

## **Assumptions in Historical-Jesus Research: Using Ancient Biographies and Disciples' Traditioning as a Control**

**Craig S. Keener**

Asbury Theological Seminary

Wilmore, KY, USA

[craig.keener@asburyseminary.edu](mailto:craig.keener@asburyseminary.edu)

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### **Abstract**

Presuppositions of one sort or another are inevitable, but one way to control our assumptions in the interest of common dialogue is to consider how we would read the Gospels if they were not texts used by a current world religion. The majority of Gospel scholars see the Gospels as ancient biographies. Although ancient biographies varied in their historiographic practice, in the early Empire biographies about figures who lived in the generation or two before the biographer included substantial historical information about the figure. This observation may be particularly relevant for biographies about sages. Schools often preserved considerable information about their founders' teachings; ancient memory practices exceeded what is typical today, and disciples often preserved and passed on considerable information. Researchers should neither treat the Gospels more skeptically nor demand from them greater precision than we would from comparable works of their era.

### **Keywords**

biography; biographies; disciples; eyewitnesses; historiography; memory; miracles; oral; oral tradition; transmission

## Introduction

That scholars bring presuppositions to historical-Jesus scholarship is certainly no new observation, advanced by Schweitzer,<sup>1</sup> Bultmann,<sup>2</sup> and others. Some recognize this state of affairs more readily than others, but current historians generally associate the denial of historians' presuppositions with long outdated approaches.<sup>3</sup> As John Dominic Crossan warns, 'It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place to do theology and call it history, to do autobiography and call it biography.'<sup>4</sup>

Quantifying the extent to which such presuppositions affect one's work is a matter of psychology of religion, however, a matter in which I as a NT scholar have at best limited expertise.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, sociologists of religion can provide a better statistical analysis of where such presuppositions predominate than we NT scholars (cf. recently Ecklund's work).<sup>6</sup> NT scholars' pronouncements regarding consensus views

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<sup>1</sup> Since Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), scholars have periodically remarked on how frequently presuppositions shape one's conclusions in Jesus research (e.g., Graham N. Stanton, *Gospel Truth? New Light on Jesus and the Gospels* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995], p. 145).

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Rudolf Bultmann, 'Is Exegesis Without Presuppositions Possible?' in Schubert Ogden (ed.), *New Testament Mythology and Other Basic Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 145–53.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g., John Wigger, *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 411; from a more overtly subjective angle, see David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), pp. ix–x.

<sup>4</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. xxviii; cf. my own complaint in Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> The different question as to whether faith presuppositions are positive or negative, often bantered back and forth between those who favor theological readings and those who favor historical ones, is also a philosophical and hermeneutical issue. I feel most comfortable with historical approaches, but defer the philosophic question to philosophers.

<sup>6</sup> For one recent sociological study of scientists' faith, see Elaine Howard Ecklund, *Science vs. Religion: What Scientists Really Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). For what it is worth, in some disciplines stereotypes and prejudices against

typically reflect a more limited sample size than sociologists would accept.<sup>7</sup>

For this reason, after offering initial comments about presuppositions, I will turn to an approach for limiting them that draws more on my expertise. Comparing our sources with those not related to what has now become a world religion provides one means for limiting presuppositions in our shared public work.

### Common Presuppositions

Our personal beliefs about religion, running the gamut from favorable to hostile, need not inhibit historical research when we follow shared approaches. E.P. Sanders notes that scholars rarely feel the need to discuss their motives for involvement in NT research; it is simply understood that most have personal interest in the subject, whatever the particulars.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, sympathy with the subject studied often facilitates stronger intrinsic readings.<sup>9</sup> We need no more exclude from the conversation those in our discipline who hold personal religious, philosophic

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evangelicals are common enough not only to inhibit respect for opinions but also potentially hiring and tenure (George Yancey, *Compromising Scholarship: Religious and Political Bias in American Higher Education* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011], pp. 59, 64, 66, 98-101, 116-19, 142, 153-54, 173). A comparable examination of NT scholarship would demand comparable research.

<sup>7</sup> For example, though I have great respect for Marcus Borg, when he observes that over half (eleven versus ten) of Jesus Seminar respondents doubted that Jesus expected the imminent end in his lifetime (*Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994], p. 60), he works from a small sample size and a self-selected source (cf. concerns about the disproportionate perspective in the Jesus Seminar on this issue in Walter Wink, 'Write What You See', *Fourth R* 7 [3 May 1994], pp. 3-9, here p. 9).

<sup>8</sup> E.P. Sanders, 'Covenant Nomism Revisited', *JSQ* 16 (2009), pp. 23-55 (here 33).

<sup>9</sup> With respect to early Jewish sources, see Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984; London: SCM, 1983), p. 63; for scholars of Stoicism honoring Stoics, see e.g., Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, 'The Two Faces of Stoicism: Rousseau and Freud', in *The Emotions in Hellenistic Philosophy* (ed. Juha Sihvola and Troels Engberg-Pedersen; Texts and Studies in the History of Philosophy, 46; Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1998), pp. 243-70 (243).

or political interests than those in other disciplines should exclude them.<sup>10</sup>

Theological presuppositions are not the only ones, or—on *most* specific topics in historical-Jesus research today, I think—the major ones that confront us.<sup>11</sup> More often at issue in our discipline, I believe, we have inherited schools of thought, inherited critical methods, and so forth.

Moreover, our target audiences shape our objectives and our rhetoric. Historical results involve degrees of probability, and it is important to define the results for which one is looking. Often scholars seek a critical minimum on which most of us can agree, without thereby implying that this minimum is all that may be genuine in the Jesus tradition. More maximalist scholars work not to determine what scholarship as a whole will likely deem ‘certain’ but what may be defended as ‘plausible’.<sup>12</sup> So long as we define the objectives clearly (a fairly certain historical minimum or a reasonably plausible historical maximum) and do not overstate what historical methods make possible, each approach has its place. Some debates may stem from our failure to define whether a historical minimum or maximum is our goal; less understandably, some rule out *a priori* the value of any approach but their own.<sup>13</sup> If our goal is the usual historical goal of determining what is historically

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<sup>10</sup> To *a priori* exclude from conversation persons with views that differ from our own is sociologically fundamentalistic, requiring adherence to a dogma, in contrast to liberal free inquiry. In-groups may circumscribe the boundaries of their language but should not claim to speak for biblical scholarship in general.

<sup>11</sup> More generally, see Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Does, or Should, Teaching Reflect the Religious Perspective of the Teacher?’ in Andrea Sterk (ed.), *Religion, Scholarship, Higher Education: Perspectives, Models, and Future Prospects* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 193–201 (193).

<sup>12</sup> In terms of audiences, minimalist approaches often play to expectations of secular university contexts, and maximalist approaches to confessional or generically religious contexts. Nevertheless, each is, in terms of its respective epistemic goals, understandable.

<sup>13</sup> On the more skeptical and conservative poles of scholarship, many construct a ‘consensus’ that ignores scholars of other persuasions, effectively denying their scholarship. In such circles, pigeonholing an author into a category (e.g., ‘liberal’, ‘evangelical’, ‘agnostic’; or even ‘skeptical’ or ‘apologetic’) often becomes a means of dismissing her or his arguments without needing to engage them.

*probable*, however, we are more likely to take a middle way between minimalism and maximalism.

Similarly, both those who regard the Gospels as ‘historical’ and those who deny it may lay claim to being right, insofar as they are defining ‘history’ differently. As noted below, ancient biographies were related to the ancient genre of historiography. This genre was naturally not *modern* historiography, however—a genre that by definition did not exist yet. They are not modern histories, but they are useful resources for historical reconstruction.

Some critics start with a default setting of skepticism toward the Synoptics, leaving the burden of proof only on those offering claims supporting authenticity. The dominant position today, however, is that whoever articulates a position regarding authenticity must offer an argument for it.<sup>14</sup>

### **Surmounting the Impasse: The Gospels as Biographies**

Because the Synoptics are our earliest narrative Gospels,<sup>15</sup> I limit my focus here to them. For the sake of space, I further limit my remarks here to two issues: the Synoptics as biography and first-generation oral tradition preceding the composition of Mark.<sup>16</sup>

I will suggest that our default setting for the Gospels need not be more skeptical than it would be for comparable works about figures who lived a comparable date before those works. In fact, we have few biographies of figures in antiquity written as soon after the events as the first-century Gospels were written after Jesus’ ministry. If we started with the default skepticism toward other ancient sources that

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<sup>14</sup> See Dagmar Winter, ‘The Burden of Proof in Jesus Research’, in Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols.; Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 843–51.

<sup>15</sup> As is widely agreed; see e.g., Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (3rd edn; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> I am developing much of this material from sections of a much larger argument in Keener, *Historical Jesus*.

some scholars place on the Gospels, we would know quite little about antiquity.

In addition to the Gospels themselves, we need to consider the sorts of documents that emerge as most analogous in respects significant for understanding how the Gospels may have been framed. Scholars have proposed various possible genres for the Gospels over the years, but the argument for ancient biography has become the mainstream consensus.<sup>17</sup> Scholars favor biography as the genre for the Gospels largely because this was the only sort of work that focused on single characters—the feature that would readily arouse audience expectations for this genre. Some deny the biographic genre because biographies of ‘divine men’ appear only later, probably dependent on the Gospels.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., Charles H. Talbert, *What Is a Gospel? The Genre of the Canonical Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS, 70; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992); see also Philip L. Shuler, *A Genre for the Gospels: The Biographical Character of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); David E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), pp. 46-76; Dirk Frickenschmidt, *Evangelium als Biographie. Die vier Evangelien im Rahmen antiker Erzählkunst* (TANZ, 22; Tübingen: Francke, 1997); Maria Ytterbrink, *The Third Gospel for the First Time: Luke within the Context of Ancient Biography* (Lund: Lund University—Centrum för teologi och religionsvetenskap, 2004); Pheme Perkins, *Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 2-11; Ehrman, *The New Testament*, pp. 62-65. More briefly, see David Aune, *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament & Early Christian Literature & Rhetoric* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), p. 204; Vernon K. Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher: A Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation of Mark* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992), p. 10; David L. Balch, ‘Gospels (Literary Forms)’, *Brill’s New Pauly*, vol. 5, pp. 947-49 (948); James D. G. Dunn, ‘The Tradition’, in James D. G. Dunn and Scot McKnight (eds.), *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 167-84 (173-74); Charles H. Talbert, review of Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?* *JBL* 112.4 (Winter 1993), pp. 714-15 (here 715); cf. also Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), pp. 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> For their dependence on the Gospels, see e.g., John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell, ‘Introduction’, in Iamblichus *On the Pythagorean Way of Life: Text, Translation and Notes* (SBLIT, 29, Graeco-Roman Religion Series, 11; Atlanta: Scholars, 1991), pp. 1-29 (25-26). For modern scholars’ divine man category as itself a later composite, see e.g., David Lenz Tiede, *The Charismatic Figure as Miracle Worker* (SBLDS, 1; Missoula,

But this denial confuses subject with genre; most thus continue to accept biography as the genre.<sup>19</sup> The more specific genre of a biographic volume in a larger history (a category for which we have analogies)<sup>20</sup> appears relevant in the case of Luke–Acts.<sup>21</sup>

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MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972), e.g., p. 99; Carl R. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology* (SBLDS, 40; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), e.g., p. 237; Eugene V. Gallagher, *Divine Man or Magician? Celsus and Origen on Jesus* (SBLDS, 64; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), e.g., p. 173; Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World: A Study in Sociohistorical Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), e.g., pp. 288, 297–99; Erkki Koskenniemi, ‘The Religious-Historical Background of the New Testament Miracles’, in J. Harold Ellens (ed.), *Religious and Spiritual Events* (vol. 1 in *Miracles: God, Science, and Psychology in the Paranormal*; Westport, CN; London: Praeger, 2008), pp. 103–16 (105–107).

<sup>19</sup> If anything, the genre may have limited the depiction of Jesus’ exalted status (found, e.g., in Q), especially in Mark and Luke (despite their apparent beliefs; cf. Keener, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 276–77, 279). Paul’s letters earlier suggest a cosmic role for Jesus more exalted than what we find in Mark or Luke (*ibid.*, 279–81; for exalted figures in other Jewish thought of the period, see pp. 281–82, but esp. work by others, notably Larry Hurtado).

<sup>20</sup> See Burridge, *Gospels*, p. 246 (citing Diodorus Siculus Bk. 17); David L. Balch, ‘METABOLH POLITEIWN—Jesus as Founder of the Church in Luke–Acts: Form and Function’, in Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (eds.), *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse* (SBLSymS, 20; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 139–88 (143) (citing Dion. Hal., *Ant. rom.* 4.41–85).

<sup>21</sup> A majority of scholars view Acts as a history or historical monograph. See e.g., Eckhard Plümacher, ‘Lukas als griechischer Historiker’, *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft Supplementband* 14 (1974), pp. 235–64; *idem*, ‘Luke as Historian’, *ABD* 4: 398–402 (398); *idem*, *Lukas als hellenistischer Schriftsteller. Studien zur Apostelgeschichte* (SUNT, 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), pp. 33–38 (comparing mission speeches), pp. 137–39; *idem*, *Geschichte und Geschichten: Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte und zu den Johannesakten* (ed. Jens Schröter and Ralph Brucker; WUNT, 170; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 1–32; *idem*, ‘Cicero und Lukas. Bemerkungen zu Stil und Zweck der historischen Monographie’, in Joseph Verheyden (ed.), *The Unity of Luke–Acts* (BETL, 142; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), pp. 759–75 (772–73); *idem*, ‘Monographie’; Darryl W. Palmer, ‘Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph’, in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting* (vol. 1 in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), pp. 1–29; Daryl D. Schmidt, ‘Rhetorical Influences and Genre: Luke’s Preface and the Rhetoric of Hellenistic Historiography’, in David P. Moessner (ed.),

Comparisons with novels are illuminating from a literary perspective<sup>22</sup> (as they would be for other ancient biographies), but even historical novels rarely followed their sources so closely, and I know of no pure novels about characters composed within two generations of the events. (They may provide a more apt comparison for later apocryphal gospels, which appear in the heyday of novels.)<sup>23</sup>

### *Historical Intention as an Element in Ancient Biographies*

Classicists often designate ancient biography as a genre related to ancient historiography, and with good reason, given the overlap in concerns.<sup>24</sup> Classical rhetoric scholar George Kennedy, in fact, classifies biography ‘as a subdivision of history’.<sup>25</sup> While conceding the encomiastic

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*Jesus and the Heritage of Israel: Luke’s Narrative Claim Upon Israel’s Legacy* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), pp. 27-60 (59); François Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Thirty-Three Years of Research (1950-1983)* (trans. Ken McKinney; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1987), p. 5; Daniel Marguerat, *La Première Histoire du Christianisme (Les Actes des apôtres)* (LD, 180; Paris, Genève: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999), p. 49 (although noting overlap with biography); Wilfried Eckey, *Die Apostelgeschichte. Der Weg des Evangeliums von Jerusalem nach Rom* (2 vols.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), pp. 20-31; Odile Flichy, *L’œuvre de Luc: L’Évangile et les Actes des Apôtres* (CaE, 114; Paris: Cerf, 2000); idem, ‘État des recherches actuelles sur les Actes des Apôtres’, in Michel Berder (ed.), *Les Actes des Apôtres: Histoire, récit, théologie* (LD, 199; Paris: Cerf, 2005), pp. 13-42 (28-32) (reviewing recent research); Clare K. Rothschild, *Luke-Acts and the Rhetoric of History: An Investigation of Early Christian Historiography* (WUNT, 2.175; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), p. 296; Balch, ‘METABOLH POLITEIWN’, pp. 141-42, 149-54.

<sup>22</sup> See e.g., Paul M. Fullmer, *Resurrection in Mark’s Literary-Historical Perspective* (LNTS, 360; New York: T&T Clark, 2007); Rob Starner, *Kingdom of Power, Power of Kingdom: The Opposing World Views of Mark and Chariton* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Aune, *Westminster Dictionary of New Testament*, p. 322.

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Benedetto Bravo, ‘Antiquarianism and History’, in John Marincola (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (2 vols.; Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 515-27 (516). The boundaries between these two genres are quite ‘fluid’ (Philip Stadter, ‘Biography and History’, in *Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography*, pp. 528-40 [528]); see also Burridge, *Gospels*, pp. 63-67.

<sup>25</sup> George A. Kennedy, ‘Classical and Christian Source Criticism’, in William O. Walker, Jr. (ed.), *The Relationships Among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1978), pp. 125-55 (136).

character of many ancient biographies, David Aune notes that the genre ‘was still firmly rooted in historical fact rather than literary fiction’.<sup>26</sup>

In arguing this point, I do not deny that biographers (and historians) wrote with overt and covert agendas, that they made mistakes, or that they felt free to adapt and develop their material. No less than the Gospels, most ancient biographers and historians ‘preached’ moral, political, military and theological lessons, and might differ on the lessons they emphasized from the same information.<sup>27</sup> For example, Suetonius hated Domitian; Tacitus honored his father-in-law Agricola; we take such perspectives into account without discounting these portraits’ value for history. Certainly ancient biography, in contrast to modern biography, usually was not concerned with following chronological sequence and often lacked adequate sources to do so.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, it is impossible to deny that a significant proportion of their content reflects prior information, and that by choosing this genre rather than another biographers and historians committed themselves to remain bound to some degree to their sources.

At this point I should point out that some apparently divergent conclusions among scholars are more or less semantic and involve how we are framing the material. We have substantial hard evidence concerning biographies about recent characters, but whether a scholar uses it to argue that ancient biographies provide more facts or less facts than we suppose depends on the foil with which we are contrasting them. If we are challenging uninformed popular assumptions that ancient biographies simply provide uninterpreted facts (or even that they are written

<sup>26</sup> David E. Aune, ‘Greco-Roman Biography’, in idem (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres* (SBL SBL, 21; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), pp. 107-26 (125).

<sup>27</sup> This observation is actually far more often true of biographies and histories than novels. While *Joseph and Asenath* and Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses* have a religious propagandistic purpose, one would be harder pressed to find much purpose beyond entertainment in Petronius, Longus, Chaereas, Heliodorus, Xenophon of Ephesus, and so forth.

<sup>28</sup> See evidence in Keener, *Historical Jesus*, p. 82; Graham N. Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth in New Testament Preaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1974), pp. 119-21; cf. further Herwig Görgemanns, ‘Biography: Greek’, in *Brill’s New Pauly, Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World; Antiquity*, edited by Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, and Christine F. Salazar (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002-2009), vol. 2, pp. 648-51; Aune, *The New Testament*, pp. 31-32.

precisely like modern biographies), we will naturally use the evidence to demonstrate that ancient biographers treated their material much more flexibly than that. If, by contrast, we are challenging the degree of suspicion with which some scholars have approached the Jesus tradition and the Gospels, we will emphasize that first- and second-generation biographies usually included substantial historical information.

Both historical arguments would be correct, and genuine historical scholarship could make *both* cases using the same facts correctly. Because my concern here is historical-Jesus scholarship rather than popular consumption, I emphasize the latter approach, but I acknowledge that the same data could be used for both approaches.

Biographers writing about the distant past inevitably encountered considerable legendary material in their sources. Historians were likewise less accurate when they wrote about people of the distant past than when they wrote about recent events, and they themselves express awareness of this difference.<sup>29</sup> Only rarely do we have biographies about a figure who lived only a generation earlier, but that is what we appear to be dealing with in the case of the Gospel of Mark, which is usually dated only about thirty-five or forty years after Jesus' public ministry.<sup>30</sup> It is to such 'recent' biographies that we should give special attention for comparison, and a small handful from the early Empire do exist, such as Tacitus' *Agricola* (about his father-in-law) or Josephus' autobiographic *Life*.

### *A Case Study*

For comparison, I have chosen Suetonius' *Otho*, about a figure who died forty to fifty years before Suetonius wrote, and about whom

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Diodorus Siculus 1.6.2. See further Kennedy, 'Source Criticism', p. 139 on the mythical character of 'early history', citing Quintilian, *Inst.* 2.4.18-19 and Livy's repeated qualifications in his first ten books. They generally preferred writers closer chronologically to the events (Livy 7.6.6; 25.11.20; Plutarch, *Mal. Hdt.* 20, *Mor.* 859B); many recognized the obscurity of reports from centuries earlier, expecting a much higher standard of accuracy when handling reports closer to their own period (Thucydides 1.21.1; Livy 6.1.2-3; 7.6.6; Diodorus Siculus 1.6.2; 1.9.2; 4.1.1; 4.8.3-5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.12.3; *Thuc.* 5; Paus. 9.31.7; Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.15, 24-25, 58).

<sup>30</sup> See e.g., Ehrman, *The New Testament*, pp. 145, 216.

Plutarch also wrote a biography. A section of Tacitus' *Histories* likewise covers Otho's public political life, affording us a way to compare what the biographers wrote with what a historian from the same generation wrote. Because contemporary material in Tacitus and Plutarch overlaps with Suetonius' biography of Otho, this work (or the corresponding biographic material in Plutarch) provides a useful test case for whether biographers made up most of their material or primarily adapted pre-existing material.

I merely summarize my findings here.<sup>31</sup> Which elements one counts makes the exact figure subjective, but speaking roughly, in Suetonius' brief biography, I found 31 points with close correspondence to Tacitus and 18 additional points of significant correspondence. I found 30 points of close contact between Suetonius and Plutarch, with 18 further points of significant correspondence; besides these, I found 28 further points of close correspondence between Plutarch and Tacitus.

Keep in mind that Suetonius' biography of Otho is one of his briefest, the rough equivalent of only 28 paragraphs, with a total of fewer than two thousand words—i.e., roughly 19 percent, or close to one-fifth, the length of Mark's Gospel. The hypothesis that biographers worked from preexisting material explains the nearly fifty points of correspondence between Suetonius and Tacitus in the former's brief work far better than the hypothesis that biographers did not do so. Given Mark's relative length, if it exhibited a comparable measure of parallels with sources from Mark's generation, we might expect over 260 points of significant correspondence in its some 664 verses.<sup>32</sup> This calculation can be nothing more than a rough estimate, but it does suggest that we should not start with a default expectation that Mark invents most of his material.

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<sup>31</sup> See Craig S. Keener, 'Otho: A Targeted Comparison of Suetonius' Biography and Tacitus' History, with Implications for the Gospels' Historical Reliability', *BBR* 21.3 (2011), forthcoming.

<sup>32</sup> This is a low estimate, comparing only correspondences between Suetonius and Tacitus, not adding in those with Plutarch or factoring in the likelihood that Suetonius, who uses sources where we can compare Tacitus, would often use sources where we cannot compare Tacitus.

*Differences and Sources*

I do not, of course, deny differences. These differences involve not only emphasis or one source failing to report material found in another<sup>33</sup> but sometimes also conflicts on details.<sup>34</sup> The range of differences approximates the range of differences among our Gospels. Such divergences do not, however, weaken the substantial historical value of these sources on their vast points of agreement.

My point is that these biographers saw their task quite differently from most novelists. They were engaging not in free composition; they were rewriting their sources with special interests in mind. Adaptations notwithstanding, our examples of biographies about recent historical persons clearly do not fit genre expectations for novels.

That biographers employed existing sources where available does not prove that their sources were accurate, but it does suggest that the biographers often *expected* their sources to be, especially ones composed within a generation of the events. Ancient historians and biographers sometimes name their sources.<sup>35</sup> They do not name them always, however; they were particularly apt to identify their sources when alternate stories came to circulate over time.<sup>36</sup> Most relevant here, even authors writing about persons or events in the generation immediately before

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<sup>33</sup>) Ancient historians and biographers also always wrote with particular agendas (see Keener, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 117-23, and sources cited there). They would not necessarily regard as criticism the observation that more information could be added (see e.g., Josephus, *Life* 365-67).

<sup>34</sup>) E.g., the name of the astrologer who spurred on Otho's ambitions differs in Suetonius from his name in Tacitus and Plutarch (Suetonius, *Otho* 4.1; Tacitus, *Hist.* 1.22; Plutarch, *Galba* 23.4).

<sup>35</sup>) For historians: e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.1.1; 1.6.1; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.9.4, 159; 1 Kgs 14.19, 29; 15.7, 23, 31; for biographers: Arrian, *Alex.* 6.2.4; Plutarch, *Alex.* 30.7; 31.2-3; 38.4.

<sup>36</sup>) For historians: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. rom.* 1.87.4; 3.35.1-4; 8.79.1; Livy 9.44.6; 23.19.17; 25.17.1-6; Valerius Maximus 5.7.ext. 1; 6.8.3; Herodian 7.9.4; 7.9.9; Appian, *Hist. rom.* 11.9.56; 12.1.1; for biographers: Cornelius Nepos 7 (Alcibiades), 11.1; 9 (Conon), 5.4; Arrian, *Alex.* 1, *pref.* 1-2; 4.9.2-3; 4.14.1-4; 5.3.1; 5.14.4; 7.14.2; 7.27.1-3; Plutarch, *Alex.* 31.3; 38.4; 46.1-2; *Dem.* 5.5; 29.4-30.4; *Them.* 25.1-2; 27.1; 32.3-4; Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 2.4.570; 2.5.576.

them (or in a time when some of them were living) had written sources available for some events.<sup>37</sup> For all we know, Mark may have had some written as well as oral material available.<sup>38</sup>

In the case of our sources mentioned here, Tacitus normally follows annals and earlier histories,<sup>39</sup> but he also consulted personal memoirs from perhaps half a century earlier.<sup>40</sup> Plutarch consulted witnesses, including an officer who described to him what he saw while Plutarch was touring the site with him.<sup>41</sup> Suetonius apparently made some local inquiries for his work as well.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Suetonius' own father was a

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<sup>37</sup> Note for example the many contemporary histories of Nero noted already in Josephus, *Ant.* 20.154, though Josephus did not like the ones with whose perspectives he disagreed; Josephus published the *Antiquities* perhaps 27 years after Nero's death. Xenophon cites another author who had written about some events even though Xenophon himself was an eyewitness (*Hell.* 3.1.2). Suetonius might sometimes share with Tacitus the no-longer-extant work of Fabius Rusticus (cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 13.20.2; 14.2; 15.61; Ronald H. Martin, 'Tacitus', in *OCD*, pp. 1469-71 [1470]).

<sup>38</sup> This is a possibility, not a certainty; events in imperial Rome reflected much more culturally elite circles than Jesus' disciples do. I believe that Mark has sometimes abridged Q (cf. e.g., Mk 3.23-29 with Mt. 12.28//Lk. 11.20), but despite the proliferation of sources by Luke's day (Lk. 1.1), we do not know how many written sources might predate Mark and Q.

<sup>39</sup> Sometimes specifying sources only when occasion required (e.g., Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.34-35).

<sup>40</sup> *Ann.* 4.53. Tacitus elsewhere cites 'historians of that era' (*Ann.* 5.9) as sources for events a century before his time. Tacitus knows of various earlier historians, sometimes naming them only when they themselves become subjects of history (e.g., Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.34; his books survived, 4.35), and often mentioning both the verdict of 'the majority' of historians from the earlier era noted and dissenters from that consensus (e.g., *Ann.* 4.57). Historians could also refer readers more generally to 'other historians' (Velleius Paterculus 2.48.5); cf. Lk. 1.1.

<sup>41</sup> Plutarch, *Otho* 14.1. In this case Plutarch confesses that he does not know why the scene was as his witness described it (bodies gathered and piled up at a temple; *Otho* 14.2). Plutarch also visited Otho's tomb at Brixillum (*Otho* 18.1). For Plutarch's range of sources, see P.J. Rhodes, 'Documents and the Greek Historians', in *Companion to the Greek and Roman Historiography*, pp. 56-66 (65-66).

<sup>42</sup> Suetonius, *Vesp.* 1.4. He sometimes could establish his point by naming various earlier sources supporting it (Suetonius, *Jul.* 9.3). Suetonius' sources more generally include notes he took from official 'libraries and archives', and while he proved less

tribune serving under Otho, and shared with him information about Otho's character and actions.<sup>43</sup> A generation is, after all, not a very long time, for it remains within living memory of eyewitnesses and participants whom writers would naturally wish to consult.<sup>44</sup>

None of these observations should come as a surprise to us; most of us who teach courses in the Synoptic Gospels ask our students to compare parallel pericopes, noting similarities and contrasts, both of which (over the course of enough pericopes) abound. What is typical in the Synoptic Gospels is also typical in the biographies of Otho by Suetonius and Plutarch and where they overlap with Tacitus. This is what we would normally expect and is also what we find in these test cases.

### **Sources within Living Memory of Eyewitnesses can be Fairly Reliable**

Oral material about Jesus circulated in the period in which our Gospels were being written, and it is not surprising that Gospel writers would have drawn on such tradition as well as on earlier written sources such as Mark and Q. This method was in keeping with ancient practice.<sup>45</sup> Early Christian writers themselves assume knowledge of traditions about Jesus not recorded in their Gospels (e.g., Acts 20.35; Jn 20.30; Papias frg. 3.4, Holmes).

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critically discerning about his various sources than Plutarch, modern historians appreciate 'his hesitation to impose his own judgments' on his material (Kennedy, 'Source Criticism', p. 141). Kennedy notes (p. 141) that the Gospels rely on simpler tradition, but nevertheless deems useful this comparison with hard data.

<sup>43</sup> *Otho* 10.1.

<sup>44</sup> For example, historians normally sought to consult with families of relevant individuals (see the sources in Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* [Leiden: Brill, 2002], pp. 82-83). Rainer Riesner, 'Die Rückkehr der Augenzeugen. Eine neue Entwicklung in der Evangelienforschung', *TBei* 38.6 (2007), pp. 337-52, has noted the shift back toward emphasizing eyewitnesses in Gospels studies (citing Byrskog, Bauckham, and Hengel).

<sup>45</sup> See e.g., Keener, *Historical Jesus*, p. 141.

*Ancient Memory*

Some societies pass on information orally for centuries, maintaining accuracy in the key points transmitted.<sup>46</sup> In oral cultures the point of recall tends to be thematic rather than verbatim, but can include epics considered hopelessly long to modern western audiences.<sup>47</sup> We expect variation in oral performances, perhaps explaining a number of variants in our Gospel tradition as well.<sup>48</sup>

More directly relevant to the Gospel tradition, the ancient Mediterranean world highly prized oral memory. Uneducated bards recited Homeric epics and other poets from memory.<sup>49</sup> Records abound of carefully trained memories among the educated. The elder Seneca claims that he was able to recount long sections of over a hundred declamations from his youth,<sup>50</sup> though Seneca was admittedly exceptional.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Bernard Lewis, *History Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), p. 43; Jan Vansina, 'Afterthoughts on the Historiography of Oral Tradition', in Bogumil Jewsiewicki and David Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies: What History for Which Africa?* (SSAMD, 12; Beverly Hills, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1986), pp. 105-10 (110).

<sup>47</sup> See John Harvey, *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester: Apollon, 1998), p. 41. On the retention of 'gist' in eyewitness memory even when details are inaccurate, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 333-34.

<sup>48</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 112 (with p. 110), 118, 122; cf. Albert B. Lord, 'The Gospels as Oral Traditional Literature', in Walker (ed.), *Relationships Among the Gospels*, pp. 33-91 (but also the response in Charles H. Talbert, 'Oral and Independent or Literary and Interdependent? A Response to Albert B. Lord', pp. 93-102). On the frequent lack of verbatim recall, and often re-creation, see, e.g., Henri Moniot, 'Profile of a Historiography: Oral Tradition and Historical Research in Africa', in Jewsiewicki and Newbury (eds.), *African Historiographies*, 50-58 (56-57).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Martin Litchfield West, 'Rhapsodes', in *OCD*, pp. 1311-12; Xenophon, *Symp.* 3.5-6; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 36.9.

<sup>50</sup> *Controv.* passim. Kennedy, 'Source Criticism', p. 143, argues that, given the ancient emphasis on memory and the use of commonplaces in declamations, Seneca's recollection of declamation pieces is more credible than some critics have allowed.

<sup>51</sup> Tacitus also claims to remember long dialogues years later (*Dial.* 1), but this claim is at least partly a literary device.

Difficult as it may seem to most readers today,<sup>52</sup> he testifies that in his younger days he could repeat back two thousand names in exactly the sequence in which he had just heard them, or recite up to two hundred verses given to him, in reverse.<sup>53</sup> Even if his recollections of youthful prowess are exaggerated, they testify to an emphasis on memory that far exceeds standard expectations today.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly, orators would memorize their speeches, often even several hours in length;<sup>55</sup> *memoria*, i.e., ‘learning the speech by heart in preparation for delivery’, was one of the five basic tasks of an orator.<sup>56</sup> Rhetorical students practiced declamation, offering their practice speeches ‘from memory’.<sup>57</sup> At least rhetorically trained hearers could recall elements of speeches, with memory strong enough even to supplement written sources.<sup>58</sup>

### *Ancient Disciples’ Memory*

Memory would be most effective within the first generation or two, when eyewitnesses still spoke and could be consulted as correctives, and

<sup>52</sup> Some mnemonic claims attributed to much earlier periods (Valerius Maximus 8.7.ext. 16) are less credible (see Pliny, *N.H.* 7.24.88).

<sup>53</sup> Seneca, *Controv.* 1.pref.2.

<sup>54</sup> Another source claims that one sophist even in his old age could repeat back fifty names in sequence after hearing them just once (Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 1.11.495), and further examples could be added.

<sup>55</sup> Quintilian, *Inst.* 11.2.1-51. In first-century BCE Roman courts, each defense speaker had ‘only’ three hours (Cicero, *Brutus* 93.324); by the second century ce, Tacitus laments that the time was normally just one or two hours, curbing eloquence (*Dial.* 38).

<sup>56</sup> Philip E. Satterthwaite, ‘Acts Against the Background of Classical Rhetoric’, in Winter and Clarke (eds.), *Acts in its Ancient Literary Setting*, pp. 337-79 (344); cf. Thomas H. Olbricht, ‘Delivery and Memory’, in Stanley E. Porter (ed.), *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.–A.D. 400* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 159-67, esp. 159, 163, citing *Rhet. Her.* 1.3-5; Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.351; Malcolm Heath (ed.), *Hermogenes on Issues: Strategies of Argument in Later Greek Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p. 7; Eunapius, *Lives* 502. Ancient rhetoricians praised this skill (Aeschines, *Embassy* 48, 112).

<sup>57</sup> Duane F. Watson, ‘Education: Jewish and Greco-Roman’, in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp. 308-13 (310); cf. Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 18.19.

<sup>58</sup> Eunapius, *Lives* 494; cf. Lucian, *Peregr.* 3.

in settings of schools, where students would rehearse and pass on what they received from their teachers. The early church was not a school setting per se, but many or most of its most prominent leaders (cf. 1 Cor. 15.5-7; esp. Gal. 1.18-19; 2.8-9) were not only eyewitnesses but those who learned their mentor's teachings as his disciples.

Memorization was the most widespread feature of ancient Mediterranean education.<sup>59</sup> Memorizing sayings of famous teachers was a regular school exercise at the basic level;<sup>60</sup> students at various levels also memorized examples.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, higher education (after about age sixteen) included memorizing many speeches and passages useful for speeches.<sup>62</sup>

More relevantly, sayings attributed to founders of Greek schools were transmitted by members of each school from one generation to the next;<sup>63</sup> the practice seems to have been encouraged by the founders of the schools themselves.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, in all schools 'teaching was passed down from master to pupils, who in turn passed it on to their own pupils';<sup>65</sup> the founder's teachings often functioned as canonical for their communities.<sup>66</sup> Students might deliberately rehearse the previous

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g., Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.3.1; 2.4.15 (rote); Plutarch, *Educ.* 13, *Mor.* 9E; Musonius Rufus *frag.* 51, p. 144.3-7; Diogenes Laertius 6.2.31; Eunapius, *Lives* 481; Helmut Koester, *Introduction to the New Testament* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), I, p. 93; Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 84; Watson, 'Education', pp. 310, 312; Heath, *Hermogenes*, p. 11.

<sup>60</sup> Musonius Rufus *frag.* 51, p. 144.3-7 (though it is either misattributed or, more likely, Musonius recycled an earlier saying of Cato—144.10-19).

<sup>61</sup> Theon, *Progymn.* 2.5-8.

<sup>62</sup> James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), p. 256. Both understanding and memory mattered (Isocrates, *Demon.* 18, *Or.* 1).

<sup>63</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools* (SBLDS, 26; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), p. 193; Aulus Gellius 7.10.1; Socrates, *Ep.* 20.

<sup>64</sup> Diogenes Laertius 10.1.12, on Epicurus, according to Diocles; on followers of Pythagoras, cf. Culpepper, *Johannine School*, p. 50.

<sup>65</sup> Loveday Alexander, 'IPSE DIXIT: Citation of Authority in Paul and in the Jewish Hellenistic Schools', in Troels Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul Beyond the Judaism/Hellenism Divide* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), pp. 103-27 (112).

<sup>66</sup> Alexander, 'IPSE DIXIT', pp. 112-13.

day's lectures.<sup>67</sup> They further studied and emulated teachers' behavior,<sup>68</sup> transmitting it to subsequent generations.<sup>69</sup>

Sometimes a deceased teacher's former disciples also collectively remembered bits and pieces of speeches, sewing them together,<sup>70</sup> a process relevant to communal memory and to other cases of groups of disciples carrying on their master's teachings. Apart from feats of exceptional memory above, communal memory is relevant where a group of hearers could remind one another of various points, with those whose memory was strongest presumably taking the lead. Whereas 'chain' transmission might depend on a single person's memory, 'net' transmission of a community could help guarantee larger amounts of tradition.<sup>71</sup> My point is not, of course, verbatim recall. Indeed, paraphrase was a standard rhetorical exercise.<sup>72</sup>

### *Jesus' Jewish Disciples*

Jewish education emphasized memorization of Torah (through repeated reading and recitation).<sup>73</sup> Josephus likewise stressed memorization and understanding, though his focus (in contrast to that of Greeks) was the law rather than earlier Greek authors.<sup>74</sup> This method of learning was thus hardly limited to the circle of later rabbis; it was part of regular Jewish education in the home and basic school education all Jewish youths were to receive.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>67</sup> Lucian, *Hermot.* 1. Ancients report this emphasis to an unusual extent among Pythagoreans (Iamblichus, *V.P.* 20.94; 29.165; 35.256; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 1.14; 2.30; 3.16; Diodorus Siculus 10.5.1).

<sup>68</sup> See e.g., Philostratus, *V.A.* 5.21; Walter L. Liefeld, 'The Wandering Preacher as a Social Figure in the Roman Empire' (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1967), p. 223; Robbins, *Jesus the Teacher*, p. 64.

<sup>69</sup> Eunapius, *Lives* 458; Philostratus, *Lives* 1.22.524.

<sup>70</sup> Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 1.22.524.

<sup>71</sup> See Dunn, *New Perspective*, pp. 43, 114-15 (noting traditional Middle Eastern culture on pp. 45-46).

<sup>72</sup> Theon, *Progymn.* 1.93-171; Libanius, *Anecdote* 1.4; 2.3; *Maxim* 1.2-5; 2.3; 3.2; Hermogenes, *Method* 24.440.

<sup>73</sup> Watson, 'Education', p. 312.

<sup>74</sup> Josephus, *Life* 8; *Apion* 1.60; 2.171-73, 204.

<sup>75</sup> See Rainer Riesner, 'Education élémentaire juive et tradition évangélique', *Hok* 21 (1982), pp. 51-64; idem, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der*

The most easily documented example, however, where we have the greatest volume of extant material, is among disciples of rabbis. No written rabbinic source dates to the first century, but it is hardly likely that this evidence would be discontinuous with all the other Jewish and Greco-Roman evidence that we do have.<sup>76</sup> Rabbinic evidence is consistent with this expectation: rabbis lectured to their pupils and expected them to memorize their teachings by laborious repetition.<sup>77</sup> This practice of memorizing teachings would have been particularly intense for those preparing to be teachers themselves.<sup>78</sup> Rabbinic sources emphasize careful traditioning.<sup>79</sup> Because this traditioning in practice tended toward ‘net transmission’ rather than ‘chain transmission’ (i.e., the sayings became the property of the rabbinic community, and not only of a single disciple of a teacher), transmission could be guarded more carefully in the first generation or two.<sup>80</sup> There is also evidence that

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*Evangelien-Überlieferung* (2nd edn; WUNT, 2nd series, 7; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1984).

<sup>76</sup> Some also offer the argument, which seems consistent with our other evidence about academic memory, that the later rabbinic method hardly arose *ex nihilo* after 70 CE (e.g., Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* [2 vols.; WBC, 33AB; Dallas: Word, 1993–1995], I, p. xlix).

<sup>77</sup> *Sipre Deut.* 48.1.1-4; 48.2.6; Martin Goodman, *State and Society in Roman Galilee, A.D. 132–212* (Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies; Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), p. 79; cf. *Sipre Deut.* 4.2.1, 306.19.1-3; *b. Ber.* 38b; *p. Meg.* 4.1, §4; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (ASNU, 22; Uppsala: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1961), pp. 113-21, 127-29, 168-70; Dov Zlotnick, ‘Memory and the Integrity of the Oral Tradition’, *JANESCU* 16-17 (1984–1985), pp. 229-41. Because Meir was Akiba’s student, his anonymous traditions were assumed to stem from Akiba (*p. Ber.* 2.1, §4).

<sup>78</sup> See Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 124-25.

<sup>79</sup> E.g., *tos. Yeb.* 3.1; *Mek. Pisha* 1.135-36; *Sipre Deut.* 48.2.6; *Ab. R. Nat.* 24 A; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 21.5; *b. Suk.* 28a; *p. Sheq.* 2.5; cf. *m. Ed.* 1.4-6; *Sipra Behuq.* p. 13.277.1.12; see further George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (2 vols.; New York: Schocken, 1971), I, p. 99; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (2nd edn; 2 vols.; trans. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1979), I, p. 68; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 122-70; idem, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 19-24; Harald Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), pp. 14-17.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. net transmission in the less formal Middle Eastern village settings (Dunn, *New Perspective*, pp. 45-46). This claim is not to deny Jacob Neusner’s challenge to rabbinic

other Jewish teachers, like Jesus, sometimes spoke in easily memorizable forms.<sup>81</sup> Stylistic features of oral tradition (and perhaps a teaching style designed to facilitate such transmission) pervade Jesus' teachings recorded in the Gospels.<sup>82</sup>

*Why should we expect Jesus' disciples to prove less reliable than other disciples of teachers?* Whatever else Jesus may have been, virtually all scholars agree that he was a teacher who had disciples. Is it not likely that they would have preserved the substance of his teaching? Again, we find variants in the Gospel tradition, but we also find considerable overlap.

As noted above, most scholars date the Gospel of Mark to within a generation of Jesus' public ministry. Any sources on which Mark depends are obviously earlier than Mark, and even our latest first-century Gospels about Jesus are not late by the usual standards for studying antiquity. W.D. Davies rightly noted that probably only a single lifespan 'separates Jesus from the last New Testament document. And the tradition in the Gospels is not strictly a folk tradition, derived from long stretches of time, but a tradition preserved by believing communities who were guided by responsible leaders, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus'.<sup>83</sup>

### *Note-taking*

It is even possible, though much less certain, that one or more disciples may have been literate enough to take basic notes on some of Jesus' teachings at the time. Disciples of advanced Greek teachers, both in philosophy and rhetoric, often took notes during their teachers'

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biography and so forth; developing his approach, David Instone-Brewer is currently evaluating which traditions are early (*Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004–]).

<sup>81</sup>) See documentation cited in Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 25–29. Greek and Roman philosophers also could do the same (Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 1.22.523; Seneca, *Ep. Lucil.* 108.9–10).

<sup>82</sup>) Dunn, *New Perspective*, p. 115 (including 'parataxis, rhythmic speech, repetition, multiple existence, and variation').

<sup>83</sup>) W.D. Davies, *Invitation to the New Testament: A Guide to its Main Witnesses* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 115–16; cf. similarly E.P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSM, 9; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 28.

lectures.<sup>84</sup> These notes could prove very close to what was said in the classroom.<sup>85</sup> Many teachers left the matter of publication to their followers.<sup>86</sup> From an early period those who took such notes sometimes published them.<sup>87</sup> Sometimes these works even preserved the teachers' personal style,<sup>88</sup> just as the Synoptics preserve some distinctive style and language for Jesus.

Although Jewish disciples, known to emphasize orality, may have taken fewer notes, our limited evidence suggests that they also were able to take notes and use them as initial mnemonic devices to recall larger blocs of material.<sup>89</sup> Aside from controversial general arguments for a degree of literacy in Jewish Palestine,<sup>90</sup> at least one of Jesus' followers, a tax-collector (Mk 2.14),<sup>91</sup> should have had the skills to take such notes. Indeed, later Christian tradition might suggest that the other disciples later made

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Seneca, *Ep. Lucil.* 108.6; Arius Didymus, *Epit.* 2.7.11k, p. 80 line 36–82.1; Lucian, *Hermot.* 2; see also Kennedy, 'Source Criticism', p. 131 (on Socrates); Stanley K. Stowers, 'The Diatribe', in Aune (ed.), *Greco-Roman Literature and NT*, 71–83 (74) (on Epictetus); Cora E. Lutz, 'Musonius Rufus: The Roman Socrates', *YCS* 10 (1947), pp. 3–147 (here pp. 7, 10; on Musonius); cf. Iamblichus, *V.P.* 23.104 (on Pythagoreans).

<sup>85</sup> See Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.pref. 7–8.

<sup>86</sup> Kennedy, 'Source Criticism', p. 129. Even Aristotle's 'books' are simply his regularly revised lecture notes (*ibid.*, p. 131), though the extant versions are well-organized (Cic., *Fin.* 3.3.10; 5.5.12).

<sup>87</sup> A fifth-century bce example in George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times* [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980], p. 19.

<sup>88</sup> E.g., Epictetus, *Diatr.* 1.preface; cf. Xenophon, *Apol.* 1.

<sup>89</sup> Gerhardsson, *Memory*, pp. 160–62; cf. S. Safrai, 'Education and the Study of the Torah', in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography; Political History; Social, Cultural, and Religious Life and Institutions*. Edited by S. Safrai and M. Stern with D. Flusser and W. C. van Unnik. 2 vols. (Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum 1. Vol. 1: Assen: Van Gorcum, 1974; vol. 2: Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 945–70 (966).

<sup>90</sup> See Alan Millard, 'Literacy in the Time of Jesus', *BAR* 29.4 (2003), pp. 36–45; Peter Head, 'A Further Note on *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*', *EvQ* 75.4 (2003), pp. 343–45.

<sup>91</sup> In Matthew's Gospel, this tax-collector is even Matthew (Mt. 9.9), one of the twelve (Mt. 10.3; Mk 3.18). This particular claim is distinct from the question of who wrote the Gospel of Matthew.

use of his notes.<sup>92</sup> Whatever the particulars, the possibility that some disciples took some notes during Jesus' ministry or soon afterward is a factor worth taking into account. Confronted with a classicist's evidence of note-taking in antiquity, one traditional form critic conceded that such evidence would require revision in the skepticism of some of his more radical peers.<sup>93</sup>

### *Illiterate Disciples?*

Some complain that Jesus' disciples were too illiterate for memorization. I have already questioned whether all were necessarily illiterate; moreover, those disciples whose occupations we know may have had resources superior to peasants. Fishermen, like tax-gatherers, were 'among the more economically mobile of the village culture'.<sup>94</sup> Mark declares that Zebedee's family employed 'hired servants' (Mk 1.20);<sup>95</sup> Luke even indicates that the two families had formed a fishing cooperative (Lk. 5.10).<sup>96</sup>

For that matter, not all disciples elsewhere derived from the ranks of the well-to-do.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, synagogues provided a learning environment, and Palestinian Jews were known for their knowledge of

<sup>92</sup> See Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 250, noting Papias' testimony in Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.39.16.

<sup>93</sup> Reginald H. Fuller, 'Classics and the Gospels: The Seminar', in Walker (ed.), *Relationships Among the Gospels*, pp. 173-92 (179).

<sup>94</sup> Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), p. 241; cf. *ILS* 7486; John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem as Jesus Knew It* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1978), pp. 29-30; Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), p. 27.

<sup>95</sup> Hengel, *Property*, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David Balch, *The New Testament in its Social Environment* (Library of Early Christianity, 2; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), p. 69; Shimon Applebaum, 'Economic Life in Palestine', in *Jewish People in the First Century*, pp. 631-700 (685).

<sup>97</sup> Among Greeks, cf. Alciphron, *Farm.* 11 (Sitalces to Oenopion, his son), 3.14; 38 (Euthydicus to Philiscus), 3.40; among Jewish people, cf. accounts of Hillel and Akiba, e.g., *b. Ned.* 50a; *Pes.* 49b.

their traditions.<sup>98</sup> Nor does educational status always correspond with oral memory; indeed, the strength of orality can be inversely proportional to literacy in some societies. Memory cultivation is particularly emphasized in oral cultures,<sup>99</sup> and there remained a bias toward orality and oral memory in the first-century world.<sup>100</sup> My wife, who is Congolese and has her PhD in history, spent much of her childhood in villages. She observes that the earlier, less literate generations passed on oral stories, but that the stories are being lost as more literate younger generations fail to repeat them and most stories fail to be written down.

*Some Distinctively Early Traits Remain in the Gospels*

Despite the especially Diaspora genre and Greek language of our earliest extant Gospels, traces of distinctly Palestinian Jewish traditions and Aramaic figures of speech persist. Not all features shared by the Jesus tradition and a Judean-Galilean milieu are unique to them; features such as hyperbole and even beatitudes, for example, appear elsewhere. Nevertheless, some features are mostly distinctive to the milieu of Jesus and his earliest followers, and such features invite our attention. Whether Aramaic or Greek was dominant, Lower Galilee was a fairly

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<sup>98</sup> Josephus' statements on Jewish literacy above, like that in *m. Ab.* 5.21, may reflect the literate elite, with much of the population learning the Torah orally (Richard A. Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995], pp. 246-47); but there were undoubtedly reasons others considered Judeans a 'nation of philosophers' (Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism: Edited with Introductions, Translations and Commentary* [3 vols.; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974–1984], I, pp. 8-11, 46-50; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1983], p. 39), and 'The synagogue was a comparatively intellectual milieu' (Rainer Riesner, 'Synagogues in Jerusalem', in Richard Bauckham (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting* [vol. 4 in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995], pp. 179-211 [209]).

<sup>99</sup> Byrskog, *Story as History*, pp. 110-11; cf. Eddy and Boyd, *Jesus Legend*, p. 280; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 325-41.

<sup>100</sup> See Harvey, *Listening*, p. 53 (citing Seneca, *Ep. Lucil.* 100.2); cf. again Papias frg. 3.4 (Holmes).

bilingual milieu.<sup>101</sup> Probably already in the early Jerusalem church, Greek quickly became the one common language everyone could understand (at least if we take seriously Luke’s report of early converts among the Hellenists), and in any case a transition to Greek language and perspectives from Diaspora cultures took place long before our finished Gospels, perhaps all of which come from the Diaspora.

Of course, Palestinian Judaism was influenced by its larger context, so that some Hellenistic features could appear in Galilee, and translation could obscure earlier features (in Lk. 5.19 Luke even transforms the traditional roof in Mk 2.4 into a tile roof more familiar to his audience). But the features that are distinctly Palestinian Jewish presumably derive from Jesus or from the earliest Palestinian Jewish movement surrounding his first disciples. As a rule, that circle would be the least likely to have misunderstood or fabricated Jesus’ teaching.

I will note just a few Palestinian Jewish figures of speech that I have elsewhere drawn from Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>102</sup> For example:

- Lust hyperbolically constituting adultery (Mt. 5.28).<sup>103</sup>
- The warning that it would be ‘measured’ to one as one measured to others (Mt. 7.2; Lk. 6.38).<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> See e.g., John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York: Doubleday, 1991–1994), I, pp. 255–68; Max Wilcox, ‘Semitic Influence on the New Testament’, in *DNTB*, pp. 1093–98 (1094). I personally observe the effectiveness of multilingualism in my African wife and her culture.

<sup>102</sup> I borrow this material from my ‘Suggestions for Future Study of Rhetoric and Matthew’s Gospel’, *HTS Theological Studies* 66.1 (2010), Art. 812. Technically these could reflect other Jewish communities in the East (including Babylonia and probably Syria); my point is that they appear rarely if at all in Hellenistic sources, including most Jewish sources composed in Greek. Where some elements appear commonly in Matthew and only rarely in his sources, it is possible that Matthew has exercised the freedom to reuse wording from specific contexts in his tradition in other contexts, a freedom that few of his contemporaries would have begrudged him (rhetorical handbooks even discussed relocating material, and it is doubtful that Jewish rhetoric would have found this any more objectionable).

<sup>103</sup> See *Test. Iss.* 7.2; *Reub.* 4.8; *b. Nid.* 13b, bar.; *Shab.* 64ab; *p. Hallah* 2.1, §10; *Lev. Rab.* 23.12; *Pesiq. Rab.* 24.2; further, Keener, *Matthew*, pp. 186–87. Jesus may read Exod. 20.14 in light of Exod. 20.17.

<sup>104</sup> Many compare the Jewish maxim: ‘By the measure by which a man metes it is measured to him’ (judgment in the present era in *m. Sot.* 1.7; *b. Sot.* 8b; *Pesiq.*

- Removing the beam from one's eye before trying to remove the chip from another's (Mt. 7:3-5//Lk. 6.41-42).<sup>105</sup>
- The phrase, 'to what shall I/we compare?' (Mt. 11.16//Lk. 7.31) was common in Jewish rhetoric, especially to introduce parables.<sup>106</sup>
- The phrase, 'So-and-so is like' (Mt. 11.16; 13.24; 25.1; cf. also Mk 4.26, 31; 13.34; Lk. 6.48-49) is common in Jewish rhetoric.<sup>107</sup>
- Like many of Jesus' parables in the Gospels, early Jewish parables very frequently have interpretations.<sup>108</sup>

*Rab.* 39.2; more fully, Morton Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels to the Gospels* [Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1951], p. 135; Gustaf Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua: Studies in the Gospels* [New York: Macmillan, 1929], p. 225; W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988–1997], I, p. 670; David Bivin, 'A Measure of Humility', *JerPersp* 4 [1991], pp. 13-14). Perhaps only one stream of Jewish tradition applied it to the day of judgment as Jesus does (cf. Hans Peter Rieger, 'Mit welchem Mass ihr messt, wird Ruch gemessen werden', *ZNW* 60 [1969], pp. 174-82).

<sup>105</sup> Possibly a figure of speech; attested in *b. Arakin* 16b; *b. B.B.* 15b (Geza Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993], p. 80; other texts in Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Hoboken, NJ: KTAV; New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'Nai B'Rith, 1987], p. 137), if it is not a polemical distortion of Jesus' teaching.

<sup>106</sup> See *m. Ab.* 3.17; *Suk.* 2.10; *tos. Ber.* 1.11; 6.18; *B.K.* 7.2-4; *Hag.* 2.5; *Sanh.* 1.2; 8.9; *Sipra Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim* 99.2.5; *Behuq.* pq. 2.262.1.9; *Sipre Num.* 84.2.1; 93.1.3; *Sipre Deut.* 1.9.2; 1.10.1; 308.2.1; 308.3.1; 309.1.1; 309.2.1; *Ab. R. Nat.* 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 11, 14, 16, 19, 23, 24, 27, 28, 31A; 2, §10; 4, §14; 8, §24; 9, §24; 12, §29; 13, §§30, 32; 18, §§39-40; 30, §63; 32, §§69, 70B; 35, §77; *b. Sanh.* 107a; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 1.2; 3.8; 14.5; 27.6; *Pesiq. Rab Kah. Sup.* 1.11; 3.2; 7.3; cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (2nd edn; trans. John Marsh; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), p. 179; Robert M. Johnston, 'Parabolic Interpretations Attributed to Tannaim' (PhD dissertation, Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1977), pp. 531, 630.

<sup>107</sup> See *tos. Suk.* 2.6; *Sipra Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim* 99.2.2; *Behuq.* pq.3.263.1.5, 8; *Sipre Num.* 84.1.1; 86.1.1; 89.4.2; *Sipre Deut.* 3.1.1; 11.1.2; 26.3.1; 28.1.1; 29.4.1; 36.4.5; 40.6.1; 43.8.1; 43.16.1; 45.1.2; 48.1.3; 53.1.3; 306.4.1; 306.7.1; 309.5.1; 312.1.1; 313.1.1; 343.1.2; 343.5.2; *p. Taan.* 2:1, §11; *Lev. Rab.* 27.8; cf. Johnston, 'Parabolic Interpretations', p. 531; Vermes, *Religion*, p. 92; Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, p. 179; Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2nd rev. edn; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 101.

<sup>108</sup> See David Stern, *Parables in Midrash: Narrative and Exegesis in Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 24; Johnston, 'Parabolic Interpretations', pp. 561-62, 565-67, 637-38; Vermes, *Religion*, pp. 92-99; earlier, cf.

- The first half of the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ (Mt. 6.9-10//Lk. 11.2) closely echoes the Kaddish (as well as the language of other early Jewish prayers).<sup>109</sup>
- The Pharisees’ divorce question reflects a debate among Pharisaic schools from Jesus’ day (albeit more clearly in Matthew than in Mark).<sup>110</sup>
- ‘Son of Man’ (in all the Gospels) is a specifically Semitic construction<sup>111</sup> (one that makes about as little sense in Greek as it does in English).
- ‘Moving mountains’ (Mk 11.23; Mt. 17.20; 21.21) may have been a Jewish metaphor for accomplishing what was difficult or virtually impossible (though rabbis, who preserve it, apply it especially to labor in Torah).<sup>112</sup>

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Judg. 9.16-20; 2 Sam. 12.7-9. Interpretations also appear with many Greek fables, so this analogy is not uniquely Palestinian Jewish, though Jesus’ story parables have much more in common with rabbinic parables, even in matters of detail (see Johnston, ‘Parabolic Interpretations’, *passim*) than with animal fables.

<sup>109</sup> For the Kaddish, see Joseph Bonsirven, *Palestinian Judaism in the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 133; Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 98; idem, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), p. 21; Moore, *Judaism*, II, p. 213; Smith, *Tannaitic Parallels*, p. 136; Norman Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), pp. 28-29; Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism*, p. 43; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, I, p. 595; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary* (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), p. 371; for the Eighteen Benedictions, see David Bivin, ‘Prayers for Emergencies’, *JerPersp* 5 (1992), pp. 16-17.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. (esp. with reference to Matthew), e.g., Ernst von Dobschütz, ‘Matthew as Rabbi and Catechist (1928)’, in Graham Stanton (ed.), *The Interpretation of Matthew* (2nd edn; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), pp. 27-38 (33); Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), p. 142; John Andrew Overman, *Church and Community in Crisis: The Gospel According to Matthew* (NTIC; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), pp. 82, 279. For the Pharisaic debate, see *m. Git.* 9.10; *Sipre Deut.* 269.1.1. The more liberal interpretation appears in Josephus, *Ant.* 4.253 (relevant for a Hellenistic audience).

<sup>111</sup> With, e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), pp. 260-62 (this is true regardless of the other debates surrounding its meaning).

<sup>112</sup> E.g., *Ab. R. Nat.* 6A; 12, §29B; *b. Ber.* 63b; *Sanh.* 24a. So also D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1977), p. 305; Jeremias, *NT Theology*, p. 161; cf. *Test. Sol.* 23.1, possibly derivative.

- Jewish teachers debated among themselves which commandment was the ‘greatest’ (Mk 12.28; Mt. 22.36).<sup>113</sup>
- Jesus links the two ‘greatest’ commandments on the basis of the common opening word *we’ahavta* (‘You shall love’; Mk 12.30-31; Mt. 22.37-39);<sup>114</sup> this linkage reflects a common Jewish interpretive technique.<sup>115</sup>
- Later Babylonian Jewish teachers, not likely influenced by Jesus, could depict what was impossible or close to impossible as ‘an elephant passing through a needle’s eye’;<sup>116</sup> in Palestine, where the largest animal was a camel,<sup>117</sup> the camel expression used by Jesus seems analogous.<sup>118</sup>
- Current Pharisaic debates about purity with respect to the inside or outside of cups.<sup>119</sup>

Many other sayings also imply a Palestinian setting more relevant to Jesus than to the later church.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, early Christians neglected to create answers in the Jesus tradition for even some of their own most pressing questions: some significant conflicts that early Christians

<sup>113</sup> Later rabbis often discussed the question of the ‘greatest’ commandment; see e.g., Hagner, *Matthew*, p. 646. Akiba valued love of neighbor as the greatest (*Sipra Qed.* pq. 4.200.3.7).

<sup>114</sup> With Walter Diezinger, ‘Zum Liebesgebot Mk xii,28-34 und Parr’, *NovT* 20 (1978), pp. 81-83; David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1988), p. 479.

<sup>115</sup> *Gezerah sheva* (perhaps borrowed from Hellenism, but notably common in Jewish interpretation; e.g., Mek. *Nez.* 10.15-16, 26, 38; 17.17; *Pisha* 5.103; cf. CD 7.15-20; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* [2 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003], pp. 305, 1184, for further sources).

<sup>116</sup> I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels* (2nd ser.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), II, p. 208; Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua*, p. 230; Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 195; Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 166, citing *b. Ber.* 55b; *B.M.* 38b.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. *b. Ket.* 67a.

<sup>118</sup> The expression persists as late as Qur’an 7.40, though this reference (involving eternal life) might evoke the tradition of (or ultimately based on) Jesus’ usage.

<sup>119</sup> Jacob Neusner, “First Cleanse the Inside,” *NTS* 22 (1976), pp. 486-95 (here pp. 492-94); Martin McNamara, *Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament* (GNS, 4; Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), p. 197 (citing *m. Kel.* 25.1-9; *Par.* 12.8; *Tob.* 8.7; see also *m. Ber.* 8.2; the houses material in *b. Shab.* 14b, bar.).

<sup>120</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 25-29.

faced (such as circumcising Gentiles) fail to turn up in the Gospels.<sup>121</sup> Likewise, Mark uses words of Jesus to address the controversy about the purity of foods, yet provides this explicit interpretation only in an editorial aside (Mk 7.19; cf. 1 Cor. 7.10, 12).

### *Miracles*

I must briefly digress to address an objection that one might raise: how can the Gospels be biographies when they include so many miracle stories? While the majority of ancient writers were not shy about supernatural claims, few biographies boast large numbers of healing claims (Suetonius and Tacitus do agree in attributing two to Vespasian).<sup>122</sup> But few biographies had as their subject healers; yet most scholars today accept that Jesus was in fact a healer and exorcist, whatever their explanation for this claim.<sup>123</sup> Even Josephus probably preserves the tradition

<sup>121</sup> Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), p. 105; Stanton, *Gospel Truth*, pp. 60–61; N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1992), p. 421.

<sup>122</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.81 (citing surviving eyewitnesses); Suetonius, *Vesp.* 7.

<sup>123</sup> For summaries of this consensus, see Barry L. Blackburn, ‘The Miracles of Jesus’, in Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans (eds.), *Studying the Historical Jesus: Evaluations of the State of Current Research* (NTTS, 19; Leiden: Brill, 1994), pp. 353–94 (362); Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles* (JSNTSup, 231; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 16–17; John W. Welch, ‘Miracles, *Maleficium*, and *Maestas* in the Trial of Jesus’, in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Jesus and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 349–83 (360); Joel B. Green, ‘Healing’, *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (5 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), II, pp. 755–59 (758); Michael R. Licona and Jan G. Van der Watt, ‘The Adjudication of Miracles: Rethinking the Criteria of Historicity’, *HTS/TS* 65.1 (2009), art. 130: 2; James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 670; Arland J. Hultgren, ‘The Miracle Stories in the Gospels: The Continuing Challenge for Interpreters’, *Word and World* 29.2 (Spring 2009), pp. 129–35 (134–35). For examples, see Otto Betz, *What Do We Know About Jesus?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), pp. 58–60; Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 16; E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), p. 11; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II, pp. 617–45, 678–772; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp. 143–44.

that Jesus performed what many regarded as miracles,<sup>124</sup> suggesting that it was a key element in how people perceived Jesus. A biography of a healer cannot easily evade including healing narratives.

A variety of voices today in the anthropology of religion,<sup>125</sup> sociology of religion,<sup>126</sup> and philosophy of religion<sup>127</sup> have been challenging some

<sup>124</sup> Geza Vermes, 'The Jesus Notice of Josephus Re-Examined', *JJS* 38.1 (Spring 1987), pp. 1-10; idem, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), p. 79; see also Meier, *Marginal Jew*, II, p. 621; Theissen and Merz, *Guide*, p. 74.

<sup>125</sup> E.g., Edith Turner, 'Psychology, Metaphor, or Actuality? A Probe into Inupiat Eskimo Healing', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 3.1-2 (1992), pp. 1-8 (published by the American Anthropological Association); idem, *The Hands Feel It: Healing and Spirit Presence among a Northern Alaskan People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996); idem, *Among the Healers: Stories of Spiritual and Ritual Healing around the World* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), e.g., pp. 26-27, 83-89; David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet (eds.), *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994); cf. Barbara Tedlock, 'From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography', *JAnthRes* 47 (1991), pp. 69-94.

<sup>126</sup> E.g., Candy Gunther Brown, Stephen C. Mory, Rebecca Williams, and Michael J. McClymond, 'Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Proximal Intercessory Prayer (STEPP) on Auditory and Visual Impairments in Rural Mozambique', *SMedJ* 103.9 (Sept. 2010), pp. 864-69; Donald E. Miller and Tetsunao Yamamori, *Global Pentecostalism: The New Face of Christian Social Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Michael Bergunder, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 233; Margaret M. Poloma, *The Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee, 1989), p. 57; cf. Tetsunao Yamamori and Kim-kwong Chan, *Witnesses to Power: Stories of God's Quiet Work in a Changing China* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 2000), pp. 42-48.

<sup>127</sup> E.g., (among many, mostly challenges to Hume), A.E. Taylor, *David Hume and the Miraculous* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927); Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1970); J. Houston, *Reported Miracles; A Critique of Hume* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999); John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000); idem, 'Bayes, Hume, Price, and Miracles', in Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Bayes's Theorem* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), pp. 91-109; George I. Mavrodes, 'David Hume and the Probability of Miracles', *IJPhilRel* 43.3 (1998), pp. 167-82; Francis

traditional modern western approaches to claims about anomalies. Some scholars in various ways (such as John Pilch, Donald Capps, etc.) have begun publicly exploring ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions of Jesus’ healings in ways that press beyond the traditional epistemological consensus, though most often in ways (e.g., psychoimmunology) that do not explicitly require presupposing supernatural activity.<sup>128</sup> Most scholars, however, are more content to simply note that Jesus was known as a healer and exorcist without discussing the question of causation.<sup>129</sup>

What is relevant here is that we do not need to deny the possibility of eyewitness experiences standing behind many of the reports, since we have similar claims for most such experiences today. Anthropologists report claims of religious cures in various religions,<sup>130</sup> and trance

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J. Beckwith, *David Hume’s Argument Against Miracles: A Critical Analysis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989); Robert M. Burns, *The Great Debate on Miracles; from Joseph Glanvill to David Hume* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1981); Robert A. Larmer, *Water into Wine? An Investigation of the Concept of Miracle* (Kingston, Ont., and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988); Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Action; Key Issues in the Contemporary Debate (1965-1995)* (Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia 12; Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1996); Philip Dawid and Donald Gillies, ‘A Bayesian Analysis of Hume’s Argument Concerning Miracles’, *PhilQ* 39 (1989), pp. 57-65; Robert Hambourger, ‘Belief in Miracles and Hume’s Essay’, *Nous* 14 (1980), pp. 587-604. Quentin Smith, “The Metaphilosophy of Naturalism,” *Philo* 4.2 (2001). 195-215, p. 197 (not a theist himself) estimates perhaps 98% of those publishing on philosophy of religion advance theism.

<sup>128</sup> See e.g., John J. Pilch, ‘Insights and Models from Medical Anthropology for Understanding the Healing Activity of the Historical Jesus’, *HTS/TS* 51.2 (1995), pp. 314-37; idem, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); idem, ‘The Holy Man, Enoch, and his Sky Journeys’, in Mihály Hoppál and Zsuzsanna Simonkay (eds.), with Kornélia Buday and Dávid Somfai Kara, *Shamans Unbound* (Bibliotheca Shamanistica, 14; Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2008), pp. 103-11; Donald Capps, *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008); J. Harold Ellens, ‘Biblical Miracles and Psychological Process: Jesus as Psychotherapist’, in Ellens (ed.), *Religious and Spiritual Events*, pp. 1-14.

<sup>129</sup> Scholars can accept Jesus as an exorcist and healer without passing judgment on whether he acted supernaturally (Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], pp. 197-200).

<sup>130</sup> See e.g., Stanley Krippner and Jeanne Achterberg, ‘Anomalous Healing Experiences’, in Etzel Cardeña, Steven Jay Lynn and Stanley Krippner (eds.), *Varieties of*

experiences often indigenously construed as spirit possession appear in a strong majority of the world's cultures.<sup>131</sup> Several New Testament scholars have begun taking into account anthropological parallels with spirit possession beliefs and experiences,<sup>132</sup> and a number of scholars

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*Anomalous Experience: Examining the Scientific Evidence* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), pp. 353-96; Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *In Sorcery's Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 225-29; Laura Scherberger, 'The Janus-Faced Shaman: The Role of Laughter in Sickness and Healing among the Makushi', *Anthropology and Humanism* 30.1 (2005), pp. 55-69 (here pp. 59-64); Larry Peters, *Ecstasy and Healing in Nepal: An Ethnopsychiatric Study of Tamang Shamanism* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1981), pp. 51-53, 61, 63, 65-68; James McClenon and Jennifer Nooney, 'Anomalous Experiences Reported by Field Anthropologists: Evaluating Theories Regarding Religion', *Anthropology of Consciousness* 13.2 (2002), pp. 46-60 (46-48). Cf. further Linda L. Barnes and Susan S. Sered (eds.), *Religion and Healing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For the recognition among biblical scholars, cf. e.g., Eduard Schweizer, *Jesus the Parable of God: What Do We Really Know About Jesus?* (PrTMS, 37; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1994), p. 44.

<sup>131</sup> See e.g., Erika Bourguignon, 'Spirit Possession Belief and Social Structure', in Agehananda Bharati (ed.), *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1976), pp. 17-26 (18); cf. also idem, 'Introduction: A Framework for the Comparative Study of Altered States of Consciousness', in Erika Bourguignon (ed.), *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness, and Social Change* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1973), pp. 3-35 (17-19); idem, 'The Self, the Behavioral Environment, and the Theory of Spirit Possession', in Melford E. Spiro (ed.), *Culture and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier-Macmillan, 1965), pp. 39-60; Janice Boddy, 'Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 23 (1994), pp. 407-34 (409); I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Middlesex, Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), pp. 100-26; Craig S. Keener, 'Spirit Possession as a Cross-Cultural Experience', *BBR* 20.2 (2010), pp. 215-36.

<sup>132</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision (Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship)* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 62; idem, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), pp. 149-50; John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), pp. 315-17; J.A. Loubser, 'Possession and Sacrifice in the NT and African Traditional Religion: The Oral Forms and Conventions behind the Literary Genres', *Neot* 37.2 (2003), pp. 221-45; again, Keener, 'Spirit Possession'.

have offered analogies of shamans for Jesus' or his early followers' healing ministry.<sup>133</sup>

Other scholars offer various analogies to claims in the Gospels.<sup>134</sup> Historian Ramsay MacMullen, for example, compares with early Christianity movements early twentieth-century African prophets like Simon Kimbangu and William Wadé Harris.<sup>135</sup> Historians cannot treat these figures without reporting anomalous claims associated with them. Imperfect as many of these analogies appear (and as analogies nearly always are), they attempt to explore issues with which traditional western approaches have been uncomfortable.<sup>136</sup> In any case, reports of cures and exorcisms in the Gospels need not undermine the status of these works as early biographies containing substantial genuine information about Jesus.

## Conclusion

One way to help control presuppositions is to examine the Gospels as we would contemporary documents, in terms of their genre, their proximity to the events reported, the character of oral tradition in

<sup>133</sup> See e.g., John Ashton, *The Religion of Paul the Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 32–40; Todd Klutz, *The Exorcism Stories in Luke-Acts: A Sociostylistic Reading* (SNTSMS, 129; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 196–97; Pieter F. Craffert, 'Crossan's Historical Jesus as Healer, Exorcist and Miracle Worker', *RebT* 10.3–4 (2003), pp. 243–66.

<sup>134</sup> See e.g., Craig S. Keener, 'Cultural Comparisons for Healing and Exorcism Narratives in Matthew's Gospel', *HTS/TS* 66.1 (2010), Art. #808; Margaret J. Field, 'Spirit Possession in Ghana', in John Beattie and John Middleton (eds.), *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa* (New York: Africana, 1969), pp. 3–13 (10); R.E.K. Mchami, 'Demon Possession and Exorcism in Mark 1:21–28', *AfThJ* 24.1 (2001), pp. 17–37; I treat the question in greater detail in my forthcoming work, which includes the summaries from scores of my interviews with people who claim to be eyewitnesses of what they regard as miracles, especially in the Majority World.

<sup>135</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University, 1984), pp. 7, 23–24. For other analogies, see Eve, *Miracles*, pp. 357–59; Michael J. McClymond, *Familiar Stranger: An Introduction to Jesus of Nazareth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 83.

<sup>136</sup> For comments on this discomfort, see e.g., Ashton, *Religion*, pp. 174–75, 177.

Mediterranean antiquity, and the like. For many singly attested traditions (both in individual Gospels and in antiquity more generally), our most feasible approach for assessing probability rests on these factors.

While scholars will disagree over the status of the Gospels' theological claims, approaching the Gospels as first- and second-generation ancient biographies invites us to explore them for historical information about Jesus with greater confidence than radical critics and greater caution than popular expectations. That the Gospels are recent biographies of a teacher make them more rather than less likely to contain reliable tradition, given what we know of messages being passed on in schools. The authors' theological distinctives do not obliterate a significant degree of shared tradition, tradition we would expect to be substantive within living memory of the eyewitnesses.