

The Gospel in Latin America: Between Narrative and Testimony

Sidney de Moraes Sanches

Introduction

In a recent book, James Dunn raised the argument that, with regard to the movement of the traditions about Jesus Christ within the earliest communities, we should abandon the literary paradigm in exchange for an oral paradigm.¹ This is supported by evidence that the prevailing culture in the time of Jesus Christ was oral as opposed to written.

1. James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Sidney de Moraes Sanches is a Baptist pastor from Brazil with a Th.D. from the Faculdade Jesuítica de Filosofia e Teologia. He is a professor at the Faculdade Nazarena do Brasil in Campinas and has been a member of the FTL since 2003.



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Dunn points out five characteristics of oral tradition in this foundational period of the traditions about Jesus: its oral performance; its communal nature; the assumption that certain people were responsible for maintaining and transmitting the community's traditions; parallel accounts that compete with each other as alternative sources; and the formal combination of fixity and flexibility, of stability and diversity.²

Dunn concludes:

Oral tradition is oral memory; its primary function is to preserve and recall what is of importance from the past. Tradition, more or less by definition, embodies the concern for continuity with the past, a past drawn upon but also enlivened that it might illuminate the present and the future.³

Richard Bauckham argues that eyewitnesses spread their memories of Jesus Christ by word of mouth.⁴ This eyewitness testimony continued to spread even after the Gospels were written down. When considered in this way, oral tradition is not mere memory; it is also a literary genre, narrative and testimonial discourse.

Based on the intuition of Dunn and Bauckham, we understand that the narrative genre with its testimonial character was fundamental for the existence and survival of oral tradition as it was transcribed and reaches us throughout the ages. In this essay we will develop this point and explore the broad strokes of the narrative literary genre, of the discursive genre of testimony, their importance for the survival and transmission of the oral tradition about Jesus Christ, and how they allow the inclusion of the other—the hearer

2. *Ibid.*, 93–98.

3. *Ibid.*, 98.

4. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).