



Preface

In the spring 1976, I was invited by a German theological society (*Pfarrer-Gebets-Bruderschaft*) to lecture to German students of theology. The overarching theme on that occasion was the value of the Gospels as historical sources, and the place was Holzhausen, not far from Marburg, the university city of the renowned Rudolf Bultmann. My lectures were published in 1977 with the title *Die Anfänge der Evangelientradition*¹ and appeared the same year in Swedish under the title *Evangeliernas förhistoria*,² as well as later on in English, French, Danish, Italian, and Spanish (1977–80).

The lectures in Holzhausen were held at a time when the so-called form-critical school (*Formgeschichte*) still had a safe hold on gospel research in Germany, with a wide hearing even in other countries. Its influence was, however, on the decrease. The situation was different fifteen years earlier, when my doctoral dissertation *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (1961)³ appeared. That book received very severe criticism from the form critics, something which only partly was due to the fact that it was written in a somewhat pointed way. The book aroused a lively debate and I felt called upon to publish a follow-up booklet in which I tried to remove misunderstanding and meet objections against my approach.

¹Glauben und Denken 919; Wuppertal: Brockhaus.

²Lund: Verbum-H. Ohlsson.

³ASNU 22; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup; Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard.

The name of this booklet was *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (1964).⁴

“The Origins of the Gospel Tradition,” which is now reprinted in the present volume, is the English translation of the Holzhausen lectures. The time and the place of the lectures explain why the presentation is angled as it is. My task was to discuss the origins and earliest history of the gospel tradition. The audience was educated in the form-critical theories with a very skeptical opinion of the reliability of the Gospels. It is against this approach that I conduct my argumentation. If it had been today, I would have devoted more space to the interesting changes which seem to have occurred in the Jesus traditions between the Master’s ministry and the emergence of our four gospels. The texts have, as we know, to some extent become colored by the experiences the Christians had and the insights they gained after the death of Jesus and the breakthrough of the resurrection belief, something I have tried to elucidate in other connections over the years. Today I would also have reminded my listeners of the *problematic* character of all formation of tradition, even within the church.

The faculties of theology in Sweden have for many years had good cooperation with their German colleagues in Tübingen. As to my dissertation, one of the two New Testament professors at the Protestant faculty of Theology in Tübingen, Ernst Käsemann, wrote a caustic review, one of the most negative presentations my book received (1963). The other New Testament professor, Otto Michel, also reviewed the book (1964), but in an appreciative way.

It was presumably at the instigation of Professor Michel that I was invited to Holzhausen in 1976; we gave lectures there, both of us. Dr. Michel also wrote (together with his colleague in Wuppertal, Klaus Haacker) the preface to the German edition of my lectures.

In November 1980, I gave guest lectures in Tübingen, this time invited by Dr. Käsemann’s successor, Peter Stuhlmacher. Two years later he organized an international symposium on the theme “The Gospel and the Gospels.” The lectures and discussions on this occasion were characterized by a balanced view of tradition. The contributions were

⁴ConNT 20; Lund: Gleerup; Copenhagen: Munksgaard; now Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

edited—by Dr. Stuhlmacher—in a massive volume with the title *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien: Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982*.⁵ My essay had the title “Der Weg der Evangelientradition.” The book appeared in 1991 in an English translation as well.⁶ My contribution, “The Path of the Gospel Tradition,” is now reprinted in the present volume, this time much better translated.

An important dissertation had been ventilated and published in Tübingen before the Tübinger Symposium, Rainer Riesner’s *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*.⁷ Riesner—who was present in Holzhausen 1976—complements *Memory and Manuscript* by elucidating the transmission which occurred in broad, popular contexts in Israel: in homes, elementary schools, and synagogal activities. His contribution refutes a point of view which the Jewish-American rabbinist Jacob Neusner had put forward against my dissertation, namely that the rabbinic methods of transmission were but academic specialties. Riesner collects, furthermore, from ancient Israel and the world around it much pre-Christian evidence that the methods of the rabbis were mainly old devices of teaching and transmission, which only needed to be refined. In that way he refutes the second main point of criticism against my dissertation, advanced by Dr. Neusner and others, to wit, that the rabbis after A.D. 70 created new methods, which did not exist in the time of Jesus and his apostles. Riesner’s dissertation has received great attention; it has appeared in three German editions (the latest in 1988), and the promised English translation is long overdue.

In April 1984, a lengthy symposium held in Jerusalem—“Symposium de interpretatione evangeliorum”—focused upon the question of the genetic relations between the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The meeting had been well prepared by three research teams—each one representing an important approach to the synoptic question (the Two Document Hypothesis, the Two Gospel Hypothesis and the Multiple Stage Hypothesis)—and by individual scholars elucidating complementary aspects. All

⁵WUNT 28; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1983.

⁶*The Gospel and the Gospels* (ed. P. Stuhlmacher; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

⁷WUNT² 7; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1981.

the papers had been distributed in advance, so that the discussions could start immediately each time, after only a short introduction. One of the main concerns of the meeting was to point out areas in need of further research. My own task on this occasion was to discuss the oral prehistory of the gospel texts. I now had the opportunity to present an analysis of the anatomy of the early Christian tradition, so to speak: what it was, in its different dimensions, and how it functioned on its way from Jesus to the evangelists. I developed here my approach to the problem of tradition in a more discursive and explicit way than earlier. The documents from the symposium were published by David L. Dungan in 1990 under the title *The Interrelations of the Gospels*.⁸ In the meantime, some of us had already published our papers separately. My own contribution, e.g., had appeared as a booklet with the title *The Gospel Tradition* in Sweden in 1986.⁹ This text is the third item reprinted in the present volume.

The dissertation *Memory and Manuscript* was my basic study of the theme of tradition and transmission in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. The book ended with a short chapter sketching the path of the gospel tradition from Jesus to the completed Gospels, as I imagined it at that stage. I did not even begin the comprehensive task of analyzing the concrete material in the Gospels from my point of departure—against the background of early Christianity’s “work with the word of the Lord.” I have, however, dealt a good deal with that task since then, in a long series of contributions. I started with the somewhat peculiar text on how Jesus was put to the test by the devil before his public ministry in Israel, according to Matthew and Luke.¹⁰ After that I examined a number of early Christian pericopes,

⁸ BETL 95; Leuven: Leuven University Press & Peeters.

⁹ ConBNT 15; Lund: Gleerup; now Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International.

¹⁰ *The Testing of God’s Son (Matt 4:1–11 & Par): An Analysis of an Early Christian Midrash* (ConBNT 2:1; Lund: Gleerup, 1965; now Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International). The substance of the most important of the yet unpublished chapters of the book (ch. 7) is printed as an article in German, “Gottes Sohn als Diener Gottes,” in *Studia theologica* 27 (1973): 73–106, and in my volume *The Shema in the New Testament: Deut 6:4–5 in Significant Passages* (Lund: Novapress, 1996), 139–72.

where one can see that Israel's ancient creed, the Shema, including the greatest commandment in God's law, determines the line of thought and the design of the pericope.¹¹ I have also analyzed all the synoptic parables, which I classify as narrative meshalim, and especially the parables of the synoptic parable chapter (Matt 13 and parallels).¹² I have studied all the material in Matthew which concerns the mighty acts of Jesus,¹³ and in addition the prehistory in Matthew, the passion narrative, and the resurrection stories.¹⁴ As to the logia material (the aphoristic meshalim), I have so far not, however, been able to examine more than a limited number of sayings.¹⁵ Here very much remains to be done, and my own contributions hereafter will be few.

After a series of exegetical conferences on the synoptic question, a two-part symposium was held in Dublin, Ireland, in 1989 and

¹¹Seventeen of these studies, originally published one by one in scattered journals and festschrifts, have been collected in my book *The Shema in the New Testament* (n. 11).

¹²All the parables are analyzed in the article "Illuminating the Kingdom: Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 266–309. On the parable chapter see "The Parable of the Sower and Its Interpretation," *New Testament Studies* 14 (1967–1968): 165–93, and "The Seven Parables in Matthew XIII," *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972–1973): 16–37. More exhaustive is my book *Jesu liknelser: En genomlysning* (Lund: Novapress, 1999).

¹³*The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew* (Scripta minora 1978–1979, 5; Lund: Gleerup, 1979), completed with the article "Mighty Acts and Rule of Heaven: 'God Is with Us,'" in *The Shema in the New Testament*, 187–201. More exhaustive is the Swedish version of this study, *Jesu maktgärningar i Matteusevangeliet* (Lund: Novapress, 1991).

¹⁴See, *inter alia*, my contribution "Ur Matteusevangeliet" (commentary on chs. 1–2, 5–7, 26–28), in *Ur Nya testamentet* (ed. L. Hartman; 2d ed.; Lund: Gleerup, 1972), 108–201; the article "Gottes Sohn als Diener Gottes," and further "Kristi uppståndelse—de bibliska vittnesbörden," *Din uppståndelse bekänner vi* (ed. E. Franck; Stockholm: Verbum, 1988), 24–61, as well as "Mark and the Female Witnesses," *Dumu-E₂-Dub-ba-a: Studies in Honor of Ake W. Sjöberg* (ed. H. Behrens et al.; Philadelphia: Occasional Publications of the S. N. Kramer Fund 11, 1989), 217–26.

¹⁵See, e.g., my comments on the Sermon on the Mount in "Ur Matteusevangeliet," 125–50; "Salt and Sacrifice: A Cryptic Mission Word in Matthew (5:13a)," in *The Sum of Our Choices: Essays in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe* (ed. A. Sharma; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 265–76; and some articles in *The Shema in the New Testament*.

Gazzada, Italy, in 1990 on the theme “Oral Tradition before, in, and outside the Gospels.” At these two meetings a number of scholars discussed the oral Jesus tradition behind the four gospels, behind the Pauline letters and the *Didache*, and this in the light of recent results from tradition research within other disciplines. The thirteen introductory papers from the symposium were published in 1991 by Dom Henry Wansbrough with the title *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*.¹⁶ For my part I addressed the synoptic parables under the heading “Illuminating the Kingdom: Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels.”¹⁷

Some years ago the tradition problem was enriched by an extensive and solid investigation, written by my pupil Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism, and the Matthean Community*. The author shows how Jesus is presented as teacher in the Gospel of Matthew and how the treatment of the transmitted material has been influenced by the conviction that Jesus is “the only teacher” of the church. Dr. Byrskog has brought the study of the early Christian Jesus tradition a clear step forward.¹⁸

In 1998 a third edition of *Memory and Manuscript*, with the follow-up booklet *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* in the same volume, was published in the United States.¹⁹ The book starts with two new texts, one written by me, the other by one of my sharpest critics, Professor Jacob Neusner. My preface contains an account of the origin and aim of my dissertation, of the discussion around it, and of my further work on the early Christian tradition. In his generous foreword Dr. Neusner then recommends my book unreservedly, at the same time apologizing for the negative criticism

¹⁶ JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: JSOT Press.

¹⁷ See above, n. 12.

¹⁸ ConBNT 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994. See now also Byrskog’s *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 2000). See also S. Westerholm, *Jesus and Scribal Authority* (ConBNT 10; Lund: Gleerup, 1978).

¹⁹ *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* with *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Livonia: Dove, 1998).

he leveled against it in his youth. It is not easy for a scholar to admit being wrong earlier; Jack Neusner has the moral courage to do so.

The present volume contains reprints of three of my studies of the early Christian tradition. As I have already indicated above, the texts have originated at different points of time and in different circumstances. They also have a different character. “The Origins of the Gospel Tradition,” from 1976, gives a popular review of the question to what extent the New Testament evangelists enable us to hear the voice of Jesus. The basic question is: Was the tradition from Jesus and about Jesus preserved in a reliable way, and are the records of the Gospels trustworthy? Second, “The Path of the Gospel Tradition,” from 1983, contains a critical discussion of the approach of the form-critical school to the problem of the early Christian tradition, ending with an alternative sketch of the path of the tradition. In the third study, “The Gospel Tradition,” from 1986, I have tried to give a rather detailed picture of the different aspects of the early Christian tradition and of the transmission of it as well as an assessment of the reliability of the four oldest of the extant written records.

Two of the texts are here reprinted in their original form, apart from some minor stylistic improvements and updated literature references in some footnotes. Within brackets I also add a few new pieces of information. As for the article “The Path of the Gospel Tradition,” however, a thorough renovation of the earlier translation (published in 1991) has been necessary, since it was very poor and quite often misleading.

Many scholars confine themselves today to studying the New Testament documents as *texts*—their nature, structure, content, and way of functioning, as well as their readers’ reading and reception of them—and to expressing an opinion about their reliability as historical sources without discussing the question how the material may have been preserved during the decades between the Master’s ministry in Israel and the evangelists’ writings. They fail to give any attention to two centuries of assiduous attempts to elucidate how the sayings of Jesus and the memories of his ministry were preserved during the first decades of the church. To me it seems clear that the question whether the New Testament documents give us a historically reliable picture of Jesus of Nazareth, cannot be answered without a thorough

study of the early Christian tradition problem. Although it is a difficult issue, we must do what we can.

For my part, I have become convinced that we can hear the voice of Jesus himself in the Gospels. His pronouncements and the narratives about his actions have been interpreted and clarified by his disciples, but they reach us nevertheless in a reliable form. These small texts have been handed down to posterity by devoted and faithful adherents who wanted nothing other than to receive the message of their master, and that in such a way that they would be able to preserve it and clarify it to others, so that they might know as much as possible about Jesus Christ, the crucified, resurrected, and living Lord of the church.

My old friend Donald Hagner—an American of Swedish extraction on the paternal side—has taken the initiative to produce this book. He has also seen to the negotiations with the publishers and spent considerable time on the manuscript, improved the translation, checked bibliographical data, and so forth. I thank him warmly for his brotherly help, this time as well as on many earlier occasions given gladly.

BIRGER GERHARDSSON
Lund, September 2001