The Case of the Gospels:
Memory's Desire and the Limits of Historical Criticism

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> In der Erinnerung wird Vergangenheit rekonstruiert.[1]
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> (J. Assmann 1992:31)

Memory and remembering are presently much in vogue in humanistic and social science discourse. We are experiencing the revival of a topos that played a principal role throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages both in the orally and scribally processed formations of thought. In our time a rapidly growing body of disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies seeks to trace and reconstruct multiple forms and processes of remembering and forgetting, past and present. For example, renewed attention is being paid to ancient and medieval practices of visually processed forms of remembering. Conceivably, insight into a mnemonic craft of thought that stored much that was considered worthy of remembering in iconic style may cast an illuminating light on our present media situation, which—in part at least—is characterized by an extreme inundation of images.

In what has become a classic, Frances Yates (1966) surveyed the ancient and medieval art of mnemotechnique—ranging from memory as a set of waxed tablets to an architectural design functioning as storehouse or inventory—and produced in effect a handbook on ancient Western memorial commonplaces. Yates deserves credit for having raised awareness about the cognitive role of a visually based memory, recognition of which since the eighteenth century had receded into oblivion. Some of her subsequent publications created the unsupportable impression that iconic conventions and techniques of memorization were cultivated in predominantly esoteric circles (1972, 1979, 1982). However, recent contributions by Mary Carruthers (1990, 1998) and Janet Coleman (1992) have expanded the scope of Yates' work and corrected the one-sided hermetic predisposition.

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[1] "In remembering the past we reconstruct it."

Carruthers' *Book of Memory* (1990) may be described as a study of the nature and activities of medieval thought, including practices of composing and reading texts, appropriating pictures, envisioning words and events, "eating" and "digesting" words, and modes of meditation and prayer. She has unfolded a culture extending from late antiquity into the Renaissance in which thought was deeply rooted in the human sensorium of touching, smelling, hearing, and varying forms of visualization. Her work suggests, by implication more than by definitional explicitness, that some of our central Western metaphors did not mean what they have come to mean to us today. Among those concepts we had thought we knew, but which require rethinking in ancient and medieval terms, are text and textuality, author and tradition, reading and writing, and logic and cognition, to name but a few. Most importantly, Carruthers arrives at the conclusion that the culture of late antiquity and the Middle Ages—notwithstanding its steadily increasing manufacture of manuscripts—was predominantly a memorial culture rather than a purely documentary, textual one. Coleman's *Ancient and Medieval Memories* (1992) distinguishes itself by a superior knowledge of ancient philosophy and medieval theology, and by uncommonly subtle representations of philosophical argumentation. Her hugely impressive inventory of ancient and medieval theories of memory, which encompasses almost 2000 years of Western intellectual history, principally makes the argument that the measure of remembering was not historical verification as such, but rhetorical persuasiveness. One was inclined to remember primarily what was deemed worthy of remembering, and what merited remembering depended on the bearing it had for present time and circumstances. Only with the advent of the Enlightenment, she claims, were concerted efforts made to reconstruct the past as past.

Since the 1980s an interdisciplinary group of scholars under the leadership of Jan Assmann (1992) and Aleida Assmann (1999) has produced a steadily growing body of work that carries on the legacy of the pioneering work on memory by Maurice Halbwachs (1925, 1941, 1992, 1997). Memory is here entirely allied with the group and with group identity—a concept that will prove pertinent to the case of the gospels. Once again, the process of remembering does not work purely for the benefit of what is deemed worthy of recollecting; that is to say, it is not primarily fed by needs for preservation of the past in a state of authenticity. Rather, memory selects and modifies subjects and figures of the past in order to make them serviceable to the image the community wishes to cultivate of itself. Socialization and memory mutually condition each other, seeking in the last analysis preservation not of the remembered past but of group identity. The emphasis is decidedly on the sociological dimension of memory.

This concept of cultural memory, which entails the construction of the symbolic and historical stability of group identity, in some ways resembles our current notion of tradition. But the Assmanns and their colleagues shy away from the metaphor of tradition, arguing that it overemphasizes the elements of continuity and evolutionary progression. A vital point that appears to be frequently slighted by the notion of tradition is memory's regressive gesture toward the past. The memory work of the group consists in constructing a new image from elements it retrieves from the past. At the same time, this gesturing toward the past is deliberately oriented toward the present. In using the past selectively, memory retains not the past as such but in a sense creates a new past that speaks to the needs of the present. In sum, memory is conceived less as a storage or archive, and more as a dynamic operation that reappropriates the past in the interest of communal identities. The isolated user who calls up ready-made memories is replaced by the social interaction of a community within which memories are produced. Again, this concept may be relevant for the gospel compositions if, as will be argued, each gospel constructs a new representation of the sacred past in order to meet the demands of a changing present.

The contemporary work on memory can be linked with and greatly enriched by current media studies. I refer to the classic contributions by Albert Bates Lord (1960, 1991), Eric A. Havelock (1963, 1978), Walter J. Ong (1967, 1977, 1982), Jack Goody (1968, 1977), John Miles Foley (1987, 1990, 1991), and many others. Orality is speech that actualizes itself in the act of speaking performances. To be efficacious oral discourse has to make audience adjustments; but faced with the risks of forgetting it also needs to resort to memorable forms and subject matters. Scribality, on the other hand, may dodge immediate responsibilities toward hearers. Due to its temporal and physical distance from audiences, it can disregard the pressures hearers put on speakers and the expectations they bring to oral performance. Owing to this new media constellation, scribality may exercise greater freedom vis-à-vis both audience/readership and tradition. Scribality, being more loosely dependent on audiences than orality, may thus not merely reinforce identities groups hold of themselves but effectively reshape them. In a classic article Ong (1977:53-81) has described this phenomenon as the fictionalizing of the writer's audience. Insofar as writers construct in their imagination a readership cast in certain roles, readers in turn are expected to relive the roles in which they are cast "which seldom coincide[s] with . . . [their] role[s] in the rest of actual life" (61). Likewise, scribality's disengagement from oral tradition may produce precisely the kind of alienation that will prove productive for creative reassessments of tradition in ways primary oral cultures cannot ordinarily tolerate (*ibid*.:17-49).

Scribally effected memory, therefore, may develop new possibilities of reappropriating the past and engender thought in new ways. Especially in times of radical change and disaster, when prevailing paradigms have lost all persuasive powers, the medium of scribality is entirely suitable for undertaking a productive retrieval of the past so as to point a way out of the crisis. The textualization of a tradition is therefore by no means a guarantor of stability and continuity. In the case of the gospels one needs to take into account the medium of scribal technology and the potential it harbors for reshaping tradition. To be sure, scribality, due to its storing function, appears to have solved the problem of forgetting, but its scribally enforced distance from hearers may facilitate innovative thought and in a sense bring about an intensified form of forgetfulness.[2]

In view of the interest presently being devoted to various aspects of memory in the humanistic and social sciences, one cannot escape the impression that *mnemosyne* has been promoted to virtually paradigmatic significance. In its most general sense, the rediscovery of memory induces us to reconsider basic premises of the ancient and medieval manuscript culture. Memory, memorial processes, and their interfacing with social realities, expectations, and identities suggest that extratextual thought processes cannot be excluded from the composition of the gospel manuscripts.[3] Our concept of the scribal culture that produced the gospel texts should not, therefore, be confined to textuality, intertextuality, written sources, and source dependencies without consideration of the memorial operations that are implied in the gospels' diverse reappropriations of the past. It is in this sense that the current work on memory will be integrated into our reflections on the gospel compositions.

Concepts of Tradition

When we turn our attention to New Testament scholarship, we observe that memory and memory studies—with one exception—play an insignificant role in the contemporary scholarly apperception of the canonical gospels. In most quarters of the scholarly guild *mnemosyne* simply is not a relevant issue. I see no, or next to no, serious influence of

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[2] "Das kulturelle Gedächtnis . . . birgt Risiken des Vergessens und Verschwindens, Veraltens und Verstaubens, die der mündlichen Überlieferung fremd sind, und bedeutet eher Bruch als Kontinuität" (J. Assmann 1992:101).

[3] Excluded from consideration are manuscripts that are the result of simple copying techniques and practices.

the memorial work being done in the humanistic and social sciences over the last half-century. Nor have the by now classic studies on orality and textuality produced over the past five decades by Lord, Havelock, Ong, Goody, Foley, and others made any appreciable impact on New Testament studies. Deeply grounded in our humanistic legacy and profoundly insightful about the implications of the communications media, these studies, if applied judiciously and knowledgeably, could prove beneficial for the health of biblical studies.

To the extent that a discourse on memory has taken place at all in New Testament scholarship, it has been decisively shaped by Birger Gerhardsson. His monumental work, aptly entitled *Memory and Manuscript* (1961), will remain an unsurpassed classic of biblical studies in the twentieth century. The book developed a model of early Christian traditioning processes on the analogy of rabbinic Judaism of the Tannaitic and Amoraic period, dated roughly from the catastrophe of 70 CE to the fifth century. In Gerhardsson's view, memorization was practiced both in the Pharisaic, rabbinic school tradition and in early Christianity as a mechanical commitment of materials to memory by way of continual repetition. In the Christian tradition, the carriers were primarily authority figures, with Jesus himself as the inaugurating authority, and the twelve apostles as the first and crucial link in the chain of tradition. Changes that did occur in the traditioning processes were confined to interpretive adaptations. On the whole, tradition was, therefore, characterized by fixity, stability, and continuity, and the primary purpose of transmission was the deliberate act of communicating information for its own sake, without serious regard for matters of interpretation and application. As a result, the tradition never radically altered sayings of and stories about Jesus. Based on the assumed model of Pharisaic, rabbinic transmission techniques, the synoptic materials, cast in memorable modes of communication, were repeated many times over, until they arrived, more or less intact, in the narrative gospels.[4]

It is worth observing that the first and virtually only time in modern biblical scholarship that memory is introduced as a key concept into the study of Christian origins, it is presented as cold memory, highlighting its retentive function and reducing it to strictly preservative purposes. One may ask whether projecting memory as the grand stabilizing agent reflects the

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[4] In subsequent publications Gerhardsson has minimally modified his thesis, making small concessions both to changes in the processes of the tradition and to the gospels' autonomous narrative identities vis-à-vis tradition. By and large, however, he has adhered to the thesis of a virtually unbroken continuity of tradition from Jesus into the gospels.

anxieties of modernity and its historical consciousness that seeks to safeguard the factual reliability of the gospels.

Critics of Gerhardsson's erudite work have frequently observed a precarious backdating of rabbinic pedagogics into the period before the conflagration of the second temple. Undoubtedly, the watershed significance of 70 CE both for Jewish and for Christian hermeneutics is difficult to overrate. Backdating was also the major issue raised by Jacob Neusner (1972) in one of the harshest pieces of criticism directed against memory and manuscript. However, we need to mention here that Neusner has recently "recanted" and in a dramatic gesture of intellectual repentance endorsed the new edition of *Memory and Manuscript* (Gerhardsson 1998). With the greatest respect for Neusner's unparalleled knowledge of rabbinics, I remain unconvinced that memorization—if indeed it was the prevailing method of rabbinic transmission in the first century of the common era—serves as the appropriate mode for early synoptic transmission processes.

While the rabbinic tradition enjoyed a distinct appreciation for the accuracy of the transmission, its written legacy does not entirely support the idea of accuracy as the sole determinant of traditioning. The Mishnah is characterized by a multitude of traditions and a variability of certain themes. To be sure, it does not concede the same interpretive space to each theme and tradition. As a rule, halakig exegesis tends to be more stable than the haggadic one. But the overall impression provided by Mishnaic texts is that single entities of the tradition are revised and provided with glosses, expanded as well as shortened. Is all this the result of the textualization of oral traditions, or do we not gain some insight here into what oral composition in performance might have been like?

That many dominical sayings in the synoptic tradition are mnemonically shaped so as to acoustically effect an oral and, we should add, visual apperception among hearers is self-evident. But we distance ourselves from the assumption that mnemonics *eo ipso* entail memorization. That information is couched in mnemonically usable patterns is a commonplace of ancient and medieval rhetorical conventions. Customarily, mnemonics operate in the interest of assisting memory and of facilitating remembering in the oral processing of knowledge and information. They allow for, indeed thrive on, hermeneutical inventiveness and compositional freedom in performance. Memorization, by contrast, enforces the inculcation of words through ceaseless repetition, and displays little interest in accommodation to social contexts and live audiences. The issue raised by Gerhardsson comes down to the question of whether early Christian memorial culture transpired as passive transmission under the aegis of cold

memory, or as hot memory, propelled by active remembering and socialization.

Perhaps the difficult issue of tradition can be further illuminated from the larger perspective of Jewish-Christian hermeneutics. Both in rabbinics and in Christianity a similar concept emerged that became virtually canonical as far as the comprehension and status of their respective traditions were concerned. In early Christianity the idea emerged that the disciples/apostles had been appointed to be eyewitnesses of Jesus' life, from baptism to resurrection, and were therefore both destined and qualified to function as reliable guarantors of the tradition. In the rabbinic tradition scribal scholars between 80 and 200 CE generated the theory that Moses had transmitted a depository of revelatory words that were meant to supplement the Torah; they were handed down, more or less intact, all the way into the rabbinic present. The rabbinic thesis resembles the Christian postulate, and both originated at a moment in Jewish-Christian post-war history when the two faiths were in dire need of self-legitimation. At this point in history both Judaism and Christianity grew self-conscious about the tradition as tradition by anchoring it in the sacred origin and by further securing it via the thesis of an unbroken continuity. In both instances, tradition, or all subsequent remembrance of tradition, is, so to speak, canonized. In other words, the myth of tradition tells us how tradition as a whole was remembered. It deserves to be appreciated as the core element of the tradition's receptionist history, and must not be used as a starting point, let alone core element, for the reconstruction of the historical processes of the tradition.

More recently, Rainer Riesner has contributed a major work that in many ways is indebted to and carries forward Gerhardsson's pioneering study. In *Jesus als Lehrer* (1984) Riesner, not unlike Gerhardssson, argues that Jesus practiced the method of memorization and systematic repetition to make sure that his hearers preserved his message intact. Moreover, following his teaching activity in Galilee and in view of steadily increasing threats to his life, Jesus, according to Riesner, confined himself to the circle of the twelve and imparted esoteric information to them. This development enabled the circle of the twelve to function as "guarantors of the continuity of tradition."[5] Mnemonically shaped sayings, deliberate teaching

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[5] Riesner 1984:485: "Selbst wenn eine Funktion des Zwölferkreises als Garanten der Traditionskontinuität von Jesus nicht beabsichtigt gewesen sein sollte, so erfüllte die Gruppe doch faktisch diese Aufgabe."

summaries, esoteric teaching, and frequent repetitions created favorable conditions for "a reliable post-Easter transmission of the logia materials."[6]

As far as the esoteric feature is concerned, it needs to be pointed out that Jesus' retreat to the circle of the twelve constitutes a narrative element that is intricately linked with other narrative features and must not, therefore, tempt us to draw far-reaching historical conclusions. Caution is all the more called for since the Nag Hammadi gospels have demonstrated that esoteric teaching can be a genre indicator. This points up a basic problem in the work of Riesner as well as in that of Gerhardsson. They move uncritically from issues of genre and narrative to history, or, to be more precise, they fail to explore sufficiently the genre indicators and narrative dynamics of the gospels. They have not, that is, made the well-known turn to language, rhetoric, and narrative that has distinguished much of the work in the humanities during the last century.

In summarizing the work of Gerhardsson and Riesner with a view toward memory, it is striking that the concept has been reduced strictly to its retentive, reproductive, and preservative function. Tradition functions in what essentially are iterative operations that emanate without noteworthy alterations into the pleroma of the gospel narratives. In other words, memory acts as the stalwart of stability, safeguarding an unchanging tradition and thus guaranteeing the historical reliability of the gospels. For this is what seems to matter most: overcoming historical skepticism.[7] It is possible that the highly restrictive concept of memory made fashionable by Gerhardsson and Riesner has contributed to the repression of a discourse on the broader and more dynamic role of memory in gospel studies. This is regrettable because "memory and manuscript" remain key issues for our understanding of the composition processes leading up to the gospels, and, I should think, of the formation of early Christian texts more widely.

It would seem to be a matter of some importance that neither Gerhardsson nor Riesner has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the gospels' sayings materials, the most valuable piece of evidence available as far as the synoptic tradition is concerned. With regard to our understanding of the nature and operation of the pre-gospel tradition, their work does not move us beyond that of Rudolf Bultmann, whose 1921 publication of *The History of*

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[6] *Ibid*.:430: "Bereits dadurch waren gute Voraussetzungen für eine zuverlässige nachösterliche Tradierung des Logienstoffes geschaffen."

[7] *Ibid*.:502: "Sollte auch der in der vorliegenden Arbeit nur skizzierte nachösterliche Verlauf des Überlieferungsprozesses in den Grundzügen zutreffen, so kann die historische Skepsis der 'klassischen' Formgeschichte überwunden werden."

the Synoptic Tradition had marked an earlier twentieth-century landmark in biblical studies (see Bultmann 1995, Theissen and Vielhauer 1971).

In this classic work, Bultmann examined such excruciatingly difficult issues as the oral tradition assumed to have preceded gospel textuality, that tradition's component particles, the laws of oral transmission, and the relation between tradition and gospel. For the first time in modern biblical scholarship the synoptic sayings and stories were subjected to a thoroughgoing examination. The author's principal argument stated that tradition lay in the background of the written gospels, that it was largely oral in character, and that the gospels were deeply implicated in this oral matrix. In the most general terms, the case he made was based on the observation that many of the individual component parts of the gospel narratives—different types of sayings and miniature stories—carried the hallmarks of oral composition and performance. When isolated from their involvement in the gospel's mega-narrative, these individual units were analyzable, their original form reconstructable, and their performance in particular social settings imaginable. By examining a myriad of data and by recreating the developmental pattern of oral processes, Bultmann sought to write a history of the oral synoptic tradition preceding the narrative gospels. Whatever else his work accomplished, it seemed to have demonstrated that the gospels were the products of a history of the transmission of oral traditions, rather than a direct transcription of the events surrounding Jesus' life and death. The gospels were nourished by, at least partially composed of, and above all intelligible as reservoirs of tradition.

Bultmann's project was informed by a trinity of theoretical principles: the original form of oral units, the dominance of directional growth processes, and the intrinsic causality of the tradition. First, the simplest form of a unit was usually taken to be the original form, constituting a basis for observing secondary developments. Second, the dominant trend, generally, was assumed to have been from purity and simplicity toward complexity, manifesting a quasi-evolutionary ascent of oral tradition culminating in the narrative gospels. Third, as far as the motivating forces of oral transmission were concerned, it was assumed that tradition itself exerted pressures toward ever more comprehensive manifestations. Propelled by their own gravity, the multiple pre-gospel springs, streams, and rivers had little choice but to flow into the reservoir of the gospel narrative.

This model of the tradition's evolutionary ascent from simplicity to complexity, propelled by the law of intrinsic causation, suggests a thought pattern so utterly persuasive to the human imagination, so conveniently logical (not to say intellectually seductive), and so deeply comforting and diagrammatically visualizable that it may seem difficult to imagine any other

mode of tradition. And yet, Bultmann's model is burdened with significant problems stemming from a lack of understanding of orality, gospel narrativity, and, last but not least, memory.

First, there is no such thing as "the original form" in oral speech. When the charismatic speaker pronounced a saying at one place and subsequently chose to deliver it elsewhere, neither he nor his hearers could have understood this other rendition as a secondhand version of the first one. And when the second rendition, delivered before a different audience, was at variance with the first one, neither the speaker nor his audience would have thought of differentiating between the primary, original wording and its secondary, derivative version. Instead, each proclamation was an autonomous speech act. There exists, therefore, in oral speech a multiplicity of original speech acts, or, to use a Heideggerian term, an equiprimordiality[8] of multiple speech acts, which suggests a principle entirely different from and indeed contrary to the notion of the one, original form.

Second, there is no spatial directionality inherent in speech. Words spoken are not spatial phenomena that lend themselves to representation in directional patterns. Speech is bound up with temporality, and therein lies the greatest difficulty we have in imagining it. Not only are spoken words inaccessible to developmental patterns, but they are un-imaginable in any diagrammatic form or fashion. Oral tradition is constituted by discrete acts of speaking, separated by intervals of non-speaking and silence, and partially retained and resignified in memories—altogether not as items that are connectable by sequential tracts. Speech, in other words, does not flow in this or that direction, nor does it by a law of intrinsic oral causality irresistibly build up toward textuality.

Third, it is evident that Bultmann cannot attribute constructive powers and narrative creativity to the final gospel productions. As he views them, they are almost entirely the outworkings of tradition. Mark, generally considered the oldest of the canonical gospels, merely brings to fruition what in the tradition had already been well on the way toward the gospel formation. Because the gospels are considered the expected summations of pre-gospel processes, they offer in principle little new information over and above tradition, and are for this reason unworthy of any attentive narrative consideration.

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[8] Heidegger 1986:131: "Das Phänomen der Gleichursprünglichkeit der konstitutiven Momente ist in der Ontologie oft missachtet worden zufolge einer methodisch ungezügelten Tendenz zur Herkunftsnachweisung von allem und jedem aus einem einfachen 'Urgrund'."

Although Bultmann's concept of the synoptic tradition is utterly different from that developed by Gerhardsson, both are ironically agreed in their depreciation of gospel narrativity. Neither model manages to account for and appreciate the gospels' distinct narrative designs. If for Bultmann the gospels as narratives are uninteresting because they represent the expected outcome of an evolutionary, expanding tradition, for Gerhardsson the gospels lack innovation because the genetic code of their basic structure had been inscribed into tradition at its very inception. And so it happened that each of the two major models that have been developed in the twentieth century about the relation between gospel and oral tradition were incapable of appreciating the literary, poetic autonomy of the synoptic gospels.

Fourth, Bultmann's monumental scholarly contributions, which span New Testament texts and their historical environment, hermeneutics, and theology, display no sustained reflection on memory. The concept is without mention in his scholarly work. This vacuum seems to be related to his inadequate understanding of both orality and gospel textuality. The phenomenon of orality, this irreducibly interlocutionary practice of communication—including aspects such as speech and performance, orally patterned discourse and the interaction of *aides-mémoire* with cognition, the role of audiences, the somatic components of memory, and remembering versus memorization—constitutes a syndrome that did not occupy his scholarly thought. While he was fully aware of the mnemonic functioning of many sayings and stories, he never pursued this basic insight in the direction of what Ong has referred to as "the oral noetic processes" (1982:64), or what we might call an oral hermeneutics. His focus was entirely on determining the original form of a saying or story and its setting in the life of the community, and not on the rhetorical, performative, memorial aspects of speech. As far as the phenomenon of synoptic gospel textuality was concerned, he could not bring himself to acknowledge inventive, productive, memorial activity on the level of narrative construction. The gospel of John was different because it seemed obviously shaped by a particular theological idea. But in the case of the synoptics, tradition was the creative agent and the gospel its natural outcome.

More than half a century after Bultmann's history of the synoptic tradition John D. Crossan published another comprehensive analysis of dominical sayings. As far as taxonomic clarity and classificatory exactitude are concerned, *In Fragments* (1983) by far eclipses the pioneering studies of Bultmann, Gerhardsson, and Riesner. Juxtaposing words and their variant versions in parallel columns, Crossan provides useful insights into the vast and variegated scope of the dominical sayings. However, it needs to be pointed out that *In Fragments* is far from being an exhaustive inventory of

all the available materials. His study, which is limited to Jesus sayings or aphorisms in Mark and Q[9] and their parallels in Matthew and Luke, as well as to some extracanonical sources, comprises altogether 113 items. Three years later Crossan published *Sayings Parallels* (1986), a workbook designed for the study of Jesus' parables, aphorisms, dialogues (discursive interactions with interlocutors), and stories (provided they contain sayings). In addition to the sources previously used, his new work consulted the fourth gospel, all New Testament texts, fragments of apocryphal gospels, the Nag Hammadi texts, the Apostolic Fathers, and the early patristic tradition. The sum total of sayings accounted for in the *Sayings Parallels* is 503, more than four times as many as Crossan had inventoried in *In Fragments*. One needs to get a sense of the vastness of the sayings tradition, all the more so since Gerhardsson and Riesner, who opted for continuity of tradition and cold memory, failed to examine the sayings in detail.

What is striking, apart from the sheer quantity of sayings, is the scope of their variability. There seem to be no real limits to the plural modes of modification, mutation, and interpretation. Abbreviations and expansions, substitutions and transpositions, in short all kinds of changes are observable. Now it is self-evident that these observations are made on the basis of written materials. This is a matter of some import because the thesis advocated by Gerhardsson and Riesner views the gospels as the written repositories of a tradition that was subject to relatively minor changes. Crossan's comprehensive analysis of the dominical sayings does not support this thesis.

From the perspective of media dynamics it is entirely possible that textuality traffics more freely with the sayings than oral tradition. As we observed earlier, scribality's detached status from direct accountability vis-à-vis hearers may engender greater compositional productivity. And yet, one may ask whether the scribally accessible sayings materials should not look different if indeed they were rooted in mnemotechnical procedures that were committed to the principle of verbatim reproduction and retention. Is it in fact imaginable that Jesus expounded his message with rote regularity and pedantic repetitiveness, and without any regard for the diversity of audiences and circumstances? If that were the case he would have operated in violation of one of the basic principles of ancient rhetoric, namely that the relationship of speaker and hearers inevitably influences what is said and how it is said. Is it possible, historically and theologically, to think of Jesus'

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[9] The symbol Q stands for a hypothetically reconstructed source (or gospel) of sayings (or discourses) that may have been used by Matthew and Luke in the composition of their respective gospels.

personal proclamation as having reached his hearers in a state of timeless neutrality and removed from direct existential engagement? Undoubtedly, remembering was a crucial concern for speaker and hearers alike, but the culture of remembering is entirely compatible with active memorial composition and appropriation, and does not as a rule imply rote memorization.

The Eclipse of Gospel Narrativity

As we turn from tradition to gospel composition we remember that Bultmann, Gerhardsson, and Riesner had made little allowance for the compositional integrity of the gospel narratives. This exposes a malaise in biblical studies that points to yet another repression of the dynamic role of memory.

Long before Bultmann, Gerhardsson, and Riesner, the gospels as narratives have been the cause of great difficulties for interpreters. While narrative has proven to be fertile ground for theoretical issues such as fictionalizing versus factuality, revealing versus concealing, content versus form, foundationalism versus revisionism, story versus discourse, myth versus history, and so forth, the immanent world of the gospels has—until recently—remained strangely inaccessible. Despite intense scholarly attention to the gospels, the history of gospel scholarship over the last 250 years could be negatively judged as an escape from narrativity.

In a noted book entitled *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974), Hans Frei has documented with painstaking precision the inability of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biblical scholarship to capture the narrative shape and logic of the gospels. This loss of narrative comprehension, the so-called eclipse, occurred because priority was given not to narrative itself, but to what narrative was assumed to be referencing.

Whether biblical narrative was considered to have been constructed on the logic of history, in which case narrative significance was equated with external events, or whether it was seen to be encapsulated in ideas and ethical counsel, meaning was in each case held to be separable from the narrative plot. In one instance, narrative pointed to what was assumed to matter above all else, namely the history of the narrative's subject matter, while in the other case narrative was understood to refer to what was theologically superior, namely ideas. In each instance, what was assumed to be the essential core was extrapolated from what was downgraded to an inessential frame, and the result was a loss of narrative reading. One failed to grasp the narrative realism and to take narrative seriously not merely as a

clue to historical and ideational references, but as a literary entity in its own right.

Frei chose to interpret historical and ideational referentiality with a very broad compass. In principle, any reading of narrative that prioritized a narrative-neutral world above, beneath, or in front of the biblical narrative was suspect, whether that world was constituted by "historical events, the general consciousness or form of life of an era, a system of ideas, the author's intention, the inward moral experience of individuals, the structure of human existence, or some combination of them" (1974:278). What he objected to was a reading that subordinated the narrative configuration to its assumed subject matter—whatever that may be.

In bemoaning the loss of narrative reading and in invoking the ideal of the narratological *sensus literalis* of the gospels, Frei appeared to champion what in the Anglo-American literary world came to be called the New Criticism, a rigorous type of formalist aesthetics that insisted on the autonomous, internally unified organism of the text as the bearer of meaning. Notably, however, Frei's professed intellectual sympathies did not lie with Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, W.K. Wimsatt, and other representative advocates and practitioners of the New Criticism, but rather with Derridean deconstructionism. At least as he came to view his eclipse of biblical narrative ex post facto, it appeared that he intended to expose what in postmodern terminology would be called the logocentric passion of biblical studies. Logocentrism, this deep-rooted desire to attribute transcendental significance to the referents of language, be they historical or ideational, was at fault for distracting attention away from the narrative signifiers toward assumed signifieds, the alleged carriers of full presence. Because Derridean deconstructionism had refocused attention to the internal play of signifiers, and was therefore treating narrative with greater respect than either historical or phenomenological hermeneutics, Frei, when pushed for his own intellectual identity, would be inclined to side with Derrida: "It is this displacement or divestment of a signified world into the intertextuality of an indefinite sequence of signifiers—a focal insistence of the Deconstructionists—that is so apt in their critique of phenomenological hermeneutics" (1986:56). Frei's project concerning the rehabilitation of narrative was not, therefore, an outgrowth of the New Criticism and its often observed resemblance to classical Christian theology, which, it is said, endowed the sacred text with the stature of a complete and authoritative presence of meaning, embodying a literary correspondence to the dogma of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, incarnated as divine Word. Rather, what Frei was up against was the eclipse of biblical narrative that, he seemed to suggest, was effected by a logocentric thirst for ideational purity or factual

correctness, a striving after underived origin, which in its desire to abstract ideas or historicity from the assumed narrative frame was compelled to view a strictly narrative reading of the gospels as superficial or simply wrongheaded.

It may be said, therefore, that Frei's intellectual endeavor, which documented the history and rationality of the eclipse of biblical narrative more than it illuminated the nature of narrative itself, exposed, willingly or unwillingly, a theological complicity with the eclipse of biblical narrative. Theological rationalists and superrationalists alike aspired to divest the text of its narrative "framework" in order to retrieve its quintessential reality. All tended to view form as an impediment to epiphany.

Even though Frei did not, as far as I can see, lean on classical antiquity or medieval hermeneutics and their considered treatment of the linguistic sign (Manetti 1993; Eco and Marmo 1989), it may be claimed that his study exposed the implications of the signs' character of language as the underlying linguistic, philosophical, and theological crux with regard to the interpretation of biblical narrative. Exemplarily formulated by Augustine, the theory states that all words, written and spoken, refer to or signify corresponding realities; words "merely intimate that we should look for realities; they do not present them to us for our knowledge."[10] Deeply entrenched in the ancient linguistic method of knowing, the Augustinian signs theory had it within its powers to induce readers and interpreters of the gospels to focus less on narratives themselves and more on what they were assumed to be referring to. Conceivably, Frei's project to deconstruct referentiality shows a closer affinity to Derrida's relentlessly elaborate deconstruction of his beloved North African compatriot's signs theory than to the Christian romanticism of the New Critics.

We have seen that the eclipse of biblical narrative, which Frei had documented through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, extended deeply into the twentieth century. Whether one approached the gospels from the perspective of form criticism[11] (Bultmann), or from a view opposing form criticism (Gerhardsson), or with an interest in and equipped with the tools of historical criticism (Riesner), understanding of the interior consistency of narrative reality was almost always lacking. It appeared to be

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[10] *De Magistro* 11.36.1-3: hactaenus verba valerunt, quibus ut plurimum tribuam, admonent tantum, ut quaeramus res, non exhibent, ut norimus.

[11] The objective of form criticism is to isolate what presumably were orally operating sayings and stories from their gospel contexts, to locate their function in early Christian communal settings, and to reconstruct a history of the transmission of oral traditions.

exceedingly difficult to come to terms with the notion that the gospels' narrative emplotments did not merely illustrate or point to meaning but constituted meaning in their entirety. The eclipse of biblical, and especially gospel, narrative was regularly accompanied by a loss of memorial sensibilities. For if one views the gospels primarily as an outgrowth of tradition, or as carrier of history, and if one focuses meaning on underlying ideas or history, one will never come to appreciate the gospels' literarily plotted configurations, which are to a considerable extent, as we shall see, the result of socially engaged and productive memorial activities.

The Typographic Captivity

There is every indication that the eclipse of gospel narrative and its accompanying loss of memorial sensibilities had become institutionalized in biblical studies. While it is true, as we shall see below, that greater appreciation for the narrative nature of the gospels has recently been developed in gospel studies, the discipline remains beholden to basic heuristic tools and models without which we cannot imagine the scholarly work of gospel studies, and which are profoundly insensitive to memory as a productive arbiter in the composition of the gospel narratives.

For the most part biblical studies are being conducted as a fiercely text-centered discipline. This is a commonplace given the fact that the Bible, including its compositional and receptionist histories, is constituted as a textual enterprise of staggering proportions. But as far as the very concept of text is concerned, we are laboring under a cultural discrepancy that separates the ancient media world from modernity's communications culture. On the one hand, biblical texts without exception came into existence as chirographically produced papyri, scrolls, and codices. Modern biblical scholarship, on the other hand, is a child of the typographic age. The typographic technology deeply affected both interpretations of and attitudes toward the Bible. On the one hand, the print Bible, the first major mechanically standardized book of early modernity, helped pave the way for humanistic and ultimately historical-critical scholarship and its fixation on original intent and individualized authorship. On the other hand, the printed text's systematic orderliness, which "effectively reified the word" (Ong 1982:119), pointed toward categorical literalism, culminating in Protestant fundamentalism—a modern, not an ancient or medieval phenomenon (Kelber 1999). Modern biblical studies largely learned its basic trade on the technologically transformed print Bible. As a consequence, a typographic consciousness has deeply penetrated biblical studies, and an ingrained print

mentality has shaped basic assumptions, methods, and even theories—a development that has proven hostile toward gospel narrativity and memorial practices.

The so-called Two-Source Hypothesis can conveniently be used to demonstrate the point. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, this hypothesis has become a fundamental explanatory model in gospel scholarship. It is widely, although not universally, accepted as the most plausible theory that accounts for the interrelationship among the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Because these three synoptic gospels are remarkably similar, to the point of exhibiting verbatim versions, but also remarkably different as far as the existent wording, themes, and arrangements are concerned, scholars have assumed some kind of interrelationship among the three. What in scholarship is known as the Synoptic Problem concerns issues such as the compositional priority of one of the synoptics, and the literary interrelationship among all three. It is one of those problems in the humanities that appears ever more puzzling and virtually irresolvable the more deeply one looks into the textual evidence. The Two-Source Hypothesis argues that Matthew and Luke independently used Mark as their basic narrative source, to which they added teaching materials drawn from a second, hypothetically reconstructed document known as Q, which consisted largely of Jesus sayings.

It would be difficult to consult an introduction to the New Testament that does not display the theory in diagrammatic fashion, displaying the view that Matthew and Luke each used two sources, Mark and Q, in the composition of their respective gospels. To account for Matthean and Lukan materials not covered by Mark and Q, one often resorts to additional sources labeled SM and SL respectively, thus in effect postulating a Four-Source Hypothesis. The assumed connections between gospels and other gospels or literary sources are represented in straight lines, displaying an unwavering directionality and finality. In their full implementation these diagrammatic models attribute the texts of Matthew and Luke in their entirety to literary sources, thereby conveying the impression that the composers of these gospel texts are intelligible largely as ingenious jugglers of sources, and that their compositions result from the combination of other texts. There is no room in this model for orality, for memorial processes, for social engagement, for mental compositional activities, and for extratextual sensibilities of any kind.

The problematic nature of this model has not escaped the attention of some observers. Willi Marxsen, who took the lead in the modern rediscovery of the gospels' narrative emplotment, articulated an entirely appropriate criticism vis-à-vis the Two-Source Hypothesis (1968:116):

> We also need to note that the Two-Source theory looks at the connections between Mk. and the other Synoptics merely from the angle of literary dependence. But we now know that in their writing Matthew and Luke were influenced by definite theological concepts, which often resulted in a very independent treatment of their models.

While it is widely conceded that Matthew and Luke use their sources flexibly, even creatively, the explanatory model for Matthean and Lukan compositions nonetheless relies exclusively on literary sources. One would never guess, from pondering these diagrams, that Matthew and Luke represent autosemantic narrative constructions whose inventive center of composition lies outside their respective literary sources. But when we claim here that the explanatory model of the Two-Source Hypothesis does not take Matthew's and Luke's active treatment of their sources into account, are we not then conceding that it fails to represent crucial compositional activities, and hence is inadequate at best and seriously misleading at most?

The second example concerns the so-called gospel parallels, a universally popular teaching and research tool that lines up the synoptic gospels (and John) in parallel fashion, allowing students to undertake critically comparative studies. Few paradigms have more deeply impacted our habits of thought than this systematic organization of gospel texts into parallel columns. In laying out the gospels into tidy columns one next to the other, study habits that nurture a growing conviction that a gospel text is comprehensible largely or exclusively in relation to other gospel texts have been internalized, and a mental image of a closed textual system of gospel relations has been canonized. Texts are made to operate in a textual universe, deriving from and feeding into new texts, hence finding their raison d'être in an exclusively textual universe. So deeply engrafted in our mindset is this model that we need reminding of the artificiality of this arrangement, which is designed to feed our analytical needs but in no way corresponds to the oral and chirographic dynamics of the ancient marketplace of communications. But if absolutely basic research models and teaching tools are as seriously flawed as we claim they are, what does that mean for gospel scholarship and its results?

In further exemplifying the consequential typographic bias, I shall briefly digress into a different medium. I will reflect on an oil painting, produced by a Valentin de Boulogne and dated around 1600. The painting

represents the apostle Paul and is entitled "Saint Paul Writing his Epistles."[12] The apostle is sitting at a desk, dipping his quill into an inkwell. He is surrounded by books, manuscripts, and a notebook, all of which he appears to consult in composing his letter. Produced approximately 150 years after the invention of printing and the publication of the Gutenberg Bible, the painting's dominant impression is one of the omnipresence of texts. At a time when the duplicating effects of the print medium had dramatically increased the availability of texts, it seemed entirely unimaginable that Paul could have composed his letters without ample recourse to texts.

The only concession to ancient scribality is a scroll in the right corner of the table. But the overwhelming impression the painting conveys is that of Paul as textual scholar, who reads, compares, and reflects on different texts—one of them being a printed text (presumably the Hebrew Bible)—in order to compose his own text. This is how the typographic imagination of the late sixteenth century, a thoroughly literary, text-centered imagination, conceived of the composition of the Pauline letters: texts, even letters, grow out of other texts.

Under the impact of this artistic imagination it requires a strenuous act of historical imagination to recall that the Paul of the first century did not write but dictated his letters, that all his writings, including the most intricate theological arguments in Galatians and Romans, were mentally composed, and that large segments of his arguments are structured according to the conventions of Jewish-Hellenistic rhetoric. The painting has succeeded in displacing Paul's oral, rhetorical, scribal culture with the exclusively literary, textual, typographical culture of the sixteenth to seventeenth century, and it did so around the same time that rhetoric was eliminated from the curriculum of most European universities.

We may look upon this painting as a metaphor for the kind of cultural displacement I see happening in biblical studies, and also, I should like to add, in parts of classical and medieval studies. The two explanatory and research models I have submitted for discussion exhibit not simply the issue of intertextuality (Clayton and Rothstein 1991; Buchanan 1994; Genette 1982; Culler 1975)—a commonplace in literary criticism that expresses awareness of the fact that texts cannot be created simply out of lived experience.   The crux of these models is that they represent diagrammatically constructed closed worlds, systems within which every item of the tradition has been assigned its due place. This is no longer ancient or medieval intertextuality, which always recognized interfaces and

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[12] I could easily have selected one of many stylized pictures of an evangelist as writer, but the Pauline example seemed to me even more persuasive.

permeable boundaries, but modernity's print mentality with a vengeance, a mentality that locks all items into typographic space, relentlessly strives after finality, totality even, and seems oblivious to worlds outside its boundaries. Together these two models confine the gospels and their sources to a tightly configured textual space that leaves little room for particular narrative formations and no room for memorial activity.

The Poetics of Gospel Narrativity

It was only during the last four decades that some biblical scholars began to approach the gospels with the kind of literary-narratological singlemindedness that Hans Frei had envisioned (Wilder 1964; Petersen 1978; Rhoads 1982; Rhoads and Michie 1982; Poland 1985; Moore 1989; Fowler 1991). The most significant outcome of these efforts has been the recovery of separate Markan, Matthean, Lukan, and Johannine literary identities. At this point, the literary exploration has progressed far enough that we can speak of the narrative poetics of a Mark, Matthew, Luke, or John. It is now clearly demonstrable that distinctive narrative points of view are mediated by thematic, rhetorical, and literary devices such as the particular arrangements of episodes, distinct plot causalities, the casting and typecasting of characters, framing devices of various kinds, ring compositions and intercalations, strategies of misunderstanding and role reversals, multiple forms of redundancies, pointedly executed polemics, topological-geographical configurations, and so forth. Many, although by no means all, aspects of the gospels show evidence of intended selectivity, valuation, and composition. It is, therefore, increasingly apparent that each gospel is the result of a deliberate compositional volition and a distinctly focused rhetorical outreach. In other words, a growing number of biblical scholars have come to the realization that each canonical gospel is composed with an individual literary integrity.

Once we are cognizant of the plotted nature of the gospels, we can no longer attribute the sole motivating agency for the gospel narratives to the forces of tradition. Bultmann's assumption that the gospels in their entirety are the outworking of tradition has now become untenable.[13] Indeed, once

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[13] Bultmann's basic assumptions about the gospels have been continued in our generation by Helmut Koester. For him Mark "was more of a collector than an author" (1990:286) or, as he put it elsewhere, Mark was "primarily a faithful collector" (289). He appears to have overlooked at least four decades of fruitful work on the narrative nature of Mark.

we make allowance for the gospels' narrative intentionality, e.g., their ability to score dramatic points, to channel discernible values, and to dramatize corrective views, the paradigm of source theories as the basic rationale for gospel compositions loses a good deal of its explanatory value. This is not, of course, to deny the shaping influence of pre-gospel traditions, including so-called sources. But the weight of tradition notwithstanding, in the last analysis it is the final compositional volition that shaped tradition, and not vice versa.

Nor will recognition of the plotted nature of the gospels henceforth permit us to honor the prevalent convention of privileging ideas over their narrative elaboration, and of separating content from form. Because in narrative meaning is constituted by narrative, a conscientious narrative appreciation will refrain from abstracting theological ideas from their narrative enlistment. For example, as far as the gospels are concerned, there is, strictly speaking, no so-called christology apart from narrative, because the protagonist comes to life, acquires identity, pursues his focused career, and submits to execution within the coordinates of a narrative world, which is composed of the interfacing of all the words and incidents that make up the narrative.

This is not to say that the gospels are fully plotted narratives in the sense of a detective story in which every single detail turns out to be crucial. Story has a history, and the gospel narratives are in large part episodic with many elements not fully under authorial control. Nor do we endorse a narrative poetics that is synonymous with full narrative closure. Undeniably, the gospels are compositions with deep diachronic roots in oral and written traditions. From the perspective of both production and of consumption, they open out to realities outside their narrative boundaries. They are, we shall see, informed by issues that are current in their respective communal settings and therefore deliberately audience-oriented. The point, however, is that there are overarching thematic plot constructions that have a way of subsuming the episodes into a semblance of narrative unity.

By way of example, let us see what a narrative interpretation of the classic theological concept of eschatology may look like. To begin with, one may view narrative as the genre that is exceptionally fitted to mediate the human experience of temporality and to constitute time-consciousness (Ricoeur 1984-88). The gospels, like all narratives, explore miscellaneous potentials for configuring temporality and indulge in fictional experiments with time. Instead of extrapolating the theological idea of eschatology from its narrative implications, we will trace temporality through its narrative engagement.

What is immediately evident in reading the gospels is an unequal distribution of time. The narrator controls the tempo of time, speeding up the story of the protagonist's life through a rapid succession of episodes quickened by the staccato rhythm of strong, swift temporal beats, and slowing time down in the death story, whose narrative length seems out of proportion to the narrated few days. The effect of the decelerating narrative tempo is an intensification of the solemnity of the last days.[14]

As far as the narration of eschatology is concerned, the apocalyptic speech of Mark 13 offers insight into a dramatic reinvention of time. Notably, the speech "disrupts" the narrative sequence precisely at the neuralgic point that gave rise to the aporia of time, namely the destruction of the sacred center. Strategically placed at the peak of an elaborate anti-temple narrative build-up that culminates in the protagonist's prediction of the destruction of the temple, the discourse is constructed to respond to the temple disaster and the crisis it has engendered. It deviates from the story line of Jesus' life because the severity of the crisis calls for novel temporal modalities that appear not fully explicable via the narrative mechanism that mediates the protagonist's own time.

Rupturing the narrative mediation of the protagonist's life, the speech conjures the specter of wars and rumors of wars, of conflict among political kingdoms, of earthquakes, famines, and persecution. Here the protagonist's voice more emphatically than in other discourses is the narrator's, speaking above the heads of the listening disciples and addressing the readers of the gospel (13:14: "Let the reader understand"). The central event around which the speech is constructed is signified as "the desolating sacrilege" (13:14), a metaphor that summons the reader to search for clues in the informing context of Daniel. Yet physical destruction is not what is said to account for the extremity of the crisis and the depth of grief. The crux of tribulation is that it disconfirms a time that had been pregnant with signs and omens, and crowded with prophets and Christs. Saturated with promises and full of expectations, it was perceived to be eschatological prime time, messianic time, the *kairos*. But contrary to dreams and expectations, all signs of full time were consumed in the conflagration of war and in the horrors of flight, in killings and homelessness. And so, full time is shown to have been lost time, not simply in the sense of having been a time of destruction, or time deleted and abolished, or simply time past, but in the sense of having been a

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[14] A narrative assessment of the passion narrative will, therefore, conclude that the obvious discrepancy that exists between the episodic life story of Jesus and the more coherently flowing story of his death may be due to a narrative rationale more than to sources. See Kelber 1976.

time misunderstood and misconstrued. Deconstructing full time, the speech also denounces the presumptions of the present, and discredits all claims to a metaphysics of present, viewing the presence as a blessing in disguise at best and time of absence at worst. Extricating *kairos* from the ruins of a misconstrued history, full time, if it is to be had at all, is projected into the future. Time lost is the thing to be gained. In an almost Proustian sense, redemption is the regaining of lost time.

The readers of Mark's gospel are advised to integrate this specific temporal reconceptualization with the gospel's fuller narrative mediation of time, and to synchronize all narrative configurations of time with their own time. In particular, they need to connect the crisis of time and its narrated resolution in Mark 13 with Jesus' announcement of the *kairos* and the speech's anticipation of full time in the future (13:24-26). This comprehensive synchronization of the narrative's temporal emplotment, including the aporia of time, with the readers' time would appear to position both the crisis of time and the readers' time in an interim period framed by the fullness of the *kairos* in Jesus' past and the future coming of the Son of Man. This is what a reading of the gospel that has undertaken the shift from the classic theological concept of eschatology to an informed appreciation of the narrative construction of temporality may look like.

Memorial Arbitration

To grasp the full implications of the poetics of gospel narrativity, we need to recognize that all four narratives take up and address topics that are live issues in tradition and/or in their respective communal settings. For example, Mark unambiguously endorses the tradition concerning Jesus' resurrection, yet chooses to withhold a resurrection appearance story both from the disciples in the narrative and from the readers of the narrative (16:1-8). He is clearly aware of the traditional theme of Jesus' resurrection appearance legitimating apostolic authority, but he chooses to dissociate himself (and his readers) from it. This is an example illustrating that narrative's deep engagement with and deconstructive attitude toward tradition. Luke is known for his inclination to further enhance pro-Roman proclivities that are already in evidence in Mark. For example, three times the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate announces Jesus' innocence (Lk 23:4, 14, 22). Clearly, the narrative shows keen awareness of and strives to negotiate a rapprochement with the political realities of the Roman Empire. The gospel of John dramatizes a rivalry between Peter and the Beloved Disciple, the latter, carrying the unqualified blessing of the narrator, ever so

often surpassing Peter. It suggests a prior and informed knowledge of a Petrine type of tradition that, from the narrator's viewpoint, is in tension with his own religious and communal identity, represented by the Beloved Disciples. Matthew, finally, to cite one of the more notorious examples, wages an unmitigated polemic against the Pharisees. This—by far the most Jewish gospel, counseling not merely Torah observance but Torah radicalization à la Qumran—is also the one gospel that makes anti-Pharisaism a deliberate narrative theme. There is a broad-based scholarly consensus that Matthew's narrative mirrors the post-70 CE conflict between a Pharisaic, rabbinic type of Judaism and Matthew's dissident, messianic Judaism. The debate between these two representatives of Judaism will have reached a new level of intensity in the aftermath of the colossal catastrophe of the temple's conflagration. This event forced a debate both in Judaism and among the followers of Jesus with a view toward the future of post-70 CE Judaism. In this context, the gospel's vituperative language is designed to delegitimate a Pharisaically guided Judaism, and to carve out and sanction the social and religious identity of Matthew's messianic Judaism. Within a short time, Matthew lost the battle for Judaism. These examples, which can easily be multiplied, demonstrate the gospels' agility in critically and creatively molding their narratives as they appropriate and respond to issues that are live concerns both in their respective communal settings and in the larger Greco-Roman-Jewish historical environment.

From this particular insight into gospel narration, let us now probe the issues of gospel versus tradition, gospel composition, gospel interrelationships, and stable versus dynamic memorial processes—all issues that are at the heart of this essay. Once we have taken full cognizance of the compositional artistry and respective narrative autonomy of each canonical gospel, we are bound to acknowledge that gospel parallels and source diagrams are at best formalistic propositions that beg, indeed cover up, vital questions about the nature of the gospels.

When we consider, first, that there is a deliberate and creative imagination at work in the formation of the gospels that gives them distinct narrative profiles; and when, second, we observe the gospels' plural implications in traditions both past and present, and in voices and themes that far exceed one or two identifiable literary sources; and when, third, we pay particular attention to the gospels' polemical postures, which are as a rule ad hoc constructions more than products of simple word-by-word rewritings of sources, must we not inevitably come to the conclusion that there cannot be a single unified field theory capable of explaining gospel compositions and gospel relations entirely in terms of literary relations, literary dependencies, and copying processes? Must we not think

then—quite apart from, or in addition to, or perhaps over and above literary sources—of a cultural matrix other than literary sources, of, for example, a memorial arbitration that retrieved and reproduced, selected and adapted tradition with a view toward one's own present?

With this question we return to our introductory review of current studies on memory and imagination ranging from Carruthers and Coleman all the way to Halbwachs and the Assmanns. While the modern scholar is brought up on the inviolate authority of texts and their relation to other texts, many ancient and medieval writers were more interested in the dynamics of reception and internalization. Both processes of composition and reading aloud were frequently described through metaphors of digestive activity (Carruthers 1990:164-69,192-94). Memory *inter alia* served the purpose of producing texts by way of composition, and of making it one's own by way of consumption. One of memory's deepest mysteries was its unfathomably immense capacity for storage. In the tenth book of his *Confessions* Augustine offers a sustained meditation on memory, going into rapture over this "large and boundless chamber," replete with "numberless secret and inexpressible windings," "the plains and caves and caverns, innumerable and innumerably full of innumerable kinds of things."[15] But when Augustine and the ancients praised memory, they were thinking not solely of the memorial powers of retrieval, memory's retentive, preservative, and iterative faculties. The proof of a superior memory lay also in its ability to mentally collect and store the items, to scan all stored materials, to call them up in their mental locations, to move them about and to reshuffle them. In the technical nomenclature of rhetoric, mnemonic storage existed in the interest of *inventio*, namely, the collecting and arranging of materials for the purpose of composing both speeches and texts.

To think of the gospels as ultimately works of productive memorial processes is to cultivate extratextual sensitivities, and to think of a cultural tissue at once more copious and more elusive than our linear perception of literary sources will allow. Consideration of the inventive role of memory suggests a judicious plugging into the web of cultural memory, retaining, collating, and adapting traditional items, reclaiming and citing some, responding critically and even deconstructively to others, while recontextualizing many so as to make them serviceable to the present. Last but not least, the model of productive memory also assigns forgetfulness its appropriate place. For forgetfulness, far from being an insignificant

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[15] *Confessiones* 10.8.15: penetrale amplum et infinitum; 10.8.13: qui secreti atque ineffabiles sinus eius; 10.17.26: campis et antris at cavernis innumerabilibus atque innumerabiliter plenis innumerabilium rerum.

appendix to tradition, is an essential correlate of remembering. In bringing the gospel narrative to present remembrance, its compositional processes are bound to function selectively, consigning to oblivion some memories while foregrounding others.

The deepest impulse driving the memorial composition of the gospels is the retrieval of the past for the benefit of the present. Transmission for the sake of preservation is not the only, or even most important, function of memory. Rather than aspiring to preserve the precious past as past, the cultural memory that we see operating in the formation of the gospels proceeds from the perspectives of the present because it seeks to legitimate the past as present. By drawing on the past from the perspective of the present, one retains not the past itself, but a recreated new past that accomodates present circumstances. In the words of Jan Assmann that serve as the epigraph to this piece: "In der Erinnerung wird Vergangenheit rekonstruiert."

This is why the gospel narratives as cultural memories always reflect the condition of their production. Selection, organization, and composition of materials are informed not predominantly by responsibility vis-à-vis the past, but more by ethical, communicative, and rhetorical accountability toward the present. And if this seems an exaggerated view, let us modify the wording by claiming that the gospels as memorial compositions seek to maintain an impossibly precarious balance between a simultaneous responsibility toward the past and toward the present, with a view as well toward the future. But what matters most in the literary-memorial composition of the gospels, I would insist, is not the preservation of tradition per se, but rather the maintenance of tradition for the purpose of shaping and preserving group identity.

Significantly impacted by the disaster of 70 CE, the gospel narrators regressed into tradition's sacred past. They remembered the beginnings of the renewal movement, focusing on the life and death of the unforgettable charismatic, and they did so in narrative form that accounted for and provided guidance under new and difficult circumstances. Viewed from this perspective, the gospels are neither the products of stable mnemonics, nor the result of strictly intra-gospel scribality, but symptoms of the selective functioning of scribal and memorial processes.

Epilogue: The Dilemma of Memory and Manuscript

In the thousands of pages I have read on the so-called Synoptic Problem, rarely ever is the issue of the materiality of communication taken

into account. It is simply taken for granted that the issue is a literary one that is susceptible to an exclusively literary solution. And yet no theory of the gospels' literary nature and composition will ever be valid unless it is imaginable in terms of ancient media realities that are by no means exhausted in literary terms. How can one imagine—technically, scribally, orally, memorially, compositionally—a scribal authority plugging into multiple social, ideational, and historical matrices, while at the same time engaging in near-verbatim copying of some texts (in the case of Matthew and Luke at least), while all the while engaging in a fairly focused compositional activity?

Technically, the production of many ancient and medieval manuscripts was the result of a division of labor. Often a scribal expert in charge of the chirographic production wrote from dictation. He had little or no authority over the formulation of the text. That was the business of the dictator. Since simple scribal copying will fall short of an explanation for the gospel compositions, may we conceive of a process of mental composition, and of the dictator as the intellectual, imaginative locus from which the gospels unfolded? In other words, can one imagine the dictator mentally in control of texts to the point of verbatim remembering, and versed as well in multiple traditions, themes, and social networkings, and also able to reshape written and unwritten traditions with a view toward both the present and the future? Or should one think of a process of composition in the process of writing, and view both the scribe and scribality as the locus of inventive production? Here we have reached the limits of how we can presently envision the nature and composition of the gospels. But this much does seem clear to me: memory and manuscript are the twin categories that are critical for our understanding of the gospels and their narrative compositions. Deeper knowledge of the dynamic interfacing of memory and manuscript would bring us closer to finding a resolution to the intricate issues that lie at the heart of the Synoptic Problem.

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