

I have announced on the blog that my new book, Jesus Before the Gospels, will be available March 1. The book is about how the stories of Jesus were passed along by word of mouth for several decades before being written, and about how modern studies of both memory and oral cultures can help us understand what probably happened to the traditions as they circulated orally from one person to another over all those years.

In reaction to a previous post on the topic, a reader made the following interesting comment:

### **COMMENT:**

The Iliad [of Homer] exists today in its modern form because of oral tradition. We can be pretty sure that the story did not happen as it's told to us, even if you leave out the part about kibbitzing gods (and we can be pretty sure that it wasn't originally meant to be a literal recounting of the Trojan War, literalism never being the mission statement of poetry). But inspired by it, Schliemann did go out and find Troy. Which we wouldn't have known about at all. If not for the Iliad. Oral tradition should not be underestimated.

### **RESPONSE:**

This comment raises an intriguing issue (and answers the issue in a way I completely agree with). If ancient writings based on oral traditions can be shown to contain reasonably accurate information about the geography, religion, and culture of the time that they describe, doesn't that show that they can be accepted as generally relatively accurate?

This has long been argued. It continues to be argued with some vehemence by proponents of the accuracy of the New Testament. Let me give you one example dealing not with Jesus and the Gospels but with the apostle Paul and the book of Acts.

In Acts 14 we are told that...

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