

MEMORY, JESUS, AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

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By

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Society of Biblical Literature
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PREFACE

While working on aspects of orality and the Synoptic Problem in 1998, it occurred to me that I should extend my reading to incorporate memory studies as they were found in the discipline of psychology. That impulse was the beginning of an intriguing and at times challenging exploration, and now, more than a decade later, this book is the eventual product. The topic of human memory and its characteristics dominates most of its pages, and although I have written on the Synoptic Problem elsewhere, in this manuscript the topic has shrunk to near invisibility. The intellectual journey that has led to this new perspective has been one of fascination and excitement, some of which I hope has remained visible, despite the constraints of formal academic writing.

Along the way a large number of individuals and institutions have been very generous with their help. I would like to express my warm thanks to the following institutions: my employing body, Avondale College and the South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, for the six months' release from teaching in 1998 and a further six months in 2005 and 2010; the Avondale College Foundation and the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst for their monetary underwriting of the time I spent in library research in Tübingen, Germany, in 1998 and 2010; Theologische Hochschule Friedensau for their support for several further trips to the Tübingen libraries during my twelve months' secondment between 2003 and 2004; and Avondale College Foundation for further underwriting the costs of my research leave in 2005 and 2010. Nor should I forget the various conversation partners who have helped clarify my thinking: partners such as Rainer Riesner, Armin Baum, Bernhard Oestreich, Herman Lichtenberger, Grenville Kent, and Vivienne Watts. My thanks also to Udo Schnelle, Hermann Lichtenberger and Scott Caulley,

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus was crucified within a few years of 31 C.E.,¹ while the appearances of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are usually dated somewhere between 60 and 90 C.E. (e.g., Schnelle 2002, 244, 266, 288; Kümmel 1975, 98, 120, 151, 246). These dates presuppose a period of at least thirty to sixty years between events in the life of Jesus and the time at which they were recorded in the Gospels. Thus, before it was written down, the Jesus tradition was almost certainly preserved in human memory for many years,² if not decades. Much can happen to traditions that are preserved in human memories for this length of time.

This simple observation has been the catalyst for much careful academic scrutiny of the character of the Gospel traditions. Although the intensity of engagement with the question varies from decade to decade, it is a theme that is constantly present in Gospel studies, and in some periods the topic has been researched with near obsessional intensity. Nor should this be surprising, given the centrality of Jesus and his teachings to Christianity. If one is to form an assessment of Jesus, then, some assessment must be made of the qualities of the available sources of information about him.

This book brings a new dimension to the ongoing discussion about the Gospel traditions. It does so by exploring many of the insights provided by the discipline of psychology. Extensive experimental investigation of human memory has been taking place for well over a century. Yet despite the awareness in Gospel studies of the importance that memory must have played in the preservation of the traditions about Jesus, the insights provided by experimental psychology have only been considered in very gen-

1. Dates between 26 and 36 have been suggested for the crucifixion of Jesus, and no real consensus has emerged. The options are canvassed in Riesner 1998, 35–58.

2. One cannot discount the existence of some written records earlier than the extant Gospels. Their potential contribution will be evaluated in chapter 8.

eral terms, if at all, in evaluating the Gospel traditions. The following pages will go some way to filling that lacuna.

Human memory is complex. Assessing its impact on the traditions of Jesus found within the Gospels will require the consideration of a range of different factors. Some of the topics that will appear in the following pages include: forgetting curves; long-term memory for languages and autobiographical details; flashbulb and other personal event memories; false memories; hindsight bias; the characteristics of eyewitness memory; collective memory; and confabulation. Along the way, new questions will be asked, such as: Are there personal event memories in the Gospels? How many eyewitnesses of Jesus were likely to have been alive at the time of the writing of the Gospels? What implications flow from the observation that some of the Gospel stories show characteristics that are consistent with the view that they originated from eyewitnesses? My own memories of events of thirty years ago are fragmentary at best and probably suspect, so why should the memories preserved in the Gospel accounts be any different? Are there known mechanisms for reliably preserving memories over such long periods, or must the Gospel materials be treated with the same skepticism with which other legends of distant historical figures are treated? Each of these questions will be addressed somewhere in the following pages.

The content of this book is organized in two parts. Part 1 (chs. 1–5) largely deals with what is known about individual autobiographic memories and collective memory. The first chapter introduces the characteristics of eyewitness memory. The following three chapters deal specifically with the strengths and frailties of the memory of individuals. They explore the potential impact that transience, suggestibility, and hindsight bias can have on eyewitness testimony. The final chapter in part 1 moves away from the memories of individuals to a consideration of the “memory” of groups, so-called collective memory.

Part 2 (chs. 6–10) uses the observations made in part 1 to form conclusions concerning the qualities of various kinds of tradition that can be identified in the Synoptic Gospels. It also attempts to sketch a possible model for the development and transmission of the Gospel traditions.

This, then, is a broad preview of the journey to be undertaken. As well as being largely unknown in Gospel studies, some of the experiments that will be reported are surprising and interesting in their own right and will thereby provide entertainment as well as insight along the way. The journey will begin with an examination of the characteristics of eyewitness memory (ch. 1).