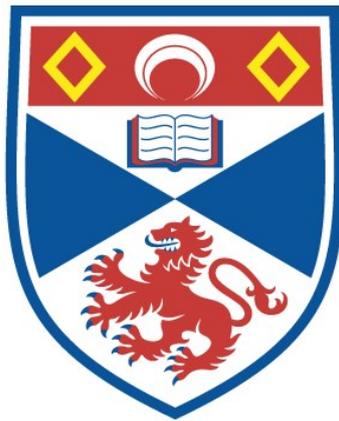


**ON THE SELECTION OF ORAL-TRADITIONAL DATA :
METHODOLOGICAL PROLEGOMENA FOR THE
CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW MODEL OF EARLY CHRISTIAN
ORAL TRADITION**

Travis M. Derico

**A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
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METHODOLOGICAL PROLEGOMENA FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF
A NEW MODEL OF EARLY CHRISTIAN ORAL TRADITION

by Travis M. Derico

Submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree of

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Previous "technical" models have failed to provide a satisfying illustration of the social mechanism employed by the first Christians in the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition. This is largely the result of their having been constructed using unsuitable comparative data. Oral-traditional systems are the products of unique socio-cultural circumstances, and cannot be assumed to resemble each other apart from careful analysis. Thus, any non-early-Christian oral-traditional data which is to be included in a model of early Christian oral tradition must be selected on the basis of its *comparability* with the early Christian data in respect to both literary and socio-cultural features.

I, Travis Derico, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 35,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

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INTRODUCTION: ON THE UTILITY OF CURRENT MODELS

In his 1961 monograph *Memory and Manuscript*, Birger Gerhardsson complained that, to that time, not one scholarly contribution to the question of Synoptic origins had “provided a concrete picture of how the carriers of the Synoptic tradition had set about transmitting their tradition, technically speaking.”¹ The situation is marginally improved after forty years, due to the impetus provided by Gerhardsson’s ground-breaking study and the recent swell of interest in “orality” among New Testament scholars. There are now multiple “technical” pictures of early Christian oral tradition on offer.

But these have not been developed without difficulty. The oral-traditional techniques employed by the first Christians do not lend themselves easily to historical analysis, obscured as they are by the intervention of nearly two thousand years, and having apparently been of insufficient interest to merit much direct literary comment by their first-century practitioners. Moreover, the investigation of oral-traditional systems has never been considered to fall within the disciplinary bounds of New Testament studies. New Testament scholars concerned with the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition by the early church have been forced to contend with questions normally reserved for researchers in the social sciences.

Faced with a dearth of direct evidence and an unfamiliar technical landscape, investigators of early Christian oral tradition have had to resort to somewhat oblique methods of investigation. Thus, recent discussion of the oral-traditional habits of the

¹ Gerhardsson 1961, ix-x.

first Christians has been characterised by the increasingly explicit use of explanatory models. The use of models, an unavoidable if often implicit practice, may serve the analysis of historical situations in a number of ways. Where an object of historical inquiry is unfamiliar, it is often necessary to compare it to models drawn from things which are known. If the object is complex (and it invariably is), the explicit use of models may help to alter perspective and further debate by stimulating new questions and by exposing unexamined presuppositions to critical scrutiny.² In the present instance, however, the intended object of study is missing altogether. In this case a model must serve a different purpose: it must fill the gap in the historical record.³

Three major models have been proposed which are designed to illustrate the specific social mechanism employed by the first Christians to carry and transmit their traditions about Jesus. Each differs widely from the others in regard to its theoretical rationale and its methodological design. Yet none of these models has proved capable of providing a convincing picture of the oral-traditional system employed by the early church. The inadequacy of these earlier attempts does not imply the unsuitability of conceptual modelling as a means of illustrating this mechanism; indeed, it is difficult to imagine any other productive means of approaching this problem. Nevertheless, if a more useful model is to be constructed, it will be necessary to establish an alternative method for doing so. This paper will present the foundation of such a method.

² See Carney 1975, xiv; Esler 1994, 12.

³ Though only, of course, in a hypothetical sense. See Carney 1975, xvi, 17 on the use of models to "patch out" missing data.

Virtually all current discussion of the oral Jesus tradition is conducted in reference to some kind of comparative oral-traditional data. This is eminently appropriate; presumably few present day scholars would be confident enough to propose a model of early Christian oral tradition on the basis of historical instinct alone. To achieve credibility on the subject, the New Testament scholar must anchor his speculation to data related to some more accessible tradition. Yet, curiously, no New Testament scholar has argued in any detail for the selection of specific comparative oral-traditional data.

This is an oversight which must be corrected. The structure of a model of early Christian oral tradition derives in large part from the comparative oral-traditional data on which it is patterned. The selection of inappropriate data will almost certainly result in the construction of an inadequate model. The present study will therefore attempt to establish a strategy for the selection of a body of oral-traditional data which may facilitate the construction of a new and more useful model of early Christian oral tradition.

First, however, it is necessary to consider more carefully the models of early Christian oral tradition which are currently available, in order to demonstrate the desirability of a new model. As noted above, three major models have emerged which purport to show how the first Christians transmitted their traditions about Jesus. But these are all, to some extent, reactions to an earlier approach to this question.

The Form-Critical Model

The most influential and enduring conception of early Christian oral tradition remains that proposed by the early New Testament form-critics, especially Rudolf

Bultmann.⁴ The impact which Bultmann's views have had on the debate over the nature and role of the oral Jesus tradition in the early church is difficult to overestimate. His conception of a Jesus tradition controlled by "the laws...of popular narrative and tradition" may still be observed (though often disguised in more fashionable terms) in the discourse of many present-day scholars, and even where it is not endorsed it remains a major point of departure for current discussion of the subject.⁵ It will be useful, therefore, to consider briefly the form-critical model of early Christian oral tradition as endorsed by Rudolf Bultmann.

The form-critical model is essentially an application to the Gospels of the methods employed by Hermann Gunkel in his analysis of the traditions underlying the book of Genesis.⁶ Gunkel had asserted that the narratives of Genesis were the products of the transmission of oral traditions by "unlettered tribes"; naïve, childlike people who were "incapable of reproducing their experiences objectively", and who had "no interest in leaving to posterity an authentic account of the events of their times".⁷ The Genesis stories were considered to be less the product of individual creativity than of a process of communal shaping which controlled their formation and development.⁸ Gunkel identified legends through the application of a "criterion of incredibility": stories in Genesis which "go directly against our better knowledge"

⁴ See esp. Bultmann 1963; also Dibelius 1934; Schmidt 1919.

⁵ Bultmann 1934, 32.

⁶ See Bultmann 1963, 2; Gunkel 1901.

⁷ Gunkel 1901, 1.

⁸ Gunkel 1901, 39.

must be legendary.⁹ He conceived of each legend as having circulated independently, so that each could be classified according to the purpose it may have served in the life of the communities in which it circulated.¹⁰

These basic tenets of Gunkel's form-criticism were adopted and elaborated by Bultmann and the other early New Testament form-critics in their attempts to "determine the original form" of the individual sayings and stories which comprise the canonical Gospels.¹¹ They considered the Gospel materials, like the Genesis narratives, to be highly "unliterary" literature.¹² This unliterary character was taken as an indication that the Gospels also had undergone a period of oral transmission.¹³

Bultmann, mirroring the views of the folklorists of his day, conceived of all oral traditions as governed by a body of universally applicable "laws".¹⁴ These "laws" were characterised as the means "by which a body of tradition is always controlled in its growth".¹⁵ In light of their apparent oral provenance, the Gospel

⁹ Gunkel 1901, 7.

¹⁰ Gunkel 1901, 24-36.

¹¹ Bultmann 1963, 6.

¹² See e.g. Bultmann 1963, 6; Dibelius 1934, 1-2.

¹³ Although Bultmann considered it "a matter of indifference" whether the Jesus tradition was oral or written on account of its "unliterary character", he nevertheless proceeded on the assumption that the earliest stages of the tradition were indeed orally transmitted; see e.g. Bultmann 1963, 6, 187, 321; 1934, 321; cf. Dibelius 1934, 9-11.

¹⁴ Bultmann 1934, 29; see also Dibelius 1934, 1. Note esp. Bultmann's dependence on the work of Danish folklorist Axel Olrik (Bultmann 1963, 187-205); W. Kelber would also rely on Olrik in his exposition of certain "laws" of "orality"; see Kelber 1983, 51, 59.

¹⁵ While Bultmann sometimes overtly defined these "laws" as such, more often their efficacy was simply assumed. Thus, one may read his description of the "law of single perspective" ("one is not asked to watch two different series of events happening at the same time"; Bultmann 1963, 188-189), the "law of repetition" (important phrases are repeated; 191), and the "law of end-stress" ("the most important thing is left to the end"; 191); but also note more oblique, but equally authoritative pronouncements, such as: "feelings and motives are mentioned only when they are essential for the point"; and, "other participants are described only in so far as it is necessary" (Bultmann 1963, 189). A similar approach was taken by Dibelius: cf. his "law of biographical analogy" (accounts of the lives of

materials were equated with other kinds of orally-transmitted literature, which naturally followed the same "laws" of development. Bultmann's monolithic view of oral tradition freed him from any need to elaborate on the specific social mechanisms which the early church may have employed in the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition. Instead, he attempted to illustrate the tendencies of the Synoptic tradition by comparing it with fairy tales, folk-songs and poetry, and religious and quasi-religious myths and legends, irrespective of generic or cultural considerations.¹⁶

Although Bultmann's conception of the oral Jesus tradition has been criticised on a number of counts, at this point it will suffice to note two fundamental flaws in his form-critical model of early Christian oral tradition: First, it is widely recognised by students of oral tradition, and of literacy, that activities related to these phenomena do not operate on the basis of any set of universal "laws".¹⁷ Rather, communities which produce oral literature do so on the basis of their own particular circumstances and motivation, so that a wide variety of approaches to the transmission of oral traditions may be observed to operate in cultures around the world.¹⁸ Second, since all oral traditions are not controlled by a single set of "laws", oral traditions from

holy men in different cultures are similarly structured; Dibelius 1934, 108-109), and his determination that a particular vivid report "does not arise from a religious tendency or theory but from [a storyteller's] joy in lively and graphic description" (Dibelius 1934, 78).

¹⁶ Bultmann employed comparisons between the Synoptic materials and a wide range of generic types from ancient Jewish, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Indian sources, as well as more recent English, Russian, German, Turkish, Indian, African and Greek folk-stories (among others). See e.g. Bultmann 1963, 6, 46, 67, 106-108, 184, 187, etc.; cf. Dibelius 1934, 5, 107-108, 116, 133-177, etc.

¹⁷ See e.g. Foley 1988, 102-103, 109-110; Finnegan 1977, 7-16; Street 1984, 4-6; Bowman and Woolf 1994, 2-3; Holy 1987, 16. This was noted in relation to the form-critical view by E. P. Sanders at least as long ago as 1969; see Sanders 1969 8-26; esp. 18, n. 4.

¹⁸ The classic study is Finnegan 1977.

widely different backgrounds cannot be assumed to be similar to one another. Both of these points will have recurring significance for the present study.

The Rabbinic Model

Birger Gerhardsson's above-cited monograph *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* presented a direct challenge to the form-critical picture of Synoptic origins championed by Rudolf Bultmann. While Bultmann had assumed that oral traditions are always characterised by a more or less predictable expansion, Gerhardsson countered with a detailed exposition of the apparently fixed, stable system of oral transmission described in the third century Rabbinic literature.¹⁹ This system would serve as the basis of his model of the transmission of the Synoptic tradition.

Gerhardsson characterised Jewish piety during the first few centuries A.D. as "torah-centric," with Torah including not only the Pentateuch, but the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures and also the largely supplemental oral Torah.²⁰ While the authority of oral Torah was variously construed by different groups within Judaism, it was nevertheless broadly understood that written Torah often required some form of commentary.²¹ As a result, interpretative and explanatory material came into being which would be transmitted orally, by trained specialists, alongside the written Torah. This material comprised both a sayings and a narrative tradition.²²

The transmission of oral Torah took place in the Rabbinic academies, where

¹⁹ See e.g. Bultmann 1934, 32-35; 1963, 2, 6; Dibelius 1934, 4.

²⁰ Gerhardsson 1961, 71.

²¹ Gerhardsson 1961, 21-23.

students would be taught the most important oral texts.²³ Oral Torah was learned through an intensive program of rote memorisation under the close supervision of a teacher who would instruct and correct in such a way as to bring about the complete internalisation of the material.²⁴ Only when the material had been thoroughly learned would its interpretation be taught.²⁵

Gerhardsson documented a number of specific techniques employed by the Rabbis to assist in the memorisation of oral Torah. Teaching by example was a well known pedagogical method with a distinguished history in the ancient world, and the Rabbis often deliberately acted in such a way as to reinforce their verbal teaching.²⁶ Oral texts were associated with the texts of written Torah, or grouped according to other principles of arrangement.²⁷ Consolidation of teachings in summaries and ellipses eliminated extraneous verbiage and often intensified the effect of the resulting traditional units.²⁸ Various mnemonic devices were used, including catch-words and phrases, and alphabetic and numeric associations.²⁹ Rhythmic and metered speech, along with melodic intonation, attached "a distinct pronunciation" to the material.³⁰

²² Gerhardsson 1961, 171-189.

²³ Gerhardsson 1961, 126-127.

²⁴ Gerhardsson 1961, 126-127.

²⁵ Gerhardsson 1961, 126.

²⁶ Gerhardsson 1961, 185-189.

²⁷ Gerhardsson 1961, 90.

²⁸ Gerhardsson 1961, 136-148.

²⁹ Gerhardsson 1961, 148-156.

³⁰ Gerhardsson 1961, 163-168.

Written notes were also sometimes used, though unofficially and despite official attempts at suppression.³¹

On the basis of this data, Gerhardsson then turned to the Synoptic tradition in order to present a brief sketch of how certain features of the system employed by the Rabbis in the transmission of oral Torah might have functioned also in the early church. He pointed out that while the Synoptic tradition was not “torah-centric,” the Jewish Scriptures did play a significant role in the life of the first Christians.³²

Further, Jesus apparently taught in the style of a rabbi who interpreted Torah.³³

Gerhardsson thought it likely that he would therefore have required his disciples to memorise certain of his teachings, and would subsequently have taught their interpretation; certainly many of Jesus’ deeds would have been deliberately intended to reinforce his oral teaching.³⁴

If so, Jesus’ followers might reasonably be supposed to have transmitted their traditions using the same methods employed by their teacher. Gerhardsson conceived of a college of the Twelve, formally residing in Jerusalem, as the authoritative source for the transmission of the Jesus tradition.³⁵ The Twelve formed and arranged the tradition, mainly on *mishnaic* principles, in order to optimise its potential for stable

³¹ Gerhardsson 1961, 157-163.

³² Gerhardsson 1961, 225-234.

³³ Gerhardsson 1961, 325-326. Bornkamm, however, argued that, though Jesus “enters on the scene like a scribe”, he did not behave very much like a rabbi. He asserted that Jesus “never claims for himself the authority of the fathers,” as a rabbi would, and his use of Scripture is not like the exposition of the rabbis. Further unlike the rabbis, Jesus moved around rather “informally” and counted women and socially unacceptable persons among his followers. Most significantly, Jesus’ freedom in regard to the law is “without parallel as far as a rabbi is concerned”; see Bornkamm 1960, 96-100.

³⁴ And vice versa. Gerhardsson 1961, 328-329, 334.

³⁵ Gerhardsson 1961, 329-330.

transmission.³⁶ The Evangelists could then make use of this standardised tradition, supplemented by their own notes, in the composition of their gospels.³⁷

Gerhardsson's model has not been particularly well received, though a good deal of the criticism it has received has been illegitimate. Early reviews by M. Smith and J. Neusner represented Gerhardsson as creating an anachronistic picture of first century Pharisaic and Christian practice based on the third century Mishnah.³⁸

Though often repeated, these charges reveal a basic misunderstanding of Gerhardsson's method. On closer examination, Gerhardsson's approach has much to recommend it.³⁹

Gerhardsson's expressed intention was to create a model of early Christian oral tradition by *diachronic analogy* with the Rabbinic materials.⁴⁰ His rationale for this approach derived first of all from the implicit recognition that something which actually exists, could possibly exist.⁴¹ If the Rabbis could be shown to have employed a particular system of oral transmission, then it would not be impossible, given a reasonable degree of comparability with the Rabbinic situation, for another group to have used the same system. Gerhardsson believed that the historical

³⁶ Gerhardsson 1961, 333.

³⁷ Gerhardsson 1961, 201-202, 335.

³⁸ See Smith 1963; Neusner 1971; also e.g. Barrett 1967; Teeple 1970.

³⁹ More recently, two of Gerhardsson's students have assumed and expanded on his approach; see Riesner 1988; Byrskog 1994; 2000. For additional positive appraisals of Gerhardsson's approach see Meyer 1991, and esp. Neusner's forward to the 1998 Eerdmans reprint of *Memory and Manuscript*.

⁴⁰ See Gerhardsson 1998, 14-15.

⁴¹ Cf. Malina 1995. This axiom is a major presupposition not only of social-scientific criticism of the New Testament, but of every kind of heuristic enterprise.

situation of the early church could indeed be shown to be comparable with that of the Rabbis.

Gerhardsson contended that there were compelling historical factors which suggested the suitability of his analogy. Significant points of contact could be demonstrated to exist between Rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, including: “a common heritage; a common milieu; common conditions of life;” and “mutual influences.”⁴² Further, Gerhardsson argued “we cannot postulate that everything connected with the Rabbis is *exclusively* Rabbinic, or that everything to do with the Pharisees is specifically Pharisaic.”⁴³ Most of the pedagogical techniques practised by the Rabbis are known to have been employed by both Jewish and non-Jewish teachers for many hundreds of years prior to the birth of Christianity.⁴⁴ Moreover, some of the traditional materials included within the Rabbinic literature are generically and topically similar to the materials found in the Synoptic gospels. Narratives, aphorisms, and parables are common to both, as is the interpretation of Torah. Given this apparently high degree of comparability between the two groups, Gerhardsson considered that shared conceptions and techniques of the transmission and interpretation of oral-traditional materials might easily have existed between the Rabbinic and early Christian teachers.

It appears, then, that Gerhardsson’s choice of comparative data is at least theoretically sound. The Rabbinic literature is, after all, a perfectly logical (perhaps

⁴² Gerhardsson 1998, 16.

⁴³ Gerhardsson 1998, 16-17.

⁴⁴ Gerhardsson 1961, 122-170; 1964, 15.

the *most* logical) place to begin a study of early Christian oral tradition. The Rabbis lived and transmitted their oral traditions quite near to the first Christians, chronologically, geographically, and culturally speaking. Significant generic and topical affinities do exist between the Synoptic and the Rabbinic literature. In addition, there is perhaps no extant source until the advent of the modern discipline of anthropology which offers so much detail concerning a specific system of oral transmission. The very “concreteness” of this particular source of oral-traditional data makes it an obvious choice for a comparison with the oral-traditional practices of the early church. Gerhardsson’s model is, in fact, a good idea.

Unfortunately, it seems to entail a more strictly formalised system of oral transmission than the available evidence related to the first-century church will allow. Jesus is not portrayed in the Gospels as teaching by rote memorisation, nor do his disciples claim to have been taught in this way in the other New Testament writings. The fact that such training is never mentioned requires some explanation; if it occurred, it must have represented a significant part of the ministry of Jesus to the Twelve, and would certainly have contributed to their authoritative status in the church.⁴⁵ Yet, instead, the learning of the Twelve is greatly de-emphasised (e.g. Mt. 11.25; Lk. 10.21).⁴⁶ The classic description is Luke’s, when Peter and John are appraised by the Sanhedrin as “ἄνθρωποι ἀγράμματοι καὶ ἰδιῶται” (Acts 4.13).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Cf. Kelber 1983, 14.

⁴⁶ The New Testament evidence regarding Jesus’ own learning is of dubious value to the present discussion. Jesus, while regarded as “μὴ μεμαθηκώς” by John (Jn. 7.15) and as a mere carpenter’s son in the Synoptics (Mt. 13.55; Mk. 6.3; Lk. 4.22), is nevertheless recognised by his detractors as possessing “wisdom” (Mt. 13.54; Mk. 6.2). He reads in the synagogue (Lk. 4.20) and teaches in the temple courts (Jn. 7.14). In all cases he amazes those present with his “gracious words” (Lk. 4.22) and his “learning” (Jn. 7.15). On this evidence Jesus could potentially have taught by rote

Nowhere in the New Testament are the Twelve depicted either as teaching by memorisation, or as taking on a group of students.⁴⁸ The same is true of Paul, who might perhaps be considered more likely to have adopted a traditional Jewish approach to the transmission of tradition (Acts 22.3; 26.5; Phil. 3.4-6). While Paul apparently took a number of protégés, he is nowhere described as making them memorise anything, and it seems likely that he would have resisted taking a group of formal students.⁴⁹

For all their similarities, the Christians and the Rabbis were two very different types of groups whose respective oral traditions performed a different range of functions.⁵⁰ The oral Torah was the province of a trained few who employed it primarily for purposes of Scriptural exegesis and legal disputation. The Jesus tradition, however, was taught to all believers (cf. Mt. 28.18), and was used in preaching to outsiders (cf. Acts 2.14-38), teaching and exhorting believers (cf. Acts 20.35), and as part of Christian worship (cf. Acts 2.42-46). Moreover, unlike the Rabbis, the first Christians believed that their testimony about Jesus was guided by

memorisation or any other method; what is significant to the Gospel writers is simply that his authority comes not from another teacher, but from God (e.g. Jn. 7.16-18).

⁴⁷ Here the most significant question is not whether Peter and John were illiterate rustics, but why the Jewish leaders regarded them as unschooled if they were known to have spent the last three years studying under a (formally traditional) teacher. The problem remains even if the label is "*distinctly dogmatic*" (Gerhardsson 1961, 12, original emphasis). The Jewish leaders' estimate of Peter and John is not disparaging; they are "astonished" at the apostles' "boldness" (Acts 4.13). Why does Luke attach this label to Peter and John if they are known to the Christian community as men trained in the methods of the Rabbis?

⁴⁸ A related issue is that Gerhardsson has failed to reconcile his concept of the Twelve serving *in collegio* in Jerusalem with the fact that the Rabbinic traditions speak primarily of *individual* teachers. Although he refers to the Qumran community as a possible analogue, it is not clear how such an arrangement might work (or, again, why there is no mention of it in the early Christian literature).

⁴⁹ Or so one could read 1 Cor. 1.10-17.

⁵⁰ Cf. Fitzmyer 1978, 250.

the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt. 24.19; Mk. 13.11; Lk. 21.15; Jn. 14.26; etc.).⁵¹ This belief may have militated against a rigorous method of traditional memorisation and transmission.⁵²

Although the first-century Christians might have had access to methods of oral-traditional transmission which were similar to those of the Rabbis, it does not appear that they chose to use them. The central role Gerhardsson has assigned to rote memorisation is difficult to place within the picture of Jesus' teaching found in the Synoptics, or that of his disciples elsewhere in the New Testament. Thus, despite its apparent promise, Gerhardsson's model fails to provide a satisfying explanation of the oral-traditional system employed in the transmission of the Jesus tradition in the early church.

The Oral-Formulaic Model

In a series of field studies in the 1930's, classicist Milman Parry, aided by his then student Albert Lord, documented the system of oral composition and transmission employed by Serbian and Croatian epic poets in the former Yugoslavia, in order to demonstrate the oral provenance of the Homeric epics.⁵³ Lord conducted several further studies in Yugoslavia after Parry's untimely death in 1936, ultimately

⁵¹ These differences are reminiscent of some which R. Horsley, following James Scott, has noted in relation to "great", or "official", traditions, which are employed by elite groups for the purpose of perpetuating an existing power structure, and "little", or "popular", traditions, which are employed by the greater part of a society to promote their own interests (though of course the Rabbinic and Christian traditions are not immediately related in this way); see Horsley and Draper 1999, 98-104.

⁵² Of particular concern is the role which the Fourth Evangelist assigns to the Holy Spirit in the apostles' teaching. John 14.26 has Jesus assuaging his disciples' fears, promising that "the Holy Spirit...will remind you of everything I have said to you." If the apostles were known to have memorised Jesus' teachings by rote, and to have learned (and subsequently taught) the methods by which such learning was traditionally accomplished, this statement loses much of its force. Davies (1962, 30) also saw "a need for a greater emphasis on the Spirit in the interpretation of Acts than is found in Gerhardsson."

⁵³ Lord 1960, widely consulted as "the bible of Oral Theory" (Foley 1988, 41, n. 15), contains the definitive account of these field studies. See also Parry 1971.

several further studies in Yugoslavia after Parry's untimely death in 1936, ultimately recording and analysing more than two thousand oral texts.⁵⁴ On the basis of their observations, Parry and Lord claimed not only to have proved the oral composition of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but to have uncovered the two chief characteristics of *all* oral poetry. These are: 1) oral poetry is always *composed in performance*; and 2) oral poetry is always *formulaic* in character.⁵⁵ These broad principles represent the foundation of what came to be known as the "oral-formulaic theory."

Some years later, Walter Ong would employ these principles in a number of expositions of the "psychodynamics" of "orality."⁵⁶ Ong advanced an influential view of "written" and "oral" as points of departure not only for the study of poetry, but for the entire human experience. He posited a strict dichotomy between the distinctive modes of thought employed by "primary oral" cultures, devoid of literacy in any form, and those employed by "chirographic," or literate cultures. Ong extended and reinterpreted the oral-formulaic theory in an effort to codify the characteristics of all "oral cultures," and thereby of all types of oral literature.⁵⁷

While some awareness of the work of Parry and Lord existed among New Testament scholars during the 1960's and 1970's, the publication of Werner Kelber's book *The Oral and the Written Gospel* in 1983 decisively established the oral-

⁵⁴ These recorded texts form the core of what is now the Milman Parry Collection of Oral Literature at Harvard University.

⁵⁵ See Lord 1960, 32-33, 43-44, 65, etc.

⁵⁶ See Ong 1970; 1977; 1982.

⁵⁷ See Ong 1977: "What Nagler says of poetry would apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other forms of discourse in oral cultures, where the entire noetic economy is dominated by formulas, so that poets simply maximise, in often exquisite ways, processes of thought and discourse endemic throughout the entire culture."

formulaic theory as an authoritative methodological tool for investigating the oral-traditional practices of the early church.⁵⁸ Like Gerhardsson, Kelber desired to challenge the old form-critical model of “intrinsic causation and aggregate growth,” but also criticised Gerhardsson’s model of “inert tradition and passive transmission” as equally inattentive to the peculiar properties of “orality.”⁵⁹ Drawing from the work of Parry and Lord, especially as interpreted by Ong, Kelber analysed various aspects of the gospel of Mark, parts of the Pauline corpus and the hypothetical sayings document *Q* in an attempt to develop an “oral hermeneutic” which could properly take account of the impact of early Christian “orality” on these texts.⁶⁰ The basics of Kelber’s method may be adequately demonstrated through a brief consideration of his treatment of Mark.

Kelber’s model of early Christian oral tradition is founded on Ong’s concept of “orality” as a broad phenomenon of speech and thought which is constituent to all “primary oral cultures.” Although Kelber conceded that the first Christians lived in “a world that was no stranger to literacy,” he nevertheless conceived of the early church as essentially an oral sub-culture which maintained, along with most of the rest of the population of the ancient world, only the most tenuous of connections with literate culture.⁶¹ The transmitters of the Jesus tradition were oral performers, storytellers possessed of “a multitude of oral needs, functions, and thought

⁵⁸ For pre-Kelber considerations of the oral-formulaic theory for its utility in NT studies see e.g. Lohr 1961; Güttgemanns 1971; Talbert 1978.

⁵⁹ Kelber 1983, 2-14, 32.

⁶⁰ Kelber 1983, xv.

⁶¹ Kelber 1983, 17, 21: “Speaking...is in fact the sole medium of most people in antiquity.”

processes," of "oral likes and dislikes, sensibilities and imaginative powers, storage and recall functions, values and norms."⁶² Kelber therefore surmised that the pre-canonical synoptic tradition would have followed certain rules of behaviour which are typical of all orally transmitted traditions.

First, since "oral thinking" necessarily "consists in formal patterns," the language used to compose and transmit oral-traditional materials in the early church must have been *formulaic* in character.⁶³ Second, "in orality, *tradition is almost always composed in transmission*," which means that, third, the oral Jesus tradition must also have been quite *variable* in terms of both the form and content of its constituent traditional units.⁶⁴ Fourth, and related to the issue of traditional variability, "authorities can influence but not entirely control speech," and therefore the traditions of the early church must have been *carried by divergent streams of tradition*.⁶⁵ Turning to Mark's gospel, Kelber attempted to demonstrate the effects of these characteristics on the text through an analysis of four story-types: *heroic stories* (healings), *polarisation stories* (exorcisms), *didactic stories* (apophthegmata), and

⁶² Kelber 1983, 44.

⁶³ Ong defined the "oral formula" as "more or less exactly repeated set phrases or set expressions (such as proverbs) in verse or prose, which...have a function in oral culture more crucial than any they may have in a writing or print or electronic culture." (Ong 1982, 26) Kelber, however, construed it in such a way as to include virtually every kind of apparently oral compositional arrangement. In addition, though both Ong and Kelber regarded "formulas" and "formulaic language" as performing a primarily mnemonic function, for both Parry and Lord their function was *metrical*; Parry, followed by Lord, defined the formula as "a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea." (Lord 1960, 3) See e.g. Kelber 1983, 47-48, 51, 53, etc; also Ong 1982, 26-27, 33-36, 146; cf. Lord 1960, 3-4.

⁶⁴ Kelber 1983, 30 (original emphasis), 27, 70-72; Ong 1982, 31-33; cf. Lord 1960, 5.

⁶⁵ Kelber 1983, 32-34.

parabolic stories."⁶⁶ Kelber considered each of these story-types to be products of "the oral medium and of oral mentality," based on their incorporation of a number of distinctly oral formal and thematic elements.⁶⁷

Kelber conceived of oral "formularity" as performing a primarily mnemonic function, and the perceived mnemonic value of Markan forms was Kelber's principal criterion for determining their compositional origins. Thus, Jesus is typecast as a healer simply as a "mnemonic necessity" – what "[the oral medium] remembers is not the ordinary occurrence, but what in some sense is extraordinary."⁶⁸ He is made to perform exorcisms because "struggle and competition, conflict and adversary relations have decided mnemonic advantages over the daily grind."⁶⁹ Any moral values attached to such contests are merely accidental: "it is the functional need of oral remembering, more than addiction to moral values, that promotes antithetical structuring of knowledge."⁷⁰ Conversely, when Jesus confronts the Pharisees, the transmission of ethical information is paramount, while the narrative acts as a "mnemonic trigger" which helps the hearer recall the teaching; it "sweetens the

⁶⁶ Kelber 1983, 45.

⁶⁷ Kelber 1983, 50.

⁶⁸ Thus "Jesus...appears as an accomplished performer of powerful deeds, but for the most part his healings lack a motive other than the mere presence of sick persons" (Kelber 1983, 51). Interestingly, Stevan Davies, in his recent argument for the centrality of healing in Jesus' ministry, cites Kelber's consideration of Jesus' parables (Kelber 1983, 67) in support of the assertion that the parables were themselves intended to serve as a means of inducing an "ASC [altered state of consciousness] trance state" in his hearers, precisely in order to facilitate healing or exorcism. See Davies 1995, 125, 128.

⁶⁹ Kelber 1983, 54.

⁷⁰ Kelber 1983, 55.

pill.”⁷¹ “Mnemonic patterning” is equally evident in the triple failure and triple success of the seed in the parable of the Sower, and the opposition of the smallest seed and the largest seed in the parable of the *Mustard Seed*.⁷²

Having thus identified its oral forms, Kelber could by process of elimination establish the effects of “textuality” on Mark’s gospel. He concluded that, “in the last analysis, [Mark’s gospel] takes its cue from an authority other than the oral imperative.”⁷³ Although Mark’s relationship to “orality” is “deep seated and complex,” it is his fundamental commitment to the written word which controlled the composition of his gospel.⁷⁴ And since “writing always entails a rewriting of worlds,” Mark’s gospel is “more transmutation than mere transmission.”⁷⁵

Kelber’s model is unlike the other two recent models of early oral Christian tradition in that while it is based, at several removes, on data derived from studies of actual oral-traditional systems, he has not used this data to create an analogy with the oral-traditional system employed in the early church. Instead, Kelber has constructed a *prescriptive* model which claims not to show what the transmission of the pre-canonical Synoptic tradition might have been like, but rather what it *must* have been like. This has proved to be a very popular approach. Although few of the conclusions drawn by Kelber in *The Oral and the Written Gospel* have achieved broad acceptance, his method of appeal to the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic theory as

⁷¹ Kelber 1983, 57.

⁷² Kelber 1983, 59.

⁷³ Kelber 1983, 80.

⁷⁴ Kelber 1983, 80.

however, Kelber's approach suffers from grave and numerous methodological and conceptual flaws.⁷⁸ Two of these are of particular concern.

First, the potential applicability of Kelber's model depends entirely on the veracity of his view that there exists a universal set of rules by which all oral-traditional systems are bound to function. However, this contention, as noted above, is unsupportable in light of the many, often widely dissimilar varieties of oral-traditional practices which have been studied and documented in cultures around the world. Substantial compositional or structural similarities cannot be assumed to exist across broad generic lines, or between traditions separated by culture, time, or geography, or between compositions recorded in different media.⁷⁹

poetry of the South Slavs and the narrative prose of the Gospels were so great as to render the two traditions completely incomparable; "in fact, the very term 'oral tradition' cannot be used of the two transmissions without inviting serious misunderstanding and misapplication" (78-79). Indeed, "what Parry discovered about the memories of illiterate singers operating in an oral, epic, and rhythmic tradition has, for all practical purposes, nothing whatever to do with the memories of illiterate peasants operating within the Jesus tradition" (78). Crossan then gives his reasoning for these conclusions: "To propose that Jesus and his first companions, precisely because they were illiterate peasants, would have shared special memory capacities akin, for example, to Parry's Balkan bards, is to ignore the presence of centuries-old tradition in the Balkan case and of total newness in the Jesus case. If, on the other hand, the traditions about Jesus had stayed alive for centuries primarily among illiterate Galilean peasants, their transmission might well have developed procedures analogous to those used by a Homer or a Mededovic" (79; cf. Kelber 1983, 79). A number of objections could be raised in reference to these statements. Crossan has mistakenly represented Parry and Lord as being primarily concerned with "the memories of illiterate singers" (78, author's emphasis; see Lord 1960, 5, 13-29, 99-123, etc.), and the singers themselves as being totally illiterate (see Lord 1960, 137). More importantly for the present discussion, however, in these statements Crossan reveals an unconscious dependence on the very research he has declared inapplicable to his work. Crossan assumes that all "oral traditions" are essentially the same, so that, given enough time, they will develop on the same basic trajectory. On this scheme, the oral Jesus tradition is simply a pre-postic tradition, rather like a caterpillar is a pre-butterfly. This assertion is completely untenable; there is simply no evidence which would suggest that a given type of oral literature is likely to mutate into another generic or traditional type over any period of time. For a fuller critique of Crossan's relationship to the oral-formulaic theory see Derico 2000, 121-127.

⁷⁸ Kelber has been strongly criticised for, among other things, his diametric opposition of "orality" and "textuality," his insinuation that the early church was a type of oral sub-culture, his depiction of Mark's alleged polemic against the Twelve, and his failure to actually exegete the text of Mark in favour of a broad phenomenological approach. See e.g. Dunn 1986; Hurtado 1989, 1997; Blomberg 1990; Gerhardsson 1990; Boomershine 1994; Dewey 1994; Halverson 1994. For a thorough *methodological* critique of Kelber's model of early Christian oral tradition, the interested reader is referred to Derico 2000.

⁷⁹ See Foley 1988, 109-110.

Second, following Ong, Kelber conceived of “rules” of “orality” as phenomena which are generated naturally by the unique psychological structures of “the oral mind.” This concept has had a long and dubious history in both anthropology and New Testament studies, being closely related to yet older ideas about the substandard intellectual and artistic capacities of people living in “primitive” cultures. It has also been shown to be an insufficiently critical means of apprehending the varied and complex interactions which relate to the composition and transmission of oral tradition in specific socio-cultural situations.⁸⁰

In light of these points, Kelber’s model must be regarded as inadequate to explain the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition. The early church did not operate within a “primary oral” culture, and did not produce epic poetry. Denied appeal to a universally applicable set of rules deriving from a universally attested “oral mentality,” Kelber’s model is devoid of both analogical and prescriptive power.

The Informal Controlled Model

In a 1991 article entitled “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” Kenneth Bailey outlined another possible model of early Christian oral tradition. Bailey, like Kelber, saw the form-critical conception of a completely informal and uncontrolled oral Jesus tradition and Gerhardsson’s depiction of a Jesus tradition which operated under fairly stringent formal controls as the two main alternatives available to the investigator of the oral Jesus tradition. However, rather than rejecting both out of hand, Bailey sought to offer a median position based on his

⁸⁰ See Finnegan 1973, 113-114.

first-hand knowledge of Middle Eastern village life, gained over thirty years of living and teaching in the region.

Bailey pointed out that both “informal, uncontrolled” and “formal, controlled” approaches to the transmission of oral-traditional materials may be observed in the present day Middle East.⁸¹ Tragedies and war atrocities, for instance, naturally lend themselves to exaggeration and hyperbole, and “when tragedy or civil strife occur, rumour transmission quickly takes over.”⁸² Yet Muslim scholars are sometimes known to memorise the entire Qur’an, and Eastern Orthodox priests and monks often put extensive liturgies to memory.⁸³ These two phenomena exist side by side, one the result of “natural human failings,” the other of “a carefully nurtured methodology of great antiquity.”⁸⁴

However, Bailey also observed a third phenomenon, with its own distinct methodology, which operates in the Middle East alongside the other two. This is an approach to the transmission of oral traditions wherein materials are transmitted outside a formal pedagogical setting, but are nevertheless deliberately managed by means of social pressures applied by the communities themselves. Bailey chose to term this phenomenon “informal, controlled oral tradition”.

The classical setting for the transmission of informal, controlled oral tradition is the evening gathering, called *haflat samar*, where the men of a village assemble to

⁸¹ Bailey 1991, 38.

⁸² Bailey 1991, 38.

⁸³ Bailey 1991, 38-39.

⁸⁴ Bailey 1991, 39.

tell stories and recite poetry.⁸⁵ In such gatherings there are no specifically designated teachers or students, though only established members of the community may recite community traditions. In practice, however, "the older men, the more gifted men, and the socially more prominent men tend to do the reciting."⁸⁶ Everyone else is an informal "student," and participates by listening to the elders pass on the traditions.

Bailey noted five specific types of oral-traditional materials which are transmitted in an informal, yet controlled fashion. These are, 1) *proverbs*; 2) *story riddles*; 3) *poetry*; 4) *parables*; and 5) well-told *accounts* of the important figures in the history of the community. These materials are assigned different levels of control by the community. Poems and proverbs are transmitted in fixed form, and no changes of even the smallest kind are permitted. In the case of parables and stories about important people and events, however, the situation is slightly different. With these, "the central threads of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed."⁸⁷

In an attempt to define more specifically the degree of flexibility afforded parables and stories, Bailey conducted a casual experiment with a group of his Arab students in Beirut. This entailed presenting them with a traditional story about the noble Shann, which they had all heard told orally, but had never read. Bailey then

⁸⁵ Bailey 1991, 40. Women and young people are normally relegated to their own *haflat samar*. This is not the *only* setting for the transmission of informal, controlled oral tradition; Bailey refers in passing to political meetings and, notably, worship services, among others, as potential settings for the transmission and composition of community traditions (see e.g. 49-50).

⁸⁶ Bailey 1991, 40.

⁸⁷ Bailey 1991, 44.

questioned them about the degree of flexibility afforded its constituent features. He explained,

We then examined what must be present in the recitation for them to sense that I was telling it correctly. We produced a list. The proverb that appeared in the story had to be repeated verbatim. The three basic scenes could not be changed, but the order could be reversed without triggering the community rejection mechanism. The basic flow of the story and its conclusion had to remain the same. The names could not be changed. The summary punch line was inviolable. However, the teller could vary the pitch of the traveller's emotional reaction to Shann, and the dialogue within the flow of the story could at any point reflect the individual teller's style and interests. That is, the story teller had a certain freedom to tell the story in his own way as long as the central thrust of the story was not changed.⁸⁸

Thus, the transmission of such stories is characterised by both continuity and flexibility. However, Bailey distinguished the idea "continuity and flexibility" from "continuity and change." He considered that "continuity and change" could imply the storyteller's license to change any 15% of the story, so that after several tellings the whole story could be changed. "Continuity and flexibility," however, means that the main lines of the story cannot be changed at all. A storyteller's variations must occur within the recognised structure of the story. In this system a story may, theoretically, be retold an infinite number of times without incurring any significant degree of structural change.⁸⁹

According to Bailey, the primary "controls" placed on the transmission of informal controlled oral-traditional materials were bound up in the ever-present threat of public humiliation. He observed that Middle Eastern culture is a "shame-pride" culture, where children are taught proper behaviour not by appeal to abstract moral

⁸⁸ Bailey 1991, 44.

⁸⁹ Bailey 1991, 44.

principles, but to a sense of honour.⁹⁰ In such a culture, people are quite eager to avoid public correction, and if someone is uncertain as to the precise wording or form of a traditional unit, they will typically refrain from reciting it at all.

Bailey did not attempt to make specific application of his model to the New Testament materials, but offered a short depiction of how a system of informal controlled oral tradition might have functioned in the first-century church. He suggested that the ὑπηρέται mentioned in Luke 1.2 were specially designated people who functioned in regard to the Jesus tradition in a way similar to their counterparts' handling of the scrolls in the synagogues.⁹¹ And since Luke uses a single definite article to cover both ὑπηρέται and αὐτόπται, it is likely that these people were also eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry and teaching.

Bailey theorised that an informal, controlled system of oral tradition functioned in the villages of Palestine until their devastation in the war of 66-70 A.D. Until this time, Christians in these villages "would record and transmit data concerning [Jesus] *as the source of their new identity.*"⁹² The earliest church may have refined this method of transmission, so that not every Christian, but only one designated an ὑπηρέτης τοῦ λόγου was authorised to recite the tradition. After 70 A.D., many of these people would have been dispersed. Nevertheless, they would have guaranteed the authenticity of the tradition "at least to the end of the first century."⁹³

⁹⁰ Bailey 1991, 42.

⁹¹ Bailey 1991, 50; see also Bailey 1989, 43-44.

⁹² Bailey 1991, 50 (original emphasis).

⁹³ Bailey 1991, 50.

Bailey's model of "informal, controlled oral tradition" appears to possess a number of important strengths. Especially notable is the role played by Bailey himself in its construction. Although Bailey's choice to found his model on data collected entirely by himself poses a certain amount of methodological risk, his approach nevertheless displays some significant advantages over the two previous models discussed above.

The most significant, and obvious, advantage to Bailey's approach is that his personal acquaintance with the social and oral-traditional data he described frees him from the need to interpret data collected by someone else. The difficulties involved in interpreting data collected by social scientists, to whom the New Testament scholar is so often compelled to turn for information of this sort, are manifold. Anthropological and folklore studies are most frequently conducted on the basis of discipline- and task-specific motives and perspectives, and may employ unfamiliar technical categories and terminology.

Moreover, data which has once been collected for a specific anthropological purpose is often difficult to recontextualise appropriately. When collected and/or recorded by a person other than the author of the model, such data is necessarily skewed toward the particular interest of its collector, which rarely has anything to do with the oral traditions of the early church. Certain types of data which might be of particular interest to the investigator of the oral Jesus tradition may be de-emphasised or ignored. As a New Testament scholar, however, Bailey could construct his model so as to be directly relevant to the question of early Christian oral tradition as it is currently conceived. His extensive experience in the cultural world of the Middle

East, combined with a specialist knowledge of the historical, linguistic and socio-cultural backgrounds of the early church, permitted him to consider data specifically on the grounds of its utility for his proposed model and without recourse to an intermediary.

One further advantage might be noted. Like Gerhardsson's, Bailey's is an analogical model, designed to demonstrate how a specific, empirically verifiable oral-traditional system might have functioned in the early church. However, Bailey's analogy is based on a system which is (ostensibly) still in operation. Such a system can be far more thoroughly explored and tested, and in greater detail, than any documentary record. The types of oral literature included in Bailey's model, like that of Gerhardsson, are well represented in the canonical gospels. But in a living oral-traditional system such as Bailey has described, there is a theoretically infinite amount of oral-traditional literature which may be analysed in the process of transmission (and, potentially, of composition), in diverse social contexts, and as recited by various performers. The potential applicability of Bailey's model might therefore be plotted more accurately than has been possible with previous models.

But Bailey's model also displays two important weaknesses. The first relates to Bailey's characterisation of the early church's use of informal, controlled oral tradition. Bailey defined the oral-traditional system on which his model is based as "informal" on the grounds that it operates in settings where there is no designated teacher or student: "anyone can theoretically participate," though not everyone is

assigned the same level of public honour.⁹⁴ Yet when Bailey considers how this system might have operated in the early church, he pictures the recitation of the oral Jesus tradition as being the exclusive province of “specially designated authoritative witnesses,” the αὐτόπται καὶ ὑπηρεταὶ τοῦ λόγου of Luke 1.2. In addition, he conceived of the early Christians engaging in the transmission of some *formal* controlled oral tradition, of which “anyone with a good memory could...become a reciter.”⁹⁵

“Specially designated authoritative witnesses” are surely formal, in some sense official, teachers, whose very existence cries out for the complementary existence of formal, official students. Such an office does not, of course, preclude the possibility of oral traditions being transmitted in an informal *setting*, but Bailey seems to envision a one-sided transmission where eyewitnesses recite the tradition, and everyone else listens, but do not themselves recite. This is clearly a different situation than that which he has described as operating in the present-day Middle East, which allows for anyone who has grown up in a village, and who has reached a certain level of social standing, to become an authoritative reciter of the village traditions.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Bailey 1991, 40.

⁹⁵ Bailey 1991, 51. Thus, though Paul can recite *formal* traditions about Jesus, even he cannot become a transmitter of the *informal* controlled oral tradition, and must content himself with making “occasional passing references to Jesus sayings in the Synoptic Tradition.” But is it possible, given that both types of tradition must certainly have originated with eyewitnesses, that there would be no overlap between them?

⁹⁶ It should be noted, however, that Bailey’s depiction of the transmission of *informal* controlled oral tradition actually seems to emphasise certain apparently *formal* features of the process. Thus, when Bailey asks in a *haflat samar* to hear a story with which he is not familiar, “the circle quickly sensed the formal nature of what was happening.” Likewise, when a Christian congregation wished to memorise the preacher’s illustration so that they can retell the story throughout the week, “the preacher was not *allowed* to continue until they had done so” (author’s emphasis); Bailey 1991, 42-43, 49-50.

While it is not unreasonable to suggest that the early church may have customised existing social procedures for their own purposes, it must be pointed out that in the present instance this suggestion goes some way toward undermining the authority of Bailey's model. The primary advantage of Bailey's method, as discussed above, is his first-hand knowledge of an actual oral-traditional system. Yet what he perceived as operating in the early church is not what he has described as occurring in the present-day Middle East, and he has neglected to explain the reasoning behind this diversion.

Moreover, Bailey's speculation about the role of eyewitnesses in the early church, apparently unconnected to his Middle Eastern data, is by far the most problematic feature of his model. Bailey seems to imagine a situation where the ὑπηρέται do not merely tell of their recollections of Jesus in their own words, but do so in some kind of stylised traditional form. But if these specially appointed witnesses are the only ones permitted to recite the informal, controlled tradition, how did their traditions become formalised? It might seem to defeat the purpose of appointing eyewitnesses if they were then expected to recite traditions about teachings or events they had never heard or seen. Further, did any believer who had witnessed Jesus during his lifetime hold the post of ὑπηρέτης? If not, how were these officers "designated"? Other problems could be mentioned, not the least of which arise from Bailey's association of keepers of scrolls in the synagogues with "keepers" of the oral Jesus tradition.

The second major weakness in Bailey's model is the anecdotal nature of the data used to construct it. While Bailey is without question extremely knowledgeable

concerning the details of Middle Eastern village life, he did not collect the social and oral-traditional data for his model from a detailed study of any specific community or communities. Rather, his observations of informal, controlled oral tradition were compiled over a series of many years and in a number of different contexts, and are described in his article simply for illustrative purposes.

Much of Bailey's model is therefore difficult to assess. Bailey provides roughly nine specific examples of oral literature in transmission, none of which were recorded at the time of their recitation. Six of these are not assigned to a reciter, but to the villages from which they were collected. Of the remaining three, two are originally attributed to one person, with subsequent retellings by anonymous reciters, while the final example is recited and then retold by at least six people; in none of these instances are transcriptions of the retellings provided. On the three occasions where the actual contexts of particular recitations are noted, these are painted in extremely broad strokes. This lack of detail effectively prevents Bailey's readers from evaluating his interpretation of the data.⁹⁷

It also severely inhibits any application of his model to the texts of the Gospels. The question of how the early church transmitted its traditions about Jesus is inextricably linked to the question of the relationships between the Jesus traditions recorded by the various New Testament authors. But since Bailey did not provide exact transcriptions of the tellings and retellings of the oral-traditional literature he

⁹⁷ Of additional concern is Bailey's failure to explain his conception of the inviolable "central thrust" of a traditional story.

recorded, very little of it is suitable for comparison with the New Testament literature.⁹⁸

In spite of these weaknesses, Bailey's model should not be judged too harshly. Bailey was "not suggesting absolute categories," and his article was clearly not intended to provide a detailed exposition of his model.⁹⁹ Some of the difficulties surrounding his conception of Luke's ὑπηρεταὶ τοῦ λόγου might be cleared up by a more pronounced emphasis on the role of community elders in the transmission of informal, controlled oral tradition. In general, Bailey's model is both intriguing and plausible, and bears further consideration as an analogue to the oral-traditional system which carried the Jesus tradition in the first century. Nevertheless, since appropriate methodological controls were not applied regarding the selection and annotation of his data, the actual validity of the data cannot be verified to any degree of certainty. Any application of Bailey's model to the texts of the Synoptic gospels must therefore remain inconclusive.

Conclusion

In light of the above considerations, it is worth repeating the following two points: 1) The vast amount of comparative evidence relating to systems of composition and transmission of oral traditions in various cultures demonstrates that such systems are the products of specific, often highly complex socio-cultural circumstances, and are to that extent unique. 2) Given the distinctiveness of individual

⁹⁸ However, see Dunn 2000.

⁹⁹ Bailey 1991, 51.

oral-traditional systems, not every such system can be expected to provide comparative data appropriate to a model of early Christian oral tradition.

Both the oral Jesus tradition and any oral-traditional system from which comparative data is collected must be considered discrete entities which may, to varying degrees, be similar to or different from each other and any other system. It is therefore necessary to give some attention to the question of how suitably comparable oral-traditional data is to be selected for use in a new model of early Christian oral tradition. This question will be taken up in the following chapter.

COMPARABILITY

As a subject for research, the oral Jesus tradition is rather unco-operative. It is no longer extant, and the mechanism by which it operated is virtually undocumented. Its shape and substance must be reconstructed from written literary treatments of the life and ministry of Jesus and of his earliest followers. The investigator of the oral Jesus tradition which was carried in the early church is denied much of its content, and most of its context.

Investigation of the oral tradition of the early church also poses considerable problems of perspective. Western New Testament scholars, faced with such a perplexing and unfamiliar subject, must be wary of the uncritical propagation of ethnocentric bias, where western values, cultural patterns and modes of thought are assumed to motivate non-western people; chronological bias, where modern attitudes and concepts are supposed to have been held by ancient peoples; and disciplinary bias, where the now-traditional methods of New Testament scholarship are held to be the only worthwhile means of approaching questions related to the early church.

The present study is thus necessary on two grounds. It is necessary as a prerequisite to the construction of an actual model of the oral Jesus tradition: if a workable model is to be composed, some thought must be given to procedural concerns. However, it is also necessary as a means of demonstrating the utility of any resulting model.

Models do not simply appear out of thin air, though they have often been presented as though they had. This was a major failing of certain earlier authors whose models of early Christian oral tradition first appeared in publication fully

formed, though ostensibly derived from data gathered and interpreted in the context of highly specialised interdisciplinary studies of oral-traditional systems. Lack of methodological detail had the effect of suppressing or completely concealing serious flaws in these models, and tended to depreciate the value of new and provocative hypotheses by rendering them impossible to confirm. For a model of early Christian oral tradition to be successful, all of its component parts must bear up to scrutiny, and must therefore be made available for examination.

The term "model" is difficult to define, despite the frequency with which it is used.¹ A great variety of different kinds of models are used for a great variety of purposes in all academic disciplines. This paper will make no attempt to define models as a universal concept, but a description of the specific type of model which is being advocated here will be of some use at this stage in the discussion.

The model toward which this paper is a preliminary step is a kind of conceptual illustration based on a comparison between an accessible source of oral-traditional data and the available data related to the oral tradition of the early church.² Such a model can only offer an analogy with the oral-traditional system employed by the first Christians. It can make no claims to absolute historical reality, nor can it hope to provide anything more than an approximate picture of the social mechanism which carried the oral Jesus tradition. It is a *model*, and must not be pressed for information it cannot provide.

¹ See Carney 1975, 7-11. A model of the kind under discussion here must undergo many stages of refinement and revision before something like a final product can be achieved. In this paper, therefore, the term "model" may refer to the proposed project at any stage of revision; the context of the discussion will make the specific usage clear.

Conceptual models are most often conceived to illustrate rather broad phenomena such as economic or political systems.³ However, the type of model under consideration here is extremely limited as to its possible applications. It is designed only to illustrate a particular phenomenon which occurred during a relatively brief period within a specific social group. In a certain sense this fact negatively impacts the proposed model's suitability for testing and verification, as it cannot necessarily be applied to other phenomena. However, models may be evaluated in other ways.

On the Evaluation of Models

Conceptual modelling, whether to explain or clarify a phenomenon which is accessible to observation, or, as in this case, to provide a speculative account of an otherwise inaccessible phenomenon, is ultimately an inductive exercise. Models perform an ampliative function which, in ideal circumstances, *may* facilitate a fuller understanding of their antecedent phenomena. Thus Philip Esler rightly asserts that models cannot be classified as "true" or "false," "valid" or "invalid," as though they were syllogistic arguments.⁴ However, a model can be described as "better" or "worse," or more or less "useful".⁵ Here what is at issue is the intrinsic aptness, insofar as this can be verified by external observation, of a model to achieve its stated purpose. This may be assessed on three main grounds.

² It should be noted, however, that any oral-traditional data which might be compared is necessarily the product of prior interpretation.

³ E.g. Carney 1975, 7: "A model is an outline framework, in general terms, of the characteristics of a class of things or phenomena."

⁴ Esler 1994, 13; 1995, 4-8. Cf. Carney 1975, 11-13 on a model's "goodness of fit". For two contrasting views on the issue of reliability and validity in qualitative research methods, see Kirk and Miller 1986; Wolcott 1994, 337-373.

First, and perhaps most obviously, a model may be judged on the credibility of its overall explanation of the phenomenon in question. In light of the previous chapter's discussion of current models, it is apparent that not all models of early Christian oral tradition will be able to provide an equally convincing explanation of the mechanism used to transmit the oral Jesus tradition. This criterion is of long-term concern to the present study, though it is obviously not possible to predetermine the credibility which might be achieved by any model which might be constructed in light of the present study.

Second, a model may be evaluated on the basis of the propriety of its use of data. The data on which a model is based must be properly understood and properly represented in its interpretation and arrangement. If the author of a model can be shown to have misconstrued or misinterpreted the data from which it is constructed, the model may rightly be regarded with some suspicion.⁶ This criterion is the more significant since a model could conceivably be judged to provide a "useful" explanation or illustration even if it is constructed from badly construed or even non-existent data.

Third, a model may be evaluated on the degree to which its constituent data can be shown to be comparable to the phenomenon it is designed to illustrate. This criterion is of fundamental importance to the present study, and is to a large extent presupposed by the first two criteria. Oral-traditional systems are the products of particular cultures and communities, and may take any number of forms. Each such

⁵ Cf. Esler 1994, 13.

system is therefore substantially unique, and cannot be simply assumed to resemble another system apart from careful analysis. However, the evident singularity of a complex system in terms of the minute details of its contents and context does not in itself prevent such a system from being viewed as in some sense similar to another complex system.

No human being is exactly like another; each person is manifestly different in terms of their emotional and psychological complexion, their intellectual capacities, and their physical characteristics. Yet a psychologist, a teacher or a physiologist might quite reasonably regard two people as similar in a certain limited, but nevertheless useful, sense. Two unique oral-traditional systems might likewise possess certain corresponding features on account of which the two systems might be considered similar. Thus to designate two oral-traditional systems, features, or products as "comparable" is simply to assert that they are, in an appropriate sense, similar enough to justify their classification as like entities.

Models are by nature comparative tools.⁷ Any benefit which may be derived from a conceptual model depends entirely on its disposition when juxtaposed with real phenomena. If the data which underlies a model is of a broadly dissimilar kind to the phenomenon to which it must be compared, the model itself can be of very little use. Hence no data can be selected for use in the proposed model until it is deemed sufficiently similar to warrant such a comparison. However, it is not immediately obvious how or to what degree similarity must be established before a comparison of

⁶ Thus Kelber wrongly assumes, on the basis of his belief that all oral-traditional systems are governed by the principles of "orality", that the oral Jesus tradition can be understood as substantially comparable to any other oral tradition. See discussion, ch. 1 above.

oral-traditional data can be legitimately made. This question may be profitably approached through a consideration of John Miles Foley's principles of "dependence".

Foley's Principles of Dependence

John Miles Foley is the consummate proponent and defender of the oral-formulaic theory. Having himself conducted field research on the oral epic poetry of the southern Slavs, Foley has penned numerous books and articles applying the oral theory to Old English poetry.⁸ Foley's work was foundational for Kelber's aforementioned consideration of "orality" in Mark, Paul and *Q*, and has been widely cited by New Testament scholars subsequently interested in the potential of the oral-formulaic theory for application to early Christian literature.⁹ More significantly for the present study, Foley has dealt extensively with the issue of "comparability" as it pertains to the analysis of potentially oral-derived texts.

The pioneering work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord in the former Yugoslavia was taken up and reinterpreted by others to such an extent that by 1988 Foley could note that, in addition to ancient Greek and Serbocroatian, the oral theory had been applied to more than one hundred language traditions. Foley enthusiastically considered this huge expansion to indicate nothing less than "the

⁷ Esler 1994, 12-13.

⁸ See Foley 1976, 1980, 1981b, 1983, 1990, 1995, 1999, etc.

⁹ Walter Ong's conception of the "oral formula", substantially adopted by Kelber, was directly influenced by Foley (though Ong's definition of the formula differs quite widely from Foley's); see Ong 1982, 25-26; Foley 1980; 1981b, 274. An explicit recent application of Foley's work (esp. Foley 1991) to the Synoptic materials may be found in Horsley and Draper 1999.

making of a new discipline".¹⁰ However, the rapid proliferation of oral-formulaic studies brought with it a number of problems. Disputes arose within the Parry-Lord school over the viability of the "formula" as an indicator of oral composition in written texts, and over the actual oral provenance of particular bodies of oral-traditional poetry.¹¹ In addition, a consistent tendency could be observed within oral-formulaic studies to emphasise the similarities between oral traditions to the exclusion of any differences.

In response to this trend, Foley warned of the "need for an increased awareness of methodological preliminaries in studies associated with Oral Theory."¹² He pointed out that that "a criticism that cannot make distinctions because it is too involved in rehearsing real or apparent points of contact is not a comparative criticism."¹³ Foley observed that specific oral-traditional features may be dependent for their existence on a specific oral-traditional system, or on a particular type of oral-traditional literature, and thus cannot be assumed to occur where these systems or types of literature are absent. He therefore offered three principles which could guide subsequent comparisons of oral-traditional systems and literature: *tradition-dependence*, *genre-dependence*, and *text-dependence*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Foley 1988, 57.

¹¹ On the dispute over the "formula", see Foley 1981b; Finnegan 1990b; Nagler 1974. Concerning the oral provenance of Old English poetry see Magoun 1953 (rpt. Fry 1968, 83-113); Benson 1966 (rpt. Foley 1990, 228-242); Foley 1983.

¹² Foley 1988, 109.

¹³ Foley 1988, 109.

¹⁴ The discussion of Foley's three principles of "dependence" followed here is in Foley 1988, 109-110; the same discussion is included in Foley 1985, 68-70. See also Foley 1981, 1983.

Foley's first principle, *tradition-dependence*, asserts the essential importance of "allowing each oral poetic tradition its idiosyncratic features and actively incorporating those features into one's critical model of that tradition."¹⁵ Such features might include characteristics of the local language, distinctive narrative features, mythical and historical content, or any other characteristic which is peculiar to that tradition.¹⁶ These features may figure so prominently in a particular tradition that it cannot be observed to share any significant similarities with other traditions, whether in terms of systems of composition and transmission or of the types of oral literature produced. There is "no reason to suppose that traditional units which take shape under different tradition-dependent systems must be exactly or even closely comparable."¹⁷

Foley's second principle, *genre-dependence*, means "demanding as grounds for comparison among traditions nothing less than the closest generic fit available, and, further, calibrating any and all comparisons according to the exactness of that fit."¹⁸ Foley regarded the failure to observe this principle as one of the principle shortcomings of oral-formulaic studies up to that point. He criticised the penchant of some analysts within the Parry-Lord school to set "lyric elegy beside epic or verse hagiography or riddle, building insupportable bridges" between dissimilar genres and

¹⁵ Foley 1988, 109.

¹⁶ Foley 1988, 109.

¹⁷ Foley 1988, 109.

¹⁸ Foley 1988, 109.

unrelated traditions. For a proper comparison to occur, it must be possible to establish at least "a basic [generic] congruency".¹⁹

Foley's third principle of comparison, *text-dependence*, is "the necessity to take into account the precise nature of each text."²⁰ Foley observed that the types of media in which oral or potentially oral materials are recorded may have a significant impact on their form and content, and that this must be taken into account where a comparison is to be made. The analyst must determine as much of the history of a particular text as possible, including "the circumstances of collection, the history of manuscript transmission, ...the editing process through which [a text] might have or actually did pass," and any "other factors that would help to calibrate the comparison realistically."²¹ Where such contextual details cannot be determined, this should be admitted, even at the risk of leaving questions of oral provenance unanswered.

In addition, this third principle implies that texts (oral or otherwise) which are employed for purposes of comparison must be consulted in their original languages and with "philological precision".²² This must be true of all texts involved, no matter how briefly considered. Though not always observed in past oral-formulaic studies, Foley saw this as an essential requirement for a fair and exact comparative analysis.

Foley's principles were intended to cope with the rapid expansion of oral-formulaic studies into new territories, and are specific applications of the most basic requirement of this sort of comparative analysis: to compare like with like. Unlike

¹⁹ Foley 1988, 110.

²⁰ Foley 1988, 110.

²¹ Foley 1988, 110.

many of the pronouncements of oral-formulaic scholars on subjects such as “formulas” and “themes”, “composition in performance”, and so on, which were conceived in and for the analysis of oral epic poetry, Foley’s principles are theoretically appropriate to the analysis of all types of oral and ostensibly oral literature.

In the event, the type of comparative study that Foley’s principles are designed to regulate and encourage is, in outline, quite similar to that under consideration here. These sorts of studies are in fact the trademark of the oral-formulaic school, having originated with Parry and Lord’s field studies in the 1930’s which were specifically designed to determine the social mechanism by which certain traditional materials, possessed only in written form, were carried. This likeness is more than superficial, as will be seen more clearly below. Therefore, the present study will employ Foley’s principles of dependence as a means of enforcing a high level of methodological rigour in the construction of a model of early Christian oral tradition.

Comparability *in absentia*

However, Foley’s principles of “dependence” do not completely resolve the issue of traditional comparability for the purposes of this paper. In fact, they serve to accentuate a major complication which attends the use of data related to the early church: the oral tradition of the early church cannot be directly compared to another oral-traditional system, because the oral tradition of the early church is absent. Any data ostensibly derived from or descriptive of the oral Jesus tradition must be reconstructed from written documents.

This problem is not explicitly addressed by Foley, even though it is common also to the Parry-Lord studies on the Homeric epics and his own work on Old English poetry. Implicitly, however, he attempts to resolve it in two ways. First, he simply assumes that a degree of uncertainty is a necessary characteristic of all such studies. Given the obvious historical problems involved, and the overtly inductive nature of the entire exercise, it is hardly surprising that the suitability of comparisons between modern and ancient oral-traditional systems cannot be absolutely assured. While such uncertainty must be admitted, it need not obstruct the construction and presentation of hypotheses concerning a text's oral-traditional provenance.

Second, Foley emphasises similarity between generic types as the primary type of similarity necessary for the establishment of comparability between oral-traditional systems. This is in fact the only positive criterion for the determination of comparability between oral traditions asserted by his three principles of "dependence". Again, Foley's principle of "tradition-dependence" implies that oral-traditional systems may be considered comparable if they can be shown to have been comprised of substantially similar traditional features. Explicitly, however, his concern is to show that they have produced similar generic types of oral literature.

A fundamental assumption of the Parry-Lord oral-formulaic school is that if an observed oral-traditional system can be shown to produce literature which is closely similar to literature produced by an unobserved system, chances are high that the systems themselves may be closely similar. In any case, very little descriptive evidence exists relating to the mechanisms by which either the Homeric or the Old English poems were carried and transmitted, so that no serious attempt is ever made

to assert comparability between oral-traditional systems through an analysis of the systems themselves. Rather, the existence of two texts of a similar generic type, if these can be demonstrated to have been orally derived, is considered significant evidence for the comparability of their parent systems.

The oral tradition of the early church presents both advantages and disadvantages as an object of study compared to the above-mentioned subjects of oral-formulaic analysis. In contrast to the Homeric and Old English poetic traditions, for which little historical evidence is available, the first Christians have left some literature which deals specifically, if for the most part indirectly, with the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition. In addition, a fair amount can be determined about the cultural and social contexts in which the oral Jesus tradition was carried, both from early Christian and from contemporary Jewish and pagan sources. In further contrast, few would dispute the existence among the first Christians of an oral tradition relating to the life and teachings of Jesus.²³ Nor is there any real doubt that much of the content of the oral Jesus tradition, and some of its formal features, have been preserved in the Gospels and to a lesser degree in some of the other canonical and extracanonical early Christian literature.

The benefits of this situation are plain. The investigator of the social mechanism which carried the oral Jesus tradition in the early church is not forced to rely only on similarities between texts in order to posit its comparability with another oral traditional system, since evidence of various kinds is available. Neither is he

²³ See e.g. Fitzmyer 1978, 255: "Any solution of the Synoptic Problem has to reckon, first of all, with a pre-literary oral tradition about what Jesus did and said"; Wansbrough 1991, 9: "An emphasis on the importance of the oral tradition, as well as a realization that the written Gospels

required to convince anyone of the existence of his object of study (though he must still argue his particular case). He may thus concentrate his energies on the question *how*, and not *whether*, the first Christians transmitted their traditions about Jesus orally.

On the other hand, the types of literature produced by the early Christians do not possess most of the distinctive characteristics which permit Foley to place so much weight on generic and other textual similarities in the determination of comparability between oral epic traditions. While use of a similar poetic metre and a similar type of "poetic grammar" could be seen as resulting from the use of a similar compositional method, such a claim would be much more difficult to support in regard to the formal features of the parables, aphorisms and other ostensibly oral-traditional types which may be observed in the New Testament literature.

However, the comparison of texts alone cannot bear the full weight even of a model of oral epic poetry. The fact that a community is observed to produce a certain style or genre of literature by means of a particular oral compositional technique does not guarantee that such literature will only ever be produced by that technique. A different community might very well produce a similar type of literature by a different oral compositional technique, or by writing. Discoveries to this effect are not unheard of among writers of oral-formulaic studies.²⁴

In view of these observations, a few points can be made which may help clarify the scope of the problem faced by the present study in respect to the establishment of

depend on a period of oral transmission in the Christian communities, has been one of the salient contributions of the twentieth century to the study of the Gospels."

²⁴ See e.g. Opland 1971; Finnegan 1977, 70-71; Foley 1983; Benson 1990.

comparability. Although the evidence concerning the oral tradition of the early church is scant and somewhat fragmentary, matters could be worse. This is not simply to encourage the weary Synoptic tradition-critic, but to point out that there is some scholarly precedent for attempting to define ground-rules for a proper comparison between modern oral traditions and ancient ones which are even less well-attested than that of the early church. Scant evidence is not the same as *no* evidence, and it may yet be possible to construct a methodologically sound and useful model of the oral Jesus tradition using the extant early Christian literature.

In regard to the establishment of comparability between the oral traditions of the early church and more accessible traditional data, the present study suggests a simple argument by analogy: If certain types of data from an observable tradition appear to resemble corresponding types of data which may be gleaned from the extant materials related to the early church, it may reasonably be suggested that other correspondences, though directly unobservable, might exist between the two traditions. However, following Foley, an assertion of comparability does not abrogate the necessity to recognise the various differences which exist between traditions and individual traditional units.

Types of Data

Foley's principles of "dependence" indicate two types of data which will be duly regarded here as critical to any assertion of traditional comparability. Foremost of these in Foley's scheme is *textual data*. A comparison of two oral-traditional systems will be virtually impossible apart from an analysis of actual or ostensibly oral literature from both systems. Given the limited efficacy of literary comparisons as a

means of establishing comparability between traditions, however, it would be imprudent to place the kind of singular emphasis on these which may be observed in many oral-formulaic studies. Literary comparisons should not, of course, be devalued as a necessary form of evidence for traditional similarity, nor as a means of testing the utility of an eventual model. But in the present instance other forms of evidence may also be exploited to bolster an argument for comparability.

In addition to textual data, Foley implicitly allows that *traditional data* may also be viewed with an eye to potential similarities. While the traditional complexion of the oral Jesus tradition was certainly distinctive, this does not preclude the possibility that certain of its traditional features may have analogues in other traditions. As has been observed, actual early Christian traditional data is somewhat difficult to come by. However, an equally important type of data is available for the purposes of the present study, though it is not specifically considered by Foley.

Oral-traditional systems are, like any social phenomena, products of a particular socio-cultural situation. They are, in effect, "social-" and "culture-dependent" phenomena. But certain social and cultural features will be more likely to have a direct impact on the form and/or content of an oral tradition than others. Where such features can be defined, they may also be compared to corresponding features which may similarly impact another tradition. Thus *socio-cultural data* may also play a pivotal role in the determination of comparability between oral-traditional systems.

But it is still necessary to specify the kind of source which will be best suited to provide oral-traditional data for the construction of a model of early Christian oral

tradition. Previous models have relied on one of three types of sources: either on data derived from a historical study of a dead oral tradition (Gerhardsson) or on data derived from a contemporary study of a living oral tradition (Bailey), or alternatively on a combination of features derived from disparate traditions (Kelber); these effectively exhaust the possible sources of relevant and usable data.

Sources of Data

The mechanism used in the early church to transmit the oral Jesus tradition is not well documented, and the absence of the early church itself precludes the possibility of achieving direct access to the settings in which it operated. The sheer antiquity of the matter lends an element of uncertainty to every attempted reconstruction. It would be extremely desirable, in lieu of further documentation, to gain access to records of some well documented, substantially comparable oral-traditional system which was synchronically situated with the oral Jesus tradition. Such records would almost certainly reflect some light on the way the early Jesus tradition might have operated in its socio-cultural context. The problem lies in locating such records.

As it turns out, the only records which even remotely resemble this ideal are those created by the rabbis in the third century.²⁵ These do in many ways appear to meet the above criteria. A two century gap is probably too great to consider them precisely synchronic in relation to the gospel materials, but the Rabbinic tradition is certainly far more carefully documented in terms of essential elements of form and content, even to the point of containing specific details of transmission and

application. Furthermore, many of the traditional units recorded in the Rabbinic literature bear a significant likeness to certain synoptic pericopae in regard to genre and topical matter. Perhaps most intriguingly, both the Rabbinic tradition and the early Christian tradition manifestly possess, to whatever degree and at however many removes, a "common heritage".²⁶

However, the (admittedly sparse) historical data relating to the transmission of the Jesus tradition contained in the early Christian literature does not seem to accommodate the highly formalised oral traditional practices described in the Rabbinic documents.²⁷ Unfortunately, once this conclusion is firmly drawn, dependence on an ancient tradition as a source of data is ruled out for the purposes of the projected model. Various other hypothetical problems could be discussed concerning the application of such data, but in the present case these are moot. There simply are no other traditions of the same period which are documented extensively enough to facilitate a useful comparison.

Data derived from a living tradition presents a different set of problems. Separated by two thousand years of history and culture, a living tradition provides no sure means of illuminating the socio-cultural context of the early Jesus tradition. None of the dialects in use by the earliest Christians are still spoken, and there is no *a priori* reason to suspect that a system of oral-traditional practices similar to one in use two thousand years ago is in force anywhere in the modern world.

²⁵ On this issue see e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1951; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Ellen 1984; Jarvie 1984; Kirk and Miller 1986; Nencel and Pels 1991.

²⁶ Gerhardsson 1961, 16.

²⁷ See the discussion, p. 2-8 above.

However, these problems may not be insurmountable. The type of model under discussion here is intended to support a sound *analogy* with the oral tradition of the early church. As such it does not require any direct historical, cultural, social, or linguistic links with early Christianity. A living oral tradition only needs to be substantially *comparable* to the primitive Jesus tradition in these respects in order to serve as a potential analogy.

Further, a contemporary tradition presents certain advantages as a source of data. Once a suitably comparable, accessible contemporary tradition is selected, it can actually be investigated in the present. A dedicated observer can collect specific oral texts and document them with reference to the particular circumstances of their performance and transmission. The socio-cultural and linguistic settings of the tradition can also be documented, as well as specific occasions on which people, customs, and institutions can be observed to shape and transform the tradition, or be shaped and transformed by it. Individual participants in the traditional system can actually be consulted as to their own thoughts and feelings about it. Given the consent of the participants and a sufficient allotment of time, any observable feature of a contemporary tradition can be documented in almost unlimited detail. A comparable living tradition might therefore prove extremely valuable as a source of data for a model of early Christian oral tradition. Despite the lack of any necessary connection to the early Jesus tradition or its socio-cultural context, its very accessibility might make it a useful analogy which could shed light on the oral traditional practices of the early church.

From a certain perspective, a model which combined data from various sources might seem the best option. By combining data it might be possible to create a nearly ideal model for the study of the primitive Jesus tradition. Data from an ancient tradition, for instance, might offset the enormous chronological gap between a living tradition and the early Christian tradition, while a comprehensive study of a present-day tradition might compensate for any lack of comparability on the part of the ancient tradition. In fact, however, this approach would cause more problems than it would solve.

As noted above, lack of familiarity with the many practical issues related to the transmission of oral tradition has frequently led to the advancement and acceptance of untenable hypotheses regarding the oral traditional practices of the early church. The purpose for basing a model of early Christian oral tradition on a known tradition, modern or ancient, is to bind historical speculation concerning the nature and form of the primitive Jesus tradition to actual human behaviour. However, the combination of elements of a modern and an ancient tradition can only create a model of a hypothetical tradition.

A single oral traditional system operating within a specific socio-cultural context can be conceived of as possessing a natural internal cohesiveness in that there are complex and necessary relationships of time, circumstance, and interaction which exist (or have existed) between its constituent features. This natural cohesiveness is the single objective basis for any model's claim to act as an "empirical" representation of an actual oral traditional system. By creating an artificially contrived "tradition" out of specific features of two or more separate traditional

systems, any claim to a natural internal cohesiveness is lost, and with it the utility of the subsequent model.

To insist upon the preservation of a tradition's natural internal cohesiveness is not to naïvely demand total objectivity in the collection and interpretation of data, or to circumvent the subjective elements of selective observation and reporting, but only to draw attention to the fact that the more external arrangement which is required to cohere the model, the less claim the model will have to "empirical" status in any sense. The model proposed here must be sufficient to describe a specific series of regular human interactions which take place within a given social context, and therefore must incorporate a range of social, cultural and literary data. The interpretative dangers in attempts to synthesise data collected from disparate cultures and communities into a single, overarching pattern are manifold.²⁸ For this reason the present study will not endorse a combination of two or more oral traditional systems as a source of comparative oral-traditional data, but will advocate the use of comparative data gathered in the course of detailed observations of a single system.

Having considered the possible types of sources for the data required to construct an analogical model of early Christian oral tradition, the present study will endorse the use of a single contemporary oral tradition which can be shown to be substantially comparable to the oral Jesus tradition. Dependence on a single source will permit a comprehensive treatment of both literary and social elements, and will provide a consistent standard for the construction of a model of early Christian oral tradition.

²⁸ See e.g. Clammer 1984, 66; Ingold 1989; Moore 1999, 10-23.

Thus far in the present study the oral Jesus tradition has been regarded in a very general sense. It is clear, however, that a specific oral-traditional system of the kind suggested above cannot be compared with any precision to a broad concept. Nor can a broad concept provide a very reliable perspective for the interpretation of the early Christian data. Rather, it is necessary to declare a particular early Christian community for which the proposed model of early Christian oral tradition can be constructed. Two primary candidates present themselves for this purpose: the church at Jerusalem, and the church at Corinth.²⁹

The church at Corinth recommends itself as a location for the proposed model on a number of grounds.³⁰ There is ample socio-cultural evidence concerning the city of Corinth and its environs during the New Testament period and for quite a long time before and after. More importantly, some evidence exists concerning the actual social complexion of the church at Corinth, both through the letters of Paul and those of slightly later Christian writers. Further, Paul's letters to the Corinthian church certainly contain references to the Jesus tradition, both implicit and explicit.

Yet the church at Corinth also poses some significant problems. The canonical Corinthian letters provide only a very small amount of textual data which could be attributed to the oral Jesus tradition, and it might be difficult to justify appeals to Paul's other letters for additional textual data (which would not amount to much anyway). An equally small amount of traditional data is available from the Corinthian letters, though some additional traditional data could possibly be provided

²⁹ Recent studies of the oral Jesus tradition as it may have operated in a Markan, Matthean, *Q* or other community can be of little use to the present study, since these cannot be pinned down to a particular place with any certainty.

from later Christian writers. Thus any comparison with a more accessible tradition would have to rely quite heavily on a consideration of broad socio-cultural data.

There would also be problems with a location of the proposed model in the church at Jerusalem. Little of the available textual data related to the Jesus tradition as witnessed by the New Testament writers is widely held to be derived (first-hand) from or directed to the Jerusalem church. Specific traditional data also, as will be expected, is only minimally available. Despite these problems, however, the Jerusalem church holds considerable promise for the purposes of the present study.

Although no extant textual data may be absolutely certified to be a direct product of the Jerusalem church, virtually all of the Jesus tradition which is recorded by the New Testament writers is more or less explicitly claimed to derive from one of the Twelve, all of whom were at least one-time authorities in the Jerusalem church.³¹ The Synoptic gospels, therefore, as well as John's gospel, may be considered legitimate sources of textual data which, properly qualified, may serve the construction of the proposed model. Moreover, Richard Bauckham has convincingly argued both for the reliability of Luke's depiction in Acts of the leadership situation in the Jerusalem church, and for the authenticity of the canonical letter of James.³² The inclusion of these sources of textual and traditional data significantly enhance the possibility of achieving a useful comparison between the oral-traditional system employed in the Jerusalem church and another more accessible tradition.

³⁰ See Malherbe 1977; Theissen 1982; Meeks 1983.

³¹ A possible exception to this is the appearance of Jesus to Paul on the road to Damascus.

³² See esp. Bauckham 1995; 1990; also Johnson 1995.

Further, if, as Bauckham and others have argued, the Jerusalem church during the period before 70 A.D. enjoyed a position of singular esteem and authority, it might be possible to determine what influence it may have exerted over the form and content of the Jesus tradition as this was transmitted to the other churches.³³ Thus it would be preferable to consider the way the oral Jesus tradition may have functioned in the Jerusalem church before attempting to chart its activity in the Corinthian church. Hence, the present study will endorse the construction of a model of the oral Jesus tradition as it may have operated in the Jerusalem church during the period of James' pre-eminence, roughly between 43 and 62 A.D.

Conclusion

Having settled on the pre-70 Jerusalem church as the most suitable historical location for the proposed model, it is now possible to describe more precisely the characteristics of a source of comparative data which should be sought for use in the proposed model of the oral Jesus tradition. This may be accomplished through an examination of certain of the major features which characterised the Jerusalem church in the first century. The following chapter will provide a brief description of these features with a view to their relevance to the selection of data for use in a model of early Christian oral tradition.

³³ See Bauckham 1995, 417-427.

NARROWING THE FIELD: SOCIO-CULTURAL FEATURES OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

It was noted in the previous chapter that certain of the socio-cultural features which characterised the Jerusalem church in the first century will have directly affected the social mechanism by which it carried and transmitted the oral Jesus tradition. This assertion is not especially controversial; few, if any, joint human activities are unconnected to the socio-cultural and personal circumstances of their participants. Yet it is significant for the present study in that it suggests an additional means of illustrating the oral-traditional system used by the first Christians.

A source of data, to be useful to the proposed model, must first be shown to produce oral literature comparable to that which is (ostensibly) recorded in the early Christian literature. However, it might also be evaluated on the degree to which it exhibits socio-cultural features similar to those supposed to have directly influenced the oral-traditional practices of the Jerusalem church in the first century. If such features can be observed, similarities could also reasonably be posited in respect to their influence on the oral-traditional practices of their respective communities.

What follows in this chapter is an attempt to specify several of the socio-cultural features of the Jerusalem church in the first century which would likely have impacted the oral-traditional system by which they transmitted their traditions about Jesus. This will obviously require an examination of the evidence related to the Jerusalem church itself. It will also, however, necessitate a survey of some of the evidence related to its wider social environment, both because of a desire to properly contextualize the cultural features under consideration, and because the paucity of

evidence related to the early church requires that certain of its characteristics be deduced from what is known of its parent society. These investigations will begin with a consideration of the social composition of Jerusalem in the first half of the first century A.D.

The Social Composition of Pre-70 Jerusalem

Recent estimates of the population of Jerusalem in middle of the first century have varied from as few as 25,000 to as many as 200,000 people.¹ However, Wolfgang Reinhardt, in an evaluation of the Lukan accounts of the rapid initial growth of the church in Jerusalem, has argued for a median figure.² Reinhardt analysed the figures provided by ancient authors and the archaeological evidence, and also considered such factors as the economic situation of Jerusalem in the first century, the available water supply, the area of the city and its apparent population density, the population densities of other ancient and modern cities, and ancient building techniques. His study led him to estimate between 100,000 and 120,000 permanent residents of Jerusalem in the 40's A.D.³ The number of people in the city would rise dramatically during the various festival days, so that neither Josephus' figure of 2,700,000 participants in a Passover feast shortly before the siege of Jerusalem, nor Tacitus' figure of 600,000 besieged within the city, need be regarded

¹ Reinhardt 1995, 241-243 provides a useful table of recent estimates of the population of first-century Jerusalem.

² See Reinhardt 1995.

³ Though he allowed for as few as 60,000 as a low estimate; Reinhardt 1995, 263.

as wildly exaggerated.⁴ By this account, Jerusalem was a major metropolitan centre which received a large and regular influx of local and international visitors.⁵

Even when it was not filled with festival crowds, Jerusalem was a multi-cultural city.⁶ While the majority of its citizens were of Palestinian origin, there is evidence that a large number of Diaspora Jews made their homes in Jerusalem, as well as many proselytes who had moved there from other cities.⁷ Thus, while Aramaic was the dominant language in first-century Jerusalem, Greek was also widely spoken.⁸ In addition, Hebrew is known to have been spoken by some in Palestine at this time, and Latin would have been spoken by the Roman occupiers.⁹ Many of the citizens of Jerusalem, particularly those involved in trade and commerce, will have been at least bilingual.¹⁰

Jerusalem's inhabitants, like those of all major cities, represented the full spectrum of social classes. That a wealthy aristocracy existed in Jerusalem in the first century is evident from both literary and archaeological evidence.¹¹ The aristocratic class in Jerusalem included landowners and merchants, but its most influential

⁴ Josephus, *War* 6.425; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.13. See Reinhardt 1995, 258-259; Sanders 1992, 126-127.

⁵ Sanders (1992, 69) cites the Elder Pliny's statement that Jerusalem was "by far the most illustrious city of the East"; Pliny, *Natural History*, 5.70.

⁶ Fiensy 1995, 230.

⁷ See Fiensy 1995, 231-232; Hengel and Marksches 1989, 8-9, 12.

⁸ See e.g. Schürer 1979, 20-23, 79; Hengel 1974, 58-61. On the continuing debate regarding the prevalence of spoken Greek in Palestinian society see e.g. Porter 1993; Casey 1997; Hengel and Marksches 1989, 8-9, 12.

⁹ See Fitzmyer 1970; Schürer 1979, 22-28, 80; Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 87; Wilcox 1994.

¹⁰ See e.g. Fitzmyer 1970; Schürer 1979, 28; Wilcox 1994.

¹¹ See Fiensy 1995, 215-220.

members were the wealthy priestly families.¹² According to Josephus, during the period between 41 and 66 A.D., these families, with the High Priestly families at their head, were “entrusted with the leadership of the nation” by the client-kings Herod of Chalcis and Agrippa II.¹³

The lower class consisted of small merchants, craftsmen, and unskilled labourers, as well as the poorer priests and Levites. Jerusalem supported a vast number of tradesmen and merchants, many of whom worked in support of the Temple cult or in the building and maintenance of the Temple itself.¹⁴ Priests not on duty in the Temple might work as scribes, teachers of the law, or magistrates, or they might farm or even work at a trade.¹⁵ Tradespeople, farmers, and merchants could theoretically make a reasonable living, though of course their success depended on their individual skills and circumstances. At the very bottom of the lower class were the unskilled labourers who performed menial jobs such as carrying burdens or watching over people or property. Unskilled workers were naturally much lower earners than merchants, tradespeople, or farmers, being paid on average one denarius per day.¹⁶ The lower class made up the vast majority of the population of Jerusalem in the first century.

¹² See Sanders 1992, 317-340.

¹³ Josephus, *Ant.* 20.251. See Schürer 1973, 376-377.

¹⁴ Bakers, weavers, goldsmiths, washers, ointment merchants, and money changers, among other occupations, were particularly necessary for the continuation of the Temple worship. Further, since the Temple was still under construction during most of the first century, a large force of carpenters, stone masons, and labourers would also have been necessary. See Fiensy 1995, 219-222; Hanson and Oakman 1998, 150.

¹⁵ Fiensy 1995, 220. Cf. Sanders 1992, 77, 146-157, 170-172; he considers that “the priests and Levites were, on the whole, well supported” by tithes and other contributions.

¹⁶ See Fiensy 1995, 222 and citations.

Yet there were people whose social standing was below that even of the unskilled workers. These included slaves, the physically deformed and diseased, those of questionable parentage, and workers in certain objectionable occupations. Such people were societal outcasts; they were a “submerged” class.¹⁷ With the exception of some slaves, who might be given positions of great responsibility and status within a particular household, life for members of this class was for the most part lived in poverty as well as social isolation.

“Class” and “Status”

Before turning to the question of the specific social composition of the Jerusalem church, it will be helpful to distinguish the relationship between “social class” and “social status”. The terms “social class” and “social status” are somewhat ambiguous, and refer to social conditions which are closely intertwined, with the result that they have sometimes been used interchangeably in studies of early Christianity.¹⁸ However, these terms may properly denote two discrete kinds of social relationships, and a distinction between the two concepts will be useful in the present discussion. It will therefore be necessary to adopt working definitions for the two terms.

In a 1984 article, Richard Rohrbaugh, drawing on the work of Stanislaw Ossowski, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, and Erik Wright, attempted to clarify the terms “class” and “status” for use in New Testament studies.¹⁹ Rohrbaugh defined “class”

¹⁷ Fiensy 1995, 223, following Finkelstein 1940, 4.

¹⁸ E.g. Stambaugh and Balch 1986; cf. Rohrbaugh 1984. See also the comments in Kyrtatas 1987, 12.

¹⁹ Rohrbaugh 1984; Ossowski 1963; Stavenhagen 1975; Wright 1979.

as primarily a political and economic phenomenon which is characterised by asymmetric power relationships between politico-economic "interest groups."²⁰ As opposed to a gradational approach which views lower classes as those which have "less of something that the upper classes have more of,"²¹ Rohrbaugh advocated a "relational" view of class, wherein "economic stratification is...seen as a polarisation between those who do and do not control the system."²²

"Status," however, derives from "other stratification systems...that are not asymmetrical and are not necessarily based on economics."²³ Rather, these systems are based on factors such as birth, education, geographical location, occupational prestige, and gender, and tend to reflect widely-held societal values.²⁴ The interaction of these systems produces a more individualised social stratification which can be plotted on "a gradational continuum from low to high on a social scale."²⁵

Further clarification of Rohrbaugh's suggestions may be obtained through a consideration of "class" and "status" in terms of social mobility. Although the main elements of the class structure of first-century Roman society were institutionalised and thus relatively fixed, a certain degree of social mobility was nevertheless possible. The distinctions between social classes were founded on the accumulation and maintenance of wealth. This held true for the whole range of social classes in Roman society (except, of course, for the emperor): senators had to own property

²⁰ Rohrbaugh 1984, 538, 540.

²¹ Rohrbaugh 1984, 529 quoting Wright 1979, 6.

²² Rohrbaugh 1984, 538.

²³ Rohrbaugh 1984, 538.

²⁴ Rohrbaugh 1984, 538.

worth 1,000,000 sesterces, and admission to the equestrian order was contingent on ownership of 400,000 sesterces; those who were not born Roman citizens could purchase citizenship, and slaves could purchase their freedom. The highest levels of Jewish society were not institutionalised on the same grounds – no amount of personal wealth would make a non-Levite a priest. Nevertheless, the accumulation of wealth in first-century Jerusalem was the primary means of elevating one's social position in respect to social class.

One's social status, on the other hand, could be altered for better or worse depending upon a variety of factors, including personal achievement. Improvements of one's status might eventually lead, directly or indirectly, to a change of social class. However, it was equally possible for a person to achieve a high level of prestige and influence despite their membership in a relatively powerless social class and a low personal net worth.²⁶ Likewise, a person's social status might become low even if they were part of a powerful class.

The conceptual relationship between "class" and "status" is extremely close, and any distinctions drawn between them must necessarily be artificial. However, Rohrbaugh's suggestions, properly qualified, will provide a convenient means of differentiating between the two concepts. Therefore, the term "social class" will be defined in the present study as referring to the interrelated system of "interest groups" which may be distinguished by their roles within a society's economic system;

²⁵ Rohrbaugh 1984, 538.

²⁶ So in a different context Fiensy notes that Hillel worked as a woodcutter in Jerusalem, earning half a denarius per day (b. Yoma 35b); Fiensy 1995, 222.

whereas "social status" will denote the relative prestige of an individual person within a defined social group.

The Social Composition of the Jerusalem Church

Although the fragmentary nature of the evidence defies the construction of a precise historical picture of the social classes represented in the first-century Jerusalem church, a general picture can be derived from the New Testament literature.²⁷ Some social diversity can be noted even among the Twelve. The sons of Zebedee were fishermen whose family business was well-off enough to employ hired help (Mk. 1.19-20), but, inasmuch as they are portrayed as working themselves, would have belonged to the lower class.²⁸ Peter and Andrew were James' and John's fishing partners (Lk. 5.10), so were evidently in a similar class position. James the Lord's brother would also have been of the lower class, as he would likely have been a carpenter like Joseph his father (Mt. 13.55) and Jesus his brother (Mk. 6.3).²⁹ Matthew, as a tax-collector, might have accumulated sufficient wealth to have belonged to the upper class, though in any case his social status among his fellow Jews would have been extremely low.³⁰

Similar diversity can be noted among other members of the Jerusalem church. Barnabas is a Levite and a landowner (Acts 4.36-37); he may well have been part of the upper class, as might Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1). Luke suggests that these

²⁷ See e.g. the similar complaint in Meeks 1983, 72.

²⁸ On the structure of the fishing economy of Galilee see Hanson and Oakman 1998, 106-110.

²⁹ Fiensy 1995, 227.

³⁰ Tax-collecting was contracted and sub-contracted at a number of levels, so it is difficult to gauge Matthew's actual earning power (see e.g. Hanson and Oakman 1998, 139-141). However, he is portrayed in both Mt. and Mk. as being a home owner, and as giving a banquet at which many people

were not the only persons who donated property (Acts 4.34-35). Mary, the mother of John Mark, owned a house large enough to hold a gathering of “many people (ἱκανοί)”, and owned at least one slave (Acts 12.12-13).³¹

However, the church also included widows of sufficiently low income to require charitable aid from their fellow Christians (Acts 6.1), and the entire congregation is sometimes portrayed as being in financial distress (Acts 11.27-30; 1 Cor. 16.1-4; 2 Cor. 8).³² Luke mentions that a large number of priests joined the church; the social rank of these priests is unknown (Acts 6.7). Mark, Barnabas’ kinsman, was probably a Levite as well (Col. 4.10).³³ The church is also portrayed as containing some people from the “submerged” class. Luke seems to imply that many of the beneficiaries of the apostles’ healings joined the believers (Acts 5.12-16), and the slave girl Rhoda is depicted as having been one of their number as well (Acts 12.13-15).³⁴

Some cultural diversity is also observable in the Lukan account of the Jerusalem church. The quarrel about provision for widows which resulted in the appointment of the Seven is between the Greek and Hebrew contingents in the church (Acts 6.1). One of the Seven, Nicolas, is specifically referred to as a proselyte from Antioch (Acts 6.5). Thus at least Greek and Aramaic appear to have both been

attend. Nevertheless, tax-collectors were regarded very dubiously by both Jews and non-Jews; see Schürer 1973, 376.

³¹ Fiensy 1995, 227.

³² Moreover, Luke’s portrayal of the community of goods in the Jerusalem church suggests that many of its members required financial assistance; see Bartchy 1991, 315 (*contra* Conzelmann 1987, 24). On the status and rights of Jewish widows see Hanson and Oakman 1998, 48.

³³ Fiensy 1995, 227.

³⁴ On the presence and role of slaves in the early Christian communities in general see Kyrtatas 1987, 19-86.

spoken in the Jerusalem church from very early on, if not from its inception at Pentecost (Acts 2.5-13).³⁵

Although the New Testament literature provides relatively few references to the class or ethnic backgrounds of specific individuals, the evidence just noted shows significant social diversity among the Jerusalem Christians. Most students of Pauline Christianity have, on similar evidence, concluded that the Pauline churches were comprised of a cross-section of society.³⁶ It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that the social composition of the Jerusalem church during the first century closely mirrored the social composition of Jerusalem at large.³⁷

The social and cultural backgrounds of the Jerusalem Christians will have factored significantly in the development and maintenance of their oral traditions. Being predominantly Jewish, the Jerusalem church could access a built-in store of traditional materials, some of which might well have been oral. Yet they were a culturally mixed community, and thus might also have had access to a broader range of oral-traditional methods and materials than just those common to Palestinian Jews.

In addition, the cultural composition of the Jerusalem church will have determined the languages in which the oral Jesus tradition would have been most commonly heard and transmitted by its members. And while a linguistically homogeneous community may produce oral literature which requires translation before it can be transmitted over ethnic boundaries, oral literature produced by a

³⁵ See Hengel 1979, 71-80; Fiensy 1995, 235-236 and citations.

³⁶ See e.g. Malherbe 1977, 29-31; Theissen 1982, 69; Meeks 1983, 73; Gill 1994; cf. Fiensy 1995, 230; Kyrtatas 1987, 14; Osiek and Balch 1997, 100.

³⁷ Stegemann and Stegemann 1999, 218-219; Fiensy 1995, 230, 235-236.

linguistically heterogeneous community may require much less translation to achieve this effect, particularly if one of the community languages is a widely spoken trade language.

The social class of the Jerusalem Christians will largely have determined the kinds and amounts of resources which were available to the church at large. In particular, a community which is made up of people from the upper class is likely to have sufficient monetary resources available to provide, for instance, a certain level of education for its children; a community which is made up of people from the lower class might have less access to both money and learning. Access to education, in turn, will determine the level of literacy which is attempted and achieved within the community. Thus, the issue of the social composition of the Jerusalem church impinges on another question which is of the highest relevance to a study of early Christian oral tradition: To what degree were the first Christians literate?³⁸

Literacy in pre-70 Jerusalem

It is notoriously difficult to estimate, for any period or any place in the ancient world, how many people could read or write.³⁹ William Harris, in his oft-cited study of ancient Greco-Roman literacy, notes that “in the Roman Empire as a whole, the degree of literacy is likely to have varied widely from one region to another.”⁴⁰ However, Harris argued strenuously that the ancient world was “so lacking in the characteristics which produce extensive literacy [especially subsidised schools] that

³⁸ In this study “literate” and its related terms are used in a very broad sense to indicate reading and/or writing ability at any level.

³⁹ It is difficult to determine literacy rates even when the populations in question are available for analysis and questioning; see e.g. Hanson 1991.

we must suppose that the majority of people were always illiterate."⁴¹ He estimated that "the likely overall illiteracy level of the Roman Empire under the principate is almost certain to have been above 90%."⁴² Mass literacy was never achieved, and was only rarely attempted, in the ancient world.⁴³

The ability to read in the ancient world did not always correspond with the ability to write.⁴⁴ Writing was generally considered a separate skill, and professional scribes were widely employed to perform all manner of writing-related duties.⁴⁵ It will not have been necessary for someone with only a basic education to have spent much time learning to write, or practising their writing skills once they had learned. On the other hand, as Harris has noted, there is no reason to suppose that there would have been many people who were able to read well but unable to write.⁴⁶

"The great strength of W. V. Harris' book on ancient literacy is that it does not attempt to go beyond the evidence," and on this strength his basic conclusions concerning the proportion of literates to non-literates in the ancient world have received broad acceptance within both New Testament and classical studies.⁴⁷ However, some have objected to Harris' negative views of the levels of literacy

⁴⁰ Harris 1989, 329.

⁴¹ Harris 1989, 13.

⁴² Harris 1989, 22.

⁴³ Harris notes that during the Hellenistic era Teos and a few other cities saw "acts of quasi-egalitarian educational philanthropy" which led to high rates of literacy on a local scale, "perhaps even at a level of 30%-40% among the freeborn men;" Harris 1989, 329.

⁴⁴ See Harris 1989, 4-5; Gamble 1995, 7; Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 22.

⁴⁵ See Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 21-24; Sanders 1992, 179-182.

⁴⁶ Harris 1989, 5; see also Youtie 1971.

achieved and its significance to the general populus in certain specific regions.⁴⁸ In particular, Harris tended to minimise the significance of the survival of inscriptions, archives and substantial collections of graffiti.⁴⁹

Further, although he criticised the tendency of certain more timorous scholars to avoid numerical estimates of ancient literacy, Harris gave no such estimate for Judaea, even though he deals specifically with the question of literacy there in the first century.⁵⁰ Harris viewed literacy in “the entire period from the invention of the Greek alphabet to the fifth century A.D. [as] a single phenomenon”.⁵¹ Thus, despite his acknowledgement of regional variations, Harris preferred to reason against widespread literacy in Judaea on the basis that it “would be very much at odds with what we know of Greek literacy.”⁵² More specific evidence is, however, available concerning literacy in Jerusalem during the first century.

The central role of Torah within second-temple Judaism is well established. M. D. Goodman has observed that “no ancient society was more blatantly dominated by a written text than that of Jews in the Roman period.”⁵³ Torah permeated every facet of Jewish life, and this provided a profound incentive to literacy which was not

⁴⁷ Cornell 1991, 7. Within NT studies see e.g. Horsley and Draper 1999, 125-127; Gamble 1995, 4-5; Alexander 1991, 160; within classical studies see esp. the collection of essays in Humphrey 1991.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Horsfall 1991, 60; Cornell 1991, 7-8; Hopkins 1991, 134-135; Gamble 1995, 7.

⁴⁹ Many more of these have come to light since the publication of Harris' book; see Horsfall 1991, 60.

⁵⁰ Harris 1989, 7, 281-282.

⁵¹ Harris 1989, 3.

⁵² Harris 1989, 281-282.

⁵³ Goodman 1994, 99.

present in Greco-Roman culture.⁵⁴ Thus, in addition to the priests, Levites, and scribes, for whom literacy was a near necessity, many laymen also learned to read so as to be able to study Torah.⁵⁵

Moreover, while nothing like an organised campaign toward mass literacy was ever attempted, some attempt was certainly made to teach male children to read.⁵⁶ The acquirement of literacy in the ancient world was, in general, dependent upon either a sufficient degree of personal wealth or the support of a wealthy person. Jewish elementary education, however, seems to have been much less restrictive of social class, so that lower class male children had a much greater chance of receiving a basic education than elsewhere in the Roman world.⁵⁷ Women will only have been educated if their families were quite wealthy, and thus will only rarely have been literate.

However, the degree of familiarity with which even the completely illiterate would have regarded many parts of Torah was significant. Sabbath attendance at the synagogue is assumed by all the extant literature relevant to first-century Jewish practice, and the reading of Torah at these services was standard practice.⁵⁸ Those

⁵⁴ See Gamble 1995, 7.

⁵⁵ See Sanders 1992, 191-192.

⁵⁶ Gamble cites Josephus (*Contra Apion* 2.204; *Ant.* 4.211), Philo (*Ad Gaium* 115, 210), and also Rabbinic sources (T. Levi 13.2; P. T. Megillah 3.73d; P. T. Ketuboth 13.35c) in demonstration of a Jewish interest in basic literacy; Gamble 1995, 7. See also Gerhardsson 1961, 56-66; Hengel and Marksches 1989.

⁵⁷ Gamble 1995, 7. Nevertheless, the upper classes would have been more likely to send their children to *בית ספר*; Gerhardsson 1961, 59.

⁵⁸ See Maccoby 1989, 70-72; Perrot 1988, 137; Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 32-34; Schürer 1973, 426-427.

who could not read, including women, would have had at the very least weekly exposure to Torah when it was read each Sabbath morning in the synagogues.⁵⁹

Religious literacy in Jerusalem will not only have been in Hebrew. Aramaic targums were certainly being written in first-century Palestine, though their precise function in the synagogues remains unclear.⁶⁰ Further, some of the large number of Greek Jews and proselytes who had taken up residence in Jerusalem will have learned to read from the Septuagint, and undoubtedly all of them will have heard Torah read in Greek or other languages in the synagogues of the Diaspora.⁶¹

Jewish literacy in first-century Jerusalem was not, of course, completely monopolised by religious functions. Many Jews will also have met with the normal inducements and opportunities toward literacy which were common throughout the whole Roman world. Literacy could help in business, provided access to literature, and made one appear more sophisticated. The desire to study Torah was a motivation to literacy *in addition to* these more mundane concerns.

If the evidence about literacy in Jerusalem during the first century is "relatively good" compared to the evidence available for other regions, it does not lend itself to numerically precise description.⁶² However, the evidence cited above seems to indicate that an ability to read will have been more prevalent among Jews than non-

⁵⁹ On the role of women in the synagogues see Mattila 1996; Burtchaell 1992, 244-246; Brooten 1982.

⁶⁰ See Fitzmyer 1970, 525. It may be that the reading of Torah on the morning of the Sabbath was accompanied by an Aramaic translation (Demskey and Bar-Ilan 1988, 33), though Perrot considers targumim to have been homily or commentary; Perrot 1988, 155.

⁶¹ Perrot 1988, 155.

⁶² Harris 1989, 281.

Jews.⁶³ The fact that Jerusalem was a major urban centre will also have had an impact on its rate of literacy, since, in general, the greater an area's population density, the more opportunities for education were available.⁶⁴ It therefore seems reasonable to suppose that something more than 20% of free Jewish males in first-century Jerusalem would have been able to read in at least one language.⁶⁵

Literacy in the Jerusalem Church

In regard to literacy, as with social class, the first-century Jerusalem church will have reflected the situation of its parent society.⁶⁶ Figuring very conservatively, perhaps no more than 10 adult Christians out of 100, virtually all male, would have had the ability to read, and perhaps not all of these would have been able to write. This figure in itself provides ample scope for an investigation of the oral-traditional practices of the Jerusalem church.

Yet such an estimate also eliminates any possibility of regarding the Jerusalem church as a kind of oral sub-culture.⁶⁷ Certainly the early churches did produce written literature of various kinds, and the Jerusalem church is occasionally portrayed as doing so in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 15.20; James; Jude). Further, literature in the ancient world was normally intended for reading aloud, and Christian gatherings will have included public readings of Scripture, and occasionally letters

⁶³ See Gamble 1995, 7.

⁶⁴ Harris 1989, 13. Thus, Bar-Ilan considers that in rural areas and small towns the rate of literacy would have been less than 10%; Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 33-34.

⁶⁵ This estimate assumes an even number of men and women, and also that women will typically have been illiterate.

⁶⁶ See e.g. Gamble 1995, 5.

⁶⁷ As e.g. Kelber 1983. Nor will it support the postulate that deep scepticism toward writing in general existed within the early church; on this see Alexander 1990.

from absent leaders or friends.⁶⁸ Thus, even those Christians who were unable to read for themselves would have had ample exposure to written language, forms and conventions.

The early Jerusalem church was apparently comprised of a cross-section of its parent society, and would have been statistically similar in regard to the literacy of its members. But what kind of group was the early Jerusalem church? This question is of obvious and fundamental significance to the present study. The way the first Christians treated their traditions about Jesus will have depended in large part upon their motivation for coming together in the first place, and on the way they decided to organise themselves.

Distinctive Characteristics of the Jerusalem Church

The social/cultural/religious milieu from which early Christianity emerged was in many ways markedly different from any other in the Roman world, as is demonstrated by the puzzlement Jewish and Christian customs and behaviour (both in Palestine and elsewhere) produced in many non-Jews.⁶⁹ Non-Jews in the period in question generally did not distinguish between Christians and Jews, at least in legal terms, and they did not regard either group as being very much like themselves. But Christians certainly were recognised by other Jews as promoting something outside the range of acceptable Jewish teaching.

Christians believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They believed that he had risen from the dead, and eagerly awaited his return and the full and final

⁶⁸ See e.g. Starr 1991. However, it is too much to suggest, as Achtemeier 1990, and following him Slusser 1992, that reading aloud was the exclusive method of reading in the ancient world; see Gilliard 1993; Knox 1968.

establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. They fervently desired to convince others of the truth and relevance of these claims, and often went to great personal lengths to do so. These points are almost embarrassingly obvious, and would not bear mentioning if it were not for the fact that the theological distinctiveness of the early Christian communities has been so studiously ignored in many recent discussions of early Christian oral tradition.⁷⁰ For some authors, a conception of early Christian communication as governed by the laws of "orality" operating in the ancient Mediterranean world has precluded the need to consider the stated motives and intentions of the first Christians themselves.⁷¹ But to regard the efforts of the early church to advance their beliefs over and against those of their parent group and society in general as irrelevant to the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition is a serious error in judgement.

It should also be noted that the pre-70 Jerusalem church was an extremely young institution by the standards of "a world in which novelty was scorned".⁷² While there is no doubt that the early church took over many of the practices and attitudes of its parent societies, these will have been combined with new, uniquely Christian features. The Jerusalem church may not have completely solidified its procedures during the period under consideration here.

⁶⁹ See e.g. Wilken 1980, and esp. Stern 1974.

⁷⁰ E.g. Crossan 1999; Davis 1999; Horsley and Draper 1999. Cf. Gerhardsson 1961, 46f.; Sanders 1969, 27-28.

⁷¹ Thus Horsley and Draper (1999) recognise the significance of the opposition and interaction between "great" and "little" traditions (98-121, 180-181, etc.), but fail to consider the effect this may have had on any *choices* made by the "Q community" as to how to transmit their "founding and grounding" (168) traditions. Rather, they assume that the "Q community" had no choice, but simply conformed to the basic paradigms of "oral performance" (160-174, etc.).

⁷² Sanders 1992, 424.

However, it is not clear to what degree the distinctiveness of the early Christian communities extended to their social structure.⁷³ This uncertainty has partially to do with the fragmentary nature of the evidence related to the early churches, and partially to do with the fact that the evidence for practically all other groups in the ancient world is just as fragmentary. Nevertheless, attempts have been made to interpret the available evidence concerning the social structure of the Jerusalem church through considerations of other kinds of associations which operated in the same socio-cultural milieu.

Comparison: The Household

Some New Testament scholars have been intrigued by the possibility of a direct relationship between the structure of the ancient household and that of the early Christian communities.⁷⁴ Luke notes that Christians in Jerusalem met together in private houses (Acts 2.46; 5.42; 12.12).⁷⁵ The available literary, archaeological and epigraphical evidence seems to indicate that the private house was in fact the *locus operandi* for nearly all churches until the fourth century A.D.⁷⁶ Bradley Blue has suggested that the early Christians met in houses “*not by default alone* (i.e., there was nowhere else to meet)”.⁷⁷ Rather, private dwellings presented certain distinct advantages over other potential meeting places. They were, for instance, an

⁷³ See e.g. Meeks 1983, 74-75.

⁷⁴ See e.g. Bartchy 1991, 314; Malina 1986, 99.

⁷⁵ See Rom. 16.5; 1 Cor. 16.19; Col. 4.15; Philem. 2. On *domi ecclesiae* in Jerusalem and elsewhere see Blue 1994.

⁷⁶ Stegemann and Stegemann 1999, 216. However, the archaeological evidence remains sketchy for Jerusalem, where no early Christian meeting places have as yet been uncovered; see Blue 1994, 124, 137.

⁷⁷ Blue 1994, 121 (his emphasis).

inconspicuous place of assembly in an environment which was sometimes hostile, and provided facilities for meal preparation, an essential part of early Christian worship.

However, not all of the members of the Jerusalem church will have lived in an actual house. The most common type of residence found in urban areas in the ancient world was the one- or two-room flat which might be positioned over shops or workshops, or built into multi-storey buildings.⁷⁸ The vast majority of the citizens of Jerusalem will have lived in such accommodation; only the relatively wealthy will have been able to afford a house or property.⁷⁹ Some of the wealthy homeowners who joined the Jerusalem church provided space for fellowship and worship (as e.g. Mary, mother of John Mark; Acts 12.12). Such house-groups would have been comprised of only a portion of the total congregation; they were the basic "cells" of the church in Jerusalem.⁸⁰

The ancient Mediterranean household was comprised of one or more autonomous conjugal families along with members of their extended family, and sometimes, depending on the family's financial status, slaves or even hired workers.⁸¹ Inter-household relationships, as well as relationships between members of the household and other relatives and outsiders, were shaped and constrained to a large extent by the kinship norms of the ancient Mediterranean world.⁸² Leadership of the

⁷⁸ Blue 1994, 155-157; Reinhardt 1995, 251-253.

⁷⁹ Blue (1994, 155-156) cites R. MacMullen's estimate that only 3% of the residents of Rome lived in a proper house; the figure is similar for Pompeii, where houses made up only 9% of the total residential area. He also notes J. E. Packer's count of just 22 private mansions at Ostia.

⁸⁰ The entire church in a city might also occasionally come together, cf. Acts 2.46, 5.12; Rom. 16.23; 1 Cor. 14.23. See Meeks 1983, 75; Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 140.

⁸¹ Malina 1993, 122-123; Moxnes 1997b, 20-21.

⁸² See e.g. Malina 1993, 117-148; 1995, 108-110.

household was governed by a strict hierarchy, at the top of which was the family patriarch. Male family members would have ranked in authority under their patriarch more or less according to age. Although the family patriarch was extremely influential within the household, female family members were subject to their husbands, or, if unmarried, their father.⁸³

On the basis of this evidence it has been suggested that the individual "cells" of the broader Christian congregation in any particular city will have naturally taken on some of the qualities of the household; the kinship norms which governed all family situations in ancient Mediterranean societies will have adhered to any association which was primarily based in the home.⁸⁴ Christian house-groups would therefore have been *fictive kin groups*.⁸⁵

In such a situation, the leader of a house-group would naturally have been the head of the house in which it met. He will have presided over meetings held in his home, and the members of the house-group would have deferred to him as their "elder" in all matters related to the group. He, in turn, would have some responsibility to care for the group's members corresponding to his role as

⁸³ See e.g. Esler 1994, 31-34.

⁸⁴ Malina (1996, 51) asserts that in the ancient Mediterranean world "individuals participate in all larger social groupings only through their family." Cf. Hanson and Oakman 1998, 20-23; Osiek and Balch 1997, 124-125; Barclay 1997, 75-78.

⁸⁵ See Malina 1995, 108-109; 1986, 99; Campbell 1994, 241-247; Bartchy 1991, 314.

patriarch.⁸⁶ Some confirmation of a fictive kin relationship might be found in the familial terms the early Christians used to describe each other.⁸⁷

While correspondences between the ancient Mediterranean household and the early Christian house-congregations are illuminating, a comparison between these two types of associations does not completely explain the structure of the early Jerusalem church.⁸⁸ The hierarchy of the ancient Mediterranean family would not have involved the sort of extra-household convocations of leaders noted in Acts, nor the apparent super-patriarchal authority of an apostle. Nor would it have encompassed the sort of trans-local relationships which existed between the early churches. Moreover, there is some evidence that leaders were not always permitted to simply emerge naturally from within house-church situations (cf. Acts 14.23).⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cf. Campbell 1994, 153-154; Harvey 1974, 331; Bartchy 1991, 314; Osiek and Balch 1997, 97. Meeks (1983, 76), citing Acts 17.9, suggests that the owner of a house in which Christians regularly met would also have had some legal responsibility over the group.

⁸⁷ Malina 1995, 109.

⁸⁸ Cf. Meeks 1983, 76-77.

⁸⁹ See e.g. Roberts 1975; Bornkamm 1969, 665; Burtchaell 1992, 293-294. Luke's statement concerning the origins of "elders" in the Pauline churches during this period may well shed some light on the origins of the elders in Jerusalem. He notes that, as they travelled through Lycaonia, Pisidia and Pamphylia, Paul and Barnabas χειροτόνησαντες δὲ αὐτοῖς κατ' ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους (Acts 14.23). This seems to indicate that Paul and Barnabas deliberately chose particular people to act as senior figures in each church. It seems not unlikely that elders were also deliberately chosen in Jerusalem, either by the remnant of the Twelve, or by popular election. Campbell (1994, 163-172) has argued that Luke intended χειροτονέω to mean "ordain with the laying on of hands" in the sense of "blessing" (as it came to mean somewhat later; see Ferguson 1975). He considered that, in societies which revere their older members, "elders" are not appointed, but are simply recognised as having reached this status (cf. Harvey 1974, 331). Thus, Paul and Barnabas would simply have endorsed those leaders who had already emerged within the churches. Yet Campbell's view seems inadequate, for three reasons: 1) To read χειροτονέω as "blessing" is rather a departure from its normal usage (as Campbell himself recognises). The normal meaning of χειροτονέω in the New Testament period is *to choose, elect, or appoint* (see Bauer 1979). This is certainly its meaning in 2 Cor. 8.19, the only other instance of the word in the NT. By way of example, an (admittedly unscientific) appraisal of every use of the word χειροτονέω (around 28) by Josephus in his *Antiquities* shows that it always represents a choosing or ordaining of someone (or something) to fill a position which he/she did not already hold (e.g. kingship, generalship, marriage, etc.). 2) Campbell's suggestion that Paul and Barnabas only had to acknowledge the leaders which would naturally have arisen in the churches seems overly optimistic in light of a) the recentness of these churches' foundation, and b) Paul's obvious concerns about the unsuitability of some for leadership roles in the churches (as e.g. 2. Cor. 11.13; Gal. 6.12; Col. 2.16-19). 3) In any case, neither advanced age nor property ownership will have been the primary

Comparison: Voluntary Associations

A second type of ancient group which has served as a useful subject of comparison with the early Christian congregations is the private "voluntary association". This term has been used to describe any of a broad class of associations sometimes called *collegia* in Latin, and θιάσοι, κοινά, ὀργεῶνες, or ἐράνοι, among other terms, in Greek.⁹⁰ Unlike institutions such as the family, the city, and the state, membership in voluntary associations was not automatic or compulsory.⁹¹ Further, voluntary associations in the Hellenistic period had no official connections with government, and in fact were often discouraged by the state.⁹² Their membership was not typically drawn from the elite classes, but from the urban poor.⁹³

Collegia could vary quite considerably in size, but on average ranged between 15 and 100 members.⁹⁴ Many met in private homes, though some had commonly owned buildings for meetings and other purposes, often provided by a wealthy patron or patroness, who would in many cases have been only nominal members of the association.⁹⁵ Roman voluntary associations were normally arranged on the pattern of the city or the army. Their primary leaders might be known as *centuriones* or *decuriones*, or *magistri* or *quinquennales*, and under these a host of other subordinate offices might be held. Greek associations tended toward a smaller number of leaders,

qualification of Christian leadership; "it was seniority *qua* Christians that would have counted"; Roberts 1975, 405.

⁹⁰ Kloppenborg 1996, 17.

⁹¹ Wilson 1996, 1.

⁹² See Cotter 1996.

⁹³ Wilson 1996, 10; Kloppenborg 1996, 17.

⁹⁴ Kloppenborg 1996, 25; Wilson 1996, 13.

though they used an extremely wide range of terms to describe them. The status of group members within the group was established on the same social expectations held by the wider society; voluntary associations were generally male dominated, and personal wealth and achievement were highly valued. The collegium was the *polis* writ small; it provided an opportunity for those who were excluded from the *cursus honorum* of city and state to give and receive honours.⁹⁶

Although the actual functions of Graeco-Roman voluntary associations overlapped considerably, they may be roughly divided into three main types. *Religious clubs* were organised for the express purpose of paying homage to particular gods and goddesses, but beyond this their actual functions and practices were quite diverse. Sacrificial and purification rites were performed in the meetings of some of these associations, while in others such activities would have played little or no role.⁹⁷ Some associations imposed a strict code of conduct on their members, while others seem to have been little more than an excuse to get together and drink.⁹⁸

In general, the members of *professional collegia*, or trade guilds, were workers in a particular trade or a set of related trades.⁹⁹ However, professional collegia were primarily social organisations, and were not designed to achieve any particular trade-

⁹⁵ Kloppenborg 1996, 23, 25.

⁹⁶ Kloppenborg 1996, 26.

⁹⁷ Wilson 1996, 13; Kloppenborg 1996, 19.

⁹⁸ Kloppenborg 1996, 19.

⁹⁹ Though Kloppenborg notes that membership in a trade guild might depend on one's location as much as one's actual occupation; Kloppenborg 1996, 24.

related political or economic purpose.¹⁰⁰ More important to the professional collegium was the procurement of patronage in support of their common meals, or to provide buildings for the group's meetings or perhaps a common burial ground.¹⁰¹

"The most basic locus of organisation was in the household itself," and there appear to have been a great many groups which were formed in association with particular households.¹⁰² The activities of these *domestic collegia* are somewhat less clear than those of the two types noted above, but they seem to have been organised on similar principles.¹⁰³ Domestic collegia naturally gave special honour to the master or mistress of the household, who normally functioned as the group's chief benefactor.

In addition to their tendency to meet in homes, a number of similarities can be observed between the types of voluntary associations described above and the early Christian congregations. All voluntary associations had some type of religious focus.¹⁰⁴ All will have filled a social role as well; communal dining, at least, was "a fairly constant feature of life in associations".¹⁰⁵ Moreover, although voluntary associations tended to be rather homogeneous in terms of both class and gender, some

¹⁰⁰ Occasionally some professional collegia did withhold services or even riot over grievances related to such issues as price inflation; see Kloppenborg 1996, 19.

¹⁰¹ Kloppenborg has asserted that associations for the sole purpose of providing for burials were probably not in existence during the period under consideration here, although many (if not most) associations would have attended to the burial of their members. When they did arise under Hadrian, funerary collegia seem often to have been a cover for those who wished to meet for other purposes; Kloppenborg 1996, 19, 21-23. Cf. Cotter 1996, 87-88.

¹⁰² Kloppenborg 1996, 23; McCready 1996, 68-69; Barclay 1997, 67-68.

¹⁰³ Kloppenborg 1996, 23.

¹⁰⁴ Wilson 1996, 7, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Wilson 1996, 12.

could be quite inclusive, extending membership to freedmen, women, and slaves, as well as to freeborn men.¹⁰⁶

Important differences have also been observed. Graeco-Roman associations did not (in general) demand the exclusive allegiance of their members; in principle a person could have been a member or patron of several different guilds or mystery cults, each of which might have honoured a different deity.¹⁰⁷ This was manifestly not the case in the churches; to be baptised into Christ "signalled...an extraordinarily thoroughgoing resocialization, in which the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, supplanting all other loyalties."¹⁰⁸

Further, although a professional or religious association might have analogues in many cities throughout the empire, these would generally have been autonomous local organisations.¹⁰⁹ Any contacts which occurred between two similar associations were usually casual and informal. The early Christians, by contrast, had a pronounced understanding of themselves as part of something which was not confined to a single congregation or city.¹¹⁰

Moreover, it is not clear to what extent the types of Graeco-Roman organisations considered above would have been common to first-century Jerusalem. However, the synagogue was a type of association which is known to have been a

¹⁰⁶ The most inclusive voluntary associations were typically those which were organised around the cult of a deity, though such inclusiveness could not be described as typical; Kloppenborg 1996, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Wilson 1996, 9-10.

¹⁰⁸ Meeks 1983, 78.

¹⁰⁹ Wilson 1996, 3; McCready 1996, 63-64; Meeks 1983, 80; see also Ascough 1997.

¹¹⁰ Though they may well have seen themselves as being of central importance; see Bauckham 1995, 417-427.

prominent feature in Jewish communities in Judaea and elsewhere. Most of the members of the early Jerusalem church would have grown up attending weekly meetings in their local synagogue, and Jesus and his disciples are known to have taught on occasion in the synagogues. Thus many investigators of the early church have turned to the synagogue as a more likely antecedent for the structure of early Christian groups.

Comparison: The Synagogue

Though its period of origin is unclear, by the first century A.D. the synagogue was ubiquitous in both Palestine and the Diaspora.¹¹¹ The primary function of the synagogue, as its name suggests, was to facilitate the weekly assembly of the local Jewish community on the Sabbath. These meetings were characterised by the reading of Torah, as noted above, and may also have included activities such as praying and singing.¹¹² Whether synagogue meetings in the first century took place mostly in purpose-designed synagogue buildings or in other public or private dwellings is a matter of some dispute, but it seems likely that a number of synagogue buildings did exist in pre-70 Jerusalem.¹¹³

A wealthy synagogue might also have performed a number of additional functions. A synagogue might provide the personnel and setting necessary for legal proceedings. Many synagogues apparently supported elementary schools

¹¹¹ See Richardson 1996, 99-102; Sanders 1992, 198; Burtchaell 1992, 202, Maccoby 1989, 59-60.

¹¹² Sanders 1992, 195-208. Assemblies for the reading of Scripture may also have taken place on Mondays and Thursdays; see Burtchaell 1992, 221.

¹¹³ Sanders has argued persuasively that the scarcity of archaeological evidence for pre-70 synagogues in Jerusalem is primarily due to chance, and to the fact that later synagogues were often built on earlier ones, thus eradicating their remains; see Sanders 1990, 341-343; 1992, 200-201; cf.

(בית ספר), and schools for the teaching of oral Torah (בית המדרש), and also served as a kind of archival library.¹¹⁴ Synagogue buildings sometimes provided accommodation for visitors from the Diaspora, facilities for ritual bathing, and storage for important documents and other valuables.¹¹⁵

The authority structure of the synagogues is a heavily debated issue. A synagogue could be convened anywhere by a quorum of ten men, and any male was permitted to read or say the blessing.¹¹⁶ Literary and epigraphic sources provide information concerning a number of titles given to notable persons within the synagogues, but it is often difficult to discern the degree to which any particular title indicates a position of actual responsibility within the synagogue and not simply of honour.¹¹⁷

Israel was a “presbyteral people” in the sense that her local settlements had long possessed a class of elders (זקנים/πρεσβύτεροι) who effectively controlled the affairs of the community.¹¹⁸ This was no less true in first-century Jerusalem, where there seems to have been a ruling council of seventy elders, presided over by the High Priest.¹¹⁹ In Jerusalem, as in the smaller Judaeian villages, the community elders will

Richardson 1996, 99-102 Hanson and Oakman 1998, 77, 79. For the view that synagogues mostly met in other kinds of buildings see Kee 1989.

¹¹⁴ See Burtchaell 1992, 221-222; Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 35-36.

¹¹⁵ See Richardson 1996, 99-102 ; Burtchaell 1992, 223-224.

¹¹⁶ Demsky and Bar-Ilan 1988, 32.

¹¹⁷ Burtchaell 1992, 233-234 lists 16 of these titles, and notes the inherent difficulty of differentiating between them.

¹¹⁸ Burtchaell 1992, 228.

¹¹⁹ The γερουσία was, of course, subject to the sovereign; Burtchaell 1992, 230, 233.

probably also have had jurisdiction over the synagogues.¹²⁰ However, "elder" may simply have been an honorary title designed to indicate a person's status in the community rather than an office held within the synagogues themselves.¹²¹

The direct administration of the synagogues was undertaken by an official known as the ἀρχισυνάγωγος, who was probably chosen from among the elders of the community.¹²² In all but the smallest communities, the ἀρχισυνάγωγος was assisted by at least one officer (ὑπηρέτης/ἵππ) who may have performed any of a variety of functions, from acting as a treasury clerk or a bailiff at legal proceedings to cleaning synagogue buildings or digging graves.¹²³ Additional people might be appointed to fill the offices of teacher, scribe, or trustee.¹²⁴

Several connections and correspondences may be noted between the early Jerusalem church and the synagogues, especially in respect to the content and character of their meetings.¹²⁵ Both Christians and Jews seem to have attended community meetings on at least a weekly basis. Both groups included prayer and the reading and interpreting of Torah in their worship services, and perhaps singing as well. However, fewer similarities can be noted between the social structures of the

¹²⁰ Schürer suggested that the Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem formed special congregations, probably with their own councils of elders; Schürer 1979, 428; cf. Campbell 1994, 50.

¹²¹ Harvey 1974, 324-326; Campbell 1994, 44-54.

¹²² Burtchaell 1992, 240-244; Schürer 1979, 428, 433-436.

¹²³ Burtchaell 1992, 246-249; Campbell 1994, 49; Schürer 1973, 438.

¹²⁴ Sanders has contended that priests did most of the teaching in the synagogues; see e.g. Sanders 1992, 201. However, see also Burtchaell 1992, 254-256.

¹²⁵ Burtchaell 1992; Sanders 1992, 207-208; Meeks 1983, 80-81.

two groups.¹²⁶ Membership in the synagogues was largely a matter of cultural identity, whereas the early Christian communities were culturally mixed. Further, the terminology most often used to describe synagogue leaders is not applied to the leaders of the early Christian ἐκκλησίαι, with the exception of the term πρεσβύτερος. But this exception is not insignificant, as will be seen below.

The above comparisons highlight certain features which they shared with some of the other groups which shared their environment. Certain of these are nearly axiomatic in discussions of this question, and may be considered defining characteristics of the first-century Jerusalem church. Thus, it was a voluntary organisation, at least in the sense that membership was not compulsory. Yet it demanded absolute fidelity from its members, and placed great significance on the maintenance of fictive kin relationships between them. Its local "cells" met regularly in private homes for worship and fellowship. But these cells also regarded themselves as part of a larger local and world-wide body. These features will all have left their mark on the oral-traditional practices of the first-century Jerusalem church.

But the early Christian congregations do not correspond exactly to any of the three types of ancient associations considered above, and the distinctive character of the Jerusalem church must be taken into account in any investigation of its oral-traditional practices. A community bound together by a common heritage and belief system might be expected to produce traditional materials of a different character than a group which is simply thrown together by circumstance. The Jerusalem Christians, however, comprised a community whose defining beliefs were rejected by the rest of

¹²⁶ Meeks 1983, 81; McCready 1996, 62; Stambaugh and Balch 1986, 142.

their society; this will have had a profound effect on their attitudes, and their behaviour, toward their central traditions.

Social Control in the Jerusalem Church

The mechanism which is employed to carry a community's traditional materials will be chosen and developed on the basis of the specific value these materials have for the community. The New Testament documents depict the Jerusalem Christians as adopting and sustaining unorthodox and often dangerous lifestyles in response to recitations of their central traditions, and even as using them as a regular part of their corporate worship. If this is so, the first Christians' high esteem for their traditions about Jesus will certainly have influenced the way they chose to carry and transmit them.

For this reason, and on the basis of the available literary evidence, it may be reasonably assumed that not every possible interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus would have been acceptable to first-century Christians. It is therefore highly unlikely that the oral Jesus tradition would have been transmitted in a completely haphazard, uncontrolled fashion. Rather, it seems certain that the early Jerusalem church will have deliberately exerted certain kinds of controls over the transmission of its essential traditions.

This assertion bears heavily on the issue of the leadership of the Jerusalem church. Leadership by older men of standing in the community was the norm in ancient societies. In this respect the Jerusalem church was similar to all ancient associations, voluntary or otherwise.¹²⁷ However, it is clear that the elders of the

¹²⁷ See Campbell 1994, 246-247.

Jerusalem church were not merely leaders in the wider Jewish community, but were specifically Christian leaders. Here it will be useful to give some brief consideration to these leaders in the interest of clarifying their role in relationship to the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition.

The leadership situation in the Jerusalem church is perhaps more clear in respect to its earliest period than it is to later periods. Jerusalem was home to the Twelve, and these first and most renowned of Jesus' disciples will have governed the proceedings of the church during the first several years of its existence. Luke also describes the election of the Seven, to whom the Twelve delegated the responsibility of caring for the physical needs of needy Christians (Acts 6.1-7). By the period under consideration in this paper, however, the situation had apparently changed.

Evidence of this fact can be observed in Acts 11, when Luke introduces the reader to an apparently new group of leaders: "the elders (οἱ πρεσβύτεροι)". The Jerusalem elders are a group of some significance, for they receive the church at Antioch's financial gifts against a predicted famine (11.30). Thereafter in Acts the Jerusalem elders make a number of brief appearances, most significantly in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas are appointed to consult "the apostles and the elders" on the relationship of Gentile believers to the Law of Moses (15.2, 4). There the elders deliberate with the Twelve (15.6) and participate in the decision not to impose the Mosaic code on Gentile believers (6.4). They are presented as co-signatories with the Twelve of the letter of instruction sent to Antioch, Syria, and Cicilia (15.23), and as helping to choose its bearers (15.22). The authority of the apostles and elders is

subsequently reiterated by Paul and Silas as they carry the instructions concerning Gentile believers from town to town (16.4). On his return to Jerusalem Paul again reports to the elders, along with James, who advise him on public relations matters (21.17-26). Yet neither the origins of this group, nor their precise relationship to the Twelve, nor indeed any other substantive details concerning their role in the church are ever explained.¹²⁸

Richard Bauckham notes that the Jerusalem elders have generally been identified in one of three ways.¹²⁹ Some have held that the elders were in fact the Seven named in Acts 6 (e.g. A. M. Farrer) or their successors (e.g. F. F. Bruce).¹³⁰ Alternatively, R. A. Campbell has suggested that the elders were simply “the Twelve themselves by another name”.¹³¹

Bauckham himself has opted to identify the “elders” as the group who takes over the leadership of the Twelve after the death and dispersal of the Twelve.¹³² He

¹²⁸ At least to the satisfaction of an outsider; see however Black 1952; Farrer 1946; Campbell 1993.

¹²⁹ Bauckham 1995, 429.

¹³⁰ Bauckham 1995, 429.

¹³¹ Campbell 1993, 516. Campbell suggests that the Jerusalem church was always governed by a group of twelve leaders, and that in the earliest period these were simply known as the Twelve; when the original Twelve died or left Jerusalem, they were replaced by other eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry on the order of Joseph/Justus/Barsabbas and Matthias (518; Acts 2.23). Moreover, “the leadership of Jesus and the Twelve was followed at quite an early stage by that of his brother James and the Twelve” (528). Campbell defines the term “elder” as a “general title of honour that might attach itself to any group of senior believers or holders of office,” and asserts that over time it naturally attached itself to the Twelve (518). Luke's designation of the original Twelve as the “apostles” (a much later term; 521), allows him to signify the passing of the evangelistic leadership of the church “from those who stayed in Jerusalem to those who went to Rome” (528): the Twelve are “apostles” until they cease to bear witness according to Jesus' commission; thereafter they are “elders” and Paul and Barnabas are “apostles” (527). Bauckham has criticised Campbell's view on the grounds that 1) his explanation of the role of James is not that presented in Acts, where James is clearly depicted as the successor not of Jesus, but of Peter (cf. Acts 12.17); and 2) he fails to take account of the connection between the appearance in the narrative of the elders in 11.30 and the fates of James and Peter in 12.1-19; see Bauckham 1995, 431-433.

¹³² Bauckham 1995, 433.

suggests that the persecution under Herod Agrippa (12.1) effectively put an end to the Twelve as a constitutional body in Jerusalem, and resulted in their replacement by a body of elders.¹³³ Thus, Luke's statement that the death of James bar-Zebedee and the imprisonment of Peter happened at about the same time (12.1) as the church at Antioch's gift was delivered to the elders indicates the transition between the pre-eminence of Peter and authority of the Twelve and the reconstituted leadership of the church under James the Lord's brother and the elders.¹³⁴

Although Bauckham's suggestions are persuasive, the present study does not require any firm commitments regarding the precise identity of the Jerusalem elders. Nor is it necessary to determine the precise term by which these figures were described in the first century.¹³⁵ Of more pressing concern is their actual function in the leadership of the church.

Some consensus may be found on this issue despite considerable diversity of opinion concerning the identity of the Jerusalem elders and the nature and derivation of their position in the church. Most importantly for the present study, there is a nearly universal identification of the Jerusalem elders with the role of teacher. Those

¹³³ Bauckham notes that while Luke specifies that the previous persecution did not terminate the leadership of the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 8), in chapter 12 he does not. Rather, by informing the reader of the death of James bar-Zebedee (12.2) and the departure of Peter to "another place" (12.17), Luke indicates that the Twelve had not survived as a constitutional body of leaders in Jerusalem; Bauckham 1995, 436.

¹³⁴ The newly-formed body of elders might possibly have included James and/or any surviving members of the Twelve (Bauckham 1995, 433-438). Even if he were not counted as one of this body, he would almost certainly have been considered an "elder" in the broader sense. It is highly likely that James will have wielded considerable influence over the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition in the Jerusalem church; however, neither Luke nor Paul seems to portray him as holding an autocratic position (see Acts 21.18-25; Gal. 3.9).

¹³⁵ Related to this is the fact that many scholars have equated the role of the *πρεσβύτεροι* referred to in Acts with that of the *ἐπισκόποι* noted elsewhere in the New Testament, since the two words appear to be used interchangeably not only in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 3.1, 5.17; Titus 1.5-7) but

who have associated the elders of the Jerusalem church with the Seven or their successors have answered the question of their function primarily by reference to Luke's description of their appointment, and occasionally to the activities of Stephen and Philip (Acts 6-8).¹³⁶ By this reckoning the elders were appointed to a specific office, the primary role of which was to care for the material and financial needs of the church, though their responsibilities also extended to preaching and teaching. A complementary view conceives of the elders of the Jerusalem church as deriving from the first Christians' understanding of themselves as the new Israel. The elders were appointed on the precedent of Torah (esp. Nu. 11, Ex. 18, and Dt. 1), and must therefore have functioned as teachers and interpreters of the Law, as well as custodians of the church's general well-being.¹³⁷

Others have understood the Jerusalem elders as modelled on more recent Jewish precedent; the Sanhedrin, or the synagogue. Those who have taken this position have also emphasised the teaching function of the elders, in addition to their roles as judges and overseers in the Christian communities.¹³⁸ Still others have taken an opposing view which regards "elders" not as holders of a specific office, but as those typically older men whose status in the community was such that they automatically filled roles of leadership. Yet all of these scholars also have observed

also in Acts (20.17, 28). Cf. Burtchaell 1992, 296-298; Campbell 1994, 241-246; Brown 1980, 332-333; Harvey 1974, 329.

¹³⁶ See Bruce 1982, 277; Farrer 1946, 133-142, Black 1952, 116.

¹³⁷ See Farrer 1946, 135-139; Daube 1976; Karrer 1990, 152-188; Bauckham 1995, 430.

¹³⁸ E.g. Burtchaell 1992, 298; Bornkamm 1969, 663.

that those who led the early Christian congregations certainly included teaching and preaching among their duties.¹³⁹

But if elders, almost certainly authoritative figures in the Jerusalem church, were also regular teachers, they would certainly have exerted some of their authority on the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition. Insofar as the elders represented the formal leadership of the Jerusalem church, their influence over the transmission of the Jesus tradition would have been formal as well as informal. Those who showed themselves to be competent and effective teachers of the community traditions would have been endorsed by the church leadership and promoted to positions of greater status and authority.¹⁴⁰ Those who were seen as purveyors of “false teaching”, however, would most likely have been severely rebuked, or even condemned outright and drummed out of the community.¹⁴¹ Elders who taught would have influenced the form and content of the Jesus tradition by their personal style and charisma, as well as through any attempts to formalise its transmission.

However, control of the oral Jesus tradition would not have been the sole province of community leaders. The members of the Christian community in Jerusalem would probably have agreed with the traditional pronouncements of his/her leaders, and in any case the maintenance of his/her identity as a believer will have required the maintenance of certain specific beliefs.¹⁴² The precise kinds of controls which the “lay” members of the Jerusalem church attempted to place on the

¹³⁹ E.g. Campbell 1994, 251; Harvey 1974, 332.

¹⁴⁰ See e.g. Acts 6.1-6, 15.2.

¹⁴¹ As Paul seems to be threatening in 2 Cor. 13.

transmission of the Jesus tradition are inaccessible to the modern investigator.

However, some scholars have seen traces in the New Testament writings of certain foundational cultural values which would have provided the social framework to support the application of any such controls. These values are most often represented by the terms *honour* and *shame*.¹⁴³

Bruce Malina has described the accumulation of *honour* – socially acknowledged worth in regard to power, gender status and religion – as the ultimate goal of persons living in many modern and ancient Mediterranean cultures.¹⁴⁴ Such persons perceive honour as a “limited good”, and consider virtually every interaction with non-family members as a transaction of honour.¹⁴⁵ Honour can be ascribed to a person on the basis of their family relationships and their status in the community, or it can be earned through appropriate public response to social interaction outside the family.¹⁴⁶

In such a culture, the loss of honour is perceived as a disastrous event which has significant social consequences both for the individual and for that person’s family group. Any act of dishonour perpetrated within the family itself is considered an exceptional social transgression.¹⁴⁷ Individual and corporate honour is therefore

¹⁴² Moreover, the first Christians shared the responsibility of transmitting at least some parts of the Jesus tradition in corporate worship; as e.g. the Lord’s Supper.

¹⁴³ Malina 1993, 28-62; Esler 1994, 25-29. Cf. Bailey 1991, 42: “As the present writer has observed over a period of 37 years, Middle Eastern village culture is a shame-pride culture.”

¹⁴⁴ Malina 1993, 30-31.

¹⁴⁵ Malina 1993, 34.

¹⁴⁶ Malina 1993, 33-39.

¹⁴⁷ Malina 1993, 46.

vigorously defended by minimising as much as possible any opportunity for its loss.

This concern for one's honour and the honour of one's family is called *shame*.

Honour and shame are obviously rather more complex social values than the above paragraphs might indicate on their own.¹⁴⁸ However, this abbreviated description is sufficient to point out that these values, inasmuch as they were part of the cultural fabric of the first-century Jerusalem church, would have provided a sufficient degree of shared social expectation to have effectively supported attempts at social control of the oral Jesus tradition by the early Christian community. The traditions of the community are certain to have been regarded as important indicators of community identity, and thus of honour.

The question of the kinds of social controls which were placed on the oral Jesus tradition is of obvious significance to any study of its transmission by the Jerusalem Christians. The term *social control*, while widely used in social-scientific studies, has no generally agreed definition. Here it is used simply to denote the attempts made by a given community and/or its representatives to influence or manipulate the behaviour of its members.¹⁴⁹

Social control may take a variety of forms. It may, for instance, be deliberately and publicly enacted by individuals in positions of power within a community through the official creation and enforcement of laws or rules. Official controls of

¹⁴⁸ Malina notes, for instance, that honour and shame may be perceived in ways which are common to both males and females, and also in ways which are quite gender specific. Moreover, shame may be considered both positively (as described above) or negatively, in the sense that a person may get "shamed", or dishonoured; Malina 1993, 50-53.

¹⁴⁹ Meier (1982, 36) cites A.B. Hollingshead's definition – "Social control inheres in the more or less common obligatory usages and values which define the relations of one person to another, to things, to ideas, to groups to classes, and to the society in general" – and quips, "Now, omit the words 'social control' and ask a sociologist what is being referred to."

this sort might have been placed on transmission of the oral Jesus tradition by the Jerusalem elders. However, social controls need not be intentionally constructed at all. They may also be cultural mores which become fixed over a long developmental process. Once firmly in place such mores have the force of an unwritten community code to which all community members must conform. They may also be manipulated by individuals or groups in order to achieve some desired effect. The conceptions of "honour" and "shame" noted above are perfect illustrations of these sorts of culturally constructed controls.

Oral Forms

It is necessary at this point to remark briefly on the oral literary forms in which traditions about Jesus might have been clothed by the Jerusalem Christians. This issue is complicated by two facts which have already been mentioned in this paper, namely: 1) the first Jerusalem church no longer exists, and 2) any consideration of the oral Jesus tradition must take place via a consideration of written documents. However, these complications have not stopped New Testament scholars from confidently defining the oral genres used by the first Christians based on certain forms which can be discerned in the Gospels: sayings, short stories and parables, riddles, proverbs, and poetry.¹⁵⁰ The notion, popularised by the early form-critics, that these shorter generic types might often have circulated more or less independently has been assumed in most discussions of early Christian oral tradition.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Descriptions along this line may be observed from the works of the early NT form-critics (e.g. Dibelius 1934; Bultmann 1963) right up through the more recent considerations of this issue (e.g. Kelber 1983, 45; Bailey 1991, 50).

¹⁵¹ See e.g. Bultmann 1963, 3-4; Dibelius 1934, 2-4.

This scenario is not entirely unconvincing. Concise oral forms of this sort are widely attested among people living in many different communities and cultural groups.¹⁵² Moreover, the New Testament records a number of instances where Jesus traditions are cited independent of a longer narrative (e.g. Acts 20.35; 1 Cor. 7.10; 11.23). However, the oral Jesus tradition need not have taken only these shorter forms. It has long been supposed that at least the Passion narrative was circulating as a story in its own right during the first century, and even longer stories incorporating many shorter traditional units may well have been told by first-century Christians. Indeed, there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that long narratives similar in length and form to the canonical Gospels might not have been told from time to time in the early churches.¹⁵³

The above considerations are highly relevant to the vetting process which must precede the selection of a source of comparative data for use in a model of the oral Jesus tradition. The lack of direct evidence concerning the nature of this mechanism necessitates the use of any circumstantial evidence that may be found. Many of the features of the pre-70 Jerusalem church mentioned above may be reasonably supposed to have a direct impact on the mechanism used to transmit the oral Jesus tradition. A community which is found to be similar to the early church *a propos* several of these features might also be similar in regard to its oral-traditional strategies.

¹⁵² A detailed (though primarily illustrative) discussion of oral genres and their cultural distribution, with generous references to relevant studies, is in Finnegan 1992, 135-157; see esp. 146-152.

¹⁵³ Though the issue of Gospel genre has normally been approached from a literary perspective, as e.g. Aune 1980; 1988a; 1988b; Burrige 1992; 1998; Talbert 1978; 1988. However, see

Conclusion

In light of these observations, it is possible to speak of an ideal modern community from which oral-traditional data could be gleaned for the construction of a model of the oral Jesus tradition in the first-century Jerusalem church. Such a community would first of all have to produce types of oral literature which could be shown to be generically similar to those which have been tentatively identified in the Gospels and other early Christian literature. This might include not only the briefer generic types, but also, potentially, longer narrative forms. Any similarities which could be demonstrated between the topical or stylistic characteristics of the early Christian literature and the oral literature of a modern community would greatly increase the value of the proposed model.

The ideal community for comparison with the early Jerusalem church would not be an isolated village, nor any sort of ethnic enclave, both because the Jerusalem church operated in an urban environment and because its members associated voluntarily. It would instead have regular contact with "outsiders", and its members would derive from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This combination of cultural diversity and outsider contact might encourage knowledge of more than one language among the community's members.

In addition, the ideal community would be comprised of people from a wide spectrum of social backgrounds. Disparity in the levels of wealth and power held by community members would be accompanied by disparities in their educational backgrounds. It would be desirable if the majority of community members were not

Horsley and Draper 1999, who suggest that *Q* at least is to be thought of as representative of an oral genre.

highly educated, and thus highly literate; however, a completely illiterate community would be unlikely to suit the needs of the proposed model.

The perfect source of oral-traditional data for the proposed model would be the product of a culture which places a high value on the family as a social unit, and where a patriarchal family structure is reflected in the structure of the wider society. Leadership positions will be filled by men of standing in the community, and the community may see itself as a kind of family group under the headship of these community "elders". However, it would be most helpful if the community were only a few decades old. A community which has been in existence for several generations will have had time to stabilise its traditions to a degree which might be difficult for a younger community to achieve.

Finally, the ideal community would be bound together by common beliefs and ideals which are to some extent dissonant to those of their parent society. The more such beliefs could be shown to relate to a significant person or event in the history of the community, the more useful it would be for the purposes of the proposed model. Community members would display a high degree of loyalty to each other, and the honour of the community would be vigorously defended.

This description is only a sort of wish-list for the aspiring modeller of the oral Jesus tradition. It is probably unlikely that a single community can be found which exhibits all of these desiderata. Nevertheless, a conception of an ideal community may provide a useful standard by which potential sources of oral-traditional data can be evaluated. A community which can be shown to exhibit many of these

characteristics may therefore be judged more suitable for use as a data source than a community which exhibits only a few of them, or none at all.

However, the selection of oral-traditional data cannot be accomplished by the mere establishment of discriminatory criteria. If a model of the oral-traditional mechanism employed by the first-century Jerusalem Christians is to be constructed, a sufficient quantity of suitably comparable oral-traditional data must actually be located and collected. But this requires that the author of such a model is able to gain access to the necessary data. This issue will be taken up in the following chapter.

QUALITY CONTROL: ON THE COLLECTION OF ORAL-TRADITIONAL DATA

To this point in the present study, issues related to the selection of comparative oral-traditional data for use in a model of early Christian oral tradition have been treated from a purely theoretical point of view. However, having determined a number of criteria by which such data may be chosen, it is now necessary to attend to certain practical matters. These relate to the actual *collection* of oral traditional data.

Although the authors of previous models of early Christian oral tradition have sometimes attempted (briefly) to defend their choice of comparative data, no-one has ever argued in any detail for the adoption of a particular method of collecting comparative data for use in such a model. Instead, New Testament scholars have apparently proceeded on the assumption that the method by which such data is collected is irrelevant. But this assumption is inaccurate. As the preceding chapters have emphasised, not all sources or types of oral-traditional data will be suitable to support an illustration of the oral-traditional practices of the Jerusalem church. Thus, the data necessary for this purpose cannot be chosen indiscriminately, but must be consciously and carefully selected on the basis of its apparent comparability with the data related to the first-century Jerusalem Christians.

A model of early Christian oral tradition of the kind under discussion here will require an assortment of data derived from observation of a modern community. Types of relevant data might include oral texts and the circumstances in which they are performed; individual conceptions of the meaning and significance of specific oral texts; the conventions by which certain varieties of oral texts are composed,

performed, and transmitted; the social environment in which composition, performance, and transmission take place; the social structures and institutions which exert pressure on such events and on individual perceptions of the events; and individual conceptions of, responses to, and attitudes toward these social structures and institutions. This list is not comprehensive, but merely illustrative; other types of data might be equally relevant to the proposed model. However, such data cannot be used unless it can first be accessed, and this presents a serious problem for the modeller of the oral traditions of the Jerusalem church if he does not live in a community which possesses a comparable oral-traditional system.¹

Thus, in recent years, scholarly discussion of the oral Jesus tradition has tended to rely heavily on the work of social scientists. Issues related to the collection and analysis of ethnographic data, normally considered to lie outside the scope of New Testament studies, are of course *de rigueur* for researchers within the increasingly related disciplines of social anthropology and folkloristics. For decades these researchers and their forebears have developed and tested methods of collecting and interpreting ethnographic data with an eye to maximising both the theoretical utility and the reliability of studies of this kind. Over time, certain strategies have been demonstrated to be acceptably reliable, and have thus become standard practice among ethnographic researchers. Here it will be helpful to give some consideration to the most widely used and accepted of these methods, so as to gain some idea of the process by which oral-traditional data is normally collected.

¹ As e.g. K. Bailey; see discussion, ch. 1.

Participant Observation

The standard method within social anthropology for the collection of ethnographic data is *participant observation*.³ As a participant observer, the investigator takes up residence in the community from which data is to be collected, often for an extended period, and participates in the life of the community. He then collects data in the local language on the basis of his personal observations, using any of a variety of techniques including first-hand observation, formal and informal interviewing, and archival research.⁴ Thus this “method” is actually a broad strategy under the auspices of which numerous more specific methods and strategies for data collection are facilitated and customised to the observation of particular groups and the analysis of particular theoretical issues.⁵

Participant observation is a strategy which is peculiarly suited to the collection of oral-traditional data. A number of specific strengths may be observed. First, participant observation provides the researcher with unique opportunities to develop firsthand knowledge of the studied community. The investigator’s personal presence, and his ability to engage with community members in their own language, allows for a more rapid and full appreciation of the ways and means of community life.

² Certain types of ethnographic analysis, however, are becoming an increasingly common feature of New Testament studies; see e.g. Malina and Pilch 2000; Malina 1993; Neyrey 1998; Esler 1995.

³ See e.g. Werner and Schoepfle 1987, 21-22; Bernard 1994, 148-149. On the development of fieldwork as the primary instrument of social anthropology see e.g. Urry 1984, 35-61; Gosden 1999, 15-61.

⁴ See Holy 1984, 15-16. For a general introduction to ethnographic field research and methodology see e.g. Agar 1996; Bernard 1998; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Ellen 1984; Fetterman 1998; Finnegan 1992; Georges and Jones 1980; Gravel and Ridinger 1988; Spradley 1980; Stewart 1998; Van Maanen 1988; Werner, et al. 1987.

⁵ See Holy 1984, 19.

Over an extended period of research, the fieldworker's experiences and relationships in the studied community may lead to the development of an "insider's" perspective on the community's oral traditional practices. "Performances" of "oral texts" will cease to be generic, alien occurrences, and become meaningful events involving specific friends or strangers. "Authorities" and "institutions" will no longer be hypothetical facilitators and controllers of social activity, but real persons and organisations with whom the researcher must interact. This intuitive knowledge of the various facets of community life will greatly increase the fieldworker's authority in regard to his analysis and interpretation of the recorded data.

Second, participant observation provides considerable flexibility in regard to the types of data which can be collected. Once a residence is established in the community which is to be studied, the field researcher is limited only by the quality of his relationships with the people about and from whom he is learning. As these relationships deepen, he may no longer be confined to strictly public aspects of the community traditions, but will be able to observe how and for what reasons these traditions are carried and transmitted by individual people and families. Moreover, fluency in the local language allows the researcher to collect data whenever and wherever the opportunity is presented, and not merely when an interpreter is present.

Third, participant observation provides the opportunity to conduct both synchronic and diachronic observation. A year long field study (standard for basic anthropological research) allows the researcher to adapt and assimilate to a new community, polish linguistic skills and cultural knowledge, and observe and collect

data in its social and chronological contexts.⁶ When good relations are developed between community members and fieldworker, opportunities to observe and collect may extend over many years.⁷

On Taking the Field

As noted above, New Testament scholars have generally relied for oral-traditional data on the work of social scientists. For some time it has been assumed that this is the only option available to such scholars, inasmuch as participant observation and its related methods are considered to lie outside the province of New Testament studies. It may be necessary, therefore, if a model of the oral-traditional practices of the first-century Jerusalem church is to be constructed, to rely for the necessary comparative data on a completed ethnographic study written by an anthropologist on the basis of his own field research.

This approach might, in any case, be supposed to offer certain advantages. An anthropologist, uninterested in the relationship of his study to the performance and transmission of the early Jesus tradition, may appear in some sense to be a more objective observer than someone who is actively interested in these issues.⁸ Data collected by an anthropologist working within his own discipline and area of expertise

⁶ See Bernard 1994, 149. An extended period of study is desirable also because of the ever-present problem of time. If data is to retain its internal cohesiveness, it must be collected in a fairly intensive and synchronic fashion, so that integral connections between events and their participants are not allowed to dissipate. Yet the collection of certain kinds of data, as, for instance, transmissional patterns of oral texts, will require a relatively extensive, diachronic period of observation. Apart from these issues, an extensive period of observation is usually a practical necessity in that a given community will probably not submit to close scrutiny apart from a lengthy introduction to the observer.

⁷ See e.g. Kirk and Miller 1986, 69-70; Bernard 1994, 169.

⁸ On the ongoing debate over the issue of "objectivity" in the description and interpretation of ethnographic data see e.g. Evans-Pritchard 1951; Lévi-Strauss 1963; Ellen 1984; Jarvie 1984; Kirk and Miller 1986; Nencel and Pels 1991.

might be considered as inherently authoritative and reliable. Close scrutiny, however, shows that these apparent advantages are in fact serious liabilities.

In the first place, it is difficult to see how a lack of interest in the primary question under consideration would be advantageous in this context. As has been repeatedly observed in the present study, the production of a model of the oral Jesus tradition requires that the selection of the necessary oral-traditional data be conducted on the basis of its comparability with the data related to the oral-traditional practices of the early church. This datum applies not only to the choosing of a source of useful data, but equally to the selection of particular data.

Not all kinds of ethnographic data will be relevant to the proposed model, and no researcher can record and articulate every social and literary feature of a given community, or even everything he personally witnesses there. Knowledge of the first-century Jerusalem church and its social-cultural environment would provide crucial criteria of selection by which data appropriate to the study might be collected and described. A lack of such knowledge will almost certainly result in a failure to collect certain data which will be of relevance to a study of the oral Jesus tradition, though not to the researcher's own interests.

This problem may best be illustrated by considering the rather daunting prospect of attempting to locate a completed anthropological study which meets all the criteria of comparability and scope essential to the construction of the proposed model, although composed by a person who is at least uninterested in and probably completely unaware of the concerns of the modeller. It does not seem completely unlikely, given the vast amount of anthropological and folkloristic research that has

been conducted around the world during the last few decades, that an ethnographic account of a community in some way comparable with the first-century Jerusalem church might be found to exist. A study of this kind might be supposed to contain a description of the community's major social and cultural characteristics and institutions.

It might also be possible to locate a study specifically oriented toward the oral-traditional practices of a particular community. This kind of study might possibly include extensive collections of oral traditional data in the local language, though it is by no means certain that this would be so. It will be rather more difficult, however, to locate a study of a comparable community which contained *both* a significant collection of oral literature, properly annotated in regard to context, and a careful consideration of the socio-cultural characteristics which underlie the workings of its oral-traditional system. The possibility becomes even more faint if further demands are placed on a hypothetical anthropological or folkloristic study.

Ideally, the range of oral traditional data provided in such a study would include generic materials which would be comparable to those represented in early Christian literature, as well as dissimilar types, if any were available, for purposes of comparison. This data would be accompanied by detailed annotation regarding the context and circumstances of their performance. Additionally, an ideal study would include a collection of informal interviews in the form of conversations with various members of the community on subjects related to the transmission and performance of traditional materials.⁹

⁹ See e.g. Ellen 1984, 225-226.

Equally desirable specifications could be multiplied. What is required for the construction of a model of early Christian oral tradition is a study which is specifically concerned with the oral-traditional system of a given community in its socio-cultural *context*. But even if such a study was found to exist, it would still be necessary to come to grips with the cultural distance between the author of the model and the modern community.

Here the potential for misunderstanding is great. The construction of the model requires the recontextualisation of the ethnographer's data, and the appropriateness of the recontextualisation depends on its author's understanding of the ethnographer's experience. Yet many, if not most, of the experiences which provide the context for the ethnographer's own account will undoubtedly remain implicit at best. This lacuna is only expanded by any deliberate or accidental omissions which result from differences in theoretical emphasis, not to mention omissions of methodological and procedural detail. The author of the projected model is therefore in a position to reap virtually none of the benefits of the ethnographer's experience and intuitive knowledge of the studied community, and cannot even be certain of his ability to properly interpret the data which the ethnographer has actually recorded. Indeed, in the absence of significant methodological detail it would be difficult even to ascertain the ethnographer's own depth of knowledge, or the degree to which he has adhered to accepted standards of participant observation.¹⁰

⁹ See e.g. Ellen 1984, 225-226.

¹⁰ See Clammer 1984, 68: "Very many anthropologists who claim to use the technique [of participant observation] actually live apart from the people studied, often....with much better facilities than those of the informants, and surround themselves with equipment (justified as being "necessary" to the fieldwork) and comforts (often characteristic of their own culture). This often extends even to the consumption of their own rather than the native food. Very few anthropologists...ever actually

Moreover, a lack of interest in early Christianity will certainly mean a lack of interest in the way the debate over the nature and form of the early Jesus tradition has been conducted by New Testament scholars. The inattentiveness to methodological detail which has plagued previous analogical models of early Christian oral tradition is regarded here as a serious and costly error which must not be duplicated if the utility of a new model is to be ensured. However, ethnographic researchers are notoriously reticent to document their own methods and procedures in any detail.¹¹ Even in the unlikely event that a non-fieldworker were fortunate enough to acquire a copy of the ethnographer's fieldnotes, these would be of uncertain value.¹² Fieldnotes are generally written for private use, and are liable to present to the outside reader a mere conglomeration of "chaotic odds and ends of information," particularly if the reader has not had personal experience in the studied community.¹³

In the second place, any authority which an anthropologist may command in the production of an ethnographic study is due precisely to his claim to extensive first-hand experience of the studied community through participant observation.¹⁴ Participant observation is a defining characteristic of anthropology; it is often, in fact, the only point of agreement among anthropologists engaged in the perpetual debate

fulfil or even attempt to fulfil Malinowski's demand that the fieldworker know the local language intimately..."

¹¹ See e.g. Stewart 1998, 2-4.

¹² See Kirk and Miller 1986, 52: "...rarely has any researcher (or student) actually seen another's field notes."

¹³ See Lutkehaus 1990, 308-318; Kirk and Miller 1986, 51-59.

¹⁴ See Spradley 1980, vii-viii; Holy 1984, 14-19; Hastrup and Hervik 1994, 3-5.

over what anthropology actually entails.¹⁵ However, participant observation is simply a strategic solution to a specific type of problem. It is not the domain of anthropologists only, and researchers in various related and heretofore unrelated disciplines have begun to realise its potential for adaptation to their own work.¹⁶

It is therefore difficult to rationalise a reliance on the fieldwork of a disinterested ethnographer on the grounds of disciplinary authority, when to acquiesce on this point will necessarily result in a diminishment of any such authority for the purposes of the projected analogy. From the perspective of the anthropologist, reliance on second-hand data is an unacceptable foundation for an ethnographic study.¹⁷ By relying on (i.e. appropriating, reinterpreting, and recontextualising) data collected by an anthropologist apart from participant observation, the study is, again from the perspective of the anthropologist, rendered suspect, if not totally invalidated. Things do not look much better from the perspective of the New Testament scholar, for whom a more or less informed reconstruction of the ethnographer's field methods and the application of recontextualised data at two removes from its source will seem a somewhat unstable basis for what is admittedly an already tentative hypothesis. Production of the type of model under consideration here requires specialist knowledge of both a modern oral-traditional system and the literature, history, and cultural backgrounds of first-century Christianity.

¹⁵ See e.g. Ingold 1989, 10-11; Clammer 1984, 63-67; Holy 1984, 17-18; Thomas 1999, 262-279. For a dissenting view cf. Jarvie 1984, 16.

¹⁶ See e.g. Wolcott 1995, 75-76.

¹⁷ See Holy 1984, 24-26; Kirk and Miller 1986, 34.

In light of the above considerations, it would seem most unlikely that a single anthropological study of sufficient scope and detail could be found for use in the construction of the proposed model. Moreover, even should such a study become available, the prospect of recontextualising ethnographic data at two removes from its original collection must raise suspicions concerning the validity of a modeller's interpretation, and thus the utility of any model he creates thereby. There is, however, another option which, though rarely considered, may provide a satisfactory solution to this problem: the author of a model of early Christian oral tradition might personally engage in an extended field study in order to collect the necessary oral-traditional data.

Although somewhat unconventional, this strategy would provide the best opportunity for methodological control, and would go farthest toward ensuring the ultimate suitability of data. A period of field research would, theoretically, permit the author of a model of early Christian oral tradition to select the most closely comparable oral-traditional data available. It would, in addition, permit him/her the greatest possible understanding (for an outsider) of the studied community's oral-traditional system, and thus the greatest possible authority in regard to its recontextualisation in a model of the primitive Jesus tradition.

At one level, this suggestion is simply an attempt to advocate the achievement of precision and clarity in the construction of the specific kind of model which is being considered here. At another, however, it represents a conviction that any scholar who attempts to treat a subject which requires the use of cross-disciplinary tactics should actually have some command of those disciplines which he intends to

combine.¹⁸ Therefore, if the present study is correct in assigning significant epistemic value to a model of the early Jesus tradition based on an ethnographic study of a modern oral tradition, the researcher who undertakes to construct it should be critically liable to specialists in both New Testament studies and the social sciences in regard to the actual utility of his methods and conclusions.

In view of its somewhat unorthodox nature, a few comments should perhaps be made concerning the actual feasibility of this line of approach. The processes involved in field studies vary greatly according to the specificities of individual projects, and there is no universally accepted standard for what constitutes appropriate background preparation for field research.¹⁹ However, the recent proliferation of literature intended to guide the ethnographic neophyte has made instruction in the art of participant observation far more systematic and accessible than in past decades, when a "sink or swim" approach to fieldwork tended to dominate social anthropology.²⁰ Moreover, university anthropology departments have increasingly recognised the desirability of more extensive training of new fieldworkers, and formal courses in fieldwork methodology and practice are now common in both Britain and the United States. This new accessibility has resulted in the adoption of ethnographic approaches by researchers in a wide range of disciplines.

¹⁸ This recalls C. S. Lewis' still telling criticism of certain New Testament critics: "if he tells me that something in a Gospel is a legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read, how well his palate is trained in detecting them by the flavour..." Lewis 1967, 154.

¹⁹ Note for instance the varying approaches to this issue in Wolcott 1995, 65-85; 1994, 149-171; Bernard 1994, 148-149; Spradley 1980, v. On the persistence of the "sink or swim" method of training fieldworkers see Jackson 1990, 3-33.

²⁰ See Ellen 1984, 155, also n. 12 above.

However, commitment to the collection, analysis, and application of ethnographic data does not here imply a commitment to anthropology *per se*. The proposed model is intended as a possible solution to a specific historical question. This fairly narrow focus means that other more specifically anthropological concerns such as relate to issues of kinship, domestic roles, sexual mores, and economic structures would be significant to the construction of the proposed model only insofar as they can be observed to impact the central issue of the studied community's oral-traditional practices. Further, the proposed project need adopt no specific theory of culture or social process.²¹ Its theoretical scope should be confined exclusively to the question of how data collected directly from a known modern community may illuminate data related to an essentially unknown ancient community. These caveats do not diminish the necessity of a broad contextual description of the community, but denote the equal necessity of a clear theoretical focus and a well-defined priority of data selection.

It must be emphasised that the intention to employ a study of a modern tradition for the illumination of an ancient one need not, and should not, carry negative theoretical or ethical connotations. The more or less explicitly communicated feeling of some anthropologists that "societies ought to be studied as interesting in their own right or not at all" is an admirable reaction against the abuses of colonialism, but need not constrain the proposed study except in spirit.²² The project proposed here is completely unconcerned with theories of human social

²¹ On the uncertain relationship between ethnography and theory see e.g. Moore 1999, 9-23; Stewart 1998, 7-10; Clammer 1984, 70-72.

²² Gosden 1999, 9.

development or evolution, and should therefore be totally devoid of spurious allusions to "primitive culture," "laws of development," "the oral mind," or other such social-scientific chestnuts. Nor, lacking any specific mandate to anthropological speculation, would it engage any comparative issues regarding the relationship between the culture of the studied community and all other cultures.

Such a study is therefore in no position to either disparage or commend the cultural or social features of a studied community either generally or specifically. The proposed study is intended to produce an *analogy* with the oral-traditional practices of the first-century Jerusalem church based on apparent literary and socio-cultural similarities. Participant observation, the baseline strategy for the collection of ethnographic data among professional ethnographers, is simply the best possible strategy for the purposes of the present study.

Conclusion

The scheme outlined above is not, of course, entirely new. Essentially the same plan was conceived by the classicist Milman Parry in the early part of the twentieth century for the purpose of determining the compositional origins of the Homeric epics. Given that there are a number of similarities between the theoretical problems which confront the present study and those faced by Parry, it is somewhat heartening to consider the successes which have been achieved through the application of his method.²³

²³ See esp. Foley 1988. As has already been noted in this paper, there are also considerable differences between the work of Parry and Lord and that of the proposed study. The epic poetry of Homer contains many distinctive metrical and generic features which are readily identifiable and which are therefore amenable to a specific theory of oral composition. The gospel materials contain few such distinctive characteristics. In addition, the Homeric literature, manifestly created for the purposes of providing entertainment, can be easily envisioned as functioning in a specific kind of social context.

The success or failure of the model envisioned in the present study, however, remains to be seen. Having examined the major issues related to the selection of comparative oral-traditional data for inclusion in a model of early Christian oral tradition, it remains only to summarise the recommendations which have been presented here. This matter will be attended to in the concluding section.

The gospel materials are less easily placed. It should probably also be noted that the Homeric epics are not a matter of religious faith for a large percentage of the world's population.

CONCLUSION

The proper selection and management of comparative data is fundamental to the success of a model of early Christian oral tradition. Since the data used to construct a comparative model determines the model's final shape, the veracity of any conclusions which are drawn through an application of such a model depends upon the appropriateness of the comparative data used in the model's construction.

The relevance and utility of specific oral-traditional data for the construction of a model of early Christian oral tradition cannot be simply assumed; it must be argued. All communities, as all individual human beings, are unique, and will not necessarily employ precisely the same methods of transmitting or preserving their central traditions. If oral-traditional data is to be used, it must be certified as appropriate for the proposed task in reference to each stage of its treatment, including especially its initial selection.

In light of these considerations, this paper has proposed the foundation of a method by which a new and more adequate model of early Christian oral tradition might be constructed. The selection of (non early Christian) oral-traditional data for use in the construction of a model of early Christian oral tradition should be undertaken with primary concern for its comparability with the available early Christian data. Comparability may be established by confirmation of a suitable degree of similarity between the early Christian data and the comparative data in four areas. The first three of these are related to the comparison of oral and/or written literature, and correspond to John Miles Foley's principles of "dependence": 1) tradition-specific aspects of literary data, including topical matter, stylistic

idiosyncrasies, and linguistic or dialectic particularities; 2) the generic qualities of compared literary data; and 3) the specific media in which any literary data has been recorded and, where possible, its history of transmission. In addition, given the relative paucity of evidence related to the early church, it will be helpful also to consider 4) any socio-cultural similarities which may be demonstrated to exist between the communities which produced any compared oral or written literature.

There can be no expectation, however, of finding anything like an exact match between two compared oral traditions or the communities which produce them. Comparability must therefore be determined on the basis of the cumulative degree of similarity and difference which is perceived to exist between the early Christian data and any data with which it is compared, and not necessarily on the extent to which similarity or difference may be observed in regard to any one of the above areas of analysis. But a comparison of this kind can only be made between specific oral traditions and their parent communities. Therefore, the present study has advocated a comparison between the relevant and available data related to the Jerusalem church during the pre-eminence of James and that from a (thus far hypothetical) single modern community.

A consideration of certain socio-cultural features which will have impacted the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition by the Jerusalem Christians provides a number of criteria by which to evaluate a given community's suitability for comparison. Ideally, for example, such a community would be socially and culturally diverse. It would be, corporately, neither totally illiterate, nor highly educated. It would be located in a culture which considers the family to be the most fundamental

social unit, and which gives primacy of esteem to older males. Finally, it would be keen to promote its own particular belief system, and its own honour.

The construction of a model of the oral-traditional system employed by the first-century Jerusalem Christians will require the use of both literary and socio-cultural oral-traditional data. But this requires that good information exists concerning the oral-traditional practices of whatever modern community is chosen to fill this role. Some attention must therefore be given to the means by which oral-traditional data will be collected for inclusion in the proposed model.

The authors of some previous models of early Christian oral tradition have relied on data collected by anthropologists and folklorists. But it is not certain that field research conducted by a researcher uninterested in and unacquainted with the particular problems associated with study of the early church could provide the scope and quality of data which would form the basis of a convincing illustration of the first Christians' oral-traditional practices. It would be far more desirable for the author of a model of early Christian oral tradition to control both the selection and the collection of the necessary comparative data.

The standard anthropological approach to the collection of ethnographic data is "participant observation", where ethnographic data is collected during an extended period of close interaction with the members of the studied community. This approach is also endorsed by the present study as the best means of collecting the necessary comparative data for a model of early Christian oral tradition, on several grounds. It would allow an observer to obtain first-hand knowledge of the mechanisms by which a body of oral traditions are transmitted, the social contexts in

which such traditions are recited, and the connections between it and the wider socio-cultural environment in which it operates. It would also contribute significantly to the observer's ability to interpret the data in question.

It may be useful, as a final consideration, to speculate somewhat further concerning the cultural location of a community which might be useful as a source of data for a model of early Christian oral tradition. A number of New Testament scholars have noted that significant parallels may be observed between the socio-cultural environment of the early Christian churches and that of certain communities in the present-day Middle East. An increasing number of works have been published during the last several decades which take their hermeneutical cue, at least partially, from Middle Eastern anthropology.¹

Claims to correspondence between modern and ancient Mediterranean cultures are frequently made on the assertion that real cultural continuity exists between the two, though this assertion would seem difficult to prove.² Yet there are apparent indications of real similarity. If nothing else, there is much in the socio-cultural *situations* of certain present-day Middle Eastern communities which seems to echo the socio-cultural environment of the first-century Jerusalem church.

The hierarchy of power in first-century Palestine, and in the Jerusalem church, was dominated by *older males*. The linguistic environment of first-century Jerusalem will probably have been at least *bilingual*, but most of its citizens will have *spoken a Semitic language* at home. The province of Judaea during this period was *under*

¹ See e.g. Crossan 1999; Hanson and Oakman 1998; Malina 1993; Osiek and Balch 1997.

² See e.g. Malina 1993, xi; Bailey 1991, 34-35.

military occupation. Christians in Jerusalem were a *minority* community, and perhaps a *persecuted minority* at that. All of these factors may be supposed to have had some effect on the transmission of the oral Jesus tradition, and it seems plausible that similar features could also be observed in a community in, for instance, present-day Palestine or Syria or Lebanon.

Further, it seems quite likely that oral-traditional literature that bears significant generic similarities to that which may be fossilised in the early Christian literature is currently being produced in certain Middle Eastern communities. Here it is instructive to recall the types of oral-traditional materials to which Kenneth Bailey was exposed during his time in the Middle East: *proverbs, story riddles, poetry, parables, and accounts* of important figures or events in the community's history.³ Each of these genres is well represented in the Synoptic literature.

It may be, then, that the modern Middle East is the most profitable cultural location in which to begin a search for an oral-traditional system which is substantially comparable with that of the first-century Jerusalem church. Unfortunately, this prospect cannot be pursued further here. A more comprehensive exploration of the issue is planned, however, as part of a more extensive and interactive research project which will precede the construction of a new model of early Christian oral tradition.

³ Bailey 1991, 41-42.

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