

Eric Eve. *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014. 224 pages. \$29.

From the beginning the dualistic aim of this insightful survey text is clear: to present its readers with alternative models for studying the oral tradition behind the Gospels while simultaneously challenging the dominance of form criticism. Form criticism is defined as “the study of the history of individual units of (oral) tradition, based on the assumption that there is a discoverable link between their form and their social setting.” Although the dominant method of study for the last century, Eric Eve argues it has several flaws. These flaws, reflected in the work of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, both key figures in form criticism, are primarily viewed as belief in: the anonymous handing on of the tradition; the notion that the Evangelists were mere collectors and editors of individual units of oral tradition; oral tradition was primarily transmitted through preaching, exhortation, and disputes with outsiders; the form of the individual unit of oral tradition relates to a sociological setting; and there is no significant difference between oral and written media in the synoptic tradition.

Utilizing the Gospel of Mark as a point of reference, Eve introduces readers to more recent approaches to the study of oral tradition. Beginning with the Rabbinic Model, Birger Gerhardsson’s thesis critiques form criticism’s assumption regarding the anonymous collection of individual units of oral tradition as well as the mode in which it was transmitted. Gerhardsson views the handing on of oral tradition as a tightly controlled process analogous to Jewish memorization teaching practices, rather than anonymously collecting scattered individual units. Using Jesus’ teaching the disciples, and Paul, as examples to support his theory, Gerhardsson claims oral transmission was not only deliberate, but also carried out only by those in authority with no “primary” format for transmission. Extending his position further, he determined the tightly controlled process continued in the same manner after Jesus’ death.

Following the Rabbinic Model, Eve highlights the Media Contrast model of Werner Kelber (chapter 4), which challenges form criticism’s position on fixed form (preaching, exhortation, and disputes with outsiders) and the lack of distinction between forms of media. Additionally, this approach critiques Gerhardsson’s memorization theory. Viewing oral transmission as a “process of social identification and preventative censorship,” Kelber states: “Oral composition and transmission is constrained by audience response and social situation in a way that writing is not.” Therefore, oral transmission “preserves whatever it deems essential while abandoning or transforming that which no longer meets social approval.” This process of preventive censorship and social identification emphasizes the fluidity of the oral tradition over and against a fixed form or stock content.

Between these two poles stands a third approach. Kenneth Bailey, using his own personal experiences as a missionary and teacher, bases his theory on the concept of “*haflat samar*,” (party of preservation) where the community gathers, tells stories, then passes them on in an effort to form/maintain communal identity. Called the Informal Controlled Oral Tradition (Anecdotal Approach), this theory views the process of handing on the tradition as one akin to communal storytelling. As indicated in the title, there is both an informal and a controlled aspect to this theory. Accordingly, stories (parables, historical renderings, key events, etc.) related to the identity are tightly controlled while others (jokes, casual news, tragedies, etc.) are not.

Following the Anecdotal Approach, Eve dedicates two full chapters detailing both social memory theory and the psychology of memory that collectively form the Memory Approach.

Relying on wisdom from a range of theorists, Eve makes clear that, if tradition survives, it does so because it is remembered.

The final approach Eve proposes is the Eyewitness Model by Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham. This approach shifts from the “how” to the “who”; the eyewitness. The eyewitness is the person who sees and then testifies about what s/he saw. Therefore, a critical concept regarding the eyewitness is autopsy. Autopsy is a visual means to gather information about a certain object.

Overall this text has much to offer and goes a long way in providing a means for understanding the complexity of the oral tradition. The initial appeal of this text, due to the detailed discussion on form criticism, is to the academy. With skillful precision, Eve gets behind form criticism in order to highlight its origins by giving voice to its major architects. In doing so, he also highlights its flaws, which is the point of the text. *Behind the Gospels* is an insightful book whose detailed scholarship has lasting potential.

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