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WHOSE JEWISH JESUS?
PART TWO: THREE VOICES IN THE
THIRD QUEST COMPARED

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A New Jewish View of Jesus

An elderly Jewish woman ends up in a Catholic hospital. Facing her bed is a big picture of Jesus. A considerate nun, knowing the woman is Jewish, asked if she would like the picture taken down. ‘Oh no,’ replies the woman, ‘such a success by one of our boys. Leave it up!’¹

This anecdote points to a very different attitude that is taking hold certainly in some Jewish circles, both among Jewish scholars and among ordinary practising Jews. More than half a century ago Martin Buber, who could call Jesus not an ‘other’, meaning an apostate, but his ‘brother’, even foresaw a time when,

*the Jewish community, in the course of its renaissance, will recognize Jesus; and not merely as a great figure in its religious history, but also in the organic context of a Messianic development extending over millennia whose final goal is the redemption of Israel and of the world.*²

Something of such a change of stance in the Jewish community is taking place in our time, as I reported in Part One of this Article. Nevertheless, Buber could not accept Jesus as the Messiah who has already come, and those Jews who today take Jesus as ‘one of us’ mainly see him, along with Geza Vermes, as a combination of Rabbi and Galilean holy man. If there is any recognition of Jesus as Messiah at all, it is as the Messiah son of Joseph, the suffering Messiah who, in certain Jewish teaching, must precede the Messiah son of David who will accomplish the awaited redemption of Israel and the world.³

Both the Christian and Jewish understandings of Jesus take the same starting point, namely the Gospels, especially the Synoptic Gospels, that form the principal witness to the life of Jesus. So how come so many radically different takes on Jesus? Those on the Jewish side would argue that the Jesus of Christian faith has become detached from Jesus the Jew viewed in His historical context, that is, as a Jew belonging to first century Judaism. They would also argue that the distinctive features of what was to become known as Christianity, arose from Jesus’ early disciples coming to terms with the shattering blow of Calvary and the loss of a Leader in whom they had invested so much hope.

In this context the new enterprise being pursued in historical Jesus studies, known as the Third Quest, is highly relevant. This is because the distinguishing feature of the Third Quest is the emphasis being placed on understanding Jesus in His first century Jewish context. Each of the three major contributors to the Third Quest that I have selected – Tom Wright, John P. Meier, and James Dunn – has produced (or is engaged in) a major study, but each has also followed a different methodological approach.

In concentrating on these three scholars I of course exclude other scholars who have

1 Related by Lance Fitter in ‘Jesus and Me’ in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* (Beatrice Bruteau, ed.) 2001, p. 133.

2 Cited in Martin S. Friedman, *Martin Buber: the Life of Dialogue*, 1955, p. 279.

3 Byron L. Sherwin, “Who do you say that I am?”. A New Jewish View of Jesus’ in *Jesus through Jewish Eyes*, pp. 36-42.

also made most valuable contributions, for example, Jürgen Becker, Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz or, going back a generation, E.P. Sanders. However, in a quite short article any survey of even one author's work must inevitably be fairly restricted; historical Jesus studies tend to be massive works of scholarship with much interaction with other scholars. My aim therefore is simply to provide a broad survey of the scholar's contribution, concentrating on the key issues and providing some evaluation, and then to see what kind of Jewish Jesus emerges. Finally, I will try to bring out where the findings of these different scholars challenge the Jewish Jesus of the Jewish reclamation movement.

Tom Wright's Elaboration of Ben Meyer's Thesis

Ben Meyers' book, *The Aims of Jesus*, which I examined in Part One of this article, was very much a programmatic study, and so it was inevitable that some scholar would produce a fully developed outworking of essentially the same thesis. That scholar was to be Tom Wright whose two volumes, *The New Testament and the People of God* (NTPG) 1992, and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (JVG) 1996, have taken Meyer's short book much further.

Wright's Methodology

About one third of Wright's first volume is devoted to issues of methodology. This is wise considering that a large superstructure is to be built on the principles to be adopted. Wright takes up the approach required by critical realism (outlined in Part One) and applies it to the three areas entailed in the study of the historical Jesus: literature and the meaning of texts, historical research as applied to the Second Temple period, and the theological dimension – penetrating the ways of thinking current at that time. What is distinctive with Wright is the importance he attaches to grasping the 'world view' of the various protagonists in the drama, and in taking their characteristic 'stories' as the key to entering into their world views.

The Big Story and First Century Judaism

Wright was not the first to try to find an overarching narrative behind the Bible taken as a whole, but he has certainly given a great impetus to such a trend, and there are now many scholarly books of this type, together with their popular counterparts carrying titles such as 'The Big Story'.

According to Wright, the big story that formed the world view of most Jews and Jewish groups in the Second Temple period is set against the background of God's creation of the universe and the fall of Adam. It begins with the call of Abraham and, through him, the birth of God's covenant people, Israel. 'The descent into Egypt and the dramatic rescue under the leadership of Moses formed the initial climax of the story.' But since then things have gone wrong: 'Why is everything not now perfect?' Within the history related in the Hebrew Scriptures, two further 'Sin / Exile / Return' cycles unfold. The first and much shorter cycle concerns the decline under the Judges, when 'all the people did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 21:25), followed by the establishment of the Monarchy under

David: 'David was the new Abraham, the new Moses, through whom Israel's god⁴ would complete what was begun earlier.'⁵

The second much longer cycle recounts the history of Israel's decline marked by the division of Solomon's kingdom, the succession of mostly bad kings and the repeated lapses into idolatry by the people, despite the warnings of the prophets. First the leading people from the Northern Kingdom and later those from the Southern Kingdom are taken into captivity, but God preserves a faithful remnant among the latter exiles and after 70 years brings some of them back to Jerusalem. The Jews are restored and enjoy some measure of autonomy in the Persian Empire, and in due course the Temple is rebuilt. Hence the Second Temple period begins and is to last until the destruction of this Temple, in 70 AD. But during this period, the story 'runs out without a sense of an ending, except one projected into the future. The story still needs to be completed.'⁶

It is Wright's contention that the majority of Jews living in the Second Temple period considered themselves figuratively to be still living in exile. It is true that the period of independence, gained under the Maccabees, in some sense seemed to achieve the full national restoration that the Jews cherished, but this turned out to be a false dawn as the later Hasmonean kings differed little from pagan rulers, and to make things worse took control of the Temple cult by appointing and removing the High Priest, as they chose. Ultimately even the people's national independence was lost when Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 BC and the Romans then ruled the Land, either directly or through client kings such as Herod the Great, Herod Antipas and the like. Where was the restoration promised by the prophets? And what about the larger dimension of such restoration that involved the people living in true righteousness with every evil, from social oppression to disease and disability, being brought to an end?

Wright then examines the variants told by different Jewish groups as their version of the basic story. So, in *Sirach* a happy ending completes the unfinished story: in 50:1-21 the contemporary High Priest (probably Simeon II, 219-196 BC) is praised, so implying that 'Israel's story finds its perfect conclusion in the splendid and ordered worship of her god in the Temple.'⁷ In *1 Maccabees* a similar happy ending is found in the victories achieved by Judas Maccabeus and his brothers against the Seleucid kings. But most groups saw the ending of the story as still to be completed and as requiring their group to remain faithful to the end. In *Jubilees*, for example, stress is placed on the need to maintain strict Sabbath observance and the practice of circumcision and the importance of keeping the festivals according to the older solar calendar. In the *Wisdom of Solomon* the stress falls on avoiding paganism at all costs. In their different ways the Community at Qumran and the Pharisees likewise saw strict observance of the Law as the means of ushering in the promised

4 This is Wright's idiosyncratic way of referring to God. The style is intended to demonstrate impartiality.

5 NTPG, p. 216.

6 NTPG, p. 216.

7 NTPG, p. 217.

glorious end, in the former case in complying with special rules given to the Teacher of Righteousness, and in the latter case in keeping the oral Torah that had developed alongside the written Torah.

Wright's contention that the outlook of the majority of Jews at the turn of the eras was moulded by a common basic story, notwithstanding the different ways that some may have seen that story as coming to its conclusion, has been criticised by many. James Dunn provides a good example. His objections are that a) Wright 'exaggerates the importance of the theme of exile and return in Palestinian Judaism', b) 'there was no single comprehensive grand narrative shaping the thought of Jesus' contemporaries', and c) Wright has failed to 'demonstrate that the narrative of return from exile was a controlling factor in Jesus' own teaching'.⁸ I believe that each of these points rests on a misunderstanding of Wright's critical-realist approach.

As I understand him, Wright is not claiming that the vast majority of Jews consciously placed themselves in the big story I have just outlined, but rather that this story subconsciously moulded the world view lying behind the varied and distinctive tenets that the particular groups held. In this respect, Jesus was no exception: His programmatic identification with the Restorer figure promised in Isaiah 61:1-3 bears this out. As Wright himself has already explained, the praise given to Simon the High Priest in *Sirach* 50 is one such variant: the author believes that with the proper functioning of the Temple cult in what was then an independent Israel, the promised restoration has already come. So when Dunn writes, 'there was no real evidence *those who were actually living in the Land* thought of themselves as still in exile' and cites *Sirach* 50 in support, his criticism here is misplaced. Dunn also comments, 'And the Sadducean priests responsible for the twice daily *Tamid* offering in the Temple presumably did not think of themselves as still in exile', but there is little way of knowing what such Sadducean priests thought, as they have not left writings to record their theology and Meyer's suggestion, already noted, that the Sadducean priesthood saw in the maintenance of the Temple cult the hope of liberation from gentile rule and so too 'looked for the redemption of Israel', may not be far off the mark.⁹

In any event Dunn and similar critics are taking the concept of 'still living in exile' too literally. 'Exile' is a figurative way of expressing bondage and oppression, and 'still living in Exile' thus means 'still waiting for the long-expected redemption'. In fact, Craig Evans in an early appraisal of Wright's work on the historic Jesus can cite a wide variety of texts, which indicate just how widespread the idea of still living in exile, taken in this sense, really was among Jews in the Second Temple period.¹⁰ Wright himself has responded to this criticism thus:

As has been repeatedly shown in the study of Qumran and other Jewish

⁸ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, (JR) 2003, pp. 472-77.

⁹ Ben Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, p. 238.

¹⁰ Craig A. Evans, 'Jesus & The Continuing Exile of Israel' in *Jesus & The Restoration of Israel* (Carey C. Newman, ed.) 1999, pp. 78-91.

*movements, many at the time believed that Israel remained in a state of exile long after the return in the last decades of the sixth century.*¹¹

Here he cites Michael Knibb's classic study on Qumran in support.¹²

Wright's Jesus: The Completer of the Story

So, if in the Jewish world of Jesus' day there was a general expectation that Israel's history still awaited completion, how did Jesus' ministry and message answer to such an expectation? Although 'Jesus ultimately fits no known pattern within the first century',¹³ Wright finds that the label 'prophet' fits best. Although the early church was to attach much greater significance to other roles such as that of Messiah and of suffering Servant, Wright finds the references scattered throughout the Gospels which call Jesus a prophet, 'isolated but telling' as undoubtedly bearing witness to authentic tradition.¹⁴ But what kind of prophet? Wright demonstrates at length that Jesus,

*was announcing a prophetic message after the manner of 'oracular prophets' and that he was inaugurating a renewal movement after the manner of 'leadership' prophets. He was, in fact, to this extent very like John the Baptist only more so.*¹⁵

Here Wright is adopting a taxonomy employed by Robert L. Webb. As an 'oracular prophet' Jesus came to Israel 'with a word from her covenant god warning her of the imminent and fearful consequences of the direction she was travelling'¹⁶ but as a 'leadership' prophet, that is, one inaugurating a renewal movement, Jesus 'gathered round him a group of followers and acted in various symbolic ways which indicated, for those with eyes to see them, that the great exodus, the real return from exile was at last on its way.'¹⁷ As Wright goes on to elaborate, in such symbolic actions and the stories He told, Jesus saw Himself as more than a prophet: 'he made it clear that he envisaged his own work as bringing Israel's history to its fateful climax. He really did believe he was inaugurating the kingdom.'¹⁸

As Wright himself recognises, he has come to an understanding of the historical Jesus that 'corresponds to many Third Quest studies'¹⁹ such as those of Ben Meyer and, as we shall see shortly, of John P. Meier; that is, that Jesus was far more than a teacher of the Law as it was intended to be, far more than a moral reformer, He was one who saw Himself

11 N. T. Wright, 'Theology and Jesus', *JSTNT* 69 (1998) p.111.

12 Michael A. Knibb, *The Qumran Community*, 1987, p. 20.

13 JVG, p. 144.

14 JVG, p. 162.

15 JVG, p. 163.

16 JVG, p. 164.

17 JVG, p. 168.

18 JVG, p. 197.

19 JVG, p. 150.

sent by God to warn of God's imminent judgement, and to inaugurate God's rule on earth through the gathering of a faithful remnant. In short Jesus was 'an eschatological prophet'.

However, Wright at the outset disarmingly shares a confession he often makes to his students:

*Quite a high proportion of what I say is probably wrong, or at least flawed or skewed in some way which I do not at the moment realize. The only problem is that I do not know which bits are wrong.*²⁰

8 There is, in fact, one feature running throughout Wright's two volumes that many will find jarring. In Wright's view, when Jesus used 'apocalyptic' language to describe the End-time, this should be taken in an entirely metaphorical sense²¹ to refer not to 'the end of the space-time universe' but to a dramatic, divine intervention that brings about a new world-order and that takes place *within* history.

I cannot deal adequately here with the several major issues raised by Wright's stance, but I consider the following points should be maintained: 1) A major thrust of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was that through His own 'coming' and His saving works, a new world-order has irrupted into the present world. In this sense the Kingdom of God has already come and is operative and growing in the present world.²² 2) That does not mean that for Jesus the ultimate fulfilment of the Kingdom of God was of secondary importance or an event lying far off in the distant future. Like John the Baptist, Jesus saw the present world-order as subject to the Day of Judgement that will take men and women unawares.²³ 3) Apart from promising rich blessing for those who follow Him faithfully, and warning of loss and punishment for those who refuse His call, Jesus gave few precise indications as to what kind of world will follow the Grand Assize and the Heavenly Banquet. All that can be said, with some confidence, is that Jesus gave some clear signs that 'the final kingdom is transcendent and *discontinuous* with this present world',²⁴ for example, that in the post-resurrection life 'they neither marry nor are given in marriage.'²⁵ However, one can hardly use Jesus' words to decide such an issue as whether the present cosmos will be dissolved and *replaced* by new heavens and a new earth, the apparent scenario in 2 Peter 3:9 -13, or whether, by contrast, the present material world will continue in a still recognisable but *renewed* form, which is Wright's interpretation of Romans 8:21.²⁶

20 NTPG, p. xvii.

21 See NTPG pp. 284-86 for a brief outline of this view, which, as Wright notes, has its origin in George B Caird's *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 1980.

22 This is brought out clearly and convincingly in Jürgen Becker's *Jesus of Nazareth*, in particular, in Section 4.2.2, 'The Coming Kingdom of God as Integral Part of the Present' (pp. 102-25). Becker's methodology for establishing authenticity is broadly the same as John P. Meier's; see further below.

23 See Becker's treatment in Chapter 3.2. 'The Announcement of Judgment in the Proclamation of Jesus' (pp. 49-83).

24 Meier II, p. 337.

25 See the discussion in Meier II, pp. 336-48; III, pp. 437-44.

26 'The coming new world will involve, not the abolition of the present, one, but its transformation' (Wright, *Letter to the Romans*, p. 597).

John P. Meier: The Historical-Critical Method Re-applied

Both Ben Meyer's and Tom Wright's portrayals of Jesus derive from their attempt to understand Jesus in His Jewish context and, in particular, against the background of the widespread Jewish longings for restoration, national and spiritual, prevalent in the first century. In each case the historical method pursued has taken in a wide sweep of the currents of Jewish history and concentrated on Jesus' aims. The approach taken by John P. Meier is somewhat different, although the striving to view Jesus in His Jewish context is still paramount.

Before going further, I must stress again that it is difficult to do justice to Meier's work in a short compass: already the first four volumes of *A Marginal Jew* amount to more than 3,000 pages and a fifth volume is yet to come! This enterprise is encyclopaedic in scope, and in fact to some extent the volumes can be used as an encyclopaedia, and a good one at that. Meier's treatment of individual topics, such as the dating of Jesus' life, the language or languages He normally spoke, and which He is likely to have taught in, or His family relations and His upbringing, is judicious and often definitive. For example, Meier's textual analysis of Josephus' celebrated Testimony in his *Jewish Antiquities* 18.3.3 that separates out the Christian editing from the authentic core, is so deft that Dunn is happy to accept it without qualification.²⁷ Likewise, Dunn endorses, without need for further comment, Meier's review of the Twelve²⁸ and also his historical analysis of Jesus' 'extraordinary deeds'.²⁹

Meier's Procedure

Meier's overall aim is to arrive at a historical Jesus 'whom we can recover, recapture, or reconstruct by using the scientific tools of modern historical research'.³⁰ He is aware that like any other scholar he brings with him a personal stance that has an important bearing on the objectivity of the enterprise; in his case, that of a convinced Christian and a Roman Catholic scholar. His resolve therefore is to,

*try my best to bracket out what I hold by faith and examine only what can be shown to be certain or probable by historical research and logical argumentation.*³¹

This is the classic historical-critical method in a nut-shell. Meier likens the procedure he proposes to an 'unpapal conclave', in which four historians, a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, and an agnostic are locked up in the Harvard Divinity School library and confined there until they come up with a consensus document on who Jesus of Nazareth was and what He

27 Meier I, pp. 59-69; Dunn JR, p. 141.

28 Meier III, pp. 128-47; Dunn JR, p. 507.

29 Meier II, pp. 509-1038; Dunn JR, p. 671.

30 Meier I, p. 1.

31 Meier I, p. 6.

intended in His own time and place. As Meier notes, this could be a useful starting point for dialogue between Jews and Christians.³²

In practice, Meier's procedure combines several elements. First of all there is straightforward historical research requiring sources to be evaluated and judgements made on the information they provide, hence Meier's concern with Josephus and his short reports on John the Baptist and Jesus. Second, there is the newer sociological approach that tries to make sense of Jesus in relation to the social environment in which He moved, hence Meier's often misunderstood title for his series: *A Marginal Jew*. By using this term, Meier sees Jesus indeed as fully Jewish, but moving on the fringes of society, being neither ruler, priest nor scribe, but simply from a family of artisans one stage above peasant level. This approach was pioneered in historical Jesus studies by Gerd Theissen in his *The First Followers of Jesus*, in 1977. The third element is the continuous attempt to establish the authenticity of the various accounts of Jesus and His teaching, as conveyed in the Gospels, as various passages are examined.

What binds these elements together is the programme running through much of this large work that attempts to build a picture of Jesus on the basis of His relationships with others: in Volume I with His immediate family relationships and His place in the community in which He grew up and lived, before His public ministry began; in Volume II with His relationship to His mentor, John the Baptist; in Volume III with His relationships with various categories of followers, on the one hand and various classes of competitors and adversaries, on the other.

Meier's Use of the Criteria

Meier's claims about the aims and teachings of Jesus rest on a careful application of the criteria for authenticity that I described briefly in Part One and which take their origins in form criticism,³³ and were stated definitively by Norman Perrin. Meier attaches most importance to the criterion of double dissimilarity and the variant of it, which he terms the criterion of embarrassment.

The criterion of double dissimilarity has been defined as applying where 'there are no grounds either for deriving a tradition from Judaism or for ascribing it to primitive Christianity.'³⁴ Of course this is a severely restrictive test and, though this criterion must be regarded as essentially valid, the instances of where it applies are quite few. Jesus prohibiting, on the basis of the creation ordinance in Genesis 1, any kind of divorce and also remarriage following divorce is the classic instance. This is more radical than the strict teaching of Shammai on divorce, and was in fact modified by the subsequent addition by

32 Meier I, pp. 1-2.

33 Form criticism considers the 'forms' that were thought to be the basic paradigms for different kinds of oral tradition. Some of the first form critics, such as Rudolph Bultmann, envisaged the erosion of the original 'pure' forms through the operation of certain laws of development. See further p. 14 below.

34 Stanley E. Porter, *The Criteria for Authenticity in Historical-Jesus Research*, 2000, pp. 36-37.

Matthew of 'except for the case of fornication', and by Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul makes concessions for wives to separate if they must but not to remarry, and for those married to unbelievers to accept divorce if the unbelieving spouse insists upon it. Somewhat similar, and again a case of Jesus interpreting the Law of Moses by reference to a prior creation ordinance, is Jesus' dictum, 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27).

This criterion has been reviewed frequently³⁵ and there are two main criticisms. The first is that our knowledge of Judaism in the first century is incomplete and subject to unanticipated expansion, as for example when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light. The second is that, as Ben Meyer has put it,

*the requirement of simultaneous discontinuity with Judaism and the post-paschal church errs by excess [emphasis mine] ... Discontinuity with the post-paschal church is sufficient to establish historicity.*³⁶

Meier's second criterion, the criterion of embarrassment, is a form of this latter discontinuity. It applies where material has been faithfully preserved by the early Church which it could hardly have invented and will have caused it embarrassment. Of course what could cause such embarrassment to the early Church is a matter for judgement and may be difficult to assess, but where there are good grounds for applying this criterion, a high degree of probability of authenticity will result.³⁷ One example where it may apply is the mention that various women travelled with Jesus, unaccompanied by husbands or chaperones. Such cases are of course relatively few, but the most significant concern Jesus' relations with John the Baptist, particularly the fact that Jesus was baptised by John and that Jesus' message built upon John's. It is primarily on the basis of these references to John the Baptist that Meier reaches the same conclusion, as do Ben Meyer and Tom Wright, that Jesus would be seen by His contemporaries as being, or claiming to be, an eschatological prophet whose role was to proclaim and be instrumental in bringing in the new age of the reign of God.³⁸

What is most striking about Meier's use of the criteria for authenticity is that in addition to the criteria of double dissimilarity and embarrassment, he also extensively deploys the criterion of multiple attestation: this applies where a story about Jesus, or a saying attributed to Him, is found in more than one source or in more than one form, such as: aphorism, parable, dialogue, miracle story etc. Meier normally uses this criterion as no more than a supportive argument, but, in that it contributes to the overall conclusions he reaches, the validity of this test should be questioned, as does Eric Eve on a number

35 Porter, *Criteria*, pp. 69-76.

36 Ben Meyer, *Aims of Jesus*, p. 86.

37 See Porter, *Criteria*, pp.109-110.

38 Meier, II, p.167. See also the lecture referred to at the beginning of Part One of this Article. This summarizes Meier's findings following his completion of Volume III of *A Marginal Jew*.

of grounds.³⁹ Referring to Theissen and Merz, he points out that multiple attestation of the same tradition in independent sources means no more than ‘the tradition is older than the earliest of the traditions in which it occurs’;⁴⁰ this will bring it back closer to Jesus, but not necessarily go right back to Him.⁴¹ Further, as stressed by Stanley Porter, there may be doubts over whether the two or more sources are truly independent.⁴² Not all scholars accept the ‘two document’ hypothesis⁴³ to resolve the synoptic problem, and with some other theories, such as those that see either Matthew or Luke as the ground document, the witnesses may come from only one base source which may or may not go back as far as Jesus.⁴⁴

A somewhat different, and in my view sounder, basis for establishing authenticity where a story or saying recurs in different sources or genres has been put forward by James Dunn. This rests on what he sees as the essential stability of the oral traditions behind the Gospels.

James Dunn and the Oral Tradition

Dunn begins his treatment of this topic with a brief historical review. He points out that, with the exception of J. G. Herder, the 19th century Biblical scholars scarcely recognised that oral tradition lay at the start of the process that ultimately resulted in the written Gospels. The position changed with the rise of form criticism at the beginning of the 20th century, and in particular with the insight reached by K. L. Schmidt, that a Gospel writer, such as Mark, tied together various units of oral tradition with an editorial narrative framework of his own, ‘like pearls on a string’. Nowadays the Gospel writer is regarded more of an author in his own right than a mere collector of traditions, but the idea of oral units of tradition being incorporated into a narrative framework is still generally accepted.

Dunn confines his survey of the form critics to Rudolf Bultmann, who classified the oral units of tradition into various ‘forms’, for example the short narrative that culminated in Jesus performing a mighty work, or the short account of the circumstances resulting in one of Jesus’ sayings. In each case, Bultmann envisaged a setting in life that gave rise to the tradition in a ‘pure form’ but then held that the tradition developed according to certain laws of development, such as a tendency to add concrete details, give proper names to unnamed individuals, increase length, make various expansions, diminish Semitisms, change indirect speech into direct speech, and so on.⁴⁵

39 Eric Eve, ‘Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation’, *JSHJ*, (3.1) 2005, pp. 23-45.

40 Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 1998, pp. 116-17. But these authors accept the criterion as valuable, where there is an element of ‘going against the grain’ of later Christian tradition. So the frequent references to ‘Kingdom of God/Heaven’ in Jesus’ teaching become plausible in the light of the paucity of such references elsewhere in the New Testament.

41 Eve, ‘Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation’, p. 26.

42 Porter, *Criteria*, pp. 86-89.

43 The theory that the two basic sources are Mark and Q and that Matthew and Luke have used these documents in different ways and added separate source material of their own.

44 Eve, ‘Meier, Miracle and Multiple Attestation’, p. 28.

45 These tendencies are set out by Bultmann at various points along the way in the course of his investigation; see, in particular, his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 2nd edn, 1968, pp. *61-69, *179-205.

Most of Bultmann's 'laws' of development have been found questionable, if not wanting. In particular, E.P. Sanders, in a detailed study⁴⁶ based essentially on how the later NT Apocrypha used the canonical Gospels, concluded that there were no laws of development as such and that some of the supposed tendencies were not tendencies at all. For example, the material did not necessarily grow in overall length or become less Semitic. The only fairly strong indications of later development were the giving of proper names to otherwise anonymous individuals, and the use of direct speech instead of indirect speech, especially where the direct speech is in the first person.⁴⁷ An assumption Sanders makes in his study is that oral literature is liable to develop according to similar tendencies to those operating in written literature, but, as we shall see shortly, in the case of some oral literature that it has been possible to study over a substantial length of time, the traditions remained stable; there was no significant development at all.

However, as Dunn rightly points out, the most radical challenge to the form critics came from the Swedish scholar Birger Gerhardsson, who argued that the nearest parallel to the handing down of tradition that can be found in a Jewish context is the process in Rabbinic Judaism, whereby the 'oral Torah' (the unwritten additional material that supplements the written Law of Moses) was maintained and handed down through the institution of the *beth ha-midrashim*, that is, the 'school' in which a learned Rabbi of high repute would teach a small group of advanced Torah scholars, with some cross-checking taking place between the different schools. The procedure involved constant saying out aloud, with the appropriate accentuation and chanting, the Mishnah passage under study. In this way Rabbis and their students would become living copies of the Mishnah texts in question.⁴⁸

Gerhardsson envisaged that when Jesus is said to have 'taught' His disciples, a similar procedure would have been employed so that the Twelve, in particular, would have memorised Jesus' teachings in order to pass them on to others.⁴⁹ Gerhardsson also saw the Apostles, after the Resurrection, as acting as a kind of Rabbinic 'college' or court based in Jerusalem, in which the teaching of Jesus and the stories about Him would be preserved and to which points of interpretation or difficult issues would be referred for decision. In fact, Gerhardsson took the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, to be a session of this Apostolic College.⁵⁰ Gerhardsson's work is most helpful for understanding many aspects of Rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, the Gospels give no clear indication that when Jesus taught His disciples He made them commit His words to memory or that He used Rabbinic teaching methods to do so. In the view of Samuel Byrskog, a pupil of Gerhardsson,

46 E.P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, 1969.

47 Sanders, *Tendencies*, pp. 272-75.

48 Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 1961, pp. 71-170.

49 More recently Gerhardsson has clarified, and arguably modified, his position by indicating that Jesus' sayings and parables are haggadah which were taught as 'memorised texts' but with 'freer wording than halakic rules'. See Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*, 2001, p. 123 and n. 57.

50 *Memory and Manuscript*, pp. 274-280.

*The disciples never formed such a coherent group of persons, even less were they trained in the techniques of memory and transmission.*⁵¹

But the chief reason for rejecting Gerhardtsson's proposal is that if Rabbinic teaching methods had been employed, Jesus' words and the stories about Him would have been preserved in each of the Gospels with a far closer degree of verbal correspondence than is in fact the case. As Richard Bauckham concludes, adding his voice to those of others,

*This model of memorisation and the transmission of exact words is too rigid to explain the actual extent of variation in the Jesus traditions as we can observe them in the Gospels.*⁵²

This is the starting point for Dunn's own contribution to the question of the oral traditions behind the Gospels.

The Transmission Process

Once the likelihood, if not near certainty, that oral traditions lay behind the written Gospels had been fully grasped, attention began to be paid to the actual procedures by which originally oral literature was maintained, generation after generation, before being committed to writing. For this reason the still living tradition (at least until the mid 20th century) in which epic poems were being recited orally in certain parts of former Yugoslavia, assumed great importance and studies such as Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales*, 1960 attracted special attention. Lord found these epic tales to consist of more or less standard scenes, such as the assembly of the nobles, the sending and receiving of the messenger, the donning of the hero with clothing and armour, and the like. On the occasion of each performance, the poet built up each scene, *as he went along*, by drawing from his stock of much-used formulaic phrases. Of course this genre has no equivalent in the New Testament, yet such a study brings out the true character of oral, as opposed to written, literature. Here there is no original version, no standard text to be carefully memorised and reproduced with varying degrees of faithfulness: rather the oral poet produces an essentially new composition on each occasion he performs for a specific audience, but on the other hand he has learnt the shape of the tale, it is what the audience has come to expect, and it therefore retains a certain stability.⁵³

More recently another kind of living oral tradition that may have more direct bearing on the traditions behind the Gospels has been brought to the attention of New Testament scholars, by Kenneth Bailey.⁵⁴ Bailey, a theological college professor, over the course of his

51 Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 2000, p.70.

52 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 2006, p. 251.

53 See Lord's summarising passage: *Singer of Tales*, pp. 99-104.

54 Kenneth Bailey's work is summed up by his article 'Informal, Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels' reprinted in *Themelios* 20.2 (1995) pp. 4-11. The article is readily accessible on the Internet and is well worth reading.

career gained a close familiarity with the culture of Middle Eastern villages from as far apart as Southern Egypt to Lebanon, and became aware of the way in which oral traditions were preserved in the village from generation to generation. He termed the procedure ‘informal, controlled oral tradition’ as against the ‘informal, uncontrolled oral tradition’, envisaged by Bultmann and the ‘formal, controlled tradition’ of the rabbinical schools, proposed by Gerhardsson, for the handing down of the Gospel traditions.

The traditional materials handed down in the villages varied from poems and pithy proverbs to parables and stories, important to the village for various reasons. The traditions would be passed on at communal gatherings, always by someone whose entire life had been spent in the village and often, as in the case of stories defining the identity of the village, by a respected elder. All the villagers would know the saying or story being told and would immediately correct any deviation made by the speaker. In the case of poems or proverbs exact verbal repetition was insisted on, but in the case of parables and longer stories, some flexibility was allowed to the narrator. What, in this case was insisted on, was that the basic flow of the story and the inner connections were maintained and that the closing punch-line was exactly reproduced.⁵⁵

The examples Bailey gives are remarkable. One concerns the biography of John Hogg, a Protestant missionary in Egypt, written by his daughter Rena and published in 1914. In this book she included some anecdotes about her father, which she had collected in 1910 from the various villages where he had ministered. Over the period from 1955 to 1965, that is, some 50 years later, Bailey visited the villages in question and found the same stories being told, in virtually identical form, even though the villagers had no access to the published biography.⁵⁶

While accepting that Bailey’s evidence is ‘impressionistic and anecdotal’,⁵⁷ Dunn takes his ‘informal, controlled’ model as the most likely explanation of how the oral gospel traditions were maintained, principally because it best accounts for the kinds of correspondences and divergences that occur between parallel passages in the Gospels. Further, building on Walter Kelber’s thesis that Mark’s Gospel represents a written crystallisation of various oral traditions, but one that still retains the distinctive characteristics of oral literature,⁵⁸ Dunn proceeds to compare a number of Synoptic parallel passages. He concludes that in each case it is more likely that the Gospel writer is separately retelling, in an oral mode, the tradition that has come to him, rather than editing an earlier written account on which he is dependent. To give but one example – in the three accounts of *The Stilling of the Storm* (Matthew 8:23-27, Mark 4:35-41, Luke 8:22-25), the basic flow of the story is the same; certain key phrases are constant – ‘woke Him up’, ‘we are perishing’, ‘He got up and rebuked the wind’, ‘there was a calm’; and the punch-line is

55 Bailey, ‘Informal, Controlled Oral Tradition’, p. 7.

56 Bailey, ‘Informal, Controlled Oral Tradition’, p. 8.

57 Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus*, p. 46.

58 Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, 1983, pp. 44-89.

almost identical, 'Who then is this that even the winds and the sea obey Him?' When the differences in the accounts are examined, Dunn suggests that they are best taken as the 'variations within the same' feature of a live retelling of the oral tradition, rather than the kind of amendments that might be made in editing a written source.

The Jesus of Oral Memory

Clearly this insight has major implications for investigation into the origin of and relationship between the Synoptic Gospels. Dunn himself continues to uphold the predominant two-document theory as the solution to the synoptic problem, but he strongly warns against what he calls 'the literary default setting',⁵⁹ that is, the mindset that has dominated the thinking of Western scholars since the introduction of printing in the 15th century. The automatic response of such a mindset is to try to explain variations between two apparently related documents in terms of one being an edited version of the other or both being edited versions of an earlier common source.

What is important in the present context, however, is that the 'informal, controlled' model of performance of oral tradition that Dunn argues underlies the Synoptic Gospels gives a great measure of reliable access to the Jesus who actually ministered in Galilee. Dunn makes this contention in very modest terms:

*If the synoptic tradition does not give us direct access to Jesus himself, neither does it leave us simply in the faith of the first-century Christian churches stopped well short of that goal. What it gives us is **the remembered Jesus** – not simply as they chose to remember him but also as the impact of his words and deeds shaped their memories and still reverberated in their gatherings.⁶⁰*

It becomes clear, as Dunn deals with various topics that he often allows for elaboration and development of the oral traditions in their various retellings while still retaining their essential core. Dunn's comments on the miracle accounts sum up his general approach:

If we have learned anything from our analyses of the Jesus tradition thus far, it is that traditions characteristically were elaborated in the retelling without affecting the stability of subject matter and core.⁶¹

Some will find Dunn's position here a little disappointing. Since Dunn has adopted Kenneth Bailey's model of oral tradition with enthusiasm, how is it that he does not attribute an even greater reliability to the oral traditions now crystallised in the written Gospels? After all, the stories about Dr Hogg, a founding figure and thus comparable to Jesus, were recounted with remarkable faithfulness, even some 50 years after he died – a

59 *A New Perspective on Jesus*, pp. 79-125; JR, pp. 335-36.

60 JR, p. 328.

61 JR, p. 672.

longer interval than that between Jesus' ministry in Galilee and the probable date of the earliest Gospel. However, even Gerhardsson in his later writing accepted that some reworking of the traditions took place as they were handed down:

We see in the Synoptic Gospels that the Jesus tradition has been reworked during the period of its transmission during the early church, that abridgements and additions have been made in an effort to make the meaning clearer.⁶²

A weakness of Dunn's position in *Jesus Remembered* is that he pays insufficient attention to the role of eyewitnesses in relation to oral tradition, although since the publication of his book, he has had to come to terms with this question. The control exercised by eyewitnesses was identified long ago by one of the first form critics, Martin Dibelius. Referring to what he termed the 'legends' about Jesus and his followers, Dibelius wrote:

Thus the weightiest part of the tradition had been developed at a time while eyewitnesses still lived, and when events were only about a generation old. It is not to be wondered that this part of the tradition remained relatively unaltered.⁶³

Samuel Byrskog goes further and presents a cumulative argument for 'the interaction of direct autopsy [eyewitness testimony] and orality in the Gospel tradition.'⁶⁴ The essential elements in this argument are: the importance attached to eyewitness testimony in the recording of history in antiquity,⁶⁵ the ideal in Jewish circles that a disciple should both hear and see his master, and that discipleship was the comprehensive setting for both hearing and seeing Jesus. Accordingly, Byrskog finds the original Disciples of Jesus as both the source and first bearers of the oral tradition. The individual Disciples he takes, as of special importance as eyewitnesses are Peter, Mary Magdalene, and among Jesus' family, His mother Mary and James.⁶⁶ More recently Richard Bauckham has published a major study of the various eyewitnesses involved and their particular contributions to various parts of the Gospel traditions.⁶⁷

As a result of dialogue with both Byrskog and Bauckham, Dunn now attaches much greater importance to the role of eyewitnesses. So, in a later article Dunn agrees (apart from the words in square brackets) with Bauckham's thesis that 'the traditions were originated and formulated by named eyewitnesses, [in whose name they were transmitted] and who remained the living and active guarantors of the tradition.' Dunn also 'agrees in principle' with Bauckham's further contention that:

In Christian communities which did not include eyewitnesses among their

62 Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*, 2001, p. 24.

63 Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*, p. 295.

64 Byrskog, *Story as History*, p. 103, 105-106.

65 Luke in particular follows an accepted procedure when he plans to 'set down an orderly account of the events ... handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (Luke 1:1-2).

66 Byrskog, *Story as History*, pp. 69-91.

67 Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2006.

*members, there would probably be recognized teachers who functioned as authorized tradents of the traditions they had received from the eyewitnesses either directly or through very few (authorized) intermediaries.*⁶⁸

Dunn's main reservation here is to insist on the insights gained from grasping the nature and essential stability of oral tradition transmitted and maintained in a community setting. Otherwise Bauckham and Dunn now broadly attach the same degree of importance to the eyewitnesses in their role of exercising control over the transmission of the traditions.

Dunn's Procedure in Practice

Because Dunn's position over the general reliability of the oral traditions regarding Jesus is quite cautious, in practice he occasionally employs one of the criteria derived from form criticism to determine historicity. For example, that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist and that Jesus' ministry at first overlapped with the Baptist's is supported by the test of embarrassment to the first believers,⁶⁹ but the method Dunn most customarily employs in reading the Gospels is to apply what he calls 'a broad-brush criterion', which he defines as: to look for 'any feature which is *characteristic within the Jesus tradition and relatively distinctive of the Jesus tradition*'.⁷⁰ The rationale for this broader criterion stems from Dunn's understanding of the origins of the oral traditions and the reason for their retellings:

*If a feature is characteristic within and relatively distinctive of the Jesus tradition (in comparison with other Jewish traditions), then the most obvious explanation of its presence in the Jesus tradition is that it reflects the abiding impression which Jesus made on at least many of his first followers, which first drew them into and constituted their community with other disciples, and which was celebrated ... in the gatherings of the first churches through the first generation of Christianity.*⁷¹

This criterion allows Dunn to appropriate a substantial part of the Gospel materials as in great measure attributable to Jesus. The denunciation of the Pharisees provides a good example of Dunn's approach. Here one should remember that for both form critics like Bultmann and the Jewish reclaimers of Jesus, such as Geza Vermes, these passages are the creation of the primitive Church, in response to opposition from the Pharisees in the post-Easter years. By contrast, Dunn can write:

Jesus is consistently shown as engaged in dialogue and dispute with the Pharisees. Here we can see how the tradition has been elaborated, with

68 Dunn, 'Eyewitnesses and the Oral Jesus Tradition', *JSHJ* 6 (2008) p. 105. His citations are from Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 290.

69 JR, pp. 378-79.

70 JR, p. 333.

71 JR, p. 333. This key sentence is repeated in *A New Perspective*, p. 70.

*Matthew in particular extending the motif of debate with the Pharisees quite substantially. But that is obviously the way to express the point: Matthew extended a motif already thoroughly integrated in the Jesus tradition.*⁷²

Because Jesus' relationship with the Pharisees lies at the centre of the controversy over whether contemporary Jews, the heirs of the Pharisees, can claim Jesus to be 'one of us', it is significant that Dunn, while conceding that the extreme hostility in Matthew 22 owes something to the Church, nonetheless endorses the general picture given by the Gospels that Jesus in His lifetime was fundamentally at odds with the Pharisees and they with Him.

It should also be noted that Dunn here, and indeed characteristically, traces the source of the Jesus tradition not to post-Easter reflection, but to the remembering of Jesus' words and deeds as they made their impact on the Disciples in the course of Jesus' ministry. A telling example is how Jesus' commendation of faith was remembered, namely as complete trust in a loving, powerful heavenly Father, not as faith in Jesus Himself as would have been more natural if the tradition had been formed only after Easter.⁷³

The Characteristic Jesus

What then can be said of the characteristic Jesus derived from the Jesus *remembered* by His first Disciples? Dunn would agree with Wright that Jesus 'ultimately fits no known pattern within the first century', but before reaching such a conclusion examines the various roles in which His contemporaries could have cast Him: royal Messiah? A role too easily taken primarily in a political sense and hence declined by Jesus. Priestly Messiah? A non-starter because Jesus was not descended from Levi. The Prophet of Jewish expectation? Here a more positive answer can be given. But in the end Dunn suggests,

*the tantalising possibility that Jesus deliberately claimed a degree of distinctiveness for his mission, for all its thoroughly Jewish character, which left both hearers and disciples struggling for words to express the significance of what they were seeing and hearing – and remembering.*⁷⁴

However, when Dunn examines the question, 'How did Jesus see His own role?' he comes to a conclusion of some significance:

*[T]he fact that the kingdom was present precisely in and through Jesus' mission, a fact so clearly attested in the memory of his teaching, bespeaks an eschatological significance for Jesus, of which, however self-deprecating, he can hardly have been unaware ... Jesus seems to have seen himself as the eschatological prophet who had been given the role indicated in Isaiah 61.1-3.*⁷⁵

72 *A New Perspective*, p. 71. The italics are Dunn's.

73 JR, pp. 549-553.

74 JR, p. 704.

75 JR, p. 706.

In his overall conclusion, Dunn can therefore describe Jesus as,

remembered as the one who above all took on the role of eschatological spokesman for God. And from that we can deduce without strain, something of Jesus' understanding of that role – his conviction of being God's eschatological agent at the climax of God's purposes for Israel.⁷⁶ (Emphasis mine)

Thus in the end Dunn too comes to a view of Jesus' aims and role, not dissimilar from those of Tom Wright and John P. Meier.

More Than Sage or Rabbi

Each of the three contributors to the Third Quest, whose work I have now examined – Tom Wright, John P. Meier and James Dunn – have been at pains to understand Jesus as a Jew, working within a Jewish context. What is surely significant is that, while each has pursued a different methodology, they have each come to see Jesus as an eschatological prophet, that is, a prophet who not only announced, but set in motion, the long-awaited new age of God's rule on earth.

During Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, the chief priests, the scribes and the elders asked Him for the basis of His authority, and He answered them, 'Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?' (Mark 11:27-33). John P. Meier sees the criterion of embarrassment applying here, so vouching for the authenticity of this passage.⁷⁷ But the main point for Meier is that this exchange,

gives us further insight into what Jesus implicitly claimed he was. He is not here casting himself in the role of a traditional Jewish sage, scribe or (to use the term anachronistically) rabbi. By comparing himself with John, he places himself more or less in the category of an eschatological prophet who does not derive his authority from institutional channels like the law or the temple.⁷⁸

The religious leaders of Israel quickly saw the danger of answering, 'From heaven', so they replied, 'We do not know.' But if John's authority came from heaven, why indeed did they not believe him and, more importantly, not believe Jesus who claimed the same authority?

This passage underlines the obstinate fact that however much we may try to domesticate Jesus, to accommodate Him to our own scheme of things, He stands before us as the Master, summoning us to unreserved and costly discipleship. May God give each of us, whether Gentile or Jew, grace to heed this long-foretold prophet, the Prophet like Moses, one raised up from among the Jewish people! (Deuteronomy 18:15)

⁷⁶ JR, p. 762.

⁷⁷ Meier, II, pp. 165-66. John the Baptist, Meier argues, is not being presented from the normal New Testament perspective as Jesus' forerunner and thus on a lower level, but rather as a parallel and equal figure.

⁷⁸ Meier, II, p. 166.

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Please Note:

JSJH = Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus.

JSNT = Journal for the Study of the New Testament.

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