Introduction

New Testament scholars have long supposed that between the death of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels, Jesus' words and deeds were handed down by word of mouth in something called 'oral tradition'. This has never been to deny a possible role for written documents as well; hypothetical texts such as Q, miracle-story collections and sayings collections have long been proposed. The point is rather that the transmission of Jesus material by word of mouth is assumed to have played a major role in the formative stages of the Jesus tradition, and that this 'oral tradition' can be invoked as a full or partial explanation of the material available to the Evangelists (the people who wrote the Gospels).

While it is likely that the Evangelists also had written sources available to them, this book is not concerned with the question of source criticism, nor with that of the literary relationship between the Gospels, otherwise known as the Synoptic Problem. For the purposes of this book we shall assume the priority of Mark (i.e. that Mark was the first to write a Gospel and that both Matthew and Luke used his Gospel as a source) and leave open the question of 'Q' (the other source supposedly used by Matthew and Luke for the material they have in common that does not appear in Mark), except to the extent that other scholars refer to it.

For much of the last century the dominant model of oral tradition among New Testament scholars was that supplied by form criticism. As will be argued in Chapter 2 (and subsequently), it is a model that has several flaws, but it nevertheless continues to supply many New Testament scholars with their default assumptions about oral tradition, even when they have abandoned form criticism as a method. It is not as if no alternative models are available, however; the study of oral tradition has moved on a long way since form criticism represented the cutting edge of New Testament scholarship, and quite a few New Testament scholars have engaged with these developments, as we shall see. It is rather that even after all this time their collective efforts have not yet fully exorcised the form-critical ghost from the scholarly mindset. The present book represents one more attempt to do so. It also aims to inform readers who may not be all that familiar with developments in thinking about the oral tradition behind the Gospels about the various proposals currently on offer.

At a first approximation these may be classified into five approaches: the rabbinic model (associated particularly with Birger Gerhardsson; see Chapter 3), the media contrast model (Werner Kelber, Chapter 4), the model of informal controlled oral tradition (Kenneth Bailey, Chapter 5), the memory model (several contemporary scholars; see Chapters 6 and 7), and the eye-witness model (Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham, Chapter 8). On closer examination, however, three of these models (the media contrast model, the informal controlled tradition model and the memory model) will be found, with some adjustment, to converge on a broadly similar approach.

As should soon become apparent, however, 'oral tradition' is a blanket term covering a wide variety of phenomena. It would be a mistake to suppose that 'oral tradition' refers to some kind of monolithic process that operates everywhere and at all times in exactly the same way. It may also be a mistake to assume that the same model of oral tradition applies equally well to all phases of the transmission of the Jesus material; this is quite unlikely to have been the case, and since we lack any direct access to what took place we certainly cannot know it to have been the case. This is a further reason for considering several models of oral tradition in this book; even if one approach turns out to be the most promising overall, it is important to be aware of other approaches and likely that each approach can contribute something towards our overall understanding.

The main task of this book is thus to present its readers with the principal lines of thinking about the oral tradition behind the Gospels (although it may turn out that 'memory' proves to be a more helpful category than 'oral tradition' and that the use of the preposition 'behind' is questionable in this context). Chapter 9 will attempt a couple of probes into the tradition as a way of testing the models on offer, and Chapter 10 will round off the discussion with a number of conclusions. But before launching into a discussion of the various models of oral tradition on offer, it will be helpful to provide the reader with some general orientation. This the first chapter will attempt to do by sketching what 'oral tradition' might mean in the context of the media situation of the first-century Roman Empire.