

# Oral Tradition

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As Luke begins his Gospel, he tells us he is editing inherited oral and written traditions about events (see Luke 1:1–4). The realization that our Gospels are the fruit of oral tradition causes some people distress: it challenges their presumption that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts. However, with fuller study, this realization is extremely enlightening: it gives us both a reason to trust the accuracy of each Gospel's main message and a key to understanding why the Gospels differ so much from one another. To demonstrate the accuracy of these statements, we must examine the characteristics of literature that has passed through oral tradition.

## A Community's Witness

Many people have a prejudice that oral tradition is, by definition, inaccurate. They connect it in their minds with a game that many played as children called Gossip or Telephone. In this game one person whispers something to someone else, who whispers it to someone else, and so on. Finally, the last person to receive the message states out loud what he or she has heard. Then the first person states what was originally whispered. The whole goal is to illustrate the inaccurate nature of information received in this manner.

This game has absolutely nothing to do with oral tradition, because the information is whispered to one person at a time. It is not the product of a community's witness. Obviously, if the game were played out loud, the mistakes would be corrected as they occurred. Because oral tradition is the product of a community's witness, it is extremely accurate in its basic message, its basic intent.

However, literature that is the fruit of oral tradition does not claim accuracy in three areas: exact quotations, exact historical social settings, and exact historical chronology. These characteristics of literature that has come through oral tradition are evident in the Gospels.

## Not Exact Quotations

Have you ever seen a red-letter Bible? Red-letter Bibles print words attributed to Jesus in red ink, suggesting that, because Jesus actually said these words, they are more important than any other words. In fact, when the Gospels attribute words to Jesus, they are not claiming that the words are exact quotations.

For instance, if one were to ask each Gospel, "What did Jesus say on the cross?" the accounts would not agree. Mark describes Jesus as starting to pray Psalm 22, saying: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). Matthew has Jesus saying the same words. However, Luke describes Jesus as forgiving those who are crucifying him, promising a criminal that he will be with Jesus in Paradise, and saying, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). In John, Jesus speaks to his mother and the beloved disciple, says that he thirsts, and finally says, "It is finished" (John 19:30).

If a person misunderstands the literary form of the Gospels, presuming they are eyewitness accounts, that person might ask, "Which account is accurate?" However, once a person knows that literature that passes through oral tradition is not claiming exact quotations, then that person can ask a much more helpful question: Why does each author picture Jesus saying this particular thing?

The answer will be found in each author's pastoral and theological purpose: Mark emphasizes Jesus' suffering for his persecuted audience. Luke emphasizes Jesus' constant offer of forgiveness for his Gentile



audience. John emphasizes Jesus' divinity by showing that Jesus is always in charge for his end-of-the-century audience. Noticing the differences, and asking why the accounts differ, results in our better understanding what each author intends to teach.

## Not Exact Social Setting

When stories about Jesus' mighty words and mighty actions were passed on, the storyteller did not always state exactly where Jesus was at the time. Therefore, the editor of each Gospel provides the social setting. For example: Where was Jesus standing when he taught the Beatitudes? Matthew says Jesus was on a mountain (see Matthew 5:1). Luke says Jesus was on a plain (see Luke 6:17). Again, the helpful question is not, Which one is right? but, Why does Matthew picture Jesus on a mountain? The reason is theological: Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses who promulgates a new law. Moses, of course, promulgated the first law from a mountain.

## Not Exact Historical Chronology

Nor do the Gospels all present Jesus doing things in the same order. For example, at what point in Jesus' ministry did he clear out the Temple? The answer depends on which Gospel you ask. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus clears out the Temple at the end of his ministry, shortly before his death. In John, Jesus clears out the Temple at the beginning of his ministry, right after the wedding feast at Cana. Did Jesus do it twice? No. Once more, to understand the author's intent, we must ask the right question: Why does John picture Jesus doing this right after the wedding feast at Cana?

John has a theological reason for ordering the events as he does. John is trying to help his end-of-the-century audience see that the Risen Christ is present in the Church and in the Sacraments. His stories have two levels of meaning: one about Jesus during his public ministry, and one about the presence of the Risen Christ. At the literal level, John describes Jesus as filling empty ablution jars, which represent the law, with water that becomes wine. At the allegorical level, John is picturing Jesus establishing a new spiritual order that begins with Baptism (water) and the Eucharist (wine). John places the cleansing of the Temple right after the wedding at Cana because, at the allegorical level, the effect of being born again through what we call the Sacraments of Initiation is the *cleansing of the temple*, the forgiveness of sin for those reborn into the body of Christ.

To know that literature that comes through oral tradition does not claim accuracy in exact quotations, exact social setting, or exact historical chronology is extremely helpful when reading the Gospels. This knowledge helps us to avoid bringing false expectations to our reading of the text. It also helps us center on what is really important: on what the inspired authors intended to teach by the way in which each tells the story. Only when we probe the author's intent will we understand the revelation that each canonical Gospel offers the Church.

