Biblical scholarship has found it difficult to come to terms with the oral factor. In part at least this is due to the fact that for over five centuries biblical studies have been conducted in the print medium bereft of oral sensibilities. Of course, there was form criticism, which arose almost one hundred years ago and has cast a long shadow over our understanding of gospel composition, tradition, and the language of Jesus. But critical assessments of classical form criticism have been steadily mounting, especially in English-speaking scholarship. Over the last sixty years a growing number of alternative models have appeared that aspire to be more closely attuned to the ancient art of communication. A specific concern has been to get a better grasp of the phenomenology of speaking and oral-scribal interfacing in antiquity. In *Behind the Gospels*, Eric Eve, Fellow and Tutor at Harris Manchester College, Oxford University, has given us a detailed and exceptionally informed review of recent scholarly discussions about oral tradition, much of which has been conducted apart from and more often in disagreement with the form-critical model.

Eve has organized his book into ten chapters. In chapter 1 he describes the ancient media world in which the rate of literacy was low, dictation was widely practiced, citational habits were not necessarily based on close readings, and texts were often implicated in oral processes and likely to operate in a manner akin to musical scores. Fully aware of the
complex interactions of speech and writing, and weary of the “Great Divide,” he nonetheless pleads for a differentiated exploration of oral versus scribal characteristics. Chapter 2 rehearses the story of form criticism, focusing on the two seminal figures of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. Eve reviews the major form-critical premises— isolation and classification of separate units of the tradition, the collective origins of the tradition, correlation of form and function, distinction between Palestinian versus Hellenistic settings, the notion of the original form, and many more—and finds most of them wanting. Although form criticism provided useful insights and raised important questions, it did not furnish a well-grounded theory of oral tradition. Chapter 3 takes up Birger Gerhardsson’s thesis concerning a deliberately controlled transmission of Jesus traditions based on rabbinic teaching procedures. Gerhardsson, Eve suggests, deserves credit for competently exposing the shortcomings of form criticism. On the other hand, Eve questions whether Gerhardsson’s model fits the data provided by tradition and gospel. There is more variability in the Synoptic tradition than Gerhardsson seems to allow for and next to no narrative characterization of Jesus’s teaching in the fashion explained by him. Erhardt Güttgemanns and Werner Kelber are the subject of chapter 4, entitled “The Media Contrast Model.”

Although coming from different directions, both pressed for a strong oral-written distinction. Influenced by Albert Lord and modern linguistics, Güttgemanns developed the most programmatic critique of form criticism to date. Kelber likewise deconstructed form criticism by advancing a concept of oral tradition that was driven by social identification and preventive censorship and uninformed by any single uniform tendency. Eve acknowledges that new ground had been broken but concludes that both have overdrawn the oral-scribal contrast. In chapter 5 Eve offers an incisive analysis of Kenneth E. Bailey’s theory of the processes of oral tradition. Forging a middle way between Bultmann and Gerhardsson, Bailey constructed a theory of informal controlled oral tradition whereby oral materials are shaped to suit social needs, while retaining the thrust of a story. In a masterfully detailed and judicious examination Eve arbitrates the intricate discussion between Bailey, his critic Theodore J. Weeden, and his advocate James Dunn. A basic issue, Eve argues, is whether informal controlled oral tradition operates to reshape more than to preserve historical factuality, or vice versa.

Eve devotes two chapters to the topic of memory. Chapter 6 addresses memorial operations generally and operative in oral tradition. Memory, both in its individual and social manifestation, he argues, adapts to present circumstances and relies on conceptual frameworks. This recognition of the social shaping of oral tradition challenges the single-minded search for methodological purity and historical data uninvolved in memory. Special attention is paid to John M. Foley’s highly innovative way of conceptualizing oral tradition: spoken words activate the circumambient tradition by way of metonymic
referentiality, generating a well-spring of meanings far beyond their lexical definition. In chapter 7 Eve discusses the memorial workings of oral tradition based on studies by James Dunn, Richard Horsley (with Jonathan Draper), and Rafael Rodriguez. Dunn, sharply critical of Kelber’s premise of ruptured relations between gospel and tradition, draws on Bailey’s theory of the coexistence of stability and variability, even though, Eve observes, his inclination is to favor stability and continuity. Since oral tradition, Dunn argues, played a dominant role in the composition of the gospels, literary theories alone are ill-suited to explain the Synoptic gospels. For Horsley, Q and Mark are oral-derived texts, as defined by Foley, which functioned as performances in a context of an ongoing oral traditioning, and not as tradition’s end products. Eve, however, wishes to allow for greater complications in the shift from orality to written gospels. Drawing on insights from social memory, oral tradition, and Foley, Rodriguez, not unlike Dunn, boldly describes the Synoptics as instantiations of an ambient tradition rather than as literary redactions of one another. Eve agrees that source criticism needs to be revisited but insists that the Synoptic problem cannot be resolved without access to literary sources. Chapter 8 moves away from collective memory to the individuality of eyewitnesses. Surveying the ancient historiographical techniques of direct or indirect eyewitness testimony, Samuel Byrskog has made a case for its applicability to the gospels.

Eve welcomes consideration of the role of individual tradents but wonders whether ancient historians’ preference for autopsy can serve as a workable model for the gospel authors, who did not view themselves as historians. Richard Bauckham, building on Byrskog, advances the thesis of the gospels’ substantial reliance on eyewitness testimony. Eve commends his insightful critique of form criticism but questions whether the gospels’ narrative plots give any evidence of eyewitness reminiscences. Offering his own case study of the workings of the Jesus tradition, Eve examines its comparative existence in Mark vis-à-vis Paul and in Mark vis-à-vis Josephus. He acknowledges the existence of a stable core common to Paul and Mark, although stability, he cautions, is not synonymous with fixity. Concerning the portraits of John the Baptist narrated in Mark and in Josephus (the Testimonium Flavianum almost universally being viewed as a Christian redaction or creation), Eve concludes that, while both authors were constrained by recognizable stable traditions, these were “not infinitely flexible” (176). His case studies, Eve concludes, confirm both the expected mix of stability and variability, as well as the workings of social memory theory.

This summary cannot come close to doing justice to what may be the greatest strength of Behind the Gospels: its exquisitely nuanced, acutely sensitive, and immensely fair reportage of a complex and at times bewildering new subdiscipline in biblical scholarship. Skillfully organizing a vast array of materials and theories, carefully weighing the pros and cons, Eve has managed to tell a gripping story and to make orality studies the fascinating
subject that it is. More than that, throughout he conveys a sense of the paradigmatic significance of orality studies that may hold it within their power to make substantial contributions to much-needed new perspectives on the Synoptic tradition.

In view of form criticism’s silence with respect to memory, the extensive treatment Eve (and some of the authors discussed) have accorded the subject is most welcome (86–134). While affirming the need for defining characteristic features of oral tradition—something the recent Great Divide discussion has rejected—he wisely cautions that, far from being “laws,” these attributes are meant to be “indications” of how oral tradition is likely to work (7). Contrary to often-repeated assertions, he correctly observes that Bultmann’s *History of the Synoptic Tradition* was not based on folkloric evidence but almost entirely on intra-Synoptic writings (26). He is likewise on target in stating that Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered* offers surprisingly little on memory (109, 114). Eve’s assessment of positions taken and concepts proposed is sensible, sound, and almost always to the point.

One may ask whether Jens Schröter’s *magnum opus, Erinnerung an Jesu Worte*, should not have merited a separate treatment, and one is also left wondering whether *Behind the Gospels* is the most appropriate title, since Eve and most authors reviewed are fully cognizant of the ongoing and circumambient nature of tradition. I would finally want to suggest that the recent text-critical work by Kim Haines-Eitzen, David Parker, and Eldon Epp might profitably be included in the discussion because, according to their view, the papyrological evidence of the early Jesus tradition suggests a model of considerable fluidity. Even in the tradition’s initial stage, the transit to textuality did not bring about substantial stability. But then again, Eve himself is aware of the significance of recent studies in text criticism when in his final assessment he suggests that what may be needed is something in the nature of “a Copernican revolution: the Synoptic Problem needs rethinking in terms not only of ancient compositional practices … but also in the light of a fuller understanding of the interplay of scribality, orality and memory, and indeed, of recent developments in text criticism” (184).

This is a book of programmatic significance, and one hopes for a wide readership not only among biblical scholars but among humanists and social scientists who have an interest in the issue of oral tradition.