

**Birger Gerhardsson on the Transmission of
Jesus Traditions
– How Did the Rabbinic Model Advance a
Scholarly Discourse?**

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1. Introduction

The current scholarly debate on the transmission of Jesus traditions in early Christianity is lively.¹ The so-called Scandinavian school, or the rabbinic model, originally initiated by two Swedish New Testament scholars, Harald Riesenfeld and Birger Gerhardsson, has influentially shaped the scholarly discourse. In many respects critical of the early form-critical work by Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann,² especially Gerhardsson offered a historically more sensitive alternative to the romantic folkloric understanding of the development and transmission of the Jesus traditions.³ Gerhardsson's work was largely dismissed for decades as anachronistic and untenable; the early negative reactions were so influential that he was denied a hearing for a long time.⁴ In this paper, I intend to flesh out Gerhardsson's view and evaluate the criticism leveled against him. By critically engaging with Gerhardsson's work and the subsequent discussion on it, I also attempt to demonstrate the scholarly advances that were introduced or made possible by his theses.

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- 1 See, e.g., E. Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the oral tradition* (London: SPCK, 2013); R. A. Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing* (BPC 9; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013); J. D. G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013); R. Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014); M. F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).
 - 2 M. Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2nd rev. edn, 1933); R. Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhöck & Ruprecht, 3rd edn, 1958); also K. L. Schmidt, *Der Rahmen der Geschichte Jesu: literarkritische Untersuchungen zur ältesten Jesusüberlieferung* (Berlin: Trowitzsch & Sohn, 1919). While "Schmidt's influence is greatly eclipsed" by Dibelius and Bultmann (Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 33, 123), the term "separate oral units" nevertheless stemmed from his argument, which proposed a radical "rejection of the outline" of the Gospels. See V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition: Eight Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 2nd edn, 1949), pp. 12–13; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 15–16; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 74.
 - 3 B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961); idem, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1964). The 1998 edition of Gerhardsson's two works is referenced in this article (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).
 - 4 Esp. M. Smith, "A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition", *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 169–176; J. Neusner, "In Quest of the Historical Rabban Yohanan ben Zakai", *HTR* 59 (1966), pp. 391–413.

2. The Formal Controlled Tradition

The works of Harald Riesenfeld⁵ and his student Birger Gerhardsson⁶ offer some of the most significant counter proposals to early form criticism.⁷ Deriving their basic influences from Scandinavian Old Testament scholarship,⁸ both scholars argued against the basic tenet of flexible anonymous community tradition: the pre-Gospel oral tradition was formally controlled and handed down in manners reminiscent of rabbinic teaching and mnemonic techniques.⁹ Particularly, Gerhardsson is recognized as a seminal figure in research history, his ideas regarding the Jesus traditions, transmission, and memory being widely discussed.¹⁰

2.1. Birger Gerhardsson's Model

Gerhardsson's dissertation is of the greatest importance, although his subsequent articles further elucidated and somewhat qualified his viewpoints.¹¹ Gerhardsson first presented the comparative material for his model of the transmission of traditions within early Christianity.¹² He focused on the Jewish Torah of the Tannaitic (ca. 10–220 CE) and Amoraic periods (ca. 220–500 CE).¹³ Gerhardsson deliberately

5 Professor of New Testament exegesis in Uppsala 1953–1979.

6 Professor of exegetical theology in Lund 1965–1992.

7 H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of "Formgeschichte"* (London: Mowbray, 1957); idem, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970); Gerhardsson, *Memory*; idem, *Tradition*.

8 On the "Uppsala School" in Old Testament scholarship, including, e.g., Gerhardsson's Old Testament professor Ivan Engnell, G. W. Ahlström, H. S. Nyberg, Helmer Ringren, and Geo Widengren, see G. Widengren, "Tradition and Literature in Early Judaism and in the Early Church", *Numen* 10 (1963), pp. 42–83 (43–44); B. Gerhardsson, "The Secret of the Transmission of the Unwritten Jesus Tradition", *NTS* 51 (2005), pp. 1–18 (1–2); S. Byrskog, "Introduction", W. Kelber and S. Byrskog (eds.), *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspectives* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2009), pp. 1–20 (4–5).

9 Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*; idem, *The Gospel Tradition*; Gerhardsson, *Memory*; idem, *Tradition*; contra Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, pp. 1–8; Bultmann, *Geschichte*, pp. 1–8.

10 Gerhardsson's thesis has been further elaborated by R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981); idem, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher", Wansbrough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (JSNTSup 64; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 185–210; S. Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (ConBNT 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994); idem, *Story as History – History as Story* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

11 Gerhardsson, *Memory*; also, idem, *Tradition*; idem, *The Origins of the Gospel Tradition* (London: SCM, 1979); idem, "Der Weg der Evangelientradition", P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien. Vorträge vom Tübinger Symposium 1982* (WUNT 28; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), pp. 79–102; idem, *The Gospel Tradition* (ConBNT 15; Lund: Gleerup, 1986); idem, "Illuminating the Kingdom: Narrative Meshalim in the Synoptic Gospels", Wansbrough, *Jesus*, pp. 266–309; idem, "The Secret", pp. 1–18. Gerhardsson's articles (1979, 1983, 1986), were published in a combined English edition, Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

12 The scope of this paper does not allow a thorough presentation of Gerhardsson's rabbinic sources; the focus is on his basic analogy between the formal method of transmission, namely, memorization and replication of teaching, and early Christian transmission of "the Gospel tradition."

13 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 19–189, esp. pp. 19–42.

chose this comparative material.¹⁴ He recognized that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, ending in 135 CE, would have changed rabbinic views and actions; no significant new teaching techniques were introduced after 70 CE.¹⁵ He also looked at the transmission techniques of the Hellenistic groups, due to the Hellenistic influences on Palestinian Judaism and the Jewish educational system.¹⁶

Gerhardsson distinguished between the transmission of the written and oral Torah, emphasizing the role of the latter, which took place in different contexts within Judaism, “school” (בֵּית מִדְרָשׁ) being the most important one. While the sacred tradition was part of daily life, the activity of methodical transmission and preservation of the oral Torah took place within the scholarly circles.¹⁷

Like the written Torah, the oral Torah was carried and handed down through the memorization of the saying and narrative forms. The oral Torah interpreted, complemented and modified the written Torah. In the case of the former, an oral text was learned by repetition, and in the case of the latter, a written text was learned from reading.¹⁸

Memorization and interpretation were never confused. The basic method of transmission was employed on all educational levels: the traditionist repeated the oral text for the students, then required them to interpret it. Knowledge of the oral Torah was considered incomplete without interpretation, though on the lowest level of education this interpretation was often rudimentary.¹⁹ The general principle of “learn first, and then understand” denoted conservation of the authentic words of the teacher via condensation and abridgment,²⁰ mnemonic techniques,²¹ the help of written notes,²² repetition,²³ and measures to maintain the vast received and learned oral text material.²⁴

Gerhardsson divided the material of the oral Torah into the sayings tradition and the narrative tradition.²⁵ Doctrinal material and additional inspired words and episodes concerning the deeds of the rabbis were typically introduced to the process of transmission. The students memorized brief halakhic statements with other new sayings; the fixing of the doctrinal statements in different forms at differ-

14 See esp. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 30; cf. Byrskog, “Introduction”, p. 6. Criticizing Gerhardsson of plain anachronism at this point is unwarranted.

15 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 77–78. For example, Gerhardsson argued that Rabbi Aqiba (ca. 40–137 CE) made important contributions to “the re-editing of the traditional material in the oral Torah”, but his mishnah did not “represent a total innovation in method for transmission, learning, and study.”

16 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 22–27, 86–89, 150.

17 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 72–78.

18 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 79–83, 113–114; cf. Byrskog, “Introduction”, p. 7.

19 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 93–112, 113–119.

20 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 137, on the principle of דַּרְךְ קְצָרָה (“in the shortest way”) as a common pedagogical tendency in Rabbinic Judaism.

21 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 153: “Elements of the tradition are grouped together with the help of a conscious mental connection, such as a definite catch-word.”

22 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 157–163, argued that while students could use private notes to aid their memory, such notes were not considered authoritative.

23 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 163–168.

24 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 168–170.

25 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 171–189.

ent stages of the process resulted in different forms of the same tradition. Haggadic material also came to include additional sayings, which the teachers wished their students to memorize. Sayings only spoken by the teacher on one occasion or in an everyday discussion, and even free and peripheral sayings, were sometimes incorporated into the tradition due to the students' reverence for their doctrinal authorities.²⁶

Gerhardsson argued that the rabbinic narrative tradition was tendentious like any ancient tradition: it had an "intention of preserving and spreading, in one way or the other, the many-faceted wisdom of the Torah in face of all the situations of life."²⁷ The eyewitness reports of the teachers' words and actions were important for the formulation of most of the narrative tradition (with the exception of the imaginative haggadah type of material); after witnessing his teacher's words and deeds, the student was able to illustrate the way the doctrinal authority would settle particular questions.²⁸ Thus, Gerhardsson accounted a process of transmission, which was based on solidity and flexibility, rigid memorization and dynamic adaptation to new questions and situations.

Gerhardsson employed the rabbinic methods, while trying to avoid imposing them inflexibly on early Christianity. He began by asking how the Jesus tradition was handed on after the apostolic period.²⁹ Papias and Irenaeus subscribed to the language of memorization and receiving of traditions. The early church held a traditional conception of the origins of the Gospels, in which discipleship and memory were emphasized: all four Gospels were derived from "reliable traditionists who stand at one [Jesus' disciples] or two [the Apostles' disciples] removes from Jesus Christ."³⁰ The early writers were not specific about the literary category (Gattung) of the Gospels, which were written down as an emergency measure, a reflection of the ancient skepticism toward the written word.³¹ Several factors indicate that, during the first period of the church (approx. until 250 CE), the Gospels were regarded as "Holy Word" (ἱερός λόγος) or "oral (messianic) Torah," which primarily functioned orally, rather than as "Holy Scriptures" (ἱεραὶ γραφαί).³² Gerhardsson argued that the majority of the disciples came "from that section of the people which looked to the learned Pharisees as its teachers and spiritual leaders;" in line with the Pharisaic distinction between oral and written Torah, they began to compile collections of the Gospel material from oral tradition, also using written notes.³³

The Lukan author was central to Gerhardsson's argument.³⁴ He rejected "an extremely tenaciously-held misapprehension among exegetes" (most notoriously by Dibelius and Bultmann) that an early Christian author must be either a purposeful theologian or a fairly reliable historian. Luke was a purposeful theologian with an apologetic interest in demonstrating the reliability of the tradition on the basis of the eyewitnesses; this did not undermine his faithfulness to the tradition and his

26 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 174–181.

27 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 181–182.

28 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 183–184.

29 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 194–207.

30 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 194.

31 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 195–197.

32 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 197–207, esp. p. 200.

33 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 201–202.

34 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 208–261.

relative reliability as a historian.³⁵

According to Gerhardsson, Luke-Acts depict Jerusalem as the center for the teaching of the apostles.³⁶ The twelve apostles are the witnesses to Jesus' earthly ministry and resurrection; this gives them the authority to witness and teach "the word" in the name of their teacher Jesus, in a way reminiscent of the rabbinic disciples' way of speaking in the name of their masters.³⁷ In Luke's presentation, "the word" functions as an analogy to the rabbinic oral Torah. The speeches in Acts summarize the contents of "the word,"³⁸ although the church also adopted Israel's Scriptures.³⁹ The apostles engaged in "the service of the word" (διακονία τοῦ λόγου), which included teaching and discussion to find its meaning.⁴⁰ While there are similarities between Gerhardsson's study of Rabbinic Judaism and his presentation of Luke's view, the Christo-centric (rather than Torah-centric) nature of early Christianity is emphasized: the Lukan Jesus sets the example of midrashic exegesis⁴¹ and the apostles carry on with a christological interpretation of Scriptures.⁴²

Gerhardsson depicted Paul as a witness of the delivery of the Gospel tradition; the picture generally agrees with that of Luke-Acts.⁴³ Gerhardsson shared with Harald Riesenfeld the notion of Paul's use of technical language of transmission.⁴⁴ Such language, occasionally used in the form of fixed formulas,⁴⁵ would not have been employed when referring to hearing gossip or preaching.⁴⁶

Gerhardsson argued that Paul's preaching (kerygma), which he says to have received directly from the Lord (Gal. 1:11–2), was to be distinguished from Paul's teaching (didache): the former mainly concerned Paul's preaching of the law-free Gospel to the Gentiles, while the latter included what he received from the tradition and passed on in his teaching.⁴⁷ Paul's teaching originated from Jerusalem and was probably handed on to him by Peter during Paul's visit to the city (Gal. 1:18). Paul's seeking of recognition for his apostleship and Gospel from Jerusalem indicates that he respected the city as the doctrinal center of the original apostles (Gal.

35 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 208–213, esp. p. 209; cf., e.g., Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, pp. 10–11; Bultmann, *Geschichte*, p. 52. Gerhardsson later modified his position by deeming Luke's presentation as "simplified and even tendentious," yet maintained that the Gospel traditions were reliably transmitted by people who were informed about Jesus' words and deeds. See Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, pp. 61–63.

36 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 214–220, also p. 334: "An intensive work on the logos was also carried on in other churches, but the Jerusalem church was the centre of the early Christianity and the leaders of this congregation was considered as the highest doctrinal authority of the whole Church." Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, p. 50, later somewhat modified this.

37 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 220–225.

38 Cf. Acts 2:22–36; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 5:29–32; 10:34–43.

39 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 225–234.

40 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 234–245.

41 E.g., Luke 4:16–22, 24:27, 32, 44–45.

42 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 227–234, esp. pp. 228–230.

43 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 262–323.

44 E.g., παραλαμβάνειν; παρὰδιδόναι; cf. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*, pp. 17–20; contra Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, 16–22. Riesenfeld argued that this language was not used of the transmission of vague folklore material.

45 E.g. 1 Cor. 11:23–25; 15:3–7.

46 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 13–14, 265–266, 281–283, 288–291. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 11:2, 23–25; 15:1, 3–7; Gal. 1:9; 1 Thess. 2:13; 4:1; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6.

47 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 262–273, esp. p. 273.

2:1–2, 9).⁴⁸ Paul nevertheless acted as an individual with authority to handle the Jesus tradition. Paul could view himself as a part of the chain of authoritative apostles because of his encounter with the risen Christ.⁴⁹ As a former Hillelite Pharisee, he transmitted and interpreted the tradition in the same way as the oral Torah.⁵⁰ Gerhardsson argued that the evidence from Paul supports that authoritative individuals, not an anonymous collective, transmitted and interpreted the Gospel tradition, which in essence derived from Jesus himself.

Finally, Gerhardsson argued that the origins of the tradition lie, first, in Jesus of Nazareth, namely, his teaching, works, suffering, death, and his disciples' experiences of the empty tomb and, secondly, in the Torah, which Jesus as a historical figure held sacred and, through interpretation, wished to "transform into the messianic Torah."⁵¹ The tradition was transmitted and written down by Jesus' followers, who regarded him as more than an earthly teacher: the Messiah, Christ, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Lord, etc. Gerhardsson argued that such high views cannot be disconnected from Jesus' own understanding of his ministry, position, and person; such a notion of authority would lead the earliest Christians to transmit the tradition accurately.⁵²

Gerhardsson stressed that, like any Jewish teacher in that context, Jesus required his disciples to commit his teachings to memory.⁵³ Within the earliest church in Jerusalem, Jesus' closest disciples (the collegium of Apostles) were the first authorities of the Gospel tradition. It was their responsibility to intensively study the Scriptures ("midrash exegesis") and discuss doctrinal questions. In a rabbinic manner, both authoritative sayings of Jesus and narrative accounts of his deeds were memorized, repeated, expounded and applied.⁵⁴

Gerhardsson rejected the form-critical idea that the primary modes of transmission were only preaching, exhortation and apologetics.⁵⁵ The traditions were probably additionally used in other activities like prayer, sacred meals, charitable activity, exorcism, and healing. However, the essential *Sitz im Leben* for the "actualization," collection, and fixing of the tradition took place when it was taught in a manner reminiscent of the rabbinic teaching techniques. The collegium of apostles in Jerusalem presented the tradition on the basis of eyewitness accounts, relating their teaching to the Scriptures.⁵⁶ Gerhardsson did not address the question of the interpretation of the tradition in these situations.

Besides the technical transmission and the reliability of the tradition, the change and variability in the tradition was addressed by Gerhardsson.⁵⁷ He allowed for the

48 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 274–280.

49 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 280–282

50 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 288–323, esp. pp. 302–306. According to Gerhardsson, Paul produced his doctrinal, ethical, and ecclesiastical "Talmud" on the basis of the Scriptures and the "Mishnah," which was the Gospel tradition, and communicated it to the early Christian congregations.

51 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 324–335, esp. p. 327.

52 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 324–325.

53 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 326–329.

54 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 329–332.

55 See Dibelius, *Formgeschichte*, pp. 9–16. "Preaching" was the primary use of the tradition according to Dibelius.

56 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 330–331, 335; also Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, pp. 41–44.

57 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 334: "[I]f the gospel tradition was carried in this way, how can there be variations between different parallel traditions?"

change and development of the tradition to a certain degree. Jesus might have delivered some of his sayings in more than one version; there was the category of “theme and variations” in Jewish teaching. Also, most of the Gospel material is haggadic and was not transmitted as literally as halakhic material.⁵⁸ Furthermore, adaptations might have occurred at an early stage when the material was gathered. The complex translation process (mainly from Aramaic to Greek) may also have resulted in variations. The possibility of small alterations due to faulty memorization could not be excluded. The material was also subject to redaction when it was interpreted and placed in new contexts.⁵⁹

To sum up Gerhardsson’s position, Jesus and his first followers purposefully aimed at the accurate transmission of the Jesus tradition. Within the Gospels, the tradition is interpreted and does not offer a completely historically accurate picture of what actually happened during Jesus’ earthly ministry. The tradition is nevertheless basically reliable: it is not the result of the creative work of an anonymous community in changing circumstances and needs, like the form-critics argued.

2.2. Critique of Gerhardsson’s Thesis

Gerhardsson’s view evoked a heated scholarly debate. His rabbinic model received much criticism immediately after its publication,⁶⁰ the initial reactions by Morton Smith and Jacob Neusner in particular being so dismissive that Gerhardsson was largely denied a hearing for some time.⁶¹ However, these early criticisms must be

58 This raises the question as to where the literally transmitted halakhic material, emphasized by Gerhardsson, is.

59 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 49–58, esp. pp. 55–56. Gerhardsson allowed, for instance, that the baptism and temptation narratives were creations of Christian scribes. See Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, pp. 49–58.

60 For the lists of early reviews, see Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. xxiii, xxiv. See esp. the sympathetic yet critical early review by J. A. Fitzmyer, “Note: Memory and Manuscript: The Origins and Transmission of the Gospel Tradition”, *TS* 23 (1962), pp. 442–457.

61 See Smith, “A Comparison of Early Christian and Early Rabbinic Tradition”, *JBL* 82 (1963), pp. 169–176 (176), who famously deemed Gerhardsson’s thesis “impossible to conceive”; Neusner, “In Quest”, pp. 391–413.

For discussions and criticisms of Gerhardsson’s view, see, e.g., W. D. Davies, “Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach to the ‘Gospel Tradition’”, W. C. van Unnik (ed.), *Neotestamentica et Patristica: Freundesgabe Oscar Cullmann* (NovTSup 6; Leiden: Brill, 1962), pp. 14–34; P. H. Davids, “The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition: Twenty Years After Gerhardsson”, France and Wenham (eds.), *Gospel Perspectives, Vol. 1: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980), pp. 75–99; Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer, passim*; idem, “Jesus as Preacher and Teacher”, pp. 185–210; Kelber, *Oral and Written*, pp. 8–14; idem, “Conclusion: The Work of Birger Gerhardsson in Perspective”, Kelber and Byrskog (eds.), *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 173–206; E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 15; E. P. Sanders and M. Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, pp. 129–132; D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp. 1031–1035; Neusner, “In Quest”, pp. 391–413; idem, “The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees Before A.D. 70: The Problem of Oral Transmission”, J. Neusner (ed.), *The Origins of Judaism, Vol. 2: The Pharisees and Other Sects* (New York: Garland, 1990), pp. 160–162; P. S. Alexander, “Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism at the Turn of the Eras”, Wansbrough, *Jesus*, pp. 159–184; B. F. Meyer, “Some Consequences of Birger Gerhardsson’s *Account of the Origins of the Gospel Tradition*”, Wansbrough, *Jesus*, pp. 424–440; S. Talmon, “Oral Tradition and Written Transmission, or the Heard and Seen Word in Judaism of the Second Temple Period”, Wansbrough, *Jesus*, pp. 121–158; B. W. Henaut, *Oral Tradition and the Gospels: The Problem of Mark 4* (JSNTSup 82; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 41–53; Byrskog, *Jesus the Only*

read in light of subsequent discussion; an important indication of the unfairness of the early dismissals is Neusner's own preface for the 1998 edition of Gerhardsson's work, where he apologizes for initially following Smith's simplistic misrepresentation of Gerhardsson's view.⁶²

The most common criticism against Gerhardsson is anachronism: Gerhardsson is accused of naïvely reading later rabbinic techniques into the first-century situation.⁶³ This criticism is, however, at least partly unwarranted, as has been recently argued by several scholars.⁶⁴ First, although Gerhardsson later admitted to have written his dissertation at a time when scholarship was more optimistic about the use of rabbinic material to illustrate earlier periods,⁶⁵ he never suggested that it should simply be read back into Jesus' time. Rather, even though the pedagogical techniques were refined after 70 and 135 CE, completely new methods were not invented by the rabbis. Thus, the rabbinic materials would have conveyed the basic idea of what first-century Jewish teaching methods were like.⁶⁶

Secondly, Gerhardsson paid attention to the larger context of Greco-Roman education, assuming that mechanical methods of oral transmission were not explicitly Jewish or rabbinic.⁶⁷ It has been confirmed by other scholars that these methods, such as the memorization and replication of teaching, were common in the wider ancient world at the time.⁶⁸ The basic historical analogy may thus hold despite the

Teacher, passim; idem, *Story as History, passim*; idem, "Introduction", pp. 1–20; M. Jaffee, "Oral Tradition in the Writings of Rabbinic Oral Torah: On Theorizing Rabbinic Orality", *Oral Tradition* 14 (1999), pp. 3–32; idem, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), *passim*; idem, "Honi the Circler in Manuscript and Memory: An Experiment in 'Re-Oralizing' the Talmudic Text", Kelber and Byrskog, *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 87–111; H. W. Hollander, "The Words of Jesus: From Oral Traditions to Written Record in Paul and Q", *NovT* 42 (2000), pp. 340–357 (342–344); Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 197–198; idem, *The Oral Gospel Tradition*, pp. 213–229; M. F. Bird, "The Formation of the Gospels in the Setting of Early Christianity", *WTJ* 67 (2005), pp. 113–134; idem, *The Gospel of the Lord*, pp. 83–90; R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 249–252; Tuckett, "Form Criticism", pp. 21–38; T. C. Mournet, "The Jesus Tradition as Oral Tradition", Kelber and Byrskog, *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 39–61; D. E. Aune, "Jesus Tradition and the Pauline Letters", Kelber and Byrskog, *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 63–86; L. Alexander, "Memory and Tradition in the Hellenistic Schools", Kelber and Byrskog, *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 113–153; A. Kirk, "Memory", Kelber and Byrskog, *Jesus in Memory*, pp. 155–172; M. Kankaanniemi, *The Guards of the Tomb (Matt. 27:62–66 and 28:11–15): Matthew's Apologetic Legend Revisited* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 2010), pp. 59–62; Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory, passim*; idem, *Oral Tradition*, pp. 34–36; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 33–46.

62 Neusner, "Foreword", Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. xxv–xlvi.

63 Most notably, Smith, "Comparison", pp. 169–176; also Talmon, "Oral Tradition and Written Transmission", pp. 132–133; Davids, "The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition", pp. 76–81; Kelber, *Oral and Written*, p. 14; Terence C. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (WUNT 195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), p. 64.

64 See, e.g., Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 198; Bird, "Formation", pp. 125–127; Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, pp. 250–251; Byrskog, "Introduction", p. 6; Eve, *Behind*, p. 39.

65 See Gerhardsson's preface for the 1998 edition of his work, Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. xii–xiii.

66 See, e.g., Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. xii–xiii, 30, 77–78; idem, *Tradition*, pp. 14, 16–21; also idem, *Reliability*, p. 73.

67 E.g. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 22–27, 86–89, 150; cf. Byrskog, "Introduction", p. 6.

68 Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer, Chapter 3*; Bird, "Formation", p. 126; Alexander, "Memory and Tradition in the Hellenistic Schools", pp. 135–139, 152; so also Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, pp. 250–251; Eve, *Behind*, p. 39. On "memorization" as a method of instruction in the Greco-Roman world, see, e.g.,

charge of anachronism: the core elements of the mechanical teaching method, employed by Jewish rabbis, probably existed prior to 70 CE, and can illuminate the early Christian transmission of traditions.⁶⁹ It is only fair to mention that the Jewish rabbis were probably not the first to use memory in education.

There is, nevertheless, more to be said with regard to the question of anachronism. Gerhardsson's rather optimistic view of the continuity between Pharisaism and Rabbinic Judaism has more recently led to the criticism that he seems to have assumed, like the form critics, that before the writing of the Gospels the Jesus traditions were purely oral and did not make use of writing.⁷⁰ While the Pharisees probably had an oral tradition independent of Scripture,⁷¹ the notion of a purely oral transmission of "oral Torah"⁷² is probably a later Amoraic construction (from the third century CE onwards) and should be applied to neither the Pharisaism of the pre-70 CE period nor to the transmission of the Jesus traditions in the same period.⁷³ Martin Jaffee has argued extensively that, despite the general preference of a living teacher over written books in antiquity, there never was a purely oral process of transmission.⁷⁴ In the Jewish circles, the Pharisees wrote down their "traditions of the fathers,"⁷⁵ and there were other highly literate Jewish groups at the time of Jesus (for example, the Qumran community).⁷⁶ The transmission of rabbinic material always involved an interplay between oral performance and written text.⁷⁷ Retrospectively, it seems, therefore, that Gerhardsson's rabbinic model did not take the role of written text seriously in the pre-70 CE period.

This criticism of Gerhardsson raises the question as to whether the historical Jesus or the disciples could have displayed the literary skills required by the rabbinic-type transmission situation, envisaged by Gerhardsson. After all, Jesus originated and mainly ministered in rural Galilee, which probably had a low rate of literacy,⁷⁸

Quintilian, *Inst. Orot.* 1:3:1; 2:4:15; Seneca, *Contr.* 1. pref. 2, 19; Plutarch, *Lib. Educ.* 13; Philo, *Vit. Mos.* 1:48; Xenophon, *Symp.* 3:5–6; Diogenes Laertius, *Vit.* 10:1:12; C. S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 28; idem, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), pp. 1:57–62.

69 See, e.g., Davies, "Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach", pp. 10, 33–34; Alexander, "Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism", pp. 159–184; Bird, "Formation", pp. 126–127.

70 Davids, "The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition", p. 79; Talmon, "Oral Tradition and Written Transmission", pp. 146–48; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 39–40; cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 71–78, 79–83, 113–114.

71 Cf. Mark 7.1–15 and Josephus, *Ant.* 13:297–298; Bird, "Formation", p. 126.

72 According to Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, p. 251, Gerhardsson "may... have been misled by the rabbis' principle of exclusively oral transmission of 'oral Torah' (expressed in b. Gittin 60a: 'Words orally transmitted you may not write')."

73 See esp. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth, Chapter 7*; Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, p. 251; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 39–40.

74 Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth, passim*; idem, "Oral Tradition in the Writings of Rabbinic Oral Torah", pp. 23–24: "Rabbinic oral-performative tradition must be imagined as a diverse phenomenon, incorporating aspects of rote memorization of documents (fixed-text transmission) and more fluid oral performative aspects (free-text transmission)." Also, p. 24, n. 30: "... I do not follow him [Gerhardsson] in claiming a total absence of written textuality for either tradition."

75 Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth, Chapter 3*.

76 Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth, Chapter 2*.

77 See, e.g., Jaffee, "Oral Tradition in the Writings of Rabbinic Oral Torah", pp. 3–32; idem, *Torah in the Mouth, passim*; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 39–40.

78 See, e.g., C. Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee* (LNTS/JSNTSup 413;

and according to the Jesus traditions, called as his leading disciples three fishermen, Peter, James, and John, of whom literacy might not have been required.⁷⁹ As for the disciples, Gerhardsson argued for a picture contradictory to that of the Jesus traditions: the majority of the disciples probably came “from that section of the people which looked to the learned Pharisees as its teachers and spiritual leaders,”⁸⁰ which indicates that they were probably familiar with the Pharisaic teaching methods. However, Gerhardsson’s explanation in *Tradition and Transmission*, namely, that the disciples are merely depicted as “uneducated” in the Gospels for ideological purposes, is somewhat wanting. First, his allowance of such ideological changes may undermine his basic task of trying to establish the reliability of the tradition.⁸¹ Secondly, besides his recognition that “[t]he Christian Church has always regarded the twelve as unlearned men of the people,” Gerhardsson speaks of the development that must have taken place in the disciples’ educational skills during the decades of leading the work of the church.⁸² This explanation begs the question as to how exactly Gerhardsson viewed the historical situation. Were the disciples familiar with the Jewish (Pharisaic) teaching methods due to their background (unlike the Jesus traditions indicate), or did their learning increase gradually? Despite this ambiguity, Gerhardsson makes a fair point regarding “the development of specifically Christian exegesis and theology” prior to the writing of the Gospels: the phenomenon needs to be explained and cannot be bypassed with light remarks about the education level of Jesus’ disciples at the time of their call.⁸³

As for the historical Jesus, Gerhardsson’s analogy between the teaching role of Jesus and the title “rabbi” has a ring of historical truth to it. Although it remains debated whether or to what extent writing served as an actual control on the transmission of Jesus traditions,⁸⁴ Jesus’ role as a Jewish teacher indicates that a rabbi-pupil relationship may reflect to some degree Jesus’ relation to his disciples. While Jesus’ charismatic prophetic leadership does not suggest the typical attributes of a rabbi or scribe,⁸⁵ and there are direct claims in the Gospel material that Jesus did

London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2011), pp. 71–123; idem, “Early Christian Book Culture and the Emergence of the First Written Gospel”, C. Keith and D. T. Roth (eds.), *Mark, Manuscripts, and Monotheism* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), pp. 22–39 (35–36); C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001); also, Eve, *Behind*, pp. 10–11; contra Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (BS 69; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001).

79 Eve, *Behind*, pp. 40–41.

80 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 202.

81 Eve, *Behind*, pp. 40–41; cf. Gerhardsson, *Tradition*, pp. 24–26.

82 Gerhardsson, *Tradition*, p. 25.

83 Gerhardsson, *Tradition*, pp. 25–26. Italics are original. See Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, p. 288; Riesenfeld, *Jesus als Lehrer*, pp. 497–498, who argue that there could have been individuals within the Jesus movement who were from classes that could read and write.

84 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 201–202; idem, “Illuminating”, p. 307, argued that written notebooks, such as collections of Jesus’ sayings or accounts of his life, could have been used as aids to memory by early Christians prior to the full written Gospels. See Eve, *Behind*, pp. 8–14: the notes “remained little more than an aide-memoire;” cf. Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, p. 289: the notebooks would reinforce the capacity of oral transmission to preserve the traditions faithfully. Also, see Keith, “Early Christian Book Culture”, pp. 31 n. 42, 37, who, while not denying that early Christian manuscripts could sometimes function as aids to memory, emphasizes “their broader social significance” in maintaining and articulating group identity.

85 M. Hengel, *The Charismatic Leader and His Followers* (trans. J. C. G. Greig; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1981), pp. 42–57; C. K. Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 9–10; in

not teach like a scribe,⁸⁶ “rabbi” is not a completely inadequate definition of his ministry of teaching; while Jesus surely was not “a convenient Jewish rabbi” but rather fit many categories of leadership (such as sage, healer, prophet), teaching was a very central activity in his ministry, ῥαββί being the most frequently used title for Jesus in the Gospel traditions.⁸⁷

Recent scholarship suggests that Jesus’ teaching method seems to have conveyed, at least to some audiences, that he was a scribal-literate Jewish teacher, although in reality he may only have appeared as one.⁸⁸ It may not be too far-fetched to assume some Pharisaic-scribal kind of influence on the disciples from Jesus; his teaching and behavior were taken as a challenge by and led into rivalry with the Pharisees, who were held in high regard as local religious authorities.⁸⁹ This raises the question as to why Jesus would have employed drastically different methods from those of his opponents. Also, would it have been impossible for the disciples to reflect, at least, a growing interest in a pedagogical method typical in that context? After all, Gerhardsson originally never said that Jesus was a Tannaitic-type rabbi and his disciples were themselves formally educated Pharisees, although he did imply that they were not “uneducated” in the sense that the Gospels indicate.⁹⁰ Gerhardsson’s model did, therefore, draw scholarly attention to important historical features concerning Jesus as a Jewish teacher and his disciples, often neglected within the form-critical paradigm.

Some have objected to Gerhardsson’s thesis on the grounds of there being no clear presentation of a rigid handing of traditions by Jesus and his followers in the New Testament.⁹¹ It is, however, not clear how strong of an objection the lack of such evidence really is. Eve points out that “if it were the case that Jesus and his followers were using the teaching and learning techniques common to their culture... there would be no particular reason for the New Testament authors to draw attention to the fact; they would be more likely simply to take it for granted.”⁹² In fact, the Gospel material does depict Jesus using his disciples to transmit his teachings to others during his lifetime, which suggests at least some form of memorization on

Bird, “Formation”, p. 124; idem, *The Gospel of the Lord*, p. 85.

86 Cf. Mark 1:22; Matt. 7:29; Smith, “Comparison”, p. 172; Bird, “Formation”, p. 124; idem, *The Gospel of the Lord*, p. 85.

87 See, e.g., G. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (trans. I. McLuskey, F. McLuskey, J. M. Robinson; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), pp. 57, 83, 96–97; B. D. Chilton, *Profiles of a Rabbi* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); idem, *Rabbi Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Bird, “Formation”, p. 126; cf. Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy*, pp. 165–188, on Jesus’ literacy; for ῥαββί in the Gospels, see BDAG (2000), p. 902.

88 See Keith, *Jesus’ Literacy*, pp. 165–188, esp. p. 188, who argues this on the basis of “the various early Christian Jesus-memories that appear in the sources.”

89 On the Pharisees, see J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus: Volume Three: Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 289–388 (339): “All Gospel sources testify to Jesus’ interaction with Pharisees during the public ministry. The tone of the interaction is often adversarial... both Jesus and the Pharisees were competing to influence the main body of Palestinian Jews...”

90 Cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 201–202, with Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, p. 73: “I have never said that Jesus was only a rabbi, still less that he was a rabbi of the late Tannaitic type...”

91 Smith, “Comparison”, pp. 174–175; Barrett, *Jesus and the Gospel Tradition*, pp. 9–10; Sanders and Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 142; Kelber, *Oral and Written*, p. 14; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 198; cf. Eve, *Behind*, p. 43.

92 Eve, *Behind*, p. 43, despite his rather skeptical view on Gerhardsson’s overall thesis.

the part of the disciples.⁹³ It is not implausible to argue that the use of rabbinic-like terminology in the New Testament⁹⁴ “provides at least one significant point of contact between the transmission of traditions in early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism.”⁹⁵

In line with Gerhardsson, some scholars have aimed to present other historical evidence of systematic memorization in the tradition process.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, some of the suggestions are not compelling. Bird is probably right in contending that Riesner’s suggestion, that the references to Jesus’ house in the Gospel of Mark explicitly refer to “Jesus’ school of teaching,” is far-fetched.⁹⁷ Also, Riesenfeld’s suggestion, that Paul prepared himself for apostolic work by committing the Jesus tradition to memory during his three-year stay in Arabia, seems somewhat oversimplified.⁹⁸ Although Paul probably would have reflected the Jesus traditions against his own background in Pharisaism, there is no clear evidence that he actively memorized the tradition specifically during that time in Arabia. However, Byrskog’s notion of the Matthean community does not strike as unimaginable. According to him, they focused on Jesus as the teacher and applied his teachings to their community life, as they transmitted them in a careful and controlled manner. This suggestion is possible, given the pedagogic atmosphere of the time.⁹⁹

While some role of memorization in the process of transmission is widely recognized, Gerhardsson’s model does not seem to account for the variation that has taken place within the Jesus traditions.¹⁰⁰ In other words, there seems to have been no real concern among the Synoptic authors to preserve memorized material in a fixed form.¹⁰¹ Gerhardsson allowed some variability and flexibility and would probably consider such changes compatible with his theory of verbatim learning, paralleled within the rabbinic tradition; one of his central arguments was that most of the Gospel tradition is haggadic material, often transmitted with more variation than halakhic material.¹⁰² Nevertheless, while it has been pointed out that the rab-

93 See, e.g., Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1–16; Matt. 9:36–10:15; Davids, “The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition”, p. 84; Bird, “Formation”, p. 126. This is admitted also by Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 198, who nevertheless maintains that the model of memorization does not account for “divergencies in the tradition.”

94 The terminological connections are presented in Bird, “Formation”, p. 126.

95 Bird, “Formation”, p. 126; cf. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, p. 16; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 290–291; idem, *Tradition*, p. 7. However, note the criticism by Eve, *Behind*, p. 41, that the New Testament usage of παράδοσις of the Christian tradition is entirely Pauline, and Paul’s use may reflect his Pharisaic background more than the teaching methods of Jesus and his disciples (already in Smith, “Comparison”, pp. 169–176).

96 See Bird, “Formation”, p. 125; also idem, *The Gospel of the Lord*, pp. 85–86.

97 Bird, “Formation”, p. 125; cf. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer*, pp. 437–439; e.g. Mark 2:1, 3:20, 9:33.

98 Bird, “Formation”, p. 125; idem, *The Gospel of the Lord*, pp. 85–86; cf. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition*, pp. 17–18; also, already Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*, pp. 19–20.

99 Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, pp. 235, 329, 401; pace Bird, “Formation”, p. 125.

100 E.g. E. E. Ellis, “The Synoptic Gospels and History”, Chilton and Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Activities of Jesus* (NTTS 28; Leiden: Brill, 1999) pp. 49–57 (56); Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 198; Bird, “Formation”, p. 124–125; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 41–42.

101 Eve, *Behind*, pp. 41–42; cf., e.g., Matt. 5:3–11; Luke 6:20–26; Matt. 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4.

102 Eve, *Behind*, p. 42; cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 334–335; idem, *Tradition*, pp. 31–47; idem, “Illuminating”, pp. 298–299; idem, *Reliability*, pp. 51–57, 71, 79–81; idem, “The Secret”, pp. 15–16. It is questionable whether Gerhardsson succeeded in demonstrating the analogous “haggadic” and “halakhic” materials in the Jesus traditions.

binic material neither remained stable in the course of transmission nor aimed at the preservation of the *ipsissima verba* but rather consisted of formulaic summaries,¹⁰³ it is debatable whether the variations in the Synoptic material resemble those in the rabbinic material referred to by Gerhardsson.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, Gerhardsson's model of flexibility and variation needs to be qualified.

There were probably "differences between eyewitness memories" and "the ways the individual members of the twelve told the traditions/memories" from the beginning; the Jesus traditions must have been told and retold by other teachers "in the absence of eyewitnesses already during the first period."¹⁰⁵ This would inevitably have resulted in some variation in the traditions, as well as flexibility and freedom in the communities in which the different versions of eyewitness memories and interpretations of the traditions were told and retold. When different versions of the same story were heard from the twelve by other teachers, some freedom must have been taken in the retelling.¹⁰⁶

It is also argued that the process of transmission cannot be viewed as "systematic impartation of encyclopedic knowledge," in other words, "rigid," due to the itinerant and urgent nature of Jesus' mission to proclaim the kingdom.¹⁰⁷ This criticism, however, partly misses the point; it is at the very heart of Gerhardsson's thesis that the formal process of teaching and transmission of tradition was a separate activity from its use in other contexts,¹⁰⁸ imaginably also in proclamation to other villages" which "desperately had to hear the gospel of the kingdom."¹⁰⁹ The tenability of Gerhardsson's model is not so much determined by the social use of the tradition, say, in urgent situations of proclamation, as by whether or not there could have, besides that, existed a systematic setting for the handing on of traditions among the disciples of Jesus. It is not unimaginable that Jesus would have applied the basic pedagogical method of his time when with his disciples, although neither the effect of the social use of the tradition on its transmission nor the flexibility in its telling can be done away with.¹¹⁰

Another major criticism of Gerhardsson's thesis, namely, that his notion of the controlling collegium formed by the twelve apostles in Jerusalem is implausible, has been presented by several scholars.¹¹¹ First of all, it needs to be acknowledged that

103 Alexander, "Orality in Pharisaic-Rabbinic Judaism", pp. 172–176, 182; Eve, *Behind*, p. 42.

104 Eve, *Behind*, p. 42: "If Gerhardsson were content to argue that the Jesus tradition preserved the gist rather than the wording of Jesus' sayings this might not be too problematic for him, but he makes a point of distinguishing between the way the Gospel tradition preserved Jesus' words and the way other New Testament writers as Paul use the gist of Jesus' teaching in paraphrase."

105 Kankaanniemi, *Guards*, p. 62; also Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p. 201, on Kelber, *Oral and Written*, that "oral retelling of Jesus' words will already have begun during Jesus' lifetime."

106 Kankaanniemi, *Guards*, pp. 62–63.

107 Bird, "Formation", p. 125, referring to Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. xxxi: "Jesus left behind him thinkers not memorizers, disciples not reciters, people not parrots."

108 Cf., e.g., Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 330–331, 335; idem, *Reliability*, pp. 41–44; Byrskog, *Story as History*, p. 174; idem, "Introduction", p. 10.

109 Bird, "Formation", p. 125.

110 It does not appear implausible to me that there could have been both conservative forces (i.e. authoritative individuals) and flexibility involved in the process of transmission.

111 E.g. Bird, "Formation", p. 125; Davies, "Reflections on a Scandinavian Approach", pp. 25–27; Davids, "The Gospels and the Jewish Tradition", p. 87; Kelber, *Oral and Written*, p. 14; Eve, *Behind*, pp. 40–41, 44–45; Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*, p. 36; cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 214–220, 330–331, 334.

Gerhardsson never claimed Jerusalem to be the sole context of “the work of the word,” although he stressed the centrality of the leaders of the Jerusalem church.¹¹² He somewhat qualified his position later by stating that the evangelists took their traditions from different sources.¹¹³

In contrast to the criticism, Loveday Alexander contends that such a collegium could have existed on the analogy of Hellenistic schools. Luke’s picture would have had to make sense to his audience, and such a collegium is what would be expected in the light of the Hellenistic school tradition. Also, the need to develop the tradition would not have been left to “chances of memory” because of its importance as a bearer of the community’s identity.¹¹⁴ This argument is, however, inconclusive regarding the historicity of the collegium: it could have been the case that Luke coined the idea exactly because of the expectations of his community. On the other hand, even Eve, who otherwise deems Gerhardsson’s model too scribal and related to the medium of writing, admits that such a collegium would not be impossible to envisage if orally operated.¹¹⁵

Aside from the criticism of the medium of writing, the important role of controlling authorities during the transmission process should not be underestimated.¹¹⁶ Rafael Rodríguez is probably right in contending that Gerhardsson’s reading of Acts 15 as “a regular description of early Christian general session,” as opposed to “a special, ad hoc gathering of the Jerusalem church to settle a significant, persistent problem that was not typical for the early Christians,” is too speculative.¹¹⁷ Rodríguez argues further that, in his letters, Paul provides authoritative doctrinal and pragmatic pronouncements independently of Jerusalem, which alone suggests a broader distribution of authority within early Christianity than the collegium of the twelve in Jerusalem.¹¹⁸ However, the authority and eyewitness status of the twelve¹¹⁹ is clearly articulated by Paul,¹²⁰ who himself seems to have been reluctant to break the authority structure of early Christianity “during the dynasty of the twelve” by freely creating Jesus traditions.¹²¹ This is not to be taken as an understatement about the flexibility of the process due to different tellings and variant forms of the traditions, which were based on the same episodes and also found in the written Gospels eventually.¹²²

112 Gerhardsson, *Memory*, p. 334.

113 Gerhardsson, *Reliability*, p. 50.

114 Alexander, “Memory and Tradition in the Hellenistic Schools”, p. 152; cf. Eve, *Behind*, p. 41.

115 Eve, *Behind*, p. 41.

116 Eve, *Behind*, p. 45, admits that “it would be odd indeed if the Twelve ceased to have any function within a year or two of Jesus’ death or if certain persons did not come to have much more control over the tradition than others.”

117 Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*, p. 36; cf. Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 245–261.

118 Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*, p. 36.

119 On the historicity of the twelve, see J. P. Meier, “The Circle of the Twelve: Did It Exist During Jesus’ Ministry”, *JBL* 116 (1997), pp. 635–672; idem, *Companions and Competitors*, pp. 125–197; J. E. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), pp. 136–138; also Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 326.

120 E.g., 1 Cor. 9:1–5; 15:3–11; Gal. 1:11–19; 2:1–10. Especially, that of Peter.

121 Kankaanniemi, *Guards*, pp. 60–62, esp. p. 62. That Paul does not seem to create sayings is indicated by 1 Cor. 7:12. It seems plausible that “the Jesus traditions Paul assumed that his churches knew derived mostly from Jerusalem.”

122 Cf. Kelber, *Oral and Written*, p. 21: “while they [the Twelve] were important traditionists, they were

All in all, Gerhardsson's model attempted to turn the scholarly attention to "the profoundly mnemonic character of written and, above all, oral tradition," and introduced "neglected diachronic aspects into the form-critical program."¹²³ Unfortunately, these aspects of his work were neglected for a long time. Despite the reservations expressed by some, for example, that it is difficult to imagine Gerhardsson's theory to describe the whole tradition process from Jesus' earthly preaching to the written Gospels in detail,¹²⁴ his basic analogies regarding the transmission of tradition and the role of memory in education are historical in nature, and as such they seem plausible.

Some of the commendable aspects in Gerhardsson's model have been recognized by scholars otherwise very critical of his theory. Werner Kelber, a chief critic of Gerhardsson, is able to comment appreciatively, "Gerhardsson... advanced an explanatory model that was suited to demonstrate the historical concreteness of the traditioning processes and the actual techniques that were operative in the transmission and reception of the tradition."¹²⁵ Also, Eric Eve, who is not convinced of Gerhardsson's overall account of the oral tradition behind the Gospels, contends, "that the primitive Church would have been concerned to preserve traditions about Jesus and would have regarded some persons as particularly authoritative tradents is a priori more probable than form criticism's assumptions to the contrary."¹²⁶ Finally, Rafael Rodríguez, who deems Gerhardsson's conception of transmission too rigid and inflexible, says, "Gerhardsson... rightly recognized that the early Christians thought they were passing on Jesus' actual teachings and accounts of his actual life... Jesus' disciples preserved his teaching by committing it to memory and transmitting his teaching in memorized form... This... represents a significant advance over New Testament scholarship's form-critical legacy."¹²⁷

3. Conclusion

In sum, Birger Gerhardsson tried to turn the scholarly attention to the reality that the transmission process of the Jesus traditions is to be related to the historical techniques of transmission such as memorization and replication. His work, which was initially rejected and denied a hearing, enabled later scholars to recognize that there were authoritative individuals exercising control over the transmission process, as opposed to the form-critical notions of anonymous community: the first Christians committed to memory what they believed were Jesus' actual teachings and accounts of his life. Later views that cohere with Gerhardsson have had an impact on research, which Gerhardsson himself did not have due to the initial rejection of his theses.

by no means the only ones... the 'common folk' cannot be ruled out from the telling of stories... authorities can influence but not entirely control speech to the extent imagined by Gerhardsson."

123 Byrskog, "Introduction", p. 11.

124 See Eve, *Behind*, p. 45; Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 64. Especially, when differences between rural Galilee where Jesus ministered, Jerusalem where the twelve gathered, and the Gentile cities where Paul ministered, are taken into account.

125 Kelber, "Conclusion: The Work of Birger Gerhardsson in Perspective", pp. 173–206, esp. p. 177.

126 Eve, *Behind*, p. 45.

127 Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*, p. 35.