Before anyone wrote about Jesus, people surely talked about him. Eventually some of the things people said about him were written down. Scholars have thus long assumed that an oral tradition of some sort stands behind the New Testament gospels and provided at least some of their content. The problem is that, of course, these oral traditions as such no longer exist. All that remains is what was written.

The last century has witnessed a continual stream of diverse scholarly inquiry into this oral tradition. As recent research has become increasingly interdisciplinary (drawing on psychology, cognitive science, sociology, etc.), it has become a difficult subject for the uninitiated to approach. The time is thus ripe for an introduction and assessment of the field. Eric Eve’s Behind the Gospels admirably satisfies this need. Although he has not been a major participant in the actual debate over oral tradition, his substantial work on Jesus and the gospels provides the expertise necessary for a critical, “outside” perspective.

Eve begins with an overview of the “ancient media situation” (ch. 1), which signals the shift away from studying orality in isolation from other communicative and cultural
media. Oral tradition is “rather but one factor (albeit often the dominant one) of a complex interplay of memory, orality and scribality” (2). What most distinguishes speech from writing is its nature as a multisensory and interactive event in a specific time and place. The spoken word is accompanied by a host of other visual and aural cues. Unlike written communication, which can be conveyed far beyond its original time and place, oral communication is stored only in memory. Eve then introduces the seminal work on Homer by Milman Parry and Albert Lord (ca. 1930–1960) to illustrate how scholars have approached the study of ancient oral tradition. That is, given the ephemeral nature of the spoken word, how is oral tradition created and transmitted, and how can we study it centuries later? Parry and Lord’s “oral formulaic theory” argued that the Homeric literature was composed in oral performance primarily using a stock of formulas (e.g., “swift-footed Achilles”) and narrative structures in a manner similar to the oral poetry of contemporary, illiterate Yugoslavian bards. Eve then presents four general characteristics (but not rules) of oral tradition: it consists of a series of unique performances, its interest is in “practical application in the present,” it “prefers the vivid and the concrete to the abstract and general,” and it prefers what is striking and dramatic (6–7). The last major section concerns writing in antiquity, focusing especially on the “oral use” of texts (i.e., texts were normally read aloud, whether to oneself or to a group), their physical limitations (e.g., lack of organizational cues, far fewer texts due to hand copying), and low literacy rates. Thus even where texts were available, they functioned in an oral context. Eve’s claim that texts functioned in “a thoroughly oral way” (9) needs some qualification, however, since clearly some of the “characteristics of orality” (2–4) still do not apply (e.g., the same text can and certainly was read aloud numerous times with a high level of stability between readings; the wording of a text is thus not as dependent on individual memory). Nevertheless, Eve encourages a moderate approach that recognizes the real differences between orality and writing but that also acknowledges their complex relationship. Thus analogies drawn from preliterate or “purely” oral cultures (as in the Parry-Lord theory) must be used with caution.

In chapter 2 Eve turns to the origin of the modern study of oral gospel tradition in the *Formgeschichte*, or “form criticism,” of the early twentieth century, focusing on Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. They argued that a purely oral stage of transmission preceded the writing of the Synoptic Gospels and that the tradition itself consisted of discrete and unconnected “units” (pericopes) of oral tradition that were only placed in a narrative context by the evangelists. Further, the shape of the tradition was determined by its use in early Christian preaching and teaching, its *Sitz im Leben*. While acknowledging their important contribution, Eve argues that Dibelius and Bultmann lacked an adequate

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theory of oral tradition and that their assumption of a close link between form and social setting was unfounded. At the most fundamental level, form criticism erred by treating the oral tradition as equivalent to another written source.

The next six chapters discuss major models for how the oral Jesus tradition actually worked. The first serious alternative to form criticism was the “rabbinic model” (ch. 3) of Harald Riesenfeld and his student Birger Gerhardsson (on whose work Eve focuses). Whereas form criticism envisioned “uncontrolled (yet strangely law-like) growth of anonymous community traditions,” these Scandinavian scholars argued that the oral Jesus tradition involved a “tightly controlled process” of transmission similar to the “oral Torah” of rabbinic tradition (33). The New Testament basis for this was Paul’s formal language of tradition (e.g., 1 Cor 15:3–7), the depiction of Jesus as a teacher, the important role of the Twelve, and the memorable form of the gospel sayings material. Eve finds this model historically plausible in general but unconvincing when applied specifically to the oral Jesus tradition, since the requisite scholastic setting for such oral tradition is both unattested in the literature itself and seems incompatible with the tradition’s own depiction of the Twelve as uneducated.

Eve turns next to the “media contrast model” (ch. 4) of Erhardt Güttgemanns and Werner Kelber. Güttgemanns criticized form criticism for its failure to distinguish orality and writing. The Gospel of Mark was not the inevitable, evolutionary endpoint of the oral gospel tradition but something fundamentally new. Kelber similarly argued for a “radical discontinuity between the Gospel of Mark as a written text and the oral tradition that preceded it” (51). Kelber’s early work implied a sharp divide between orality and writing (61–62). He has nuanced his views somewhat in response to criticism (63–65; the so-called Great Divide view has been widely criticized), and he recognizes the complex media situation in antiquity. Yet he maintains that foregrounding the oral nature of the pregospel tradition is crucial; orality is not and should not be treated as the same as writing (64).

Chapter 5 takes up a significantly different approach. Based on personal experience as a missionary in the Middle East, Kenneth Bailey proposed a model of “informal controlled tradition.” Bailey bases this model on his observation of oral traditions regarding John Hogg, a nineteenth-century missionary in Egypt who founded the Christian communities Bailey visited. In contrast to form criticism’s informal, uncontrolled tradition and Gerhardsson’s formal, controlled tradition, Bailey argues that the traditions about both John Hogg and Jesus were controlled with regard to their “basic shape and point” (67) through a process of informal response and correction in community gatherings. Eve sees some merit in Bailey’s approach, to the extent that it essentially illustrates oral tradition’s combination of flexibility and stability through social control as construed by Kelber and
others (83). But it clearly needs verification by methodologically rigorous sociological research, and it would always have the same limitations that all contemporary anthropological and sociological studies have when applied to antiquity.

The next two chapters concern on the most recent major trend in the study of oral Jesus tradition: attention to the role of memory. Chapter 6, “Memory and Tradition,” introduces contemporary research on individual and social memory and then discusses how scholars have analyzed oral tradition from this perspective. While Eve initially recognizes oral tradition as but one “aspect of social memory” alongside “commemorative rituals, monuments, ceremonies, habitual practices, and written texts” (86, emphasis added), in the remainder of the discussion he fails to specify how writing functions in social memory compared with orality. Chapter 7 then engages closely with three scholars who utilize memory in their analysis of oral Jesus tradition: James Dunn, Richard Horsley, and Rafael Rodriguez. Perhaps the most important implication here is that “the Gospels were embedded in and surrounded by the tradition” (124, discussing Rodriguez). Thus concepts of orality and social memory are just as important for understanding the written gospels themselves. But I suspect that understanding the oral embeddedness of the written gospels may be quite a different aim than the study of “oral tradition” proper.

The final model is that of “eyewitnesses” (ch. 8), proposed in different forms by Samuel Byrskog and Richard Bauckham. Both argue that authoritative eyewitnesses had a significant role in shaping and controlling the oral tradition about Jesus. Eve sees the notion as generally plausible but impossible to prove, and he also rightly notes that there is still no guarantee of historical accuracy.

Eve then tests these models by “Probing the Tradition” (ch. 9). He briefly examines parallel “traditions” in Mark and Paul and then Mark and Josephus. In the handful of parallel traditions in Paul and Mark, Eve finds considerable stability and variability (169). One must, of course, accept his explicit assumption of “no direct literary relationship” between Mark and Paul (159). However one construes that relationship, once Paul put ink on papyrus, everything he wrote about ceased to be purely oral tradition. Perhaps this simple fact should be more widely recognized in studies of early Christian oral tradition. The supposed tradition common to Mark and Josephus (mostly centered on John the Baptist) exhibits far less stability. Nonetheless, Eve concludes that these two probes best support the models of media contrast (Kelber) and social memory (e.g., Rodriguez), with

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2. To give but one example where social memory is opposed to writing: “where the great tradition may at least in part be recorded in writing, the little tradition exists solely in social memory and is rehearsed entirely through oral communication” (116, emphasis added). Perhaps this derives mainly from the language of the person he is summarizing (Horsley). But Eve is not quoting here, and he does nothing to correct a notion of social memory that excludes writing.
their assertions of stability and flexibility. But the traditions Eve examined here do not even test Gerhardsson’s model, since he focused on Jesus’s sayings, which barely appear in Paul.

In the concluding chapter, Eve offers three emergent theses:

1. Oral tradition typically exhibits both stability and change; (2) collective memory reflects both the impact of the past and the needs of the present; and (3) individual memory (insofar as it can be distinguished from social aspects of memory) is both generally reliable and capable of being seriously misleading. (178)

He also reflects on the implications for historical Jesus research, to which he is not opposed, but for which oral tradition and social memory theory offer no conclusive answers.

Before concluding, I offer two overall comments. First, Eve uses the phrase “the gospels” too ambiguously. When he refers to “the Gospels as oral-derived texts” (107), does he mean all three Synoptics? John, too? This flattens their differences. While I agree that written texts functioned in an oral context, the nature of the “orality” of those four particular gospels certainly varied. Second, Eve and several of the scholars he cites too frequently cast blame on “print culture.” To be sure, Gutenberg’s legacy has profoundly shaped modern culture, but Eve’s contrast between “ancient and modern use of texts” in a description of the limitations of “writing in antiquity” (8–13) submerges the richness of ancient and medieval literary culture. For example, organizational features such as the division of words, verses, chapters, and paragraphs are not modern, print-culture inventions. Even if such features were uncommon in ancient literary Greek manuscripts, word division is common in Hebrew manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the medieval Masoretic Hebrew biblical text is replete with organizational and paratextual features. As for the Greek New Testament, chapter divisions (kephalaia) and the Ammonian sections/Eusebian canons (which indicate parallels in the gospels) emerged long before the printing press. Thus even if Eve is right that such reading aids were not immediately available to the earliest readers of the gospels, it is incorrect to suggest that concerns for textual organization are generally anachronistic. Otherwise we would need


4. To give a further example, Eve implies that the concept of a word as “an isolated lexical unit” is somehow a product of “print culture” (106). Since this is obviously wrong (we could easily multiply ancient literary
to critique such meticulous scholars as Origen, Eusebius, and the rabbis for their “print culture” assumptions.

In the end, Eve has produced a fair and perceptive treatment of the major models of oral Jesus tradition. The volume will be useful both to those already engaged in the subject and to those desiring an entrée to an increasingly technical subdiscipline of New Testament research. On a whole, I agree with his sober assessment that, while many of these models offer useful insights in how oral traditions about Jesus may have functioned, they are all speculative to a certain extent, and none is able to state how the oral tradition must have worked in specific instances (159).

references to the concept of individual words or point to ancient lexica around the world), it appears that Eve has simply gotten carried away in the rhetoric of critiquing print culture.

5. For a better systematic presentation of all the terminology and basic concepts, neophytes may wish to consult chapter 2 of Rodriguez’s Oral Tradition and the New Testament, which is formatted like a glossary.