RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ORALITY AND MEMORY
IN THE STUDY OF JESUS AND THE GOSPELS

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Scholars are increasingly recognizing that a literary paradigm, such as that which characterizes the modern Western world, is not appropriate for understanding the transmission of the Jesus tradition and the composition of the Gospels. On the one hand, recognition of an oral stage of tradition that preceded the composition of the Gospels has been axiomatic since the earliest form critics, such that today, “that oral tradition was a vital factor in the development and transmission of early Christian material is now almost universally accepted, and has become an a priori assumption in the field of Synoptic Gospel research.”¹ Nevertheless, the vast majority of research in historical Jesus and Gospel studies has emphasized a literary paradigm and, as such, made several assumptions about the relationship between oral communication and written texts that have since been radically undermined.² In particular, the assumption that the Synoptic Gospels have an exclusively literary relationship to one another (not to mention the assumption that Q and even the special Matthean and Lukan sources must have at one time been written documents) has come under heavy fire in recent years in light of the likelihood that the Jesus tradition circulated orally both prior to and alongside the written Gospels. Furthermore, scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the role of memory within oral tradition. This paper summarizes an emerging consensus on the nature of orality as it concerns the Gospels before examining two different approaches to memory that have come to the forefront of discussion in the last decade. We conclude that credible theories can be put forward to support almost any approach to memory, and often do little more than reflect the presuppositions of each scholar.

² Mournet, Oral Tradition, 6-9.
Orality and the Historical Jesus

From Lord to Dunn

Mournet identifies Albert B. Lord as the “pioneering” innovator whose work inaugurated a new era in the study of orality. Prior to Lord’s *The Singer of Tales* (1960), the dominant approach to oral tradition reflected the work of the Brothers Grimm, who analyzed nineteenth-century German folklore and concluded that oral tradition tends to grow or expand from a single “pure” original; that is, it moves from simplicity to complexity and from short aphorisms to lengthy narratives that ultimately result in a fixed, written form. Further setting up the contrast with Lord, Birger Gerhardsson’s *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (1961) took the question of orality more seriously than did most form critics, but explained the traditioning process at work in the Gospels as similar to that of how rabbinic Judaism transmitted its tradition: through formal, mechanical memorization. Mournet notes that what the early form critics and Gerhardsson share is an inattention to actual sociological and anthropological research regarding how oral composition and transmission actually happens. With Lord, however, we enter a new era of study based on scientific study of oral societies.

For his part, Albert Lord carried out research into oral methods of composition in Yugoslavia, where he was first a student and then the successor to Milman Perry, who is renowned for demonstrating that Homer was not a literary author so much as he was an oral composer, reworking oral tradition into new arrangements. Lord’s chief contribution was that the telling of epic poetry was (and is, in oral cultures even today) not simply the recitation of a memorized text, but rather a “performance,” drawing on certain set phrases from which the singer could base his performance. As Mournet summarizes, Lord observed that “the

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performance of a tradition is not the verbatim reproduction of previously memorized material, but rather a fresh ‘re-creation’ of the story on every occasion.” While the essential details are fixed, the details change from performance to performance. As must again be noted, this represents a stark contrast from the linear, evolutionary approach to oral tradition; in this view, a lengthy sequence or narrative of tradition might well represent the base unit of oral composition. In his article “The Gospels as Oral Traditional Literature” (1978), Lord contended that the three Synoptic Gospels represent three oral variants of the same Jesus tradition. While Lord is no doubt overstating his argument here, this does represent an early attempt to apply the insights of real study of orality to the Jesus tradition.

The next figures of importance are Warner Kelber and Joanna Dewey. Despite the great deal of diversity between these two scholars’ works, they both attempted to demonstrate the oral character of Mark’s Gospel. While Kelber saw a strong dichotomy between orality and literacy, Dewey saw much more overlap between the two, such that she goes as far as arguing for the oral composition of Mark as a whole. Kelber, in his The Oral and the Written Gospel (1982), saw the first written gospel as a revolutionary development in the Jesus tradition, freezing one particular performance and thus cutting the life off of the oral process. Yet Kelber is likely exaggerating the effects of the writing of Mark, for there are good reasons to think that oral versions of a tradition continue alongside of written forms in most oral cultures.10

Paul Achtemeier wrote an influential article in JBL in 1990 describing “The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity.” Achtemeier’s thesis was that reading and writing in antiquity followed the patterns of oral communication because both were apparently always done out loud. The implications are, first, that there is a strong connection between orality and literacy; second, following Ong, that writing invariably contains “residual

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7 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 70-1.
8 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 81-2.
orality,” and that these verbal clues can be found in the literature of antiquity to help hearers process the material as it is read aloud. Some scholars, such as Oivind Anderson, have gone beyond Achtemeier to see such strong linkage between oral and written composition that the two are practically indistinguishable, particularly at the level of an individual pericope, but this appears not to be the majority view.

The work of Kenneth Bailey among Middle Eastern bedouin tribes led to the publication of the article “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels” (1991), which, as the title indicates, argued that the oral tradition behind the New Testament was both informal (that is, with no formal teachers or students) and controlled (on account of the limits set by the community). Mournet credits Bailey as being one of the first “to take seriously the character of oral tradition as reflected in the nature of the agreements and disagreements in the Synoptic Tradition.”

Another significant contribution to the study of orality was from Richard Horsley and Jonathan Draper, whose Whoever Hears You Hears Me (1999) studied Q from an oral perspective. Horsley in particular drew on the work of John Miles Foley and his theory of metonymic referencing, which emphasizes how over the course of a performance an audience understands extra-textual references. Q, therefore, is best viewed not as a written document, but a libretto (that is, a dramatic, operatic performance), functioning within a broader extra-textual frame of reference which can be analyzed with profit. Draper maintained that oral and literate registers are different enough that oral layers can in fact be discovered within Q.

Alan Dundes, who has studied folklore in highly oral societies for over four decades, studies the Bible according to the insights gleaned from his field studies in his Holy Writ as Oral Lit (1999). Approaching the Bible as a folklorist (which need not entail judgments about the

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11 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 88-9. These oral clues include “redundancy, inclusio, and other mnemonic devices” (Mournet, Oral Tradition, 89 n. 154).

12 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 90-91.

13 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 96-7. For his part, Draper follows Hymes’ analysis of “measured verse” as the key sign of orally performed discourse.
historicity of the recorded events), Dundes noted that both Old and New Testaments contain three key characteristics of folklore: variation in number, name, and sequence. According to Mournet, Dundes’ chief contribution was to affirm that the Bible is “fully the product of ancient methods of authorship and therefore must be analyzed as such”; given the parallels between much of the Bible and folklore the world over, it is appropriate to use the insights of research in the areas of folklore and sociology to shed light on the oral history of the Jesus tradition.14

Finally, the work of James D. G. Dunn has built on the work of Bailey in particular by arguing for a process of tradition development that includes both the fixed and flexible characteristics of oral tradition. For Dunn, tradition can vary according to the context of a given retelling, but it maintains a fixed center that is established by the community. Dunn suggests that this model of oral retellings is a better way of understanding some of the Matthean-Lukan parallels than that their use of a written Q document.15 Oddly, however, in his discussion of orality Dunn largely ignores the work of memory scholars such as Halbwachs, Gerhardsson, Riesner, and Byrskog. As a result, Dunn’s discussion of “Jesus remembered” offers little definition of what precisely “remembering” entails and fails to engage the key issues that have arisen in this field of study. As Bockmuehl summarizes, “Aside from a recognition of the fragility of personal and social memory, one of the implications of attending to such studies might be to give more explicit credence to the nature of memory’s particularity as attaching most fruitfully to persons, places, or objects that may persist or mutate where individual recollection merely pales.”16 While Dunn is surely correct to emphasize the role of oral tradition in the formation of the Gospels, more nuance in the area of memory is needed, particularly regarding the relative importance of collective memory versus individual memory in inaugurating and transmitting oral tradition. Whose memories were valued in early Christianity? What role might

15 Mournet, Oral Tradition, 98.
the apostles have played as “custodians” of the tradition? How might oral history overlap with oral tradition? These kinds of questions, unfortunately, receive little or no answer. Dunn’s work, therefore, is best understood as a basic case for the role of orality without a critical engagement with the nature of memory. Before turning to memory, though, we conclude with what we can say with confidence about orality in general.

**Preliminary Conclusions**

What then can we say about the existence of a rough “consensus” among those who seek to apply the insights of orality to the study of the Gospels? Is there any kind of foundation from which scholars can proceed to speak of memory with some degree of confidence?

First, most would likely agree that in the ancient world there was no hard and fast distinction between oral communication and written text. As Mournet concludes, “Texts were heard rather than read silently, composition was typically by way of dictation, and oral performance and ancient texts were closely related to one another – functioning as both a source for texts, and as the impetus for writing the text in the first place.”

The result is that there are no indicators that can prove whether or not a tradition had an oral prehistory; instead, the best that can be done is to argue that an oral background is more or less likely, depending on the number of oral characteristics displayed by the text. “As in any historical discussion, one must often be content with reaching a certain level of probability rather than certainty.”

Second, there is some degree of consensus as to the basic characteristics of oral communication:

(1) *Redundancy.* Mournet calls this “perhaps the most pervasive characteristic of oral communication.” As early as Lord’s recognition that Homer’s writings contained “noun-epithet” formulas (e.g., “wide-eyed Athena”), there has been an understanding that repetitive devices aid the performer’s memory, emphasize key details, and guide the listener in

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understanding the performance. “Microscopic” repetitive features include, besides the 
aforementioned noun-epithet formulas, parataxis, pleonasm, and simple repetition of words. “Macroscopic” features include ring composition, chiasmus, and inversion.\textsuperscript{20}

(2) \textit{Variability}. The other major characteristic of folklore is variation. As Lord initially observed and subsequent studies have continued to verify, in oral performance the elements outside of the basic outline of the story vary according to each individual retelling. In other words, there is no such thing as a fixed original or \textit{ipsissima verba} from which all other performance traditions grow.\textsuperscript{21} Nevertheless, it is important to note that this variation takes place around a stable core. Oral cultures had both the desire and the ability to have some measure of stabilization of their tradition. To the extent that certain traditions were viewed as important to the self-identity of the community, boundaries were established to maintain the essential elements of the tradition. “The adaptive variability of oral tradition functions within the bounds of a traditional setting, thus ensuring that key elements of a tradition remain intact.”\textsuperscript{22} This process of stabilization was aided by the presence of eyewitnesses in the communities who served as a “stabilizing, self-corrective force used to help counterbalance the variable character of oral communication.”\textsuperscript{23} Ritual, cultic, or liturgical uses could also stabilize tradition.\textsuperscript{24} Thus, contemporary studies of orality have distinguished flexibility and stability as the defining characteristics of the variability typical of oral communication. This seems to confirm the more anecdotal observations of Kenneth Bailey regarding his “informal controlled oral tradition.”\textsuperscript{25}

In summary, therefore, redundancy and variability, the latter here characterized by flexibility and stability along the lines of the \textit{informal controlled oral tradition} model, form the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 175-7.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 180.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 185.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 186.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 187.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Mournet, \textit{Oral Tradition}, 190.
\end{itemize}
basic foundation on which new developments in orality studies can be drawn. Broadly speaking, recent publication on the subject of orality has focused on the dimension of memory within oral tradition. Some scholars have emphasized collective (social) memory, while others have focused on individual (eyewitness) memory. Proponents of these two theories have tended to debate the usefulness and applicability of these models to the oral tradition behind the Gospels. We will examine each model in turn before coming to a conclusion about which best accounts for the nature of the Gospels.

**Memory and the Historical Jesus**

*Social Memory Theory*

Broadly speaking, collective (or social) memory theory argues that groups of people have sets of common memories that create or shape the group’s collective self-identity or self-understanding. The roots of social memory theory are found in the writings of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that memory was in essence a social phenomenon. Alan Kirk summarizes Halbwachs’ view as that “memory is constituted by social frameworks, which is to say he focuses on the way the structure and inner workings of groups shape memory for the people belonging to those groups.” The Egyptologist Jan Assmann furthered this line of inquiry through his study of “communicative memory,” that is, “face-to-face circulation of foundational memories.” Assmann argued that a “crisis of memory” occurs some forty years after the initial testimony as the carriers of memory begin to disappear; this often leads to a transition to written forms of the memories. Closely linked to social memory are ritual acts or practices that commemorate past events, that “densely sedimentize memory into various material

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28 Kirk, “Memory,” 5.

and visible formats that function to make the past immanent in the present.”

A further key presupposition of social memory theorists is that all memory is *distortion*, meaning that issues of emphasis, perspective, and interpretation are inextricably bound up in the entire memory process. Thus, the memory of the past is not identical to the actual past.

Social memory theorists contend that a community’s oral tradition can serve many purposes. First, memory is a *constructive* activity: which memories are remembered and how they are interpreted depend on the present. “The present itself is hardly static; memory frameworks are thus themselves constantly subject to renovation, gradual or radical, as external and internal factors in the group’s existence change.” Memory is thus constantly adapted to fit changing present circumstances. Second, memory has a *political* function: that is, “the past is appropriated to legitimize particular sociopolitical goals and ideologies and to mobilize action in accord with these goals.”

Collective memory has implicit power to shape, challenge, or affirm political or ideological agendas and values. Carrying this argument further, Eric Hobsbawm has more radically argued for the “invention of tradition,” which Kirk describes as the claim that “much if not most of what goes under the rubric of the venerable past, and thus authoritatively constitutive for the present, is in fact of recent origin and in many cases fabricated, either de novo or out of the detritus of the past, by hegemonic interests seeking legitimacy by appropriating the antique aura of “tradition” for new practices, structures, and values.”

Third, memory is a *social frame*: in contrast to the extremes of Hobsbawm and others, this aspect of memory affirms the real impact of the past on the present. “The past, itself constellated by the work of social memory, provides the framework for cognition, organization, and interpretation of

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32 Kirk, “Memory,” 11.

33 Kirk, “Memory,” 11-12 (italics original).

34 Kirk, “Memory,” 13 (italics original).
the experiences of the present.”  

In other words, memories play an active role in shaping a community’s perception of reality and interpretation of experience. Finally, social memory is normative: “the social memory has an indelible ethical coloring; its images of archetypal persons and events embody a group’s moral order.”  

Le Donne includes the power of typology in this category as the “means of interpreting the roles of relatively new characters (in the narratives of story and history) by the great characters of metanarratives.”  

Thus, present events are measured and interpreted according to culturally significant metanarratives. In this way, the past can also provide moral guidance or legitimacy for the present. Halbwachs even went so far as to suggest that social memory only retains events that have a pedagogical purpose.  

In summary, then, there is a considerable dialectical relationship between the past and the present, with each exercising considerable power over the other.

In their 2005 essay “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory,” Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher set out the implications of social memory theory for Gospel research. The German scholar Jens Schröter was the first to apply social memory theory to the study of the Jesus tradition. As translated by Kirk and Thatcher, Schröter claimed that “the appropriation of Jesus tradition can be understood as a process of selection, by which the present situation was interpreted through reference to the person of Jesus.”  

Therefore, Schröter argued, “the history of the Gospel tradition is in fact the history of the reception of Jesus’ image in various contexts,” such that “each act of reception constitutes a discrete episode within that history, affected by the configuration of social and cultural variables inhering in the respective situations.”  

As a result of this process, the historical Jesus can only be known through his reception, through how the


37 Le Donne, Historiographical Jesus, 56.

38 Kirk, “Memory,” 18.


early communities remembered Jesus. This awareness “that every act of traditioning is an act of remembering in which past and present semantically interact” is of course very similar to that articulated by James Dunn, though Schröter and Dunn arrive at their conclusions from slightly different avenues. Kirk and Thatcher conclude that the dynamics of oral tradition reception are in fact very similar to the dynamics of social memory, and posit this foundation for further research.

There is, of course, some overlap with this view and that of the early form critics, in that both maintain that the Gospels are best described as collective traditions that circulated orally within the church prior to being written down. Over the course of this process, the traditions were redacted to serve the theological needs of the different churches from which these traditions came. But, as opposed to the social memory approach that emphasizes the mutual influence of the past and the present on one another, Bultmann and others of his persuasion effectively bracketed out any discussion of “memory” by seeing the traditioning process as entirely one way (the needs of the present essentially created the past). In other words, while memory theorists grant present social realities as impacting how the past is remembered, they also note that the past exercises power to shape and influence the present; “a group’s ‘social memory’ is the constant, creative negotiation of commemorated pasts and open-ended presents.” More, then, than form criticism, social memory theory gives a balanced approach to the study of orality and memory in the first Christian decades.

_The Debate over Eyewitness Testimony_

The social (collective) approach to memory is not, by any means, universally accepted as the best way to account for the oral stage of the Gospel tradition. Birger Gerhardsson

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42 Kirk and Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition,” 39 (esp. n. 4 on 39).
45 Kirk and Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition,” 32.
and his disciples Samuel Byrskog and Rainer Riesner have led the charge against social memory theory, instead contending for the greater influence of individual memory (on account of the authoritative role of Jesus’ disciples in the early church), rather than that of the community, in oral tradition.

Byrskog studied the attitudes of Greco-Roman historians towards eyewitness testimony in his *Story as History – History as Story* (2000). Byrskog studied classical historians such as Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus, and Tacitus, and concluded that the ancients valued eyewitness testimony (as opposed to written documents) as the ideal sources for history. And not only this, but the best eyewitnesses were not detached observers but those who were passionately involved in the events themselves. Byrskog identified eyewitness testimony within the Gospel tradition and thus argued that this practice was in fact indicative of the very best ancient historiographical practice.46

Thus, it is not surprising that in his review of Dunn’s *Jesus Remembered*, Byrskog notes that Dunn’s discussion of the traditioning process makes no attempt to define memory or explain precisely how individual remembrance works. Instead, Dunn emphasizes remembering in terms of its collective or corporate dimension over and against the role of the individual’s testimony. As Byrskog argues, Dunn “dismisses oral history and fails to realize, first, that oral tradition overlaps with oral history and, secondly, that his own discussion of disciple-response actually locates the first traditioning in the oral histories of Jesus’ followers.”47 In particular, Byrskog complains that Dunn gives lip service to the role of individual memory insofar as the role of eyewitnesses in the early Christian communities is not emphasized or integrated into his model of corporate remembering.48 In a response to Byrskog, Dunn insists that he does indeed value the role of eyewitness testimony, in the forms of both their original testimony and their continued measure of controlling the interpretation of that testimony. Still, Dunn emphasizes that


“the interplay of individual and community must have had all the complexity of group
dynamics.”

Dunn’s emphasis in Jesus Remembered was not to give an account of the original
eyewitness testimony, but merely to discuss how the traditioning process, which in his view
necessarily refers to community tradition, has affected the shape of the Synoptic tradition.

**Bauckham, Jesus and the Eyewitnesses**

Richard Bauckham explicitly views his Jesus and the Eyewitnesses as a defense and
development of Byrskog’s work. Bauckham’s thesis is simply “that the texts of our Gospels are
close to the eyewitness reports of the words and deeds of Jesus.” For Bauckham, these
eyewitnesses did not disappear after first transmitting their memories, but were in fact “people
who remained accessible sources and authoritative guarantors of their own testimony throughout
the period between Jesus and the writing of the Gospels.” Thus, having analyzed both biblical
and post-biblical Christian texts, Bauckham concludes that “traditions were originated and
formulated by named eyewitnesses, in whose name they were transmitted and who remained the
living and active guarantors of the tradition.”

Bauckham takes issue with Dunn’s (and by extension, Bailey’s) model of informal
controlled tradition on two levels, charging that this model lacks nuance: informal controlled
transmission need not exclude formal controlled transmission to some degree. First, Bauckham
finds evidence for formal transmission through memorization. Bauckham sees passages such as 1
Cor 11:23 as examples of a formal process of “handing over” the Jesus tradition, which the
Apostle was careful to keep distinct from his own parenesis (cf. 1 Cor 7:10-16).

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49 James D.G. Dunn, “On History, Memory and Eyewitnesses: In Response to Bengt Holmberg and Samuel

50 Dunn, “Response,” 482.

51 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 11.

52 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 240.

53 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 241.

54 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 290.

55 Bauckham, Eyewitnesses, 278.
of 1 Cor 11:23-25, given that Luke and Paul show no dependence on one another’s writings, can only be explained on account of a process of strictly memorized oral tradition standing behind the similarities. Bauckham therefore suggests that certain kinds of Jesus material, namely his short and pithy aphorisms, would have been memorized word-for-word, whereas the longer parables were probably subject to performance variation.\(^{56}\) For Bauckham, memorization therefore functioned as a key factor in the stability of the Jesus tradition: memorization “was exercised to the extent that stable reproduction was deemed important and in regard to those aspects of the traditions for which stable reproduction was thought appropriate.”\(^{57}\)

Second, also contra Dunn, Bauckham argues that there was some degree of formal control over oral transmission because the eyewitnesses did not simply fade away or become irrelevant after their testimony had passed into oral tradition. Instead, Bauckham insists that the eyewitnesses continued to share their testimony within their Christian communities, and when the Evangelists researched their Gospels, they no doubt sought to have as close to eyewitness testimony as possible. While Dunn and Bailey seem to suggest that it is the community that exercises informal control over the tradition to the extent that it serves the needs of the community, Bauckham shifts the role of controlling the tradition to the eyewitnesses themselves.\(^{58}\) As evidence, Bauckham cites a key passage from Papias:

I shall not hesitate also to put into properly ordered form for you everything I learned carefully in the past from the elders and noted down well, for the truth of which I vouch. For unlike most people I did not enjoy those who have a great deal to say, but those who teach the truth. Nor did I enjoy those who recall someone else’s commandments, but those who remember the commandments given by the Lord to the faith and proceeding from the truth itself. And if by chance anyone who had been in attendance on 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

\(^{56}\) Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 282.

\(^{57}\) Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 287.

\(^{58}\) Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 293.
disciples, were saying. For I did not think that information from books would profit me as much as information from a living and surviving voice.\(^59\)

This quotation demonstrates Papias’ preference for eyewitness testimony (or an account of that testimony only once-removed), and the existence of that testimony in the church through the time of the writing of the Gospels. It also echoes Irenaeus’ description of how Polycarp related from memory the teachings of John.\(^60\) This seems to be a picture of a direct “chain of tradition” from the eyewitnesses to following generations. The teaching of Jesus, therefore, appears to have been transmitted not so much by communities as by the eyewitnesses to Jesus and by their authorized intermediaries.\(^61\) Similarly, 1 Cor 15:3-8, which notes that some of the eyewitnesses to the Resurrection were still alive, suggests that “Paul thus takes for granted the continuing accessibility and role of the eyewitnesses, even extending to a very large number of minor eyewitnesses as well as to such prominent persons as the Twelve and James.”\(^62\) On this view, the Gospels were written to preserve this eyewitness testimony as the original eyewitnesses began to pass from the scene; “in other words, the Gospels stepped into the role of the eyewitnesses, which they had vacated through death.”\(^63\) Thus, we have arrived back at Byrskog’s view of the best ancient historiography, which sought to draw on the oral accounts of eyewitnesses.

How, though, might this account of eyewitness testimony square with the model of social memory? Bauckham contends that individual memory is the “prime source of collective memory and can feed into the latter at any stage while the individuals in question are still alive and actively remembering their own past.”\(^64\) In other words, individual and social memory are

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62 Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 308 (italics original).
64 Bauckham, *Eyewitnesses*, 312.
linked, but scholars must be careful not to equate the two by absorbing individual memory into collective memory. “Individual recollective memory did not lose its own identity through absorption into collective memory, but maintained that identity even when it was transmitted by the collective memory,” precisely because the eyewitness nature of the testimony guaranteed the grounding of the community’s identity in the historical details of the life of Jesus.65

Bauckham identifies nine characteristics of eyewitness memory, and finds evidence for all of them in the Gospels, concluding that “the memories of eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus score highly by the criteria for likely reliability that have been established by the psychological study of recollective memory.”66 Additionally, Bauckham argues that the Gospel accounts contain little subsequent interpretation from a post-Easter standpoint. Connecting all of these dots, Bauckham argues for a continuity of tradition before and after the resurrection, which is possible precisely because of the presence of eyewitnesses, who remained the authoritative source of their traditions.67 Variation among the Gospels, therefore, is to be explained as different “performances” of the tradition, not the result of additional layers of detail placed on top of a core tradition.68

Of course, Bauckham’s account of eyewitness testimony has not been universally accepted. Responding to Bauckham from the perspective of a more skeptical position, Judith Redman utilizes psychological research to demonstrate that although the oral transmission of stories within a community is indeed quite accurate when the material is deemed sufficiently valuable, “many of the inaccuracies in eyewitness memory come into being within hours, days, or weeks of the event being witnessed” on account of the frailties of memory or bias.69 The

continued presence of the eyewitness control does not guarantee accuracy. In closing, Redman is agnostic as to whether variation in the Gospels is best explained by redaction or an eyewitness effect.\textsuperscript{70}

**McIver, Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels**

In response to this debate between Bauckham and Redman, Robert K. McIver continues the study of experimental psychology to analyze how human memory might function in regards to the Gospels. In particular, McIver seeks to further test Bauckham’s claims regarding the reliability of eyewitness recollective memory.\textsuperscript{71}

The first part of the book (chapters 1-5) discusses what experimental psychology has taught us about memory. McIver begins with *individual autobiographic memory*; that is, eyewitness memory. Research on the reliability of eyewitness memory has demonstrated that it is generally reliable, though it is subject to the frailties of human memory, such that all eyewitness testimony contains some mixture of truth and fiction.\textsuperscript{72} McIver then dives into a discussion of these frailties of human memory, identifying transience, suggestibility, and bias as the three most likely to influence eyewitness memory of events.\textsuperscript{73} *Transience* refers to the fact that most things that happen to a person are forgotten. Psychologists have discovered that rates of forgetting for most kinds of memories are very predictable and can be quantified mathematically. Specifically, researchers suggest that episodic memory that survives in the mind for the first five years after the initial event “is likely to be very stable for the next twenty years or more, after which time a further slow decline takes place.”\textsuperscript{74} But certain memories, namely those that created significant emotional or sensory impacts on a person, are less susceptible to transience. Even the strongest

\textsuperscript{70} Redman, “Eyewitnesses,” 197.

\textsuperscript{71} Bauckham’s case was confined for this reliability was confined to just one chapter (Eyewitnesses, 319-57).

\textsuperscript{72} Robert K. McIver, Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels (Atlanta: SBL, 2011), 20.

\textsuperscript{73} McIver, Memory, 21.

\textsuperscript{74} McIver, Memory, 40.
personal memories will fall short of perfect accuracy, particularly in regards to specific details and the chronological ordering of events, but they are nevertheless more reliable than other kinds of memories.\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Suggestibility} refers to the introduction of false memories into a person’s account of the past. The most important generator of suggestibility is “social contagion,” which is the process by which “false memories contributed by others in a group can be seamlessly incorporated into an individual’s memory.”\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Bias} is another form of memory distortion in which current knowledge (“hindsight bias”), a desire to make one’s self look good (“egocentric bias”), and generic memories and opinions (“stereotypical bias”) can reshape memories of reality.\textsuperscript{77} Some of these frailties might result from the fact that human memory “resides in a number of different subsystems, each of which has different qualities of persistence and reliability.”\textsuperscript{78} Thus, different parts of the brain contain different memory systems that are subject to different rates of decay; the result is that we are reconstructing rather than simply retrieving our memories. This constructive process explains how the mind might “fill in the gaps” as it connects various fragments of information regarding past events. McIver also briefly treats the concept of collective memory (chapter 5), but this is little more than a review of the literature; it is clear his focus is on eyewitness memory.

In part two (chapters 6-10), McIver applies these insights to the Gospel traditions. Based on the previous chapters, McIver posits the following as criteria that could increase the probability that a given piece of written material is based on eyewitness testimony:

1. It consists of narratives of events, places, and people.

\textsuperscript{75} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 58.

\textsuperscript{76} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 59.

\textsuperscript{77} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 71. These parallel Le Donne’s (\textit{Historiographical Jesus}, 52) categories of memory distortion: distanciation (forgetting over time), instrumentalization (reinterpreting memories for a present purpose), conventionalization (conforming memories to typical experiences), narrativization (conventionalizing memories through the storytelling process), and articulation (conforming memories to language conventions for oral performance).

\textsuperscript{78} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 76.
2. These narratives are particularly vague with respect to time and often with respect to place.

3. The narratives usually lack further narrative context.

4. The narratives usually describe events that took place over a short time period.

5. The narratives can be full of sensory information and often contain irrelevant details.\(^79\)

That eyewitness memory is particularly vague with regard to time, it is significant that most of the incidents in the Synoptics have vague time references. “In other words, as might be expected of accounts based on human memory, the Gospels are granular, made up of loosely linked but vivid incidents.”\(^80\) Thus, eyewitness memory may be what lies behind the pericope form of the Synoptics. What, though, of the common view that the pericope form is in fact evidence of a formalizing of community tradition? The simplest suggestion is that eyewitnesses were crucial in the initial formulation of the Gospel tradition, evidence of which is still seen even as the accounts continued to be shaped in the collective memories of early Christian communities.\(^81\)

As for frailties of memory, McIver concludes from his study of transience that the key period for these memories was the first three to six years after Jesus’ death and resurrection. The intervening decades between then and the writing of the Gospels are less important. Undoubtedly many memories of Jesus were lost during these first formative years, but the ones that survived had particular importance to the eyewitnesses and were unlikely to have changed much over the following decades.\(^82\) This also suggests that a document written a decade after Jesus’ death and resurrection is not likely to be any more accurate an account of a person’s memory than one written four or five decades after; earlier written sources are therefore not absolutely more

\(^{79}\) McIver, Memory, 124. This list is copied verbatim from this page.

\(^{80}\) McIver, Memory, 126.

\(^{81}\) McIver, Memory, 130.

\(^{82}\) McIver, Memory, 144.
reliable.\textsuperscript{83} As for suggestibility and bias, McIver suggests that these have indeed likely caused errors to be introduced into the Gospel tradition, but these are only errors in detail, and these details were only able to enter the tradition because they were consistent with what else was known about Jesus.\textsuperscript{84} Wholesale fabrication of the Jesus tradition is extremely unlikely.

In summary, McIver takes a balanced view of eyewitness memory: he admits its potential for error (through transience, suggestibility, and bias), but this error is generally restricted to specific details, while the overall picture of the original event is generally quite accurate. His book provides genuine insights into how psychology sheds light on memory, yet I still wonder how accurate these models are for approximating the memory capacity of ancient people in an oral society. We might also note that McIver’s conclusions regarding the reliability of eyewitness memory closely parallel those of Bauckham.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Allison, Constructing Jesus}

Dale Allison’s recent tome on Jesus and memory weighs in on the skeptical side of the debate, chastising Bauckham for an “overly optimistic about the reliability of the tradition.”\textsuperscript{86} Following Redman, Allison argues that human memory is selective, creating and deleting details to suit the purposes of recollection, such that the fallibility of memory should lead historians to be “profundely unsettle[d],” for “even where the Gospels preserve memories, those memories cannot be miraculously pristine; rather, they must often be dim or muddled or just plain wrong.”\textsuperscript{87} The best that memory can do is give us the general “gist” of what happened. Thus, in his approach to the historical Jesus, the search for authentic or inauthentic aspects of the tradition is misguided; instead, what matters is identifying the consistent patterns that memory has

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{83} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 152.
\item \textsuperscript{84} McIver, \textit{Memory}, 156.
\item \textsuperscript{85} Cf. Bauckham, \textit{Eye witnesses}, 331-5.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Dale C. Allison Jr., \textit{Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History} (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 1 n. 1.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Allison, \textit{Constructing Jesus}, 8-9.
\end{itemize}
preserved. “Certain themes, motifs, and rhetorical strategies occur again and again throughout the primary sources; and it must be in those themes and motifs and rhetorical strategies – which, taken together, leave some distinct impressions – if it is anywhere, that we will find memory.”\textsuperscript{88}

Here there are clear echoes of Dunn’s “characteristic Jesus,” though Allison is overall more skeptical about the tradition than Dunn appears to be on account of Dunn’s belief that the community and apostolic witness ensured a fixed center of each tradition rooted in Jesus himself.\textsuperscript{89} Allison suggests that even if this were true, Dunn ignores the effects of the frailties of memory on those who originated the tradition. For Allison, “tradition originated when recognized leaders or authorities called upon their memories; and those memories must have been subject to all the failures and biases that modern science has so helpfully if disturbingly exposed.”\textsuperscript{90} Thus, even if Bauckham’s claim that the Gospels are rooted in eyewitness testimony proved to be true, we would still have little more than the general “gist” of the Jesus tradition.

\textit{Conclusion}

As with all statistics, the data of experimental psychology can be used to support either a high view or a low view of the reliability of eyewitness testimony. I cannot help but feel that many scholars “cherry-pick” the evidence that fits their own views on the reliability of the Gospels. Compounded with the fact that memory may have functioned much differently in ancient, oral societies, it is hard to have a great deal of confidence one way or another. What is clear, however, is that any reasonable account of memory in regards to the oral transmission of the Jesus tradition must take into account both social memory and individual memory. On the one hand, Paul and other early Christian writers did indeed note a process of formal, controlled transmission. McIver is probably closest to reality when he argues that while this memory was not perfect, its errors were most likely found in the details and not the core of the tradition. The heavy skepticism of Redman and Allison is unwarranted. On the other hand, to think that social

\textsuperscript{88} Allison, \textit{Constructing Jesus}, 15.

\textsuperscript{89} Allison, \textit{Constructing Jesus}, 29.

\textsuperscript{90} Allison, \textit{Constructing Jesus}, 30.
memory played no role in the formation of the Jesus tradition would be naive; without question the early church preserved and transmitted those elements of the Jesus tradition that were relevant or otherwise deeply significant to them. If Jesus did indeed die and rise from the dead, this would be sufficient motivation to carefully remember and transmit his words and deeds. Our Gospel accounts are likely to be very accurate. If, on the other hand, Jesus was not who the canonical Gospels claim him to be, a model that allows for more creativity and development of the Jesus tradition on the part of the church is called for. Thus, the final decision on which element of memory to emphasize likely comes down to what happened on Easter morning.


