MEMORY, JESUS, AND THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS
MEMORY, JESUS, AND THE
SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

By
Robert K. McIver

Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta
Contents

List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................ ix
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ x
Preface ................................................................................................................................................ xi

Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 1

Part 1: Personal and Collective Memory

1. Eyewitness Memory ......................................................................................................................... 5
   Issues Surrounding the Use of Eyewitness Testimony in Gospel Studies ........................................ 5
   The Characteristics of Eyewitness Testimony .................................................................................. 10
   Eyewitness Case Study 1: A Foiled Gun Shop Robbery in Burnaby, Vancouver ........................... 12
   Eyewitness Case Study 2: John Dean’s Testimony ........................................................................ 16

2. Transience and the Reliability of Long-Term Human Memory .................................................... 21
   Seven Frailties of Human Memory .................................................................................................... 21
   Long-Term Human Memory and the Gospels ............................................................................... 22
   Forgetting Curves ............................................................................................................................. 23
   Rates of Memory Loss During the First Five Years ....................................................................... 29
   Rates of Loss for Memories up to Fifty Years Old ........................................................................ 35
   Conclusion: Memory Stable after the First Five Years ................................................................ 39

3. Personal Event Memories ................................................................................................................. 41
   Flashbulb Memories Perhaps Exempt from Transience ............................................................... 41
   The Reliability of Flashbulb Memories up to Three Years Later ................................................ 44
   Flashbulb Memories as Personal Event Memories .......................................................................... 49
   The Reliability of Personal Event Memories up to Fifty Years Later ......................................... 53
   Conclusions ....................................................................................................................................... 57
CONTENTS

4. Suggestibility and Bias ................................................................. 59
   Suggestibility and False Memories 60
   Hindsight and Other Memory Biases 71
   Memories as Reconstructions from Various Memory Subsystems 76

5. Collective Memory ..................................................................... 81
   Elusive Nature and Explanatory Power of Collective Memory 82
   Experimental Evidence for Collective Memory 84
   The Influence of the Present on Collective Memory 87
   Collective Memory in Oral Societies 91
   Collective Memory Eight Decades after Halbwachs 93

PART 2: JESUS TRADITIONS AS MEMORY

6. Collective Memory as an Explanation of Gospel Origins ............... 97
   Collective Memory and Gospel Studies 98
   Confabulation and formgeschichtliche Explanations of Gospel Origins 99
   Confabulations in Collective Memories 103
   Jesus as Teacher, and the Disciples as Preservers of the Jesus Traditions 110
   Kenneth Bailey’s Description of Formal, Controlled Oral Traditions 115
   Collective Memory in James D. G. Dunn’s Jesus Remembered 117
   Conclusions 120

7. Eyewitness Memory and the Gospel Traditions .......................... 123
   Characteristics of Written Texts Derived from Eyewitness Traditions 123
   The Pericope Form and Eyewitness Traditions in the Gospels 125
   From Eyewitness Memory to Written Gospels 127
   The Apophthegmata (or Chreiai) as a Case Study of Potential Eyewitness Material 131

8. Memory Frailties and the Gospel Traditions .................................. 143
   Transience and the Gospel Traditions 143
   Personal Event Memories, the Gospel Traditions, and Transience 145
   Source Documents and the Frailty of Transience 148
   Suggestibility and the Gospel Traditions 153
   Suggestibility and the Possibility of Nonauthentic Jesus Tradition 157
   Bias and the Gospel Traditions 158
   Conclusions 160
## CONTENTS

9. Collective Memory, Jesus as Teacher, and the Jesus Traditions ...................... 163
   Jesus as a Teacher 164
   Collective Memories of Jesus’ Teachings and the Jesus Traditions 168
   Gospel Traditions of Jesus’ Teaching: Parables 170
   Gospel Traditions of Jesus’ Teaching: Aphorisms 176
   Jesus as the Origin of the Teachings Traditions 180

10. Conclusions: Memory, Jesus, and the Gospels ................................................ 183

Appendix A. The Potential Pool of Eyewitnesses at the Time the Gospels
   Were Written...................................................................................................... 189
   First-Century Life Expectancy 189
   The Potential Pool of Eyewitnesses to the Life and Ministry of Jesus 202

Works Cited................................................................................................................ 211

Index of Ancient Texts and Authors................................................................. 229
Index of Modern Authors......................................................................................... 233
Subject Index.............................................................................................................. 239
# List of Tables

1.1. Yuille and Cutshall’s Analysis of Accuracy of Eyewitness Reports 14
3.1. The Accuracy of Fifty-Year-Old Eyewitness Memories of World War II Compared to General Knowledge 55
4.1. An Example of Hindsight Bias: Mean Probabilities Assigned to Each Outcome of the War between the British and Gurkas 72
9.1. The Parable of the Sower in Matthew and Mark (Greek) 172
9.2. The Parable of the Sower in Matthew and Mark (English) 173
A1. Frier’s Life Table for the Roman Empire 196
A2. Coale-Demeny South and West Models Level 3 200
A3. Surviving Eyewitnesses of Jesus at Later Time Periods 208
List of Figures

2.1. Ebbinghause percent “saving” in relearning: up to two days 24
2.2. Ebbinghaus percent “saving” in relearning: up to thirty-one days 25
2.3. Forgetting curve for lists of nouns 27
2.4. Retention curves for four-year-old autobiographical memories 32
2.5. Retention curves and retrieval cues 33
2.6. Bahrich: Spanish in pmastore 36
2.7. Retention of Spanish vocabulary for periods of up to fifty years 37
4.1. Marital satisfaction over twenty years of marriage 75
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,
James D. G. Dunn and Brent Holmberg, Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, and Risto Uro and Istvan Czachesz for invitations to explore aspects of my ideas with the Neutestamentlich Seminar at Halle University, the German-English research seminar at Universität Tübingen, the “Historical Jesus” Seminar of Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, the “Mapping Memory: Tradition, Texts, and Identity” Consultation at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, and the “Mind, Society and Tradition” section of the International Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature, respectively, as well as organizers of various ANZATS/ANZSTS and ANZABS conferences at which I have been permitted to present various aspects of my research. A special thanks to Tom Thatcher—for continual encouragement and exceptional editorial insight. Thanks are also due to my copyeditors Don Hansen, Doug Robertson, and Stella Tarakson; and to Richard Anderson, the interlibrary loans librarian of Avondale College. Most important, my warm thanks go to my family, who have followed me around the globe and who have endured a number of long separations as my research has progressed. To these and many others, I owe a deep debt of gratitude.

RKM; Martinsville, NSW 2265; December 2010
Jesus was crucified within a few years of 31 C.E., 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, 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).