

## ORAL TRADITION\*

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### Resum

La tradició oral és una expressió que fa referència a qualsevol cosa que connecta el passat amb el present a través de la paraula que s'ha rebut per via auditiva, i reflecteix diversos tipus de versions orals que influeixen en la configuració d'aquesta tradició. L'antiga crítica formal, si bé estava atenta al caràcter oral de la tradició, no apreciava la complexa relació entre la forma oral i el *Sitz im Leben*; valorava una noció unilateral de l'oralitat folclorística i descuidava el paper de la memòria individual en contextos socials i la narrativitat inherent de la tradició oral de Jesús. Tanmateix, en lloc de l'abandonament de l'anàlisi de la crítica formal, proposem la necessitat d'una nova comprensió del *Sitz im Leben*, parant atenció a l'existència d'escrits i d'oralitat retòrica en el cristianisme primitiu. Aquest tipus d'anàlisi crítica emprava formes orals i literàries com la *chreia*, que són inherentment mnemòniques i narratives, i obre la possibilitat de definir com moure'ns en la *bioi* escrita sobre Jesús, mitjançant la tradició oral de Jesús, i remetre'ns de nou a les primeres històries orals sobre el Jesús de la història i, per tant, al Jesús històric.

**Paraules clau:** Tradició oral, crítica formal, narrativa, *chreia*, Evangeli de Marc.

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**Abstract**

*Oral tradition is an expression that refers to anything that connects the past with the present through the word of mouth and which is received aurally and reflective of various kinds of oral mind-sets that influence the way the tradition is understood. Old form criticism, while attentive to the oral character of tradition, failed to appreciate the complex relationship between an oral form and the Sitz im Leben, it cherished a one-sided notion of folkloristic orality and neglected the role of individual memory in social contexts and the inherent narrativity of the oral Jesus tradition. Rather than abandoning form-critical analysis, however, a new understanding of the Sitz im Leben including attention to the existence of scribal and rhetorical orality in early Christianity is needed. This kind of form-critical analysis employs oral and literary forms such as the chreia, which is inherently mnemonic and narrative and opens up the possibility of defining how to move from the written bioi about Jesus, via the oral Jesus tradition, and back to the earliest oral stories about Jesus of history, and, by implication, to the historical Jesus.*

**Keywords:** *Oral tradition, form criticism, memory, narrativity, chreia, the Gospel of Mark.*

## 1. DEFINITIONS

Tradition can be many things. The acclaimed American sociologist Edward Shils defined tradition as «anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.»<sup>1</sup> The decisive criterion of tradition is here temporal and focuses on it as something that existed before the situation arises. However, not only the pastness of tradition is important, but also its present dimension. The constitutive feature of tradition is that it connects the past with the present. Jan Vansina, the influential Belgian anthropologist, stresses this double temporal aspect of (oral) traditions: «They are the representations of the past in the present», he says.<sup>2</sup> They are of the present, because they are told in the present; and they embody a message from the past, because they are expressions from the past. One cannot deny either the past or the present in them.<sup>3</sup>

Adding the term «oral» to the concept of tradition implies that it is communicated by word of mouth and received aurally *as well as* intrinsically reflective of the mind-set that characterizes oral groups and oral communication. Such characteristics are manifold, from popular, folkloristic orality

1. Edward SHILS, *Tradition*, London: Faber and Faber 1981, 12.

2. Jan VANSINA, *Oral Tradition as History*, London: James Currey, and Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya 1985, XII.

3. So also Øivind ANDERSEN, «Oral Tradition», in Henry WANSBROUGH (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, Sheffield: JSOT Press 1991, 17-58, esp. 26.

to the learned oral modes of communication. We therefore need to speak of different «oralities» in antiquity and different kinds of oral traditions. Here it is important to notice that the term «oral» attaches to tradition characteristics which have to do both with the way it is mediated and received *and* with the way it is to be interpreted.

The definition suggested above is free from a number of features that are often thought to be characteristic of oral tradition. While oral tradition comes from the past, it does not have to speak about the past; while it might become the manifestation of the collective memory and identity of a group, it does not have to be embraced by a large number of people; while it might be normative, it does not necessarily carry inherent claims of immediate acceptance; while it can survive the changes of time, it does not have to span over several generations; while it might conform to present concerns, it is not empty of diachronic dimensions. The Jesus tradition integrated several of these other characteristics, but when speaking of the material as oral tradition we are essentially classifying it as something which was handed down orally from the past to the present and which connected the present time of the early Christians with the past history about Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. ORAL TRADITION AND FORM CRITICISM – CRITIQUE

For Biblical scholars oral tradition is closely linked to form criticism. This approach tried to come to terms with how the present time of the Christ-believing communities related to the past by means of oral tradition and constituted the most sustained and influential method of the study of oral transmission during last century. It was an attempt to methodologically trace the oral traditions of the words and the deeds of Jesus and the narration about him reflected in the Gospels back to their earliest forms and origin.<sup>5</sup>

4. I have discussed the definitions of tradition and transmission more fully in Samuel BYRSKOG, «The Transmission of the Jesus Tradition», in Tom HOLMÉN – Stanley E. PORTER (eds.); *The Handbook for the Study for the Historical Jesus*, 4 vols., Leiden: Brill 2011, 1465-1494 (1466-1468).
5. I developed my critique of form criticism for the first time in my review article of Rudolf BULTMANN, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, *JBL* 122 (2003) 549-555.

### 2.1. *The Notion of the Oral Sitz im Leben*

One of the basic insights of form criticism was that each form correlated to a specific life-setting, the *Sitz im Leben*. The idea of this correlation was based on a notion of the oral character of the tradition. The speakers or performers of a tradition chose the type to follow as the occasion presented itself and were then restricted to its pattern, so that the possibilities for individual variation became limited while conventional and typical forms exercised control. The *Sitz im Leben* was an oral occasion, that is, it was the locus of the tradition as an oral entity which was subordinated to the collective forces of the traditioning group. Thus, there existed a close correlation between each *Sitz im Leben* and the oral form of the tradition.

The fundamental idea uniting the three pioneers of form criticism, Hermann Gunkel, Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius, was thus that the tradition must be of an inherently oral character in order to be shaped by the *Sitz im Leben*. The idea of a correspondence between the oral form and the activities of the community, be that ancient Israel or the early Christian churches, was based on a conception of how popular, folkloristic orality functions in typical situations of a group. For Gunkel this meant that the correspondence operated on the earliest phases of the tradition, while it was much less evident at later stages of collection and writing. For Bultmann and Dibelius it operated all the way through the transmission process and the composition of the Gospels, because the Gospels were seen as the popular, kerygmatic out-come of the oral activity of the communities. It was, as a matter of course, Bultmann's and Dibelius' conception that came to determine New Testament scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.2. *The Notion of Orality*

Old form-criticism is today being challenged due to several more recent insights. We might bring attention to three such insights. One of them is that we have discovered that there existed other forms of orality than the one assumed by the form critics. At that time no one took seriously the more advanced and sophisticated strategies of communication embedded in the

6. For a more extensive discussion and literature, see Samuel BYRSKOG, «A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*: From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond», *ZNW* 98 (2007) 1-27.

biographical and rhetorical features in the Gospels and indicating a certain level of scribal education. Such educated strategies —we might label them «scribal orality»— do not easily yield to a one-dimensional and simple connection between a form and its *Sitz im Leben*, even less to any attempt to strip away the secondary modifications and trace the tradition back to its pure form.

The insights from folkloristic research is still of significance, most prominently in James Dunn's use of Kenneth Bailey's study of the performance of tradition in the gatherings of Arab villages as an explanatory model for the Jesus tradition.<sup>7</sup> However, it remains unclear how this kind of folkloristic orality relates to «scribal orality», that is, to the more advanced patterns of oral composition and communication which have been unveiled in recent studies of the narrative and rhetorical dimensions in the Gospels and which suggest that the pre-Gospel tradition was colored not by the particular collective features of a particular *Sitz im Leben* but by sophisticated oral and rhetorical ambitions to make tradition clear and relevant to different audiences.

### 2.3. *The Notion of the Community and Memory*

Another insight challenging old form criticism is the notion of the community and memory. The confidence of the form critics in the creative dynamics of the community blinded them to the presence of individuals and to the function of memory.

It is still fashionable to point out —rightly so, indeed— that communal and social structures are decisive for how the past and the present reality is perceived and interconnected. While the stress on the community today recurs in helpful attempts to understand oral tradition from the perspective of social or collective memory,<sup>8</sup> the notion that the community created and

7. James D. G. DUNN, *Jesus Remembered*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003. Dunn's influential book has been thoroughly discussed in Robert B. STEWART — Gary R. HABERMAS (eds.), *Memories of Jesus: A Critical Appraisal of James D. G. Dunn's Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Nashville, B. & H. Academic 2010.

8. For a recent overview of the discussion, see Alan KIRK — Tom THATCHER, «Jesus Tradition as Social Memory», in KIRK — THATCHER (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (SBLSS 52) Atlanta: SBL 2005, 25-42; Alan KIRK, «Memory», in Werner H. KELBER — Samuel BYRSKOG (eds.), *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2009, 155-172. For a helpful introduction to the field of

shaped oral tradition solely on the basis of present needs and future-oriented interests has given way to an attention to the boundaries of the collective force of perception and creation.

One such boundary would have been the existence of eyewitnesses during at least the initial stages of the transmission process.<sup>9</sup> Their presence does not imply a straight way from tradition back to Jesus, to be sure. Here I differ in emphasis from other studies of eyewitness testimony.<sup>10</sup> Each act of observation and recall involves interpretation and the oral histories of eyewitnesses indicate a socially conditioned perception of the past that is intrinsic to history.<sup>11</sup> But their existence is important precisely as a reminder of the interactive nature of individual and communal components in the oral Jesus tradition and a call for further precision in estimating the social and the collective dimension of memory.

#### 2.4. *The Narrativity of Tradition*

A final point, which is still not taken fully into account, is the narrativity of the tradition. The Jesus tradition has its peculiar characteristic in that it hands down material which relates a vital message of revelation to the life of a historical person. It is insufficient, therefore, to approach and conceptualize the initial stages of the oral Jesus tradition from the viewpoint of how abstract forms of verbal teaching or rumors of marvelous actions were con-

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social and collective memory, see Barbara A. MISZTAL, *Theories of Social Remembering*, Philadelphia: Open University Press 2003.

9. See Richard BAUCKHAM, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2006. Bauckham develops insights from my study *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000, 2001, and Leiden – Boston: Brill 2003.
10. I have discussed Bauckham's view and indicated the differences in «The Eyewitnesses as Interpreters of the Past: Reflections on Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*», *JSHJ* 6 (2008) 157-168; and «A "Truer" History: Reflections on Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*», *Nova et Vetera* 6 (2008) 483-490.
11. My use of oral history has sometimes been misunderstood as a simplistic use of eyewitnesses for the reconstruction of history. This misunderstanding reflects a neglect of attention to what oral history is all about. It is a social perspective on history and presents a way of deconstructing the illusory objective innocence of historical positivism and of acknowledging history as a *story* that is communicated orally and that always is part of the social settings and perceptions of eyewitnesses, tradition, and memory. My own theoretical agenda is influenced primarily by Paul THOMPSON, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (3d ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000) and, for social memory, by Eviatar ZERUBAVEL, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 2003.

veyed, because such models fail to appreciate the narrative dynamics at work when the tradition concerns words and actions intrinsically bound to each other in the life story of a venerated person.

The tendency to dichotomize the sayings material and the narrative material at a pre-Synoptic stage does not take into account how an oral mind-set functions. Such a mind-set tends to structure the past as episodes according to narrative plots. Memory usually narrativizes the past.

Moreover, the narrative character of the Jesus event itself probably fostered a kind of tradition that held together smaller and larger units of words and happenings and initiated an integration of verbal and behavioral tradition. Some of Jesus' sayings would be incomprehensible without a narrative frame and, vice versa, his behavior and actions were an important part of his teaching and proclamation. The early hellenization of Palestine makes it unlikely that such narrative elements can be ascribed to late hellenistic redaction, as the early form critics believed. Narrative material in the double tradition also points to a narrativizing tendency in clusters which were predominantly focused on sayings.<sup>12</sup> And it is likely that any kind of collection of sayings at this time —be that Q, if it existed, or the Gospel of Thomas— was part of an oral environment of narrative comment and elaboration.

As we will see, the pre-Markan tradition was probably not void of narrativity. The form-critical conviction that Markan apophthegms can be reduced to bare dominical sayings is not mandatory as soon as they are seen as elaborations of *chreiai*, which by definition were reminiscences relating sayings or actions to particular persons. The Gospel writers were not the first ones interested in the narrative dimension of the Jesus tradition. For all we know, in early Christianity the Jesus tradition was, from the beginning, recalled within the matrix of a grand narrative event.

### 3. ORAL TRADITION AND FORM CRITICISM – A PROPOSAL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Granted that old form criticism has lost its grip as a comprehensive method for tracing oral tradition back to its earliest forms and origins, there exists today a bewildering array of attempts to move from the Gospels to

12. For the Q-material, cf. Stephen HULTGREN, *Narrative Elements in the Double Tradition: A Study of Their Place Within the Framework of the Gospel Narrative*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2002.

the oral tradition and back to the historical Jesus.<sup>13</sup> The way forward is difficult to foresee. Some scholars, especially from North America, follow the lead of the pioneering work of Werner Kelber and proclaim the death of form criticism,<sup>14</sup> arguing today that the oral tradition was so intimately linked to memory as a social construction that we must be content with memorable refractions as the constitutive element of tradition and of history.<sup>15</sup>

The criticism labeled against form criticism notwithstanding, there might be a future for a modified version of formal analysis of oral tradition and the important notion that it relates to certain formative settings in the communities. I have elsewhere suggested we define *Sitz im Leben* somewhat differently and take into account insights such as those mentioned above. My tentative proposal is that we think of it as *that recurrent type of mnemonic occasion within the life of early Christ-believing communities when certain people cared about the Jesus tradition in a special way and performed and narrated it orally and in writing*.<sup>16</sup> I wish to elaborate briefly a few points hinted at in this definition and indicate how we might move towards a renewed form-critical work with the oral Jesus tradition.

13. For a recent over-view, see Samuel BYRSKOG, «The Transmission of the Jesus Tradition: Old and New Insights», *Early Christianity* 3 (2010) 1-28.
14. The pioneering work of Werner KELBER is his book *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (with a new introduction by the author; Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1997. The book was first published in 1983. Kelber has developed and modified his view in several articles. He was himself thoroughly familiar with the form criticism of Bultmann and Dibelius.
15. Cf. e.g. Anthony LE DONNE, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David*, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2009; Dale C. ALLISON JR, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2010; Rafael RODRIGUEZ, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text*, London: Clark 2010; Chris KEITH, «Memory and Authenticity: Jesus Tradition and What Really Happened», *ZNW* 102 (2011) 155-177; Anthony LE DONNE, *Historical Jesus: What Can we Know and How Can we Know it?*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2011. German scholars are not equally pessimistic about the future of form criticism in view of the increasing recognition of memory. Cf. Ruben ZIMMERMANN, «Formen und Gattungen als Medien der Jesuserinnerung: Zur Rückgewinnung der Diachronie in der Formgeschichte des Neuen Testaments», *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* 22 (2007) 131-167.
16. I proposed this definition for the first time in a lecture at the 2005 conference of the *Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas* and published it as «A New Quest for the *Sitz im Leben*: Social Memory, the Jesus Tradition and the Gospel of Matthew», *NTS* 52 (2006) 319-336, esp. 323. It was elaborated in «A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*.»

### 3.1. *The Sitz im Leben of Certain People*

Firstly, special attention is given to only to certain people within the community, not the whole community. The tradition activity of that limited group is what constitutes the *Sitz im Leben*.

This more limited scope is different from old form criticism. Earlier, and still to a significant extent, the idea of the creative force of the entire community dominated scholarship. It was the activities of the Church that constituted the different *Sitze im Leben*. Recent studies of social memory or collective memory also often speak vaguely of what group or what community that actually remembers socially the oral tradition. These studies neglect the fact that what we have in the Gospels is the product of a few literary skilled individuals and that the oral Jesus tradition is available mainly through the narrative work of these persons. The Gospels reflect, so to say, moments of intelligent biographical narrativization of the Jesus tradition. We know very little about the broader communal settings of these people. Labels such as the Matthean community, the Markan community, the Lukan community have become problematic.<sup>17</sup> The *Sitz im Leben* is certainly part of the activities of a larger community, and it might synchronize its specific activity of transmission with that larger setting, but it is not identical with it. To the extent that we wish to study the contours of the broader setting of oral tradition, we must be aware of using the lenses provided by that more limited group.

It is an intriguing challenge for scholarship to integrate approaches to oral tradition that focus on individual memorization with those that focus on social and collective memory. There is sufficient evidence from Greek, Roman and Jewish antiquity as well as the New Testament itself to assume that memorization existed. But it existed within the context of socially conditioned negotiations in memory between the past and the present. No one denies that memorization was only a part of the more complex mnemonic negotiation that took place mentally between the two temporal horizons. Biblical scholars dealing with social and collective memory tend to follow the pioneering work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs uncritically and fail to address that memory exists in the matrix between the individual and

17. Cf. Richard BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audience*, Edinburgh: Clark 1998; and the over-view of the discussion in Edward W. KLING (ed.), *The Audience of the Gospels: The Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, London: Clark 2010.

the collective and is never purely individual or purely collective.<sup>18</sup> It would be helpful if we reserved the expression «social memory» precisely for this matrix and thought of it as a label distinct from «collective memory.» A few years ago I proposed that while the latter is social in that it includes those recollections of a group that are shared by *all* of its members and nourishes collective identity, the former is social in that it deals with the social aspects of the mental act of *individual* remembering and nourishes the social identity of the individual.<sup>19</sup> Social memory is thus interested in the memory of individuals in social contexts which are larger than the individual and yet related to the individual. In that sense, we might indeed speak of the *Sitz im Leben* as a mnemonic occasion *within* the life of early Christian communities when *certain people* cared about the Jesus tradition.

### 3.2. *The Sitz im Leben as a Recurrent Situation*

To be noted in the definition above is also that it is the involvement of that specific group in a recurrent type of situation that is of interest, not the situation as such. Scholars today often use the expression *Sitz im Leben* almost synonymously with an historical situation of a group or a text and empty it of its form-critical meaning. The emphasis on recurrence is in line with how it was originally used by the early form critics and takes seriously that certain repetitive characteristics of social gatherings are formative.

These recurrent features manifest themselves variously. Most form-critical thinking of the last century focused on different activities in the Christ-believing communities. The notion of memory was largely ignored. Leading form-critical scholars such as Gunkel, Bultmann and, to a certain extent, Dibelius neglected that the *Sitz im Leben* deals in the present with material from the past and about the past and that this negotiation between the two temporal horizons is central.<sup>20</sup>

18. HALBWACHS' study *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 1950) was published posthumously by Jeanne ALEXANDRE (born Halbwachs) on the basis of manuscripts found among Halbwachs' papers. His major contribution to the field of collective memory was *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, new ed. 1952. It first appeared in 1925.

19. «A New Quest for the *Sitz im Leben*», 322.

20. Dibelius' sensitivity to the pastness of tradition is evident in a statement concerning paraenesis: «Wie sich im Urchristentum von Anfang an neben enthusiastischen auch nomistische Gedanken gezeigt haben, so steht neben dem pneumatischen Interesse, für das alle christliche Paränese den einen göttlichen Ursprung hat, die Wertschätzung der Tradition, der Authen-

Generally speaking, the recurrent features of the *Sitz im Leben* have to do with the social dynamics of repeatedly relating in memory to the past in the present. To be sure, the mnemonic situation is never uniform. What is of importance, however, is that each situation, whether we think of it as deliberate work with tradition or as closely related to other internal, and external activities of the Christ-centered communities, can be seen as that recurrent mnemonic kind of event which influenced the way certain people cared about, performed and narrated the Jesus tradition.

When people met in scribal settings to study the tradition, or when they used that tradition for the purpose of preaching, apologetics, polemics, edification and of discipline, it was the basic orientation towards the remembered past that was typical and repeatedly but variously exhibited a controlling and formative role on tradition. To the extent that these activities regularly contained a mnemonic negotiation between the past and the present, the *Sitz im Leben* can be seen as an institutionalized occasion. If we argue, for instance, that the episodes of Jesus' miracles were creatively employed in the mission of the early communities, and that the tradition carriers were missionaries, that mission must have had mnemonic characteristics which need to be accounted for. The missionaries chose, after all, to repeatedly tell stories in the present that were located in the past. It is the basic mnemonic character of the occasion which defines the *Sitz im Leben* and influences the Jesus tradition.

### 3.3. *The Sitz im Leben and the Oral Enactment of Tradition*

Finally, the proposal above suggests that the specific group regularly involved in the *Sitz im Leben* both cared about the Jesus tradition in a special way and performed and narrated it. They not only deliberately worked with tradition but also enacted it orally to the rest of the community. The activity of performance and narration comes close to the activity of preaching and there is no need to separate it too strictly from the activity of careful work with the Jesus tradition. A small glimpse of this more comprehensive form of transmission might be found in 1 Cor 15:1-3:

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tie und der Autorität», See Martin DIBELIUS, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 1933, 243.

Now I should remind you, brothers, of the good news that I proclaimed (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ὃ εὐηγγελισάμην) to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed (τίμι λόγῳ εὐηγγελισάμην) to you – unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on (παρέδωκα) to you as of first importance what I in turn had received (παρέλαβον): that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.

Paul here uses the two terms of transmission —«I handed on», παρέδωκα, and «I received», παρέλαβον— in a clause which explains his preaching of the gospel —the verse is introduced with «for», γάρ. He apparently regards the preaching the gospel to the Corinthians —τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ὃ εὐηγγελισάμην ὑμῖν— as a kerygmatic performance or enactment of tradition and in this sense as a kind of or an extension of transmission. This performance, moreover, contains narrative elements. The tradition to which Paul refers did not include a mere accumulation of what Jesus had said, but a story of what happened to him and of his appearances. It has to do with performance as well as narration.

Regrettably there is a tendency among Biblical scholars to stress either that the Jesus tradition was faithfully handed on in careful acts of transmission separated from kerygmatic performances *or* that it was regularly used and shaped in oral performance and enactment. This is an unfortunate polarization. Several studies of oral performance tend to equate transmission and performance entirely, arguing that in orality one cannot differentiate between diachronic and synchronic means of communication. This way of arguing is as one-sided as the one arguing in the opposite direction, namely, that transmission was always passive and entirely independent of oral performance. Groups that communicate orally might indeed show a keen sense of pastness and do not always exhibit a functional, homeostatic attitude to tradition. We need, with Paul, to envision a kind of oral and narrative performance and enactment of tradition that integrates the diachronic dimension into the present time of the narrative without demolishing the pastness of tradition.

#### 4. THE CHREIA AND ORAL TRADITION

Thus far I have attempted two things, namely, to criticize some aspects of how oral tradition was studied in early form criticism and to introduce a modified version of the notion of the *Sitz im Leben* that takes seriously the

link between oral tradition, individual and collective memory, oral performance and enactment, and narrativity. If we move from here to the oral Jesus tradition, we are faced with the alternatives that the various units of tradition originated either when certain eyewitnesses listened to and observed Jesus' words and actions and what happened to him and formed their impressions into oral stories *or* when certain people experienced the need to create episodes resembling such histories.

In both cases, once the rumors and oral stories survived the initial dangers of collective censorship and once the created episodes become part of the oral tradition cared for by certain people in the communities, we might assume that they were shaped into forms which were known to the Christ-believers, which they could elaborate, and which were suited to express the oral, mnemonic and narrative character of the tradition. All we have however are the Gospels they finally composed. Granted the characteristics of the oral pre-Gospel tradition indicated above is correct, we need to seek in the written Gospels themselves for textual traces of the mnemonic and narrative experiences of the early followers of Jesus. Such traces ought to be visible as specific textual forms which include oral, mnemonic and narrative features that reflect the involvement of individuals and groups and that provide ways of preservation as well as elaboration of tradition.

#### 4.1. *The Chreia as an Oral and Narrative Form*

The *chreia* (together with the *apomnēmoneuma*, ἀπομνημόνευμα) might be a good starting-point and is today becoming increasingly recognized as prominent form in Mark and Luke.<sup>21</sup> We know from the *Progymnasmata* of Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius and Nicolaus how teachers taught students to elaborate and condense it for various rhetorical purposes before they entered the more advanced stages of rhetorical training. Instead of pointing to an

21. Burton L. MACK and Vernon K. ROBBINS made some important observation in this direction in their book *Patterns of Persuasion in the Gospels* (Sonoma: Polebridge Press 1989), thus picking up some old insights of DIBELIUS and Vincent TAYLOR. For a more recent, full study of the *chreia* in Mark, see Marion MOESER, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World and the Rabbis*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 2002. For Luke, see Tobias HÄGERLAND, «Retoriska övningar vid den sista måltiden (Luke 22:14-38)», *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 76 (2011) 137-160, and the literature referred to there. I developed some preliminary ideas in a similar direction for the first time in «The Early Church as a Narrative Fellowship: An Exploratory Study of the Performance of the *Chreia*», *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 78 (2007) 207-226.

allegedly pure form by means of theories concerning the tendencies of tradition and through classifications based on how literary types and forms were supposedly used in various activities,<sup>22</sup> as the old form-critics did, a study of the *chreia* opens up the possibility of a disciplined and controllable analysis of how items of tradition were made to function in different settings.

It is important to realize that the *chreia* was an inherently oral form, notwithstanding the fact that it could appear in writing. It was essentially a vital part of the preliminary exercises intended to prepare the students for more advanced studies of rhetorical techniques and oral delivery. The kind of orality we are dealing with here is not the folkloristic and popular orality that dominated the work of form criticism but a more scribal and rhetorically shaped orality that easily could be used also in writing. We are dealing with oral tradition as sophisticated oral communication and introduce rhetorical considerations into the attempt to perform tradition-historical analysis.<sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, it was inherently narrative in that it included at least some kind of brief situational remark, and it harmonizes thus with the narrative character of the Jesus tradition. Theon, active during the second half of the first century CE, defined a *chreia* accordingly as «a concise statement or action which is well-aimed, attributed to a specified character or something analogous to a character» (96 lines 19-21).<sup>24</sup> In distinction to the *apophthegma* (ἀπόφθεγμα), which could be anonymous (cf. Plutarch, *Apophthegmata Laconica*), the attribution to a named individual is central to what the *chreia* is and provides a narrative nucleus to the form. The narrativity of the attribution is evident both in the brief *chreia* and in its expanded form. The brief *chreia* often contained a participial clause that accompanied the attribution and described the circumstances of the speaking or acting person. The exercise that required students to expand the *chreia* for the sake of producing a persuasive argument —Hermogenes calls it *ergasia* (ἐργασία)— added descriptive details about the person's credentials and circumstances or enlarged the dialogue of the sayings-*chreia* into a little story with dramatic traits of its

22. The form-critical idea of regularity of the tendencies of the Synoptic tradition was decisively criticized already by Ed P. SANDERS in his dissertation *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969.

23. For a tradition-historical analysis of the tradition behind Mark 2:1-12, see now the dissertation of my doctoral student Tobias HÄGERLAND, *Jesus and the Forgiveness of Sins: An Aspect of his Prophetic Mission*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012, 226-249.

24. The references to Theon follow Leonardi SPENGLER, *Rhetores Graeci* (vol. 2), Leipzig: Teubner, 1854. Spengel's edition is referred to in Michel PATILLON – Giancarlo BOLOGNESI, *Aelius Théon Progymnasmata* (Collection des Universités de France), Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1997.

own. Conversely, a longer story could be abbreviated into a short *chreia*. Through its attribution to a specified character the *chreia* betrayed an embryonic narrativity that could be developed and again reduced according to various rhetorical needs.

#### 4.2. *The Chreia as a Mnemonic Form*

For the present purposes it is noteworthy that the *chreia* was a thoroughly mnemonic entity. It should be memorized before it was elaborated. The memories of the past, of sayings and events, became stylized in memorable anecdotes that people learned to remember and modify from memory.

This mnemonic character of the *chreia* comes to the surface in the exercise which required students to recite it from memory. For Theon this was the first and most simple of eight gradually more difficult exercises with the *chreia*. It is obvious, he says, «because we try to the best of our ability to report clearly the assigned *chreia* in the same words or in others as well» (101 lines 7–9).

This mnemonic character of the *chreia* is not to be confused with exact memorization. The all-important matter was that the *chreia* should be remembered in a way that was clear and understandable to the person reciting it and to her/his audience. Recitation of the *chreia* in the classroom probably kept closely to the words of the teacher who provided it, but recitation with other words was also permissible, «in others as well», as Theon expressed it. The emphasis fell on clarity. The recitation, whether in the exact words of the teacher or in a paraphrase, had to make sure that clarity was not sacrificed. Such variations are not to be regarded as disorganized, because they were intended to make a point more evident. Rather, they reflect stylized attempts to negotiate in memory between the past and the present and to allow the memories of the past to be socially relevant and clear in repeatedly new situations.

#### 4.3. *Mark 1:35-39 – A Test Case*

Let me, to conclude, take an example from Mark 1:35-39:

And in the morning, while it was very dark, he got up and went out and went into a deserted place, and there he prayed.

And Simon and they that were with him hunted for him,  
and they found him and say to him: «Everyone is searching for you.»  
And he says to them:

“Let us go elsewhere to the neighboring towns, in order that I may preach also there; for to this end I went out.»

And he went into their synagogues throughout all Galilee, preaching and casting out demons.

According to Theon’s classification, this is a sayings-*chreia*. Such a *chreia* could have a statement that was prompted by the situation or that was unprompted. This saying belongs to the former category. Jesus responds to something. Theon mentions four species of such responses (97 line 24 – 98 line 20): to a simple question answerable with «yes» or «no»; to an inquiry that required a longer answer; to a question calling for an explanation or a reason; and to some remark in the situation. In the last instance the actor is not asked about something but invited to speak in a general sense. The Marcan statement belongs to this category. Jesus does not respond to a question or an inquiry but to the disciples’ report that everyone is searching for him.

The saying itself could be of different kinds. Theon mentions twelve ways in which it could be expressed (99 line 13 – 101 line 2): as a maxim, as an explanation, with a wit, with a syllogism, with an enthymeme, with an example, with a wish, in a symbolic manner, in a figurative manner, with double entendre, with a change of subject, and in a combination of the aforementioned forms. The Jesus-saying comes closest to the explanatory manner of presentation. Being in a deserted place and finding out that everyone is searching for him, Jesus wants to go on to neighboring towns and *explains* that this is the reason why he went out. This explanation is not immediately transparent and commentators often generalize it to concern Jesus’ mission mentioned programmatically in 1:14–15 or statements later in the narrative, such as the ones in 2:27 and 10:45. But the saying has an explanatory function within the *chreia* itself. The verb «went out» (ἐξῆλθον) harks back to the use of the same verb (ἐξῆλθεν) in the situational remark in verse 35 and indicates that Jesus left Capernaum in order to come into the rest of Galilee. His saying explains the *reason* why he left his home-town and went out to a deserted place where he prayed. He simply wished to move on. Accordingly, the after-effect of his saying is that he «went into» (ἦλθεν) all of Galilee preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

The use of a rationale, «for to this end I went out», reflects perhaps the method of elaboration. According to Hermogenes, the elaboration should

include an encomium for the one who spoke or acted, a paraphrase of the *chreia*, and a rationale. In addition, he indicated the use of five further elements after the rationale: argument from the opposite, from analogy, from example, from authority, and an exhortation to heed to the one who spoke or acted. In Mark there is no explicit praise of Jesus, but in accordance with Hermogenes' exercise the saying of Jesus consists of a statement followed by a rationale. Jesus does not here argue his case by adding arguments of different kinds. The saying is only slightly elaborated with a rationale that accords with the situational remark in verse 35 and supports the explanatory function of the Jesus-saying.

All in all, the author of Mark introduces his *bios* in a way that presents Jesus as a person who acts and speaks succinctly and that anchors the narrative historically within anecdotes related to Peter. This combination, it is suggested, reflects the author's reliance on and mastery of the Greek *chreia*. He does not develop the *chreiai* into long argumentative entities but is content with presenting smaller narrative units. As rhetorical entities they provide the story with a basic narrative force and indicate a specific setting of expressive performance based on mnemonic practices. It is perhaps not by accident that Papias, according to Eusebius, about half a century later assumed that Mark wrote down from memory what he heard Peter teaching in the form of *chreiai*, πρὸς τὰς χρείας (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.15).<sup>25</sup>

It would take us too far afield to investigate the *chreia* identified here or other *chreiai* in Mark diachronically. I think it can be done, once we learn how to move backwards and trace the various manipulations that the *chreiai* might have gone through due to different rhetorical needs and audiences. If our observations thus far are correct, the presence of *chreiai* in Mark might suggest that also the pre-Gospel Jesus tradition was shaped according to rhetorical forms that included mnemonic and narrative features and that provided ways of preservation as well as elaboration of tradition.<sup>26</sup>

25. The idea that πρὸς τὰς χρείας means that Peter conveyed teachings «according to needs», that is, that he adopted his teachings to the circumstances, has been largely abandoned in favor of the view that it describes the *chreia*-form of Peter's teachings. So already R. O. P. TAYLOR, *The Groundwork of the Gospels*, Oxford: Blackwell 1946, 76. Joseph Kürzinger made this understanding part of his argument for the presence of rhetorical terminology throughout the Papias quotation. See KÜRZINGER, «Die Aussage des Papias von Hierapolis zur literarischen Form des Markusevangeliums», *BZ* 21 (1977) 245-264. Matthew BLACK did not object to this part of Kürzinger's proposal in «The Use of Rhetorical Terminology in Papias on Mark and Matthew», *JSNT* 37 (1989) 31-41.

26. The idea expressed most pointedly by Whitney SHINER in his book *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International 2003) that the

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As I hope has become evident from these considerations, the oral Jesus tradition was not oral only in the sense that it was largely unwritten. To say that the Jesus tradition was oral involves much more and needs precision. It was suggested that we are dealing with a scribal and rhetorical kind of orality. The tradition was cared for by special people who negotiated in memory with the past embedded in it and also narrated their formalized memories orally to the community. In that comprehensive act of transmission of the oral Jesus tradition, they related preserved and elaborated sayings and actions of Jesus to specific oral forms without therefore abolishing its pastness and the deliberate mnemonic acts of transmission.

Several questions remain to address. A full study of the Gospels along the lines suggested above will reveal the extent to which the early Christians employed *chreia*-like building-blocks for the oral Jesus tradition and how these blocks related to other pieces of memory and narrativity such as we find in the Passion narrative. Today I wished to indicate that the study of the oral Jesus tradition along the lines of old form criticism is not a dead end but needs to be thoroughly revised. I also wanted to point to the possibilities of a renewed formal analysis of oral Jesus tradition that takes seriously its mnemonic and narrative character and that points in the direction of a winding but yet plausible path from the written *bioi* about Jesus, via the oral Jesus tradition, and back to the earliest oral stories about Jesus of history, and thus, by implication, to the historical Jesus.

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pre-Markan tradition grew through repeated and bombastic oral performances might thus need to be balanced with an appreciation of the more disciplined form of oral enactments of tradition.