

2014

The Oral Gospel Tradition by James D. Dunn

Edward J. Mills III

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mills, Edward J. III (2014) "The Oral Gospel Tradition by James D. Dunn," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 89: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol89/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized administrator of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Oral Gospel Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. x + 390 pages. Paperback, \$45.00.

Having read most of theologian James Dunn's voluminous work and enjoyed and learned from it a great deal, I was a bit disappointed with his latest, *The Oral Gospel Tradition*. It is not that there are no great essays in it. It is just that there seems to be no common thread that ties all the essays together in spite of the book's common theme of the oral Gospel tradition.

In the last fifty years there has been a steady drumbeat in both Classical studies and New Testament studies to persuade scholars to escape the two fields' modern orientation towards texts and instead understand the ways in which the ancient world was also an oral/aural society. The push to understand ancient texts this way has largely been successful, and James Dunn is one of the prime movers of this shift in New Testament scholarship. These collected essays, which include a collection of his older published essays, were important in moving New Testament scholarship in this direction.

Dunn divides his work into three parts but does not indicate a thematic core for each division. Readers are thus left to determine for themselves his rationale. The first appears to cover the oral/aural nature of ancient societies, the second is comprised of essays written in response to critics of the first part of his three-part *magnum opus*, *Jesus Remembered*, and the third section is a set of essays that flesh out the consequences of seeing ancient texts as oral/aural documents and texts written in an oral/aural society. Of the three, the first and third parts are the most rewarding. In Part One there are seven essays, the most important of which appears in the book's second chapter, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition." This essay, first published in 2003, was a real *tour de force* in the push to move to an oral/aural understanding of the New Testament texts. Other chapters in part one on the Q Source and John's Gospel are also quite good, although some knowledge of Greek is needed to read some of these essays. What I find most compelling in these essays is that although they engage in theoretical issues having to do with oral societies and memory, the overall analysis is much more basic and profound. Dunn simply lays out parallel texts from the Gospels and thereby fashions a more solid argument for the oral nature of these texts. The texts themselves and their sameness, yet difference, make a much stronger case for the oral nature of these texts than all the volumes on oral memory that have been used to argue for the oral nature of these texts. Indeed, this is Dunn's unique contribution to the whole conversation about the oral nature of the New Testament texts.

The essays in Part Two are responses to various scholars' critiques of *Jesus Remembered*, and it is helpful to have read *Jesus Remembered* in order to engage with these essays. In fact, all of the essays in the book have been revamped with references to *Jesus Remembered* in mind, and I found the continual references to this book a bit tedious at times. Nevertheless, even those who have not read *Jesus Remembered* will likely find that the essays are worth wading through anyway. In Part Three, Dunn seems to answer the implied "so what" question about his strong preference for seeing the New Testament documents as deeply affected by oral tradition. In this section, all four essays are really worth reading. Chapter Fourteen, "The History of the Tradition (New Testament)," is a particularly good overview of the course of biblical scholarship over the last several generations.

Three things stand out in Dunn's work. First is his detailed, document-based approach to his argument for the continued oral shaping of the traditions about Jesus beginning with the oral tradition, through the Q Source, and into the Gospels themselves. Most of the other leaders of the

oral tradition movement spend much of their time discussing oral traditions in other cultures and theories of memory and memory retention. I much prefer, and am much more persuaded by, Dunn's approach. Secondly, Dunn argues for the continued fluidity of the New Testament even after it was reduced to text. In this he is very persuasive. The several endings of the Gospel of Mark are examples of the ongoing work that shaped the text after its first rendition. Thirdly, Dunn argues convincingly (and more in depth in *Jesus Remembered*) that we can never get back to the very words of Jesus, but only the impact and impressions he made upon his followers that end up being embodied in the oral tradition and then the gospel texts. We can know the basic facts about Jesus and his deeds and sayings, but never the very words of Jesus. The oral, and then textual, renditions of the Jesus tradition were done with ancient commonplaces that stressed the core of a tradition but whose details were fairly fluid. That is why when one looks at parallel texts from the Synoptic Gospels, for example, one is struck with how free the tradents (those who preserved the oral traditions) were to manipulate and alter the settings and the very traditions they were passing on. It is quite a shock for many first time examiners used to the fixed texts of the post-Gutenberg world to see how free the gospel writers are with the traditions they inherited, as we see for instance in the very different use of Mark and the Q Source by Matthew and Luke.

I started this review by saying that I was a bit disappointed with *The Oral Gospel Tradition*. It is, however, a book worth reading for those historians and theologians who are interested in the process of how the traditions about Jesus were handed down and then reduced to text, and how those texts remained fluid for a century or more. It is a good look into the very different world of the New Testament era. The essays I have highlighted in particular are worth the price of the book.

Edward J. Mills III
Adjunct Professor of Hebrew and Christian Traditions
Tusculum College
Greeneville, Tennessee