

Orality is No Dead-End

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Abstract:

Paul Foster has recently argued that ‘orality’ (along with memory and the Fourth Gospel) is one of three ‘dead-ends’ in historical Jesus scholarship, and that it is more appropriate to continue to use traditional methods such as form criticism. While some of Foster’s criticisms are valid, he does justice neither to the particular scholars he addresses nor to the wider implications of orality studies for New Testament and Historical Jesus scholarship. It is in any case inconsistent to advocate form criticism while denying the usefulness of orality studies. NT scholarship needs to embrace newer approaches to ancient media studies, not spurn them as ‘dead-ends’.

Keywords:

Orality, form criticism, memory, historical Jesus, Gospel traditions

Introduction

The title of a recent article by Paul Foster declares memory, orality and the Fourth Gospel to be ‘Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research.’¹ This title goes beyond what Foster actually argues in his article, since he concludes that all three alleged ‘dead-ends’ may in fact have a role to play. Foster’s actual case seems to be the more modest one that certain appeals to memory, orality and the historicity of the Fourth Gospel do not in fact give us increased access to the historical Jesus in the sense of showing more of the traditions about him to be reliable. This could well be so, but several aspects of Foster’s discussion of memory and orality require further scrutiny, not least the claim in Foster’s conclusion that methods such as

¹ Paul Foster, ‘Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research’, *JSHJ* 10 (2012), pp. 191–227.

form criticism 'are still the most appropriate tools for historical Jesus research.'² There is a danger that readers of Foster's article may come away with a rather more negative impression of the value of orality and memory studies than is warranted, and so some corrective seems called for. In this essay I shall focus on Foster's treatment of orality.³

Before embarking on this in detail, it may be useful to make a couple of preliminary points.

The first is that while Foster complains that the study of orality is a dead end in historical Jesus research, his critique of the notion of 'orality' in fact says very little about its application to research into the historical Jesus. The second is that Foster's apparent preference for form criticism, together with some of the criticisms he levels at the use of memory, suggests a somewhat positivist view of history (in particular a seeming desire to establish the factual historical veracity of individual sayings or incidents removed from their narrative contexts) that fails to engage seriously with some more recent approaches that have moved on from this kind of methodology.⁴ Thus what Foster perceives as a dead end others may regard as a necessary roadblock on an abandoned path to nowhere. This essay will, however, largely engage with the specific criticisms Foster levels at the use of 'orality'.

The Meaning of 'Orality'

The matter is complicated by Foster never clearly defining what he takes 'orality' to mean. It is a term often invoked in scholarly discussions, and at first sight seems straightforwardly to refer to oral/aural communication as opposed to written communication, and in particular to

² Foster, 'Memory', p. 227.

³ Foster's comments on the use of memory approaches are addressed (*inter alia*) in a pair of forthcoming articles by Chris Keith, 'Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research: The First Decade, Part One' and 'Social Memory Theory and the Gospels: The First Decade Part Two', which are due to be published in *Early Christianity* probably some time in 2015.

⁴ E.g. Foster, 'Memory', pp. 198-99, 202; whether Foster's statement on p. 212 that 'invoking notions of orality does not provide some unproblematic route back to the historical Jesus' betrays a positivist preference will be discussed below. For the articulation of alternative approaches to historical Jesus research see, e.g., Anthony Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology and the Son of David*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), 74-77 and Theissen, Gerd and Winter, Dagmar, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (tr. M. Eugene Boring; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 233-42.

face-to-face spoken communication to a live audience. Sometimes, however, the term is used in a more all-embracing way to refer to a culture or mind-set in which the spoken word is the primary form of communication, with such writing as there is being strictly subordinate to it. There is some danger that ‘orality’ in this sense starts to be used as a surrogate for ‘illiteracy’ or in support of a ‘Great Divide’ model that sharply contrasts not only oral and literate modes of communication, but oral and literate cultures or modes of thought. This kind of ‘Great Divide’ model has come in for a great deal of criticism and has been largely abandoned by specialists in media studies.⁵ Nevertheless, several New Testament scholars employ the term ‘orality’ as a kind of convenient shorthand for the highly residual oral society of the first-century Roman Empire.⁶ The difficulty is to get the right balance between recognizing that the media realities of that society were very different from those of the modern West and avoiding the danger of slipping into some essentialist notion of ‘orality’ as if it were a uniform phenomenon.

Foster may be aware of all of this, but he does not explicitly say so, which leaves it uncertain what he actually means by ‘orality’. He may simply be reflecting the terminology of the particular scholars he criticises (James Dunn and Terence Mournet), who do indeed sometimes use terms such as ‘oral mode’ or ‘oral paradigm’ in a way that could be taken as essentializing. Moreover, the abstract of Foster’s article speaks not of ‘orality’ but of ‘claims that Gospel traditions should be understood as primarily reaching the evangelists orally’,

⁵ For critiques of this kind of ‘Great Divide’ approach see Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 18–19, 22–24, 160–68, 272–73; Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy & Orality* (Milton Keynes: Blackwell, 1988); John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Voices in Performance and Text; ed. J. M. Foley; Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 66, 79, 201–11; and John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 26, 36–39, 66–69.

⁶ E.g. J.A. Loubser, *Oral and Manuscript Culture in the Bible* (Biblical Performance Criticism, 7; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); Pieter J.J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity* (Biblical Performance Criticism, 5; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

while his conclusion uses the phrase ‘oral transmission of tradition’.⁷ These are both rather more specific than the ‘orality’ of the title, and Foster’s understanding of the former phrase seems more specific still, as we shall see. But since the ‘oral transmission of tradition’ is surely what form criticism purports to study, it is curious to find Foster concluding that there is no place for investigating the ‘oral transmission of tradition’ in historical Jesus research so that we should therefore continue to use form criticism. This is a point to which we shall return, but in the meantime it needs to be emphasized that, despite Foster’s title, it is not ‘orality’ as a whole that he is condemning as a dead end, but certain quite specific appeals to oral processes.

Foster’s specific critique of ‘orality’ is confined, as noted above, to the work of two scholars: James Dunn and his student Terence Mournet. This hardly seems a representative sample, given the substantial number of other scholars who have contributed to the discussion of oral tradition in relation to the New Testament, such as Werner Kelber, Joanna Dewey, Antoinette Wire, Pieter Botha, Kenneth Bailey, Richard Horsley, Jonathan Draper and Bobby Loubser. To be sure, it would be unreasonable to expect an article to engage with all of them, but this does seem rather a large body of scholarship to pass over when declaring an approach to be a dead end.

Foster’s Critique of Dunn and Mournet

Rather than worrying about the scholars Foster does not choose to engage with, however, we should take a closer look at his critique of those that he does: James Dunn and Terence Mournet. In essence Foster argues the following points: (a) the invalidity of Dunn and Mournet’s arguments that the nature of the variations between synoptic parallels indicates some degree of oral transmission rather than literary dependency; (b) that Dunn and Mournet (and by implication, other scholars who favour an ‘oral’ approach) are too wedded to the

⁷ Foster, ‘Memory’, pp. 191, 226.

Parry-Lord paradigm of oral transmission; (c) that the Parry-Lord paradigm is inapplicable to the Gospels since it is based on the very different genre of epic poetry; (d) that the Parry-Lord paradigm has in any case been shown to be flawed; (e) that we have no access to the process of oral transmission behind the Gospels so it is futile to discuss it; and therefore (f) we should continue to use more appropriate methods such as form criticism. I believe Foster is right about (a), wrong about (b), only half-right about (c) and (d), mostly right about (e), and completely wrong about (f). We now need to consider each of these points in turn.

In his section on ‘Orality and the Historical Jesus’ Foster begins by noting Dunn’s plea for a change from a literary to an oral mind-set before going on to address the work of Dunn’s student Terence Mournet on the likely incidence of oral transmission behind the double tradition in Matthew and Luke.⁸ I have no quarrel with Foster’s critique here. In particular I concur that the degree of variability between the Synoptic Gospels is not in itself an argument for an oral rather than a literary relationship between them, and that Dunn’s suggestion ‘that certain traditions are characteristic of Matthew or Luke working in oral mode’ seems to encompass two quite disparate modes of transmission (use of oral tradition and free reworking of a written source). For one thing, as John Kloppenborg has pointed out, the kind of variations we find between synoptic parallels are well within the kind of variations we find between other ancient authors and their written sources. Conversely, oral tradition can be quite good at fixing the wording of material cast in a memorable poetic form. Thus the degree of variability in wording between two versions of the same material is no automatic index of whether the relation between them is written or oral. Moreover, the suggestion that variations between synoptic parallels may be explained by the variability of oral tradition risks being self-contradictory, since it is hard to see how the wording of an oral

⁸ Foster, ‘Memory’, pp. 202–203, 207–210; Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (WUNT, 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

tradition can explain that of a written text unless the former is relatively fixed (otherwise the writer would be influenced only by the gist of the tradition, not by its wording).⁹

To be fair to Dunn and Mournet, however, part of what they are trying to do (in company with many others) is to warn against unconsciously bringing anachronistic print-culture assumptions to the study of ancient texts, and to emphasize that the use of manuscripts and their interaction with the spoken word in that culture was not the same as the way things typically work today.¹⁰ To the extent that terms like ‘oral mode’ or ‘oral paradigm’ are trying to draw attention to that fact, they have some justification, even though they risk being oversimplifications, both because they use ‘oral’ in what could too easily be taken as an all-encompassing way and because (which may also be part of Foster’s point) that the actual media situation was more complex than one of pure orality.

More problematic for Foster’s case is that the particular aspects of Dunn’s and Mournet’s arguments that he criticises have more to do with the Synoptic Problem than the historical Jesus. To be sure, Foster is trying to undermine the claim that the Evangelists received their material directly from oral tradition (which Foster sees as part of a larger claim to historical authenticity), but he nowhere cites either author (or anyone else) explicitly claiming that oral tradition provides an especially reliable channel of transmission. Moreover, whatever written sources were or were not available to the Evangelists, Dunn’s points are that the oral tradition had not ceased to exist by the time they wrote and that it played a substantial

⁹ Foster, ‘Memory’, 209; Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 2013) pp. 111–12; John S. Kloppenborg, ‘Variation and Reproduction of the Double Tradition and an Oral Q?’, *ETL* 83 (2007), pp. 53–80.

¹⁰ See, e.g. Pieter J. J. Botha, ‘Greco-Roman Literacy as Setting for New Testament Writings’, *Neotestamentica* 26 (1992), pp. 195–215, reprinted in Botha, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 39–61; Pieter J. J. Botha, ‘Authorship in Historical Perspective and its Bearing on New Testament and Early Christian Tests and Contexts’, *Scriptura* 102 (2009), pp. 495–510, reprinted in Botha, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 113–131; William A. Johnson, ‘Toward a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity’, *The American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000), pp. 593–627. The influential article by Paul J. Achtemeier, ‘Omne verbum sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity’, *JBL* 109 (1990), pp. 3–37, is now generally recognized as overstating the case, but the rejoinder by Frank D. Gilliard, ‘More Silent Reading in Antiquity: Non Omne Verbum Sonabat’, *JBL* 112 (1993), pp. 689–694, acknowledges that even the literary culture of antiquity was one of high residual orality.

role in the composition of the Gospels. The first point is almost certainly true; the second may or may not be, but Foster provides no evidence to the contrary except insofar as it relates to the Synoptic Problem.

Foster could, perhaps, have referred to passages that might suggest that Dunn is overly sanguine about the historical reliability of the tradition to which he appeals.¹¹ He might, for example, have cited Dunn as stating that ‘the oral Jesus tradition itself provided the continuity, the living link back to the ministry of Jesus, and it was no doubt treasured for that very reason’.¹² Mournet also indicates that he regards oral tradition as a reliable source of historical information.¹³ It could have been germane to Foster’s argument to challenge both scholars on this point, although his argument would then need to acknowledge that Dunn is working in a framework of critical realism rather than historical positivism, so that the ‘living link’ of the quotation should not be understood as a transparent window onto the historical Jesus, but rather as a tradition of memory going back to the impact Jesus made on his disciples, already perceived through the lens of incipient faith.¹⁴ In any case, when it comes to Dunn’s treatment of specific incidents in the Gospels it becomes apparent that his view of the historical reliability of the Jesus tradition is rather more nuanced than the quotation just given out of context might suggest.¹⁵ But in fact, this part of Foster’s case remains unmade, so it remains quite unclear how his critique of Dunn and Mournet actually contributes to the conclusion that the study of oral transmission is useless for historical Jesus research.

¹¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making, I, Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans 2003), pp. 239–45, 249, 254.

¹² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 245.

¹³ Mournet, *Oral Tradition*, p. 122 n.72.

¹⁴ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 110–11, 130–33.

¹⁵ See, for example, his discussion of Jesus’ trial and execution at Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 774–81.

The next part of Foster's case is the claim that Dunn, Mournet (and by implication other scholars who appeal to 'orality') are 'locked into the Parry model'.¹⁶ This seems to be at best an exaggeration and at worst a complete mis-statement.

It is true that Mournet regards the work of Parry and Lord as marking a watershed in the study of orality. He does also sometimes write as if he regards certain implications of the Parry-Lord thesis as having more universal application than the evidence really warrants; and at one point when he is criticising Bultmann he contrasts a 'literate paradigm' with an 'oral' one in connection with Parry and Lord (his point in context being that Bultmann treats oral tradition too much like a species of written text).¹⁷ But it is surely an exaggeration to say that Mournet is 'locked into the Parry model,' as if the work of Parry and Lord were the only influences on his thinking about orality. At the conclusion of his survey of twentieth-century work on orality Mournet explicitly states, 'the study of oral tradition *has* evolved and changed for the better over the course of the last forty years since the publication of Lord's *Singer*'.¹⁸ So while Mournet can sometimes give the impression of taking over aspects of the Parry-Lord theory a little too uncritically, overall his understanding of oral tradition is much more broadly based. While Mournet does acknowledge a debt to Lord and does cite him quite frequently, his discussion of 'Characteristics of Oral Tradition' also calls on a number of other scholars, including, for example, Isidore Okpewho, Kenneth Bailey, and Ruth

¹⁶ Foster, 'Memory', p. 226.

¹⁷ Mournet, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 62, 67–73.

¹⁸ Mournet, *Oral Tradition*, p. 99; emphasis original.

Finnegan;¹⁹ and while Finnegan, for example, is clearly appreciative of the work of Parry and Lord, she is also quite critical of it.²⁰

The accusation of being ‘locked into the Parry-Lord paradigm’ is an even more curious one to level at Dunn, who quite explicitly bases his understanding of oral tradition not primarily on the work of Parry and Lord, but that of Kenneth Bailey, who spent many years as a missionary and teacher in the Middle East.²¹ Indeed, in his discussion of Bailey, Dunn cites Werner Kelber with approval as pointing out that ‘however helpful the lesson learned from the study of Homeric epics and Yugoslavian sagas, we cannot simply assume that they provide the pattern for oral transmission of Jesus tradition within the thirty or so years between Jesus and the first written Gospel’.²² In Dunn’s view Bailey’s experience in the Middle East means that his theory of ‘Informal Controlled Oral Tradition’ provides a better analogue to the Jesus tradition than does the study of Balkan bards. To be sure, Bailey’s work has itself come in for criticism, some of it justified (because, for example, his examples do not always prove what he claims),²³ but it does provide an alternative model of oral transmission that is apparently independent of the work of Parry and Lord, and given Dunn’s espousal of Bailey’s model in preference to Parry and Lord’s, it is curious to suggest that he is almost wholly dependent on Parry and Lord. Indeed, Dunn’s summary of approaches to

¹⁹ Mournet, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 174–90; Isidore Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*.

²⁰ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 58–72.

²¹ Kenneth E Bailey, ‘Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels’, *Themelios* 20.2 (1995), pp. 4–11; Kenneth E. Bailey, ‘Middle Eastern Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels’, *ExpTim* 106 (1994), pp. 363–367.

²² Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 206.

²³ Theodore. J. Weeden, ‘Kenneth Bailey’s Theory of Oral Tradition: A Theory Contested by Its Evidence’, *JSHJ* 7 (2009) pp. 3–43; Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, pp. 66–85.

oral tradition includes, for example, a largely appreciative summary of the work of Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper and their use of the work of John Miles Foley.²⁴

The reality is thus rather more complicated than might be suggested by Foster's seeming equation of the 'oral paradigm' with the oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord, which he appears to make when, after discussing the Parry-Lord theory, he remarks, 'The fundamental question that must be addressed by Dunn, Mournet, and others who apply the oral paradigm to model the Jesus tradition is whether such insights are applicable to the data contained in the synoptic Gospels.'²⁵ While it is true that many if not most scholars who apply insights from the anthropological study of orality to the Jesus tradition are in some sense indebted to the seminal work of Parry and Lord, it is hardly the case that all New Testament scholars with an interest in orality take over Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory wholesale and without regard to other and often dissenting scholarship in the field. It is also hard to see how the particular conclusions Foster objects to actually follow from the use of the Parry-Lord theory, since neither Parry nor Lord ever argued that their research into Yugoslav oral epic showed the historical reliability of epic poetry (although Lord did subsequently try to argue for an oral relationship between the Gospels).²⁶

Applicability of the Parry-Lord Model

The third point we need to examine is Foster's apparent dismissal of the Parry-Lord approach on the grounds that it 'was related specifically to the genre of epic poetry, which is not the

²⁴ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 204–5; John Miles Foley, *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Foley, *Singer*; Richard A. Horsley and Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999).

²⁵ Foster, 'Memory', p. 205.

²⁶ Albert B. Lord, 'The Gospels as Oral Traditional Literature' in William O. Walker (ed.), *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion, 5; San Antonio: Trinity 1978), pp. 33–91.

genre of the Gospels.’²⁷ This dismissal is a bit too hasty: we need to be clear about what the significance of Parry’s and Lord’s work might actually be, and whether and to what extent it may or may not be relevant to the study of the oral tradition supposedly preceding the composition of the Gospels. This is perhaps best discussed in conjunction with Foster’s fourth point, that aspects of Parry’s hypothesis have been called into question, particularly the notion that ‘that formulaic composition is indicative of oral transmission.’²⁸

It is quite true that this aspect of the Parry-Lord model has come in for sustained criticism. Quite apart from the difficulties of tying down a sufficiently precise definition of ‘formula’ (at least, when we get beyond the brief metrical units identified by Parry and Lord in epic poetry), or of being certain that written texts have nowhere entered into a particular process of oral transmission, there is the difficulty (as Foster also points out) of extrapolating an oral tradition from written texts when we have no access to a living oral tradition in the same time and culture.²⁹ How relevant this is to Foster’s case may be another matter, however, since New Testament scholars drawing on Parry and Lord in seeking to understand the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition rarely appeal to any supposed formulas it may contain in order to demonstrate its oral nature.³⁰ The aspects of the Parry-Lord theory more often appealed to are the notions of composition in performance on the basis of traditional material, the variability of the ‘text’ from one performance to another, and the consequent

²⁷ Foster, ‘Memory’, p. 205.

²⁸ Foster, ‘Memory’, p. 205.

²⁹ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 69–72; Ruth Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond: Doing Things with Words in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2007) pp. 111–12; Foley, *Singer*, pp. 61–73. But for a defence of Parry’s oral-formulaic approach to Homer, see Merritt Sale, ‘In Defense of Milman Parry: Renewing the Oral Theory’, *Oral Tradition* 11 (1996) pp. 374–417.

³⁰ Although some scholars do perhaps tend a little in that direction: see Pieter J. J. Botha, ‘Mark’s Story as Oral Traditional Literature: Rethinking the Transmission of Some Traditions about Jesus’ *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 47/2 (1991) pp. 304–331, reprinted in Botha, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 163–190, and Antoinette Clark Wire, *The Case for Mark Composed in Performance* (Biblical Performance Criticism, 3; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

lack of either a fixed text or an original version. While by no means universal, such features of oral transmission are also by no means confined to Yugoslav epic poetry.³¹ So the fact that the Gospels are not epic poetry does not automatically and of itself mean that no aspects of the Parry-Lord theory can apply to the oral tradition behind them.

That said, it is also true that not all oral poetry (or other oral material) is transmitted in this way, so Foster would be quite justified in pointing out that we cannot know that even a modified Parry-Lord model applies to the pre-Gospel oral tradition. It seems, however, that one of the main alternatives to composition in performance is prior composition and memorization, leading to a text that is more fixed, a process that has been observed, for example, among poets in Somalia and the South Pacific.³² As applied to the Gospel tradition, however, such a model might start to resemble that of Birger Gerhardsson, which Foster understandably rejects,³³ although it would also be applicable to Joanna Dewey's notion of Mark as an oral composition, which is arguably more plausible.³⁴ Of course these alternatives do not exhaust the possibilities. One could, for example, also envisage oral performance as almost pure improvisation, only loosely related to any prior tradition, and there is in any case no need to suppose that all instances of oral transmission fit neatly into one model or another. There is no doubt a spectrum of possibilities with pure improvisation at one end, prior composition and near-verbatim memorization at the other, and composition-in-performance

³¹ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 53–58, 69; Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, pp. 97–100.

³² Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 73–86; Finnegan, *The Oral and Beyond*, pp. 107–111; Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy & Orality*, pp. 91–109. But note the point made by Øivind Anderson, 'Oral Tradition' in Henry Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (JSNTSup, 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 17–58 (39–40), that such examples of memorization may tell us more about the relation between composition and performance than between performance and (prior, established) tradition.

³³ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (trans. Eric J. Sharpe; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). Foster, 'Memory', p. 211; for a fuller assessment see Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, pp. 33–46.

³⁴ Joanna Dewey, 'The Survival of Mark's Gospel: A Good Story?', *JBL* 123 (2004), pp. 495–507; cf. Whitney Shiner, 'Memory Technology and the Composition of Mark' in Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper and John Miles Foley (eds), *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), pp. 147–165.

generating variations on a tradition somewhere in between. It certainly seems plausible that some material in the Jesus tradition was memorized, if only because it was readily memorable (certain sayings, for example), while some material was transmitted in a manner that more closely resemble the Parry-Lord model of composition in performance of traditional material (some parables and miracle stories, perhaps) while others came closer to free invention to meet the needs of the moment (perhaps supposedly under the guidance of the Spirit or due to someone's notion of what 'must have' happened). Foster is certainly right that we cannot be certain about any of this, and it is also true that even the first case (memorization) is no guarantee of historical authenticity of itself. That said, it is not unreasonable to suggest that something like the Parry-Lord model of composition-in-performance resulting in a multiform tradition with no 'original version' to be found quite likely played *some* part in the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition, both on the grounds of intrinsic probability and because it seems a reasonable fit to what we find in the surviving texts. It indeed remains the case (as Foster would urge) that we cannot know whether and to what extent something like the Parry-Lord model applies to the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition. It may be that some scholars who appeal to 'orality' seem a bit too ready to assume that all oral performance must resemble the Parry-Lord model of traditional composition, as if no one in an oral society could come up with anything other than a variation on a traditional theme, a thesis that is surely exaggerated.³⁵ Nonetheless, the Parry-Lord approach is not quite so obviously inapplicable to the Gospels as Foster seems to suggest.

Foster also complains that the time between the origin of the Jesus tradition and its being committed to writing was too short for an 'oral paradigm' (by which he seems to mean something like the Parry-Lord model) to apply, not least because Mark is unlikely to have been the first person to commit any of those traditions to writing. There are two points here,

³⁵Wire, *Mark Composed*, is perhaps a case in point; on the weakness of this kind of position see Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 170-213.

which need to be disentangled before we can discuss them. The first is the possible existence of pre-Markan writings such as a Passion Narrative or a miracle collection underlying Mark 2.1-3.6. While these particular examples are speculative and could easily be challenged, Foster's underlying point remains valid. One criticism of the Parry-Lord approach which Foster does not mention but which could aid his case is the excessively sharp divide it postulated between oral and written media. As noted above, such a 'Great Divide' model has since come under sustained criticism and has largely been abandoned.³⁶ We should therefore be cautious about applying any model predicated upon 'pure orality' to a time and culture in which writing was clearly known and influential. Foster nevertheless thinks there was an oral stage to transmission of the Jesus tradition, even if only a very short one.

But removing any 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy cuts two ways. If *some* written texts entered into the process quite early on, that does not mean that oral transmission suddenly ceased. There is absolutely no reason to think of a clearly-demarcated 'oral' phase followed by a clearly-demarcated 'written' phase. Once written texts entered the process there was probably a continuing interchange between the two for some time.³⁷ In a situation where few could read, the content of any written documents would mostly become known through hearing them read aloud. Such re-oralizations of written texts could then enter the oral tradition and continue to be transmitted orally alongside or even apart from the written texts. Such texts could themselves be original compositions, or transcripts of oral performance, or something in between (such as compositions based on a writer's recollection of oral performance). The passing on of Jesus material by word of mouth did not suddenly cease when the first literate tradent put pen to papyrus, and it is unlikely to have ceased even

³⁶ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 18–19, 22–24, 160–168, 258–260, 272–273; Foley, *Singer*, pp. 66, 79, 210–211; Foley, *How to Read*, pp. 26, 36–39, 66–69.

³⁷ As Martin Jaffee has argued for the Rabbinic 'oral tradition'; see Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE – 400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

with the writing of the Gospels, as Papias' preference for the 'living and abiding voice'³⁸ of oral testimony would appear to suggest. So while Foster would be justified in querying the applicability of a model of pure orality (as envisaged by Parry and Lord, for example) to the Gospel tradition, he would not be justified in assuming that some kind of oral processes ceased to be significant with the appearance of the first written texts in the Jesus tradition.

Foster's second point here appears to be that there was insufficient time for the Jesus tradition to assume the fixity of formulaic expression observed by Lord in Yugoslav epic poetry.³⁹ If this is what he means he would appear to be confusing two distinct factors: the time taken to establish a tradition of formulas on which an oral-formulaic poet could draw, and the time taken for an individual poem to find a place within that tradition. Lord's observations would indeed imply a rather larger timespan for the first process than would be available to the Jesus tradition, but not for the second, which would be the more relevant to the application of something like the Parry-Lord theory to the oral transmission of the material that found its way into the Gospels. If what is being taken from the Parry-Lord theory is not its formulaic aspect in this strict sense, then there had already been plenty of time for the development of a tradition on which early performers of the Jesus tradition could draw, namely the 'epic' tradition of Israel with its stories of salient figures such as Moses, Elijah and David, in the light of whose exploits the story of Jesus might be framed.⁴⁰ Moreover, the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition might take on formulaic aspects not in

³⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.1-11

³⁹ Foster, 'Memory', p. 206.

⁴⁰ Richard A. Horsley and Jonathan A. Draper, *Whoever Hears You Hears Me: Prophets, Performance and Tradition in Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1999) pp. 95-98, 104-122, 160-172, 195-227; Richard A. Horsley, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics of Plot in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 177-201, 231-253; Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus in Context: Power, People, and Performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), pp. 36-42, 65-71, 119-123, 139-145, 156-161; Barry Schwartz, 'Jesus in First Century Memory — A Response' in Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (eds), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (SBL Semeia Studies, 52; ed. G. A. Yee; Atlanta: SBL, 2005) 249-261 (250-51); Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 208; Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, pp. 86-134.

the sense of Homeric epithets, but by settling into familiar patterns of expression that aided memorability.⁴¹ These patterns may have included verbal clichés, or at least techniques for assembling words into poetic structures, and will certainly have included current *schemata*, conventional ways of conceptualizing the world and rendering memories of events in existing narrative forms.⁴² Such familiar patterns would already have been available in the surrounding culture, and would not have needed to be developed anew with the ministry of Jesus.

The Role of Form Criticism

Foster's penultimate substantial point is that while 'orality is an important theoretical insight into the transmission of Jesus traditions' it is of little practical use since 'there is no meaningful access to the oral level. One must conclude that invoking notions of orality does not provide some unproblematic route back to the historical Jesus.'⁴³ These points may be largely valid, but it is unclear whether Foster is criticizing proponents of 'orality' for claiming or for failing to have found an 'unproblematic route'. If Foster is suggesting that the test of any method is whether it in fact provides such an 'unproblematic route' (a test which the oral approach fails), then he would be in danger of falling into the kind of historical positivism from which he apparently seeks to distance himself (at least in part) in his introduction.⁴⁴ If, however, Foster is criticizing proponents of 'orality' for making such a naïve claim, then while invoking 'notions of orality' does indeed not provide any kind of 'unproblematic route', Foster never cites anyone claiming that it does so, which makes it a

⁴¹ Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 28–29.

⁴² Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, pp. 89–90, 96–99.

⁴³ Foster, 'Memory', p. 212.

⁴⁴ Foster, 'Memory', pp. 192–93.

little hard to see how his discussion of Dunn, Mournet, and Parry leads up to this conclusion. It is also true that we have no direct access to the ‘oral level’ so that what it actually sounded like and how it actually worked are forever inaccessible to us. Whether that means we are condemned to saying *nothing* about it is another matter, to which we shall return.

First let us consider the implications for Foster’s final point, namely that we should continue to use methods more suited to the nature of the texts, such as form and redaction criticism. If there is no meaningful access to the oral level, then it is hard to see how the form-critical project of tracing the tradition-history of individual pericopae to deduce their *Sitze im Leben* or arrive at an ‘original form’ can even get started. To reinforce the point about there being no unproblematic route, let us consider an example where something of the process involved can be observed. In his discussion of ‘Informal Controlled Oral Tradition’, Kenneth Bailey cites a story about the nineteenth-century missionary John Hogg, which he says he encountered in essentially the same form during his own stay in the Middle East as it appeared in Rena Hogg’s biography of her father.⁴⁵ The story tells of how John Hogg was waylaid by a band of robbers one night, surrendered his watch and valuables to them, but then proceeded to offer them something even more valuable: a series of bible stories. By the morning Hogg had succeeded in convincing the robbers of the evil of their ways, and they undertook to give up their life of crime; Hogg then continued to support them financially until they were able to find lawful employment.

As Theodore Weeden subsequently pointed out, however, Bailey does not give the full picture, since Rena Hogg also gives an account of what actually happened.⁴⁶ In the account Rena Hogg apparently obtained from her father, John Hogg and a companion left an

⁴⁵ Bailey, ‘Informal Controlled’, pp. 4–11; Rena L. Hogg, *A Master-Builder on the Nile: Being a Record of the Life and Aims of John Hogg, D.D., Christian Missionary* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1914) pp. 214–15.

⁴⁶ Hogg, *Master Builder*, pp. 215–16; Theodore J. Weeden, ‘Kenneth Bailey’s Theory of Oral Tradition: A Theory Contested by its Evidence’, *JSHJ* 7 (2009), pp 3–43 (15–16).

Egyptian village after a day of preaching and tried without success to locate the spot where their boat was moored; after an unnerving encounter with a naked man carrying a gun and the sound of swimmers who may have been about to join him, Hogg and his companion ran into a small group of smokers whom Hogg believed merely to be guarding their melon crop, while Hogg's companion took them to be bandits. They spent the night swapping tales, in the course of which Hogg's companion chose a biblical story about the sin of murder, which caused one of the smokers to confess that he had been on the point of shooting at Hogg's companion when he had first approached. In the morning one of the melon-watchers accompanied Hogg and his companion back to their boat, and was rewarded with a gratuity for his services. Hogg's companion subsequently turned the story into the subject of a stirring sermon. In the course of oral transmission this somewhat inconsequential tale of Hogg and his companion becoming lost at night and, after one potentially alarming encounter, spending the rest of the night in the company of a small band of strangers thus appears to have been transformed into a heroic tale of John Hogg the exemplary missionary. With both accounts before us, it is not too hard to guess at the processes by which this transformation may have come about, but if we only had the later, heroic tale we should have no means of deriving the original, supposedly historical account from it.⁴⁷

What is significant about this example is the transformation of a relatively inconsequential and complex account (a relatively detailed autobiographical memory apparently passed on from father to daughter) into a more sharply focused and memorable account (one compressed into a narrative schema better fitted for community use), in which the number of actors, or at least roles, is reduced effectively to two (Hogg and the robber band) and these actors are presented in far more heroic and villainous terms than the original events indicate. Of course we have no way of knowing for sure if the Jesus tradition was in

⁴⁷ For more detailed analyses of the story of John Hogg and the robber band, see Eve, *Behind the Gospels*, pp. 68–74 and Weeden, 'Kenneth Bailey's Theory', pp. 12–21.

fact handled in a fashion analogous to that of the Hogg incident, although the literary deposit of that tradition in the Gospels suggests that it may not be such a bad model. What we can say with some confidence is that form criticism would be as powerless as any other model of oral tradition to recover the original form of the story from the later romantic tale. There is no 'pure form' to recover. There are no 'layers of tradition' to strip away. The form-critical procedure of identifying and removing later accretions would be useless, since the robber band story has not grown by accretion, it has rather undergone a total transformation from one story into another story loosely based on elements taken from the original. This is a process that form criticism's model of oral transmission simply does not fit.

Foster could certainly argue that the robber-band incident supports his scepticism about the value of the oral tradition, but it is not clear how form criticism would escape this scepticism. As noted, Foster more than once insists that we have no access to the oral stage of the transmission of the Jesus tradition. This is perfectly true in at least two senses: first that we have no direct access to the oral Jesus tradition as a living oral tradition that can be examined empirically in the way that Parry and Lord examined the practices of Yugoslav epic poets; and second that the surviving literary deposits of that tradition do not provide us with sufficient information to be able to know in any detail or with any certainty how any process of oral transmission of the Jesus tradition actually worked. But these two points militate just as strongly against form criticism as they do against any other theory of oral transmission. It is thus very hard to see how Foster can conclude that we should continue to use form criticism, which is ostensibly a method for analysing the oral stage of the tradition. Indeed, if subsequent scholarship has found reason to criticize the Parry-Lord model, it has found even more reason to question the understanding of oral transmission apparently used by form criticism.

That form criticism relied on an outdated and discredited romantic model of anonymous folklore was perhaps first pointed out by Erhardt Güttgemanns, whose criticisms were taken up and expanded by Werner Kelber.⁴⁸ Whatever the weaknesses of certain aspects of their respective cases, they were at least basing them on empirical studies of oral transmission that had some bearing on how orality sometimes functioned in the real world, and even if our understanding of ‘orality’ (or better, media studies) has become more sophisticated since they first penned their critiques of form criticism, many of the points they made remain valid, and others could be added. Form criticism, at least in theory, laid great store by the correlation of form and *Sitz im Leben*, but the assumption that such a correlation exists is nowhere adequately justified and seems to be contradicted by what is known of oral transmission in other contexts.⁴⁹ The notion that pericopae can be analysed as isolated units of transmission and were once transmitted as such is also questionable. At the very least it is hard to conceive of any plausible oral performance that would consist of the recitation of a single pericope and nothing else. The performer would have to frame the performance of the pericope with some kind of context, and the context of performance would be highly pertinent to the meaning perceived by the audience. Such a context would almost certainly include other parts of the Jesus tradition known to the audience, in the light of which the performance of any given pericope would be interpreted. The notion the best way to understand the pre-Gospel tradition is to rip individual pericopae from their Gospel contexts and considered them in isolation is deeply flawed; it implausibly assumes, for example, that interpretation of their significance was wholly or largely the contribution of Evangelists

⁴⁸ Erhardt Güttgemanns, *Candid Questions Concerning Gospel Form Criticism: A Methodological Sketch of the Fundamental Problematics of Form and Redaction Criticism* (trans. William G. Doty; Pittsburgh, PA: Pickwick Press, 1979) and Werner Kelber, *Oral and Written*. For a critique of the ‘romantic’ view of folklore from an anthropological perspective see Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, pp. 30–41; cf. Kelber, *Oral and Written*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ Finnegan, *Oral Poetry*, p. 260; Kelber, *Oral and Written*, pp. 25–26.

uninfluenced by any previous tradition of interpretation.⁵⁰ In their treatment of social memory in oral tradition, James Fentress and Chris Wickham insist that it is a mistake to approach an ancient source with the positivist goal of arriving at a core of historical fact after correcting for the bias, obvious errors and superstition in our sources, and that once ripped from their original context such ‘facts’ tend to become a mere jumble of data, deprived of the meaning given them by their original narrative context.⁵¹ Even more questionable is the notion that the oral tradition can be regarded as a series of strata to be excavated, so that one can arrive at the pristine form of a pericope by peeling back the accretions of later tradition and use. For one thing, as Kelber argued, oral tradition is not linear in this sense; it does not follow uniform processes of development.⁵² For another this kind of tradition history treats oral transmission almost as if it were a species of writing, so that one ‘layer’ can be regarded as a kind of redaction of the previous ‘layer’, as if oral performances treated previous performances as texts to be edited, but this is a most implausible model. It could only start to become even vaguely plausible on a model of near-verbatim memorization (which might just be capable of providing a prior text to ‘edit’); this does not, however, seem to be a good fit to the Jesus tradition as we find it deposited in the Gospels, and neither is it what form criticism is generally taken to propose. All in all, then, even if one can criticize elements of the Parry-Lord thesis (as one surely can), it does not follow that everything that stems from it is a step backwards from the form-critical understanding of orality, as Foster appears to argue, and given that scholars interested in ‘orality’ are not in fact as ‘locked into the Parry model’ as

⁵⁰ Chris Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (LNTS, 413; London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp. 32–41.

⁵¹ James L. Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1992), pp. 144–145; so also Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus In Tradition, Performance and Text* (LNTS 407; London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 213–225.

⁵² Kelber, *Oral and Written*, pp. 29–34.

Foster suggests, it is hardly unreasonable to suppose that scholarship based on more recent work on orality is likely to prove an advance on form criticism.

This is not to argue that the form critics got everything wrong. For example there does seem to have been a tendency to preserve and adapt Jesus material for use rather than for any kind of objective biographical or historical interest. On the other hand, however, there is no reason to suppose that the Jesus tradition achieved total homeostasis (conformity of the tradition to current community needs).⁵³ That said, the real problem with form criticism is not that it is too sceptical (as the scholars Foster attacks are said to claim), but that it is far too optimistic in its assumption that the history of individual units of tradition can be traced and their original forms uncovered. Foster's own scepticism about the possibility of any detailed knowledge of the processes of oral transmission that actually took place leads inevitably to the same conclusion, which makes his continued espousal of form criticism as puzzling as it is problematic.

The Value of Orality Studies

This is not quite the last word on the matter, however. Foster is perfectly correct in maintaining that we cannot know enough about the processes of oral transmission (or mixed oral/written transmission) that preceded the composition of the Gospels to deduce any concrete conclusions about the historical Jesus purely from whatever model of oral transmission we end up with. But that is not the point of discussing models of oral transmission. Rather the point is to arrive at the best understanding we can of the media situation of the New Testament environment and thus what seems plausible or implausible in that environment. One upshot of media (and memory) studies over the last few decades is surely that form criticism (at least as classically formulated) is based on a totally implausible

⁵³ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985), pp. 114–123, argues that while there is a tendency towards homeostasis in oral tradition, total homeostasis is rarely achieved.

model of oral transmission, and that it is a wholly inappropriate tool for investigating the Jesus tradition. Another is that the whole project of trying to get at the historical Jesus by atomising the tradition and then trying to determine the authenticity or otherwise of its decontextualized fragments is fundamentally misconceived, so that some other approach to the Jesus tradition is required. In his discussion of memory, Foster cites Dale Allison's, *Constructing Jesus* with apparent (if perhaps ambivalent) approval, but the conclusion just stated is precisely that to which Allison's final abandonment of the criteria of authenticity also leads.⁵⁴

While we cannot be sure what model of oral transmission should apply, some models are more plausible than others, and the surviving literary remains provide *some* clues. As has just been argued, there is *no* reason to suppose the form-critical model to be a plausible one, where something along the lines of the ideas developed by scholars such as Kelber, Bailey, Horsley and others seems to be reasonably well supported by meshing work on orality and memory and to be a reasonably good fit to the surviving evidence. Some such model is surely necessary, even if it is hypothetical. The only alternative, if one supposes there to have been any significant period of oral transmission at all, is to be left without any means of bridging the divide between the historical Jesus and the surviving written evidence. To assume (as Foster appears to) that the Gospels are usable as evidence for the historical Jesus is to make some kind of assumption about how oral transmission bridged that gap (unless Foster subscribes to a theory of the Gospels as direct eyewitness testimony, and his criticism of Richard Bauckham suggests he does not). To object to 'orality' in this context is simply to object to making those assumptions explicit.

To be sure, Foster does say that his paper 'does not seek to devalue the insights of social memory theory, or understandings of oral transmission of traditions' but rather their

⁵⁴ Foster, 'Memory', p. 201; Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination and History* (London: SPCK, 2010), pp. 10–26.

‘applicability ... to historical Jesus research’.⁵⁵ But the understanding of ‘orality’ used to support this conclusion seems to be limited to a couple of scholars he disagrees with, who are crudely mischaracterized as being ‘locked into the Parry model’, a model whose implications for the study of oral transmission Foster in any case scarcely does justice to. To declare ‘orality’ a dead-end is on this basis is neither reasonable nor helpful. While Foster is justified in pointing out that some New Testament scholars appeal to ‘orality’ or ‘oral tradition’ in dubious ways, *abusus non tollit usum*. Although we cannot recover the process of oral transmission with any precision, we are bound either to make some kind of assumptions or informed guesses about it or else give up on historical Jesus research altogether. That being so it is surely better for our guesses to be informed by what is known of the workings of oral transmission elsewhere. This knowledge by no means leads to one universal theory of ‘orality’, but it does make many of the assumptions of form criticism appear untenable. So if anything is a dead end here, it is not ‘orality’ (admittedly a problematic term) but form criticism.

Foster does, however, have one more argument that we have yet to address, and that is his complaint that orality and memory studies have yet to demonstrate that they have anything to contribute to our understanding of any particular passage in the Gospels. This complaint arguably misses the point that recent media and memory studies indicate that a positivistic search for the ‘facts’ underlying individual, decontextualized pericopae is simply a misconceived enterprise, since it takes proper account neither of the nature of the surviving textual evidence nor of what we can reckon to be plausible of the media situation that gave rise to it.

There is, however, another way of responding to Foster’s concern, and that is to suggest that what may be more interesting than a straight choice between credulity and

⁵⁵ Foster, ‘Memory’, pp. 225–26.

scepticism is the insight some combination of orality and memory studies may be able to give on the kinds of distortions that are likely to occur. Thus, for example, on the basis of the tendency to tell stories about Jesus in the light of salient figures from Israel's past, we might expect to find some tendency to find elements of stories about such figures (Moses, Elijah, Elisha and David, for example), colouring the Jesus tradition, and this is what we indeed do find in all four Gospels. This may suggest that such colouring is not necessarily due to the consciously theologizing redactional activity of the Evangelists, but was probably a feature of the Jesus tradition from an early stage (even if the Evangelists went on to develop it further). In relation to the study of the historical Jesus, this may on the one hand alert us to aspects of the tradition to be suspicious of, and on the other give us pause when we come to incidents in the tradition that seem simultaneously to exhibit and resist such tendencies, such as the sea-crossing and feeding miracles.⁵⁶ This is certainly not to argue that such miracle stories therefore go back to historical events in any straightforward sense, but rather that *something* appears to have been constraining the tradition, or else that there must have been *something* about Jesus' reputation that made it seem appropriate to represent him in this way. The recent work of scholars such as Rafael Rodriguez (applied to Jesus' healings and exorcisms in the sayings tradition) and Chris Keith (on Jesus' literacy) are examples of approaches that follow something like the latter line of reasoning to look at the ways in which Jesus' reputation was being preserved or contested in various gospel pericopae.⁵⁷ While such studies may lead to few specific factual conclusions about the historical Jesus (although Keith does conclude that Jesus was not, in fact, literate) they may help establish the case for a particular overall impression, which may be as much as the evidence will allow.

⁵⁶ Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus' Miracles* (JSNTSup, 231; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 259–263, 381–384; Eric Eve, *The Healer from Nazareth: Jesus' Miracles in Historical Context* (London, SPCK: 2009), pp. 150–156.

⁵⁷ Foster 'Memory'), pp. 226–227; Rodriguez, *Structuring*; Keith, *Jesus' Literacy*.

Conclusion

To conclude: Foster is quite right to argue that the criteria Dunn and Mournet employ to identify ‘oral’ as opposed to ‘literary’ dependencies between the synoptic Gospels are not fit for purpose. He is also right to argue that ‘orality’ cannot be used to guarantee the historicity of any aspect of the Jesus tradition (though he nowhere cites anyone maintaining that it can) and that since we have no direct access to the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition we cannot *know* anything about it. That Foster does not apply this conclusion to the kinds of tradition history investigated by form criticism is then something of a mystery. That there have been dubious appeals to ‘orality’, ‘oral tradition’ and the like in the past is no doubt true (and will no doubt continue to be true), but this is hardly a straightforward consequence of too many scholars’ uncritical adherence to the Oral Formulaic theory of Parry and Lord, as Foster comes close to suggesting. Perhaps Foster’s real target here is the use of ‘orality’ and memory theory in ways he perceives as being unduly apologetic; this is a perfectly legitimate target, but even if one strikes that target dead-centre one has not thereby shown ‘orality’ to be a dead end.