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How Authentic are the Words of Jesus?

1. MEMORY AND MANUSCRIPT: An Extended Review

By ALAN DUNSTONE, MA, BD, until recently Lecturer in Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield and now engaged in theological work in Papua with the London Missionary Society. In this and the following two articles, three contributors consider some of the issues raised by Birger Gerhardsson's thesis, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, (*Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Uppsaliensis*, XXII), Uppsala, 1961, 397pp., 44s. 6d.

IN 1961 the world of New Testament scholarship was again reminded of its debt to Scandinavia, with the publication of B. Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript*. Five years later, however, there are still some students in this country who are not aware of the significance of this work. It seems, therefore, not inappropriate that the editor has asked me to write an extended

review. There will be three parts to this article. We shall first briefly sketch the arguments used by Gerhardsson; then we shall point to some questions that must be asked of the book; and finally we shall try to show how he reduces the cogency of some of the arguments of Bultmann and the form critics.

THE CASE FOR ORAL TRADITION

The book is divided into two parts. 'Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism', and 'The Delivery of the Gospel Tradition in Early Christianity'. In the introduction the author shows that the form critics, for all their value, were arguing in a circle from the forms of the literary tradition to early church life, *without enough knowledge of the place of tradition in the contemporary world*. He decides that it is necessary to look at *tradition* in Jewish circles and then draw parallels with the Christian tradition.

'The written and the oral Torah'

(Chapter 1) reminds us that God's Torah, written and oral, contained complete guidance for every part of life. Occasionally it was possible for the oral to be written down, though normally the distinction was carefully preserved. (And of course the tendency was to refer back the oral Torah, along with the written, to Moses on Sinai.) 'The Attitude to the Text' (Chapter 2) was one of reverence; yet, by the exercise of sanctified (?) imagination, as many varied conclusions could be drawn from one passage as e.g., we meet in Augustine's sermons. The sacred text awoke many associations; it had to be *preserved*, along with its variant readings, but it had also to be *used*. We next learn (Chapter 3), of the 'deliberate and methodical preservation of the text'. This had a *function per se* and its importance was appreciated. Elementary teaching (Chapter 4) played its part in the preservation of the text, as did public worship (Chapter 5). At the beginning of the Christian era there were two types of Torah School in Judaism (p. 57). Memorizing played a basic educational role in the whole of antiquity.

From the written we pass to the oral Torah. Home, synagogue, school and Beth Din played their part in its preservation (Chapter 6); and we learn more of its character and sub-divisions (Chapter 7) and of the Schools for its study (Chapter 8). The oral Torah was carried (Chapter 9) and passed on (Chapter 10) by a complicated interplay of basic solidity and complementary flexibility. Not only was the whole of the Old Testament known by heart (so that a word could evoke a chapter, e.g. 'In the year . . .') but also the leading commentaries.

Chapter 11 is the longest in Part One and discusses at length some details of the theory and practice of transmission. The material (p. 122) is memorized, and learning the wording precedes learning the meaning. (How often that seems to have been the case with our Lord's disciples.) The conservation of the actual wording was important, as against our contemporary habit of *précis* and vague paraphrase; but condensation and abridgement had their place. Catchwords and mnemonic techniques could be used and even, occasionally, written notes. Techniques of repetition were learnt and pupils could acquire a knowledge of measures to counteract forgetfulness. As to the origins of the Oral Torah (Chapter 12) the desire of the

Rabbis was not to be creative, but to draw out what was there, in spite of many instances of what we call 'reading-in'. This applied not only in the Saying-tradition, but in the Narrative-tradition as well. As against Bultmann (p. 183, n. 8), he argues that for the Rabbis the value of sayings depends on their historicity.

Against that Jewish background, the author sets the evidence of the New Testament about the transmission of the words of Jesus. Chapter 13 speaks of the testimony of the Post-Apostolic Church, in which quite clearly there was a traditional conception of the origin of the Gospels. *Mathetes*, *Hermeneutes*, *akolouthēin* and *akouein* are all important words in the vocabulary of the first- and second-century Christians. Just as the Jews tried to ensure that traditions were passed on orally, so the catechumens were taught to learn by heart. On p. 204 the well-known quotation from Irenaeus is given:

'I can even name the place where the blessed Polycarp sat and taught, where he went out and in. I remember his way of life, what he looked like, the addresses he delivered to the people, how he told of his intercourse with John and with the others who had seen the Lord, how he remembered their words and what he had heard from them about the Lord, about his miracles, and about his teaching. As one who had received this from eyewitnesses of the word of life, Polycarp retold everything in accordance with the Scriptures. I listened to this then, because of the grace of God which was given me, carefully, copying it down, not on paper, but in my heart. And I repeat it constantly in genuine form by the grace of God' (quoted in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.20).

As to the witness of Luke (Chapter 14), Gerhardsson begins by arguing that the dichotomy, 'either a theologian or a reliable historian', is basically false (which of course it is, however many hallowed names may have subscribed to it). He proceeds to show how Jerusalem is related in a significant way to the *Logos Kuriou*, as also are the Apostles. The ministry of Christ and its relation to the Old Testament is examined, and the point is made (though not always rigorously applied to his own argument) that early Christianity was not Torah-centric, but Christo-centric. The Scriptures were given a specific application by Christ. (How many critics have magnified the inventiveness of the early church at the expense of Jesus Himself.) When the

author discusses an early Christian General Session (Acts 15), he claims that if the words of Jesus were definitely known on the subject, then there was no possibility of debate.

Gerhardsson claims that the evidence of Paul (Chapter 15) agrees with that of Luke. The concept of the Apostolate was of the utmost importance to Him, since a chief function of the Apostles was to be both eye-witnesses of the Christ and expounders of Scripture. In place of the Pharasaic tradition with which he broke, Paul speaks of a new oral tradition. On pp. 294ff., Gerhardsson goes into the most interesting question of Paul's attitude to the early Christian tradition of the words and works of Jesus. He makes the provocative and dangerous suggestion that the central corpus of the gospel tradition is the Mishnah, to which the rest of the Apostle's teaching, preaching and legislation is the Talmud. (The teaching of Jesus on which Paul worked could be divided into the doctrinal, the ethical and the ecclesiastical.) Section E of this chapter examines a few of Paul's words that are based on the sayings of Jesus; and shows how much had come to Paul from Jesus via the college of the Apostles.

The last chapter is entitled 'The Origins and Transmission of the Gospel Tradition'. Gerhardsson claims that one cannot understand the origins of the early Christian tradition by beginning with the preaching of the primitive church. The idea that some subtle apologists re-Judaized the gospel material is basically false; and one cannot break off Jesus from His Jewish environs. 'The opinion . . . that the Christology of the N.T. is essentially a creation of the young Church, is an intelligent thesis, but historically most improbable' (p. 325). Finally, he claims that if the disciples of Jesus were at all like those of the Rabbis, they did not forget the words of their Master; and therefore that there is a far more solid base for believing in a reliable tradition behind the Gospels than is often supposed.

It is of course impossible in a few paragraphs to *précis* a work of such scholarship and insight adequately, but it is hoped that the foregoing will have whetted some appetites.

SOME QUESTIONS

In this section of our review we shall point to a few of the questions that must

be asked of this important book; they are mainly historical and literary, with a dash of theology. Again we cannot by any means be exhaustive.

1. An eminent Oxford professor, in a lecture at Sheffield, recently ridiculed 'these fantastic modern suggestions about the power of ancient memory'. He drew parallels with the whispering-game, where the message at the end arrives in an entirely different form. Were ancient memories so good and were they so strict about copyright? Does the evidence of Jewish writings and of the Gospels support Gerhardsson or the cynics?

2. However much we may in principle agree with Gerhardsson, we must ask about some of the cruces in the Gospels. (a) *The Lord's Prayer*. In a recent article it was argued that in fact either the Lord never taught a Lord's Prayer, or that the early Christians were not bothered about His *ipsissima verba*. The variant forms of almost every verse seem to give impressive support to this thesis; and so, if we wish to side with Gerhardsson and support the accuracy of the gospel record, we must answer this important claim; for obviously the Lord's Prayer is something of a test case. (b) What of the differing accounts of *the Last Supper*? Are the evangelists complementary or exclusive? (c) *The Resurrection Appearances* are another test case, because the fact of the Resurrection was central to the claim about the Messiahship of Jesus; and yet there were apparently conflicting stories. (d) Apart from *worship* and *kerygma*, *didache* also supports Gerhardsson's detractors. Vitaly important matters, such as the admission of Gentiles and the possibility of re-marriage after divorce, were apparently not settled by an appeal to the words of Jesus. In both these cases we seem to be in a cleft stick. If Jesus, the risen Lord, was responsible for the last two verses of Matthew, then a word of Jesus was definitely at hand to settle a major question. If, however, as most commentators (e.g. McNeile) argue, these words were *thrown back* into the mouth of Jesus, then the early church did not treasure His words as such and was willing to invent dominical utterances. So with divorce: either one evangelist, in his *précis*, is too brief for accuracy, or the other with his exceptive clause is adding to the words of Jesus. It would (or possibly will?) be interesting to know what Gerhardsson would say about these and other problem passages. But in the meantime we who also

hold a high opinion of the claims of the Gospels must be able to argue with our detractors.

To sum up this objection: if the Jews were so careful about authorship and tradition, why did they attribute so much later material to Moses? Surely this proves that the early church could, quite easily, throw back its own ideas into the mouth of Jesus? In other words, what is the line between 'filling out', 'reading-in' and 'invented'?

3. Another type of question that has to be asked is whether the early church was in fact quite so patterned upon Judaism as Gerhardsson would suggest. Contrast, as well as fulfilment, forms part of the New Testament picture of the relationship between Judaism and the church. The church certainly claimed for herself the fulfilment of the Scriptures and that she was the true Israel. Yes, but 'all things have become new', the old is passed away. There was a feeling, obvious in the Epistle to the Hebrews, that the old sacrificial organization was done away. And when Gerhardsson draws parallels with priests, I begin to demur. One should also remember the constant battle with Judaism, evident from Galatians and Colossians. Perhaps this is a case of personal preference, of choosing out of this book what one would like to agree with and jettisoning the rest; but it seems to me most likely that the church's cataphetical methods were modelled on those of Judaism, and that her theology and organization were entirely different. It seems one can take over Gerhardsson's claims about Jewish memory and teaching methods, without being committed to a church that was a pale reflection of Judaism.

4. On the purely theological level, one wants to ask whether the conception of tradition was so binding upon the early church as might be suggested by this book. Independents (and I speak as a Congregationalist) have sometimes over-emphasized the independence of the local church at the expense of interdependence; and we have easily forgotten, e.g., 1 Corinthians 7: 19 and such texts, about the *common practice* in all the churches. And yet there was undoubtedly a spontaneity of approach in the first few years of the life of the church. The first Christians felt themselves filled with the Spirit; and it may well have taken a decade at least for the feeling of a binding tradition to creep in. I make this comment lest Gerhardsson's book should seem to support

an over-rigorous uniformity in the life of the church today. There is a place for variety within the unity of the catholic church.

Thus I feel that historians, theologians and students of the text of the New Testament still have many questions to ask of Professor Gerhardsson. But that is no criticism. The same is true of every important work in the field of theological study.

POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Lastly we look at some of the ways in which the researches embodied in this book can be said to diminish the force of some of the more extreme arguments against the accuracy of the Gospels.

1. *The use of one story* for a variety of teaching purposes has been shown to be characteristic of the Rabbis; and it can be applied equally to the Gospels. The ease with which many scholars explain all differences between related traditions as being secondary versions of one basic saying seems most remarkable to anyone who has noted the role played by the method of theme and variations in Jewish teaching. To assume that either Matthew or Luke is right in his presentation of the words of Jesus is to posit a false alternative; both can well be right.

2. *Parables and Allegories.* The Rabbis would use parables in many ways. Since Jülicher it has often been assumed, rather than proved, that allegory is a sign of the creative activity of the early church. Jesus, it is often said, made only one point in one parable, but He surely exercised as much freedom at least as the scribes, and He taught with authority. Why should He not use allegory in any way He chose?

3. *Paradox.* It is often argued that, 'If Jesus said A, then He did not say B'. He could not have both supported and opposed the Jewish Law. He could not have welcomed the Gentiles and rejected them. Different emphases arise in different parts of the church. Such a form of argument has always seemed to me to deny the freedom and immediacy of our Lord. But Gerhardsson has shown also that paradox was a well-known teaching method among the Rabbis.

4. *Exceptions.* Allied to the problem of paradox is the criticism that a particular saying is 'out of character'. I don't remember Gerhardsson treating this theme, but I must come in here to attack a popular fallacy. An unusual,

uncharacteristic word or action seems to me to be *more* likely to be authentic, simply on the principle of *difficilior lectio*. Any evangelist, or his scribe, would think twice before writing something that seemed to run counter to the usual line, or anything that might seem to cause offence.

5. *Wording before meaning.* Perhaps Gerhardsson opposes Bultmann most subtly by his insistence that the disciples would learn the wording before the meaning. This is especially relevant to the *vaticinia ex eventu* which Bultmann finds scattered all over the Gospels. If Gerhardsson is right, Jesus often spoke of the Passion: the disciples learnt the words, but did not understand the meaning. This has always seemed to me most likely anyway, as it would to any unbiased readers of the Gospels; but now a Rabbinic scholar supports this opinion.

6. *Jesus' Messianic Self-Consciousness.* May I repeat the words already quoted, that it is most unlikely, historically speaking, that the Christology of the New Testament is a creation of the young church? Even though they were aware of being filled with the Spirit, the Apostles and Christian writers and preachers did not attempt to invent. Their concern was to expound what Jesus had said. In an age when, in America at least, academics must publish or perish, we cannot appreciate how much importance was attached in the time of Jesus to *what had been said*. The New Testament preaching was comment upon the teaching of Jesus. And I happen to believe the 'exaggerated' words at the end of St John's Gospel about the multitude of dominical say-

ings that were at the author's time known, authenticated and treasured. The task of the evangelists was to select from vast store-houses; and they had many words of Jesus which spoke of Himself as the Messiah who must die for His people. It was Jesus, not the evangelists, the Apostles, or perverted brains in the early church, who was responsible for the Christology of the Gospels and of course of the rest of the New Testament.

Yes, Gerhardsson has much to say to the present decade about the delivery of the gospel tradition in early Christianity. We are all inclined to look at tradition and traditions in the light of the twentieth century, when one is out of date in a matter of weeks or months. A good dose of Hebrew scholarship is a most healthy antidote to some of the more extreme forms of scepticism about the Gospels. We shall all learn much from the first part of this book; and we shall look at the Gospels and Epistles through fresh eyes, when we have read the second part.

Editor's note

This article was written by Mr Dunstone in the last few hectic weeks prior to his departure for missionary service. He regrets that he was not able to treat the subject as fully as he would have wished. But we are very grateful for his introduction, and wish him God's speed in his service. The questions of Form Criticism and Oral Tradition are also touched upon by another contributor to the *TSF Bulletin*, Dr Donald Guthrie in his *New Testament Introduction — Gospels and Acts* (Tyndale Press, 1965, chapters 6 and 7).