Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels

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Some understanding of the oral tradition behind the Synoptic Gospels is an unavoidable presupposition of NT interpretation.[1] The pedagogy of the rabbinic schools was a well-known formal method of tradition transmission and its methodology is reflected in rabbinic literature. No other alternative is described in the writings of the period. The reason for this is that anthropologically speaking, what 'everybody knows' cannot be described; it functions unconsciously. Given this reality, the modern Western researcher can posit the tradition transmission of the rabbinic schools or project some other tradition transmission method modelled after the researcher's own inherited Western experience or imagination. The latter at times involves the imposition of Western cultural models and mental attitudes into a Middle Eastern cultural world. A great deal of subjectivism is often involved. From the point of view of the present writer, who has spent more than thirty years living in the Middle East (teaching in a Semitic language), mental gymnastics incredible for Middle Eastern peasant people are at times assumed by Western oral tradition theories. We are convinced that our Middle Eastern cultural world provides a concrete alternative to these Western models.

Indeed, unique sources for NT research in a Middle Eastern context are available in two forms, manuscript and oral. As to manuscript sources, many unknown Arabic and some Syriac and Coptic Christian exegetical treasures await exposure. This aspect of research is easily understood. But what is meant by oral sources?

In the summer of 1983 Professor Helga Sedan of the Archeology Department of the American University of Beirut led an excavation of the ancient tell of Busra al-Sham in the Howran district of southern Syria. The excavators concentrated their efforts on the Middle Bronze Age of 1800-1700 BC. In the course of their digging Professor Sedan found construction patterns that were, to her, incomprehensible. Discovering her frustration, the village workmen took the excavators to the far side of the modern village to observe the peculiar construction techniques of their village and district. Being an archaeology department from Beirut with 115 years' experience in the Middle East, they were intellectually and emotionally prepared to discover the answers to the puzzles of their Bronze Age excavations in the building techniques on display among the living inheritors of the ancient village tradition. In fact, this is what happened. By watching the modern villagers build a house they were able to interpret Middle Bronze Age data that had previously been a puzzle.

Turning from archaeology to textual criticism, in the 1970s in Beirut it was my privilege to teach a class of Middle Eastern students on the subject of textual criticism. I opened the subject by

surveying the types of errors that had crept into the text of the NT. During the discussion one bright Iraqi student said quietly, 'You have not discussed my major problem.' We then discovered that the student, Mr Yousef Matti, had spent ten years as a monk in the Syriac Orthodox monastery of Mar Matta in northern Iraq and that for seven of those years he had been engaged in the scriptorium copying manuscripts. His major problem was, we were told, the flies! Fly specks? No! The flies *drank* the ink before the page was dry. The ink was made by the monks themselves, using an ancient formula. The process took six months and the product was fairly thick. Flies would drink parts of the letters before the ink had had an opportunity to dry on this polished, non-porous paper. Plurals in Syriac are made with dots. Yousef told us he would carefully finish a page, lay it in the sun to dry, and on return discover that his plurals had suddenly become singulars due to the drinking of the ink by the flies!

In reflecting on the revelations of that particular class, a number of realities became evident. The ex-scribe was not a knowledgeable textual critic. Most of what was presented to him during the lecture he found valid. He confessed that he *always* corrected the grammar of his exemplar. He could not add to many of the technical aspects of the Western science of textual criticism. He *could*, however, offer the unquestionably authentic reality of his own experience which added a valuable dimension to the topic under discussion. Indeed, through Mr Matti we could enlarge on our understanding of a classical form of tradition preservation that had survived intact to the present time.

The subject of this paper is Middle Eastern oral tradition and the Synoptic Gospels. In many ways, Mr Matti presents the stance of the present writer in regard to the current topic. It is not our intention, therefore, to review all the secondary literature on the question of Middle Eastern oral tradition. Rather, like Yousef Matti, we intend to present the concrete reality of our own experience of more than three decades of life and study in the Middle East among communities of great antiquity that still preserve in oral form much of what is important to them. The reality we have experienced, and here attempt to analyse, we are calling *informal controlled* oral tradition. It is the intent of this paper to state briefly the position of the form-critical school of Bultmann, which we will call *informal uncontrolled* oral tradition. We will then turn to the work of the Scandinavian school of Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson, which can be called formal *controlled* oral tradition. C.H. Dodd will represent for us a median position. Our own experience has uncovered a specific discernible methodology functioning in traditional Middle Eastern village life that provides a structure for such a median position. It is our hope that these findings may offer a clarified model for consideration and further study in regard to the oral tradition behind the Synoptic Gospels.

Models for oral tradition

The Bultmannian view: informal, uncontrolled oral tradition

The Bultmannian view of the Synoptic tradition is perhaps most succinctly set forth in his monograph, *Jesus and the Word*, where he writes: 'I do indeed think that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.'[2] The author feels, moreover, that the various layers of the tradition can 'on the whole be clearly distinguished',[3] and that even much of the earliest layer of Palestinian Aramaic materials must be 'rejected as secondary'.[4] He is anxious to examine this 'complex of

ideas in the oldest layer of the Synoptic tradition'. He writes: 'What the sources offer us is first of all, the message of the early Christian community, which for the most part the Church freely attributed to Jesus.'[5]

The tradition transmission presuppositions of this view (with its many variations) can be described as *informal uncontrolled* oral tradition. Bultmann does not deny that there *is* a tradition stemming from Jesus, but asserts that it has, for the most part, faded out. The community, he feels, was not interested in either preserving or controlling the tradition. Furthermore, the tradition is always open to new community creations that are rapidly attributed to the community's founder. It is *informal* in the sense that there is no identifiable teacher nor student and no structure within which material is passed from one person to another. All is fluid and plastic, open to new additions and new shapes. This view offers us a complex of ideas from Palestine, ideas synthesized from various sources by the community to meet its needs. This, however, is not the only view currently argued.

The Scandinavian school: formal controlled oral tradition

In sharp contrast to the form-critical view is the Scandinavian school of Riesenfeld and Gerhardsson. In his initial essay, 'The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings', Riesenfeld argues that the *Sitz im Leben* of the gospel tradition is not the mission preaching,[6] nor is it the 'communal instruction of the primitive church',[7] but rather it stems from the person of Jesus. He writes: 'The words and deeds of Jesus are a holy word, comparable with that of the Old Testament, and the handing down of this precious material is entrusted to special persons.'[8] For Riesenfeld, the beginning of the gospel tradition lies with Jesus himself.[9] He grants that the material is collected and shaped by the primitive church, but for him, 'the essential point is that the outlines, that is, the beginnings of the proper genius of the tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus, were memorized and recited as holy word'.[10] He concludes, 'Jesus is the object and subject of a tradition of authoritative and holy words which he himself created and entrusted to his disciples for its later transmission in the epoch between his death and the parousia.'[11]

This position was then filled out with a much larger work of exacting scholarship by Gerhardsson entitled *Memory and Manuscript* (1961),[12] and then in *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (1964).[13] In the former of these two works the details of the transmission of 'the Oral Torah' are set forth with care. The mnemonic techniques, condensations, use of written notes, techniques of repetition, are all documented with precision. Then, turning to the gospel tradition and early Christianity, the 'word of the Lord' is explained as a word passed on using the above-mentioned devices of the Jewish schools. Evidence from Luke and Paul is presented to demonstrate that Jesus taught his disciples like other rabbis and that the early church organized a 'college' of the apostles along Jewish lines. Evidence for this is found in the recitation formulas, the frequent references to 'the tradition' and 'the word of the Lord', and the importance of Jerusalem as a source from which the word proceeds. Gerhardsson's conclusion to the matter is: 'When the Evangelists edited their Gospels, ... they worked on a basis of a fixed, distinct tradition from, and about, Jesus - a tradition which was partly memorized and partly written down in notebooks and private scrolls, but invariably isolated from the teachings of other doctrinal authorities.'[14]

This view can be described as *formal controlled* oral tradition. It is *formal* in the sense that there is a clearly identified teacher, a clearly identified student, and a clearly identified block of traditional material that is being passed on from one to the other. It is *controlled* in the sense that the material is memorized (and/or written), identified as 'tradition' and thus preserved intact.

In his evaluation of this view,[15] W.D. Davies offers the Scandinavians high praise for their contribution and quotes the following passage from Gerhardsson, where Gerhardsson writes, 'All historical probability is in favor of Jesus' disciples, and the whole of early Christianity, having accorded the sayings of one whom they believed to be the Messiah at least the same degree of respect as the pupils of a rabbi accorded the words of *their* master.'[16] Davies then adds, 'I find this reasonable; its consequences are, of course, significant for one's approach to "the tradition"'.[17] His main criticism concerns the place of and emphasis on the spirit:

What we are more particularly concerned to note now is that the interpretive activity of the earliest communities involving the setting of events and words in the light of the Old Testament, was likely to lend fluidity rather than fixity to the material transmitted, a fluidity in which event and meaning, *ipsissima verba* and their interpretation, would tend to merge.[18]

C.H. Dodd also enunciated a median position that perhaps reflects the stance of many where he writes:

When all allowance has been made for... limiting factors... the changes of oral transmission, the effect of translation, the interest of teachers in making the sayings 'contemporary'... it remains that the first three Gospels offer a body of sayings on the whole so consistent, so coherent, and withal so distinctive in manner, style and content that no reasonable critic should doubt, whatever reservations he may have about individual sayings, that we find reflected here the thought of a single unique teacher.[19]

In summary, the sayings of Jesus can perhaps be compared to water which comes out of a spring at the top of a mountain. Bultmann insists that the water seeps into the ground and disappears. Further down the mountain water trickles out of the ground at various points and gradually gathers into a small stream. Unsuspecting villagers who have never climbed the mountain, yet knowing that there is a spring at its top, uncritically assume that the water comes from the spring. In fact, most of it does not, but the question is irrelevant. In sharp contrast, the Scandinavian school answers - no, there is an iron pipe fixed to a concrete catchment pool at the very top. This pipe stretches all the way down the mountain and the evangelists can drink from it at the bottom, assured that they are drinking pure spring water, unadulterated by the soils and plants of the mountainside. Dodd and many others answer - put the water from all the various rivulets at the bottom of the mountain through a filter and you get the same-tasting spring water. Thus, there can be no doubt about a single unique source for that water. Dodd suggests no theory as to how the water got down the mountain. The specific purpose of this paper is to set forth a concrete methodological model that we are hopeful may provide structure for a median position. As we approach the Synoptic tradition the current options seem to be: assume the pedagogy of the rabbinic schools, project some form of radical kerygmatizing, or 'muddle through' somewhere in the middle. As in the case of Yousef Matti and his thirsty flies, we hope to sidestep abstract Western theories and concentrate rather on concrete Middle Eastern human realities with the

hope that from them a new abstraction can be formulated that will be appropriate to the Synoptic data in our hands.

An alternative way forward: informal controlled oral tradition

Initially we can observe that both the Bultmannian and the Scandinavian models still exist around us in the Middle East today. The informal uncontrolled oral tradition can be labelled 'rumour transmission'. Tragedies and atrocity stories naturally slip into this category and when tragedy or civil strife occur, rumour transmission quickly takes over. From 1975 to 1984 the present writer was awash in such oral transmission in Beirut, Lebanon. A story of three people killed in a bread line in front of a bakery by a random shell quickly became a story of 300 people massacred in cold blood when the account was retold by angry compatriots of the victims.

On the other hand, the formal controlled oral tradition is also a living reality. This form of tradition is most visible publicly in the memorization of the entire Qur'an by Muslim sheiks and in the memorization of various extensive liturgies in Eastern Orthodoxy. Nielsen, in his monograph Oral Tradition, notes, 'Turning to West-Semitic culture we remark that it is quite apparent that the written word is not valued highly. It is not considered an independent mode of expression... the written copies of the Qur'an play an astonishingly unobtrusive role in Islam.'[20] In his famous autobiography, Taha Hussein of Egypt describes his memorization of the Qur'an as a young boy of eight (around the turn of the century), and with it the learning of *Alflyat Ibn Malik*.[21] The latter work is a collection of 1,000 couplets of Arabic verse, each of which defines some aspect of Arabic grammar. It was my privilege to study in Cairo in the fifties under a venerable Islamic scholar, Shaykh Sayyed, who had both of these works fully committed to memory with total recall at the age of 75. I would bring to him a couplet of Arabic poetry and ask him if it was in the Qur'an. He would close his eyes for a few seconds, mentally flip through the entire Qur'an, and then give his answer. Similarly, any point of grammar evoked the quotation of one of the 1,000 couplets of *Ibn Malik*.

Shaykh Sayyed is the inheritor of an attitude and a methodology that is at least as old as Plato. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates record what he heard from ancient Egypt regarding a conversation between two Egyptian gods, Thamus and Theuth. Theuth was credited with the invention of geometry, astronomy, dice and letters. So Theuth was discussing the importance of his invention of letters with his fellow deity Thamus, and proudly spoke as follows:

This invention will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered. But Thamus replied, 'Most ingenious Theuth… you who are the father of letters have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory ... you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with since they are not wise, but only appear wise.[22]

Gerhardsson documents the fact that the rabbinic tradition held much the same view for the same reasons - the passing on of the memorized tradition provided opportunity for explanation and

discussion as to its meaning, while the cold lifeless book did not. In the same period Plutarch described the historian's task in his famous *Plutarch's Lives*. He wrote:

As he [the historian] has materials to collect from a variety of books dispersed in different libraries, his first care should be to take up his residence in some populace town which has an ambition for literature. There he will meet with many curious and valuable books: and the particulars that are wanting in writers, he may upon inquiry, be supplied with by those who have laid them up in the faithful repository of memory. This will prevent his work from being defective in any material point.[23]

One has a distinctively different feel for such things, having for two years observed, in Shaykh Sayyid in Cairo, a living counterpart of this ancient methodology.

Turning to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, his Grace George Salibo, Syriac Orthodox Bishop of Mount Lebanon, has described to me the tradition of the great St Ephrem the Syrian. In the late second century Bardaisan, the poet and heretic, disseminated his views not by authoring heretical texts but by composing stanza after stanza of seven-syllable-per-line Syriac hymns. Nearly 200 years after his death his material was still firmly entrenched in the Syriac community. St Ephrem in the late fourth century was anxious to counteract the heresies of Bardaisan. But he could only fight fire with fire. To compose a book disputing Bardaisan would have been pointless - who would read it? So the great saint himself composed stanza after stanza of poetry using the same seven-syllable-per-line metre and poured it, as it were, into the same lake. Because of the quality of the poetry and the cultural receptivity to the metre, his new orthodox hymns were received by the grass-roots community and the hymns moved by themselves all across the Syriac Church, displacing Bardaisan's heresy. In this theological battle of the giants no writing was involved. So today, at the 'Atshani Syrian Orthodox seminary in Lebanon, the students converse only in fourth-century Syriac and, in that same classical language, sing St Ephrem's hymns by the hour. Books? There are no books - who needs them?

So *informal uncontrolled* oral tradition and *formal controlled* oral tradition are both still very much alive in the Middle East. The first results from natural human failings; the second is a carefully nurtured methodology of great antiquity that is still practised and held in high regard by both Christians and Muslims. But at the same time we also have in the Middle Eastern traditional cultural world a third phenomenon with a unique methodology all its own, that to my knowledge is unknown in NT circles and has never been analysed. This I have chosen to call *informal controlled* oral tradition. This reality also preserves within it material of claimed great antiquity and has all the markings of an ancient methodology. In regard to this *informal controlled* oral tradition we will examine in turn the setting in which it functions, the nature of the functionaries, the kinds of material retained, the controls exercised by the community, and the techniques for introducing new material. We will then reflect briefly on the significance of this type of oral tradition for the Synoptic tradition and finally attempt some preliminary conclusions. The Synoptic problem is beyond the scope of this essay. Our goal here is to introduce *new data* that we feel worthy of consideration as a background for approaching a wide range of interpretive questions related to the Synoptic Gospels.

The setting and the reciters

As indicated by the title, the setting is *informal*. The traditional scene is the gathering of villagers in the evening for the telling of stories and the recitation of poetry. These gatherings have a name: they are called *haflat samar. Samar* in Arabic is a cognate of the Hebrew *shamar*, meaning 'to preserve'. The community is *preserving* its store of tradition. By *informal* we mean that there is no set teacher and no specifically identified student. As stories, poems and other traditional materials are told and recited through the evening, anyone can theoretically participate. In fact, the older men, the more gifted men, and the socially more prominent men tend to do the reciting. The reciters will shift depending on who is seated in the circle. Young people can have their own *haflat samar* where the same selection process prevails but produces, naturally, different reciters. I have often been seated in such circles when some piece of traditional oral literature is quoted. I might not happen to know the story and so proceed to ask what it is all about. Someone then says, 'Elder so-and-so knows the story.' The ranking social/intellectual figure then proceeds to tell the story with pride. By contrast, in the recitation of *formal controlled* oral tradition there is a specifically identified teacher with a recognized title and a specifically identified student. The two of them often meet in a special building, a school or college.

Nielsen discusses Middle Eastern story-telling but has turned to bedouin culture and noted the professional storytellers who, he claims, roam from campfire to campfire telling their tales. I am not an expert in bedouin culture and so cannot comment on his undocumented remarks. I do know how these things work in the settled, traditional village. The elders are on couches lining the walls, doing the reciting. Everyone else in the room and in the adjoining rooms are the informal 'students' listening to the elders pass on the tradition of the community. Anyone in the community can be a reciter. No official storytellers or official students are designated. Those who dominate the recitation process shift naturally, much like the shifting of speakers in the average group discussion. Who does the talking is determined by who is there. At the same time, there *are* parameters. Only those within the community who have grown up hearing the stories have the right to recite them in public gatherings of the village. I can recall vividly, in the village of Kom al-Akhdar in the south of Egypt, asking a particular person about the village traditions. He was in his sixties and seemed to be an appropriate person to ask. He offered a few remarks and was soon interrupted by others around the circle who said,

'He wouldn't understand - he is not from this village.'
'How long has he lived here?' I queried.
'Only thirty-seven years,' came the calm answer.
Poor fellow - he didn't understand, he was an outsider - only thirty-seven years - surely not long enough to be allowed to recite the village traditions in public.

Types of material retained

What, then, are the types of material preserved in this *informal,* yet *controlled,* oral tradition? The first are short pithy *proverbs*. Professor Hezkial of Assiut College in the south of Egypt has collected over 2,000 southern Egyptian village proverbs.[24] In 1974 Anis Frayha of Lebanon published a significant collection of Lebanese counterparts entitled *Mu'jam al-amthal al-Lubnaniyah* (*Dictionary of Lebanese Proverbs*).[25] Then in 1978 Dr Hani al-Amad produced a noteworthy work entitled *al-Amthal al-Sha'biyah al-Urduniyah* (*The Popular Proverbs of Jordan*).[26] Most recently, in 1985 two volumes of proverbs were published in Jerusalem by 'Isa

'Atallah of Bethlehem with the title *Qalufi al-Mathal* (*The Proverb Says*...).[27] This latter work includes 6,000 proverbs, the vast majority of them popular and colloquial in nature. Significantly, this work is subtitled 'Mowsu'ah fi al-Amthal wa al-Hikam al-Sa'ira' (Encyclopedia of Current Proverbs and Wisdom Sayings). Of particular interest to our topic is the word 'Current'. We are here observing a community that can create (over the centuries) and sustain in current usage up to 6,000 wisdom sayings. Other cultures express their cultural values visibly in buildings and monuments. One of the major ways Middle Eastern peoples express their values is through the creating and preserving of wisdom sayings that are rich and satisfying to them and to anyone who is privileged to participate in that same language and culture. Indeed, our own culture has within it some such wisdom material floating in oral form, such as 'a stitch in time saves nine'. But Middle Eastern society (as we have noted) preserves orally thousands of such wisdom sayings.[28]

The second type of material is *story riddles*. These are not riddles in the Western sense of a riddle, where the questioner puts a brain-twister to the listener. Rather, in the story the hero is presented with an unsolvable problem and comes up with a *wise* answer, like Solomon with the one baby and the two mothers. The account of Jesus and the woman taken in adultery (Jn. 7:53-8:11) also fits into this category.

A third literary form is *poetry*. In Lebanon and Palestine the poems are of two distinct types. First are the classical poems that are recited from known authors. This material is now mostly published. The poetry of pre-Islamic Arabia was preserved for hundreds of years in oral form and finally committed to writing.[29] But there is a second type called *zajal* which is a distinct unlettered form of verse, composed by intelligent villagers who are not necessarily literate. The material has some syllable counts and some end rhymes but the feature that is most prominent is a distinctive repetitive tune used for recitation. A *zajali* (a man with the skills required for the creation of this type of village verse) is a famous man. His verse will be recited all across the district in which he lives. Such men are in heavy demand at weddings and other festive occasions because of their ability to create stanzas *ad lib*. Two of them can respond to one another in *ad lib* verse like masters of ceremonies trading toasts or jokes. In the seventeenth century a *zajali* Maronite monk composed a complete history of the Maronite church in *zajal*. His work was transmitted orally for over 200 years.[30]

Fourth is the *parable* or *story*. These begin, 'Once there was a rich man who...' or 'a priest who...' or 'a soldier who...' and so forth. They are told like stories anywhere both to instruct and to entertain.

Fifth are *well-told accounts of the important figures in the history of the village or community.* These are often told in the present tense, irrespective of their age. For example, in the cliffs behind the village of Dayr Abu Hinnis, in the south of Egypt, there are Middle Kingdom cave-stone quarries that were inhabited by Christians during the times of Roman persecution. Local Christian villagers tell visitors, 'When the Romans came, *we* escaped to the mountains and *our* men sneaked down to the river at night to get water.' As we will note, the same villagers tell stories of the founding of the monastery that gave birth to their village. *I* know that they are telling stories from the fourth century and before. They know the account only as *the ziman* (from long ago). If there is a central figure critical to the history of the village, stories of this

central figure will abound. These stories are local and can be heard only in the village that considers these recollections important for its identity.

Controls exercised by the community

This brings us to examine the *controlled* nature of this transmission. Nielsen records Gunkel's recollections of story-telling by the grandfather of the German home passing on German folk tales. This is *not* the type of setting that we have observed. No-one will tell the grandfather that he is telling the story incorrectly. Rather we are discussing informal but *controlled* oral tradition. What then are the controls?

Essentially, the controls are exercised by the community itself. The material is passed on *in public* in the formal setting of the *haflat samar* described above. The seated community exercises control over the recitation of the tradition. Three levels of flexibility can be observed. Two of the above-mentioned types of tradition fall into the first level, two into the second and one into the third.

(i) No flexibility

The first level allows for *no flexibility* - not even of a single word. *Poems* and *proverbs* fall into this category. If the reciter makes a mistake, he subjects himself to public correction, and thereby to public humiliation. As the present writer has observed over a period of thirty-seven years, Middle Eastern village culture is a shame-pride culture: that is, it is a culture in which the child is not told, 'That's wrong, Johnny' (appealing to an abstract principle of right and wrong), but rather, 'Shame on you, Johnny', appealing to a sense of honour. If the reciter quotes a proverb with so much as one word out of place, he will be corrected by a chorus of voices. If the reciter is uncertain he will ask, 'How does that proverb go?' And the community will assist him from their collective memory. The poetry has its own inner poetic structure to assure its preservation. The structure/form will be recognized even by people who do not know the particular poem being recited. This is true both of the classical poems and the village *zajal* poems. As in the case of the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, most of the poetry is so well known that no one *dares* recite it unless he is sure that he has the poem accurately memorized.

(ii) Some flexibility

The second level of flexibility allows for *some* individual interpretation of the tradition. *Parables* and *recollections of historical people and events* important to the identity of the community fall into this category. Here there is flexibility *and* control. The central threads of the story cannot be changed, but flexibility in detail is allowed.

An example is perhaps appropriate. Sixteen years ago, seated in a *haflat samar,* someone responded to the group conversation with *'Wafaqa Shannun Tabaqa'* (Shann was pleased to accept Tabaqa). I immediately sensed that this was the punch-line of a story, and the story was unknown to me. So I asked, in good biblical fashion, 'What mean ye by these things?' The circle quickly sensed the formal nature of what was happening, and someone said, 'Rev. Dagher knows the story.' In fact, they all knew it, but the ranking patriarch was given the honour of telling the story to the newcomer. The story had three basic scenes and the proverb as a punch-line at the end.

Ten years after hearing this story I dredged it up out of my memory and ran an experiment in one of my classes in Beirut. The class contained village boys from Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt. The Egyptian had not heard it. The other four knew the story in all its details. Had any of them ever read it? No, they had only heard it orally. They all knew it as an old story and thus as part of the tradition. 'Did I tell it correctly?' I asked. Answer - yes. We then examined what must be present in the recitation for them to sense that I was telling it correctly. We produced a list. The proverb that appeared in the story (the punch-line) had to be repeated verbatim. The three basic scenes could not be changed, but the order of the last two could be reversed without triggering the community rejection mechanism. The basic flow of the story and its conclusion had to remain the same. The names could not be changed. The summary punch-line was inviolable. However, the teller could vary the pitch of one character's emotional reaction to the other, and the dialogue within the flow of the story could at any point reflect the individual teller's style and interests. That is, the story-teller had a certain freedom to tell the story in his own way as long as the central thrust of the story was not changed.

So here was continuity *and* flexibility. Not continuity and change. The distinction is important. Continuity and change could mean that the story-teller could change, say, 15 per cent of the story - any 15 per cent. Thus after seven transmissions of the story theoretically *all* of the story could be changed. But continuity *and* flexibility mean that the main lines of the story cannot be changed at all. The story can endure a hundred transmissions through a chain of a hundred and one different people and the inner core of the story remains intact. Within the structure, the story-teller has flexibility within limits to 'tell it his own way'. But the basic story-line remains the same. By telling and retelling, the story does not evolve from A to B to C. Rather, the original structure of the story remains the same but it can be coloured green or red or blue.

In C.S. Lewis's introduction to his anthology of the writings of George MacDonald,[31] he makes a point relative to our topic. He discusses the relationship between a story and the words in which that story is expressed. He points out that a great story consists of a particular 'pattern of events'. It is that particular 'pattern of events' that nourishes and delights the listener, not a particular set of words. Lewis grants that if the means of communication are words, 'it is desirable that [the story] should be fairly written', but he adds, 'this is only a minor convenience' (pp. xxvi-xxvii). When the community is reciting stories and parables using *informal controlled* oral tradition it is indeed passing on, in Lewis's words, 'a particular pattern of events' in a community-controlled, yet informal, setting. The overall pattern of events is fixed, as are some of the words used in expressing that pattern - but not all the words. The individual story-teller is allowed freedom within limits.

Historical narratives important to the life of the individual village also fall into this second level of flexibility that provides for both continuity and freedom for individual interpretation of the tradition. Again an example will help clarify this aspect of our topic. Twenty-five years ago Father Makhiel of the village of Dayr Abu Hennis told me of the founding of his village. The Romans came in the second century and built the city of Antinopolis. Later, Christian monks built a monastery at the edge of the city for the specific purpose of witnessing to their faith in the pagan city. To support themselves they made workmen's baskets from palm leaves, but rather than give the baskets the functional two handles, the monks put a third handle on the side. As

they sold the baskets in the market of the city, customers were attracted by the quality and price, but amazed at the three handles.

'Why have you put three handles on these baskets?' they would ask.
'Well you see,' the monks would reply, 'this has to do with what we believe.'
'How interesting. What is it that you believe?' would come the query.
'Well, we know that God is three in one, just as this basket is one basket and yet has three handles,' the monks would respond.

So, by design, the livelihood of the monastery provided an opportunity for witness. The story is a simple historical recollection that survives from the fourth century. Again, flexibility is possible and authenticity is assured. To change the basic story-line while telling that account in the village of Dayr Abu Hennis is unthinkable. If you persisted, I think you would be run out of the village. They have told it the same way for centuries. Thus, in summary, stories, parables and historical narratives have continuity and flexibility in their recitation.

(iii) Total flexibility

The third level of flexibility in the *haflat samar* can be observed in the telling of jokes, the reporting of the casual news of the day, the reciting of tragedies in nearby villages and (in the case of inter-communal violence) atrocity stories. Within this classification of material there is no control. Flux and gross exaggeration are possible. *The material is irrelevant to the identity of the community* and is not judged *wise* or *valuable*. It floats and dies in a state of total instability. It does not enter the tradition and is soon forgotten or reshaped beyond recognition.

Techniques for assimilating new material

Thus far we have been examining only old material and how it is preserved, controlled and passed on. What then of more recent material? Here we would observe an oral tradition community as it enters new material into its oral store of recollections judged worthy of preservation. The case we have in mind centres in the nineteenth century around John Hogg, a Scottish missionary who was the founder of many of the Protestant churches in the south of Egypt. A biography of John Hogg was published by his daughter in 1914,[32] primarily from his letters and papers. But, in the tradition of Plutarch mentioned above, she also used oral sources. Indeed, her father had been dead only twenty-eight years when she was assembling her material.

John Hogg was the primary founder of the new Egyptian Evangelical community. Each village had and has its own stories of what he said and did. The more dramatic of these stories have moved from village to village among evangelicals, but each account is primarily preserved in the village of origin.

In the late fifties I encountered this same tradition. One village proudly told of how he was preaching in a village courtyard and the mayor, anxious to cause trouble, sent a village guard up onto the adjoining roof to urinate on him. Hogg stepped aside, took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his head and continued preaching without looking up. The mayor was so shamed and impressed that after inquiry and study he joined the infant church and became one of its leaders.

In a trouble-maker's home in the village of Nazlet al-Milk Hogg was asked, 'Dr Hogg, do you seek to obey what is written in the Gospels?'
'I do,' answered Hogg.
'Very well then,' they said, 'in the Gospel it says that the evangelist is to eat what is set before him. Do you accept that?'
'Yes,' came the reply, whereupon they placed in front of him a dried cow manure patty of the type that village homes use for cooking fuel and said to him, 'Very well, then, eat *this!*'
Hogg reflected momentarily and answered quietly, *'Da akl in-nar. Eddini akl al-bashar wa akulha'* (This is food for a fire. Give me food for people and I will eat it). The present writer is fully confident that the above Arabic sentence is a record of Hogg's exact words spoken once over a hundred years ago and here recorded for the first time.

In the village of al-Muti'ah he anchored his houseboat on the river at the edge of the village. After some time village children began gathering and in turn composed a taunt song which they sang every time he came down from or returned to the houseboat. The taunt song was along the following lines:
Mister John Hogg is too tall.
Crack his head and see him fall.
Hour after hour, day after day, this became tiresome. Hogg decided that something had to be done. So he purchased a large sack of hard candy and told the children that he really appreciated their song. Would they sing it for him? Delighted, the children then sang the song with gusto. He then expressed gratitude and passed out hard candy to the singers as a reward. This continued for a number of days until the sack of hard candy was finally finished. On the next occasion they sang the taunt song as usual. He offered his usual thanks and praise, but there was no candy. The children complained, 'Where is our candy?' He answered, 'I don't have any more candy.' They responded testily, '*Well*, if you don't give us any candy we won't come here and sing your song for you!!' The candy was not forthcoming and so the children stomped off, never to return. The incident occurred about 1870. It was proudly reported to me in 1961 by the al-Muti'ah Evangelical community, complete with taunt song.

Before the First World War John Hogg's daughter dipped into this same oral tradition and in her biography of him told how he was waylaid at night by a band of robbers who demanded valuables. He quickly surrendered a gold watch and his money, but indicated that he had a treasure worth far more. They were curious. He pulled a small book from his pocket and spent the entire night telling them of the treasures it contained. By morning the band, convicted of the evil of their ways, sought to return his watch and money and pledged themselves to give up highway robbery. Hogg took the watch but insisted that they keep his money, and indeed then financed the gang personally until they could establish themselves in legal employment. Thus, like Plutarch (and St Luke, *cf.* Lk. 1:1-2), Rena Hogg had available to her both written and oral sources.

John Hogg was the founder of the community. Stories of what he did and said, particularly in contexts of conflict, became a part of the tradition of the community, and were passed on in their *haflat samar*. Rena Hogg dipped into that tradition in 1910. I dipped into the same tradition in 1955-65 and found the same stories told in almost the same way. The tradition will last in those

villages as long as the community he founded survives or until they acquire electricity and television.

Thus we have observed some material of great antiquity passed on in the *informal controlled* oral tradition. Other material in the tradition is a mere hundred years old. The writing down of the material (particularly in a second language) did not halt the oral recitation of that same material nor curtail its controlled flexibility. Furthermore, we discovered verifiable evidence of authenticity in oral transmission at least from 1914 to 1960.

But what is the process of *entering* new material into this form of tradition? We will limit ourselves to two illustrations, one a parable and one an historical incident. First, the parable. The official head of the Protestants in Lebanon was, until his recent death, the Rev. Ibrahim Dagher. Rev. Dagher was an authentic reciter of the *informal controlled* oral tradition of his community. In the autumn of 1967 a theological college in Lebanon where I was teaching was requested by its Board to conduct a series of public lectures relating to the war in June. We did so. The last of the series was led by three Middle Eastern pastors. Each spoke in turn. The first two gave a strong, fair, rational appeal for support of the Palestinian cause. They spoke for some forty-five minutes. Lastly, Rev. Dagher, a Lebanese nationalist, rose to his feet. He spoke as follows:

Once there was a bedouin who had a camel. On a cold night the camel said to the bedouin, 'My *nose* is very cold. May I put my nose in your tent?' The bedouin said, *'Tafaddal'* (please go ahead). A bit later the camel said, 'My *ears* are very cold. May I put my ears in your tent?' The bedouin said, *'Tafaddal.'* Then the camel said, 'My *neck* is still in the cold wind. May I put my neck in your tent?' The bedouin said, *'Tafaddal.'* The neck of the camel is very strong. When the camel had his neck in the tent he jerked his powerful neck upwards and struck the top of the tent with his head, and the tent collapsed on the bedouin and on the camel.

Rev. Dagher then sat down. That was eighteen years ago. The present text is, to my knowledge, the first time that this parable has ever been recorded on paper. The audience instinctively recognized that the camel symbolized the Palestinians, the bedouin referred to the Lebanese and the tent represented Lebanon. The point of view expressed is that of the Lebanese nationalists. My purpose here is not to agree or disagree with Rev. Dagher's views, but rather to examine the methodology of the authoritative figure in an *informal* controlled oral tradition community. The conceptual content of the parable is straightforward. He was saying, 'We the Lebanese have welcomed our Palestinian brothers into Lebanon, but there is danger lest they break down the social and political structures of Lebanon and bring the whole country crashing down around our ears.' The climate in which we lived in 1967 would *not* have allowed such a public statement. But, he did not say anything! He just told a 'simple' (?) story. A number of analytical observations can be made.

First, the author was the leader of the community. Second, the parable was told in a conflict setting. Third, an old familiar story was retold but with some critical revisions. Everyone in the audience *thought* they knew how the story was going to end. They assumed that in the end the camel would drive the bedouin out of the tent. The *revisions* in the traditional story went off like a mental hand-grenade and Rev. Dagher's main point was located in those revisions. Fourth, we all participated in a 'language-event'. Fifth, the author of the parable gave what his fellow

Lebanese deemed a 'wise answer' and thereby gave the community a good feeling about the rightness of following this particular leader. Sixth, the lecture hall was electrified and the parable was rendered quite unforgettable to all those present irrespective of their views. I venture to suggest that we have recorded above at least 80 per cent of Rev. Dagher's *ipsissima verba* even though I heard the parable *once* eighteen years ago. All of this happened in the modern sophisticated city of Beirut, not in a small rural village, yet the parable survived in Protestant circles and was retold all across the Middle East. Indeed, in the summer of 1984 the parable was repeated to me intact in Bristol, England, by a witness who had heard it in Jordan in the late sixties. Such is the strength of *informal controlled* oral tradition in the Middle East.

What, then, of an historical event? For this I would turn to a wedding in the village of Dayr al-Barsha in the south of Egypt in 1958. I was out of the village and missed the wedding. At village weddings hundreds, or even thousands, of rifle rounds are fired into the air in celebration. Much of the ammunition is old and the guns are fired carelessly. At times, as in this case, tragedy results. In the celebrations after the wedding ceremony a friend of the groom fired his rifle. The gun did not go off. He lowered the gun and then the defective bullet fired, passing through the groom who was killed instantly.

A week later I returned to the village without knowledge of the tragedy. I was first met by the man in whose courtyard I parked my car before entering the row-boat to cross the Nile to the village. The man asked me if I had heard the story: *'Sima't alqissa?*' he queried. 'No,' I answered. He related the event to me. At its climax he said:

Hanna fired the gun. The gun did not go off. He lowered the gun. The gun fired [*durib al-bundugiyya* - passive]. The bullet passed through the stomach of Butrus. He died. He did not cry out, 'O my father', nor 'O my mother' [meaning he died instantly without crying out]. When the police came we told them, 'A camel stepped on him.'

The boatman asked me the same question: *'Sima't al-qissa?'* (Have you heard the story?). He then related his version of the tragedy, but when he came to the above-mentioned climax he repeated almost the exact phrases I had heard from the first witness. The same conversation then took place with a boy on the far bank of the river. He also wanted to know if I had heard the *qissa*. He related a 12-year-old boy's view - but when he came to the climax of the story, the same verbiage emerged, almost word by word, verb by verb and tense by tense. On reaching the village I observed the same phenomena in turn with the village guards, with the mayor during a courtesy call, and with the village preacher with whom I was staying.

After some reflection and with the help of my good friend Rev. Rifqi, the village pastor, a bit of analysis was possible. When a death like this occurs the critical question becomes: is the family of the dead man going to blame the person who held the gun (in which case blood vengeance must be exacted and said person will be killed by the groom's family), or has the grieving family accepted the tragedy as an act of God (in which case some payment will be made but the police will be told nothing and sent back to their provincial headquarters)? So, after about three days, the community decided together that this was an act of God, hence the use of the divine passive verb (so common in Luke), 'The gun fired' (passive). God fired the gun, not Hanna. The police were told, 'A camel stepped on him', meaning 'We have settled this among ourselves and we

don't want any police interference in the internal affairs of our community.' We note in passing that no deception is intended or perpetrated (Middle Eastern peoples communicate *magnificently* using a very sophisticated double-talk). The police in this case knew *exactly* what had happened. *Unofficially* and privately all the details are given to them. But after the above community theological decision and the ensuing condensation of the story, the police can *officially* examine all 5,000 people in the village and receive the same answer from all. So, in roughly three days, a summary of the *climax* of the event (with interpretation) was crystallized and was available on all the various sociological levels of the village, from the young boy in the street to the boatman on the river, up through the village guards to the mayor and the preacher.

This particular story will not be told for more than a generation. The characters involved were not founders of the community. If the two families were leading families it might last two or three generations. Anyone in their teens at the time of the event would be able to retell it for the rest of his/her life. Thus the story might survive fifty years. The families involved will tell it some time longer. But what of the present witness? I am not an acceptable reciter of the village tradition. I did not grow up in that village, but I heard all of this twenty-eight years ago - and the central core is still indelibly fixed in my mind. Why? Because it was firmly implanted in my memory that first week by the constant repetition of the community condensation. Each retelling included the above-mentioned central core of information recited, in each case, with nearly the same words.

This same phenomenon of community repetition of a central core of information in a story or event was also on display in worship. Often while preaching I would tell a story new to the community. At the conclusion of the telling of the story the attention of the congregation would literally break up in what I discovered was a form of oral shorthand. The elder on the front row would shout across the church to a friend in a loud voice, 'Did you hear what the preacher said? He said...' and then would come a line or two of the story including the punch-line. People all across the church instinctively turned to their neighbours and repeated the central thrust of the story twice and thrice to each other. They wanted to retell the story that week across the village and they had to learn it on the spot. The preacher was not *allowed* to continue until they had done so. Through such incidents it was possible to observe *informal controlled* oral tradition functioning at close range, and watch it solidify and orally record information for transmission. As we have noted, there was a relatively inflexible central core of information and along with it a community-controlled freedom to vary the story according to individual perspectives.

The significance of informal controlled oral tradition for Synoptic studies: some preliminary conclusions

So, in Luke 1:2 we are told of eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, the *hoi. . . autoptai kai huperetai ... tou logou. Huperetes* is the Greek word for the Hebrew word *hazzan.*[33] The *hazzan*, as a synagogue official, was responsible, among other things, for the scrolls in the synagogue. Indeed in Luke 4:20 the *hazzan/huperetes* is clearly an official in a synagogue (and is handling the scrolls). But in Luke 1:2 we read the *hazzan/huperetes* of the *word*. The single definite article in Luke 1:2 makes it likely that these specially designated people were also eyewitnesses.

It is my suggestion that up until the upheaval of the Jewish-Roman war *informal controlled* oral tradition was able to function in the villages of Palestine. Those who accepted the new rabbi as

the expected Messiah would record and transmit data concerning him as the source of their new identity. Then in AD 70 many of the settled villages of Palestine were destroyed and many of the people dispersed. Thus the Jewish-Roman war would have disrupted the sociological village structures in which the *informal controlled* oral tradition functioned. However, anyone twenty years old and older in that year would have been an authentic reciter of that tradition. It appears that the earliest church may have refined the methodology already functioning naturally among them. Not everyone who lived in the community in the village and heard the stories of Jesus was authorized to recite the tradition. The witness was required to have been an *eyewitness* of the historical Jesus to qualify as a *huperetes tou logou* (*cf*. Lk. 1:2). Thus, at least through to the end of the first century, the authenticity of that tradition was assured to the community through specially designated authoritative witnesses. At the same time, with the destruction of the controlling communities which monitored and passed on the tradition, the corruption evidenced in the apocryphal gospels is explainable.

Thus, in summary and conclusion, here we have observed a classical methodology for the preservation, control and transmission of tradition that provides, on the one hand, assurance of authenticity and, on the other hand, freedom within limits for various forms of that tradition. Furthermore, the types of material that appear in the Synoptic Gospels include primarily the same forms that we have found preserved by *informal controlled* oral tradition such as proverbs, parables, poems, dialogues, conflict stories and historical narratives. In the case of John Hogg, the material was preserved because it was a record of the words and deeds of the founder of the community and thus an affirmation of the identity of the reciters of that tradition. We are convinced that the same can be affirmed regarding the Synoptic tradition. In the light of the reality described above the assumption that the early Christians were not interested in history becomes untenable. To remember the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth was to affirm their own unique identity. The stories had to be *told* and *controlled* or everything that made them who they were was lost.[34]

The Synoptic tradition can be compared to an automobile. For a long time we have known that the machine has an accelerator which provides for movement. But the 'car' also has a *brake* that controls and, when necessary, stops that movement. The many reasons for *movement* in the Synoptic tradition are well known and have been noted by Dodd and Davies quoted above. While affirming that freedom of movement, it has been our intent here to study the 'braking system' that keeps that movement within limits and assures continuity and authenticity to what is being transmitted. Rather than a modern subjective Western model, we are confident that a traditional Middle Eastern cultural model is more appropriate to the materials at hand.

Paul makes use of the recitation formula, 'What I have received I delivered unto you'. Thus some *formal* controlled oral tradition existed, and anyone with a good memory could, and can, become a reciter of what he/she has memorized. But Paul cannot become a reciter of the *informal* controlled oral tradition. He cannot become a *huperetes tou logou*. Thus he does not try. He presumes only to make passing references to the specific Jesus sayings in the Synoptic tradition. Following C.S. Lewis's formulation, Paul knows 'the pattern of events' of the passion. His writings are brilliant theological interpretations of that pattern of events with reflections on the ethical implications that stem from it. The evangelists in turn rely on the reciters of the tradition and produce the gospels.

We are not suggesting absolute categories. The pedagogy of the rabbinic schools may well lie behind some of the material. The assumptions of radical kerygmatizing are perhaps less helpful. Needing to account for both event and interpretation, continuity and discontinuity, fixity and fluidity, it is our suggestion that the *informal* yet *controlled* oral tradition of the settled Middle Eastern village can provide a methodological framework within which to perceive and interpret the bulk of the materials before us.

References

[1] The Gospel of John has been deliberately omitted from the discussion in order to limit the scope of the essay.
[2] R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribners, *c.* 1921,1958), p.8.
[3] *ibid*., p.12.
[4] *ibid*., p.13.
[5] *ibid*., p.12.
[6] Riesenfeld, 'The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings', in *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), p. 11.
[7] *ibid*., p.14.
[8] *ibid*., p.19.
[9] *ibid*., p.22.
[10] *ibid.,* p. 26.
[11] *ibid.,* p. 29.
[12] B Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1961).
[13] *Idem, Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity. Coniectanea Neotestamentica XX* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1964).
[14] Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript,* p. 335.
[15] W.D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: CUP, 1964).
[16] Gerhardsson, *ibid*., p.258.
[17] Davies, *op. cit*., p. 466 n. 1.
[18] *Ibid*., p.477.
[19] C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.22. C.H. Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p.22.
[20] Eduard Nielsen, *Oral Tradition. Studies in Biblical Theology* No. 11 (Chicago: Alec R. Allensen, 1954), p. 21.
[21] Taha Hussein, *An Egyptian Childhood: The Autobiography of Taha Hussein, tr.* E.H. Paxton (London: G. Routledge, 1932).
[22] Plato, *Phaedrus,* 274C-275A, tr. H.N. Fowler in *Loeb Classical Library* I (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 560f.
[23] Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives* (Cincinnati: Applegate and Co., 1855), p. 545.
[24] Hezkial, *al-Amthal al-Misriyah,* an unpublished MS listing over 2,000 Egyptian proverbs. The Arabic text with a translation into English is currently in the hands of Dr Kenneth Noun, R.R. 1, Fredricktown, PA 15333, USA.
[25] Anis Frayha, *Mu'jam al-Amthal al-Lubnaniyah (Dictionary of Lebanese Proverbs)* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 1974).

[26] Hani al-Amad, *al-Amthal al-Sha'biyah al-Urduniyah (The Popular Proverbs of Jordan)* (Amman, 1978).
[27] 'Isa 'Atallah, *Qalu fi al-Mathal: Mowsu'ah fi al-Amthal wa al-Hikam al-Sa'ira (The Proverb Says: Encyclopedia of Current Proverbs and Wisdom Sayings)* (Bethlehem, 1985).
[28] See also G.W. Freitag, *Arabum Proverbia* (Bonnae ad Rhenum: A. Marcum, 1837), three vols.
[29] Luwis Shaykhu, *Shu'ra'al-Nasraniyah qabl al-Islam* (Christian Poets Prior to the Rise of Islam) (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1967).
[30] This information was acquired from an author, scholar, attorney-at-law and lay reader of the Orthodox Church in Lebanon, Mr Wa'il Khayr. Mr Khayr (a research scholar for the Middle East Council of Churches), in a series of extended conversations during 1980-84, introduced me in depth to this remarkable aspect of Lebanese traditional culture. The same poetic phenomenon exists in Palestine, as reported to me by Dr Genes S. Khoury of the Ecumenical Center for Theological Research, Tantur, Jerusalem.
[31] C.S. Lewis, Preface to *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (London: Collins, 1983).
[32] Rena L. Hogg, *Master Builder on the Nile* (New York: Flemming Revell, 1914).
[33] *Cf.* Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University Press, 1957), p. 850. Bauer documents the probable use on a Roman-Jewish grave of *huperetes* in referring to a synagogue attendant. This official, called the *hazzan* in Hebrew, is referred to as a synagogue attendant twice in the Mishna (M. Yoma 7:1, M. Sotah 7:8). Safrai writes, 'The head of the synagogue had an adjutant, the *hazzan* (*hzn*), undoubtedly the *huperetes* of Luke 4:20, who acted as executive officer in the practical details of running the synagogue' (S. Safrai, 'The Synagogue', in S. Safrai and M. Stern (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), pp. 935f.). It is clear that the synagogue had its *huperetes* as an official in the institution of the synagogue. Is it not possible that this is the key to an understanding of the *huperetai tou logou* in the Christian church who appear in Lk. 1:2? At the earliest stage of its history the church had neither buildings nor formal institutional structures that needed staff. Rather, it had a tradition that was precious to it. As the church grew and spread there was perhaps a need for those who were naturally qualified to recite the tradition to carry a special title and, with the title, a unique responsibility.
[34] We are not suggesting an early separation between the church and the synagogue. The evangelicals of Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine live in harmony with others in their cities, towns and villages. They tell stories relating to their identity when they meet as a special fellowship within the wider community. Early Hebrew Christians had accepted Jesus (at least) as their unique spiritual guide. Meeting with their fellow Jews on Saturday, they would naturally meet in a special fellowship on Sunday to recite their own unique tradition which gave content to their own special identity.