“Eusebius and the Performances of the Gospel Stories”

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Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* gives varied information about the oral performance of the Gospels and early Christian proclamation (*kerygma*), especially the influence of their performance on the creation of written Gospels. While there are certainly historical questions about Eusebius’ work, especially when dealing with purported events a few centuries earlier, nonetheless his citations from earlier sources provide glimpses at the transformation from oral teachings to written texts. This paper surveys references to the oral proclamation of the Gospels throughout Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* in an attempt to see how Eusebius and others portrayed the oral performance of the Christian message. It is hoped that this paper will show that the initial oral performances of stories about Jesus, enlivened by the spirit of a live presentation, were key experiences in strengthening the early church and eventually producing the written Gospel texts. Eusebius and the sources he quotes present consistent elements of oral performance even when they differ on how or why the Gospels were written. One aspect that stands out is that oral presentations were preferred over written compositions because of the powerful effect they had on the listeners.
In the short recension of Eusebius’ account of the *Martyrs of Palestine*, which is sometimes included as an appendix to his eighth book in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius relates an encounter he had with a blind Christian from Egypt, John, who had suffered severe physical punishment beyond his preexisting blind condition. Yet despite these physical limitations, John was known for the excellence and strength of his memory. Eusebius recounts his astonishment when he was first in John’s presence and heard him repeating portions of the divine scripture. “While I only heard his voice, I thought that, according to the custom in the meetings, he was reading. But when I came near and perceived what he was doing, and observed all the others standing around him with sound eyes while he was using only the eyes of his mind, and yet was speaking naturally like some prophet, and far excelling those who were sound in body, it was impossible for me not to glorify God and wonder” (8 (app) 13.8).

Two things stand out from this description. First, John excelled others who were sound in body, and thus possibly by implication, his oral presentation exceeded the usual custom of those who read in meetings. Secondly, his natural speaking was likened to being a prophet, thereby emphasizing the greater spiritual power associated with his oral presentation. This second thought is confirmed by Eusebius’ next comment: “And I seemed to see in these deeds evident and strong confirmation of the fact that true manhood consists not in excellence of bodily appearance, but in the soul and understanding alone. For he, with his body mutilated, manifested the superior excellence of the power that was within him.” Thus John’s oral recitation manifested inner spiritual power and granted his listeners greater access to his soul. This access to the soul was also alluded to in relation to John’s superior memory as Eusebius called his a “transparent soul.” According to Eusebius, John “had written whole books of the
Divine Scriptures, ‘not in tables of stone’ 2 Corinthians 3:3 as the divine apostle says, neither on skins of animals, nor on paper which moths and time destroy, but truly ‘in fleshy tables of the heart,’ in a transparent soul and most pure eye of the mind, so that whenever he wished he could repeat, as if from a treasury of words, any portion of the Scripture, whether in the law, or the prophets, or the historical books, or the gospels, or the writings of the apostles” (8 (app) 13.7).

It is through this lens of oral performance as manifesting greater inner spiritual power, revealing one’s soul, and speaking as a prophet that I would like to examine other references to oral recitations of the Christian message in Eusebius’ work. Eusebius’ accounts of oral performances of the gospels during the time of the apostles may reflect some of his and his sources’ firsthand experiences with live performances of the Christian message. As Philip Sellew has noted, “Eusebius’ historical achievement as it relates to the gospels is found to lie in his collection and preservation of story, practice, and opinion, even if this is sporadic, and not in his discovery and presentation of reliable facts about the writings’ origins or early history.”

Although written Gospel texts were certainly available to Eusebius, he seems to have had an appreciation for the added value in the oral presentation of these stories.

One of the most dramatic retellings of the oral performance of the Gospels, frequently noted by those studying the formation of the Gospels, is Eusebius’ description of Peter’s preaching in Rome. In the conflict between Simon Magus and Peter over the souls of Rome, Peter’s preaching of the divine word helped thwart the influence of the evil one. Peter, as the spokesperson [προήγορος] for all the others, arrived “Like a noble captain of God, clad in divine armour, he brought the costly merchandise of the spiritual light from the east to the dwellers in
the west, preaching [εὐαγγελιζόμενος] the Gospel of the light itself and the word which saves souls, the proclamation [κήρυγμα] of the Kingdom of Heaven (2.14.6). The effect of Peter’s arrival and preaching was quickly felt by Simon: “And thus when the divine word had made its home among them, the power of Simon was quenched and immediately destroyed, together with the man himself.” Peter’s weapon, if you will, was the power of his preaching of the divine word.

The power and influence of Peter’s words did not end there but illuminated the minds of his Roman listeners as well who did not want to hear his preaching only once, but wished his words to be written down so they could be revisited. Eusebius claims this was the impetus for the written Gospel of Mark: “But a great light of religion shone on the minds of the hearers of Peter, so that they were not satisfied with a single hearing or with the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation, but with every kind of exhortation besought Mark, whose Gospel is extant, seeing that he was Peter’s follower, to leave them a written statement of the teaching given them verbally, nor did they cease until they had persuaded him, and so became the cause of the Scripture called the Gospel according to Mark” (2.15.1). Peter’s spiritual light transmitted through his performance of the divine word had greatly affected the listeners and they wanted a written memorial [ὑπομνήματα] of the teachings that had been orally communicated to them perhaps to re-experience what they had just experienced. According to Eusebius, when Peter later heard about their request, he sanctioned this newly written record for use in the churches. “And they say that the Apostle, knowing by the revelation of the spirit to him what had been done, was pleased at their zeal, and ratified the scripture for study in the churches” (Book 2.15.2).
Eusebius also recorded Papias’ account of the coming forth of Mark’s Gospel based on Peter’s preaching, but in a different fashion from that which we just finished discussing. Calling Mark the “interpreter” of Peter (incidentally, Eusebius states that Irenaeus also gives Mark the title of Peter’s interpreter who wrote down those things which Peter had preached (5.8.3)), Papias explains that since Mark had not heard the Lord himself, he relied on Peter’s recitation of the things Christ said or did. Papias goes on to say that Mark accurately wrote down Peter’s words, but not always in order since Peter adapted his oral teachings to his listeners’ needs and Peter had no intention of giving “an arrangement of the Lord’s oracles.” So Mark “gave attention to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them” (3.39.15). This passage highlights that the oral tradition consisted of various segments or units which could, or, perhaps even more accurately, should be re-ordered based on the demands of the performance moment. Joanna Dewey sees the lack of order as characteristic of oral tradition: “Indeed, I would suggest that it is the lack of a more literate chronological and topical order the Papias had in mind when he said Mark’s story was ‘not in order,’ ou mentoi taxei (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.39.15). It followed oral ordering procedures, not proper rhetorical form.” It also hints at how this is not a fool-proof transfer of information since it relied on Mark’s memory of Peter’s material, but Eusebius saw no error in this since Mark was careful to include everything he heard and not state them falsely; in other words, he was “accurate.” This process could be likened to an ancient cut and paste job: cutting from the oral teachings of Peter which varied depending on the needs of the hearers, and pasting to written sections based on what Mark remembered without omitting or introducing false material.
Clement’s version of the creation of the gospel of Mark is simpler, but shares some of the same details such as Peter’s public preaching in Rome by the Spirit and the request of the hearers to have Mark record Peter’s teachings because he could remember his sayings. It also includes Peter’s concession to the resulting written Gospel (although later in 6.25.5, Eusebius quotes Origen as stating that Mark composed his Gospel according to the instructions of Peter):

“When Peter had publicly preached [κηρύξαντος] the word at Rome, and by the Spirit had proclaimed [ἐξειπόντος] the Gospel, that those present, who were many, exhorted Mark, as one who had followed him for a long time and remembered what had been spoken, to make a record of what was said; and that he did this, and distributed the Gospel among those that asked him. And that when the matter came to Peter’s knowledge he neither strongly forbade it nor urged it forward (Book 6:14.6-7).

The account of the writing of Luke’s Gospel emphasizes Luke’s late arrival into Christianity and therefore his reliance on the oral traditions of his predecessors. When comparing Acts with Luke’s Gospel, Eusebius points out that for Acts Luke could write as an eyewitness, but for his Gospel he relied on information he heard from those who had been eyewitnesses and ministers of the word. “The latter [Acts] he composed not this time from hearing [ἀκοῆς] but his own eyes” (Book 3.4.6). Similar to what was mentioned above in his description of Mark, Eusebius goes on to emphasize that Luke did his work “accurately.”

Were there other pressures that led to the development of written gospels from oral ones? Eusebius makes a cryptic remark in Book 3 that Matthew and John only left “written memorials” [ὑπομνήματα] under “the pressure of necessity [ἐπάναγκες]” or “perforce” (3.24.5). But what was this pressure of necessity? Matthew, “who had at first preached
κηρύξας to the Hebrews” wrote down his Gospel before leaving so that he could compensate “those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence” (3.24.6). This notion seems to accord with what Richard Bauckham has noted as the main purpose for writing letters anciently. It was more important to communicate across space, than to give the writing permanence (communication over time). So in contradiction to a common scholarly assumption that the Gospel writers wrote for their own particular local community, Bauckham asks why Matthew should write “a Gospel for a community to which he was regularly preaching? Indeed, why should he go to such trouble to freeze in writing his response to a specific local situation which was liable to change and to which he could respond much more flexibly and therefore appropriately in oral preaching?” Therefore, as Eusebius pointed out, Matthew wrote down his Gospel because of the distance that would occur between him and those to whom he had at first preached.

John’s reason for writing down his Gospel was presented as more pragmatic: he saw a gap and worked to fill it. Whereas John had previously spent all his time proclaiming the Gospel orally [ἀγράφῳ κεχρημένον κηρύγματι], he finally proceeded to write after examining the other three Gospels because, according to him, they lacked “an account of the deeds done by Christ at the beginning of his ministry” (3. 24.7). Later it is remarked that John omitted a genealogy of Jesus because he already observed the ones recorded in Matthew and Luke. Instead, John “began with the doctrine of his divinity, which had, as it were, been reserved for him, as their superior, by the divine Spirit” (3.24.13).

In more general terms, Eusebius recounts in another section that despite their simple background and uncultivated speech, the apostles were able to powerfully proclaim the gospel.
They particularly relied on the demonstration of the divine Spirit and the wonder-working power of Christ. Specifically, Eusebius points out that they paid less attention to the composition of written works and instead proclaimed [κατήγγελον] the knowledge of the kingdom of heaven. “Those inspired and venerable ancients, I mean Christ’s Apostles, had completely purified their life and adorned their souls with every virtue, yet were but simple men in speech. Though they were indeed bold in the divine and wonder-working power given them by the Saviour, they had neither the knowledge nor the desire to represent the teachings of the Master in persuasive or artistic language, but they used only the proof of the Spirit of God which worked with them, and the wonder-working power of Christ which was consummated through them. Thus they announced [κατήγγελον] the knowledge of the Kingdom of Heaven to all the world and cared but little for attention to their style [τὸ λογογραφεῖν] (Book 3.24.3). Philip Sellew points out that it is standard practice to point out the virtuous character of one’s favorite author, “since good character necessarily leads to good products,” but Sellew questions Eusebius’ logic here: “we seem to be groping to find a virtue somewhere in the fact of the gospels’ ‘simple speech.’” But from a performance critical perspective, the reason for their lack of focus on writing books seems to be because they sought the continual help of a greater, super-human ministry. Thus their confidence in the spiritual power of their ministry led them to avoid rhetorical subtlety or literary skill, and instead to rely on the divine Spirit within them in proclaiming the oral word.

The animation of the divine word was also the motivation for most of the successors of the apostles. They spread the Christian message still further as they carried out the work of evangelists and found great success among first-time hearers. They were “helped by the grace
and co-operation of God, seeing that many strange miracles of the divine spirit were at that
time still being wrought by them, so that whole crowds of men at the first hearing [ἀπὸ πρώτης
ἀκροάσεως] eagerly received in their souls the religion of the Creator of the universe” (Book
3.37.3).

In another section taken from Papias, Eusebius records Papias’ desire to carefully
question and learn from those who had heard teachings directly from the apostles or earliest
followers. To him, these oral accounts were better than what could be received from books.
“[B]ut if ever anyone came who had followed the presbyters, I inquired into the words of the
presbyters, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or John or Matthew, or any
other of the Lord’s disciples, had said [εὗτοι], and what Aristion and the presbyter John, the
Lord’s disciples, were saying [λέγουσιν]. For I did not suppose that information from books
would help me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice [ζώσης φωνῆς καὶ
μενούσης]” (3.39.4). Papias’ last phrase seems to be a common proverb that is found in other
writers such as Galen, Quintilian, and Pliny. In each of their cases, they emphasized that though
written speeches existed, live performance and teaching was superior. As Pieter Botha has
surmised, “we can detect a cultural assumption of the first and second centuries that the
production of a book was not an inevitable, or even necessarily a desirable end in itself: books
are secondary to oral teaching. You will gain more, however, from the living voice and from
sharing someone’s daily life than from any treatise.” Thus “Papias’s concern is with teaching
and with the passing on and preservation of authentic tradition. He expresses skepticism about
the efficacy and value of written traditions. Written texts are secondary and subordinate to oral
instruction and traditions. The living voice of the teacher has priority, even when written
material is available."vi Papias also carefully discerned between those who simply spoke a lot and those who taught the truth and the commandments given by the Lord. “Unlike most I did not rejoice in them who say much, but in them who teach the truth, nor in them who recount the commandments of others, but in them who repeated those given to the faith by the Lord and derived from truth itself” (3.39.3). Papias also reproduced stories or unwritten traditions [παραδόσεως ἀγράφου] he had learned by word of mouth, thus showing the significant impact that the oral tradition had on him.

Eusebius makes frequent mention to the preaching activity of the earliest missionaries proclaiming the Gospels and other spiritual knowledge, the verbal activity (ἐὐαγγελέω, κηρύσσω) behind the noun of the Gospels (εὐαγγέλιον, κήρυγμα). While it is not always specifically described as an oral activity, it is likely to be in most cases and is thus a general description of oral performance as part of missionary activity. In introducing the Ethiopian servant who would take the Gospel to his own people, Eusebius notes that the saving message [or kerygma] was daily advancing and spreading when the Ethiopian servant “received of the mysteries of the divine word from Philip in consequence of a revelation.” Following his conversion, the servant was then able to return to his own country to preach the Gospel [εὐαγγελίσασθαι] of the knowledge of the God of the universe and the sojourn of our Saviour which gives life to men” (2.1.13). Many Greeks in Antioch received faith in Christ through the preaching [ἐχήρυξαν] of those who had been scattered at Stephen’s stoning (2.3.3).

As the apostles went out and preached the Gospel, they relied on the power of Christ in their preaching. “They went on their way to all the heathen teaching their message [τῇ τοῦ κηρύγματος διδασκαλίᾳ] in the power of Christ for he had said to them, ‘Go and make disciples
of all the heathen in my name” (3.5.2). Mark, for example, proclaimed [κηρύξα] the Gospel which he had written [συνεγράψατο] and first established a church in Alexandria (2.16.1). Note that even after the Gospel was written, Mark was sent to proclaim it orally. Joanna Dewey points out the importance of this fact. “The report does stress the importance of the person telling the story. A person, not a manuscript, was sent. There is no reason for oral transmission—recomposition in performance—to stop just because a written version exists.”

Pantaenus, Clement’s teacher, and others followed the zealous example of the apostles in preaching the Gospel. Eusebius’ description of their efforts emphasized the increasing and building up of the divine word (Book 5.10.2). When Pantaenus finished his missionary service in the east, he became the principal of the academy in Alexandria where he “expounded the treasures of divine doctrine both orally and in writing” (Book 5.10.4). In one last interesting reference to the relationship between oral performance and writing, Eusebius thinks Clement refers to Pantaenus when Clement wrote in the first book of his Stromata about the purpose of his writing—as a memory aid and a poor substitute for the animated words which he had been privileged to hear, “This work is not a writing composed for show, but notes stored up for my old age, a remedy against forgetfulness, an image without art, and a sketch of those clear and vital words which I was privileged to hear, and of blessed and truly notable men” (Book 5.11.3).

Conclusion

While Eusebius’ accounts of the oral performance of the Gospels and the subsequent recording of them in writing may not be historically verifiable, they are based on earlier sources ranging from named sources, the anonymous “they say” [φασι], and even less reliably presented without any claim on authority. Yet despite these historical limitations, Eusebius’
accounts may reflect oral performance elements and practices he and his earlier sources had experienced during their lives. Even though the sources are not consistent on exactly why or how the Gospels transitioned from oral to written accounts, Eusebius is more consistent in his descriptions of the *performance elements* of these oral settings. There was a strong preference for the power and spirit of oral presentations versus written compositions. Within the descriptions of oral performances, certain aspects were emphasized. Strong and excellent memory was especially valued to maintain accuracy. The presentation or order of events could be adapted based on the audience’s needs, thus these oral performances were more important for their *effect* than necessarily their *content*. The divine word, animated with the spirit, had powerful effects on those that heard the preaching as well as on the preacher himself which caused them to internalize the divine word more so than from written texts. When written texts were left behind, they stood as monuments of the presenter who could no longer be with them (either because of distance or death). In sum, oral presentations generated more power than composed works.

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3 “ὑπομνήματα were usually thought to have less polish than more literary products, since typically they took the form of private notes not meant for wide circulation.” From Philip Sellew, “Eusebius and the Gospels,” in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 120.
4 *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 29. Bauckham goes on to argue, “Few early Christian teachers seem to have felt the need to give their teaching permanence by writing it. Even where we suspect this must have been an important factor, as in the case of the book of Revelation, communication across space remains at least the ostensible occasion (Revelation was written from Patmos as a circular letter to the seven churches of Asia). It seems that the oral Gospel tradition continued vigorously and enjoyed respect long after the production of written Gospels.” (29, n. 32).
5 Sellew, “Eusebius and the Gospels,” 120.
Philip Sellew, “Eusebius and the Gospels,” in *Eusebius, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. Harold W. Attridge and Gohei Hata (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992): “Eusebius’ typical use of the verb φασί seems to be to report traditions for which he has no clear written authority. ...On the basis of this and comparable cases it would be more precise to say that Eusebius normally cites a tradition with the verb φασί when repeating oral legends. On occasion, however, Eusebius will resort to this vague authority of φασί when he is not so much unable as unwilling, for reasons of theological scruples, to quote a written authority.” (117-118).