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## Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research

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### Abstract

Three recent approaches to historical Jesus studies are assessed in this article. First, the use of memory studies as a means of validating the historical authenticity of Gospel traditions. Secondly, claims that Gospel traditions should be understood as primarily reaching the evangelists orally, and that this process provides greater confidence in the historicity of such traditions. Thirdly, the Fourth Gospel is seen in some quarters as an important source in historical Jesus research based upon new paradigms and radical redefinitions of historicity. Contrary to such claims, here it is argued that for a series of different reasons that none of these methods offers any significant advance in accessing the 'historical Jesus', as that term is usually understood. This is not to say that the methods are without value. Rather, it is the over-confident application of such approaches to the 'historical Jesus question' that is critiqued. This is especially the case when it is claimed that they provide a key methodological break-through, enabling reclamation of more Gospel traditions as being securely founded in the ministry of the historical Jesus.

### Keywords

eyewitnesses, Gospel of John, Gospel traditions, historical Jesus, historicity, memory, orality

## Introduction

The issues surrounding historical Jesus research are legion. The discipline has been stratified into discrete phases.<sup>1</sup> The criteria for determining the authenticity of events,<sup>2</sup> or words of Jesus,<sup>3</sup> have undergone extensive discussion and refinement. The so-called new quest and third quest have exhibited growing levels of confidence in establishing a larger group of sayings and events that can be attributed to the historical Jesus, especially in comparison with the emphasis in the first half of the twentieth century on the kerygmatic presentation of the 'Christ of faith'.<sup>4</sup> Such increased confidence shows no signs of abating. Recently scholars have brought new methodologies and approaches to bear on the ongoing task of producing a reliable, yet enlarged corpus of sayings and events that may be attributed to the historical Jesus. In particular, over the last decade three new approaches have been lauded as providing increased traction on the data in the Gospels. As a result, it is claimed that their application allows more data to be identified as stemming from the Jesus of history.

These three approaches are the use of memory studies, insights from anthropological studies into the oral transmission of non-written traditions, and a greater regard for the historicity of the Fourth Gospel. There is, undoubtedly, much to be learnt from the research that has been undertaken in each of these areas. Moreover, they have created new ways of probing traditions in the Gospel accounts. However, the present discussion questions whether any of these three approaches actually delivers reliable results in the field of historical Jesus research. One of the fundamental *a priori* questions concerns the nature of history and what scholars understand concerning their respective historiographical methods. However, these are not new questions, which can only be asked from the vantage of a post-modern outlook. Thucydides noted the perspectival nature of reported accounts of past events. He stated, 'Different eyewitnesses give

<sup>1</sup> For instance Theissen and Merz describe five phases in historical Jesus, which encompass the more traditional categorization of three quests. G. Theissen and A. Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (London: SCM, 1998), esp. pp. 1–15.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of methods and examples see D.L. Bock and R.L. Webb (eds.), *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus* (WUNT, 247; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For instance see the extended discussion in B.D. Chilton and C.A. Evans (eds.), *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (NTTS, 28.1; Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), pp. 14–15.

different accounts of the same event, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other, or else from imperfect memories' (*Hist.* 1.22). Thucydides reveals his preference for a historical method that is guided by a quest for ἀκρίβεια, 'accuracy', whereas Herodotus claims ἀλήθεια, 'truth', as his guiding principle. Without wishing to dichotomize these two categories, at least for heuristic purposes the tension between what may be characterized as documentary accuracy and interpretative truth is part of the challenge of the historiographic enterprise in general.

Exemplary historiography is never simply a compendium of facts; it involves the formulation of interpretative hypotheses. Recent theoretical studies that underpin the practice of historiography emphasize the idea that writing history in a manner that is free of presuppositions is not only impossible it is, in fact, undesirable. Rather what is required is an approach that is self-aware of the presuppositions it brings to the endeavour, and can discuss the way in which such pre-understandings may shape the interpretative task.<sup>5</sup> Yet, one can perhaps become overly bogged down with the 'meta-questions' of the historiographical method, without grappling with actual traditions that in some sense claim to reflect events that 'happened', or without considering the specific methodologies that are used to assess the historical content of such traditions. Here the goal is to consider the applicability of three new methodologies that are currently being applied to the Jesus tradition, and to assess the value that is claimed by their proponents, to varying degrees, in relation to so-called historical Jesus questions.

## The Remembered Jesus

It is striking the way 'memory' has become an important, if not also a somewhat trendy means of claiming that the community memories of early believers provide reliable access to the historical Jesus. In this vein, Kirk and Thatcher lament that a century of Jesus research has not given due attention to memory as a factor in establishing the historical worth of Jesus traditions. They state, '[t]he disappearance of memory as an analytical category in biblical research may be attributed to a number of factors, most

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<sup>5</sup> See in particular S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); and H.A. Veaser (ed.), *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989).

significantly the effects of form criticism'.<sup>6</sup> Bockmuehl makes a distinction between individual and communal memories, arguing that the latter provides a far more reliable path for transmitted Jesus traditions. Responding to the work of experimental psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, Bockmuehl argues that group memories act as a safeguard against individual distortions:

The casework of Loftus and her colleagues is concerned with individual memory in isolation, rather than with critical interaction of individual and collective memory—an interaction that tends in fact to mutual reinforcement.<sup>7</sup>

Memory also features as a highly important part of Bauckham's argument concerning the reliability of eyewitness testimony.<sup>8</sup> He compiles nine factors that may be used to assess the reliability of what he terms 'recollective memory'. These factors are: (1) a unique or unusual event; (2) a salient or consequential event; (3) an event in which a person is emotionally involved; (4) vivid imagery; (5) irrelevant detail; (6) point of view; (7) dating; (8) gist and details; (9) frequent rehearsal.<sup>9</sup> Applying these criteria to a general reading of the Jesus tradition,<sup>10</sup> rather than a specific treatment of individual Gospel pericopae, Bauckham advances the following conclusion.

The eyewitnesses who remembered the events of the history of Jesus were remembering inherently very memorable events, unusual events that would have impressed themselves on the memory, events of key significance for those who remembered them, landmark or life-changing events for them in many cases, and their memories would have been reinforced and stabilized by frequent rehearsal, beginning soon after the event... We may conclude that the memories of eyewitnesses of the history of Jesus

<sup>6</sup> A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, 'Jesus Tradition as Social Memory', in A. Kirk and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Semeia Studies, 52; Atlanta: SBL; Leiden: Brill, 2005), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> M. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> R. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 330–35.

<sup>10</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 341–46.

score highly by the criteria for likely reliability that have been established by the psychological study of recollective memory.<sup>11</sup>

First it must be observed that Bauckham proposes a specific model for the transmission of Jesus traditions in the initial years of the movement. This proposal is actually unverifiable. Secondly, there appears to be an obvious circularity, for Bauckham claims the reliability of the recollective memory of the 'eyewitnesses' can be read out of the Gospel accounts, and then sees such reliable eyewitness testimony as validating the Gospel accounts themselves as reliably transmitting traditions about Jesus. Thirdly, psychologists engaged in the study memory theory do not universally accept Bauckham's nine criteria. Rather these criteria are in fact formulated in opposition to the views of a large number of psychologists who have commented upon the unreliability of memory, or who have discussed the 'reconstructive nature of recollective memory'.<sup>12</sup>

Bauckham's theories have been subjected to a variety of criticisms. Redman attempts to dismantle the fundamental presupposition that eyewitnesses are reliable in light of psychological research.<sup>13</sup> She focuses on two basic questions. First, 'what light does psychological research shed on the extent to which information obtained from eyewitness accounts could be considered to be accurate information about the historical Jesus?'<sup>14</sup> Then secondly, 'what consequences does this have for the way biblical scholarship might treat eyewitness accounts?'<sup>15</sup> Her research shows that there is a long record that documents instances of the striking lack of accuracy of eyewitness accounts in court cases and other settings.<sup>16</sup> Redman notes

<sup>11</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 346.

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham rejects the dominant position that has been given to reconstructive memory in the psychological literature. He describes the seminal work of Sir Frederick Bartlett, *Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932) simply as being 'quite unjustified'. Those psychologists who continue to conduct work within the field do not share that opinion. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 330.

<sup>13</sup> J.C.S. Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research', *JBL* 129 (2010): 177–97.

<sup>14</sup> Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses?', p. 178.

<sup>15</sup> Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses?', p. 178.

<sup>16</sup> See W. Stern, 'Realistic Experiments', in U. Neisser (ed.), *Memory Observed: Remembering in Natural Contexts* (San Francisco: W.H. Freeman, 1982), pp. 95–108; orig. 'Wirklichkeitsversuche', *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Aussage* 2 (1904): 1–31.

three stages in the act of remembering, memory acquisition or encoding, retention (storage), and retrieval. After a detailed study of these processes, she notes that while 'eyewitness accounts provide useful information about what happened, many factors can influence both how accurate and complete any account might be'.<sup>17</sup> Thus Redman articulates what experimental psychologists have long known, namely that eyewitness accounts are not some pristine record of accurate and verifiable history. Therefore, even if one were to concede to Bauckham the likelihood of the presence of eyewitnesses in early Jesus communities,<sup>18</sup> both on the basis of recent psychological studies and due to the variability in the Gospel accounts themselves, it seems extremely unlikely that such figures provide 'access to the historical reality of Jesus'.<sup>19</sup>

More recent studies on memory have focused on its political dimension as communal memories are reformed to serve institutional needs and to legitimate contemporary power structures. Two major models are proposed as templates to represent the relationship between social event and social memory. The dominant presentist model argues that social memory becomes social fact as it is remade to serve contemporary values and needs. Hence memory is reconstructed in different ways as it is invoked in a variety of groups. Therefore, a notable feature according to the presentist model is that memory becomes context dependent.<sup>20</sup> The less popular model, the cultural-system model, argues that where society is in a state of constant flux, social memory endures albeit in modified states since old beliefs are not totally replaced, but rather they have new beliefs superimposed on them.<sup>21</sup> Regardless of which of these two models is preferred, their

<sup>17</sup> Redman, 'How Accurate are Eyewitnesses?', p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Employing the life-rate survival tables of Frier and Coale-Demsey, based on between 62,000 and 63,000 potential witnesses to events in the ministry and passion of Jesus, McIver demolishes Bauckham's unsubstantiated arguments for the survival of eyewitnesses. He states, 'Bauckham, then, appears to be correct in his assessment that "living eyewitnesses were becoming scarce" (2006, 7) when Matthew, Luke, and John were composed. They were scarce indeed! Indeed, if the usual dating of Mark is correct, they were probably also scarce when Mark was produced.' R.K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2011), p. 209.

<sup>19</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup> See B. Schwartz, 'Collective Memory and Social Change: The Democratization of George Washington', *American Sociology Review* 56 (1992): 221–36; M. Schudson, *Watergate in*

respective proponents do not view memory as giving unadulterated access to an immutable past. The presentist model sees social memory as having greater conceptual distance from the actual events of the past, since it becomes hostage to the political circumstances of the present.

In partial distinction, while the cultural-system model sees social memory as having some degree of alignment with past events, nonetheless the relationship between past and present is far from unproblematic. On this model, the kernel of historical reality that may be embedded in politically overlaid social memory has been remoulded in order to communicate contemporary beliefs. Therefore, either view of social memory as articulated by professional academics in the area of memory studies has a striking similarity to the perspectives of the early form critics. That is, any underlying historical connections have either been subsumed or heavily transformed to serve contemporary community needs. Thus the reshaping of traditions functions to create a social memory that addresses community concerns, and the task of reconstructing the historical reality behind these reformulated memories may be unachievable due to the degree of mutation that past events have undergone in the service of contemporary needs.

Consequently, memory studies have sought to grapple with the question of how social memory reformulates both the significance and concept of history within the groups that communicate the memory tradition. Analysing Halbwachs' work on collective memory, Apfelbaum contends that for Halbwachs, 'each subject's autobiographical memory is dialectically related not only to the collective memories of the various groups to which he or she is affiliated, but also to the broader historical memory of the society in which he or she lives'.<sup>22</sup> Hence memory is seen as providing primary insight into the contemporary timeframe when the memory was recollected, rather than when the putative event occurred. Therefore, according to most recent memory theorists, there is no implicit access to the objective reality of past events, for it is argued that social memory does not reference such a horizon. Rather social memory carries the communal function of establishing permanence, stability and duration, coupled with

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*American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, and Reconstruct the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>22</sup>) E. Apfelbaum, 'Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memories', in S. Radstone and B. Schwarz (eds.), *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), pp. 77–92, here p. 71.

a sense of rootedness that allows for the individual to construct a sense of belonging and connectedness. This is vital to the process of ongoing community renewal and formation. Hence social memory is now seen as the means by which the past is reconceptualized in ways that legitimize community, in order that the group might have a meaningful contemporary identity and so that the individual may find a level of attachment with the collective story. Apfelbaum sees this ongoing collective process of inscribing contemporary reality within the matrix of social memory as demonstrating 'the continuing importance of the historical legacy in the present-day functioning society'.<sup>23</sup>

However, there is another fundamental problem for those who employ 'memory' in historical Jesus research, apart the concerns arising from the discipline of experimental psychology about the utility of social memory as a tool for accessing historical events. Despite lauding memory as a breakthrough that allows reliable access to the historical Jesus, this appears to be at best a hypothetical assertion. The form critics, so widely criticized by proponents of memory and orality (see below), actually applied their theories to individual pericopae to test the formation and historical genealogy of the traditions contained in the Gospels. For instance, in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, Bultmann systematically classified each passage in the synoptic Gospels looking at their source and tradition history. He then discussed the tradition's origin either in the life of the early church, or in the ministry of the historical Jesus.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, it is notable that the current application of memory studies to the Jesus tradition most frequently remains embedded in the theoretical domain, with little attempt to show how the category of memory actually allows for specific traditions to be traced back to the Jesus of history. Instead, the level of argument appears to have stalled with assertions that social memory validates the historicity of the events it purports to communicate. This flies in the face of empirical and theoretical research conducted by psychologists engaged in memory studies who see that memories are often constructed to meet the needs of both communities and individuals, when communal recollections are radically recast to respond to contemporary social situations.

<sup>23</sup> Apfelbaum, 'Halbwachs and the Social Properties of Memories', pp. 91–92.

<sup>24</sup> R. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (ET Oxford: Blackwell, 1963; German orig. 1921 [5th edn 1931]). Furthermore, Bultmann applied his form-critical insights to the Fourth Gospel in his commentary *The Gospel of John* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1971 [German orig. 1941]).

There have, however, been a few fleeting attempts to apply the hypothesis of social memory to early Christian texts. Thatcher appeals to the principle of pneumatologically guided corporate memory to explain how a charismatic community of anointed believers could crystallize group commitments to the remembered Jesus as being the impartor of the Spirit of Truth (Jn 16.13), while simultaneously closing off appeals to the Spirit to legitimate a perspective that differs from those of the transmitters of the tradition. He states that,

Every person who possesses the Spirit is a remembrancer, able to recall Jesus and guided by the Paraclete in her interpretations of that memory. The author of 1 John could appeal to this principle *ad hominem* to posture the Spirit/tradition as a special 'anointing' that protects true Christians from heretical teachings (1 John 2.20-27). Yet John's charismatic approach to memory would also make it ultimately impossible to refute competing theological views... By moving Jesus into the public past, John creates an image that claims to transcend private faith experience.<sup>25</sup>

Here there is little with which to disagree, although it is questionable whether appeal to the category of memory has provided any deeper understanding of the issues that were causing tensions in the Johannine community than the insights provided by scholars using a historio-critical approach.<sup>26</sup> In fact Thatcher's use of social memory conforms to the ideas of Halbwachs and Apfelbaum, that social memory re-inscribes history in a way that reformulates it, so it may be deployed to address institutional needs or in order to legitimate power struggles. Consequently, while Thatcher's reading may be legitimate, it has no implications for historical Jesus research and it brings scholars no closer to the events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. What it does do is to provide another hermeneutical tool to enter the world of the text and perhaps probe questions concerning the theological and institutional motivations behind the formulation of the text. As such,

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<sup>25</sup> T. Thatcher, 'Why John Wrote a Gospel: Memory and History in an Early Christian Community', in A. Kirk and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (Semeia Studies, 52; Atlanta, GA: SBL; Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 94-95.

<sup>26</sup> For instance see G. Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), pp. 61-77; R.E. Brown, *The Johannine Epistles* (AB, 30; New York: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 329-77.

perhaps it better falls into the category of tracing the early reception history of written traditions in one specific social setting of the Jesus movement.

A striking feature of Bauckham's study of eyewitnesses as legitimators of the Jesus tradition is that the chapter on 'eyewitness memory' is notably devoid of reference to actual passages that are clarified or can be claimed as having historical reliability because of insights from social memory theory. Apart from a few illustrative citations to back up his nine criteria of the reliability of recollective memory in the Gospel tradition (for instance as examples of emotionally involved eyewitnesses he cites Mk 9.6 and 14.72),<sup>27</sup> there is only a fleeting attempt to demonstrate the applicability of memory theory.<sup>28</sup> Bauckham introduces the category of 'deferred meaning', to describe the process by which early believers were 'interpreting the past in the light of more recent events'.<sup>29</sup> In order to avoid the counterclaim that such acts of re-interpretation while making good sense theologically simultaneously distorted the historical dimension making it unrecoverable, Bauckham states that the process of 'later reflection and insight may—without abolishing the meaning already recognized—expand that meaning'.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for Bauckham, the historical content of the underlying event is not supplanted, but rather supplemented by the overlaid theological meaning. In this sense, without acknowledging the fact, he employs a strong form of the cultural system model. Moreover, the qualifications of memory theorists who discuss the degree of distortion that occurred between the reformulated social memory and the germinative social event are lacking. Therefore 'deferred meaning', as Bauckham introduces the term, is seen as occurring under the influence of reflection on the scriptures. Hence in Jn 12.14–16 the entry into Jerusalem on a young donkey is accompanied by the scriptural lens of Zech. 9.9 and the explanatory comment that 'his disciples did not understand these things at first'. Bauckham states that, 'such reference to the scriptural insights [was] brought to bear on their memories by the disciples only after Jesus' resurrection'.<sup>31</sup> However, while this insight is correct in itself, it neither validates the reliability of the core remembered event, nor does it show how social memory theory adds anything to the understanding of the Gospel passage in question.

<sup>27</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 342.

<sup>28</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, pp. 352–53.

<sup>29</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 352.

<sup>30</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 352.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 352.

By contrast, Dale Allison offers a far more nuanced understanding of the role of memory in the process of reconstructing the Jesus of history. He states that '[t]he fallibility of memory should profoundly unsettle us would-be historians of Jesus. We have no cause to imagine that those who remembered him were at any moment immune to the usual deficiencies of recall.'<sup>32</sup> Yet notwithstanding this important caveat, Allison also rejects the diametrically opposed alternative. He states 'the Synoptic evangelists were, for the most part, not writing creative fiction but rather reconfiguring traditions informed by the past.'<sup>33</sup> Allison notes a loss of his earlier confidence in the ability to trace the history of most synoptic traditions. Here he agrees with Sanders that because so few traditions can be verified in isolation, one must instead 'proceed by abduction—that is, by inference to the explanation, always looking for a Jesus who makes the most sense of the available facts and what we otherwise know of Judaism and nascent Christianity'.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Allison concludes that memory, be it individual or corporate, does not in itself guarantee the reliability of the traditions being transmitted. He notes that there is too much contradictory evidence from empirical psychological studies and from the perspectives of memory theorists. However, if there is a connection between tradition and some happening in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, then this is indeed a remembered event. Yet, it is not the act of remembering, even in a community context that ensures the memory is reliable, but it is dependent on many other factors that may have had an impact on the way an event is remembered, retrieved and re-used within the social setting where it continues to have a resonance and a value that resulted in its preservation.<sup>35</sup>

There appear to be a number of observations about social memory theory that can be drawn together at this point. First, a number of New Testament scholars have attempted to employ the insights from memory theory in markedly different ways from those of experimental psychologists who developed the theories. Proponents of both the presentist model and the cultural-system model note the political dimension of memory in social contexts. The former see the gap between the reformulated memory and the past event as largely unbridgeable through the medium

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<sup>32</sup>) D.C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), p. 8.

<sup>33</sup>) Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p. 435.

<sup>34</sup>) Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup>) Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, p. 22.

of memory, whereas the latter argues that a historical kernel may still be present although it has become subservient to contemporary needs. The problem is that certain New Testament scholars have not allowed the implications of these critical reflections on memory to shape the way they deploy the category of social memory. Instead they view it as an unproblematic means of verifying the reliability of past events. Secondly, apart from the catch-cry that social memory establishes historical reliability, there has been no thoroughgoing application of social memory theory to individual Gospel pericopae in a way that would demonstrate this to be a useful hermeneutical tool for clarifying historicity. In other words, insights from community memory theories have not been shown to add anything to the interpretative task. Thirdly, there has been a noticeable tendency to castigate the form critics of a previous generation for their skepticism concerning the reliability of remembered traditions. However, when one compares the form critics' handling of traditions with the way contemporary psychologists discuss the concept of memory, while there are differences in terminology, both approaches agree that the remembered event functions within communities to promote group values and that the connection between past events and the social remembrance is often quite slight. Where social memory theory may provide insights into the Jesus tradition is by analysing how such memories were received, and by reflecting upon what their pastoral or pedagogical function might have been in early believing communities—but surely this is quite similar to tracing the *Sitz im Leben* of a tradition—and that is hardly a new perspective.

### Orality and the Historical Jesus

In his Society for New Testament Studies (SNTS) presidential address of 2002, J.D.G. Dunn issued an impassioned plea for the 'default settings' to be changed in historical Jesus research.<sup>36</sup> In effect Dunn called for the transmission of Jesus tradition to be understood in terms of orality, rather than based upon the current 'typically literary mindset'.<sup>37</sup> Consideration of a number of synoptic parallels led Dunn to conclude that his selected

<sup>36</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, 'Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisioning the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition', *NTS* 49 (2003): 139–75.

<sup>37</sup> Dunn, 'Altering the Default Setting', p. 155.

examples demonstrated 'what is characteristic of oral tradition's combination of fixity and flexibility, stability and variation'.<sup>38</sup> His rejection of literary paradigms as the chief model for representing the transmission of the Jesus tradition is based on his assumption that moderns are blinkered by the pervasiveness of the written medium. Thus with engaging rhetoric Dunn declared to his audience, '[w]e here are all children of Gutenberg and Caxton. We belong to culture shaped by the book. Our everyday currency is the learned article and monograph.'<sup>39</sup> Yet, this caricature of those who treat the transmission of the Jesus tradition on a literary level misrepresents such a model as being tied up with notions of fixity that only arise with the advent of movable-type printing. Variability is a feature of a scribal activity, as well as the product of an oral environment. Moreover, those who approach the Jesus tradition on a literary level do not deny the existence of a period of oral transmission for those traditions. However, what is questioned is whether the oral stage is accessible or recoverable in any meaningful way given that all the surviving evidence is preserved in written form. Dunn's argument received fuller exposition in his mammoth volume *Jesus Remembered*, which despite its title was more concerned with orality than memory studies.<sup>40</sup>

However, before continuing with Dunn's arguments it is helpful to consider the scholarly studies that shaped his thinking on orality. The insights gleaned by Dunn are drawn both from scholars outside the field of biblical studies as well as those within the discipline. It is somewhat surprising to see Dunn representing early form critics as being opposed to the insights that an appreciation of orality can provide for gaining deeper access to the historical Jesus. The form-critical enterprise is represented as having as its goal the disregard of history, in order to emphasize the existential significance of the Christ of faith.<sup>41</sup> Yet here Dunn has perhaps oversimplified the development especially in Bultmann's thought. Bultmann's ideas appear to have emerged from a complex set of factors, including the prevailing modernist intellectual climate, his own analysis of the traditions within the Gospels, and an attempt to articulate faith in a manner which was existentially relevant to the way he perceived modern critical thinking.

<sup>38</sup>) Dunn, 'Altering the Default Setting', p. 169.

<sup>39</sup>) Dunn, 'Altering the Default Setting', p. 143.

<sup>40</sup>) J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*. I. *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

<sup>41</sup>) Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 73–78.

However, in no way can his stance on the historical value of the Gospel traditions be seen as driven by an already full-formed understanding of existential faith. Rather his evaluation of Gospel traditions, namely that even when one had penetrated beyond the written stage to an oral stage of the tradition that this in itself offered no guarantee that such material originated with Jesus of Nazareth, was part of the complex of ideas that led him to formulate his understanding of existential faith. The form-critical insight was to see many of the sayings shaped by, or having originated in, the *Sitz im Leben* of early Jesus communities.<sup>42</sup> Whether Bultmann was correct in his assessment of individual traditions is certainly worth re-assessment. However, even if one is able to gain some insight into the oral level of the tradition, as the form critics pointed out, this does not guarantee access to the actual sayings Jesus uttered during ministry.

While dismissive of the form-critical enterprise, Dunn and his student Terence Mournet are more receptive of the insights of folklorists such as the early theories of the Grimm brothers, and to a greater degree the more recent studies by Olrik and Propp.<sup>43</sup> Mournet wishes to hold onto the insights of the Grimm brothers that were used by the form critics, which led them to envisage an oral stage in the transmission process. However, he simultaneously rejects their accompanying conclusion that most traditions could not ultimately be traced back to the historical Jesus. Having agreed with the form critics only in the existence of an oral stage in the Jesus tradition, Mournet next draws upon the work of Parry and Lord to describe the role of orality in the transmission of community traditions. Milman Parry's work was based upon the observation of the oral performance of epic poetry in the former Yugoslavia during the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> From these socio-anthropological observations Parry inferred that generically similar Homeric epics had also undergone a period of oral transmission before they were committed to a written form. Building directly upon Parry's work and at times working collaboratively with him, Albert Lord conducted further extensive fieldwork recording instances of oral

<sup>42</sup> R. Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (ET New York: Scribners, 1935 [1926]), p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> See A. Olrik, 'Epic Laws of Folk Narrative', in A. Dundas (ed.), *The Study of Folklore* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 129–41; V. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968).

<sup>44</sup> M. Parry, 'Whole Formulaic Verses in Greek and Southslavic Heroic Song', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 64 (1933), pp. 179–97.

performance of epic poetry, in order to argue that such performative events were not dependent on an underlying literary text, but rather that the oral poet employed traditional formulae to shape the epic into a form that would assist memorization.<sup>45</sup> The fundamental question that must be addressed by Dunn, Mournet, and others who apply the oral paradigm to model the Jesus tradition is whether such insights are applicable to the data contained in the synoptic Gospels.

The work of Parry and Lord was related specifically to the genre of epic poetry, which is not the genre of the Gospels. There are a number of further factors that limit the applicability of such theories to the Jesus tradition, which also require discussion. However, preliminary to this, recent studies dealing with the transmission of Homeric epic poetry have strongly called into question Parry's hypothesis that formulaic composition is indicative of oral transmission. In a highly regarded study, Jasper Griffin questions the equation between orality and formulaicity as a mechanism for assuming that Homeric poetry was performed orally, being rehearsed out of a slate of formulae retained in the head of the bard.<sup>46</sup> Once again, it appears that methods or insights that have been brought over into New Testament studies generally, or historical Jesus research specifically, have been called into question or superseded in the discipline within which the imported theory originated. However, even if Parry's theory is seen as still relevant to the description of the transmission of Homeric poetry (which is being increasingly questioned) a number of fundamental problems remain.

First, Parry and Lord were able to conduct extensive fieldwork collecting and recording examples of oral performance. In other words, their theories were based on direct empirical anthropological evidence of an observable oral phenomenon. Secondly, Parry extrapolated from the contemporary Slavic examples to infer a hypothesis about the transmission of Homeric

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<sup>45</sup> See in particular A. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

<sup>46</sup> J. Griffin (ed.), *Illiad, Book Nine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), esp. pp. 32–35. Griffin does not reject the theory of oral composition of the Homeric epics, but he does re-envision the mechanisms of oral composition. Although his more nuanced perspectives have begun to predominate in Homeric scholarship, they have not had an impact on the field of New Testament studies. Those who advocate orality as the means for understanding the transmission of Gospel traditions remain locked into the Parry–Lord paradigm. See also the earlier preliminary comments of A. Hoekstra, *Homeric Modifications of Formulaic Prototypes* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1965).

epics. However, Homeric scholars had already postulated a gap of several centuries between the form of Greek used in literary manuscripts of these epics and their likely time of origin. Therefore, there was a significant temporal space between the earliest extant literary form and the time of the presumed origin of the composition. This led to competing theories of either literary or oral transmission. Lord's observations provided an evidential base for assuming that fixity of formulaic expression could be attributed to a significant period of oral transmission. His observations did not, however, establish any close connection between the 'original' compositional form and the relatively stable oral form that was the end-product of a performative evolutionary process.

By comparison, for the Jesus tradition there are a number of factors that strongly call into question the applicability of an oral paradigm. First, there is no direct access to an oral layer of the Jesus tradition. Secondly, the temporal gap between the tradition being committed to a literary form and its putative period of preservation in oral form is extremely short. Few scholars would see the Gospel of Mark as the first instance of Jesus tradition taking a written form. For instance, many theorize a pre-Markan passion narrative. It has been argued that the cycle of material in Mk 2.1–3.6 existed in a pre-Gospel literary form. Also for those convinced of the Q hypothesis (regardless of any recourse to stratification theories)<sup>47</sup> this document perhaps takes the written form of some Jesus traditions back to the early 50s <CE?>. This means that the temporal gap between the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the production of written forms of his teaching may be less than two decades. Thirdly, the written Gospels do not preserve the Jesus tradition in its original language. Not only do they truncate the time-span that is usually required for meaningful trajectories of oral transmission to be traced, more fundamentally the translational leap from original Aramaic speech events to a Greek written form negates any significant access to the oral stage of the transmission of Jesus traditions. Moreover, the agreement in the synoptic traditions of the same story in the Greek language could only be explained at an oral level if there had been close control over the oral translation of Aramaic traditions into an oral Greek form. The possibility that the translational process could have been so rigidly controlled is frankly implausible. However, such similarities are readily explicable if the

<sup>47</sup> For the classic articulation of the stratification of Q into three discernible layers see J.S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

tradition was transmitted in a written translation, such as Mark or Q, and then later evangelists modified these Greek sources of tradition. Fourthly, even if these three fundamental problems could be overcome and it could be shown that the oral stage that came prior to the literary compositions (that are now the only surviving records of the Jesus tradition) could be recovered, then it would remain the case that for most of these hypothetical recovered oral traditions there would be no verifiable way for traversing the gap between such post-Easter oral forms and the forms of teaching given by Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, the oral period of Jesus tradition, while theoretically a likely stage of the earliest transmission of Jesus material, is in reality unretrievable and inaccessible. Recent ideas about the utility of orality in historical Jesus research have tried to apply an ill-fitting model from empirically based anthropological studies of observable phenomenon to the extant literary record of the Jesus tradition. In the absence of actual oral data, New Testament scholars must focus on the actual evidence they have—literary texts of Jesus material which are not written in the language in which Jesus delivered his teachings. However, the fact that the traditions are preserved in literary form may be more of a benefit for historical Jesus studies than the assumption that the oral traditions offer a more pristine process of transmission. First, the literary texts are only a few decades later than the events they describe, which is not always the case with many records from the antique period. Secondly, there are multiple sources preserving certain traditions. While these are often interrelated to some degree, nevertheless this allows the criterion of multiple attestation to be invoked in certain cases.

One of the significant challenges from proponents of orality against a literary model is that the levels of variability within the synoptic tradition militate against accepting the notion of the literary transmission of traditions.<sup>48</sup> Two things need to be said in response. First, the high level verbatim agreement in several pericopae, in a language other than the one in which the tradition originated, suggests that a significant amount of material was in fact transmitted in written form. This is directly contrary to Rosché's claim that the double tradition is due to 'independent courses of oral, preGospel transmission'.<sup>49</sup> In order to attempt to break such an

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<sup>48</sup> T. Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency: Variability and Stability in the Synoptic Tradition and Q* (WUNT, 2.195; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), pp. 7–12, 192–286.

<sup>49</sup> T. Rosché, 'The Words of Jesus and the Future of the Q Hypothesis', *JBL* 79 (1960): 210–20, here 220.

impasse Mournet argues that calculating a numerical level of verbatim agreement for each pericopae is a misleading statistic. Instead, he states, 'it is necessary to look at the variable nature of verbatim agreement *within each pericope itself*'.<sup>50</sup> Mournet's observation is well known to statisticians. Measuring certain aspects of data, such as the overall level of verbatim agreement, allows one to make analytic comparisons; however this results in some flattening of the individual features of the dataset. Thus what such statistics offer is for a single variable or a series of multiple variables to be compared as a representative way of measuring the data set. This means that not every feature of the data is represented by the summary statistics that are calculated for comparative purposes. Mournet has done no more than measure different features in the data set. This does not invalidate the previous statistical calculations. Rather, Mournet has simply decided to measure a different variable in the hope that it will cast fresh light on the transmission of the Jesus tradition. Once both sets of statistics are presented, then it becomes a judgment as to whether measuring agreement across whole pericopae, or measuring levels of internal variability (as Mournet does), gives the best measure for concluding the tradition is more likely to have been transmitted in oral rather than literary form.

Morgenthaler's analysis of the degree of agreement between double-tradition passages forms the starting point for Mournet's analysis. Morgenthaler observes that 13.2% of Q has an agreement range of 80–98%, 78.5% of Q has an agreement range of 20–80%, and 8.2% of Q has an agreement range of 0–19%.<sup>51</sup> Leaving aside the difficulty of assigning passages with 0% 'agreement' even to the bottom level of Q passages(!), Mournet infers that such variability even in the middle band demands investigation into the possibility that the relationship is oral. Thus he suggests, 'we must move beyond previous work that has focused strictly on a comparison between individual pericopes within the double tradition. Specifically, it is necessary to look at the verbatim agreement *within each pericope itself*'.<sup>52</sup> Mournet clarifies that his goal 'is *not* an attempt to the question of the existence of a "Q" source behind the common Matthean and Lukan double tradition, nor is it an attempt to question the overall status of "Q" as a

<sup>50</sup>) Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 203 (original emphasis).

<sup>51</sup>) R. Morgenthaler, *Statistische Synopse* (Zurich: Gotthelf-Verlag, 1971).

<sup>52</sup>) Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 203 (original emphasis).

text'.<sup>53</sup> Instead he presents his goal as more modest, simply that of analysing double-tradition passages from a folkloristic perspective 'to see if that approach can lend any additional insights into the tradition-history behind the extant double tradition passages'.<sup>54</sup> Yet, notwithstanding this explicit statement, Mournet does not appear to be interested in the pre-Q forms of double-tradition passages, but in showing that many of the double-tradition passages could not have reached Matthew and Luke in written form.

Without rehearsing Mournet's lengthy statistical analysis,<sup>55</sup> it is useful to outline the conclusions that are drawn. The key insight that is observed is that when one measures internal variability for double-tradition passages, this highlights that the overall verbatim agreement between the parallel passages in the double tradition is not a helpful indicator. For Mournet a single summary statistic measuring verbatim agreement veils the degree of dynamism at work in the tradition. This may be simultaneously true, and yet irrelevant for Mournet's overall thesis that orality is the more appropriate model to characterize the transmission of the Jesus tradition. Consideration of second-century non-canonical Gospels and Acts shows how authors who clearly betray knowledge of written canonical counterparts in parts of their new works can be independently creative in their handling of the tradition elsewhere. The first point to remember is that we are not dealing with scribes making accurate copies of their exemplar texts, but with authors who wish to redeploy and recast traditions that they already know.

Mournet's next step is to draw upon Dunn's observation that certain traditions are characteristic of Matthew or Luke working in oral mode, which is presented as an important insight.<sup>56</sup> However, what this actually means is never really stated. It is unclear whether this means Matthew and Luke are drawing on an independently transmitted oral form of tradition, or whether they are aware of written sources and maybe have read these literary traditions but are simply recalling them without direct consultation of the text.

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<sup>53</sup> Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 204 (original emphasis).

<sup>54</sup> Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, p. 204.

<sup>55</sup> Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, pp. 204–78.

<sup>56</sup> See J.D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus Tradition', in D. Donnelly (ed.), *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land* (New York: Continuum, 2001), pp. 84–145.

These are two fundamentally different models of transmission. Mournet attempts to differentiate between different types of internal stability for establishing different types of transmission processes. He defines the 'core' as the internally stable elements. For those pericopae where the core does not stand out from their surrounding material Mournet suggests these passages were not likely to be transmitted in an oral fashion. However, for those where the 'core' agreement between parallels is in opposition to the context that carries the stable element, he argues that the transmission process is oral. It appears that in effect Mournet is saying if there is large-scale agreement across an entire pericope then a literary transmission process is likely. On the other hand, if there is one element that is stable then Matthew and Luke may have received traditions that have been recast through oral tradition.<sup>57</sup> While this is possible, there is no reason why a writer working with written sources should not exhibit a greater degree of redactional recasting with some elements of the source material than with others. Thus Mournet assumes that the phenomenon he quantifies proves the result he is seeking to establish. Yet the weakness of his conclusions arises because of a lack of discussion about what the collected statistics actually reveal.

In an often neglected study McIver and Carroll conducted experiments to test notions of memory and oral transmission employing insights from Gospel studies and experimental psychology.<sup>58</sup> To describe one example, three groups were asked to write a summary of less than a page in length describing the sinking of the Titanic. The first group was instructed to do this without consulting any written sources. With the second group the members were all given the same written summary, but had to return it before composing their own summary. The third group was given the summary, but could retain it while they composed their own accounts. For the first group, in comparison with the 240-word prepared summary which they had not seen, on average there were only 13.9 words in common (such as 'Titanic', 'ship', 'iceberg', 'unsinkable') and the average length of the longest string of shared words between these subjects and the unseen summary was only 2.1 (and this included unremarkable phrases such as 'an iceberg'). For the second group an average of 49 out of 240 words were shared (or 20.4%), and the average length of the longest string of shared words was

<sup>57</sup>) Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, pp. 282–83.

<sup>58</sup>) R.K. McIver and M. Carroll, 'Experiments to Develop Criteria for Determining the Existence of Written Sources, and their Potential Implications for the Synoptic Problem', *JBL* 121 (2002): 667–87.

6 words. For the final group that retained the summary, 112 out of 240 words were shared and the average length of the longest string of shared words was 18.<sup>59</sup> Although there are differences between the likely mechanisms of the transmission of Jesus traditions and the constructed experiment, it is striking that the only group that displayed significant (although not extremely high) agreement with the written source was the one that had direct access to the summary.<sup>60</sup>

Discussions about the oral transmission of Jesus traditions are useful insofar as they remind scholars that it is likely that for some period, albeit relatively briefly, such traditions circulated orally. Unless one finds suggestions such as those of Gerhardsson persuasive, that Jesus formed a type of rabbinic *yeshiva* for his disciples whereby they committed fixed blocks of tradition to memory and used notebooks to record sayings and teachings, then an oral phase appears *a priori* likely.<sup>61</sup> However, here the utility of the theory ceases. First, contemporary scholarship has no access to the oral phase of the Jesus tradition apart from the surviving written Gospel sources. Secondly, inferences from Parry and Lord concerning the oral transmission of Homeric epics are not applicable. They based their research on empirically collected data that observed the oral performance of epic poetry that was generically related to Homeric material that was likewise seen to have a pre-literary phase of several centuries. However, the Gospels are not epic poems, there is no empirically genre-related data set from which one may infer shared features with the oral phase of Gospel traditions, the oral phase in relation to some Gospel traditions is perhaps at most two decades in duration so the evolutionary fixity of formulaic features is unlikely,

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<sup>59</sup>) McIver and Carroll, 'Experiments to Develop Criteria', pp. 668–73.

<sup>60</sup>) While there are experimental design features in the experiment that are open to challenge, the basic point appears to stand—long passages of verbatim agreement are most naturally explained by literary and not oral theories. For critiques of McIver and Carroll's experimental method see J.C. Poirier, 'Memory, Written Sources and the Synoptic Problem: A Response to Robert K. McIver and Marie Carroll', *JBL* 123 (2004): 315–22; also A. Gregory, 'What is Literary Dependence?', in P. Foster, A. Gregory, J.S. Kloppenborg and J. Verheyden (eds.), *New Studies in the Synoptic Problem: Oxford Conference, April 2008—Essays in Honour of Christopher M. Tuckett* (BETL, 339; Leuven: Peeters, 2011), p. 95.

<sup>61</sup>) See B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1961), esp. pp. 105, 157–63.

and those written Gospel traditions which may originate with Jesus have been translated from the Aramaic of the original oral event. Hence, even tentative insights into oral transmission of the Jesus tradition offer little assistance in moving the investigation of such traditions from the pre-literary post-Easter setting of early Jesus community back to the pre-Easter ministry of Jesus. Therefore, orality is an important theoretical insight into the transmission of Jesus traditions, which may reflect the reality of the way early believers shared stories in the thirties and forties of the first century. However, beyond the mere statement of that likely hypothesis, there is no meaningful access to the oral level. One must conclude that invoking notions of orality does not provide some unproblematic route back to the historical Jesus.

### Historicity and the Fourth Gospel

A few caveats may be helpful at the beginning of this section in order to highlight just some of the many complexities that surround the question of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel. First, it has long been recognized that the Markan chronology of a single-year ministry is likely to be a stylistic device that leads to the climatic events in Jerusalem during Passover, which is Jesus' only recorded visit to the city. Therefore, John's account of the ministry spread over three years, with more than one Jerusalem visit, has often been considered as a better approximation to the historical reality. Secondly, and by way of contrast although the value of the observation may be debated, the Jesus Seminar did not rank a single saying attributed to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel with either the red rating: 'Jesus undoubtedly said this or something very like it'; or the pink rating, 'Jesus probably said something like this'.<sup>62</sup> Thirdly, with the Gospel of John the author presents an interpretation of Jesus based on the post-Easter revelatory understanding of his significance. In other words, the purpose of the Fourth Gospel (as is also the case with the synoptic Gospels) is very different from the modern endeavour of historical Jesus research. This does not make the Fourth Gospel 'wrong', or intentionally misleading; it is simply written for a

<sup>62</sup> Actually the Jesus seminar offers two options for understanding the colour scheme. Here the second set of definitions is cited, both for its brevity and its impact. R.W. Funk, R.W. Hoover *et al.*, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), p. 36.

different purpose. It strives to address the needs of its readers who already believed the truth statements that were being articulated. However, there has recently been a strong trend in certain areas to rehabilitate the Fourth Gospel as a valuable source in historical Jesus research.

This attempted rehabilitation of John's Gospel as an 'historical' source has been largely driven by the 'John, Jesus, and History project' at SBL, under the leadership of Paul N. Anderson. It is important to recognize that Anderson's is not a lone voice, but in many ways it is useful to interact primarily with his work both because he is a leading proponent of this perspective, and because his published works are the most extensive on this topic.<sup>63</sup> However, other supplementary views will also be drawn into this section of the discussion where appropriate.<sup>64</sup> Anderson's approach is heavily theoretical, involving much thick description, encompassing a radical redefinition of how the concept of history should be understood.

One of Anderson's major proposals concerns the hotly debated question of the relationship between the Johannine form of the Jesus tradition and that of the synoptic Gospels. While acknowledging that the relationship is complex and that 'no monofaceted theory will suffice to account for the multiplicity of evidence and perplexities that present themselves', he ultimately argues for Johannine tradition not being 'derivative from the Synoptic traditions'.<sup>65</sup> However, for Anderson this does not relegate the importance of the Johannine traditions as a source of historical material. Anderson makes the following bold claims:

The Johannine tradition engaged the pre-Markan tradition in the oral stages of their developments and sought to augment and complement the Markan written Gospel. John's oral tradition was a formative source for Q, and of Luke's two volume project... In relation to the other Gospels John's was an engaged autonomy, and an overall theory of Johannine-Synoptic relations must include factors that were interfluent, formative and dialectical.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> P.N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (LNTS, 321; London: T&T Clark, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> For a range of views relating to this approach see the collection of essays by P.N. Anderson, F. Just and T. Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, p. 125.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, p. 125.

However, what is missing from Anderson's statement is the evidence to support such assertions. While this hypothesis is based on what he describes as the dialogical relationships between various sectors of the early church, it is apparent that what is lacking is any close textual analysis. Anderson goes on to lay a double charge at the feet of post-enlightenment biblical scholarship. He states that 'none of the planks in the two platforms of the de-historicization of John and the de-Johannification of Jesus is especially strong'.<sup>67</sup> Next, one is presented with meta-questions concerning the nature of history, and an inverted understanding of the placement of Johannine elements in the development of Jesus traditions. The result appears to be that features that most scholars would view as Johannine redactional elements, which stem from the time when the evangelist placed his own theological stamp on his source material, have instead been retrojected to a pre-synoptic oral stage. Consequently, on Anderson's reading, one must assume that the synoptic evangelists almost exclusively selected elements from a mixed pool of tradition that are devoid of what scholars have erroneously identified as Johannine redaction, while the author of the Fourth Gospel appears to have done the inverse—sifting out the 'synoptic sounding' Jesus.<sup>68</sup> Here one might wish to raise issues of plausibility. How likely is it that elements which are found only in the Fourth Gospel, which appear to bear the hallmarks of Johannine theology, and which make theological sense within the carefully structured narrative of John's Gospel, were not creations of the fourth evangelist? Instead it is suggested that these were somehow filtered out of a sea of pre-Gospel traditions, only to re-emerge

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<sup>67</sup>) Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, p. 191.

<sup>68</sup>) J.D. Crossan makes similar arguments for an entirely different purpose and based upon a different text. He argues that P.Egerton 2 contains traditions from the earliest available stratum of Jesus traditions when Johannine and Synoptic elements had not been separated. He states, 'considering the random and fragmentary nature of the text and the fact that each leaf gives a curious mix of both Johannine and Synoptic material, the Gospel gives important evidence of the stage in transmission prior to the separation of these twin traditions'. J.D. Crossan, *Four Other Gospels: Shadows on the Contours of Canon* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), p. 75. It is much more likely that it provides evidence of a far later stage when Synoptic and Johannine elements were combined. It is extremely unlikely both at a theoretical level that the pre-Gospel stage of the tradition was a time of un-separated Johannine and Synoptic elements, and also at the evidential level there is no support for this unless one makes unlikely assumptions about the dating of P.Egerton 2 and the pre-history of Johannine traditions.

half a century later in a pristine stream of proto-Johannine theology, where they found a willing evangelist who seamlessly combined such authentic pre-Gospel with his own theological agenda. It may be somewhat simpler to see the fourth evangelist more directly responsible for the shaping of such material.

Anderson, in some ways, sidesteps the standard historical questions posed by scholars. Instead, his approach is to call for a dialectic approach to what he calls 'reflective historiography'. Precisely what is dialectic is uncertain, but it appears to involve a synthetic approach that combines literary, theological and historical questions in order to produce his reflective historiographical aspiration. The most straightforward(!) articulation of the approach that Anderson advocates is to be found in one of his final statements, but the meaning remains less than obvious:

If Gospel historiography can be seen as a more dialogical enterprise—from epistemic origins to tradition-critical analyses—the John *versus* Jesus dichotomy might yet be supplanted by a more conjunctive and nuanced approach.

Might this lead to a *fourth* quest for Jesus? Only time will tell.<sup>69</sup>

It appears that Anderson is looking for philosophical notions about the nature of truth, if that is indeed the correct understanding of his 'epistemic origins', to be given priority over modernist understandings of history. This appears to be a substantially post-modern agenda that not only stresses the perspectival nature of history (a point that must be given its force), but also seeks to underscore the epistemological goal of probing the reality of truth as found in the depiction of the Johannine Jesus. It is instructive that Anderson does not envisage the possibility of a fourth quest for the *historical* Jesus, but rather simply a fourth quest for Jesus. One might be justified in inferring that the enterprise of dialogical historiography is actually *ahistorical* and in fact seeks to de-historicize Jesus, in the relentless quest to bring about the Johannification of Jesus.

It remains unclear how this new dialogical enterprise gives greater insight into the Jesus of history through its understanding of the Johannine tradition. Anderson's starting point is to list 31 accounts common to all

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<sup>69</sup> Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, p. 192 (original emphasis).

four Gospels. He suggests that they 'might serve as a skeletal framework upon which to construct an impression of Jesus and his ministry based upon similar accounts in all four Gospels'.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of the correctness of this assertion, here there appears to be no recourse to theories of dialogical historiography, just the widely held criterion of multiple attestation. Once again, a common feature of the three proposed approaches discussed here—memory, orality and the assertion of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel—is that none of their proponents shows to any significant degree how these theoretical insights actually assists in handling portions of the Gospel tradition. With the attempts to reclaim the Fourth Gospel as a significant historical source, the claims have largely remained at the theoretical level, although some studies have recently been published which attempt to 'showcase' the exegetical results of probing the historicity of John's Gospel.

In the second volume of essays from the John, Jesus, and History project it is possible to view the initial attempts to identify historically reliable traditions in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>71</sup> Thus in his introductory comments to the volume, Thatcher claims the essays in the volume promise 'to offer substantial new insights for studies of the historical Jesus'.<sup>72</sup> Thatcher continues by outlining what he sees as some of the specific historical insights. Abridging the full prose of his list, he makes the following points:

it provides perspectives on...the earliest kingdom movement: Jesus' connection to John the Baptist; the structure of the movement, as evident from Jesus' relationships with the first disciples; aspects of Jesus' healing ministry...; the complex interface between the kingdom of God and the dominion of Caesar... Jesus' ambivalent stance towards the Jerusalem temple and its weighty institutional apparatus, the aristocratic Jewish priesthood, the Mosaic law, and other core elements of the symbolic universe of the mainstream Judaism of his day.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*, pp. 128–29.

<sup>71</sup> P.N. Anderson, F. Just and T. Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History. II. Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> T. Thatcher, 'Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel: Phase Two of the John, Jesus, and History Project', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Thatcher, 'Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel', p. 3.

There are, however, problems here again both with the understanding of the nature of history, and also with the presentation of the purpose of the Fourth Gospel. In his opening statement, Thatcher rightly notes that John 'provides perspectives on' the various topics that are listed. The key issue relates to the degree that the literary product that is the Fourth Gospel has subsumed the traditions it received under its powerful and rich theological overlay. The fact that the Fourth Gospel talks about the 'kingdom movement' in its own terms, while radically reducing references to what many regard as one of Jesus' central theological categories 'the kingdom of God', suggests that the Fourth Gospel has become, at least at this point, more distant from the actual proclamation of Jesus. Similarly, Thatcher's observation that the Fourth Gospel has something to say about Jesus' connection to John is not necessarily an indication of the historical value of the Fourth Gospel, even given that such a connection was in fact historical reality. The reason for this is, unlike the synoptics that recount (and wrestle) with the event of Jesus being baptized by John, the Fourth Gospel not only deletes that scene leaving an opaque reference (Jn 1.33), but the theological goal is to make the Baptist subservient to Jesus, to have him predict Jesus' superiority (Jn 1.30) and to reduce his function to that of a mere witness to the fact that Jesus is the sent one.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, while these repackaged traditions undoubtedly have some basis in actual historical events, John's narrative is not shaped by a concern with the actual events, but instead it wishes readers to be guided by the theological insights the Gospel seeks to communicate. In this way, the historical value of the traditions contained in the Fourth Gospel is often several stages removed from that of parallel traditions in the synoptic accounts. The theological overlay placed upon Baptist traditions in John's Gospel is particularly acute. Thus J.P. Meier argues, 'special caution is called for when treating the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel'.<sup>75</sup> He continues his discussion on the Baptist in the Fourth Gospel by observing, 'while the Fourth Gospel is not to be rejected out of hand as a possible source for the historical Jesus, even its ardent admirers usually admit that the Evangelist's theology has massively reshaped the tradition

<sup>74</sup> On this last point see the helpful discussion in W.R.G. Loader, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Structure and Issues* (Beiträge zur biblischen Exegese und Theologie, 33; Peter Lang: Frankfurt am Main, 1988 [2nd edn 1992]), esp. p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> J.P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. II. *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), p. 118.

reflected in his Gospel'.<sup>76</sup> It is this failure to recognize this qualitative distinction between the synoptics and John's Gospel as historical sources that is not addressed in a meaningful way by the John, Jesus, and History project. This is not to suggest that the synoptics are pristine repositories of historically unproblematic traditions—quite the opposite. The reality is, however, that those problems are magnified and exacerbated in the Fourth Gospel. While the John, Jesus, and History project may present complex redefinitions of history and historicity, more significantly it is the project's failure to address fundamental historical questions, as normatively defined, which leads to a strong questioning of its claims.

When one looks at the individual studies in the second volume of essays, it becomes apparent that there is some confusion between those details that reflect a plausible historical context and arguing that a tradition has strong claim to reflect an actual saying or event from the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In effect this is akin to claiming that Jane Austen's novels are historically reliable because they are accurate reflections of the culture in which they were written. It is certainly the case that there are many traditions in the Fourth Gospel that are not historically anachronistic, many cast light on first-century Jewish customs and practices, and several brilliantly explicate important themes that emerged in Jesus' teaching, although these are often intertwined with Johannine theological perspectives. It is not necessary to discuss all thirty studies in the second volume of essays to illustrate this confusion: a couple of examples will suffice.

Discussing the uniquely Johannine claim of the Bethsaida origin of several of Jesus' disciples, Appold argues that 'there is nothing in the text to support the contention that the mention of Bethsaida is simply a literary or theological construction'.<sup>77</sup> He then asks the natural question concerning the synoptic tradition that Peter's home was in Capernaum, and goes so far as to acknowledge that this claim 'has a long tradition on its side'.<sup>78</sup> However he sides with the Johannine tradition. His 'reasons' are as follows:

Without going into detail, I would side with those who hold the pertinent Johannine verses to be an older authentic tradition that ultimately is

<sup>76</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, II, p. 118.

<sup>77</sup> M. Appold, 'Jesus' Bethsaida Disciples: A Study in Johannine Origins', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> Appold, 'Jesus' Bethsaida Disciples', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, p. 31.

compatible with the Synoptic versions. To unpack this issue further would go beyond the parameters of this essay.<sup>79</sup>

It is hard to believe that this can be presented as historical argument. There are two assertions, that the Johannine tradition is older, and that it is compatible with the synoptic tradition. Neither of these claims is substantiated, despite the fact that they are integral to the central thesis of the discussion that the Bethsaida origin has a greater claim to historicity. Instead readers are told that 'to unpack the issue further would go beyond the parameters of the essay'. Some might say it would have been helpful if the claim had been unpacked to any degree. However, the reasons or arguments are not provided to explain why the Johannine claim of a Bethsaida origin should be preferred as historically reliable in comparison to the synoptic tradition. Instead, having asserted the historical reliability of the Johannine tradition, Appold devotes the rest of the essay to teasing out implications of that claim.

A second example of a different order is Urban von Walde's discussion of the archaeological evidence for the Pool of Siloam. This discussion is rich and informative. Any objective observer would concur that the existence of the Pool is established. The fundamental question that remains, however, concerns the consequences of this for the overall claims of the John, Jesus, and History project. Von Walde lays out three benefits of his discussion.

The first benefit from the discovery is the simple confirmation that the Pool in the Gospel of John is not fictional. But in one sense that was already known—or at least half the story (the northern pool) was known.

The second benefit is that we now have much more precise knowledge about the nature of what actually existed at Siloam...

But why did Jesus send the man to the Pool of Siloam to wash?... To send a man to a *miqveh* would be understandable, since the man would be presumed to be in need of ritual cleansing. To send the man to the *Pool of Siloam* would be all the more appropriate, since it was the place par excellence for cleansing.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Appold, 'Jesus' Bethsaida Disciples', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, p. 31.

<sup>80</sup> U. von Walde, 'The Pool of Siloam: The Importance of the New Discoveries for Our Understanding of Ritual Immersion in Late Second Temple Judaism and the Gospel of John', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, pp. 172–73.

It is possible to concur with all of von Walde's assessments: the Siloam Pool did exist, knowledge of its topography is clarified by archaeology, and the purpose in the Johannine narrative in having Jesus command the man to wash at this location may indeed have something to do with ritual cleansing. However, how does any of this contribute to key historical questions pertaining to whether Jesus was ever at the Pool of Siloam, whether he encountered a blind man there, and whether he successfully healed him? Von Walde's excellent study does clarify the purpose of the story within the context of the literary composition that is the Fourth Gospel. However, it provides no greater traction for determining the answer to what is the key historical Jesus question: namely, whether the events 'took place', or if they were constructed as a vehicle for John's theological claim that Jesus is the one who does the work of his Father (Jn 5.17, 19).

Moreover, one is perplexed by Anderson's assessment of von Walde's essay. He states, '[w]hile strict advocates of naturalistic measures of historicity will demur at the healings of Jesus in all four canonical Gospels, the archaeological backdrop of Jesus' Jerusalem ministry in John presents a Jesus every bit as historically engaged as the Synoptic Jesus'.<sup>81</sup> Contrary to Anderson the central question is not about naturalistic interpretations of the possibility of miracles; it concerns an assessment of the historical value of this specific tradition. The archaeological backdrop does not 'prove' the historical veracity of the events that are reported in John 5, any more than a geographical reference to a known location where a miracle is reported in the synoptics proves that the miracle actually happened. It is possible to construct a similar argument in relation to the healing of a paralytic by Jesus in Capernaum (Mk 2.1–12). Following the logic of the above argument, since Capernaum was an actual population centre in the first century, therefore the miracle must be historical. This is of course a *non sequitur*. Furthermore, tossing the word 'historically' into the phrase 'John presents a Jesus every bit as historically engaged as the Synoptic Jesus' has little value. What does this mean? (Perhaps that John portrays a Jesus who is presented as acting in history, but the synoptics do the same.) Bandyng around the word 'historical' does not turn the tradition under discussion into an 'actual event'.

The final example is not drawn from the second volume of the John, Jesus, and History project, but from Anderson's article on the Johannine

<sup>81</sup> P.N. Anderson, 'Aspects of Historicity in John 5–12: A Response', in Anderson, Just and Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History*, II, p. 232.

*Egō Eimi* sayings.<sup>82</sup> Anderson outlines his methodological task in the following manner.

[T]he character and function of memory will be considered in the perspective of cognitive-critical analysis, suggesting a critical alternative to the flat denigration of Johannine historicity. As a result, more adequate understandings of historicity itself, in light of critical theory, shed new light on the origin and development of these sayings in ways that have not yet been adequately explored—informing also our quests for the Jesus of history, not despite the Johannine Gospel, but precisely because of it.<sup>83</sup>

The redefinition of 'historicity' that is required in order to advance claims concerning Johannine elements being related to the Jesus of history is again palpable. In order to validate the Johannine ἐγώ εἰμι formulation as having some connection with the historical Jesus, Anderson considers not only this expression, but also the uses of εἰμι where ἐγώ is understood.<sup>84</sup>

Anderson's first move is to observe that in the synoptics I-am sayings are accounted for otherwise. Namely where 'associations with Moses and the burning bush are declared by Jesus in Mark' as well as passages where 'Jesus is accused of blasphemy, so bolstering associations with Yahweh', third 'epiphanic or theophanic association with I-am sayings...presented as anagnorisis scenes', fourth 'agency associations', fifth texts in John and Mark that 'appear possessive of theophanic overtones (Jn 6.20; 8.58; 18.5-8; Mk 6.50)'.<sup>85</sup> Again, Anderson's arguments appear to be the result of what many would see as category confusions. He promises his readers to do one thing—to establish the historical basis of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* sayings—then he moves on to deflect attention by discussing something else at length with convoluted and complex language that looks like an exercise in linguistic sophistry, and finally he claims the historicity of the Johannine element under discussion is proven. He then simply asserts his conclusions repeatedly: 'it is nearly impossible to distinguish the words of Jesus from those of the Johannine evangelist'<sup>86</sup> or '[d]espite the

<sup>82</sup>) P.N. Anderson, 'The Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings in Cognitive-Critical Perspective', *JSHJ* 9 (2011): 139–206.

<sup>83</sup>) Anderson, 'Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings', pp. 143–44.

<sup>84</sup>) Anderson, 'Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings', p. 148.

<sup>85</sup>) Anderson, 'Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings', p. 165.

<sup>86</sup>) Anderson, 'Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings', p. 165.

Johannine distinctive it cannot be said that the Johannine Jesus uniquely makes I-am claims; so does the Synoptic Jesus—especially in Mark.<sup>87</sup> From these assertions Anderson claims either ‘dialogical’<sup>88</sup> or ‘bi-optic perspectives’<sup>89</sup> on the Gospel tradition as a whole. Finally, applying these redefined notions of historicity he then claims the Fourth Gospel to be historical alongside the synoptic accounts. Hence he concludes that ‘one of the central bases for discounting Johannine historicity is itself considerably degraded, forcing Jesus and Gospels scholars alike to rethink the character of history, memory, and development with the earliest Jesus traditions—of which John is one.’<sup>90</sup>

However, throughout this long discussion there is little that mainstream historical Jesus scholars would recognize in the method being employed. Despite Anderson’s claims to the contrary, the Johannine ἐγώ εἰμι formula, which he is trying to establish as being closely connected with the historical Jesus, is not only distinctive, but unique to the Fourth Gospel. This leads to the normal supposition that it is likely part of the Johannine theological vocabulary, which has been placed on the lips of Jesus by the fourth evangelist. One may appreciate the Johannine enterprise, and see that through this creative reshaping of the tradition John has bequeathed to his community and successive generations a wonderfully rich theological resource. By contrast, however, Anderson’s claims for the historicity of the Johannine sayings are unsubstantiated, counterintuitive, unnecessarily complex, and simply do not follow.

There is, therefore, no strong or compelling example provided to illustrate how Anderson’s category of dialogical historicity actually elucidates his contention that such an approach adds something valid to historical Jesus research. Nor, contrary to the central claim of the John, Jesus, and History project can one detect any way in which the new terminological redefinitions assist historical Jesus scholars to make deeper or more substantial claims about the events or sayings that may have originated within the context of that life and teaching of Jesus during the period of his ministry. Therefore, what the John, Jesus, and History project has failed to provide is even a single, compelling example of a previously unrecognized Johannine tradition that can now be convincingly connected to the historical Jesus

<sup>87</sup> Anderson, ‘Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings’, p. 195.

<sup>88</sup> Anderson, ‘Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings’, p. 204.

<sup>89</sup> Anderson, ‘Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings’, p. 167.

<sup>90</sup> Anderson, ‘Origin and Development of the Johannine *Egō Eimi* Sayings’, p. 165.

in light of the heavy methodological discussions undertaken by the group. The challenge to Anderson is to do this without contorted redefinitions of historicity, to stay focused on the Johannine tradition that is under discussion, and to resist the temptation to assert the new method has 'degraded' understandings of history thereby creating a meaningless category into which various Johannine elements are lumped, being labelled as 'historical' in accord with these most unconventional definitions, rather than being based upon more normative perspectives of historical Jesus research.

The John, Jesus, and History project is not the only recent approach to the claims for the historicity of John's Gospel. Craig Blomberg has argued for the historical reliability of the Fourth Gospel, yet without recourse to redefining historiography.<sup>91</sup> However, there are many shared assumptions between Blomberg and Anderson. First, in term of inter-Gospel relationships, Blomberg states that,

John was familiar with many if not all of the contents of the Gospels that preceded him even if he did not borrow from them in a strict literary fashion...and [from] his lack of literary dependence on the written form of the Synoptics, we can fairly speak of John as an important, independent witness to the words and works of the historical Jesus.<sup>92</sup>

So here Blomberg and Anderson are in agreement that John is not based on the synoptic Gospels themselves, but on the traditions upon which they draw. Also in common with Anderson, Blomberg seeks to create a shared core of parallels between John and the synoptic Gospels that can thus be underpinned by the criteria of multiple attestation. However this criterion is substantially redefined, so that it is not necessary for the same event to be reported in multiple sources. His definition is that multiple attestation 'includes not merely the same saying or episode repeated in more than one independent historical source, but the recurrence of similar teachings, events, themes, motifs, or literary forms across the sources'.<sup>93</sup> This appears to be a somewhat idiosyncratic understanding of the criterion of multiple attestation. The implication would be that if a single kingdom of God saying or parable were considered authentic, then its generic, thematic or pedagogical similarity with other kingdom sayings would authenticate all

<sup>91</sup> C.L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel* (Leicester: Apollos, 2001).

<sup>92</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, p. 49.

<sup>93</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, p. 64.

other examples. In effect this would rule out the possibility that any saying in the Gospels could have originated outside of the ministry of Jesus, for nearly every saying (it is hard to think of exceptions; perhaps Lk. 23.31) has some degree of coherence with other sayings in the tradition. Consequently, the precision of the tool of multiple attestation has been blunted to such a degree by Blomberg's redefinition so as to render it virtually useless.

However, one of the particular strengths of Blomberg's work is that he provides a commentary to the entire Gospel, which focuses on the claims of historicity for each pericope. This allows for meaningful interaction and debate concerning whether there is an historical dimension to the story or saying being narrated. An important example for Blomberg, which he describes as 'one of the most difficult questions facing a study of the historicity of John',<sup>94</sup> relates to the Temple cleansing incident. In summary, he offers three possibilities: the synoptic chronology is correct and John has moved the incident to announce the meaning of Jesus' ministry; or, the Johannine placement is correct and the synoptics have moved the story to fit their schematized chronology; or, Jesus cleansed the temple twice—once near the beginning and once near the end of his ministry. Blomberg leans strongly in favour of the last explanation highlighting the differences between the synoptic and Johannine forms of the tradition. While disagreeing with Blomberg's conclusion,<sup>95</sup> he at least handles actual examples of tradition in a way that permits meaningful debate concerning the historicity of the events narrated in the Fourth Gospel. A second significant historical problem Blomberg addresses is why Jesus' language in the farewell discourses is so different from the sayings of the Jesus of the synoptics? Blomberg has no problem acknowledging these differences as being present in the farewell discourse. In fact his method is not to deny their existence, but to assert that it is self-evidently the case that Jesus would speak differently in such a context.

Thus if, in stretches of the farewell discourse from this point onwards, we find fewer linguistic or thematic parallels to the Synoptics, we should not be entirely surprised. Once John has determined to supply considerably

<sup>94</sup>) Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, p. 88.

<sup>95</sup>) At a hypothetical level the theory of two cleansings is not impossible. However, it is based on the commonality of elements in both accounts that appear to make it more plausible that a single tradition has been redacted in two different ways to serve the respective theological agendas of the Johannine evangelist and the synoptic evangelists.

more detail concerning Jesus' teaching on this night, certain distinctives were bound to emerge. When these distinctives reappear in John's epistles, he is at least as likely to have reused them because he learned them from Jesus as to have invented them and retrojected them on to Christ's lips.<sup>96</sup>

Here Blomberg at least provides a specific argument that can be discussed. The issue is whether distinctive language is a sign of a different context, or a reflection of a creative evangelist. Moreover, one must ask whether it is more likely that an authentic strand of the Jesus tradition is contained in the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine letters despite its discordance with the synoptic tradition; or, alternatively, whether this distinctive voice of Jesus was created within the Johannine branch of the early Jesus movement to address particular pastoral and pedagogical needs. The answer is not the key issue for present purposes, but one can see that since Blomberg discusses specific texts and issues, this allows for robust historical discussion that is pertinent to the historical Jesus question.

By contrast, other more recent approaches to historiography and the Fourth Gospel actually appear to close-down meaningful historical debate. This is because they redefine historicity as some meta-historical enquiry that transcends the debate concerning individual traditions, and they appear to hide behind the pretense of considering more fundamental epistemic questions without ever really clarifying what the significance of such questions might be for historical Jesus research, or how they might be answered. As an outside observer, it appears that key studies published by the John, Jesus, and History project have become so convinced that the central premise that the Fourth Gospel is a valid source for historical Jesus research is correct, that the energy is being expended on creating a language which is in essence actually *ahistorical*. What is lacking, however, is close exegetical work, and an openness to test the hypothesis in line with more centrist understandings of historiography.

## Conclusions

Negative academic papers are never a pleasure to write, but sometimes dead-ends need to be shut down. This discussion does not seek to devalue the insights of social memory theory, or understandings of oral

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<sup>96</sup> Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, pp. 200–201.

transmission of traditions, or the necessary task of grappling with the historicity of the Fourth Gospel. Rather, it questions the applicability of the first two methods to historical Jesus research, and frankly it is baffled by what is described as 'historical' in the so-called John, Jesus, and History project. Anderson rails against the 'dehistoricization of John', asserting that one 'could argue a sustained case that John contributes key elements, not only of the historical and political outline of Jesus' ministry, but also of the spiritual character of his work'.<sup>97</sup> However, he never seems to move from what is theoretically possible to providing the concrete arguments and convincing examples. The critique raised here is not directed against investigating the possible historicity of the traditions contained in the Fourth Gospel, but it questions the method being proposed by Anderson and others, which in essence appears to nullify 'history' as a meaningful category.

Problems of another order beset the application of memory theory and the notion of oral transmission of tradition to historical Jesus research. First, in both cases, those who apply the respective forms of theory described here do not appear to be cognizant of the fact that within the disciplines from which these theories are imported, the forms used as a break-through in New Testament studies are seen as being outmoded and largely flawed. For several decades, experimental psychologists and memory theorists have repeatedly commented on the politicization of social memory, and observed the way that institutional needs shape forms of recollection. The dominant presentist theory is particularly strong in emphasizing a strong disconnect between social event and social memory.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, even the most recent application of theories of oral tradition in the field of New Testament studies, such as the work of Dunn and Mournet,<sup>99</sup> are locked into the Parry model. These discussions appear unaware that there are substantial critiques against Parry's theory within the field of Homeric studies, from where such ideas emerged. However, what is perhaps more troubling than this lack of support for these theories within the disciplines where they originated is the lack of textual examples where social memory theory

<sup>97</sup> P.N. Anderson, 'Why This Study is Needed, and Why it is Needed Now', in P.N. Anderson, F. Just and T. Thatcher (eds.), *John, Jesus, and History. I. Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 13.

<sup>98</sup> Here see the general arguments of Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*.

<sup>99</sup> Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, pp. 73–78; and Mournet, *Oral Tradition and Literary Dependency*, pp. 54–99.

or orality is applied to sets of traditions in a manner that demonstrates the utility of these methods for historical Jesus research.<sup>100</sup>

What then is left of historical Jesus study? Perhaps one may critique this discussion as an ossified defence of form- and redaction-criticism. That was not the intention although it may be the outcome, since by implication this discussion suggests that such methods, perhaps modified, are still the most appropriate tools for historical Jesus research, and indeed that they are not fossilized. Fundamentally, what is being advocated is that the choice of methods must be appropriate to the textual evidence that survives in both canonical and non-canonical sources for making historical judgements about the sayings and actions of Jesus of Nazareth. Concern about the limitation of the results should not blindly drive investigators to apply methodologies that claim larger bodies of traditions as 'historical', if such interdisciplinary approaches do not fit the data. Rather, the appropriate methods must be applied, and then the results should be allowed to emerge. The methods that are used should of course be critiqued and refined, and that is what this discussion has attempted to show. While the applicability of the three approaches discussed here has been questioned, the desire is not to 'close-down' historical Jesus research. Instead, it is hoped that scholars will more actively pursue this fundamental branch of New Testament studies, confidently using methods developed within the discipline as well as those imported from outside, if these can be demonstrated to be appropriate to the analysis of the data. If the results that emerge appear meagre, that may in fact reflect the nature of the evidence. However, hopefully that can be accepted without the temptation to fudge the default settings.

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<sup>100</sup> For a helpful overview see Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, pp. 435–62.

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