Lecture 7: Jesus Traditions
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The most pressing question that a comparison of how the Synoptic evangelists used Jesus’ sayings raises, in my view, is how those traditions were treated both before the evangelists received them and in the hands of the evangelists themselves.

One of the most surprising discoveries for most people is to learn that the gospels were not the first works in the NT to be written. Even more surprising, for many, is it to learn that the first of the Gospels penned, Mark, appeared at least fifteen years after Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, which is the earliest example of Christian literature we have.

What’s more, it’s sobering to realize that if all we had were Paul’s letters, we would have very little of what Jesus said and no information about what he did. Only a few references to Jesus’ teaching are scattered about in Paul’s letters and even then he refers to them only in passing. The most striking example is 1 Cor 7.10-11 where Paul writes, “To the married I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife.” Paul underscores this as a tradition from “the Lord” (= Jesus) when he states his own advice in the next verse: “To the rest I say – I and not the Lord – that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.” The distinction Paul draws between his own judgment and the “Lord’s words” highlights the substance of vv. 10-11 as a tradition comparable to Jesus’ words as reported in Mark 10.11-12: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” Most of the half dozen or so of Paul’s other allusions to Jesus’ words are not as explicitly marked and, in fact, might have gone undetected if we did not have similar sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels.

The situation concerning Jesus’ life and activities would be even more dire, if Paul were our only source. The only thing Paul reports of Jesus’ origins is that he was “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal 4.4). Between there and Jesus’ death Paul tells us nothing. He is solely interested in the death, resurrection and return of Jesus as Lord and Christ.

This realization puts a sharp point on the question of how traditions about Jesus’ actions and words were passed along and handled for the nearly four decades before the first of the Synoptic gospels was composed. In pursuing
this question, I want to distinguish between two questions that Nickle repeatedly intertwines. One is the question of what Jesus himself said and did. The second is the question of how reports of Jesus’ sayings and deeds were handed on by his followers.

The more difficult of these is the first. As Nickle tells you (and I’ll further demonstrate), because accounts of Jesus’ words and deeds were used by early Christians to proclaim their message about Jesus and to provide guidance for their congregations, they were shaped and reshaped to meet those needs. Moreover, as Nickle reports, scholars have detected passages attributed to Jesus before his death that were uttered by Christian prophets in the name of the risen Jesus. Consequently, not everything in the gospels can simply be assumed to come directly from Jesus of Nazareth. And this issue - which is an area of investigation in its own right, known as the Quest for the Historical Jesus - is fraught with difficulties that would require a separate course to address. So we’ll put aside that question.

The question that remains is by no means a simple one, either. In fact, I am less optimistic than Nickle about how far back we can reach in the oral transmission of reports about Jesus’ words and deeds. For one thing, the method of form criticism that Nickle tells you about, was in its heyday in the first half of the twentieth century, after which scholars began to raise questions about exactly how much it can tell us about oral transmission. Form criticism is useful insofar as it helps us identify similarly structured units and learn how such are to be read. It fails us, however, at the point form critics saw its greatest contribution: in revealing the circumstances in which the tradition was used. While recognizing the form of a pronouncement story, for example, enables us to see that it highlights a memorable saying, it becomes highly speculative to posit how such sayings were used prior to their incorporation into a written gospel, even in the generalities Nickle does. Consequently, we cannot really say anything about why an oral unit was used.

Moreover, since the only access we have to these forms are in written documents, it is quite a leap to affirm that they are the same forms passed down orally. I.e. given that the forms, as we have them, are literary, how much can we deduce about the shape they took orally? What’s more, as Nickles notes, there is evidence that even prior to Mark written collections of Jesus’ words and/or deeds were in circulation, so that we cannot be certain the forms we have are straight from oral tradition. And, obviously, the same applies to Matthew and Luke, and even more so.

As a result, we are largely confined to what we can observe about the state of the Jesus traditions at the time the evangelists wrote and drawing
inferences about how the material had been handed down from how they used them.

A good starting point for studying the Jesus traditions prior to the evangelists are the introductory verses of Luke we’ve visited before, where the author refers to his sources: “1Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, 3I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.”

The author writes for someone addressed as “most excellent Theophilus.” Given the respectful address of him as “most excellent Theophilus,” it is likely that he was an upper class Roman, for this was a typical mode of address for a person of such stature. We find Theophilus addressed again at the opening of Acts, the second volume of Luke’s work.

The phrase, “the things about which you have been instructed” suggests Theophilus was a new convert to the faith. That is supported also by what the author wants Theophilus to gain: knowledge of “the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.” The Greek word translated “the truth” (ajsfavleian) comes closer to our term “certainty.” In fact, it would be legitimate and perhaps preferable to translate this (with Fitzmeyer), “so that you may realize what assurance you have for the instruction you have received.” [Fitzmeyer, Luke] I.e. this gospel’s stated purpose was to give a detailed account for a recent convert so as to support his faith. As I’ve already suggested, it seems likely that Luke’s motivation for composing his gospel was to provide a defense of Jesus, which accords with this goal of providing Theophilus assurance. We’ll consider that issue again when we study Luke.

Equally intriguing is what the author says about other works containing Jesus’ sayings. First, he acknowledges that he is by no means a pioneer. He refers to “many who had [before him] undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events.” While his reference to the “many” others who had composed such accounts includes Mark (since Mark was one of his sources), it suggests that there were additional compilations of Jesus’ work and words in circulation that he knew, which have not survived. And of course, that is consistent with our knowledge that Luke had access to sources other than Mark, and even beyond Q. And that’s not to mention the written sources that existed prior to Mark. Indications are that Mark was not alone in having composed a gospel prior to Luke.
Luke says those earlier evangelists gave an “orderly account of the events,” precisely what he promises to do for Theophilus. And yet, by implication, Luke apparently regards those narratives inadequate for Theophilus, and so takes pen in hand to compose a new one that would provide Theophilus assurance about the instruction he has received.

As for the sources available to Luke, he refers to the other accounts he knows as having been written in accordance with traditions of a particular sort: “just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.” The standard for such narratives is the traditions handed down. But notice his use of “us,” parallel to his previous reference to “the events that have been fulfilled among us.” He lumps himself in with the broader group of Jesus’ followers, and especially, by his language about traditions “handed on to us,” ranks himself alongside the authors of the other accounts he knows. Clearly he doesn’t count himself among the eyewitnesses; he is dependent on the same types of tradition as others.

Thus, when Luke asserts he has “investigated everything carefully from the very first,” he does not necessarily claim to have made contact with eyewitnesses. In fact, notice that he designates some of those handing on the tradition as “servants of the word” – which in early Christian parlance meant, as I’ve said before, gospel preachers, so that Luke acknowledges his debt to the oral transmission of Jesus’ words. Luke refers to accounts that drew on oral traditions handed down to his generation by the “eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”

You’ll recall the testimony to the value of such oral tradition voiced by Papias, Bishop of Hierapolis, the first early Christian writer to acknowledge familiarity with any of the gospels, characterizing Mark as handing on stories Peter told and mentioning a Gospel of Matthew. In spite of having access to such written gospels, he says, “If by chance someone who had been a follower of the elders should come my way, I inquired about the words of the elders – what Andrew or Peter said, or Philip, or Thomas or James, or John or Matthew or any other of the Lord’s disciples…. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and abiding voice.” - The esteem for oral tradition in the ancient world was far greater than in our culture, as Nickle points out.

So these initial verses of the Third Gospel reveal some things about traditions available to its author. He was aware of written collections of Jesus’ words and deeds, but acknowledged their origins in oral proclamation. And yet, these traditions were valuable to him and the
standard by which an account of Jesus’ ministry should be written. And yet, if he is satisfied that earlier accounts were written according to this standard, why does he set out to write another one? He seems to affirm that the record has already been preserved.

The only means I know of for answering this question is to explore how Luke handles the tradition he has received and for which he confesses high esteem. As a first test case, I want to turn to a passage we have looked at previously that is preserved only in the double tradition. Here is the saying as preserved in Matthew: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

Now let’s read Luke’s parallel text: “So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

We’ve earlier noted the different order in Luke for Matthew’s first example (giving a stone when bread is requested) and Luke’s different case study for Matthew’s second example of parental behavior. For the moment, though, I want to focus on a striking difference at the end of this unit. In Matthew Jesus uses the argument that if even humans know how to give good gifts to their children, then certainly the Father, knows how to “give good things to those who ask him!” In Luke, however, the inference takes a different turn, for now it’s that the Father knows how to “give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” How do we explain this difference between Matthew’s “good things” and Luke’s “Holy Spirit”?

One might posit that since we do not possess everything Jesus said on every occasion, we shouldn’t be surprised to find this variation. After all, many of Jesus’ sayings are cast in memorable form, and so we shouldn’t be surprised if Jesus used these statements on more than one occasion, with slight variations. That would account for the differences between Matthew and Luke. Luke had record of an occasion when Jesus drew the inference that if human parents know how to give good gifts to their children, certainly the Father knows how to give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him. Even if
Matthew’s talk of giving “good things” corresponds better to the analogy of humans who know how to give good gifts, this simply reflects on occasion when Jesus substituted “the Holy Spirit” to emphasize the gift of the Spirit, and only Luke had record of that speech.

But let’s notice a peculiarity of Luke’s Gospel. If we count the references to the Holy Spirit in Luke, we find 13. If we add to that the 3x the lone word “Spirit” is shorthand for the Holy Spirit, the total comes to 16. When we turn to Matthew, we find a slightly different story. The phrase “Holy Spirit” appears only 5x, while the term “Spirit” occurs another 7x, for a total of 12 references to the Spirit. While the total number of references to the Spirit in Matthew is similar to Luke’s, there are some differences, most notably Luke much more frequent use of the full phrase, “Holy Spirit.” Where Matthew makes up ground is in his use of “Spirit” 7x. But we need to notice something about these correspondences.

First, of the 5x Matthew uses the phrase “Holy Spirit,” 2 of them are instances Matthew, Mark and Luke have in common. Because what we are looking for is the number of times an evangelist uses the phrase “Holy Spirit” when the others do not, we have to subtract these two instances in both Luke and Matthew, leaving us with 11 possibly unique occurrences of the phrase in Luke and 3 in Matthew.

Two other instances of the phrase “Holy Spirit” appear in the story of the announcement of Jesus’ conception, which only Matthew and Luke have. The phrase occurs twice in Matthew and once in Luke. Thus, we need to discount these three instances from our total of unique uses of the phrase, since their infancy narratives seem to have come from allied sources. Subtracting these three, we wind up with only one place “Holy Spirit” is uniquely mentioned in Matthew, while Luke has it without a Matthean parallel 10x.

Where I am headed with this is to make the case that Luke had a special interest in the role of the Holy Spirit and that he frequently inserted that theme into the traditions of Jesus’ words. Already we can conclude that Luke speaks of the “Holy Spirit” 10x without any parallel in Matthew, over against Matthew’s one unique occurrence of the phrase.

Well, could it be that Luke alone inherited a set of traditions reflecting occasions when Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit? A problem for this hypothesis arises from the cases when, in double tradition passages, Matthew has simply the “Spirit,” while Luke has “Holy Spirit.” I’ll give two examples.

Matthew 3 reports that when Jesus came out of the water following his baptism, the heavens opened and “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a
In Luke, however, it is not the Spirit of God that alights on him, but specifically “the Holy Spirit.” Now notice that this difference occurs not in Jesus’ words, but in those of the narrator. That is, we’re not dealing with two different traditions about what Jesus said – one in which he used “Spirit” and the other in which he used “Holy Spirit” – but two different ways of narrating the scene, so that this case cannot be accounted for by positing that Jesus said the same thing in two different ways on two different occasions.

The second example begins with a report of Jesus sending his disciples out on a mission. When they return, Matthew’s Jesus expresses joy over their reported success as follows: “At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.”

The same event is narrated in Luke 10, where by and large the same words stand, but with a significant addition: “At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth.” This addition is part of the narrator’s introduction to Jesus’ words and thus cannot be attributed to different versions of Jesus’ words. Once again, this is a case of Luke modifying his source in narrating an event. But if Luke expresses his interest in the theme of the Holy Spirit by transforming “Spirit of God” into “Holy Spirit” and inserting the phrase “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” in the narrative comments, then there is good reason to conclude that similar phenomena in Jesus’ words stem from Luke, also. For instance, when Jesus instructs his disciples not to premeditate what to say when brought up on trial, he explains himself, according to Matthew, by saying, “for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; 20 for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

In Luke, however, the whole statement is more compact, and it is no longer “the Spirit of your Father” that supplies the words, but simply “the Holy Spirit.” This is quite similar to Luke’s transformation of “Spirit of God” into “Holy Spirit” in the first example from narrative we looked at, giving us good reason to think that Luke himself made the change.

Equally, if Luke had no reluctance about inserting the note that Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit,” then it is more than likely he is also responsible for transforming the gift of “good things” into a gift of the “Holy Spirit” in the text with which we began.

Thus, underlying those statistics of Luke using “Holy Spirit” 10x when it is either not present in Mark or Matthew, or when he alters a phrase like “Spirit of God” into “Holy Spirit,” is Luke’s desire to accent the role of the Holy Spirit. And he introduces that topic not only in narrative comments, but also in Jesus’ own words.
And so “Luke,” who claims to write an “orderly report” after having made a careful investigation, shows no compulsion to simply hand on what he has received in the form he received it. He feels free to modify it so as to convey an emphasis he thinks essential for hearing the story of Jesus aright. Granted, no modern author would think of doing this, but Luke is not a modern author.

But if the author of Luke, who worked in part from written records, felt this freedom, what about those who transmitted the stories only in oral form from the beginning. Did they sense any greater need to pass along traditions of Jesus’ words verbatim?

Nickle stresses differences between a largely literate culture like ours and a dominantly oral culture like the one in which the gospels were composed, and rightly so. But one facet of his characterization propagates what has proved to be a romantic fantasy about oral cultures: the notion that people in oral societies had more highly developed memories due to their need to remember precisely matters, since they could not preserve them in writing.

However, studies of preliterate cultures have disproved that assumption. For one thing, to suggest that people in preliterate societies retain details of a story precisely assumes a model of accuracy that is indebted to the printing press. Not only did the invention of the printing press elevate the written form, it also created a previously unknown standard for what constitutes accurate preservation among the masses. Because he printing press made uniformity of wording possible, an accurate memory of words came to mean conformity to words on a printed page. But preliterate cultures have different expectations.

This began coming to light in the 1960’s with a pioneering study of oral poetry in the Balkans conducted by Harvard professors Milman Parry and Albert Lord. Parry and Lord studied preliterate Bosnian Moslem storytellers who recounted the exploits of the great heroes during the golden age of the Turkish Empire. Parry and Lord noted that such stories characteristically employed certain themes: the ruler’s council, the army’s call to service, or the wedding guest. These themes were mixed and matched in the stories according to need, so as to provide a framework for the action.

They also noticed that these poets used set phrases, including alternative versions of a motif, such as, “Then he mounted his winged horse,” “Then he mounted his bedouin mare,” “Well, she mounted her white horse,” “Then they mounted their horses in the courtyard.” The list goes on, but you get the idea. The report of mounting a horse was a common formula that allowed the poet to interweave components of his story easily.
Here, for example, are two versions of the opening lines of one story, sung on a single day by the same poet [ABOVE].

The differences are by no means earthshaking. What’s significant, however, is that these variations occur in the words of one poet on a single day. Making this even more striking are transcripts of Parry and Lord’s interviews with some of these performers about what they saw themselves doing. Here is a partial transcript of one interview: Interviewer: “Was it the same song, word for word and line for line?” Performer: “The same song, word for word and line for line. I didn’t add a single line, and I didn't make a single mistake….” Interviewer: “Tell me this: If two good singers listen to a third singer who is even better, and they both boast that they can learn a song if they hear it only once, do you think that there would be any difference between the two versions?” Performer: “There would….It couldn’t be otherwise. It told you before that two singers won’t sing the same song alike.”

By the end of the interview, it becomes apparent that what the interviewer means by “word for word and line for line” is not what the performer means. The interviewer, coming from a culture where a printed text is the standard, means that all words are exactly the same, while the performer, from a preliterate culture, means that the gist of the story is the same.

So Parry and Lord bring to our discussion some helpful insights into oral tradition. And yet, we need to note a couple limitations in applying their findings to the Jesus traditions. We should note, for example, that they studied oral performance, not specifically how oral tradition is transmitted. Moreover, there is a difference in the age of the traditions. Parry and Lord’s research dealt with traditions that were centuries-old, whereas the traditions about Jesus were still quite young by the time they became part of written Gospels. And yet, it is instructive to note the fluidity of tradition even after it has become a fixture of a culture. In preliterate culture it is not verbatim accuracy that is the standard, but the warp and woof of the story. And that is undoubtedly why Papias confessed oral tradition to be at least as valuable to him as books, if not more so.

This sort of variation of performance in orally transmitted tradition can help us understand a difference between Matthew and Luke’s passage we have noted previously. Luke’s different location for Matthew’s first example and his altogether different example in the other case can be readily understood in light of what Parry and Lord discovered. Not only is the variation in order intelligible, but so also is the difference in the substance of the other example. If the crux of the issue in oral performance is the warp and woof of the story, then handing down this story of Jesus’ words could
tolerate different examples being plugged in to illustrate the Father’s superior ability to care for his children. And of course, we find such flexibility also in the replacement of “good things” with “the Holy Spirit” to express an idea Luke regarded important to the portrayal of Jesus. But in addition to tailoring of the tradition of Jesus’ words to suit his needs, Luke also seems to have created words and placed them on Jesus’ lips.

For this, let’s turn to a story shared by all four canonical gospels. Here is how it reads in Mark 14.3-9: 

3 While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, // and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head. 4 But some were there who said to one another in anger, “Why was the ointment wasted in this way? 5 For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they // scolded her. 6 But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. 7 For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could; // she has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. 9 Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

Alongside Mark’s account let’s place Luke’s version of the story: 

36 One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee’s house and took his place at the table. 37 And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 38 She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his // feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. 39 Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him - that she is a sinner.” 40 Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.” 41 “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” 43 Simon answered, “I suppose // the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44 Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. 45 You gave me no kiss, but from the time I // came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not anoint my head
with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. \(^{47}\) Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Obviously, there are differences. E.g. Mark’s story takes place in the home of Simon the leper, whereas Luke’s incident occurs at a dinner party in the house of a Pharisee. Further-more, only in Luke does the woman wash Jesus’ feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. Even more strikingly, while in Mark the woman anoints Jesus head, in Luke she anoints his feet.

What’s more, those who object to the woman’s actions in Mark are referred to vaguely as “some who were there,” while in Luke the one balking is “the Pharisee who invited him” into his home. While in Mark Jesus rebuts criticism of the woman by asserting she has treated him well, in Luke he blunts the Pharisees criticism by telling his host a story about a creditor who had two debtors whose debts he forgave, and their overflowing joy, parallel to that which motivated this woman. Accordingly, in place of Mark’s simple “she did what she could,” Luke details the various ways this woman has cared for him that his host has not.

Most strikingly, Jesus’ concluding comment in Mark is that the story of this woman’s deed will be repeated wherever the gospel is announced, whereas in Luke drives home the point that the woman’s actions have been motivated by love born of forgiveness, in contrast to the Pharisee.

Despite these differences, however, their story line is the same. A full-fledged assessment of the relationship between the stories in Mark and Luke would require us to compare similar stories in Matthew and John, and would involve more detail than you can imagine. Suffice it to say, however, that when one considers the parallel stories in Matthew and John, they all prove to be variations on the same tradition.

There are a couple of items in Luke’s story which show he has shaped this tradition according to some of his favorite themes, as we saw him do earlier. E.g. while the site of the dinner is not the house of a Leper, but of a Pharisee, Luke’s host does not remain anonymous. Notice that Jesus addresses him in v. 40: “Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you.’” -- And the Pharisee is called “Simon” twice more by the narrator after that. Curiously, then, this initially anonymous Pharisee’s name proves to be identical to the name of the Leper in Mark’s story. But perhaps this is just coincidence. Simon was a common name, so it could have to have been the name of both men.

However, we should note that in Matthew and Mark the Pharisees are typically treated as a group, without singling any of them out. Only Luke speaks of individual Pharisees, and this is the only time any of them is given
a name. Even more significantly, when Luke speaks of individual Pharisees it is as Jesus’ dinner hosts. Besides the invitation given here, another is extended in chapter 11: “37While he was speaking, a Pharisee invited him to dine with him; so he went in and took his place at the table.” Again, in Luke 14 Jesus receives a dinner invitation: “1On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.” -- As in the story of the woman bearing oil, both these dinner settings become the occasion for Jesus to criticize an attitude held by Pharisees. And again, this sort of private dinner party at a Pharisee’s home happens only in the Gospel of Luke.

So, is it simply coincidental that Simon is the name of the Pharisee in Luke, as it is that of the leper in Mark? Possibly. But that argument becomes more difficult to sustain when we note that such debates between Jesus and Pharisees are set in the context of dinner meetings only in Luke. That peculiarity argues that Luke felt the freedom to recast some events as taking place in the context of dinner meetings in a Pharisee’s home.

What’s more the contrast between a Pharisee and someone he despises is a theme of which Luke is fond, particularly when forgiveness is extended to the non-Pharisee. A prime example is Jesus’ story of the two men who prayed in the temple, found only in Luke 18: “10Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

As in chapter 7, the story contrasts the attitude of a Pharisee and someone he despises as a sinner. And it is he that finds forgiveness rather than the Pharisee. That story resonates with this one of the sinful woman who lavishes oil on Jesus, particularly in the contrast Jesus draws between the Pharisee’s actions and those of the woman. The woman whom the Pharisee disdains as a sinner performs her deeds out of love inspired by forgiveness. She does all the things the Pharisee neglected. And so when Jesus draws the conclusion, “her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little,” it is tantamount to saying, as in chapt 18, the sinner, not the Pharisee, finds forgiveness.
Because such disputes about the Pharisees’ attitudes and behaviors in Luke typically occur in the context of Jesus attending a meal at a Pharisee’s house, and because the story of Luke 7 sounds a theme found in the uniquely Lukan story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, there is reason to conclude that Luke reshaped this story to express a theme he considered essential to representing Jesus’ gospel, even as he substituted “the Holy Spirit” for “good things” in Luke 11. Here, however, Luke goes beyond changing words, to creating words for Jesus.

Even if we grant, for sake of argument, that the story of the two creditors came from a story to which Luke alone had access – although I don’t think we need to explain it that way – Luke expands Mark’s brief “she has done what she could” into a lengthy contrast by Jesus between what his Pharisee-host failed to do and what this woman has done. This expansion plays out Luke’s theme of forgiveness being extended to those despised by Pharisees. Evidently Luke had no reservations about placing in Jesus’ mouth words he created that expounded that theme.

Thus, when Luke claims to write an “orderly report” after having made a careful investigation, he apparently doesn’t mean he is presenting a verbatim transcript of Jesus’ words or even a precise copy of the traditions of Jesus’ words he has received. He feels free to adjust the traditions rather strikingly to convey what he considers essential for hearing the story of Jesus aright. And if the writer Luke treated the traditions he received this way, it is difficult to deny that the traditions he received had undergone similar handling.

Nickle, in my view, unsuccessfully tries to straddle the fence on this issue. On the one hand, he acknowledges that in the process of oral transmission, reports of Jesus’ words and deeds were shaped and adjusted for current situations. And yet, he also asserts that “the conservatism of the earliest Jewish Christian disciples played a role in protecting the stories from radical change.” But given the freedom Luke shows in handling tradition, why should we assume everyone before him left words unchanged? And what would constitute a “radical change”? Certainly Jesus was not transformed from a lying rebel into a paradigm of virtue. But Luke’s handling of the Jesus tradition shows that it was susceptible to modification, and there is no reason to doubt that this was true from the earliest days.

Our concern in this course will remain with what we can perceive about how the evangelists utilized the traditions they inherited to portray Jesus and his message.