

# Orality, Memory and the New Testament Gospels

Clinton Baldwin, Ph.D.

» Oral Communication was the chief method of communication in the ancient world

# Literacy in the Ancient World

- 90-95% of the people in Bible times could not read or write. It was therefore an oral culture
- The literacy rate in Roman Palestine was about **three (3%) percent** (W. V. Harris Ancient Literacy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989))

# Literacy in Ancient World

- Oral communication therefore took precedent over written communication
- **Written communication was a dimension of oral communication.**

# Importance of Oral Communication in Antiquity

## ❖ Plato's Seventh Letter:

Every serious man in dealing with really serious subjects carefully avoids writing, lest thereby he may possibly cast them as prey to the envy and stupidity of the public. As quoted in William Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 14.

# Importance of Oral Communication in Antiquity

- 2 John 12 : Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full.

# Oral Form: First Form of the Biblical Material

The contents of the books of the NT (also the OT) circulated orally before they were eventually written, decades later.

Orality naturally implies memory

- The term “Gospel” in NT, first used to refer to the oral proclamation concerning Jesus
- The method by which oral tradition about Jesus has been determined is called Form Criticism



# Characteristics of Oral Communication/Memory

# Orality and Memory

1. Memory recreates the past in light of the present. Therefore Oral communication is performed for the Specific Needs of the Community:
2. Memory recreates the past in light of the present: Reconstruction of information
3. Chronological Inconsistencies as memory is transient with hindsight bias
4. Orality cultures reflects collective memory as memory is also a collective phenomenon
5. Fixity and Flexibility, Continuity and Dis-continuity as key to memory is the Gist
6. Orality and Memory are Interpretive Realities
7. Contents Retold in Blocks/Clumps of Information
8. Memory is generally “Good” there do contain history

**We Remember the Past in Light of the Present  
Situations**

**Therefore Oral Communication Performed for the  
Specific Needs of the Community**

Gospels written not just so much to communicate historical facts, but more so to address real life situations in life of early church

»Mark: Situation of persecution

»Matthew: Who is the messiah?

»Luke: Plight of the poor the outcast, women, children, etc.,

»John: Jew Gentile Relationship

# We Remember the Past in Light of the Present: Oral for specific needs

John 9:22, 34 “Cast out of the synagogue:” By the end of the first century AD (when John gospel was written) Christians were being barred from attending Jewish synagogues. This was not the case however, during the ministry of Jesus. The incident of being “cast out of the synagogue” therefore reflects the climate when John’s gospel was being written towards the end of the first century (ca 90/3 AD), not the life situation during the ministry of Jesus in the early part of the century (ca 27-31AD)

# We Remember the Past in Light of the Present

**McIver posits that memory does not function like a video-tape. Rather, “we extract key elements from our experiences and store them. We then recreate or reconstruct our experiences rather than retrieve copies of them. Sometimes in the process of reconstructing we add on feelings, beliefs, or even knowledge we obtain after the experience. In other words, we bias our memories of the past attributing to them emotions or knowledge we acquire after the event.” (Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 78).**

**We Remember the Past in light of the present:  
Therefore Oral Communication Reconstructs  
and Adapts the Information**

# Reconstructs and Adapts

Mark: The Kingdom of God is at hand  
(1:15; 4:26; 8:10)

Matthew: The kingdom of heaven is at hand  
(3:2; 4:17; 5:3; 11:11)



# Reconstructs and Adapts

- Mark 10:17, 18: good teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered why do you call me good. No one is good except God
- Luke 18:18, 19: **Good teacher**, what must I do. . .  
Why do you call me good, no one is good except God
- Matt 19:16, 17: Some one came to him and said, teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life? And he said to him, “Why do you **ask me about the good thing**/what is good. There is one who is good...

# Chronological Inconsistencies as Memory is Transient, Hindsight Bias

# Chronological Inconsistencies..Biases

- Mk 11:12-25: The cursing of the fig tree happened before the cleansing of the temple
- Matt 21:12-22: Cursing happened the day after the temple was cleansed
- John 2:13-22: The temple cleansed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry
- Synoptic: Temple cleansed the end of Jesus' ministry (Matt 21:12-13; Mk 11:15-17; Lk 19:45-46)

# **Orality Reflects Collective Memory as Memory is also a Collective Phenomenon**

# Collective Memory

It was preserved, maintained and  
communicated by the community not by  
individuals

Although leader transmitted

The authors of the gospels no doubt held leading roles  
in their  
churches.

(So likewise other NT books. James for example, written by James the  
brother of Jesus, first major leader of the Jewish Christian Church.  
See Act 15; James 1)

Memory Preserves the Gist:  
Therefore Oral Communication consist of  
Fixity and Flexibility, Continuity and Dis-  
continuity

# Fixity and Flexibility: Gist

- Each time the story is retold, its central core will be repeated, with minor adjustments

Sometimes continuous tweaking of the core can morph the story significantly or even change or transform it completely

# Fixity and Flexibility: Gist

- Matt 8:28: Two demon-possessed men from the tombs met Jesus and disciples
- Mark 5:2-3: One demon-possessed man from the tombs met Jesus and his disciples
- Lk. 10:4-5 : Take no money, no bag, no shoes and greet no one on the way
- Matt 6:8,9: Wear sandals



# Fixity and Flexibility: Gist

- Matt 27:3-10 : Judas died by hanging
- Acts 1:18-23: Judas died by falling head first and bowels split

# Fixity and Flexibility: Gist

- Matt: 27: 7: Priests purchased the field
- Acts: 1:18: Judas purchased the field
- Acts 1: 19: Field named “field of blood” because Judas died there
- Matt: 27:8 Field named, “Field of blood” because it was purchased with blood money

# Orality and Memory is Interpretive

# Orality and Memory is Interpretive

- Matthew 5: only the man allowed to divorce
- Mark 10: both parties allowed to divorce each other
  
- Matthew: divorce only for *porneia* (fornication)  
(5:31,32; 19-10)
  
- Mark: no exception given (10: 10,11)
- Paul: Divorce for abandonment as an exception (1Cor 7)

# Interpretive

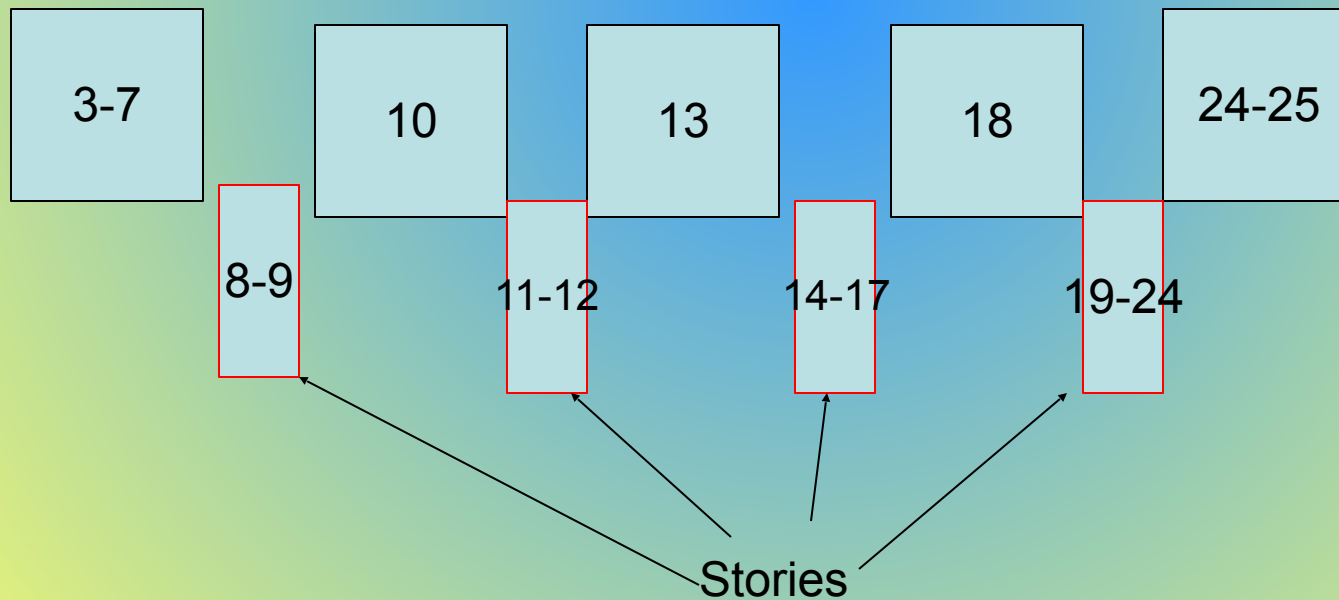
- The interpretive nature of orality means that it is theological in nature. The ancients had no other framework within which to interpret reality other than the theological framework. Everything was done by Yahweh in case of Jews and Christians and by the gods in the case of the pagans. The interpretive framework of the NT is God's actions as demonstrated through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. All history, prophecy, law, etc., is refracted through the lens of the Christ event

# Contents Retold in Blocks/Clumps of Information

The information is usually condensed, coded, grouped, etc., so as to facilitate storage and recall.

# Contents Retold in Blocks/Clumps of Information

Matthew's gospel -- teaching blocks interspersed with stories



Memory is generally “Good”  
Therefore do Contain Some  
Genuine History



# Memory “Good:” Contain History

- Episodic Memory is characterized by rapid loss of the insignificant details in the first 3 to 5 years, then the remaining information become secondary memory of up to 30 years before it begins to decline. McIver, *Memory Jesus and the Synotic Gospels*, 39,40,144/9
- Eyewitness testimony is approximately 80% accurate and 20% error

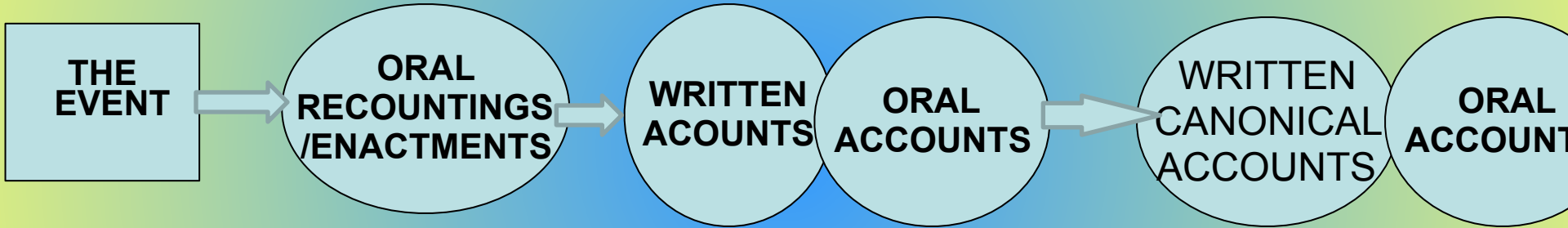
# Memory “Good:” Contain History

- The gospels were written 30-60 years after the Christ event so just about the decline period, hence the synoptic problem

# Memory “Good:” Contain History

- Jesus birth to Mary
- He lived as a Jew within Palestine
- His baptism by John the Baptist
- He taught in parables
- He had a sustained healing ministry
- The core of his message, “The Kingdom of God is at hand”
- He emphasized love and much ethical teachings

# THE DEVELOPMENT OF SCRIPTURE: THE ORAL WRITTEN TRAJECTORY



# Conclusion

- » Consider the oral base of scripture in interpreting scripture
- » Scripture contains remembered reality
- » Scripture is interpretation

# Conclusion

» The explanation of the complexities of how a cell works, does not mean the denial of the existence of God. So likewise the explanation of the processes of how the Biblical text came about does not mean the denial of the inspiration of the Bible. These scientific explanations are simple explanation of inspiration, not denial of inspiration. We must keep silent and allow our definition of inspiration to emerge from the DNA of the text itself. We have absolutely no other source or means to define Biblical inspiration other than from the bible itself.

# Conclusion

- » The fact that there are historical discrepancies in the NT does not make the NT of no value. Something does not have to be factual in order for it to be true. Parables for example, are true but not factual. The NT is of great value because they present the remembered Jesus, the overall truth of his life is salvific, it has transformed the entire world. There is value in the fact of remembering, even though the details of our memories may be faulty. We would not want to, and cannot live without memories, faulty they may be. (“The historical Jesus did not make history the historical Jesus did.” History was changed not because of brute facts but because of memory” - Ehrman, *Jesus Before the Gospels*, 294/5).

The End  
Part 1