

Collective Memory Distortion and the Quest for the Historical Jesus

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Abstract

Memory theory is being used, if not explicitly to buttress the reliability of the Gospel portraits of Jesus, to do so implicitly by shifting the search away from the *ipsissima verba Jesu* towards the memory of Jesus. Rather than argue about what Jesus did or did not say—the reliability wars—some scholars now sidestep the issue by arguing that memory is inherently reliable in a broad or general way. Thus, the Gospels are reliable not at the level of detail, but at the level of broad memory, impact, or gist. In this article I argue that such optimism can only come by selectively quoting the troubling work of memory theorists, and by ignoring the full implications of memory theory.

Keywords

collective memory; gospel reliability; historical Jesus; invented memory; memory; memory distortion

Memory theory and orality can finally be said to be affecting the search for the historical Jesus. This is work that was inaugurated in biblical studies by Birger Gerhardsson and in literary studies by Walter Ong, yet it was not until the seminal work of Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher twenty years later that the full and proper impact of memory theory and orality would be brought to bear on the search for the historical Jesus.¹

¹ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Lund: Gleerup, 1961); Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982); Alan Kirk and

One of the primary interests of questers for the historical Jesus has always been the recovery of the *ipsissima verba Jesu*.² As is well known, the development of the so-called core criteria sought to peel away layers of later sediment—tradition—in order to arrive, when possible, at authentic original utterances by the historical Jesus. So, the opening chapter of John Dominic Crossan's and Jonathan L. Reed's work on Jesus offers parallel lists of archaeological and literary 'layering'.³ The analogy is as evocative as it is unequivocal. Crossan and Reed summarize and represent decades of scholarship:

[T]he words and deeds of Jesus in our New Testament gospels fall into major layers built successively one upon (that is, over, under, around, and thorough) another. Think of them as, first, the *original* layer, coming from Jesus' own words and deeds in the 20s; next, as the *traditional* layer, coming from the tradition's adoption, adaptation, and creation of those materials in the 30s, 40s, and even later; and, finally, as the *evangelical* layer in the gospels we now possess from the 70s through the 90s.⁴

Crossan, here and elsewhere, is of course famously pessimistic on how much original material of the historical Jesus can be recovered from the canonical Gospels, but there is no question that Crossan—in line with a century of scholarship—presupposes an original speech event, in relation to which all subsequent utterances are either close (accurate) or distant (inaccurate) representations of the original, even when he privileges the *ipsissima structura* over the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus' sayings.⁵ The caveat

Tom Thatcher, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Semeia Studies, 52; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

² This process starts, it could be argued, with Ernst Käsemann's paradigm-setting focus on the sayings of Jesus, and his reliance on form- and redaction-critical ways of thinking about the transmission of sayings of Jesus (*Essays on Theological Themes* [London: SCM Press, 1964]). The process always imagines that one can reverse the process of accretion that comes with each *Sitz im Leben* through which a saying passes. A focus on retrieving the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus is apparent in Gerhardsson's *Memory and Manuscript*, as well as in the complaint of Werner H. Kelber, 'The Generative Force of Memory: Early Christian Traditions as Processes of Remembering', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006), pp. 15–22, at p. 17.

³ John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), pp. 15–50.

⁴ Crossan and Reed, *Excavating*, pp. 36–37.

⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983).

is important, because it is not only the so-called liberal streams of scholarship that search frantically for Jesus' original words, but also so-called conservative streams. The only difference between the two streams of scholarship is that the conservative stream discovers a larger body of original utterances of Jesus than does the liberal stream.⁶

It is on this point that memory and orality has had the most significant, and welcome, impact. Taking seriously the fact that Jesus operated within an oral culture, delivering his message orally and repeatedly, creating many (sometimes competing) streams of memory, requires the scholar of the historical Jesus to acknowledge that there will be no such thing as *an* original speech event. Rather, Jesus would naturally have made the same point in different ways each time he performed his material.⁷ In fact, he may even have said different and mutually exclusive things, since any other position requires one to assume that Jesus had his material all worked out before he began to deliver it. Kelber writes:

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.⁸

Orally delivered, and evolving as he went, distilling the more effective analogies and illustrations from the less effective by audience reception, Jesus'

⁶ For simplicity's sake, compare the Jesus Seminar's *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Original Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

⁷ Consider Jan Assmann's comments on the oral bard: 'The oral bard functions according to the laws of repetition and cyclical renewal. His song is constantly being made new; it "renews" itself in every performance, even if it is traditional and possibly age-old.' Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 84.

⁸ Werner H. Kelber, 'The Case of the Gospels: Memory's Desire and the Limits of Historical Criticism', *Oral Tradition* 17 (2002), pp. 55–86, at p. 84.

teachings would have many original forms. Therefore, the search for the *ipsissima verba Jesu* is wrong-headed in every way.⁹

Memory and orality has encouraged a shift in the Quest, from the search for the original (and usually unique) Jesus to the search for the characteristic Jesus. Involved in this move is a shift from details to general, from a careful reconstruction of the actual words of Jesus to the general message, the gist, or the impact of Jesus' preaching.

For example, James Dunn opens *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* with the observation that Jesus was remembered (at all) because he made an impact. Thus, it is more fruitful in the search for information on Jesus to focus on what is *characteristic* about Jesus, rather than on what is *distinctive*.¹⁰ Thus, Dunn will conclude that Jesus was baptized by John, stayed close to the Galilee, proclaimed the rule of God, referred to himself as the 'son of man', was a successful exorcist, taught in parables, liked the idiom 'Amen', and rejected the practice of dismissing fellow Jews as 'sinners'.¹¹ Elsewhere, Dunn will claim that there is an inherent reliability to the Gospel tradition because at the earliest stages the impact made by Jesus resulted in followers celebrating, reflecting on, and faithfully transmitting what Jesus said and did.¹²

⁹ Kelber, 'The Generative Force of Memory', p. 17.

¹⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). See also Dunn, *Christianity in the Making. Volume 1: Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 882–93.

¹¹ It is unclear how exactly this is much of an advance over previous scholarship that arrived at a shockingly short list of authentic and unique Jesus sayings. This list is so generic and banal that I wonder what we know about Jesus when we know these things.

¹² James D.G. Dunn, 'Eyewitnesses and the Oral Jesus Tradition', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008), pp. 85–105, at p. 87. In this work, and in *Jesus Remembered*, Dunn relies on the claims of Kenneth E. Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels', *Asia Journal of Theology* 5 (1991), pp. 34–54, concerning the controlled and reliable nature of oral memory and transmission in Middle Eastern cultures. See Theodore J. Weeden, 'Kenneth Bailey's Theory of Oral Tradition: A Theory Contested by its Evidence', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 7 (2009), pp. 3–43, for a devastating critique of Bailey, and see John S. Kloppenborg, 'Memory, Performance, and the Sayings of Jesus', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), pp. 97–132, for a pointed critique of Dunn's continued acceptance of Bailey's questionable claims.

Robert McIver wholly concurs with the approach; he argues that memory retains the 'gist' of an event much better than it retains the details.¹³ In fact, one study after another, he shows, illustrates that memory is never perfect, and is weakest on details of timing. Thus, McIver argues that the differences between Mark and Luke in the Parable of the Sower (Mk 4.1-9// Lk. 8.4-8) reveal a 'gist' resemblance more than a verbatim resemblance. Likewise, in comparing an apophthegm (Mk 12.13-17//Lk. 20.20-26), McIver concludes that 'the narrative elements of the two versions ... have a gist relationship, while the sayings of Jesus ... have a near verbatim relationship between the two gospels'.¹⁴ For McIver, this is memory at its best.

Dale Allison argues that searching for individual items Jesus may have said or done is misguided, both because of the appalling lack of accuracy when remembering details, but also because a few authentic items do not tell us anything about Jesus.¹⁵ Rather, Allison focuses on general claims and motifs that are widely repeated. In what amounts to a multiple attestation of ideas and themes, Allison argues that when large patterns emerge that depict Jesus in a certain way, these ought to be considered authentic and reliable. For example, that Jesus was a teacher and exorcist, that he was eschatologically minded, are all widely repeated images. It is therefore reasonable to trace them back to the historical Jesus, Allison claims.

For Anthony Le Donne, memory is better than older attempts to find an objectively preserved Jesus, as such an approach naturally leaves 'no other recourse than skepticism'.¹⁶ Where Bultmann counselled an existential encounter with Christ in the face of insurmountable barriers between the modern historian and the historical Jesus, Le Donne prefers memory theory: people remembered Jesus because he was memorable, and their memories of him were framed in the cultural and religious structures available to them. In other words, Le Donne, like Allison and Dunn, is interested

¹³ Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011). 'Gist' is also a term that Keener (Craig S. Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009], pp. 144-61) and Bauckham (Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eye Witnesses* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006], pp. 333-34, 344-46) like.

¹⁴ McIver, *Memory*, p. 137.

¹⁵ Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010).

¹⁶ Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What can we Know and How can we Know it?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 76.

in the impact Jesus made; this impact is apparent in the memories of Jesus' tense relationship with his mother, his political and revolutionary mission, and his clashes with power.

The shift from the *ipsissima verba* to the 'gist' of Jesus' message represents a timely and significant advance in the search for the historical Jesus; this shift, however, is often accompanied by a concomitant rhetorical shift. Historical 'accuracy', in terms of Jesus' precise words and deeds, used to be measured in recovered detail. The Jesus Seminar famously colour-coded the distance between the authentic (red) sayings of Jesus and those sayings that had been more (pink) or less (gray and black) well preserved, and conservative scholars always recovered more detail than liberal scholars. Now it appears that particular battlefield has been abandoned, but not the rhetoric. It is no longer the accuracy of the details that matters—a tall order, as scholarship-at-an-impasse attests; rather, it is the accuracy of the *gist* that matters, a seemingly more reasonable goal. Now, memory theory and orality are being used to buttress the historical accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels; it is just that this is happening on a different plane—the general instead of the literal.¹⁷

Though nuanced and careful in his work, Le Donne states time and again that memory is inherently reliable. And yet, because of the care Le Donne takes in writing about historiography, there is a considerable tension in his work. On the one hand, he offers example after example of the limitations and frailties of human memory, and yet continues to insist that memory is reliable. For example, Le Donne concludes that 'because human memory is such a fluid process, we most often rely on our external environment to both spur and constrain our interpretations of the past'.¹⁸ That memory is not entirely to be relied upon (especially in conjunction with the idiosyncracies of perception), yet he says immediately, 'I am not saying that our

¹⁷ The qualification 'synoptic' is important here. Notwithstanding occasional interest in the intersection of John and Memory, e.g., Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus—Memory—History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher, *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), the Gospel of John is left out of studies on the Gospels and memory, just as it has often been in more traditional historical Jesus scholarship. So, for example, McIver, *Memory*, writes about memory in the Synoptic Gospels, and in Keener, *Historical Jesus*, and Dunn, *Christianity in the Making: Volume 1*, John is referenced with less than half the frequency that the Synoptic Gospels are referenced.

¹⁸ Le Donne, *Historical Jesus*, p. 32.

memories are unreliable. I am saying our memories are reliable because they rely upon external (including social) frameworks'.¹⁹

Likewise, Le Donne invokes orality for the same purpose:

Understanding the difference between literate culture and oral culture is important for us because Jesus was first remembered by a largely oral culture. His words and deeds were not initially recorded, nor were they archived. Jesus' words were *remembered* by an oral community. Every time Jesus told a parable worth remembering it was remembered by several witnesses with degrees of variance and stability. Every public debate that Jesus won was remembered several times over.²⁰

For Le Donne then, orality and memory are of a piece, and together they reveal that memory can be relied upon to transmit information about Jesus reliably.

Richard Bauckham argues that the Gospels are the product of the 'collective memories' of eyewitnesses. This is a reasonable assumption, he claims, because all history relies on testimony, and the Gospels (like other historical writings) would not be any different. For Bauckham, the Gospels were not the result of anonymous and amorphous traditioning and mythologization, but were rather the result of known and recognizable eyewitnesses transmitting eyewitness memories about Jesus. He cites psychological studies on the characteristics of eyewitness memory (its vividness, its retention of idiosyncratic details, and its ambiguous temporality) and argues these traits can all be found in the Gospels. Bauckham thus assumes, throughout his work, that eyewitness memory is inherently reliable, and is to be 'trusted' where it concerns stories about Jesus.²¹

¹⁹ Le Donne, *Historical Jesus*, p. 32. A similar tension is apparent in Richard Horsley, 'Prominent Patterns in the Social Memory of Jesus and Friends', in Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 57–78. On the one hand Horsley writes that 'studies of social memory confirm that social memory of events is not stable as accurate historical information' (p. 77), while concluding later with the claim that 'studies of social memory lead ... to the conclusion that there was a far greater continuity between Jesus in interaction with his immediate followers and emergent texts such [as] the Q speeches and Mark's Gospel' (pp. 77–78).

²⁰ Le Donne, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 69–70; emphasis original. See also pp. 107–108.

²¹ Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eye Witnesses*, p. 490. Bauckham's important book was the subject of a critical issue of *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008), and

Craig Keener devotes very little space to memory theory (five per cent of his long study) because he is more interested in defending the reliability of the Gospels based on: (a) the widespread practices of ancient historians; and (b) and assumption (not the argument) that the Gospel writers were ancient historians (an assumption he shares with Bauckham). Nonetheless, in the space he does devote to memory theory he claims that memory is inherently reliable. Memory theory, according to Keener, shows that although 'memory can be imperfect, there are normally limits to this imperfection (i.e., they do not ordinarily involve free composition of events); even when some details are inaccurate, the "gist" is usually accurate'.²² Since memory is 'normally' and 'ordinarily' reliable, the Gospels must therefore be reliable, Keener argues.²³ Keener approvingly defers to E.P. Sanders for his conclusion that the 'gospel writers did not wildly invent material'.²⁴

The most sustained effort to show the reliability of memory, and to relate that work to the Synoptic Gospels, has been produced by Robert McIver. In keeping with his greater interest in psychology than in the sociology of knowledge (the normal 'home' of memory theory), McIver focuses on eyewitness memory retention. Citing several studies showing that eyewitness memory is not perfect, but that it is quite good, and studies that show that memory retention falls off quickly, but then levels off, McIver claims

his assumptions about the reliability of eyewitness memory has been shown to be out of keeping with the best psychological research. Judith C.S. Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in Light of Psychological Research', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010), pp. 177–97.

²² Keener, *Historical Jesus*, p. 145.

²³ Keener supports his claims concerning the inherent reliability of the Gospels by looking at a significant amount of ancient evidence pertaining to memorization and note-taking (*Historical Jesus*, pp. 145–50). He seems untroubled, however, by the fact that there is neither explicit nor implicit evidence in the Gospels that Jesus' disciples took notes, nor that they, on the model of ancient education, assiduously and diligently memorized their teacher's lessons. In fact, given the unflattering depiction of the disciples in Mark at least (Mk 4.13; 14.66–72; the fact that the disciples disappear from the narrative at 14.72), it seems improbable that the disciples were capable of the intellectual rigour expected among ancient Mediterranean students. Also, Keener's nuanced language invites the question: even if it is true that memory does 'not ordinarily involve free composition of events', how do we know for certain when it does? How does he establish that the Gospels are not one of those occasions involving the free composition of events? This is not resolved by Keener; it is simply assumed that the Gospels fall into those collections of memory that are reliable.

²⁴ Citing E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 193.

that memory is for the most part reliable, and that there are natural constraints on what can be invented. He concludes, 'If the traditions are to be considered reliable, it is only so because the memories on which they are built are reliable'.²⁵ He adds later that 'while exact certitude about every detail of the Gospel narratives is just not possible, the larger picture that emerges is likely to be true'.²⁶

McIver, Keener²⁷ and Bauckham all share the belief that eyewitnesses would have held positions of dominance in the communities at the time the Gospels were being written, but McIver undertakes the most technical approach.²⁸ This claim serves as part of their defense of the reliability of the Gospels. For this article, I will leave aside the question of eyewitnesses surviving, circulating, being available and accessible for interviews, as well as the important issue of eyewitness reliability.²⁹ Rather, I would like to focus on the emerging sense of optimism concerning the inherent reliability of the Gospels as collective memory.³⁰ In what follows, I shall

²⁵ McIver, *Memory*, p. 154.

²⁶ McIver, *Memory*, p. 156.

²⁷ Keener, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 151–52.

²⁸ Based on ancient life-tables, modern reconstructions of ancient life-tables, and modern third world life-tables, McIver argues that a population of 1500 for Capernaum would yield 33 surviving eyewitnesses when the Gospel of Mark was written. Likewise, with as many of 52,000 people in Jerusalem at Passover to serve as potential eyewitnesses to Jesus' public events and shaming, there could be a total of 576 people still alive at the writing of Mark. And finally, those who were part of the large crowds in Jesus' teaching ministry, such as the feeding of the 5000, could yield as many 10,000 people who heard Jesus teach and saw him perform miracles in the Galilee. This is a considerable base upon which to build a foundation of eyewitness memory and testimony. I have commented elsewhere on the serious gaps in McIver's logic here.

²⁹ See my review article, Zeba A. Crook, 'Memory and the Historical Jesus', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 42 (2012), pp. 196–203.

³⁰ There are many largely interchangeable terms circulating in recent scholarship: social memory, cultural memory, collective memory, and mnemohistory. I like Anthony Le Donne's definitions: social memory refers to 'the ways that group ideologies inform individual memories'; collective memory refers to the way memories are 'shared and passed down by groups'; cultural memory 'broadens the scope of Collective Memory'. Anthony Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion in the Jesus Tradition', in Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Stephen C. Barton and Benjamin G. Wold (eds.), *Memory and Remembrance in the Bible and Antiquity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), pp. 163–77 (165, n. 6). He also rightly warns that the two terms (social and collective memory) are used so interchangeably that the nuance of each term varies from author to author. In this article, I use the term 'collective memory' as Le Donne defines it.

argue that such optimism can only be maintained by citing memory theorists very selectively, by overlooking or minimizing the more troubling implications of memory theory, including memory distortion, and finally, by ignoring the plethora of examples of manufactured collective memory, some of them as persistent in collective memory as they are troubling. A proper understanding of memory theory ought not engender optimism in the reliability of the Gospels.

Of those who use memory theory to argue in defence of Gospel reliability, Anthony Le Donne deserves the greatest credit for directly addressing the topic of memory distortion.³¹ The term is used to refer to the 'difference between memory of the past and past actuality'.³² Le Donne relies on the work of Michael Schudson, who offers four processes of memory distortion: Distanciation (time eats away at the details and intensity of memory); Instrumentalization (putting the past to work in the present); Narrativization (attempts not only to report the past, but to make it interesting); and Cognitization and Conventionalization (making the past understandable, what we can learn from the past). To these Le Donne perceptively adds Articulation (the tendency for memories to conform to language conventions).³³ Articulation happens when memory is translated into language. The memory must fit into the 'accepted semantic framework of its context', namely grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and so on, which makes it prone to distortion.³⁴

On the one hand, Le Donne is blunt in repeating that all memory is distorted memory, and in citing favourably Assmann's complaint that the 'notion of "distorted memory" seems to presuppose that there is something like "undistorted memory"'.³⁵ There is not, Le Donne would say: all memory is distorted memory. On the other hand, Le Donne backs away from the more troubling features of memory distortion. For instance, he prefers the term 'narrativization' over the term 'fictionalization' used by others. Yet, the theorists he cites definitely do not prefer safer terminology; they write that distortion by narrativization 'inevitably' causes people to pass

³¹ See especially, Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion'.

³² Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 166.

³³ Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 168.

³⁴ Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 169.

³⁵ Jan Assmann, 'Ancient Egyptian Antijudaism: A Case of Distorted Memory', in Daniel Schacter (ed.), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 365–76, at p. 366.

down 'falsehood',³⁶ and that narrativization imposes 'a radical reordering of ... memory at the outset'.³⁷ Le Donne himself admits that narrativization 'is therefore highly distortive'.³⁸

Le Donne sees memory distortion as more benign than is warranted. First, he claims that memory distortion tends to work like a telescope, which he claims distorts images in order to bring them closer. The analogy of the telescope is wholly inaccurate. No theorist of memory, individual or collective, suggests that memory is telescopic. Telescopes do not distort images; if they did, no one would use them. Telescopes transmit a distant image with *perfect accuracy*, which Le Donne has already admitted is not the case with memory. Further, telescopes refract light, they do not refract, or affect the image itself, and thus the telescope is not at all analogous to how memory, or memory distortion, works.

Secondly, Le Donne backs away from the naturally troubling connotations of the term 'memory distortion'. It is, he claims, '*necessary to shake the negative connotations from the word "distortion" in order to understand its necessary and beneficial function*'. Distortion is, most commonly, a natural and benign function of memory selection'.³⁹ Here Le Donne reduces memory distortion to mere memory selection. All memory is distorted because all memory is composed from a selection of possible material, not from the entirety of it.⁴⁰ Selectivity is certainly an aspect of memory distortion, but it is by far not the whole or the heart of it, as Le Donne implies. Were it so simple, and were the analogy of the telescope an accurate depiction of how cultural memory works, no one would be talking about memory distortion.

³⁶) Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 169.

³⁷) Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 171.

³⁸) Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 171.

³⁹) Le Donne, 'Theological Memory Distortion', p. 167; emphasis original.

⁴⁰) It is important to recognize that memory theorists go further than this. For example, Jan Assmann writes that though all memory is clearly to some degree reconstructed and reinvented, 'it is equally clear that ... some memories are more distorted than others and some traditions more invented than others' ('Ancient Egyptian Antijudaism', p. 366). Further, Peter Burke writes that historians ought to be interested in memory as a source, and given that they must 'produce a critique of the reliability of reminiscence on the lines of the traditional critique of historical documents'. Peter Burke, 'History as Social Memory', in Thomas Butler (ed.), *Memory: History, Culture and the Mind* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 97–113 at p. 99. In other words, it is unfair to use the sentiment that 'all memory is distorted' to deflect historical analyses that might contend that some memories might be wholly unhistorical.

tion. One would certainly come away from Le Donne with the impression that memory distortion means nothing more than partial memory, e.g., the Gospel memories of Jesus are reliable, they are simply incomplete.

McIver would concur. He offers studies that show that the first three to six years after an event see the largest amount of memory transience, but that this rate of memory loss does not persist beyond this point. McIver admits that it is quite likely that 'up to 50 percent of the events of Jesus [sic] life that were witnessed by those still alive when the Gospels were written could have survived in the memory of those eyewitnesses'.⁴¹ In other words, the frailty of memory transience forces us to admit that at least 50 per cent of Jesus' words and deeds have likely been lost to us. Remarkably, though, this does not have any impact on the reliability of the Gospels in McIver's estimation. It means, in essence, that the Gospels would have had much more material in them had more material been remembered. The Gospels are made up of wholly reliable memories; they are simply a selection of memories of Jesus, not a complete repository of his sayings. Reading McIver, then, one would come away thinking that memory theory teaches us to lament the amount of material that was forgotten and lost, but to be thankful for the reliability of what was remembered.

There would seem, then, to be an emerging consensus that memory is inherently reliable, and that memory distortion is inherently benign because there are natural and predictable limits on what can be done to memory: the construction of memory is constrained by some attachment to what actually happened, by plausibility, by mutual admonishment and communal correction. This point must be addressed, lest this emerging consensus become a full-blown consensus.

Baumeister and Hastings have written about memory distortion in American political history.⁴² They are interested in the ways in which collective political memory is distorted in a motivated way (e.g., not in a passive or accidental way). The strongest motivator that leads to memory distortion is the desire of groups to see themselves in a positive light. Baumeister and Hastings itemize seven strategies and mechanisms of memory distortion: selective omission of disagreeable facts; the outright invention of false

⁴¹ McIver, *Memory*, p. 144.

⁴² Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings, 'Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves', in James W. Pennebaker, Darío Páez and Bernard Rimé (eds.), *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), pp. 277–93.

memories; exaggeration and embellishment; linking vs. detachment (presenting or adhering to, or rejecting, certain causal connections between events); blaming the enemy (making one's own misdeeds appear to be a reaction rather than an unprovoked attack); blaming circumstances; and contextual framing.

Six of these categories receive a fairly full treatment and interesting examples, while one of them does not: 'the outright fabrication of false memories'. They offer one example here, and then conclude that 'by and large outright fabrication of collective memory is rare. The implication may be that collective memories are to some extent constrained by the facts. Facts may be deleted, altered, shaded, reinterpreted, exaggerated, and placed in favorable contexts, but wholesale fabrication seems to lie beyond what most groups can accomplish'.⁴³ McIver cites this work in support of his claim that it is extremely unlikely that early Christians would have fabricated memories of Jesus. Again, we are assured by McIver that the Gospels contain reliable memories of Jesus.

Other memory theorists are not remotely as optimistic as Baumeister and Hastings. For them, memory distortion can commonly include the manufacture of memories.⁴⁴ Stephen Ceci, for instance, states that 'False reports can be the result of conscious, deliberate decisions on the part of the reporter (e.g., a lie intended to flatter, avoid punishment, gain rewards, protect loved ones), or they can be the result of indeliberate, unconscious processes (e.g., a false belief that arises from a chain of inferential or reconstructive processes that are neither planned nor even accessible to awareness)'.⁴⁵ In the same collection of essays, Michael Kammen says that 'memories can readily, with scant embarrassment or challenge, be quietly

⁴³ Baumeister and Hastings, 'Distortions of Collective Memory', p. 282.

⁴⁴ I prefer the term 'manufacture' to 'invent' when used of memory. This is because according to the strictly constructionist approach to memory, all memory is invented. Simply the act of selection, forgetting, shaping, arranging, and interpreting memories to form a coherent narrative is itself an act of invention. Rather than becoming tangled up in that issue, I would like to offer the phrase 'memory manufacturing' to refer to the creation of memories that have no basis in an historical event. That is, it is not that these memories are exaggerations of a historical event; rather, they are either so grossly exaggerated so as to be wholly new, or they are wholly manufactured or fictional.

⁴⁵ Stephen J. Ceci, 'False Beliefs: Some Developmental and Clinical Considerations', in Daniel Schacter (ed.), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 91–125 at p. 91.

repressed within a generation and replaced by alternate explanations'.⁴⁶ Kammen's point is that alternate memories can develop in the span of a single generation, and can become the memories of subsequent generations.

There are some ways in which memory distortion or memory invention are moot, or can even be rightly labelled as positive. When a community shares a set of memories and an understanding of those memories, it hardly matters whether they are accurate or not. In this instance, memory distortion is benign. Likewise, memory distortion can have a positive 'democratizing outcome' or can 'bring about a necessary readjustment of values or value systems that are out of synch—anomalous—in a particular time and place'.⁴⁷ When memory functions as part of the formation of identity, its historical accuracy is irrelevant. But for the historian, whose task it is to sift through surviving traces of past events (which might include collective memory), the distortion and outright invention of collective memory is anything but benign. Kammen makes the important point that too often with collective memory, one cannot know 'where veracity ends and distortion begins'.⁴⁸ This puts the historian in a difficult position: how is one to distinguish real memories from manufactured memories, when those who hold both 'memories' might not be able to recognize the difference between them?

Baumeister and Hastings are wrong about the rarity with which collective memories can be invented wholesale. They appear unaware, for instance, of the work of Hobsbawm and Ranger on memory invention, which appeared five years earlier. The latter collection contains six ground-breaking studies of 'invented tradition', ranging from Scottish Highland and Welsh culture to British colonial traditions in India and Africa. Hobsbawm introduces the topic by observing that traditions 'which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origins and sometimes invented'.⁴⁹ This is most commonly accomplished by attempting 'to establish continuity with a suitable past'; in

⁴⁶ Michael Kammen, 'Some Patterns and Meanings of Memory Distortion in American History', in Daniel Schacter (ed.), *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 329–45, at p. 333.

⁴⁷ Kammen, 'Memory Distortion', pp. 329–30.

⁴⁸ Kammen, 'Memory Distortion', p. 341.

⁴⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14, at p. 1.

other words, memory is manufactured in order to make something recent and invented appear old and traditional.⁵⁰ Inventing tradition is, of course, the same thing as manufacturing memory, since one cannot invent tradition without inventing the memory of that tradition's antiquity.

For our purposes, the most interesting type of memory invention referred to by Hobsbawm occurs for the purpose of 'socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour'.⁵¹ A rich example of this is provided by Hugh Trevor-Roper on the invention of the Highland kilt. According to Trevor-Roper, the establishment of an ancient and unique Highland dress began in the eighteenth century with the forgery of an epic poem (the Ossian), establishing the Highlands' cultural autonomy from Ireland. By the end of that century, the Highland Society was formed to promote 'the preservation of ancient Highland traditions'.⁵² By 1804, it was collective memory that the tartan kilt was the 'traditional garb' of the Scots, such that a change of military dress proposed by the War Office in London was vigorously protested on the grounds of culture, tradition and antiquity, and by 1822, it was authoritatively declared that the kilt 'had been part of their garb as far back as tradition reaches'.⁵³ Would Baumeister and Hastings have come to their conclusion about the rarity of manufactured collective memory had they read Hobsbawm and Ranger?

Other examples abound, two disturbing examples of which I would like to raise here. The first concerns the founder of the nineteenth-century British technophobic rebels known as the Luddites, and the other concerns the global Satanic ritual abuse panic of the 1980s.

In the years 1811–17, a movement of violent disturbances spread from Yorkshire, Midlands, and the Northwest of the United Kingdom.⁵⁴ Under

⁵⁰ Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', p. 1.

⁵¹ Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', p. 9.

⁵² Hugh Trevor-Roper, 'The Highland Tradition of Scotland', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 15–41, at p. 26.

⁵³ Trevor-Roper, 'Highland Tradition', pp. 28–29. The memory of the ancient origins of Highland dress is subtly perpetuated on the website of the Scottish Tartan Authority. Though their write-up accurately dates the tartan kilt to the early eighteenth century, the web page in question is entitled 'Ancient Highland Dress', <http://www.tartansauthority.com/highland-dress/ancient> (accessed 20 May 2012). By most ways of reckoning, the eighteenth century is not 'ancient'.

⁵⁴ The following information on the history of the Luddites comes from Kevin Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

protest was the introduction of wide-framed automated looms that could be run with little or no skill and therefore also less expensively. Those with the traditional skills felt threatened, and they rebelled, breaking into businesses at night to smash the wide frames, and burning down mills. There were political assassinations, state executions, and casualties among innocent civilians, rioters, and the British Army.

The various movements that sprouted up in the areas around the Midlands were, at best, loosely related ideologically. The groups and sub-groups had a variety of grievances, disparate goals, different ideologies, and conflicting methods. Some groups wanted local changes only, while some wanted kingdom-wide political and social change. Some targeted only machines and sought to avoid bloodshed, while others advocated assassinations of political and business leaders (not that it made any difference in the eyes of the law: it was a hanging offence to destroy frames). Some were interested less in widespread social change than simply the ability of workers to make an honest living. It was a disparate movement, yet they were united by one thing: they protested in the name of Ned Ludd, and thus became known collectively as Luddites.⁵⁵

The first historian of the Luddite movement, writing in 1811, claimed that it all started in 1779 when a young apprentice, angry at being rebuked for the quality of his work, smashed the machine he was working on with a hammer. Thirty years later, 'Ned Ludd' wrote threatening letters, signed in his name, and his followers wrote proclamations, songs, poetry about him and satires about his opponents. In short order, Ned Ludd became 'General Ludd', with songs sung in his honor exalting the 'Hero of Nottinghamshire' over even Robin Hood. He was also Captain Ludd, King Ludd, and even 'Great Enoch'.⁵⁶

Ned Ludd comes to be depicted in increasingly mythological ways. The song 'General Ludd's Triumph' refers to him as General Ludd and Brave Ludd: 'His courage, his fortitude, strikes them with fear / For they dread his Omnipotent Arm!' No less, nature itself supports Ned Ludd: 'By fire, and by water he gets them [the wide frames] destroyed / For the Elements aid his

⁵⁵ Arthur Droge deserves all the credit for inspiring me to think about parallels between Luddism and early Christianity as movements with constructed memories. See A.J. Droge, 'Cynics or Luddites? Excavating Q Studies', *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 37 (2008), pp. 249–69.

⁵⁶ Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, pp. 202–203, from a song of February 1812. Could this Enoch be the Enoch who 'walked with God' (Gen. 5:22–29)?

designs'.⁵⁷ In the summer of 1812, a song called 'Hunting a Loaf' credits Ned Ludd with breaking a thousand wide frames single-handedly.⁵⁸

A publicly posted poem entitled 'Well Done, Ned Ludd' has hymnic qualities, or at the very least certainly panegyric qualities, and closes with a hint of the mythical character Ned Ludd had acquired by May 1812: 'Deface this who dare, / Shall have tyrants fare, / For Ned's Every where, / To both see and hear'.⁵⁹ There are dozens of similar songs, hymns, poems, and panegyrics to Ned Ludd.

No less, as Kevin Binfield shows, we can even glean a biography about Ned from Luddite writings: he was promoted first to captain and eventually to general, and even came to be proclaimed king; he moved from the Midlands to the North; he recruited a relative named 'Eliza'; he established an administrative staff and 'an officer corps' around him; he had a son named Ned Ludd Jr., and that son joined the War of 1812 against the United States.⁶⁰

There is a lot we might know about Ned Ludd from the body of writings by and about him. And yet, there is only one point upon which all historians agree: there is no evidence there ever was an historical Ned Ludd. General Ludd was never spotted and never captured as the rebellion was being crushed by British troops. One could argue that perhaps he disappeared into the moors, resurfacing in another village to live out his days there, except that there are also no parish records and no physical evidence anywhere attesting to the birth or existence of a person named Ned (or more likely Edward) Ludd.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, pp. 98–99, c. January 1812.

⁵⁸ Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, p. 135.

⁵⁹ Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, pp. 129–30. This same line is added as a postscript to a number of different poems.

⁶⁰ Kevin Binfield, 'Ned Ludd and Laboring-Class Autobiography', in Eugene Stelzig (ed.), *Romantic Autobiography in England* (Wey Court East: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 161–77 at p. 168.

⁶¹ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, contends that it is reasonable to think that there were some reliable memories of Jesus' mission and character. He would have said something many times, giving his supporters many opportunities to hear them; he sent them out preaching on their own, requiring some degree of remembering what he said in order to teach in his name; some of what he is said to have taught is designed to be memorable. It is preferable then to allow that he himself said some of these things, rather than some anonymous spinner of compelling stories and sayings who is never remembered for his work (or his gift). Without intending entirely to gainsay Allison's reasonable

We are left then with the very strong impression that there was no historical Ned Ludd, or that the historical Ned Ludd is at best very distantly related to the Ned Ludd praised in Luddite writings. If this is so, then all the 'memories' of Ned Ludd from the 1810s were wholly manufactured. In other words, we must admit that the very thing conservative memory theorists say cannot possibly have happened in the case of Jesus, because these things just do not happen, did in fact happen with Ned Ludd. Memories about Ludd, in the form of songs about him, honouring titles (King, General, Captain) and artwork that made him into a brave leader, were wholly manufactured. It means that those who were writing songs and poems about Ned Ludd, and crediting him with great deeds of fearsome power, were not 'remembering' him; they were manufacturing the memories of Ned Ludd. So too must it be with all the letters written in his name, which were clearly written by many different hands, as indicated by Binfield's literary and rhetorical analysis of them.⁶² Memories of Ned Ludd were manufactured. Any autobiographical details about Ned Ludd were created accidentally when Luddites wrote in his name and praised him variously.

A second troubling example of manufactured memory comes in the form of the global Satanic ritual abuse scare of the late twentieth century.⁶³ During the 1980s, belief in Satanic ritual abuse (SRA) was widely held at all levels of society, with popular and professional paranoia peaking in 1985–92. By all accounts, it was all over by 1995, and now, eighteen years later, one hears nothing about it: no more eyewitness accounts, no more allegations, no more victim impact statements, no more professionally generated lists of indicators of SRA consulted by all responsible psychologists. At its peak, allegations of SRA were appearing all over the world, particularly in Canada, Australia, Europe, and the United States.

SRA was the subject of countless media reports, criminal investigations, 'true-life' sensational books, and movies. It was widely believed that Satanists counted in the millions, and that they held positions of authority in government, law enforcement, media, schools and kindergartens, and even churches. This very fact explained why they were so difficult to

statement, I do wonder what impact the 'biography' of Ned Ludd might have on positions like this, which are common among New Testament scholars.

⁶² Binfield, *Writings of the Luddites*, *passim*.

⁶³ The following narrative is drawn largely from Philip Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', in James R. Lewis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of New Religious Movements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 221–42.

catch and prosecute: because they had minions to protect them and thwart investigation and discovery at every level of American society. It was commonly accepted that children and adults were sacrificed annually, by some accounts upwards of 50,000 a year in the United States alone. Victims who were not sacrificed were subjected to extreme physical abuse and emotional degradation: extreme sexual abuse, forced consumption of urine, faeces, and blood. Around the world, people were accused and some imprisoned. These groups were so clandestine that no evidence of their existence could be found, only a seemingly endless list of apparent victims with extremely evocative memories.

Troublingly, but not surprisingly given the utterly fantastic nature of the memories and allegations, countless investigations produced no validation of these claims and allegations. Slowly, society appeared to regain its sanity, and, by 1994, the National Centre on Child Abuse and Neglect produced a report that discredited virtually all the charges. In 'not one out of twelve thousand incidents investigated was there the slightest hint of a "well-organized intergenerational Satanic cult who sexually molested and tortured children in their homes or schools for years and committed a series of murders"'.⁶⁴

This phenomenon relates to memory in two ways. The first concerns eyewitness memory. Though complicated by the fact that these were traumatic memories drawn out of victims in therapy in the belief that the most traumatic memories are repressed and can be reliably recovered, we are nonetheless dealing with memories of experiences that individuals believed (or were brought to believe) they had experienced.

The reliability of repressed memories recovered through psychological counselling, as well as the reliability of eyewitness memory and testimony in general, has been most forcefully challenged by Elizabeth Loftus. Concerning the memories of Satanic ritual abuse in particular, Loftus asks, 'If a memory is recovered that is not authentic, where would it come from?' She offers many possibilities:

If not authentic, the memories could be due to fantasy, illusion, or hallucination-mediated screen memories, internally derived as a defense mechanism ... a mixture of borrowed ideas, characters, myths, and accounts from exogenous sources with idiosyncratic internal beliefs... Inauthentic memories could also be externally derived as a result of

⁶⁴ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', p. 238.

unintentional implantation of suggestion by a therapist or other perceived authority figure with whom the client desires a special relationship, interest, or approval.

In other words, memories can be manufactured from any number of sources, both external and internal, both accidental and deliberate. But the most important feature of such memories is that 'Once activated, the manufactured memories are indistinguishable from factual memories'.⁶⁵ Loftus has done more than any one to challenge the common claim that there is no evidence that 'one can tinker with memories of real traumatic events or that one can inject into the human mind whole events that never happened'.⁶⁶ I am sure McIver would agree with this claim, but Loftus does not: 'There are numerous anecdotes and experimental studies that show it is indeed possible to lead people to construct entire events'.⁶⁷ She offers numerous examples.

The second way these manufactured memories touch on memory is in the collective sense. It was arguably a shared collective memory not only that led to the manufactured memories themselves, but also that led so many to accept the claims as somehow plausible.

Evidence of these experiences was largely drawn from the cultural memory bank of Christian imagery of Satan and folklore (also a form of collective memory). First of all, in the 1980s, 'it was common to claim that the supposed Satanic religion dated back centuries'.⁶⁸ In other words, the Satanic religion, and therefore surely the ritual abuse they heaped on their victims, was from long past. The past was being used—and in this case, manufactured—to explain the present, and very likely to serve some psychic need among western nations. Secondly, the only features that did go back centuries were the fantastic images and horrible stereotypes of Satanism. Jenkins summarizes: 'At every stage, we find that the supposed religion of Satanism is an artificial, literary, and intellectual concoction, a purely bookish product of relatively recent times'.⁶⁹ In fact, Jenkins points

⁶⁵ Elizabeth F. Loftus, 'The Reality of Repressed Memories', *American Psychologist* 48 (1993), pp. 518–37; the three preceding quotations come from p. 524.

⁶⁶ Loftus, 'Repressed Memories', p. 530.

⁶⁷ Loftus, 'Repressed Memories', p. 531.

⁶⁸ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', p. 223.

⁶⁹ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', p. 223.

out, 'Most of the ideas that emerged during the recent Satanism scare were well established before the Second World War'.⁷⁰

By the 1920s, 'tales of witches and Black Masses were appearing in popular culture, in fantasy and horror fiction'.⁷¹ In particular, Jenkins shows that every particular detail about modern cultic Satanism can be traced back to a single novel by Herbert S. Gorman entitled *The Place Called Dagon* (1927). This author is himself little remembered, but his novel was profoundly influential on other fantasy and horror writers. Modern American Satanism enters cultural memory as fiction, but as with many forms of memory, it eventually becomes impossible for people to distinguish between fictions and memories. By 1956, 'on no known evidence, *Newsweek* declared that some forty groups in southern California alone "devote themselves to the celebration of the Satanic Mass"'.⁷²

In other words, people's memories and claims were being pulled from a bank of collective memories deriving from Christian accusations and imagery of magic, sorcery, witchcraft and necromancy dating back to the Middle Ages, with an influential stop among the French Romantics of the mid-nineteenth century, and another surge in early twentieth-century America. And it must be borne in mind that the details about these experiences were often being drawn out (or generated) through leading questions by psychotherapists who already had a commitment to what must have happened because of their whole-hearted belief in traumatic memory repression and the possibility of recovery. Here cultural memory meets eyewitness contamination: the collectively remembered images and stereotypes, whether centuries or decades old, whether foreign or native, were being fed to victims through leading questions.⁷³

Here then are two whole movements, complete with powerful, inspiring and troubling eyewitness memories, widespread and enduring collective memories, writings and sayings by founders, and communities of believers and survivors. I suspect strongly that the more we looked, the more examples we would find of manufactured collective memories. Hobsbawm nearly says as much: 'There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the "invention" of tradition in this sense' (e.g., derived from a single initiator, and developed in either private

⁷⁰ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', p. 231.

⁷¹ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', pp. 228–29.

⁷² Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', pp. 230–31.

⁷³ Jenkins, 'Satanism and Ritual Abuse', pp. 233–34.

groups or informally).⁷⁴ Likewise, Rita Carter writes that ‘The best evidence yet suggests that both recovered and false memories are real phenomena ... False memories are not unusual. In fact, they are the norm’.⁷⁵

Peter Burke would agree: the transformation of ‘the cold and colourless William III into the popular Protestant idol “King Billy” *can hardly be explained in terms of his own personality*. Bandits turn into Robin Hoods, robbing the rich to give to the poor. Rulers travel their kingdom in disguise to learn about the condition of their subjects’.⁷⁶ It is troubling to me that Le Donne cites Burke’s chapter here as evidence that memory distortion is always minimal, and yet Burke states explicitly the opposite: people’s memories of a hero are not only fit into schemata, but that these schemata can radically alter the character of the hero. This is, it turns out, precisely what people like Bultmann and Dibelius, the targets of the new memory theorists, were saying had happened in the transmission of Jesus stories! Burke concludes: ‘Generally speaking, what happens in the case of these myths is that differences between past and present are elided, and unintended consequences are turned into conscious aims, as if the main purpose of these past heroes had been to bring about the present—our present’.⁷⁷

Not all manufactured memories would, of course, be as fantastic as those concerning Luddism and/or Satanic ritual abuse, comprising as they do entire movements, but neither do they have to be so elaborate in order to make the point. In fact, perhaps the point is made all the better by a plethora of less elaborate and systemic manufactured memories within otherwise historically grounded movements: Tacitus’s story about the ‘many wonders’ Vespasian performed, which include healing a blind man and a man with a diseased hand before many witnesses;⁷⁸ Suetonius’s stories about the birth of Augustus, which include his mother being impregnated by a serpent and all the frogs falling quiet for ever more at the cranky command of the young Augustus;⁷⁹ the removal of Mohammad’s heart to

⁷⁴ Hobsbawm, ‘Inventing Traditions’, p. 4.

⁷⁵ R. Carter, *Mapping the Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 167. See also Dennis Duling, ‘Memory, Collective Memory, Orality and the Gospels’, *HTS Theologiese Studien/Theological Studies* 67 (2011), pp. 103–13, at p. 106.

⁷⁶ Burke, ‘History as Social Memory’, p. 104; emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Burke, ‘History as Social Memory’, p. 110.

⁷⁸ Tacitus, *Histories* 4.81.

⁷⁹ Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 2.94. See Paul Veyne, *Did the Greek Believe their Myths?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) for a learned exposition on this

be cleaned by angels, which appears in a number of early Muslim biographies of the Prophet;⁸⁰ any number of Jesus' miracles 'remembered' in the Gospels. Miracles seem the best place to start in a search for manufactured collective memory, since clearly the miracles stories—regardless of whose they are—are best understood discursively. That is, they tell us how followers, worshippers, fans and acolytes revered great figures; they give us no biographical information whatsoever. How many more examples would we find the closer we looked?

At stake here has been the twofold claim that (a) collective memory is rarely, or cannot be, manufactured, and that (b) we can therefore take comfort in the understanding that collective memory is on the whole reliable. My point is most certainly not to argue stridently that collective memory is *inherently unreliable*. That would be unreasonable. My point is that it is equally unreasonable to suggest that the Gospels are to be trusted *because* they involve collective remembering, and collective memory is trustworthy. A more nuanced view would maintain, as Dennis Duling has recently, that memory *can* be reliable, but that it can also be profoundly unreliable and creative, accidentally and deliberately.⁸¹ And a recent article by John Kloppenborg in this journal shows that even when a short saying remains fairly stable in terms of wording, subtle changes and new settings can provide the saying with such a different meaning that the stability is in fact only an illusion.⁸² But far more serious, as far as the historian is concerned, is that it is exceedingly difficult to distinguish between real and manufactured memory, that is memory which goes back to an actual past event and memory that does not. And, according to the many studies conducted by Elizabeth Loftus, and as we see in the examples provided above, those whose memories have been wholly manufactured are often the least likely to know it.⁸³

tricky question, and for more examples of the implausible things otherwise rational people can believe.

⁸⁰ This story appears in the *Siras* of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 CE) and al-Tabari (d. 923 CE). For the likely origin of this story, see Harris Birkeland, *The Legend of the Opening of Muhammad's Breast* (Oslo: Kommisjon hos Jacob Dybwad, 1955).

⁸¹ Duling, 'Memory'.

⁸² John S. Kloppenborg, 'Memory, Performance, and the Sayings of Jesus', *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), pp. 97–132.

⁸³ Loftus, 'Repressed Memories', p. 524.

It is this last point that is key: we cannot take at face value the confidence people have in the accuracy or historicity of their own memories. In fact, there is according to some studies an inverse relationship between confidence in accuracy and actual accuracy.⁸⁴ So, memory theory does not, *pace* Dunn, Bauckham, Le Donne and McIver, give us cause for optimism concerning the historicity of the Gospels. On the contrary, memory theory ought to leave us feeling deeply troubled about what we can actually know about the past. Alain Gowling writes that ‘it is this capacity of texts to *create* or establish memory—if you prefer, to fictionalize—that renders them somewhat problematic as sources of historical information’.⁸⁵ Collective memory theory might enrich our understanding of how Gospel materials were transmitted, and how they may have taken shape, both in the period of oral transmission and in the period of literary redaction, but, properly understood, it does not provide shelter in the reliability wars.

⁸⁴) See studies cited in McIver, *Memory*, p. 49.

⁸⁵) Alain M. Gowling, *Empire and Memory: The Representation of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 10; emphasis original.

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