another distinction of note between the modern reader/writer and the oral poet is the concept of originality. The reader/writer idealizes originality, both from the standpoint of creativity and textuality. He or she, in research, will strive to find the earliest version of a text, if not the original copy, to discover what the author said verbatim. The author will strive to express ideas in a manner never before done, both to win acclaim and avoid accusations of plagiarism. To the oral poet, the idea of originality is worthless and even slightly stigmatic. He or she gleans the vast majority of the phrases, or formulas, from the established tradition, as well as most of the themes and narratives. Any 'original' narrative, despite being composed of numerous dated formulas and themes, would be most likely inferior, as it would not have been practiced and polished as frequently or for as long as a song established in the tradition. Furthermore, if others do not take up the song, it will die out of the tradition.³⁸

According to Lord, unless the oral poet sings in the typical performance style, in which he or she sings along with a gusle at a steady rhythm, the poetry will inherently suffer from aberrations, and the singer will have a difficult time producing it. For instance some singers

³⁶ Ibid., 99

³⁷ Albert Bates Lord, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 68

³⁸ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, (New York City: Atheneum, 1974), 100

‘cannot produce two lines’ without the gusle, while in others a distinct change in rhythmic patters is observed in the poetry they produce.³⁹ This causes problems when writing is introduced into an illiterate society and scribes attempt to record songs. These problems mean that “a dictated text, even when it is done under the best of circumstances and by the best of scribes, is never entirely, from the point of view of line structure, the same as a sung text.”⁴⁰ However, one aspect of dictation allows oral poetry to not be corrupted beyond recognition into a work of literature: the singer will never edit the song in any manner after it is recorded, as a writer would, and so the dictation will remain a work of the oral tradition.⁴¹ A singer will have been lost to the literary tradition when he or she begins to memorize ‘fixed text’ written versions of a song instead of recreating them from formulas.⁴² Thus, the end of a tradition can be reasonably dated to the widespread proliferation and imitation of collections of written songs.⁴³

When then, might one ask, will one have made the jump from an oral to a literary tradition? When one composes through writing, the total reliance upon formulaic phrases and the traditional metrical pattern is relinquished. While a singer might accidentally abandon the formulaic in small portions of his or her songs, such will not be a desired occurrence, but an awkward mistake. When a writer thinks that the formulaic has become the awkward and the unpatterned the norm, he or she will have abandoned the oral tradition for the literary. Thus, an oral composition can be distinguished from a literary text by the frequency of formulas.⁴⁴ Lord denies the existence of any middle ground, or ‘transitional’ tradition between the two.⁴⁵

³⁹ Ibid., 127

⁴⁰ Ibid., 127

⁴¹ Ibid., 128

⁴² Ibid., 137

⁴³ Ibid., 138

⁴⁴ Ibid., 130

⁴⁵ Ibid., 132

The main payoff of the work of Lord to this thesis is his development of the theory of Parry regarding the spontaneous composition of songs and the utilization of traditional formulas. His insight on the training and performance of a modern singer reveals much about the nature of the oral tradition: the preservation of narrative events, not words; the overwhelming influence of the audience; the lack of verbatim fixity and the singer's own conceptions of accuracy; the ephemerality of the spoken word; the tradition's tendency to correct itself; and the transition between oral and literary traditions. Taken together, these characteristics can be used to fashion the framework of the pre-Synoptic oral tradition. Preservation of long speeches of Jesus and the wording of the earliest stories about him are likely lost, but the key narrative events quite feasibly could have been transmitted accurately, especially over such a short period of time, between actions and written record. Also important is Lord's mention of the tendency of the tradition to correct itself. If one person began to tell an erring story of Jesus, he or she could potentially hear a correct version of the story in the future and change his or her version accordingly.

Eric Havelock:

Havelock proposes that one refer to the Greeks in the time of Homer not as 'illiterate', which connotes a failure to achieve a technology fundamental to society, but as 'preliterate' or 'nonliterate', to indicate that literacy was not something established in their society for them to neglect.⁴⁶ This appears to be an important distinction, as it helps distance one who hails from a literate mindset from his or her assumptions about the superiority of such a mindset. One should also keep in mind that the defining characteristic of the human species is its highly developed

⁴⁶ Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution and Its Cultural Consequences*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 4

verbal communication skills, or ability to use language, which the species has had for tens of thousands of years, if not longer.⁴⁷

The main thrust of the work of Havelock centers upon a different interpretation of the function of oral poetry than that expounded by Parry and Lord. He denies their strict analogy between modern Slavic oral singers and ancient Greek oral singers. Modern Slavic culture, as a whole, relies upon a written literary tradition to perpetuate its social, political, and educational structure, and thus Slavic singers serve merely as entertainers. The ancient Greeks relied solely upon the oral tradition to accomplish such lofty purposes, so the Greek poet was “society’s scribe and scholar and jurist, and only in the secondary sense its artist and showman.”⁴⁸ “Poetry was not ‘literature’ but a political and social necessity.”⁴⁹ The Greek epics were meant to be ‘functional and didactic’ rather than ‘aesthetic’ in purpose.⁵⁰ Also to be noted in the work of Havelock is his acknowledgment of the larger ramifications of orality and literacy and the transitional period in between: these effects ranged from philosophical in nature to artistic and political.

Thus, oral tradition in the day of Plato served an integral function of society. Certain parts of a culture, such as ethical, political, and religious values, as well as social conventions and technological innovations, have to be preserved in order for a society to preserve its identity. However, Havelock laconically describes the greatest problem surrounding understanding of the oral tradition as a whole, “it does not fossilize.”⁵¹ Thus, preservation, as well as reinforcement of those values, is accomplished via poetry in an oral society, as in epic poems, plays, and songs.⁵²

⁴⁷ Ibid., 107-9

⁴⁸ Ibid., 93-4

⁴⁹ Ibid., 125

⁵⁰ Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution and Its Cultural Consequences*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 5

⁵¹ Ibid., 6

⁵² Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963),

“The community has to enter into an unconscious conspiracy with itself to keep the tradition alive, to reinforce it in the collective memory of a society where collective memory is only the sum of individuals’ memories and these have continually to be recharged at all levels.”⁵³ The only way to preserve such knowledge is poetic structure, with meter and rhyme. To attain and sustain memory, constant recitation in the educational years and attendance of repetitions in the form of performance during the adult years is necessary.⁵⁴ This constant association with the same pieces of literature leads to an identification with the characters and situations therein, a subjectification of all knowledge. In a primarily literate society, the effort that the oral citizen places on memorization is replaced with an exponential increase in the volume of information encountered, and an objectification of that information takes place.⁵⁵

Havelock moves on to assert that the oral tradition is the foundation for all human culture, not just that of the preliterate Greeks. For how can humans form a culture without a shared language? And how can a language exist without a shared memory bank of words and phrases?⁵⁶ In order for a culture or society to preserve itself into future generations, the offspring have to be inculcated with “socially conditioned habits, customs, laws, history.”⁵⁷ Since writing did not exist for the vast majority of human history, the oral tradition must have been responsible for such cultural continuity. Such a body of oral tradition serves as a sort of ‘supplement’ to one’s DNA, providing a wealth of information accumulated after birth that compels humans to regulate such biological urges as those for sexual intercourse and violent aggression.⁵⁸

41-2

⁵³ Ibid., 44

⁵⁴ Ibid., 43

⁵⁵ Ibid., 44-5

⁵⁶ Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution and Its Cultural Consequences*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

⁵⁷ Ibid., 111

⁵⁸ Ibid., 110-2

Due to this reliance upon oral communication and memorization for preservation, the political figures of the day were likely to be those with the best capacity for oral memory or composition. “Since new directives and judgments were always to be framed in terms of the old...the effective judge or even general tended to be the man with the superior oral memory.”⁵⁹ The political leaders would be those who could compose and perform speeches orally and whose speeches were easily memorizable and thus easily fixable into the minds of the audience and into the minds of those who had to carry out his directives. Thus, the epic formulas of Homer were used in more than just narrative: they were used in political speeches as well.⁶⁰

In addition to affecting the political structure of the preliterate Greece, orality also served as the foundation for artistic expression. The geometric style found in Greek art from that time period, with its repetition of shapes and fixation upon proportions, betrays the rhythmic oral mindset of the society as a whole.⁶¹

Havelock then provides insight surrounding a period in which writing had been introduced into society but had not yet overtaken the oral tradition as the preeminent means of education or ‘intellectual life’, specifically during the time of Plato. Public inscriptions existed, but they were only utilized by a few officials. Poets composed in writing, but their work was conveyed orally.⁶² Athenians learned to read in their secondary education as adolescents, and that literacy built upon a previous, primary oral instruction. “[P]erhaps one learned to write little more than one’s signature...”⁶³ The teachers were often referred to as ‘harpists’, underscoring their function as facilitators of the rote memorization of a fixed and rhythmic oral text.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Ibid., 126

⁶⁰ Ibid., 127

⁶¹ Ibid., 127-8

⁶² Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 39

⁶³ Ibid., 40

⁶⁴ Ibid., 124

Havelock describes this period as one in which “writing skills were gradually but rather painfully being spread through the population without any corresponding increase in fluent reading.”

While more were gaining some knowledge of letters, there was no increase in those gaining more than a perfunctory knowledge of them.

Plato, in the *Republic*, argued the rather bold claim that poets should be banned from society. This statement must be framed in the context of his fight for the completion of the literate revolution. He sought to bring a critical examination of texts, instead of rote memorization, the objectification of information.⁶⁵ Instead of identifying with a work based upon its style or inculcation, a text should be examined objectively based upon the merits of its ideas. Plato’s eventual victory in the battle to make his society literate revolutionized Greek civilization. “Nonliterate speech had favored discourse describing action; the postliterate altered the balance in favor of reflection.”⁶⁶ “The alphabet converted the Greek spoken tongue into an artifact thereby separating it from the speaker and making it into a ‘language,’ that is, an object available for inspection, reflection, analysis.”⁶⁷ “A visible artifact was preservable without recourse to memory. It could be rearranged, reordered, and rethought to produce forms of statement and types of discourse not previously available because they were not not easily memorizable.”⁶⁸

Havelock considers literacy to have finally been achieved by a society when reading and writing begin to be taught in primary schools.⁶⁹ He reasons that literacy implies a communicative connotation. Forms of ‘writing’ like marking days with notches cannot be

⁶⁵ Ibid., 47

⁶⁶ Ibid., 8

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8

⁶⁹ Eric A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution and Its Cultural Consequences*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 27

counted towards literacy because such markings are not meant to communicate to a reader but to oneself. The existence of pictorial representation, which can only be deciphered by an elite few, as the Egyptian script, cannot be counted as 'literacy' either, as such a script is not intended to convey information to a reader but to the other few writers of such a system. Thus Havelock terms such a use of writing 'craft literacy'. A true cultural literacy necessitates the existence of a true body of readers, a general audience to receive the written message, which first became possible in Greece after the invention of the alphabet, and the linking of letters, or symbols, to consonants instead of using pictures to represent ideas, or syllables, as the Phoenicians had done. This allows a reader to fluently 'read' symbols, rather than deciphering them in a blundering fashion.⁷⁰ The reason that reading needs to be taught in primary schools is that a child possesses a much more flexible brain than an adult. One brought up in the oral tradition is highly unlikely to ever achieve fluency of reading and writing, while one reared in literacy will likely succeed in inculcating it.⁷¹

Interestingly, Havelock attributes the philosophy of atomism to the invention of the alphabet. In the alphabet the Greeks had rendered the infinite possibilities of language using a finite number of sounds, or letters, which inspired the idea that the universe could be composed in such a manner, from alternate compositions of finite atoms.⁷² He also attributes the proliferation of democratic ideals to the achievement of literacy, since it put a form of enduring communication into the hands of a large portion of citizens, thus subverting the power up until then held by priests, who during the stage of 'craft literacy' had largely theocratized society.⁷³

⁷⁰ Ibid., 56-9, 67-8

⁷¹ Ibid., 62

⁷² Ibid., 81-2

⁷³ Ibid., 83

When literacy overtakes orality, poetry is stripped of its status as preserver of cultural record and transmogrified into an aesthetic practice. Furthermore, the political figure “ceases to be a bard and becomes a ‘thinker’.”⁷⁴ Existing on the frontier of this shift explains Plato’s virulent polemics against the ‘Sophists’ and thus the modern pejorative term ‘sophistry’.

According to Havelock, history itself is the progeny of literacy and the alphabet. Oral tradition deals with the present, with current events, values, and sensibilities. At most, details of the generation of one’s grandfather is maintained. “What is preserved of the past is partial and incidental, and is woven into coherence by the use of fantasy, like the Mycenaean background emplaced in the Homeric poems.”⁷⁵

Both Thucydides and Herodotus, existing in the transitional period between orality and literacy, found themselves drawing from an oral tradition established to be less than historical, which means their history is also not up to par by modern standards. “Their kind of meditative chronicling is written in a freedom from the past, a freedom we cannot easily imagine, one untrammelled by great complexities of evidence, unburdened by great accumulation of documentation. They could create as their successors could not...” and the work of biographers in the same period were “opposed to what we think of as historical fidelity and scrupulous scholarship...”⁷⁶ Once written documentation of events proliferated, history became bound more closely to fact than it had been in this transitional period.

Also, before the invention of the alphabet, the ‘novel idea’, or original idea, became easily recordable and capable to proliferate, where before the oral tradition and the syllabaries had only been fit to preserve familiar statements that existed in the tradition. Havelock

⁷⁴ Ibid., 11

⁷⁵ Ibid., 23

⁷⁶ Ibid., 24

postulates the emergence of science, philosophy, literature⁷⁷ after the alphabet is due to the its ability to preserve such groundbreaking expressions and ideas.⁷⁸

Havelock accuses with some certainty that, in the Second Temple period, the Old Testament underwent a ‘theological editing’ that ‘restricted the realism of the original narrative’.⁷⁹ His dismissal of the validity of the Old Testament is cursory at best, and while noteworthy, the reader of this thesis should feel by no means obligated to adhere to it. In spite of this, however, the Old Testament’s repetition of syntax and situations and simplicity of characters and actions give it a sort of rhythm that gives it an appeal to ‘simple people’.⁸⁰ Also, the reason that such writings as the Old Testament, composed with pre-alphabetic syllabaries, tend towards mythical and religious subjects, is that the ambiguity of the writing technology being used required writers to limit themselves to such topics as an audience would be most familiar with, relying upon a working familiarity with the oral tradition.⁸¹ Due to this ambiguity, there was a general trend for writings in syllabaries to be a paraphrase of the more expansive oral originals they were based upon.⁸² However simplified, there would remain enough ambiguity for readers to interpret in various ways, which lead to multifarious interpretations of the Torah and other Jewish religious texts.⁸³ The existence of an original and poeticized oral form also rings true with the Synoptic Gospels, which existed originally in Aramaic oral form.⁸⁴

By far the greatest contribution of Havelock’s work to this thesis is his presentation of the oral culture as a whole: its mindset, educational apparatus, and its decline and death. He also

⁷⁷ Havelock uses literature in the modern sense, which denotes a form of written *belle lettre* that strives to achieve effect by striking and original composition, as opposed to the general sense that Parry uses to describe the narratives of Homer.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 88

⁷⁹ Ibid., 72

⁸⁰ Ibid., 72-3

⁸¹ Ibid., 73-9

⁸² Ibid., 75

⁸³ Ibid., 76

⁸⁴ Ibid., 76

presents the disconnect between an oral and a literate culture, the transitional phase between the two, and the bias the latter holds towards the former. All of this is important to understand in regards to this thesis, as it is integral in determining the lens through which to view the stories of Jesus found in the Gospels. One must begin to think in terms of the oral tradition, and its ramifications on all aspects of life, to evaluate its feasibility.

Also of note is Havelock's description of the histories of Thucydides and Herodotus. It is likely that the writers of the Gospels composed them in a manner similar to the histories of these two Greeks, drawing from oral narratives unconcerned with modern standards of historical 'truth', like hard-evidence types of textual documents. It is not unreasonable to state that the Gospels contain what a modern person would consider to be errors in number and place and a lack of regard for chronology. Just as Homer elaborated new details into his stories when dictating them, the evangelists could have done the same in their written compositions. Yet, as the singer had an ethical duty to report the 'truth' in an oral context, that is to remain true to the overall events and message of the story, how much more the evangelists, when writing of things they or their mentors witnessed firsthand and to which they had devoted their lives, can be assumed to have taken measures to ensure adherence to integral themes and narrative events like the resurrection.

Ruth Finnegan:

Finnegan denies the Parry-Lord definition of oral poetry in favor of a much broader definition – that which is distributed, composed, or performed via oral means.⁸⁵ Within this she

⁸⁵ Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 16

would include not only the epics focused upon by Parry and Lord but, to a certain extent, the work of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and top forty pop singers, as well as ‘oral prose’, which implicitly includes speeches and plays.⁸⁶ She candidly recognizes such a definition of oral poetry as wide in scope.⁸⁷

To justify her classification of oral poetry, she attempts to demonstrate how each singular method of defining oral poetry, by oral composition, transmission, and performance, is an inadequate definition of the whole process. She criticizes the classification by composition by providing examples of poets, particularly in Eskimo and other cultures, who spend long durations composing an oral poem to perform it on a separate occasion, sometimes even by someone else. Also put forward is the example of a text being composed orally before performance and having a portion of it improvised or edited during performance. In addition to this many of the famous oral epics, like *Beowulf* and the work of Homer are circulated almost entirely in print today. Furthermore, there exists a large number of written ballads that were brought to America by immigrants in oral form, which proliferated throughout entire immigrant communities.⁸⁸ It is precisely this conflict of mediums between criteria, as in poems composed orally but circulated in writing, that presents ambiguity as to what exactly can be defined as oral poetry. Thus, the degree of orality of any given work is relative and “‘oral poetry’ is constantly overlapping with ‘written poetry’.”⁸⁹ In this way the clean break provided by Parry and Lord between oral poetry and written poetry, apart from those poems meeting all three of the proposed criteria for orality, fails in a number of cases. If one accepts Finnegan’s definition of orality, then one could say the modern society still has active intercourse with the oral tradition.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 14, 16

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22

⁸⁸ Ibid., 18-9

⁸⁹ Ibid., 22

Finnegan also deals with the transmission of oral literature throughout generations. She develops the model of memorization as opposed to the Parry-Lord model of transmissions and reports claims that the Indian religious text *Rgveda*, about 40,000 lines long, could be in a large part reassembled from oral memory if the textual copies were destroyed.⁹⁰ In addition, she mentions an instance in which a song taken from a British songbook closely matched a version taken from an American folk singer two hundred years later with no access to such book and a sort of geographic isolation from many surrounding would-be new settlers.⁹¹ She uses this instance and others like it to prove “lengthy unchanging transmission over wide areas and/or through long periods of time as the expected mode of oral transmission.”⁹² However, she does hold that, for the most part, exact transmission is not characteristic of oral tradition and instead faithful variants of the same piece are transmitted.⁹³ Finnegan concludes that any universalized model of oral tradition is unobtainable and that accurate information about any particular feature of the tradition can only be obtained from researching that particular feature.⁹⁴ Factors that can affect the accuracy of transmission are the personality of the storyteller or singer, cultural expectations for the degree of accuracy, and the purpose of the piece. For instance, if a text has been deemed canonical by an organized religion, it is more likely to be faithfully preserved than a text that has not achieved this distinction.⁹⁵

Finnegan raises an important point about oral tradition. No matter how well one establishes a general model through research, one can never obtain perfectly accurate knowledge about any singular event in a specific oral tradition. In order to even test such a claim of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 135

⁹¹ Ibid., 136-7

⁹² Ibid., 139

⁹³ Ibid., 141

⁹⁴ Ibid., 152

⁹⁵ Ibid., 153-4

accuracy with absolute certainty, for example of the New Testament, one would need no less than video evidence of each event in the life of Jesus to compare with the Gospel accounts. However, even video evidence can be doctored, so even this certainty is unobtainable. Thus, the purpose of this thesis is not to determine outright and irrefutably the veracity of the written Gospels, but merely to demonstrate the feasibility of transmission from the oral to the written tradition.

Jack Goody:

Goody mentions the tendency of a singer, after having learned a song and performed it once, to adhere relatively closely to his own version.⁹⁶ This means that the discrepancies between versions are due mostly to a translation into the speaker's own words, which he or she will then more or less retain in a stable structure. He also mentions the effect the audience can have on a tale: during an African civil war, there existed a class of traveling singers that changed their description of events to suit whichever side to which they were now singing.⁹⁷ This approximates Jesus' use of cryptic parables, to avoid being persecuted for his dramatic and theologically revolutionary claims.

Goody also deals with the question of what makes a work oral in nature. Since Milton was blind when composing *Paradise Lost*, the poem must have been composed in an oral sense, dictated to a scribe similarly to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but the two sets of works differ in one integral aspect – the tradition from which they hail. *Paradise Lost*, as the product of a well-established literary tradition, cannot be reasonably recognized as an oral composition.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 81

⁹⁷ Ibid., 87-8

⁹⁸ Ibid., 91-2

Goody confirms the idea that dictation changes the nature of the poem in African culture much the same as it did in Yugoslavia. Poems being dictated were more developed and ornate than those composed under typical conditions, as the singer was no longer pressed for time in being forced to keep up a musical tempo.⁹⁹

He questions the claim of the Indian scriptures of the Vedas being transmitted accurately for hundreds of years through oral tradition alone due to the fundamental necessity of a written text for testing such a claim of accuracy.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the texts possess a degree of organization that is inconceivable for a purely oral text, which controverts claims of those preserving said texts that they were composed by purely oral means at the beginning of the world. Such claims are deemed by Goody “an attempt to legitimate Holy Writ.”¹⁰¹

One of the benefits of oral communication over written is the exigency of the author’s presence and his or her subsequent ability to frame discussion and provide clarification. Once a work is published in written form, the author is no longer needed to impart the material and the burden of interpretation is shifted largely to the reader.¹⁰² For this reason, the Brahmins of India sought to preserve the text of the Vedas through oral means instead of proliferating written copies of it. In this way, similarly to the Catholic Church or the scribes of Israel, they ensured both their personal status and adherence to orthodox interpretation of their scriptures.¹⁰³

When the authority of an established written religion is questioned, it results in an intentional and revolutionary divide, as in the Protestant Reformation. When an oral religion is

⁹⁹ Ibid., 95-6

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 111

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 117

¹⁰² Ibid., 118

¹⁰³ Ibid., 119

questioned, it results in a fluid ‘incorporation’ of external and seemingly conflicting elements, a synthesis.¹⁰⁴

Goody postulates that an oral religion is by necessity only a religion of birth or geography. Since there exists no finite, set creed, one cannot join a tribal religion unless he or she is born into or becomes a part of the tribe. However, one can convert to a written religion like Christianity or Islam by following established written precepts.¹⁰⁵

One consequence of an oral society is reverence to one’s elders. In an oral society the only way to gain information is to hear tales from one’s elders or experience things personally. Therefore, the elders provide the young with myths, farming practices, tribal customs, etc., and thus are indispensable to society. Once literacy emerges, authors supplant elders. Instead of learning one’s history from oral narrative, one can read it in a book. Thus, the elders lose much of their esteem.¹⁰⁶

According to Goody the fact that Islam is based upon a written work preserves a universal form of Islam that can be brought to the entire world. If a religion is not contained in a text, it is susceptible to the ‘transmuting power of the oral tradition’ and liable to break into local sects. “The Qu’ran immortalizes Muhammad, or the myth of Muhammad...”¹⁰⁷

Goody asserts that many in a transitionally literate society will rely upon memorizing a fixed text version of a written work, which is why such texts as the Bible contain mnemonic

¹⁰⁴ Goody, Jack. *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 10

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 5

¹⁰⁶ Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 149-50

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 133

devices to facilitate this memorization.¹⁰⁸ As in such a society literacy is not common and the copying of texts is expensive, this is the most effective means of proliferating such materials.

Goody's presentation and undermining of the long oral preservation of the Vedas shows an instance in which a society spread misinformation regarding a religious text in order to bolster the legitimacy of said religious text. If this could be proven a trend, the willing dissemination of falsehoods regarding holy books, this trend would be alarming when considering the Bible. It does, in fact, raise some concerns about the Old Testament and should be kept in mind when considering the claims of Gerhardsson about the transmission of the Oral Torah below.

However, what the Vedas had in common with the Old Testament is that both had their origins in prehistory and were passed along orally for many generations. The Gospels were composed in a time when writing was fairly common by those who witnessed the events or who were disciples of someone involved in the events. Thus their veracity is unaffected by the dubious claims of prehistoric religious texts. The stories of Christ, having been transmitted to these people by one or no degrees of separation, would not have undergone a large number of the restructurings into paraphrase that occur when an oral tale is transmitted, and thus would be likely to closely adhere to the actual events of Christ's life.

Walter J. Ong:

Even in comparison to the Ancient Greeks, the Hebrews relied quite heavily upon orality, for to them, understanding came through hearing, as is demonstrated in the statement that those

¹⁰⁸ Jack Goody, *Myth, Ritual and the Oral*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45

who *heard* the Gospel would be saved.¹⁰⁹ This is likely due to the fact that words convey the presence and thus power of the speaker.

Ong reveals much about a literate person's difficulty in conceiving of a purely oral culture by revealing an anecdote in which one folk singer is introducing another. He describes the song the other is about to sing as not being a 'literary ballad' because it had not been written but composed orally, then saying it had been "written by the author while he was singing it to his audience."¹¹⁰ This exposes a bias inherent to the modern English language that prevents facility in conceiving pure orality. He describes a modern view of oral cultural as a negative one, not focusing on what it is, but what it lacks – writing. He likens this to referring "to a horse never as a horse but always as a four-legged automobile without wheels."¹¹¹ He accuses such a view of "interfering with our understanding of the nature of the Bible..."¹¹², a claim that, if true, holds much value for this thesis, for understanding the nature of a text is vitally important for determining the plausibility of that text. Ong then remarks that one must keep in perspective that "writing is derivative of speech, not vice versa, and that speech in its original state has nothing to do with writing."¹¹³

Ong moves on to detail the differences between a primarily literate culture and a purely oral culture. Like Havelock, he holds that in a purely oral society modern history does not exist and the main concern is with the present. Also, historical facts tend to "become inextricably entangled with myth." However, he contends that members of oral cultures have remarkable memories, those that exceed the capacities of any literate man.¹¹⁴ In this way, the Christian need

¹⁰⁹ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 3

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 21

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 21

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 21

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23

not be worried by the above statement regarding the tendency toward myth, as the stories told in the Church up until the time of the Gospels were often firsthand accounts from the memories of witness and not those which would have gained sufficient distance from real events to become entangled in myth.

Since oral cultures are cultures of the word, or the spontaneous oral utterance, learning took place in a much different fashion in those cultures than it does currently. Whereas learning now is considered work to be accomplished more or less individually through reading, in an oral culture it happened through events in which words were spoken, like the singing of epic poems during a feast or the performance of a play, events in which an entire tribe or family could partake.¹¹⁵ In fact, the Hebrew word for ‘word’ and ‘event’ are the same: *dabar*.¹¹⁶ A consequence of the communal cultural aspect inherent to an oral culture is a lack of originality or independent thought. Almost everything one learns in an oral culture is through verbal fellowship with one’s tribe, in which any new knowledge would be disseminated quickly without the notion of credit that proves so important in a written society, and is explained in reference to the familiar. In fact, “[s]ustained thought in an oral culture is tied to communication.”¹¹⁷ Only literacy grants the kind of individuality that is capable of fostering a mind like that of Newton.¹¹⁸

Even orators in oral societies, while not poetizing their content, rely heavily on the mnemonic so that their words will persevere. The Beatitudes, for instance, use a sort of balanced symmetry, a formula in which each group is blessed and inherits something.¹¹⁹ However, the type of memory facilitated by such structures, except in the case of some short proverbs, has never been demonstrated verbatim in any studies on oral cultures. This is due to the fact that

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 30

¹¹⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 32

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 34

¹¹⁸ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 40

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 30

insistence on verbatim reproduction of a fixed text is a concept that only is possible and conceivable in a literate society. An oral society lacks a fixed text for comparison.¹²⁰

Even after writing and literacy had established themselves deeply into a culture, orality persisted as the favored form of communications for extended periods of time. Socrates wrote not at all; Plato wrote in dialogue form to maintain faithfulness to orality; Cicero wrote down his speeches only after he had given them, sometimes years later.¹²¹ Through the Renaissance, examinations in universities were oral disputations; writing was used primarily to learn Latin, not to compose papers on subjects.¹²² This is because the oral medium has a number of substantial advantages of the written medium. Oral speech can convey intonation; the very manner in which one utters words can change their meaning and every human capable of speech is capable of this. Tone is far more difficult to convey through writing and is only accomplished effectively by elite writers.¹²³ This is likely what concerned the early Church fathers about committing their words to the ambiguity of writing.

However, orality lacks one fundamental advantage of literacy. A written text can be edited, for factuality, coherence, grammatical errors, artifice, etc. An oral utterance lacks this capability, for there is “no way to erase a spoken word: corrections do not remove an infelicity or an error, they merely supplement it with denial and patchwork.” Corrections in written texts tend to be productive, while those in oral speeches tend to be counterproductive.

Ong mentions the abundance of redundancy in any substantial oral communication. It is necessary due to the fact that a speaker often faces acoustical problems when talking to large groups and risks having portions of his or her speech not received by the audience. To combat

¹²⁰ Ibid., 32

¹²¹ Ibid., 56

¹²² Ibid., 59

¹²³ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 100

this inefficiency, a large number of similar expressions are utilized to ensure the entire audience understands.¹²⁴

Ong notes a particular trend in oral cultures, to overthrow longstanding religious practices deemed defunct in favor of new ones to bring practical results. Thus, when bad harvests or other misfortunes beset a society, that society is liable to invent a new cult to prevent such misfortunes. However, such cults or shrines “are seldom if ever explicitly touted for their novelty but are presented as fitting the traditions of the ancestors,” in order to satiate the oral culture’s desire for the established.¹²⁵

Furthermore, the oral tradition lacks the means of abstractions of ideas that writing offers. Thus, knowledge is inseparable from narrative and often is expressed in terms of a violent struggle.¹²⁶ Oral characters tend to be heroic and monumental, doers of great deeds, because those are the kind of characters likely to persist in the oral memory.¹²⁷ This explains why many of the Christ stories that survived through oral transmission were stories of healing, exorcism, or generally shocking prophetic action, such as the cursing of a fig tree and the turning over of tables in the Temple. Also, this proclivity for narrative elucidates why, even when teachings of Jesus are related, they tend to fit into some kind of narrative framework, as in parables, hostile reactions from crowd members, or even in his standing on a mountaintop or having his disciples harvest in a grain field.

The application to the early church of Ong’s work is vital. The early church formed a community based around the disciples of Jesus, who had heard his teachings many times and bore witness to the key events of his life. As such a community was by and large an oral

¹²⁴ Ibid., 40

¹²⁵ Ibid., 42

¹²⁶ Ibid., 44

¹²⁷ Ibid., 69

community, which Ong contends is one in which conservatism and adherence to traditional modes of thought is the norm, it is unlikely that any major and intentional theological corruptions were made by an individual during the interval in between the death of Jesus and the composition of the Gospels. Such a corruption would be a novel thought, which Ong argues would not exist in an oral society such as this.

Birger Gerhardsson:

All ancient Jews considered the Torah to be directly bequeathed to them by God and to cover every aspect of life.¹²⁸ The Torah, dependent on which kind of Jew is queried, could include just the written Law of Moses, or a number of other written works and a surrounding oral tradition, which included a sort of commentary on the written aspect that the Sadducees rejected as binding and the Pharisees objected to writing down yet followed zealously.¹²⁹

Gerhardsson explains that the preservation of an oral religious tradition is due in some part to every member of the community but mostly due to those whose profession was the religion.¹³⁰ The traditions of Israel were preserved not only by word of mouth but by a remarkable number of rituals and ceremonies, such as feasts and the Sabbath. Furthermore, the education and judicial system of Israel were inextricably connected to the Torah, so its preservation incidentally consumed numerous facets of life. Part of each child's education was the memorization of passages from the Torah and every Sabbath day he or she would receive instruction in ethical and legal precepts based upon that holy book.¹³¹ In general, both Jewish and gentile education in antiquity involved the memorization of passages prior to exegesis, for

¹²⁸ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory & Manuscript with Tradition & Transmission in Early Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 19

¹²⁹ Ibid., 20-3

¹³⁰ Ibid., 71

¹³¹ Ibid., 73-4

books were rare and expensive.¹³² In this way sometimes the wording of an oral text may be preserved where the understanding of it may be forgotten.¹³³

Gerhardsson claims that, while the ancient Gentiles would preserve the ideas of another in paraphrase, in Israel “[a] person’s views were conveyed in his own words” and a “reverence and care for the *ipsissima verba*¹³⁴ of each authority remains unaltered.”¹³⁵ He backs up this statement with an example of a teaching preserved in the Talmud in which an obsolete measurement is mentioned in a purification rite.¹³⁶ However, the commentary accompanying the passage was treated in the traditional oral sense, with exact wording being neglected in favor of the paraphrase.¹³⁷

He claims that the oral Torah was preserved faithfully through memory. Such large passages, the entirety of the traditional interpretations and commentaries on the written Torah, were inculcated through constant repetition. It was very ‘seldom’ that Rabbis gave accounts of the oral Torah in their own words, for they could quote that which they had memorized.¹³⁸ Institutes of higher learning existed to provide for this hefty memorization, due to the disdain of the Pharisees for writing down the oral Torah and the infeasibility of amassing sufficient quantities of written Torah without the advent of printing. There was a separation between the Rabbis, who provided the variable interpretations and some fixed oral portions, and the *tannaim*, who provided large numbers of fixed portions of the oral Torah from memory, much like the Greek rhapsodists provided the epics of Homer from memory. It was the *tannaim* who were the standard of comparison to base one’s memorization upon. In fact, the Rabbis would often call on

¹³² Ibid., 126

¹³³ Ibid., 129

¹³⁴ exact wording

¹³⁵ Ibid., 130

¹³⁶ Ibid., 131

¹³⁷ Ibid., 132

¹³⁸ Ibid., 80-1

the *tannaim* to recite the oral Torah for them. Each *tannaim* would memorize only a portion of the existent oral scriptures and how much he memorized was dependent upon his individual abilities.¹³⁹ In this way “...the basic material [of the oral Torah] is carried on as formulated oral texts, recorded in the memories of teachers, pupils and professional traditionists, ready to be quoted or otherwise used when required.”¹⁴⁰ He goes on to relate claims that such memorization could be achieved through merely four repetitions from a teacher.¹⁴¹ To aid in this sort of verbatim memorization, Rabbis would strive to formulate their sayings so as to make them as terse and striking as possible.¹⁴²

While the Jews recognized that the oral Torah had come from various Jewish leaders throughout their history, they considered “the oral Torah as a whole as the interpretation of the written Torah – an interpretation given by God on Sinai.”¹⁴³

The authors of the Gospels hesitated to write them because they valued the oral method of transmission over the written. When orally conveying information, one has the possibility of accompanying it with an interpretation, as seen with the Rabbis of the period.¹⁴⁴ Gerhardsson speculates that the first written Christian stories were stored in notebooks and were drawn upon by Mark in writing his Gospel. He claims that this explains the existence of the gospels in codex rather than scrolls, when in both Hellenic and Jewish cultures at the time, the scroll was by far the preferred method of writing.¹⁴⁵ Until the second century, the Gospels were not seen as Scripture, but part of a holy tradition that was carried on mostly orally.¹⁴⁶ Before this, he postulates that early churches functioned much like synagogues: a teacher would quote from a

¹³⁹ Ibid., 94-6

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 113

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 120

¹⁴² Ibid., 137

¹⁴³ Ibid., 82

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 197

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 202

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 202

fixed oral tradition and interpret the passage.¹⁴⁷ He demonstrates the feasibility of mastering the early Christian oral tradition through discipleship: Iraneus had been taught by Polycarp, who himself learned from John. Gerhardsson claims that Iraneus not only learned the general narrative of the tradition, but exact quotations of it through the ‘grace of God’ and the use of some notes. Instead of the written word, most early Christians relied upon the spoken word and its authority through association with prominent disciples and apostles, much in the same way Rabbinic oral tradition was carried on.¹⁴⁸ They constantly were available and called upon to bear witness to the stories of Christ and check the oral tradition.¹⁴⁹ As disciples called by Christ, they held tremendous authority in questions of his teachings and the events of his life.¹⁵⁰ Gerhardsson even claims that Jesus instructed his disciples to memorize certain oral texts of his teachings.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, “[r]emembering the attitude of Jewish disciples to their master, it is unrealistic to suppose that forgetfulness and the exercise of a pious imagination had too much hand in transforming authentic memories beyond all recognition in the course of a few short decades.”¹⁵²

Not having utilized the work of Parry or Lord in his bibliography in developing a thesis about orality, Gerhardsson has already set himself up for criticism concerning his understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the oral tradition. His assertion that long passages of the oral Torah could be composed and transmitted orally verbatim, through repetition and infrequent utilizations of outline-like notes, is untenable when one consults field research about oral traditions.¹⁵³ Such a claim is impossible to make, as, without the existence of a written, fixed text, there is no method of evaluating one to one differences in wording between two recitations

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 203

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 204-7

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 221

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 262

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 328

¹⁵² Ibid., 329

¹⁵³ See these sections for denials of verbatim memorization of oral compositions: Parry, Lord, Ong, Goody, Finnegan, and Kelber.

with any sort of certainty. Thus, his central thesis of perfect transmission of the words of Jesus to the Gospels falls short.

However, he mentions an aspect of the Gospel tradition that carries some merit in establishing its authenticity: the existence of a close knit group of disciples in the early church and the preservation of the oral tradition through future generations of disciples, such as Polycarp and Irenaeus. These men followed Jesus and witnessed most of the integral events of his life and the utterance of his most important teachings and preserved these teachings through praxis. While verbatim wording cannot be transmitted via praxis, a good approximation of the content of those words can be supposed to have been passed on through the living example of discipleship. Furthermore, as disciples, and disciples of the first disciples, the early Christian church possessed an effective and authoritative means of correcting any aberrations in the tradition, written or oral, and, as these disciples devoted their lives to Jesus, they would be unlikely to willingly support blatant bastardizations of his teachings. Furthermore, Jesus likely repeated his core teaching numerous times in the different places in which he traveled, so the disciples may have heard key teachings of his multiple times with verbal variations, which raises the likelihood of their accurate transmission into the Gospel tradition.¹⁵⁴ Also, this means that there existed no fixed version of any major teaching of Jesus to corrupt, merely a main idea and general narrative.

Werner Kelber:

Kelber describes the degree of literacy of ancient Israel, particularly in the regions where Jesus taught and, like Gerhardsson, he affirms the firm tendency of mainstream Jews, such as the Pharisees, to favor the oral. He notes that most of Jesus' itinerant teachings took place in rural

¹⁵⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), 170

Israel, where writing was even less prevalent than in urban areas such as Jerusalem.¹⁵⁵

Furthermore, all of Jesus' teaching took place orally and the only mention of him writing is in the sand, a form of writing, which would not last and thus cannot be classified as true, communicative writing but rather a rhetorical device.¹⁵⁶ In fact, Kelber goes on to classify Jesus as an oral performer of sorts, not wholly unlike a singer typified by Parry and Lord, susceptible to many of the same constraints of the ephemerality of the spoken word, audience concerns, and spontaneous composition. The teachings of Jesus also utilize a large number of mnemonic devices and traditional formulaic devices, which proclaims both their orality and the feasibility of their transmission.¹⁵⁷ However, Kelber stresses "[v]erbatim memorization as a key factor in oral transmission has been abandoned by the majority of experts, who now admit the inevitability of change, flexibility, and degrees of improvisation."¹⁵⁸

Kelber criticizes the transmission model of Gerhardsson for not taking oral transmission seriously as a form of oral discourse, in which the speaker, audience, and message all interact with one another, and treating it rather as a written text transmitted orally.¹⁵⁹ Instead, "oral tradition is controlled by the law of *social identification* rather than by the technique of verbatim memorization."¹⁶⁰ Kelber holds that the oral tradition that was transmitted to the Gospels was preserved because its audience, who later became its speakers, identified with it and so felt compelled to pass it on. Those who did identify with the message of Jesus, such as the apostles, "needed no aids in writing because they practiced the message they preached."¹⁶¹ However, the Gospel message was also transmitted by those who identified with it in principle if not in their

¹⁵⁵ Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 17

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 18

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 27

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 27

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 23

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 24

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 25

actual lifestyle, such as the common people.¹⁶² Some of the messages of Jesus would have identified with nearly every Jew who heard them, for they involved enormous eschatological claims and subversion of the contemporary understanding of the Temple and the Sabbath.

Kelber criticizes those who insinuate that the stories of Jesus grew more and more fanciful as the years passed by suggesting that “[l]oss and discontinuity no less than growth and continuity dictate the realities of oral life.”¹⁶³ Unless a story strikes others as important and compels them to retell it, the story will be lost forever. Furthermore, as a story is passed on, an act of ‘selective retention’ occurs in the audience members. They retain the key narrative events and forget superfluous details. Also, there is a constant rearrangement of the order of events and a substitution of similar themes for one another.¹⁶⁴ These characteristics of oral tradition frame Havelock’s comments about modern history not existing in the oral tradition.

The disciples and their disciples, the Church fathers and authors of the Gospels, knew well the theme and message of the story and practice of Jesus. They knew the overall purpose of Jesus’ ministry and the significance of his Messianic and divine claims. They witnessed his resurrection and knew its import. They heard his condemnation of the Temple and saw him vindicated in their lifetimes. Thus, they had a lens through which they could view any stories about Jesus from the tradition and accept or reject them as ‘true’ or ‘false’ in the oral sense, meaning faithful to the gist of events and attitudes rather than indicative of modern historical precision of quotations and events.

This makes sense of Kelber’s statement that “[o]ne must declare unworkable the model of a tightly knit community of early Christians committed to the preservation and transmission of

¹⁶² Ibid., 25

¹⁶³ Ibid., 29

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 29

a single Gospel.”¹⁶⁵ More than a critique of Gerhardsson’s theory of verbatim transmission of a singular group of Gospel events, this typifies early Christian oral tradition as a whole. If one told a story of Jesus healing only two lepers in a certain place and another told of him healing seven at the same place, the early Church fathers would consider both of these stories ‘true.’ Whenever teaching or praxis of a group of Christians violated the general oral ‘truth’ of Jesus, action would be taken, such as Paul’s epistles to erring churches and the condemnation of Valentinian Gnosticism by Irenaeus.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 31

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated the feasibility of the oral transmission of the Christ narratives from the time of his death until the writing of the Gospels. Just as the oral singer could remember the gist of what happened in a song, the disciples could be expected to remember the integral events and teachings of Jesus faithfully, such as his resurrection and cursing of the Temple. Reinforcing this is the idea that Jesus, as an itinerant oral performer/prophet, repeated his key teaching many times in front of his disciples. These disciples, as followers of Jesus, also had his teachings ingrained into their minds through following his praxis. They proceeded to act as witnesses for what they had seen and proliferated stories they knew to be true. The Christian oral tradition had ways of correcting itself, either by errant storytellers hearing correct versions of stories or through rebuke of those who had an authoritative understanding of Jesus' life. The writers of the Gospels themselves, the disciples of Jesus or disciples of the major disciples or apostles, would have known well the main themes of Jesus' ministry and would have been able use this as a lens to accept or reject the admission of oral stories into their written accounts, working more as editors than writers. Furthermore, they lived during the time of Christ and the emergence of great myth in such a time period through such few transmissions is unlikely. Thus, one can conclude that the accurate transmission of the stories of Jesus into the written Gospels is more than feasible and is actually the most likely explanation of events.

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