

1 What Is a Gospel?

LOVEDAY ALEXANDER

Jesus said to his disciples: Make me a comparison, tell me what I am like. Simon Peter said to him: You are like a righteous angel.

Matthew said to him: You are like a man who is a wise philosopher.

Thomas said to him: Master, my mouth will not at all be capable of saying what you are like.

(*Gospel of Thomas* 13)¹

What is a gospel? In many ways the question echoes Jesus' question in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*: make me a comparison, tell me what I am like. Peter and Matthew both take the question at its face value. They look for points of comparison in the two intersecting cultural worlds of the gospels. Matthew uses the categories of the Greek world: Jesus is a philosopher, a kind of intellectual guru. Peter's answer belongs to the cultural world of the Bible, a model of holiness that is at once ethical and supernatural: Jesus is a righteous angel, a messenger sent direct from God. But Thomas resists the temptation to look for cultural analogies. For him, Jesus is *sui generis*, he is simply himself, he is not 'like' anyone else. And Thomas's reward is to be taken aside and given an insight into the hidden wisdom that Jesus whispers to the chosen few. The only trouble is that the secret *gnōsis* (knowledge) he gains is so extraordinary, so far removed from human categories of understanding, that he will never be able to communicate it to anyone else: 'Now when Thomas came back to his companions, they asked him, What did Jesus say to you? Thomas said to them, If I tell you one of the words that he said to me, you will take up stones and cast them at me, and a fire will come forth from the stones and burn you up.'

The story encapsulates neatly some of the dilemmas of contemporary genre criticism of the gospels. Some scholars stress their Jewish

¹ *The Gospel of Thomas*, trans. B. N. Metzger, cited from Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis quattuor evangeliorum*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1976), appendix 1, 519.

character, their continuity with biblical narrative patterns. Others (increasingly) locate their comparisons in the cultural world of the Greeks and Romans. And there are those, like Thomas, who stress the uniqueness of the gospels, their *sui generis* character, and refuse to make any comparisons at all with other literary genres. This means that they risk Thomas's fate of achieving understanding at the cost of cutting off channels of communication with the rest of the world, for if the gospel is to communicate, it must find some cultural common ground with those outside the charmed circle of the already convinced. But even though Thomas's solution may be risky, it is surely the right place to start. Before we can begin to ask what the gospels are *like* – that is, what literary genres they resemble – we need to make an attempt to understand them in their own terms. We need to ask what shape they are, what they are about, how they are put together, how they work.

WHAT ARE THE GOSPELS?

The four canonical gospels (which I use here as the basis for a working definition²) have many individual characteristics. But they also have much in common, so much so that their traditional titles present them as one gospel in four forms: *the* gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.³ In generic terms, it is this common core that we need to analyse if we are to arrive at a working internal definition of gospel as a genre.

All four gospels are prose narratives of monograph length, about the amount that would fit into a single scroll (Luke alone adds a second volume). All are focused intensively on the person of Jesus. Mark's opening, 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mk 1.1), seems to be paradigmatic in this respect; later Christian texts retain the title 'Acts' for stories of apostles and others, and 'Gospel' (*euangelion*, 'good news') for stories focused on Jesus. And the focus on Jesus is much more than skin-deep. Richard Burridge notes that an unusually high proportion of verbs in all the gospels have Jesus as their grammatical subject.⁴ The proportion is even higher at the level of the individual episode. In the 'ministry' section of Mark's gospel (the main

narrative before the passion) Jesus is the narrative subject of virtually every pericope. Where he is not the subject of the action, he is its chief object, and increasingly so during the passion narrative. In Mark's gospel, there is only one episode where Jesus is completely 'off stage' and that is the account of Herod's execution of John the Baptist, a narrative filler put in to bridge a gap where Jesus and his disciples are temporarily separated (Mk 6.14–29). Thus, in structural terms, Jesus comes across as the hero of the core gospel story to an unusually high degree: he is the centre not only of the story as a whole but of virtually every individual episode.

The Herod episode illustrates another important structural feature. The presence of the disciples as observers is somehow necessary for the narrative to proceed. When the disciples and Jesus are apart, there is nothing to report. In this sense, Jesus can scarcely be said to have a 'private' existence in the gospels. Although the evangelists speak as omniscient narrators, there are relatively few points where they claim the privilege of omniscience to report the inner psychological states of their characters. Occasionally, private thoughts are externalized as overheard soliloquies (e.g. In 12.27–29; Lk 10.18–22). Peter, James and John sometimes function as select witnesses for the more private moments in Jesus' life (Mk 1.36; 5.37; 9.2; 14.33). But in general, the core gospel narratives concern public events, theoretically available to public view.⁵

This story is linked in specific but not detailed fashion to a particular time and place. In Mark's version, Galilee and Jerusalem, Herod and Pontius Pilate provide the barest anchor-points in the ancient Mediterranean world. Matthew extends the story's horizons eastwards (the magi) and southwards to Egypt (Mt 2.1–18), and ends with a vision of worldwide mission (Mt 28.20). Luke's horizons look west, with the Roman Empire providing the political and chronological framework for his narrative (Lk 2.1–2; 3.1–2) – a framework which becomes progressively more explicit in Acts. John adds more internal precision, in both time and space. But the core gospel narrative seems to be able to subsist with a minimum of geography and chronology. Luke 3.23 gives Jesus' age as 'around thirty' at the point where he emerges onto the public stage as an itinerant preacher. From this point on, the narrative is episodic but continuous. Individual episodes are loosely linked, but

² For a full discussion of the term 'gospel' in second-century texts, see Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press, 1990), chap. 1. See further Chapters 2 and 11 of this volume.

³ Irenaeus *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8.

⁴ Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 4rd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 190–1, 216–7.

⁵ The obvious exceptions are the temptation stories of Matthew 4 and Luke 4, which have no human observers. But these narratives are still structured as a dialogue with an external character (Satan).

precise time-notes are few and far between: only Luke anchors his story into world history with a real date (Lk 3.1-2).

The shape of the story is broadly biographical, tracing the hero's public ministry in a roughly chronological sequence covering three years of his life at most, and culminating in his trial and death. Only two of the gospels, Matthew and Luke, have birth stories, and neither has much information about his childhood. Structurally, then, Jesus' story can be told without a birth narrative or a family history, whereas John's baptism (which is in all four canonical gospels) is somehow essential.⁶ The story itself falls into two uneven parts: Jesus' ministry (based in Galilee), and the events leading up to his death (in Jerusalem). The ministry is narrated via a loose-knit series of anecdotes of Jesus' words (parables, sayings, discourses) and actions (many but not all miraculous). The arrangement of the teaching material varies: Matthew and Luke share much that is not in Mark (though they arrange it differently); John has fewer episodes and longer discourses. But it is artificial to draw too firm a distinction between word and deed: even Mark has some teaching (cf. Mk 4.1-41, 7.1-23, 13.3-37), and many of the 'action' stories are structured around a theological point (e.g. Mk 3.1-6). So Luke's description of his first volume as an account of 'all that Jesus began both to do and to teach' (Acts 1.1) is a fair summary of the core gospel narrative. Finding a more precise narrative structure within that loose framework is difficult. All the synoptic gospels put the call of the disciples near the beginning, and mark some kind of turning-point at Caesarea Philippi (Mk 8.27-30 and parallels); all of them mark an increase in the opposition to Jesus as the narrative progresses. But individual episodes are connected to this outline in a flexible manner which suggests that the evangelists felt free to exercise a certain amount of individual licence in the overall construction of their narratives.

Things are very different when we get to the passion narratives. In all four gospels, the last week of Jesus' life occupies a disproportionate amount of narrative space – a quarter of the whole story in Luke and Matthew, up to a third in Mark and John. Here the pace slows down in an intense and highly dramatic presentation of a series of linked scenes as Jesus progressively moves from active to passive mode until the final moment of his death. All the evangelists have prepared the reader for this final scene through prediction and dramatic anticipation. And all the gospels agree that Jesus' story does not end with his death. All have

descriptions of his disciples and friends visiting his tomb after his death and finding it empty, and all except Mark add stories in which the resurrected Jesus appears to his friends and talks with them.⁷ The narrative focus moves from Jesus to his followers and their varied emotions of sorrow, doubt and joy.

Descriptively, then, we could say that a gospel is a loose-knit, episodic narrative relating the words and deeds of a Galilean prophet called Jesus, culminating in his trial and death and ending with varied reports of his resurrection. But we should also add the fact that there are four of them: four accounts of the same events, with large degrees of both overlap and variety.⁸ Sometimes all four (most often the three synoptics) tell the same story in more or less the same words. Sometimes, there will be a different location, or a different audience, or a different punchline. The order of events seems to be flexible, particularly in Jesus' Galilean ministry: episodes can be re-arranged in different ways, teaching can be inserted at different points. John's gospel ends up with a quite distinct narrative texture (as well as a distinct chronology), though the overall shape is essentially the same as that of the synoptics. Whatever way we look at it, the fourfold gospel, recognized and valued by the church from early on, is a significant literary phenomenon in its own right. If the writers of the four gospels had no contact with each other, the similarities are remarkable: if they did know each other, it is the differences that are remarkable. Any analysis of the individual gospels must also take account of the relationship between them, with its peculiar combination of fluidity and fixity, coherence and individuation.

THE GOSPELS AS ORAL TRADITIONAL LITERATURE

Many of these features can be paralleled in folk narrative. In folklore (unlike the literary novel), 'the story is told only for the sake of the events'.⁹ Folk narrators and their audiences are interested only in the action: descriptive details about the outward appearance of the characters or their surroundings do not form part of the story unless

⁷ Mk 16.1-8; Mt 28.1-10, 16-20; Lk 24.1-11, 13-35, 36-49; Jn 20.1-10, 11-18, 19-29; 21.1-23. Luke alone narrates Jesus' ascent to heaven, in Luke 24.50-3 and Acts 1.1-11 (but cf. Jn 20.17).

⁸ Cf. Chapter 2 and Stephen C. Barton, 'Many Gospels, One Jesus?', in Markus Bockmuehl, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 170-83.

⁹ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 21.

⁶ Cf. also Acts 1.22, 10.37, 13.24.

they play a role in the action. Mark Powell observes a similar descriptive economy in gospel narrative: 'If the gospels were more like modern novels we would probably read about the sound of "waves lapping at the shore of the Sea of Galilee" and the feel of "coarse, dry sand trod underfoot in the Judean desert." Such luxury of narration is not to be found. Textures, sounds, smells, and tastes are usually left to our imagination.'¹⁰ The narrative structure is focused on the hero: 'Action is performed in accordance with the movement of the hero, and what lies outside this movement lies outside the narrative.'¹¹ Often, the action proceeds through a series of encounters between the hero and the groups or individuals with whom he interacts, and it is through these public interactions that his personality is defined:

In folklore everyone is assigned a role in the narrative and there are no extra characters. All will act, and only in terms of their actions do they interest the listener. For this reason folklore tends to have only one protagonist. One character is central, and around him and his actions are grouped other people, his opponents, his helpers, or those whom he saves.¹²

We could illustrate this type of narrative structure from the popular English Robin Hood cycle. At the core of the story lies a traditional cycle of encounter tales, building up a fluid but coherent picture of a folk hero located securely if imprecisely in time (the reign of King John) and space (Sherwood Forest). He has his supporters in the community, and 'those whom he saves' through his trademark activity of 'robbing the rich to help the poor'. He has his faithful band of helpers (Little John, Maid Marian) and his implacable opponents (the Sheriff of Nottingham). In the original ballads, his story is told through a disconnected series of encounters: 'Robin Hood and Little John', 'Robin Hood and Friar Tuck'. The sequence of individual episodes is not important. Over the last two centuries, novelists and film-makers have made numerous attempts to produce a coherent narrative, providing Robin Hood with precisely the features modern readers look for: coherent narrative, psychological depth, romantic interest, links with social and political history.

It is not too difficult to parallel this process in the development of the gospel tradition. Gospel films and 'Life of Jesus' novels create a meta-narrative which tries to supply the kind of psychological information or background detail that is lacking in the canonical gospels. Matthew and Luke already feel the need to include a miraculous birth, a family history and (in the temptation stories) a rare example of a private spiritual conflict. The written gospel shape comes into being by imposing order and sequence on an essentially fluid, episodic cycle of traditional units which have a life of their own, both before and after they are taken up into the literary tradition. Narrative sequences within the gospels (apart from the passion narratives) are treated as essentially provisional, and can be readily abandoned and re-formed by successive writers. But the core gospel tradition lying behind these varied literary forms has a strong character of its own, which imposes its own rhythms on the written gospels. It is not simply a random series of recollections but a structured oral cycle which builds up a vital and coherent picture of the hero through a series of encounters with 'his opponents, his helpers, or those whom he saves'.

The totality of the gospel tradition, with its duality between oral and written, fluidity and fixity, thus exemplifies many of the features of oral traditional literature. The study of oral traditional literature has played an important role in the development of gospel studies, and was a major influence on the pioneers of form criticism such as Hermann Gunkel and Martin Dibelius. Such cross-cultural analogies have obvious pitfalls, but they also have great potential in allowing us to articulate and analyse the dynamics of oral tradition in a variety of cultures outside the Bible. One of the most significant is Albert Lord's 1978 study 'The Gospels As Oral Traditional Literature', which draws on insights gained by Homeric scholars from the study of contemporary oral epic poetry from Yugoslavia, Turkey and Finland.¹³ Lord points out that oral tradition should not be thought of simply as a series of unconnected units. The individual episodes presuppose the existence of a connected narrative, a cycle of tales related to a particular individual. The gospels, Lord suggests, belong to 'a tradition of oral life story or biography... [which] presupposes the existence of both tellers and audience as well as of stories told'.¹⁴ As with Robin Hood, this 'life story' is rarely told in

¹⁰ Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990), 71.

¹¹ Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, 22.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Albert Lord, 'The Gospels As Oral Traditional Literature', in William O. Walker, ed., *The Relationships among the Gospels: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1978), 33-91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

the form of a single, unidirectional narrative from birth to death: 'the separate elements or incidents in the life of the hero form individual poems or sagas'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the 'life' – the sequence from birth to death – is in some sense implicit in the individual episodes. These units can be combined in different ways in oral performance¹⁶ – and, eventually, in written versions of the stories 'by people who were linked to the oral tradition either by actually being a part of it, or, perhaps more probably, by being close to it'.¹⁷

But 'oral traditional literature' is a mode of composition and performance, not a genre. Cross-cultural analogies may help us to understand how such traditions tend to operate, but they cannot in themselves tell us what kind of tradition the gospel is. To find comparative material for this kind of narrative in literature contemporary with the gospels we need to look at a very different kind of tradition.

THE GOSPELS AS SCHOOL TRADITION

The earliest witnesses to the gospels already testify to the duality we have noticed between written and oral, between the fixed forms of the written gospels and the living voice of oral tradition. Justin Martyr, writing in Rome in the mid-second century, quotes gospel material from 'the memoirs [*apomnēmonēmatā*] of the apostles, which are called gospels [*euangelia*]', and describes how the gospels are used in Christian meetings:

On the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things.¹⁸

The two names Justin uses for the gospels are revealing. They are called, he says, *euangelia*, gospels. This word (literally 'good news') was used in a variety of secular contexts, including a civic decree authorizing the celebration of the emperor's birthday, but there is no record that it

was ever the name of a literary genre outside Christian circles.¹⁹ But Justin himself calls them *apomnēmonēmatā*, the 'remembrances' or 'memoirs' of the apostles. The term nicely encapsulates the duality of the gospel tradition. At its heart is the root *mnēmē*, 'memory': these are stories which are based (or claim to be based) on apostolic memory. But the verb *mnēmoneuōin* means more than the mental act of remembering: it involves the actualizing of memory through public speech, the act of mentioning or recounting what one remembers.²⁰ Thus *apomnēmonēmatā* are not simply random memories but *memoirs*, *remembrances*, memory codified, structured and articulated: an *apomnēmonēuma* (in the singular) is an anecdote, an oft-told tale focused on a particular individual. *Apomnēmonēmatā* suggests a *collection of anecdotes* assembled into a written text – though not necessarily into a unified narrative.

Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in the early second century, displays the ambiguities of the word-group well. Papias himself is conscious that the apostolic generation is dying out, and that he himself is neither a hearer nor an eyewitness. So he takes steps to bridge the gap: he seeks out and questions chance visitors, collects and passes on traditions about gospel authors and tradents (Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.2–5). For Papias, therefore, it is important that Mark, who was not an apostle himself, is connected to Jesus at one remove via Peter. And what Mark committed to writing was Peter's *apomnēmonēumatā*, his store of anecdotes, his stories of Jesus' words and actions already shaped as units of teaching material (*didaskaliai*) formulated for specific needs (*pros tas chreias*).²¹ If Papias seems slightly apologetic about this, it is precisely because Mark's written gospel preserves the essentially oral form of Peter's *apomnēmonēumatā*. Mark wrote the stories up 'just as Peter recounted them', without turning them into a proper *synaxis*, a real literary composition. Clement of Alexandria adds a few circumstantial details to the picture: it was Peter's hearers in Rome who begged Mark to put 'the unwritten teaching of the divine proclamation' into writing, 'so that they might have a written record [*hypomnēma*] of the teachings

¹⁹ On the history of the term, see Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, chap. 1.

²⁰ See further Loveday Alexander, 'Memory and Tradition in the Hellenistic Schools', in Werner Kelber and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspective* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2009), 113–53.

²¹ Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.15: Papias 'hōsa emnēmōnēusen should be translated not 'what he [Mark] remembered' but 'what he [Peter] recounted' (Alexander, 'Memory and Tradition', 118).

¹⁵ Ibid., 39–40.

¹⁶ Ibid., 41–44.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ Justin, *First Apology*, 67, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1885; reprinted 1993); cf. 65–66; *Dialogue*, 105, 106.

[*didaskaliai*] handed down to them in words'.²² Clement's language underscores the continuity between the oral tradition, shaped by constant repetition for the purposes of teaching and preaching, and the written record: *hypomnēma* is another word used of a text only one stage removed from oral composition, whether students' notes or a scholar's commentary.

From the earliest recorded stages of church tradition, then, the written gospels had a dynamic, two-sided interface with oral performance. They were seen as the deposit of oral teaching and preaching; and they were re-oralized as the basis for ongoing oral instruction (preaching and teaching) in the early church. The link with particular apostles (or their disciples) is not simply a claim to be recording apostolic 'memories'. It implies that behind the written gospels lies structured teaching tradition of oral material shaped by repetition and in accordance with the rhetorical needs of particular situations. In other words, the *apomnēmonemata* already embody the 'good news' aspect of the gospel, its character as *euangelion*. They stem from a preaching tradition that was focused on Jesus, treasuring and honing the stories of his life and death that conveyed the good news, the *euangelion*. Hence the traditional titles: as soon as the gospels have titles at all, they are known as the 'Gospel according to Mark', or 'according to John', an odd phrase which seems to imply one gospel taking multiple forms.

If we take this early church tradition seriously, we have another answer to our question: a gospel is the written deposit of oral preaching and teaching about Jesus. It is worth noting that this early testimony embodies a claim both about the *origin* of the gospels and about their *literary form*. For anti-gnostic writers like Irenaeus, there was a clear polemical motive for linking the canonical gospels with the teaching of the apostles (which is one reason why many scholars are inclined to be suspicious of the historical claim to apostolic origin). But the patristic testimony also reflects a literary judgement. Whether or not we accept the connection between Mark and Peter, the picture these writers paint of the transition from oral teaching to written text is entirely consistent with what we know from other ancient writers, and this in turn has some bearing on the question of genre.²³

Papias also reveals another important fact about the gospel in the early church. Even when there were written gospels, the oral tradition continued to carry weight: 'I did not suppose', he says, 'that information from books would help me so much as the word of a living and abiding voice'.²⁴ There is every reason to believe that this was not just an antiquarian quirk on Papias's part.²⁵ It is surprisingly hard to identify clear quotations of individual gospels as written texts during the second century: Christian preachers and teachers continue to refer to 'the gospel' (or 'the Lord') as a living, unified tradition long after it is written down, and without troubling to identify the words of individual evangelists.²⁶ It is as if each written text represents a particular performance of 'the gospel' which, however much it is valued, retains its 'provisional' character as a performance, as one possible instantiation of the gospel. Contrary to what we might expect, it is the underlying story that has solidity, while the particular performance in which it is embodied – like a particular Robin Hood film – has a more ephemeral quality.²⁷

Thus the distinctive language used by Justin, Papias and Clement suggests that we do not have to look as far afield as ancient epic to find parallels to the way the gospel tradition operates. Oral teaching was the norm in the ancient world, and the transfer of oral teaching material to written notes is well attested in a number of teaching traditions, including medicine, rhetoric and philosophy.²⁸ Many of the medical, rhetorical and philosophical handbooks surviving from antiquity are based on notes (*hypomnēmata*) taken by students from their teachers' lectures, and their format betrays the relative fluidity and provisionality

²² Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.4. For a fuller analysis of Papias's account of gospel origins, cf. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

²³ Cf. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, WUNT 123 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), and the literature there cited.

²⁴ Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, §1.4 and chap. 5.

²⁵ Recent decades have seen an explosion of interest in social memory theory and the orality of the gospel tradition, e.g. A. Kirk and T. Thatcher, eds, *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, Semeia 52 (Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2003). For a useful summary, see Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 2013).

²⁶ Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke's Gospel*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Loveday Alexander, 'Anecdotal Evidence: Memory, Tradition and Text in Early Christianity and the Hellenistic Schools', in George Brooke and Renate Smithuis, eds, *Jewish Education from Antiquity to the Middle Ages*, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity 100 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 201–35.

²² Eusebius, *Church History*, 2.15.1–2, cf. 4.14.5–7.

²³ See further Loveday Alexander, 'Ancient Book-Production and the Circulation of the Gospels', in Richard J. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 71–111.

of this form of writing: these were user-books, *Gebruchsliteratur*, designed not as a fossilized record of a particular oral 'performance' but as a base for constant glossing and updating.

Ancient teaching methods were heavily focused on the memorization and adaptation of short, pithy tales and wisdom sayings, from one-sentence aphorisms to more complex anecdotes focused on a particular teacher's words or deeds. Large numbers of these *chreiai* survive in the rhetorical handbooks and in ancient philosophical biographies.²⁹ This is precisely where Justin's *apomnēmonemata* belong. In the rhetorical handbooks, the *chreia* ('a word or deed relating to a defined individual') differs from the *apomnēmonema* or 'remembrance' chiefly in length; and it is these 'biographical' anecdotes that form the backbone of the ancient biographical tradition.³⁰ Diogenes Laertius quotes scores of them in his *Lives of the Ancient Philosophers* (third century CE). Anecdotes can be combined in an almost infinite number of ways, many of them thematic rather than 'biographical': putting them into a chronological sequence to tell a philosopher's story from birth to death is not as obvious a solution to the ancients as it is to us. What the anecdotes do imply, as Lord noted with the epic cycles, is an underlying 'life-story', which acts as a mental frame of reference for assessing the significance of a particular anecdote.

This pattern can be seen particularly clearly in the anecdotal tradition relating to Diogenes and Socrates. Because these philosophers did not write books, the anecdotes are the main carriers of their teaching; and their lifestyle was as important as their words. Both served as iconic figureheads for communities of disciples who had an abiding interest in modelling their own lifestyle on that of the master: so the anecdotal tradition becomes a focus of loyalty, with a clear ideological function in the ongoing life of a network of disciple-groups. As in the gospels, these stories tend to be structured as encounters: the teacher meets and responds to a disciple, or an enquirer, or a patron, or a hostile official. With Socrates, this anecdotal 'life-story' builds up to a full-scale paradigm of the philosophic life, starting with the philosopher's divine calling and

culminating with his trial and martyrdom.³¹ The story of Socrates acts as a cultural hypotext which was profoundly influential in the Greco-Roman world. But there is no single written *bios* (biography) of Socrates telling his story 'from birth to death': iconography and lifestyle were sufficiently nourished by the anecdotal tradition, together with the *Apomnēmonemata* of Xenophon and the Platonic vignettes of his death.

Anecdotal tradition played a similar role in the rabbinic academies. Birger Gerhardsen pioneered the study of the dynamics of oral transmission in the rabbinic schools as a possible model for the transmission of gospel tradition.³² The rabbinic texts contain a number of controversies and biographical anecdotes focused on particular sages. Like the Greek anecdotal tradition, much of this is structured around encounters between the sages and their disciples, opponents, enquirers and (predominantly) each other: the prime locus of teaching in the rabbinic schools is the halakhic debate. The rabbinic tradition also contains a number of (rather ambivalent) anecdotes about healing encounters. But what is striking here is that, although there is ample material for putting together life stories of at least the major sages, rabbinic tradition never takes this step: there is no rabbinic 'gospel' of Johanan ben Zakkai or Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. One obvious reason is that neither Eliezer nor any other Sage held in Rabbinic Judaism the central position that Jesus held in early Christianity. The centre of Rabbinic Judaism was Torah; the centre of Christianity was the person of Jesus, and the existence of the gospels is, in itself, a testimony to this fact.³³ Rabbinic tradition provides some important parallels to the oral gospel tradition, but it cannot help us to identify a genre for the written gospels.

THE GOSPELS AS WRITTEN TEXTS

So there is no shortage of material from the cultural worlds of the gospels, both Jewish and Greek, to provide generic analogues to the

²⁹ Loveday Alexander, 'Acts and Ancient Intellectual Biography', in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, eds., *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, vol. 1: *Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 31–63.

³⁰ Birger Gerhardsen, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998). See also now Martin Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³¹ P. S. Alexander, 'Rabbinic Biography and the Biography of Jesus: A Survey of the Evidence', in Christopher M. Tuckett, ed., *Synoptic Studies: The Ampleforth Conference of 1982 and 1983*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Series 7 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 19–50, at 41.

²⁹ Texts in Ronald Hock and Edward O'Neil, *The Chreia in Ancient Rhetoric*, vol. 1: *The Progymnasmata* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986); examples in Vernon K. Robbins, *Ancient Quotes and Anecdotes* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1989). For a more recent treatment see Mikeal Parsons and Michael Martin, *Ancient Rhetoric and the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), chap. 2.

³⁰ Hock and O'Neil, *Chreia*, 82–83, 109–10.

anecdotal tradition that lies behind our written gospels. Justin, Papias and Clement, as we have seen, stress the continuity between tradition and text: for them, the task of the evangelists was simply to reduce the apostolic teaching to writing, and the names they chose for the gospels reflect this continuity. The form critics of the early twentieth century, though working from different premises, came to essentially similar conclusions: the gospels were little more than compilations of pre-existent units of traditional material, arranged and selected like pearls on a string. More recent narrative approaches to gospel criticism have demonstrated conclusively that the evangelists were much more than mere 'editors' or compilers. But this insight does not in itself necessarily conflict with the perception that the gospel tradition is a form of 'oral traditional literature'. Werner H. Kelber, in his influential 1983 study *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, argued for a radical disjunction between oral and literate modes of discourse.³⁴ But folklorists are now more inclined to approach literacy and orality as 'not incompatible but reciprocal paradigms'.³⁵ Within this framework, it is not too difficult to understand our gospels as four individual performances of the gospel, each tailored with skill and artistry for an individual audience but not claiming to offer an exclusive or definitive rendition of the tradition; and in many ways this seems to be how the early church saw them.³⁶ Nevertheless, writing a book is not the same thing as giving an oral performance; the move from oral performance to written discourse is by no means inevitable, and the literary forms it engenders are far from predictable. So our final question is: what happens when we move from oral tradition to written text? What is a gospel when it is a book?

On the Greek side, there is an emerging consensus that the best place to look for a parallel genre for the gospels is Greek biography. Richard Burridge, in his influential 1992 study *What Are the Gospels?*, argues that the Greek *bios* or 'life' is typically a monograph of similar length to the gospels, focused on the life story of a famous individual from birth to death, where (just as in the gospels) the subject of the

biography is also the grammatical subject of a high proportion of verbs. As Burridge indicates, 'biography' is coming to be the consensus answer to the question, 'To what genre do the gospels belong?' (at least in the English-speaking world) – though not all are convinced.³⁷ But we still have to ask the question: if the gospels belong to the genre of biography, what *kind* of biographies are they? Genre on its own (as Burridge recognises) is not enough: we need to probe more deeply into questions of subject matter and mode of discourse if we are to understand the literary structure of these narratives and their impact on contemporary audiences. Overall, we may say that although Greek biography offers parallels to some of the narrative modes and motifs of the gospels (with greater or lesser degrees of precision), it is hard to find a precise match for the written presentation of the Jesus story as 'good news'.³⁸

Ancient biography is a wide and varied genre. Putting together a collection of anecdotes about a particular individual does not necessarily result in a flowing, connected narrative tracing the hero's life from birth to death. Biographers like Suetonius or Diogenes Laertius followed a thematic rather than a chronological arrangement. Arrian's recollections of his teacher Epicurus are simply 'discourses' with no narrative framework. Plutarch (writing at the end of the first century CE) provides a better parallel to the narrative coherence of the gospels. He adopts a narrative mode closer to that of historiography – though he shares Diogenes' conviction that the isolated saying or anecdote provides the most telling revelation of the subject's *ethos* or moral character.³⁹ Overall, what is most obviously missing in this tradition is the *good news* aspect that is essential to the gospels. Greek biographies were not always laudatory. They could be hostile, polemical or simply sensationalist: biographers were the paparazzi of the ancient world. Moreover the Greek biographical tradition is inherently encyclopedic, with 'collected lives' outnumbering single biographies. This means that comparison is built into the genre: most Greek biographies bear little

³⁴ Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

³⁵ Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktales: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), ix–xi.

³⁶ For a useful introduction to 'performance criticism' of the gospels, see Richard A. Horsley Jonathan A. Draper and John Miles Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006).

³⁷ Richard Burridge, 'Gospels and Biography, 2000–2018: A Critical Review and Implications for Future Research', introduction to the third edition of his *What Are the Gospels?* See also Craig Keener and Edward T. Wright, eds., *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biographies?* (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2016).

³⁸ 'The Gospels are almost unique as multiple, contemporary accounts of a single life': M. J. Edwards and Simon Swain, eds., *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 28 n. 74.

³⁹ Plutarch, *Alexander*, 1.1; *Nicias*, 1.5.

resemblance to cultic or kerygmatic narratives.⁴⁰ Probably the best parallel to the role of Jesus is the figure of Socrates, subject of innumerable anecdotes, dialogues, martyrdom stories and fictitious letters – but no one ever put this material together *in writing* to produce a coherent 'biography' of Socrates.

Nevertheless, the appearance of the gospels coincides with what Arnaldo Momigliano identifies as a new seriousness in first-century biographical writing: 'The writers of biographies created a meaningful relationship between the living and the dead. The wise man, the martyr, and the saint became central subjects of biography, in addition to the king, the writer, and the philosopher.'⁴¹ Signs of the new mood can be seen in second-century texts like Tacitus' *Agriкола* or Lucian's *Demonax*, affectionate portraits of well-loved individuals based on personal recollection, following a broadly narrative outline and designed to foster imitation as well as memory.⁴² The shift from biography to hagiography comes to a head in the story of Apollonius of Tyana, a Pythagorean wonder-worker from first-century Syria whose life story shows remarkable parallels to the story of Jesus. It claims to be based on the reminiscences of Damis, a first-century disciple of Apollonius – though this may be no more than an elaborate fiction.⁴³ An earlier generation of scholars suggested that the *Life of Apollonius* falls into a special genre, 'aretalogy', providing an alternative genre for the gospels.⁴⁴ But Philostratus' biography of Apollonius was written two hundred years after the gospels; it is a much longer and more elaborate composition, and bears the rhetorical imprint of the Second Sophistic. And at the time when Philostratus was writing, it is very likely that the story of Apollonius was being consciously marketed as a pagan rival to the story of Jesus. In a fluid and swiftly changing generic landscape, we have to reckon with the real possibility that the gospels themselves were catalysts for change.

⁴⁰ Cf. Sean A. Adams, *The Genre of Acts and Collected Biography*, SNTSMS 156 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁴¹ Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Development of Greek Biography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104.

⁴² Tacitus, *Agriкола*, §46; Lucian, *Demonax*, §2. On the new biographical mood in general, see Edwards and Swain, eds., *Portraits*.

⁴³ E. L. Bowie, 'Apollonius of Tyana: Tradition and Reality', in H. Temporini and M. Haase, eds., *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II.16.2 (Berlin and New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1978), 1652–99.

⁴⁴ e.g. Morton Smith, 'Prolegomena to a Discussion of Aretalogies, Divine Men, the Gospels and Jesus', *JBL*, 90 (1971), 174–99.

Does the search for a genre for the gospels fare any better on the Jewish side? Rabbinic literature, as we have seen, offers ample parallels to the anecdotal Jesus tradition, but no connected rabbinic biography. But there is plenty of biographical narrative elsewhere in Jewish literature. The Hebrew Bible itself is 'centred around prominent individuals to an extent that is alien to Greek historical writing'.⁴⁵ Much of the biblical narrative is built around biographical 'story cycles' like those of Samson or Elijah, cycles in which individual tales of the hero's prowess 'are so arranged to encompass his entire life, from birth to death'.⁴⁶ Moreover, in the Hebrew Bible these tales are subordinated to the overall narrative style and goals of 'a purposeful religious, ethical, and national work' which was to determine the character of Jewish folk traditions for generations to come.⁴⁷ It is to the biblical tradition, surely, that we should look for the origins of the religious intensity of the gospel narratives and their rich ideological intertextuality with the biblical themes of covenant, kingdom, prophecy and promise. The evangelists' move from disjointed anecdotes and sayings to connected, theologically coherent narrative is most easily explained with reference to the narrative modes of the Hebrew Bible. These are the narrative patterns, already 'deeply engrained in social memory', which 'constituted the very cognitive habits by which Jesus' first followers experienced and understood what was happening in his teaching and actions'.⁴⁸ For those who formulated, performed, and heard Mark's narrative, Jesus' actions and teachings were understandable as episodes within a longer story of the renewal of Israel by a figure whose mission was reminiscent, and fit the pattern, of the prototypes Moses and Elijah in popular Israelite cultural memory.⁴⁹

Two other developments in Jewish (specifically, Jewish-Greek) biographical writing of the Second Temple period are also worth considering. The first is in Philo, the first-century Alexandrian Jewish writer whose allegorical expositions of the Bible in Greek contain a number of single treatises devoted to individual Bible characters. Philo's *On Abraham* and *On Joseph* are 'biographical' in the limited sense that they collect together the separate incidents related to each character

⁴⁵ Edwards and Swain, *Portraits*, 27.

⁴⁶ Yassif, *Hebrew Folktales*, 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁴⁸ Horsley, Draper and Foley, in *Performing the Gospel*, 188, 190. See further Chapter 4 of this volume.

in the Bible and arrange them in chronological order as a coherent narrative. The treatment of the characters, however, is as much allegorical as historical: the patriarchs represent the history of the soul, and they are described as living prototypes of the ethical principles embodied in the Law.⁴⁹ The *Life of Moses* has a much more obviously biographical character, beginning with Moses' birth and ending with his death, and compressing into a single connected account the bulk of the biblical Moses narrative – though still arranged thematically under the headings of king, lawgiver and high priest. This is one of Philo's most accessible works and the one that has the best claim to be addressed to outsiders. It suggests at the very least that biographical narrative provided a point of cultural contact between Greek and Jew, a flexible and readily comprehensible framework that could be moulded without difficulty to reflect the ideology and cultural values of a particular religious tradition.⁵⁰

The second development is in the area of martyrology. In the Greek biographical tradition (as we have seen) Socrates was the quintessential model for philosophic resistance to tyranny. But Jewish tradition had its own prototypes for the martyr's death, and there are a number of Jewish texts which highlight martyrdom as the proper closure to a life lived in obedience to God – and therefore allocate significant narrative space to the martyr's death.⁵¹ Many of the key motifs are already present in the book of Daniel, written in the period of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century BCE. This is the setting for the Maccabean martyrs, one of the most enduring paradigms of Jewish martyrdom. Their stories are told in a multiplicity of literary forms, from the plain narrative of 2 Maccabees (second century BCE) to the sophisticated philosophical encomium of 4 Maccabees (first or second century CE). Martyrology is not of itself necessarily biographical (one of the odd features of the Maccabean martyrs is that we are told nothing of the martyrs' previous lives). But the so-called *Lives of the Prophets*, almost certainly dating from pre-70 Palestine, combine brief and schematic life stories with intensive details of the prophets' deaths and the miracles associated

with their graves.⁵² The *Lives* may have been a pilgrim guidebook recounting the cult legends associated with the tombs of the saints. Whatever we call them, it is clear from a glance at these brief biographical notices that they cannot 'solve' the problem of the gospel genre by themselves. Nevertheless, their existence adds another strand to the variety of biographical forms in first-century Jewish literature, and acts as a forceful reminder of the many possibilities for cultural interchange between Jewish and Hellenistic literature in Second Temple Judaism.

THE GOSPELS AS GOOD NEWS

So are we left with Thomas's answer, that the gospels are unique? The answer in the end is, probably, yes and no. Many of the motifs that appear in the gospels can be paralleled in contemporary texts, especially in the anecdotal material which acted as a prime carrier of school traditions both in the rabbinic academies and in the Greek philosophical schools. The way the tradition works is certainly not unique: folklore and social memory studies suggest a number of fruitful analogies. But what may be unique is the particular form this tradition takes when it is written down, a form whose external shape is strongly reminiscent of the Greek *bios* but whose narrative mode and theological framework (connectives, narrative structure, use of direct speech, intertextuality) owe much more to the Bible. This could explain, incidentally, why the psychological characterization of the gospels is wholly within the biblical framework, and shows no sign of being influenced by the philosophical *ethos* tradition which so dominated Greek biography, and why the gospels show no awareness of the normal distancing mechanisms routinely employed by Greek historians and biographers to keep the supernatural at bay.⁵³

If this seems inconclusive, it may be because we have been asking the wrong kind of question. Gospel genre criticism for most of the twentieth century was dominated by the search for a pre-existent genre to *explain* (or explain away) the gospels, as if we were hoping to find the mould into which Mark (or whoever was the first to write the gospel down) poured his Jesus story. But no such genre has been

⁴⁹ Philo, *On Abraham*, §§4–5.

⁵⁰ Maren Niehoff describes Philo as 'the first author to use biographies for broader moral, cultural, and religious purposes', stating that he combines elements of political and philosophical biography in a new synthesis: Maren Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018], 130, 115.

⁵¹ Tessa Rajak, 'Dying for the Law', in Edwards and Swain, eds., *Portraits*, 39–67.

⁵² D. R. A. Hare, 'The Lives of the Prophets', in J. H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), vol. II, 385–99; Anna Maria Schwemer, *Studien zu den frühjüdischen Prophetenlegenden Vitae prophetarum*, vols. I and II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995).

⁵³ Loveday Alexander, 'Fact, Fiction, and the Genre of Acts', *New Testament Studies*, 44 (1998), 380–99.

discovered: and that suggests that it may be time to change the way we configure the question. The gospels came into being at a time of profound cultural transformation, and were themselves active agents in that transformation. That may be one reason why it is so hard to pin them down – though the same could be said of other texts and genres of the period. Certainly, there is no evidence elsewhere for *euangelion* as a generic title: and for that we probably have the earliest preachers to thank. They were the ones who shaped the Jesus tradition as *good news*, focused on the encounter with the Christ whom they believed to be alive. They were responsible for giving that tradition its characteristic shape, which persists through written forms and into the ongoing tradition of life-giving stories carried within Christian communities down the ages, in their iconography, their liturgy and their daily life of prayer.

Further Reading

- Bauckham, Richard, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998)
- Bauckham, Richard, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017)
- Bockmuehl, Markus, and Donald A. Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Burridge, Richard A., *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 3rd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018)
- Edwards, M. J., and Simon Swain, eds., *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997)
- Eve, Eric, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (London: SPCK, 2013)
- Horsley, Richard A., Jonathan A. Draper and John Miles Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006)
- Jaffee, Martin S., *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001)
- Kelber, Werner H., *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983)
- Kelber, Werner, and Samuel Byrskog, eds., *Jesus in Memory: Traditions in Oral and Scribal Perspective* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2009)
- Stanton, Graham N., *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
- Yassif, Eli, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
THE GOSPELS
Second Edition

Edited by
Stephen C. Barton
Universities of Durham and Manchester
Todd Brewer
Independent Scholar

 **CAMBRIDGE**
UNIVERSITY PRESS

3 Gospel Sources and Interrelations

TODD BREWER

Insight into the compositional practices of the evangelists is most readily found in the prologue of Luke's gospel. Casting himself as a judicious biographer of Jesus, the author places his own gospel writing within a wider context of contemporary accounts and traditions about Jesus (Lk 1.1-4). Luke is but one of many who have 'attempted' to write about that which has been handed down since the first eyewitnesses. Scanning and compiling all the sources available to him, Luke composes the definitive presentation of Jesus' life.

From this short prologue a number of significant insights can be inferred about the dissemination of the Jesus tradition in early Christianity. There were several accounts of Jesus' ministry circulating in the early church, and the distribution of these written records was sufficiently wide for Luke himself (and perhaps even Theophilus) to have access to them. Though Luke does not indicate how many of these accounts there might be, the combination of their wide distribution and potential dissimilarity from one another was significant enough to spur Luke's writing, creating order amid the chaos of disparate accounts.¹ Additionally, Luke attests to the transmission of eyewitness testimony and appeals to it for the authentication of his presentation. The sources employed by Luke are twofold, encompassing both oral processes indebted to eyewitness testimony and written accounts about Jesus. In other words, Luke suggests that the early church possessed an abundance of oral and written recollections of Jesus' life and ministry.

The earliest Christians, subsequent to the naming of the respective evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), largely believed that the gospels were written independently of one another. Each author had his

own sources and told his own story of Jesus. Matthew was Matthew the tax-collector of Matthew 9.9; Mark was the disciple of Peter;² Luke was Paul's travel companion;³ and John was the 'beloved disciple' of John 21.24.⁴ This became a compelling and tidy solution to the similarity and differences between the gospels. Informed by the inherited traditions available to them, the hypothesis of the evangelists' independence had further theological and apologetic significance. As told by the early theologian John Chrysostom, the canonical gospels' similarity to one another establishes the veracity of their testimony, while the many points of difference between them likewise confirm their historical reliability by demonstrating the integrity of the authors. If there was a firewall that divided each evangelist from the other, this independence made them impervious to the accusation of collusion, thereby furnishing their historical veracity.⁵ For the early church, as for the church today, the issue of how the gospels were composed had substantial implications for a variety of related subjects.

For modern biblical scholarship, sustained study of the gospel texts has demonstrated the inadequacy of the early church hypothesis of independence. Particularly for the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), there is far too much overlap between them for there to be no indebtedness to one another. Instead, most scholars today consider the four canonical gospels to reside within a complex matrix of interconnection and indebtedness that reflects well the interactive diversity of early Christianity. How that web of indebtedness is precisely to be configured is still a matter of debate, and a number of hypotheses have been offered for both the synoptics and John. Each proposal has its own merits, and what follows will highlight the more influential alternatives. My overarching concern, however, will not be to offer a definitive judgement in favour of one hypothesis over others so much as to illuminate how one's interpretive decision about the gospels and their sources affects the perhaps more weighty historical and theological matters further downstream. If one's understanding of Christianity can be likened to a walk through a garden of forking paths, then the chosen solution to the issue of the evangelists' sources' is an early divide on that journey. While the debate over the gospels' sources is largely composed of meticulous study of an author's many editorial tendencies,

¹ It is reasonable to hypothesize that Luke's concerns over the multiplicity of circulating accounts of Jesus' life was also shared by his implied reader, Theophilus,

and the possibility that Jesus' life and teachings were employed by others in ways that were different from, if not threatening to, what Theophilus had been taught.

² Recorded by Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39.15-16.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1.

⁴ Recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.39.5.

⁵ Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 1.6.

informed by understandings of first-century scribal practices and oral tradition, the implications for such study are vast, extending from one's understanding of individual gospels into the ever-present issues of what the historical Jesus may have actually said or done, our understanding of the changing beliefs of the earliest Christians, the evaluation of non-canonical gospels and the utilization of the gospels for modern theology.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John lays out its own compositional procedure to offer possible clues into its use of sources. In the conclusions to the gospel the author(s) address(es) the reader directly to signal the purpose of the gospel and its origins. Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of the disciples, but these have not been depicted by its author (Jn 20.30). The signs of Jesus have been carefully selected in order that the reader might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (20.31). This apparent surplus of sources is repeated at the end of the subsequent section, and serves as the conclusion to the gospel as we have it. Jesus did so many things that the world itself could not contain all the books about him (21.25). The content and authorship of these potential books are not delineated, but the excess of Jesus' activity is contrasted with the more limited scope of John itself. While the initial ending of John (20.30-31) makes no claim of authorship, the longer conclusion of John declares the gospel to be the witness of the 'beloved disciple', whose testimony and writing comprise the gospel (21.24). According to the self-presentation of John's final chapter, the gospel bearing his name derives from the oral and written memories of John's life with Jesus.

The similarity between Luke and the final version of John on the question of the composition is striking. Both suggest that written and oral traditions about Jesus were circulated by the earliest Christians. Both authors attest to an almost superabundance of stories about Jesus' life and his teaching and simultaneously locate themselves within this milieu while distinguishing themselves from it. But in contrast to Luke, John's self-styled independence from his milieu has proven to be more persuasive to modern scholarship. The 'beloved disciple' is the only author or source to directly claim to participate in the events described by him. Only the beloved disciple claims to have the benefit of firsthand knowledge of Jesus, placing himself at the foot of Jesus' cross and within the shadow of the empty tomb. While direct authorship of the Gospel of John may be attributed to John's community, the vestiges of the book's first-person account have nevertheless led many to believe

the text stands entirely independent of its canonical counterparts.⁶ Where John bears a striking similarity to the synoptics, this is a sign of his utilization of common traditions.⁷ In either case, the 'Gospel according to John' is most purely a gospel *from* John, the fountainhead of a stream which the Johannine community has bottled for mass distribution. Even if the text has undergone a gradual revisionary process under the influence of communal disputes and pressures, the essence of its testimony remains John's handiwork.

For others, John is not independent of the synoptic gospels, yet the degree of influence is still highly debated. This accords with John's awareness of other circulating Jesus traditions. But without the aid of verbatim agreement between John and the synoptics, delineating the relationship between them has proven difficult, as the degree of John's indebtedness depends upon more qualitative measures. Some, nevertheless, have insisted that John's gospel was, indeed, indebted to the synoptics.⁸ Between indebtedness and independence, some have argued that John merely knows the synoptics, but his gospel is still functionally independent. Richard Bauckham has suggested that John demonstrates knowledge of the Gospel of Mark, signalled by the brevity of John's discussions of the imprisonment of John the Baptist (3.24) and of Jesus' anointing at Bethany (11.2). Even so, John's knowledge of Mark has not significantly informed his composition.⁹ The early church theologian Clement of Alexandria similarly believed that John wrote his gospel with knowledge of the synoptics, composing a 'spiritual' gospel in contrast to his more 'bodily' predecessors.¹⁰

⁶ Some notable works espousing an independent John include Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1966); C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953); Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003); R. Schnackenberg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, 3 vols. (New York: Crossroads, 1982).

⁷ See, for example, Rudolf Bultmann's discussion of John's sources: Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 6-7.

⁸ For more, see D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth Century Research* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 207-19; Wendy E. S. North, *A Journey round John: Tradition, Interpretation and Context in the Fourth Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

⁹ Richard Bauckham, 'John for Readers of Mark', in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 147-71.

¹⁰ Recorded by Eusebius, *Church History*, 6.14.7.

The theological and historical consequences of an independent Gospel of John are not dissimilar to that espoused by Chrysostom and his defence of the canonical gospels' independent compositions. An independent John is granted the freedom to differ from the synoptics and thereby justify his theological claims. Within modern scholarship, John's independent, eyewitness origins are utilized to defend its historical content and unique theological contribution.¹¹ Here, the historicity of John and the viability of his theological view go hand in hand, the former establishing the veracity of the latter. Whether the 'beloved disciple' is the author or the principal source of the Gospel of John makes little difference overall. John's independence from the synoptics simultaneously justifies his difference from them and furnishes his historicity.¹² The strength of the hypothesis of an independent John is its ability to account historically for both the text's strong degree of coherence and its difference from the synoptics.

A John that is knowledgeable of, or dependent upon, the synoptics raises questions about John's authorial intentions and his relationship with his predecessors. The freedom the evangelist exercises vis-à-vis the synoptic tradition often precludes scholars from seeing the text in light of his forebears. Yet it is precisely his interpretive freedom that questions how compatible John views his composition in relation to the synoptics. More modestly, could John have omitted so much synoptic material because he simply wished to supplement their honoured contributions? This complementary view is that of Clement of Alexandria and has proven to be influential. Yet it also is plausible to suggest that John wished to remedy the synoptics' inadequate understandings of Jesus. In this way, John's use of Mark is so qualitatively different from Matthew or Luke's use of Mark that it questions how compatible John

and Mark are. If John wishes to emend, if not supplant, his counterparts, he has good reason for doing so. The principal themes of John find little to no representation in the synoptics, and it may seem obvious to him that the narrative portrayals of Jesus' identity found in these texts fail to adequately expound their subject matter. From John's perspective, the synoptics narrate his activity, but do not elaborate its meaning in a satisfactory manner; few of Jesus' teachings unequivocally state who he is; nor do the synoptics' portraits of him directly address his significance for their readers, as the past of Jesus' ministry largely remains in the past. A John that is dependent upon Mark or Luke has received these traditions and refashioned them, providing John with the raw material for his construction. The gap between what is received and what is created demonstrates the substantial interpretive possibilities offered by the synoptics and the degree of creativity John employs in his composition.

Beyond the synoptics, some have proposed that John is indebted to other gospel texts outside the canon. Francis Watson has suggested that John's gospel has incorporated portions of what is known as the *Egerton Gospel*.¹³ If Egerton is concerned with properly coordinating Jesus and Moses, John has consistently redacted his source to frame Moses and Jesus in more antithetical terms and point to Jesus' more decisive filial relation to the Father. Egerton may represent a form of Jewish-Christianity, and the Gospel of John has edited his source to reflect a further distancing of Jewish and Christian communities. Conversely, Elaine Pagels has argued that John knew of the *Gospel of Thomas* and wrote his gospel to refute the its error.¹⁴ John polemically articulates an alternative christology to combat the *Gospel of Thomas*'s emphasis on God's immanent reign within all people. John even refashions the figure of Thomas, consistently ridiculing his ignorance and wryly casting him as the text's climactic convert in 20.24–29. For Pagels, this combat between John and *Thomas* ultimately serves to elevate the status of *Thomas* by dislodging John from its presumed position of historical priority. The John that emerges from Pagels's account of events is thoroughly political, writing to outflank his opponent.

¹¹ As vigorously proposed by Richard Bauckham, who writes: 'The concurrence of historiographic and theological concepts of witness in John's Gospel is wholly appropriate to the historical uniqueness of the subject matter, which as historical requires historiographic rendering but in its disclosure of God also demands that the witness to it speak of God. In this Gospel we have the idiosyncratic testimony of a disciple whose relationship to the events, to Jesus, was distinctive and different. It is a view from outside the circles from which other Gospel traditions largely derive, and it is the perspective of a man who was deeply but distinctively formed by his own experience of events.' Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels As Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 411.

¹² That such independence is seen as a virtue may reveal something of a canonical bias in New Testament scholarship. Similar arguments have been made for the historicity of non-canonical gospels, such as *Thomas*, but their appeal has been comparatively limited.

¹³ The *Egerton Gospel*, as it is called, was discovered in the 1930s. While it is likely to have been a full gospel text, we possess only a fragmentary parchment that narrates a handful of Jesus' teachings and miracles. For more on this, see Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 286–340.

¹⁴ E. Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), 40–73.

Arguments for John's dependence position him more firmly within early Christianity in response to his contemporaries. A dependent Gospel of John severs the supposedly unbroken chain of testimony that ran from Jesus right up to the text of John itself. Consequently, a new, potentially polemical evangelist emerges from the rubble of the old hagiographic monument. Such a view binds the gospel more closely to the wider movements and controversies of early Christianity and casts doubt upon the view that John is the product of an almost isolated 'Johannine community'. If John is an alien gospel in contrast to his contemporaries, its idiosyncratic character does not derive from communal isolation, but reflects the generative nature of the Jesus tradition itself and John's place within it. Perhaps it is less that John is an eccentric evangelist, and more that Jesus himself was stranger than he appeared at first glance. John may be aware of this reality, as signalled by his repeated emphasis on remembering and the ongoing revelatory role of the Spirit (14.26).¹⁵ While John was probably written later than the synoptics, this distance may have provided more clarity about Jesus' identity than the earliest followers of him were able to envision.

Along similar lines, if John is interacting with other accounts of Jesus' life, this amplifies the question of his testimony's historical character. A negative verdict on this matter is sometimes asserted,¹⁶ yet it could equally be said that a tradition-dependent John might make this gospel interesting in ways not sufficiently countenanced by modern historical Jesus scholarship. If John depends upon alternative traditions about Jesus like the synoptics or Egerton and still composes a text that radically departs from them, then either John is self-consciously unhistorical or he is operating under a very different understanding of what counts as true historical testimony. Rather than presenting a narrative

¹⁵ For more on these intertwining themes, see Stephen C. Barton, 'Memory, Remembrance and Imagination in the Formation of Redemptive Tradition: Reflecting on the Gospel of John with David Brown', in Garrick V. Allen, Christopher R. Brewer and Dennis F. Krlaw II, eds., *The Moving Text: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on David Brown and the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 2018), 37–50.

¹⁶ Most famously by the influential nineteenth-century scholar F. C. Baur, who concluded: 'But when it comes to the teaching of Jesus himself, the only portrayal of it that is in principle correct, from the current standpoint of New Testament criticism, is the one that makes its foundation the Synoptic Gospels, not the Gospel of John.' Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Lectures on New Testament Theology*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. Robert F. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, German original, 1864), 80.

that ideally corresponds to 'what really happened' in a one-to-one fashion, perhaps the truth to which John testifies comprises the coextensive interplay between past and present. The line between the voice of the narrator and that of Jesus is often indistinguishable (as in Jn 3.10–21) such that one cannot easily determine where the past ends and the present begins. It is not so much that history has been swallowed up by theology, but that the two are inseparable. John models a very different way of understanding and writing history, one that is unable to divorce the event from its reception, where the interpretive emanations radiating outwards from an event belong to the event itself and constitute its being.¹⁷ In this way, John's hermeneutic of history stands in contrast to much of the historical criteria employed by gospel scholarship.

THE 'SYNOPTIC PROBLEM'

Given the significant amount of shared material in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, resolving the quandary of how these relate to one another is no simple task. When three texts of unknown authorship and compositional date share the same information, whether it be verbatim agreement, shared sequence or common themes, it is very difficult to determine how such an overlap occurred. Did Mark read Matthew, or vice versa? Did Luke know of Matthew? Were Mark and Matthew indebted to an unknown third source? While hypotheses can be proposed,¹⁸ no definitive conclusions can be made.¹⁹ The strength

¹⁷ Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer's discussion of art and portraits: 'the presentation remains essentially connected with what is represented – indeed, belongs to it'. Therefore if the picture 'presents itself in this way, this is no longer any incidental event but belongs to its own being.... By being presented it experiences, as it were, an increase in being.' Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2004), 139, 140.

¹⁸ As an aside, while the terms 'hypothesis' and 'theory' are often used interchangeably in scholarship, I exclusively speak of hypotheses rather than theories, to better reflect the scientific usage of these words. A hypothesis is an unverified claim, while a theory is a hypothesis that has been proven by testing and then accepted as true. In contrast to Marxsen's claims that the Q hypothesis is now a verifiable discovery, no hypothesis in the realm of the synoptic problem can ever be proven or accepted to become a theory. W. Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament: An Approach to Its Problems*, trans. G. Buswell (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 118.

¹⁹ Cf. Kloppenborg, 'No hypothesis is without its difficulties, and for any of the existing Synoptic hypotheses there are sets of data which the hypothesis does not explain very well.' John S. Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 21.

of one theory over against others depends upon the theories' relative plausibility rather than quantifiable or objective measures. A plausible hypothesis offers a more coherent account than others of the direction of influence from one gospel to another and the resultant understanding of the gospels themselves. More recent debates over the synoptic problem have gravitated towards two principal hypotheses, the Q hypothesis and the L/M, or Farrer, hypothesis.²⁰ The Q hypothesis contends that Matthew and Luke used Mark independently of one another and were both indebted to a single source (*Quelle* in German) from which they derive much of their non-Mark material. The L/M hypothesis argues that no such source ever existed. Mark wrote first, Matthew depended upon Mark, and Luke wrote his gospel with knowledge of both Matthew and Mark. Other hypotheses have certainly been proposed, such as the Griesbach hypothesis²¹ and the Matthew Conflator hypothesis.²² Each of these has its own merits and degrees of coherence, but a detailed treatment of each would be prohibitive for this short essay. The following comparison between Q and L/M aims to be more illustrative, rather than exhaustive, and more broadly reflects current scholarly debates.

²⁰ The L/M hypothesis is often called the Farrer hypothesis in current scholarship, having been named after the mid-twentieth-century British scholar Austin Farrer. I strongly prefer the name 'L/M hypothesis', coined by Francis Watson, for stylistic and rhetorical reasons. In distinction from other names, L/M is a descriptive title – referring to Luke's use of Matthew (L/M) – and therefore better fulfils the genre expectations for a title. L/M is also theoretically preferable to Farrer because the relative obscurity of Austin Farrer in New Testament studies (particularly outside Britain) implies a degree of scholarly insularity that prejudices the discussion, particularly for those with little acquaintance with the field.

²¹ The Griesbach hypothesis was first proposed by Johann Jacob Griesbach, after whom it is named, in 1789. Griesbach's short pamphlet's thesis contends that Matthew was written first, then utilized by Luke, and then Mark employed both Matthew and Luke for his text. It ascended to prominence throughout the nineteenth century, but was almost decisively eclipsed by the Q hypothesis towards the end of the nineteenth century. J. J. Griesbach, *Absolutum commentatio, qua Marci evangelium totum e Matthaei et Lucae commentariis deceptum esse monstratur* (Jena: Strankmannio-Fickscherna, 1789).

²² The Matthew Conflator hypothesis, or MCH, was investigated by Martin Hengel in 2000 and recently proposed by Alan Garrow. It contends that Mark was written first, followed by Luke using Mark, and then by Matthew combining Mark and Luke for his gospel, while utilizing other sources – including a source that Luke utilized. While the MCH has been debated recently, its omission from further discussion in this essay is not a sign of implausibility; rather, several of the implications of the MCH are not altogether dissimilar from that of the Q hypothesis. For more on the MCH, see Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000); Alan Garrow, 'Streeters "Other" Synoptic Solution: The Matthew Conflator Hypothesis', *New Testament Studies*, 62(2016), 207–26.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

The view that Mark's gospel was the first to be written has few detractors, and it is the starting point for both the Q and L/M hypotheses. During the roughly forty years between the death of Jesus and the writing of Mark,²³ Jesus tradition had spread from Jerusalem to the heart of the Roman Empire. Peering behind Mark into this so-called tunnel period reveals several places where scholars have proposed Mark's indebtedness to sources, whether oral or written. For example, it seems that the collection of parables in chapter 4 reflects Mark's use of a pre-Markan collection of parables.²⁴ Mark then supplements these parables with a narrative context and an interpretation of the parable of the sower. Similar phenomena can be observed throughout Mark, such as 8.34–38 and 9.40–50, where a series of loosely related teachings are connected by repeated conjunctions. It has also been suggested that Mark himself was indebted to Q.²⁵ Additionally, Ernest Best has argued that Mark's passion narrative depended upon a pre-Markan passion narrative.²⁶ Collectively, these proposals suggest that, before Mark composed his gospel, Jesus' teachings were circulated in a piecemeal fashion as oral and written collections of teachings and stories. Mark has constructed his narrative from these building blocks and integrated them, as best he can, into a coherent story.

While Mark is the first canonical gospel to have been written, it certainly was not the first time that stories and teachings of Jesus were told. While it is possible that other gospels circulated before Mark, the absence of evidence has led scholars to speculate on the consequences of his literary endeavour. For some Q scholars, if the Gospel of Mark is aware of Q, then the writing of his gospel is the first step in an alternative

²³ The date of Mark's composition appears to be around 70 CE, and this is signalled by the text itself. As Jesus prophetically describes the future destruction of the Jewish temple and the construction of an 'abomination of destruction', the narrator's voice unusually interjects into the discourse with the grave notice 'Let the reader understand' (Mk 13.14). Whether this authorial incursion into the narrative is meant as a warning to the readers about future or past events is debatable, but the author's urgency suggests that Mark was written some time around the events of the Jewish revolt and the 70 CE destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

²⁴ Philip Sellew, 'Oral and Written Sources in Mark 4.1–34', *New Testament Studies*, 36(1990), 234–67.

²⁵ Harry T. Fielderman, *Mark and Q: A Study of the Overlap Texts*, BETL 122 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995).

²⁶ Ernest Best, *The Temptation and the Passion: The Markan Soteriology*, 2nd ed., SNTMS (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

trajectory that parallels Q's own trajectory.²⁷ Mark leads to a Christianity about Jesus and his death and resurrection, while Q leads to the *Gospel of Thomas* and so-called Gnostic Christianity. Along similar lines, Werner Kelber has argued that Mark represents the first time Jesus traditions were actually written down in narrative form, marking a turning point in early Christianity from the creative fluidity of oral tradition to the lifeless written medium.²⁸ This is probably an exaggeration, but regardless of whether Mark's gospel was the first written narrative of Jesus' life in early Christianity it was certainly the most influential, serving as the basis for Matthew, Luke and possibly John. Mark seems to have been the inventor of what became a robust gospel genre. In contrast to his predecessors' approach, Mark's utilization of the narrative form transformed the meaning and transmission of the Jesus tradition. By way of his narrative, Mark places the meaning of Jesus' activity and teaching within the horizon of his past historical context. Such a Jesus does not directly address the earliest Christian communities, but his first disciples and many interlocutors.²⁹

THE Q HYPOTHESIS

The Q hypothesis has been the centrepiece of many proposed solutions to the synoptic problem, and it arises from the incontestable observation that Luke and Matthew share a great deal of Jesus traditions that are not also found in Mark. The sheer volume of material common to the two, coupled with the additional observation that Matthew and Luke rarely emended Mark in the same way, has led many to conclude that the two evangelists are both indebted to an unknown source. The content and shape of this source are then reconstructed by comparing Matthew and Luke and selecting which of the two preserves the

more original form of each saying.³⁰ As explained in B. H. Streeter's landmark work, the earlier form is the genuine Q saying.³¹ Employing the text-critical preference for the *lectio difficilior* and informed by the presuppositions of nineteenth-century historical Jesus studies, the more primitive saying is the one that does not straightforwardly reflect the views of the evangelists and/or early Christianity. What is revealed is a fascinatingly diverse source whose complexity reflects the many overlaps between Matthew and Luke. Notably, Q is thought not to have contained a passion narrative, pointing to a version of early Christianity principally founded upon Jesus' teachings. It contains narrative portions, like the temptation of Jesus, the ministry of John the Baptist and the healing of the centurion's servant, as well as parables, beatitudes, apocalypses, exhortations and controversy sayings. It has a coherent viewpoint and is thematically organized, and for some Q itself underwent a stepwise evolution to reflect the changing interests of the community who preserved and wrote it.³² That having been said, some Q scholars are less confident that the precise wording of Q can be recovered, given the possibility that Matthew and Luke both altered the same saying.

The Q hypothesis has proven to be highly compelling to scholars with a wide range of interests. This diverse utilization of Q reflects both the relative plausibility of the hypothesis and the consequences of re-creating a hypothetical source. For historical Jesus study, the Q document is foundational, representing the earliest testimony of Jesus' life and teaching. Inasmuch as it differs from the evangelists, for more 'radical' Q scholars it serves as an alternative trajectory of early Christianity, a road not taken. This alternative trajectory represented by Q (and the *Gospel of Thomas*) is then projected backwards towards the historical Jesus. The Jesus that emerges from this enterprise can look very unlike that of the canonical texts with their emphasis upon Jesus' death and resurrection. As argued by Helmut Koester, 'Q [and the *Gospel of Thomas*] challenge the assumption that the early church was unanimous in making Jesus' death and resurrection the fulcrum of Christian faith. Both documents presuppose that Jesus' significance lay in his words, and in his words alone.'³³ Yet Q remains a source

²⁷ See James M. Robinson and Helmut Koester, *Trajectories through Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971).

²⁸ 'The objectifying, controlling power of the written medium, while taking the life out of spoken language, can freeze oral forms and preserve them in fossilized profiles'; Werner H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition. Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 44.

²⁹ For more on the different tendencies in the interpretation of narrative and sayings collections of Jesus, see Todd Brewer, *For and Against Narrative: The Hermeneutics of the Parable in Early Christian Gospels*, unpublished PhD thesis, Durham University (2015).

³⁰ James M. Robinson, Paul Hoffmann and John S. Kloppenborg, *The Critical Edition of Q. Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000).

³¹ B. H. Streeter, *The Four Gospels: A Study of Origins* (London: Macmillan, 1930).

³² Kloppenborg, *Q, the Earliest Gospel*.

³³ Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 86.

whose contents wholly derive from its canonical ancestors. This essential similarity between Q and the evangelists proves fertile soil for more 'conservative' scholars who employ Q to defend the historicity of Matthew and Luke. Accordingly, Q is simply a short stepping stone between Matthew-Luke and Jesus himself.³⁴

Whether it be a 'conservative' or 'radical' Q, the long-standing legacy of Q for historical Jesus studies has been an almost exclusive focus on the sayings of Jesus detached from their narrative placement in the gospels. In the same way that Q scholars seek to reconstruct the original form of Q, the recovery of the precise wording of what Jesus said becomes paramount. The narrative details of why, when, where or to whom Jesus taught are either irrelevant or inaccessible. The legitimization for this 'sayings approach' to historical study begun by Q scholarship was the later discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas*, whose content and form is said to parallel Q.³⁵ Together, Q and *Thomas* form an impregnable covalent bond that justifies the use of both *Thomas* and Q as well as their sayings approach to the historical Jesus. It is worth questioning whether this legacy is entirely appropriate for the task of historical study. The very contextual details provided by narrative (such as when, where, why and to whom Jesus taught) are not incidental to a historical understanding of Jesus' teachings, but indispensable.³⁶

Apart from historical considerations, Q also has vast ramifications for how Matthew and Luke are understood and their redactional tendencies in light of this earlier source. The Matthew of Q studies is distinctly an ecclesial gospel, moving away from Q's more worldly focus. The difference between Q and Matthew's versions of the beatitudes is

particularly instructive. The Q form of the sayings, derived from Luke 6.20-22, declares blessings on those who are poor, mournful and hungry. By contrast, Matthew 'spiritualizes' Q. The poor are the 'poor in spirit', the hungry become those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. In the hands of Matthew, a promise of vindication to the powerless has become an exhortation to the pious.³⁷ Likewise, the parable of the lost sheep has undergone an ecclesial redaction. Despite Matthew's retention of most of the Q form, Matthew 18.12-14 becomes a parable about the church's practice of forgiveness and restoration of those believers who fall into sin, rather than Q's illustration of Jesus' mission [Lk 15.4-7].³⁸ More broadly, according to the Q hypothesis Matthew has broken up the original Q ordering and combined it with his own special material to form much longer discourses that form the basis of the church's teaching.

Luke's redaction of Q is much more muted than Matthew's more dramatic reordering. Matthew occasionally preserves the original Q form, such as Jesus' teachings about fire and division (Mt 10.34), loving one's enemies (Mt 5.39-45) or the woes against Chorazin (Mt 11.21-24), but Luke's revisions of Q are more often extrapolations and stylistic 'improvements', rather than drastic rewriting. As is to be expected, given the constraints of reproducing Q from Luke and Matthew, most of Matthew's diversions from Q are paralleled by Luke's preservation of it. In contrast to Matthew's more creative employment of Q, Luke's views and those of Q are somewhat similar, preserving many of Q's characteristic sayings, such as the beatitudes and woes [Lk 6.20-26] or the Lord's Prayer [Lk 11.2-4]. The Luke of the Q hypothesis appears to be more of a collector of traditions without a heavy-handed redaction of their contents.³⁹ In contrast to Matthew, the Luke of Q is an ideal historian whose interest lies not in creative reinterpretation, but in 'getting it right'.

Finally, the Q hypothesis has contributed significantly to scholars' picture of early Christianity more broadly. Many of the great christological debates, such as how the proclaimer became the proclaimed or

³⁷ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linus (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 228-29.

³⁸ W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. II (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 773.

³⁹ Commenting on Luke's use of Q, Graham Stanton summarizes, 'Most scholars accept that on the whole Luke has retained the order and content of Q more fully than Matthew, so reconstructions of Q are usually based on Luke.' Graham N. Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 89.

³⁴ See, for example, Craig Evans's comments on Q's significance: 'Although some contend the Two Source Hypothesis carries with it theological or canonical implications, most find in it exegetical and tradition-critical implications, in the sense that the hypothesis aids exegesis and critical inquiry.' Craig A. Evans, 'The Two Source Hypothesis', in Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 27-46, at 27.

³⁵ At the end of his magisterial 1921 book, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), Rudolf Bultmann hypothesized that the most primitive stratum of the Jesus tradition comprised of a series of Jesus' sayings, linked by a simple conjunction. The proof he offers for his hypothesis is the recently found Papyrus Oxyrhynchus 1, a Greek fragment of what was later discovered to be a portion of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

³⁶ For a criticism of sayings approaches to historical Jesus studies by a Q scholar, see Jens Schröter, 'Jesus and the Canon: The Early Jesus Traditions in the Context of the Origins of the New Testament Canon', in Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A. Draper and John Miles Foley, eds., *Performing the Gospels: Orality, Memory, and Mark* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2006), 95-132.

the difference or similarity between Jesus and Paul, have arisen because of the Q hypothesis. Mapping each of the writings of Christianity according to their composition dates, Q provides a key witness that enables scholars to peer behind the gospels into the evolution of the Jesus tradition and the state of christological thought, representing the earliest, most primitive stratum on the timeline. As suggested by James Dunn, Q envisions Jesus as an emissary of divine wisdom, a prophet sent by God. The viewpoint of Q is that of Jesus himself, and it was only much later that Christians would speak of Jesus' divinity, a practice that culminated in the fourth-century council of Nicaea.⁴⁰ It seems that as time moved on, Jesus became more divine. Within this evolutionary model, Q is the missing link between primitive Christianity and later, more advanced, christological beliefs. While Dunn may have overstated the view of Q in his analysis, it is the *Q hypothesis itself* that makes such an enquiry possible in order to inform our understanding of the beliefs of the earliest Christians and their subsequent development. The Q hypothesis affords scholars a view of Christianity from which Matthew and Luke appear to depart. It stands as a fork in the road of early Christianity and underscores the radical multiplicity of Christian thought.

THE L/M (OR FARRER) HYPOTHESIS

The L/M hypothesis begins exactly where the Q hypothesis does: noting the great deal of shared material between Matthew and Luke. But rather than conjecturing a third, shared source between them, it proposes that Luke used Matthew as a source of his gospel. If Luke knew Matthew, then there is no need for a Q text. From this vantage point, the overlap between the two is manifold, encompassing not only the Q content, but also the birth narratives, the resurrection appearances

and the many so-called minor agreements between Matthew and Luke.⁴¹ The merits of the L/M hypothesis have only recently been reasserted, particularly by Mark Goodacre,⁴² and the consequences of this hypothesis are as far-reaching as that of Q and have yet to be fully explored. The Q hypothesis has been so influential in New Testament studies that its absence would require a radical revision of how the landscape of early Christianity is imagined.

If Luke used Matthew for much of his non-Markan material, this raises the question of what source or sources Matthew employed for his gospel. In place of Q, Francis Watson has argued that early Christianity employed written collections of Jesus' teaching whose genre resembles that of the later *Gospel of Thomas*.⁴³ These serialized lists of Jesus' teachings circulated widely in early Christianity, and Matthew utilized several sayings collections in his expansion of Mark. Using *Thomas* as a guide, the order of sayings within a collection was chosen for a variety of interpretative reasons. Some sayings were placed together because they shared a common form or theme; others shared a common catchword; some sayings were free-standing, and other sayings were juxtaposed against their neighbouring sayings to create new meanings. Each of these features of a sayings collection can be found in Matthew's gospel. The beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-10 were probably derived from a single sayings collection, and then Matthew composed 5:11 to extrapolate the meaning of the final beatitude for his narrative audience (5:2). Likewise, the command to not store up treasures on earth (6:19) is the first of several teachings that Matthew inherits from his sayings collection: 'Where your treasure is ...' (6:21), 'The eye is the lamp of the body ...' (6:22-23) and 'No one can serve two masters ...' (6:24). Individually, each of these vivid sayings lacks a contextual framework that might imbue it with broader significance, and the seams between the sayings are signalled by the abrupt shift of imagery. Matthew 6:21 was connected to 6:19-20 by way of the catchword 'treasure'. The sayings of 6:22-23 and 24 are juxtaposed with one another and 6:21 by Matthew's source to form a composite collection of wisdom sayings. Matthew then incorporates these into a broader discourse on communal practice. This

⁴⁰ The presentation of Jesus is clear, consistent and obviously deliberate, so that we can speak quite properly of a Q christology in which Jesus is understood as the messenger of Wisdom. Matthew however has taken over the Q material and edited it so that its meaning is different from that of Q, Jesus being identified as Wisdom. Here too the redaction and the presentation is clear, consistent and obviously deliberate. Consequently it becomes impossible to deny a significant difference and a clear-cut development between the christology of Q and the christology of Matthew. James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1989), 206.

⁴¹ On the minor agreements of Matthew and Luke and the L/M hypothesis see Mark Goodacre, 'Taking Our Leave of Mark-Q Overlaps: Major Agreements and the Farrer Theory', in Mogens Müller and Heike Omerzu, eds., *Gospel Interpretations and the Q-Hypothesis* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 201-22.

⁴² Most notably in Mark Goodacre, *The Case against Q: Hartsburg, P.A.: Trinity Press, 2002*.

⁴³ Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 249-85.

phenomenon is apparent throughout Matthew's five blocks of teaching. In early Christianity, if sayings collections served the modest purpose of recording Jesus' teachings for communal use in teaching and proclamation, then Matthew's employment of them within his gospel is a written augmentation of that original function.

The Matthew of an L/M hypothesis cannot straightforwardly be said to be the master ecclesial redactor of Q. Instead, many of the key themes of his gospel reflect the character of his potentially several sources that appear to be far less 'radical' than Q. It is well noted that Matthew converts Mark's 'kingdom of God' language into the 'kingdom of heaven', yet this change also reflects an extension of the heaven-earth contrast found throughout Matthew's sources, such as Matthew's beatitudes (5.3-10), ethical exhortations (6-7), Jesus' prayer (11.25) and particularly the Lord's Prayer (6.9-10). Along the same lines, beginning with Matthew's rewriting of Mark's baptism of Jesus 'to fulfil all righteousness', the multiplication of this theme reflects the nature of Matthew's sources and their incorporation by Matthew into his gospel. Righteousness language is often employed by Matthew within a traditionally Jewish ethical framework (6.1; 13.17; 23.28; 23.29; 23.35), while his other usage occurs within eschatological discourse derived from his sources (Mt 5.6; 6.33; 12.37; 13.43; 13.49; 25.37; 25.46). It is only at 5.20, where Matthew speaks of an eschatological righteousness in contradistinction to the common righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, that these two concepts of righteousness are overtly fused. In these instances and elsewhere, Matthew employs his sayings collections in accordance with his overall goal of augmenting Mark with additional teaching.

The Luke of the L/M hypothesis reworks his Matthean material by shaping it in line with his redactional goals and supplementing it with his own traditions.⁴⁴ He does so by relocating Matthew's sayings to form new juxtapositions and meanings and/or by rewriting them altogether. His own version of the beatitudes, dependent upon Matthew, is particularized towards a single meaning. Paralleling his frequent discourses on the issues of economic disparity and the proper use of wealth, it is the poor and those who hunger who are blessed (Lk 6.20-21). Matthew's parable of the sheep who went astray becomes the parable of the lost sheep, transposed into a context that supports his broader themes of repentance, restoration and joy. While Matthew

utilized the parable to emphasize communal restoration of one who has fallen away from the church, for Luke the parable illustrates and defends Jesus' ministry to lost sinners while entreating the Pharisees and scribes to join him in his celebration (Lk 15.1-7). Along similar lines, Luke further develops Matthew's use of 'righteousness' language. While he retains Matthew's concept of eschatological righteousness (14.14) and speaks of characters who are morally righteous (1.6; 2.25; 23.50), Luke adds a new wrinkle to his gospel that may undermine the overall tenor of Matthew's aims. At several points, Luke speaks negatively of those who are 'righteous within themselves' (10.29; 16.15; 18.9), or more commonly 'self-righteous'. When these instances are added to Luke's Markan saying 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Lk 5.32), proper righteousness is not the absence of sin and the accumulation of moral deeds (as in Mt 6.1), but a restored relationship with God through the repentance of sin and reception of forgiveness, as shown in the parables of Luke 15 and the story of Zacchaeus (Lk 19.1-10). On these and others, Luke's development of Matthew is equally a revision, if not a correction of Matthew.

The absence of a Q document leaves much of historical Jesus scholarship in something of a bind. It is difficult to approximate the relative distance between Matthew and his sources, either because of the success of his authorial skill or because Matthew incorporated his sources with only minor edits. Without the benefit of an independent witness to Matthew's sources afforded by the Q hypothesis, one is left questioning whether Matthew's interpretation of his sayings collections is the best one. For example, Matthew places the saying 'Leave the dead to buy their own dead' in the context of a call to discipleship, entreating one of his disciples to follow him and not bury his father (Mt 8.18-22). As a stand-alone saying, this teaching might realize other meanings in any number of possible contexts, yet Matthew's context is entirely coherent. The historian is left to choose between an unknowable possibility and Matthew's fairly reasonable estimation. Perhaps most importantly, without the Q hypothesis the prioritization of certain notions of primitivity, themselves perpetuated by Q and extended by historical Jesus scholars, appears to be an outmoded aesthetic preference.⁴⁵ In its place remains the fruitful practice of comparing versions of the same

⁴⁴ For more on Luke's use of Matthew, see T. J. Mosbo, *Luke the Composer: Exploring the Evangelist's Use of Matthew* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017).

⁴⁵ Cf. Watson: 'If the concern is to recover Jesus' *ipsissima verba* from their subsequent interpretations, then Q may seem indispensable. But it is doubtful whether this quest for an uninterpreted Jesus is viable or coherent at all; certainly, the 'primitivity' is of limited use with the synoptic problem.' Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 162.

saying for relative historical worth, extending beyond the canonical gospels to the sayings collection of *Thomas* and the many non-canonical witnesses to Jesus' teachings and actions. Within the L/M hypothesis, the quest to uncover the original words of Jesus is replaced by the more modest goal of assessing the historical plausibility and coherence of the various evangelists' portrayals of Jesus. Accordingly, the difference between the historical Jesus and his representation by the evangelists appears to be interpretative rather than radically disjunctive.

The resultant picture of early Christianity that emerges from the L/M hypothesis envisions the pre-synoptic era of Christianity to consist of the rapid spread of Jesus' teaching through both written collections and oral performances. Given the abundant profusion of traditions, it is impossible to map the evolution of their contents in any linear fashion. Interrogating the use of sayings collections rather than the specifics of their content by necessity pushes scholars to other sources of early Christianity, and in this vacuum the letters of Paul and (to a lesser degree) the story of Acts necessarily play a larger role. Consequently, there is no need to hypothesize that the preaching and exposition of Jesus' teaching at its earliest stages had little interest in the nature and consequences of his death and resurrection. The teachings of Jesus and teachings about Jesus coexisted in early Christianity, and the integration of the two is testified by the synoptic gospels themselves. This is not to suggest that the early church was uniform in its belief and did not have sharp internal disagreements. On the contrary, Luke could rightly be characterized as Matthew's opponent, just as Paul disputed with Peter and those sent from James (Gal 2.12). Within the L/M hypothesis, the story of early Christianity is not one of radical deviation from an original primitivity so much as the story of his disciples' continually attempting to engage with his significance within new interpretative horizons. Matthew represents a second attempt to grasp Jesus' meaning within the framework of narrative, aided by Mark and his compendium of sayings collections, and Luke attempts a third narrative to exceed his predecessors while following their compositional practices.

CONCLUSION

The quandary of the gospels and their sources is not just one piece within the broader puzzle of New Testament scholarship and early Christianity, but a load-bearing beam that supports the whole enterprise. Whichever way one configures the network of spreading Jesus

traditions in the early church, such decisions have many historical and theological entailments. The narration of early Christianity from the historical Jesus onwards depends upon prior decisions about the gospels and their sources. So while the work of source criticism may be arduous and the interpretive pay-off often occluded, it is nevertheless indispensable.

The movement spawned by Jesus that we call Christianity carried recollections and records of his life and teaching wherever it spread, and these proved to be highly provocative and generative of further reflection and interpretation. The gospels were central to this creative process of receiving and responding to Jesus. Whether it be the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, sayings collections or Q, the Jesus tradition proved to be a foundational resource for thought and practice, and this diversity testifies to the dynamic and creative nature of Jesus himself. The passage of time only amplified the voice of Jesus, a process that continues into the present.

Further Reading

- Bultmann, Rudolf, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, ET (New York: Harper & Row, 1976)
- Eve, Eric, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014)
- Goodacre, Mark, *The Case against Q* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002)
- Hengel, Martin, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 2000)
- Kloppenborg, John S., *Q, the Earliest Gospel: An Introduction to the Original Stories and Sayings of Jesus* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008)
- Koester, Helmut, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (London: SCM Press, 1990)
- Porter, Stanley E., and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *The Synoptic Problem: Four Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016)
- Sanders, E. P., and Margaret Davies, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989)
- Schröter, Jens, *From Jesus to the New Testament: Early Christian Theology and the Origin of the New Testament Canon* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013)
- Watson, Francis, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013)

