

A CHALLENGE TO LITERARY DEPENDENCY: DEFICIENCIES IN  
MEMORY TO EXPLAIN DIFFERENCES IN ORAL TRADITION

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In recent years, New Testament scholarship has been interested in answering the question of how reliable human memory is with regard to how the earliest actions and words of Jesus are remembered.<sup>1</sup> This study has become rather

1. Studies concerning memory as applied to New Testament research are vast in number but deserving of attention. The following list was first created by Chris Keith, 'Social Memory Theory and Gospels Research: The First Decade (Part One)', *Early Christianity* 6 (2015), pp. 254-76, but a few additions have been made here. See Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952); *idem*, *La Mémoire Collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950); *idem*, *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte: Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1941). Studies in memory grew in popularity circa 2005, with some of them listed here: A. Kirk and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity* (SBLSS, 52; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005); L. Stuckenbruck, S.C. Barton and B.G. Wold (eds.), *Memory in the Bible and Antiquity* (WUNT, 212; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007); M.I. Aguilar, 'Rethinking the Judean Past: Questions of History and a Social Archaeology of Memory in the First Book of the Maccabees', *BTB* 30 (2000), pp. 58-67; Y.Z. Eliav, 'The Tomb of James, Brother of Jesus, as Locus Memoriae', *HTR* 97 (2004), pp. 33-59; P.F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 174-75; G.M. Keightley, 'The Church's Memory of Jesus: A Social Science Analysis of 1 Thessalonians', *BTB* 17 (1987), pp. 149-56; A. Kirk, 'The Johannine Jesus in the Gospel of Peter: A Social Memory Approach', in R.T. Fortna and T. Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2001), pp. 313-21; Doron Mendels, *Memory in Jewish, Pagan and Christian Societies of the Graeco-Roman World: Fragmented Memory—Comprehensive Memory—Collective Memory* (LSTS, 48; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004); Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History—*

vast, with a large range of terms used to describe memory and its function in storytelling.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this study is to posit a theory of memory by collecting data from various studies conducted within the realm of psychology and neuroscience. This *departs* from traditional studies concerning memory and the New Testament which focus primarily on the text itself or other sociological factors that play into Gospel composition (social memory theory). By instead reverting our attention to the memory of the individual, we are able to discern a different layer, one that lies behind the composition of the Gospel accounts.<sup>3</sup> The data gleaned from these studies reveals that when people remember

*History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT, 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 255; I.H. Henderson, 'Memory, Text and Performance in Early Christian Formation', in C. Frateantonio and H. Krasser (eds.), *Religion und Bildung: Medien und Funktionen religiösen Wissens in der Kaiserzeit* (Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge, 30; Stuttgart: Steiner, 2010), pp. 168-81; W.H. Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Raphael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance and Text* (LNTS, 407; London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 3-80; Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels: Understanding the Oral Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

2. Keith notes a large number of terms: 'As should be clear, "social memory", "collective memory", and "cultural memory" do not technically refer to the same phenomena. Add to these terms further nuanced jargon such as "autobiographical memory", "individual memory", "historical memory", "communicative memory" and a host of others not named here but appearing in the literature ("hot memory", "cold memory", "normative memory", "formative memory", "counter-memory", "connective memory", "cognitive memory", "inscribed memory", "embodied memory", etc.) and one has a recipe for serious confusion.' Keith, 'Social Memory Theory', p. 374.

3. At this point, one might be tempted to consider the work of the form critics, who sought to discover the historical dimensions that lay behind the theological composition of the text (*Historie* and *Geschichte*). However, this is not the main intention of the present argument. Instead, the central aim is to discover the reason why similar pericopes appear differently with regard to their grammatical inconsistencies and explain these inconsistencies by way of memory theory. In doing so, it raises a number of critical issues with the theory of literary dependence (2- or 4-source hypotheses, *et cetera*).

complex sequences, such as a story, they are far more likely to remember the gist of the events—called *situational correspondence* below—than intricate details. When applied to the study of the Synoptic Gospels, this theory of memory reveals that the differences between the Synoptic accounts are due to how memory functioned for the earliest believers with regard to their oral traditions. Furthermore, this framework will generate reasonable doubt with regard to theories of literary dependence, commonly understood as contributing to what we call the Synoptic Problem. It is, therefore, far more likely that each of the Synoptic writers was consulting an oral tradition rather than simply copying sections from another Gospel.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Initial Challenges to Establishing a Theory of Oral Tradition*

There are a number of difficulties regarding the plausibility of relying upon oral tradition to establish a theory of literary independence. The first is that we do not have access to this oral tradition. While this is true, we can be certain that an oral tradition existed. Acts 4.33 states that the Apostles testified about the resurrection of Jesus and that local persecution drove others to testify beyond Jerusalem (8.4). We also know that these traditions were eventually gathered by the Synoptic writers and placed into written form. But does this mean that we do not have access to what was said? The differences between the accounts that will be examined below draw attention to the fact that we are looking at different versions of the same stories. It is extremely difficult to explain these differences using theories of literary dependence, as such an approach generates little other than subjective speculation as to why the Synoptic writers chose to change certain details within the same story. Instead, it is far more plausible that the differences mark a residue of oral tradition.

The second challenge is to establish that a reasonable amount of time had passed between the life and ministry of Jesus and composition of the Synoptic

4. The differences between the Gospel accounts have recently been noted by Licona, who explains these differences by way of genre, specifically ancient biography. The current study departs from this thesis by suggesting that the oral tradition that lies behind the Gospels best explains for the differences. See Michael R. Licona, *Why are there Differences in the Gospels? What we can Learn from Ancient Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

tradition. This is an important thing to note because it validates the theory that a robust oral tradition was in place from which the Synoptic writers could gather testimony. Patzia proposes that the Gospels were written at least thirty years after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, leaving room for thirty years of oral transmission.<sup>5</sup> This means that, as Moule states, the Gospel writers were heirs to a considerable body of tradition.<sup>6</sup> Patzia goes on to suggest that the Gospel writers would have received the oral material and then used this material to fit into their own life setting and purpose.<sup>7</sup>

The third challenge involves language. It is reasonable to posit that differences in the Gospel stories may have arisen due to translation or transmission errors from one language to another, namely from Aramaic to Greek. However, since the Gospels were written in Greek, it is also reasonable to conclude that Jesus himself spoke Greek.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is therefore plausible to infer that the oral transmission of the Jesus stories was also done by means of the Greek language. Since this is so, it is far less likely that the differences in the accounts are due to a mistranslation from Aramaic into Greek.

It is therefore more plausible to suggest that the differences in the Synoptic accounts are due to the nature of human memory with regard to recalling the events through orality. This article is being written in 2018 and it would be difficult to recall all of the intricate details of an event that occurred in 1998—

5. Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text and Canon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp. 52-63.

6. C.F.D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, rev. edn, 1981), p. 71.

7. Patzia, *Making of the New Testament*, p. 59. This is a rather difficult proposition to prove for a number of reasons. Let it suffice to say for this article that the differences found within the Synoptic Gospel traditions cannot *only* be linked to a particular life setting or purpose because there is no way to discover what those might be other than by means of subjective speculation.

8. The evidence for such a conclusion is too vast for this article alone, so I refer the reader to a number of critically important studies: Stanley E. Porter, *Criteria for Authenticity in Historical Jesus Research: Previous Discussion and New Proposals* (JSNTSup, 191; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); *Idem*, 'The Language(s) Jesus Spoke', in Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus* (4 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 2011), III, pp. 2455-71; Stephen E. Fassberg, 'Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?', *CBQ* 74 (2012), pp. 263-80; Hughson T. Ong, *The Multilingual Jesus and the Sociological World of the New Testament* (LBS, 12; Leiden: Brill, 2015).

even if that event was ‘life-altering’. There is no reason why I should be able to: human memory is not adapted to remember such detail. In fact, human memory is notoriously ineffective at doing what it is supposed to do: remember.<sup>9</sup>

As mentioned above, the purpose of this article is to utilize data gathered in a number of studies concerning memory and apply this data to an assessment of certain pericopes found in the Synoptic tradition. It will be shown that memory is not suited for remembering intricate detail and, instead, recalls the gist of what happened.

### *What is Memory?*

Many of us think of human memory as a collection of movie-like films that provide a perfect, chronological sequence of what has happened. A failure to ‘watch’ these films accurately is then a failure to access the ‘films’ that you have stored in your brain, a theory which is quite misguided.<sup>10</sup> This theory was first criticized by German psychologist Hugo Münsterberg in 1907.<sup>11</sup> He questioned the accuracy of memory, especially after an emotional event. After his home had been burglarized, he was called on by police to provide an account of what he had seen in his home once he discovered the break in. He told police that he had seen a trail of candle wax on the second floor, a large mantel clock that the intruder had wrapped in paper for transport but

9. This does not dismiss the idea that the Gospel writers were historically truthful and provide an accurate account of the historical events surrounding Jesus. However, it is also possible that they did not, and the Gospels represent some form of interpretation of the historical events surrounding Jesus. If this is so, it could mean that ancient concept of truth goes beyond the notion of ‘historicity’. For a distinction between ‘memory’ and ‘history’ see Pierre Nora, ‘General Introduction: Between Memory and History’, in L.D. Kritzman and Pierre Nora (eds.), *Realms of Memory* (trans. A. Goldhammer; 3 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), I, pp. 1-20.

10. For more on this, see Elizabeth Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *Witness for the Defense: The Accused, the Eyewitness, and the Expert Who Put Memory on Trial* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992).

11. The following summary is a paraphrase from Leonard Mlodinow, *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), pp. 58-63.

then left on the dining table, and evidence that the intruder had entered through a cellar window. As it turned out, however, each of the facts he provided was proven false. This was rather shocking because he understood his memory to be excellent. He had, in fact, delivered several thousand lectures without any notes.

Surprised by his inability to remember correctly, he began to study whether or not other people had the same issues with memory. He concluded that no one is able to retain a vast quantity of details, regardless of how closely they pay attention to those details. In other words, we are not capable of focusing on many things happening concurrently. This led to the discovery that errors in memory are the result of how our brains fill in the gaps in our perception, and our brains do this by relying on our expectations, belief systems and prior knowledge.<sup>12</sup> As a result, when our perceptions are at odds with what we perceive, our brains can be fooled with regard to what actually happened.

Münsterberg then applied his knowledge to the initial break-in that he had given account of years prior. The police discovered that the intruder had actually entered through the front door by removing the lock. The clock that Münsterberg had remembered being wrapped in paper and left on the table was actually wrapped in a tablecloth, a detail about which Münsterberg had wrongly applied his expectation of how things were usually packed for transport: in paper. The trail of candle wax that he had remembered on the second floor was actually in the attic; a detail that he had misapplied to the disorder that he had discovered on the second floor which caused him to remember it being there instead.

All of these discoveries were later published in his book *On the Witness Stand: Essays on Psychology and Crime*.<sup>13</sup> He concluded that memory functions in a number of ways. First, people generally remember the *gist* of what happens instead of each of the small details. Secondly, when pressed for details, people will fill in the gaps by making things up. Thirdly, people will substitute their invented details for historically accurate details and believe them as historically accurate.

Our memory behaves this way because it is functionally practical. If we were to remember every single detail of every event we witnessed, our

12. Mlodinow, *Subliminal*, p. 61.

13. See Hugo Münsterberg, *On the Witness Stand: Essays on Psychology and Crime* (New York: Doubleday, 1908).

processing time would be too lengthy and therefore inefficient.<sup>14</sup> This is illustrated by what linguists describe as a two-leveled structure of memory, composed of a surface-level and a deep-level structure. For example, when one person listens to another tell a story, the surface-level structure perceives the linguistic utterance and remembers it for approximately ten seconds. After this, the deep-level structure helps the listener to categorize the utterance so that he or she will be able to remember it for much longer. This deep-structure memory contains the gist of what was uttered but, again, the gist is characterized by the listener's expectations, belief systems and experiences. Said another way, deep-level memories are constructed by our *mnemonic domains*; we remember things that we deem closely related to those things which we have already experienced.<sup>15</sup>

### *Remembering the Future*

Constructing deep-level structures that preserve the gist of what is perceived was further investigated by many psychologists during the twentieth century. One such study was conducted by D.H. Ingvar, which he published under the title 'Memory for the Future'.<sup>16</sup> Though the title is seemingly paradoxical in nature, this study showed that certain regions within the prefrontal cortex of the brain have a crucial role in planning, foresight and imagining complex action sequences. The same evidence was discovered by Tulving, who argued

14. This is illustrated in the story of Solomon Shereshevsky, the man who could not forget. Russian psychologist A.R. Luria found that Shereshevsky was unable to recognize a person's face because he was able to remember multiple versions of every face he had ever seen. As a result, he had to compare the person in front of him to the vast inventory of images to find an exact equivalent. This extended to language as well. Shereshevsky could remember each word a person said with great accuracy, but he often had trouble understanding the meaning behind the words. See Mlodinow, *Subliminal*, p. 64.

15. Discernment is related to the neurological process within the brain that connects information. New information travels along neurological pathways and is stored according to how that information associates with previously stored information. If new information satisfies a neural convergence zone, it is stored as a 'memory' or an association. See Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), pp. 133-34.

16. D.H. Ingvar, "'Memory of the Future": An Essay on the Temporal Organization of Conscious Awareness', *Human Neurobiology* 4.3 (1985), pp. 127-36.

that brain regions responsible for imagining the future are also engaged with remembering past events.<sup>17</sup> This process results in what he called ‘mental time travel’, a capacity that he argued to be uniquely human.<sup>18</sup>

Similar results have been shown in a number of more recent studies as well. In a study conducted by Okuda,<sup>19</sup> participants were instructed to talk freely about either the near or distant past or future while a positron emission tomography scan was carried out. The scans showed that the prefrontal cortex and parts of the medial temporal lobe (the hippocampus and parahippocampal gyrus) were similarly engaged during descriptions of past and future events. In another study by Szpunar *et al.*, participants were instructed to remember specific past events and imagine specific future events that involved a familiar individual.<sup>20</sup> Again, what was shown was an overlap in activity within the prefrontal and medial temporal regions of the brain while remembering past events and imagining future ones.

These studies indicate that what we call a ‘memory’ is a combination of what has happened with what we imagine *could* happen. What could happen is created by our *mnemonic domains*; that is, the relationship between what we perceive at the moment we are trying to recall and what we have perceived at any other point in time. This process is an unconscious effort on our part to ‘smooth out’ certain details, which allow us to retain memories that make the most sense to us. This allows us to test possibilities without actually experiencing them and to create simulations, which are connected to our emotional systems.

*Memory as Related to Recalling Stories, Self-Narrative and Observations*

But how does this relate to our ability to tell stories? And more specifically, how might this have affected the earliest believers and their memories

17. E. Tulving, *Elements of Episodic Memory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); *idem*, ‘Memory and Consciousness’, *Canadian Psychology* 26 (1985), pp. 1-12.

18. See E. Tulving, ‘Episodic Memory and Autonoesis: Uniquely Human?’, in H.S. Terrace and J. Metcalfe (eds.), *The Missing Link in Cognition: Origins of Self-Reflective Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 3-56.

19. J. Okuda, ‘Thinking of the Future and the Past: The Roles of the Frontal Pole and the Medial Temporal Lobes’, *NeuroImage* 19 (2003), pp. 1369-80.

20. K.K. Szpunar, J.M. Watson and K.B. McDermott, ‘Neural Substrates of Envisioning the Future’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States* 104 (2007), pp. 642-47.

surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus? There was not as much separation between 'history' and 'fiction' for ancients as there is for moderns. The ancients did not have video recording capability, so once a person saw an event, there was no possible means by which to see it again. This meant that memory was of the utmost importance when it came to recalling events, and the only way by which the ancients were able to recall events was through the mode of telling stories.

In my estimation, there are three circumstances according to which a person can recall an event: recalling an event that is told to them, such as by listening to a story; recalling an event that is directly viewed by a subject; and recalling the recollection of an event that was directly viewed by the subject.

The first circumstance was studied by Frederic Bartlett, who read the folktale 'The War of the Ghosts' to his subjects.<sup>21</sup> After reading the story, Bartlett asked his subjects to recall the story's details fifteen minutes later, and then at regular intervals over a period of weeks and months. What he discovered was that his subjects did not just forget certain details, they also added new details to the story. The story became shorter and simpler and certain elements of the story were reinterpreted and changed to make it more comprehensible to them. This data coincides with the studies discussed above in which there is a certain bias towards one's prior knowledge and beliefs about the world when given the task of remembering.<sup>22</sup>

The second circumstance is illustrated in a study conducted by Dan Simons and Daniel Levin at Cornell University.<sup>23</sup> Levin created a number of

21. Frederick Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

22. Mlodinow, *Subliminal*, pp. 68-69. What this means is that long-term memories are often conflated with imagination and are constructed within the boundaries of subjective emotional salience. Not only this, but memories begin to decay with time according to what psychologists call the 'power-law function'. What this means is that we remember events more readily based on how powerfully we believe that they might reoccur. This makes more recent memories the most relevant, and more relevant memories are worth the cost of retrieval. In other words, 'we remember common and recent events better than rare and long-past ones'. See Boyd, *Origin of Stories*, pp. 153-54.

23. Daniel J. Simons and Daniel T. Levin, 'Failure to Detect Changes to Attended Objects in Motion Pictures', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 4 (1997), pp. 501-506.

videos that each depicted certain events in which the actor changed from scene to scene. Six students watched the scenes carefully and were asked to comment on any changes that they might have noticed. In one video, an actor is depicted sitting at a desk when the phone rings. This actor gets up and walks to the door whereupon a new video depicts a different actor walking from the door to the phone to answer it. After viewing this sequence, the six students were asked directly whether the actor sitting at the desk was different from the actor who answered the phone. Four of the six subjects admitted that they had not noticed that the actor had been switched at all.

Simons and Levin then added a new test to the experiment.<sup>24</sup> Each student was told separately to step outside where an actor approached them with a map of the Cornell campus. The actor asked the subject for help in locating a particular location on the map. After conversing for approximately fifteen seconds, two men with a large door passed rudely between them obscuring the view of the subject from the actor with the map. During that time, a new actor took the place of the former with the map. The new actor was shorter, wore different clothes, and had a noticeably different voice than the previous one. In what resulted, most of the students did not notice that an entirely new person stood before them and continued to consult the map in an effort to help. Each subject was quite surprised to discover that the actor had been switched midway through the experiment.

The third circumstance is illustrated in a study conducted by Ulric Neisser in which students were asked to recall the events surrounding the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*. The students each wrote an account of what they remembered to have happened and what they were doing when they first heard the news. Neisser then asked forty-four of the same students to recall the experience again three years later. None of the accounts collected three years later corresponded 100 per cent with what had first been written, and about 25 per cent of those accounts had a 0 percent correspondence rate. So shocked by the low correspondence rates, some students chose to believe that their later accounts were more accurate than those previously written. Some

24. Daniel J. Simons and Daniel T. Levin, 'Failure to Detect Changes to People During a Real-World Interaction', *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 5 (1998), pp. 644-48.

even refused to believe that the previous account was even theirs, though it was written in their handwriting.<sup>25</sup>

What each of these studies illustrates is the inability of memory to retain the specific details of a story, an event that is witnessed directly, or the recollection of a directly witnessed event. The data collected here further proves the above stated thesis, which is that memory is more likely to remember the gist of a story or event rather than a vast number of intricate details. This phenomenon occurs both in remembering events from everyday life, but also how one remembers a complex sequence such as a story. What is important to note is that, while the memory of intricate details is often altered in the recollection of an event, these changes are not necessarily the result of people simply being creative concerning the details. In other words, subjects do not purposefully alter the stories because they think new details were more appropriate. Instead, people fill in the lost details with new imaginative details that are related to their *mnemonic domains*.

*Memory and Imagination as Related to Telling Stories: Its Purpose and Method*

Story telling is an essential process in every society. A community's stories tell us about their values, their beliefs and even their history. In a sense, stories are imbedded memories: they recall the past to the present and inform future decision-making. Said another way, stories are a basis of reflection for future action. This is why story telling is an extremely old practice and it is related to our ability to remember and to imagine. Because we mix memory and imagination together, our ability to create any number of potential simulations based on our memory has given way to the concept of storytelling. And, as we read or listen to stories, we experience them through what Boyd calls 'semisimulation': we construct simulations within ourselves, and these simulations are central to the representation of meaning.<sup>26</sup>

Meaning is often characterized by the community in which a story originates or is presented. This is especially true of communities that create mythologies, the myths being a manner by which future generations learn how to live well within society. The information presented in a story can thus

25. Ulric Neisser, *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 6; Mlodinow, *Subliminal*, pp. 69-70.

26. Boyd, *Origin of Stories*, p. 157.

provide social information to guide decisions both now and in the future, which can also act as a means of building cohesion within that community. This is sometimes referred to as *social memory*: a collectivist grouping of memories agreed on and shared by a community. As time passes, the community shapes the memories and cultivates them into a mythology. These mythologies then help to shape future members of the community in various ways. This fits the theory of memory as purported by Bartlett above, that stories begin to fit a mold of a person's belief systems and values.

What is more, mythologies allow a community to visualize the invisible. And this is the purpose of the appearance of the many symbols and metaphors that we encounter in mythology. Mythology is then the platform upon which concepts are crafted into narrative, and these narratives are full of archetypal symbols. Developing archetypal symbols is essential for the survival of any mythology because a person needs to see themselves, so to speak, within the myth in order to perpetuate the myth.

Not only can a story inform a community ethically, it also helps improve memory. Because memory is so closely related to emotion as was discussed above, stories—invented or not—can help shape emotions toward defined conclusions. Even if the events within the stories are not likely something that we may encounter ourselves, they can create enough emotional buy-in so as to provide a basis for our thinking.<sup>27</sup> In this way, stories become symbols full of archetypal images of how one should conduct themselves either in conjunction with or adverse to communal expectations.<sup>28</sup>

### *Memory and the Synoptic Gospel Traditions*

Given the nature of our memories, can we find elements within the Gospel texts that illustrate how our memories function? This is a difficult task because, as mentioned above, we do not have access to any first-century copies of the Gospels and our first complete New Testament appears in the fourth

27. Boyd, *Origin of Stories*, p. 193. Here Boyd provides the example of the Good Samaritan: we do not need to be a Samaritan nor do we need to encounter an injured man in a ditch to learn how to act benevolently.

28. This tendency may be related to a conformist bias, that is, the unconscious habit of to welcome confirming instances and to shun falsifying ones. See Boyd, *Origin of Stories*, p. 203.

century with Codex Sinaiticus. We are forced therefore to look for residual elements of the oral tradition that formed the Gospels. But how do we know exactly what to look for?

I argue here that residual elements of oral tradition can be found in the differences between certain Gospel pericopes. If, for example, the Gospels completely aligned with a 100 per cent grammatical correspondence rate in the shared pericopes, it is more likely that the Gospel writers simply copied one another's work and then added additional pericopes distinct to their Gospel. But this is not what we find. Instead, even the shared pericopes appear grammatically differently from one another—differently enough to question whether a Gospel writer copied a previous writer's work. Sometimes the differences are minute; that is to say that the correspondence rate is quite high with the exception of minor syntactical units. Other differences are quite large which makes the possibility of literary dependence considerably less.

This could lead one to conclude, based on the grammatical differences, that the writers are recording several different instances during which the events played out in a similar way. While this may be so, it is my opinion that the pericopes mentioned below are depicting the same event. This is where an important distinction should be made. While there are very low levels of grammatical correspondence, we do find a high level of situational correspondence. Situational correspondence has less to do with verbal construction and aspect, and more to do with the components of the narrative, or the *gist* of the event. For example, we can have a basic framework for the Legion narrative:

1. Introduction of Jesus to the scene
2. A demon-possessed man
3. Conversation/exorcism
4. A swine herd
5. The death of the herd
6. The response of the onlookers

Each of the above listed components is found in each Gospel's version and, therefore, the accounts share a high rate of correspondence. However, the choices of verbal aspect from which the authors guide the readers are quite different. In addition, other constituents of the language appear differently in each Gospel, leading to a low rate of grammatical correspondence. If we are able to discern the difference between grammatical and situational

correspondence, we are more able to discern the reliance upon oral versus written traditions.

It would follow that a high rate of situational correspondence matched with a low rate of grammatical correspondence is evidence of the residue of oral tradition. This means that a source is able to present certain components of the story differently—such as rearranging the order of certain components as in the temptation narratives—while still maintaining the gist of the story. When tested against the theories of memory mentioned above, strong evidence for a reliance upon a robust oral tradition is favorable to literary dependence. In what follows, a number of shared pericopes will be examined according to their grammar, after which comments will be made concerning the findings.

### *The Temptation of Jesus*

The temptation pericopes can be found in Mt. 4.1-11, Mk 1.12-13 and Lk. 4.1-13. At first glance, the most obvious difference among the three accounts is how much shorter Mark's version is: two verses as compared to Matthew's 11 and Luke's 13. This is often reconciled by positing that Mark's version was written first because its details are so sparse, and that Matthew and Luke 'fill out' the details in a later edition of the story using Q material.<sup>29</sup> This is problematic because the so-called earliest version of the pericope lacks significant detail—would it not follow that the earliest and closest version of the story, historically speaking, would have the most detail or, at very least, different details? At any rate, the differences here are a substantial indication of the residue of oral tradition.

The opening lines of each version provide an excellent illustration of a number of significant differences in syntax that indicate the residue of oral tradition, and a number of observations can be made about these lines. The first observation that can be made is that of the verb sequence used by each writer:

29. See W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison Jr, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–97), I, pp. 350-51; F. Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50* (ed. H. Koester; trans. C.M. Thomas; Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 139; Stanley E. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament: Studies in Tools, Methods, and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), p. 270.

| Matthew 4.1  | Mark 1.12-13   | Luke 4.1-2   |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Τότε ὁ Ἰησοῦς <b>ἀνήχθη</b> εἰς τὴν ἔρημον ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος, <b>πειρασθῆναι</b> ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου</p> | <p>Καὶ εὐθὺς τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτὸν <b>ἐκβάλλει</b> εἰς τὴν ἔρημον καὶ ἦν ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ τεσσαράκοντα ἡμέρας <b>πειραζόμενος</b> ὑπὸ τοῦ Σατανᾶ, καὶ ἦν μετὰ τῶν θηρίων, καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι <b>διηκόνουν</b> αὐτῷ.</p> | <p>Ἰησοῦς δὲ πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου <b>ὑπέστρεψεν</b> ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, καὶ <b>ἦγετο</b> ἐν τῷ πνεύματι ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἡμέρας τεσσαράκοντα <b>πειραζόμενος</b> ὑπὸ τοῦ διαβόλου</p> |

Comparison of Mt. 4.1, Mk 1.12-13 and Lk. 4.1-2

Mark begins with a narrative present, which is more aspectually prominent than Matthew and Luke's use of the aorist (*ἀνήχθη* and *ὑπέστρεψεν*). Luke then shifts the aspect but includes the Imperfect *ἦγετο*, which is different from Matthew's chain and creates more prominence. This is an important shift because, according to the evidence presented by Porter, it is far less likely, if not completely unlikely, that a writer will alter a text and shift the verb tense-form to one that is less prominent.<sup>30</sup> This means that, according to the statistics provided, Mark—and by association Luke—could not have come before Matthew if we are to accept a theory of literary dependence. However, accepting such a theory does not account for the differences between Mark and Luke with regard to verbal choices (*ἐκβάλλει/ἦγετο*), agency (*ἐκβάλλει* as direct action of *τὸ πνεῦμα/ἐν τῷ πνεύματι*) and content.

It therefore becomes far less plausible that literary dependence exists. Again, one could assume that, if Mark wrote his Gospel first, Matthew and Luke would change the verb tense to a more 'appropriate form'. But what exactly makes this choice more appropriate?<sup>31</sup> What is more, we cannot assume

30. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, pp. 268-71.

31. It has been said that Mark's Greek has a cruder and less polished form than that of the other Gospel writers. If that is so, it is not obvious why those who formed the New Testament canon decided to include it over the, no doubt, many other later more 'polished' documents that would have appeared in the first and second centuries. What is even less obvious is why several scholars choose to understand Mark's writing style as more terse or less sophisticated in the first place. Porter asserts that

that Matthew and Luke are copying from an alternative written source, say Q, because their verbal syntactical choices are different. If they did copy from Q, it would follow that the verbal choices reflect what would be represented in that shared document. Instead, we see Matthew using an aorist passive of ἀνάγω and Luke using an imperfect passive of ἄγω in the subordinate clause. Matthew's use of an aorist passive infinitive (πειρασθῆναι) does not coincide with Luke's use of a present passive participle (πειραζόμενος).

What these opening words of each pericope show, as well as those to follow, is that each Gospel writer is writing independently of the others. There is too low of a grammatical correspondence rate among the opening verses of these pericopes to suggest that any writer copied the work of another Gospel writer or of some other shared, written source. Instead, this example reveals the residue of the oral tradition that lay behind the composition of the Gospels. This also lends itself to an explanation of why the temple scenes in Matthew and Luke are switched (Mt. 4.5-7; Lk. 4.9-12). Since we can no longer assume literary dependence, it makes the most sense to conclude that the oral source from which Matthew and Luke gather the details of the story switched the details. It, therefore, is more reasonable to posit that the source of this pericope simply told the story differently to each writer. This is reflected in the general sense of agreement between the opening lines of each pericope: the use of ἀνάγω/ἄγω and πειράζω. However, the differences in syntax are evidence of someone who is remembering the gist of the pericope, a theory that has much more in keeping with how human memory operates.

#### *One or Two Legions?*

The next example of residual oral tradition that will be examined is the story of the demoniacs from the Geresenes/Gadarenes (Mt. 8.28-43; Mk 5.1-17; Lk. 8.26-39). At first glance, there are some obvious differences between the pericopes, some so large that one might be tempted to consider them to be

those who criticize Mark as terse often do not address the issues of grammar that may actually evidence a level of sophistication to Mark's writing style. It is this author's opinion that opinions of 'terseness' or 'lack of sophistication' are the result of handcuffing oneself to the theory that Mark's Gospel was written first and that the later Gospels were literarily dependent upon it, a position that constrains oneself from examining (or having to examine) the grammatical aspects of Mark's composition. See Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, pp. 259-63.

two separate and distinct events. While this may certainly be true, the *gist* of each story is too similar to consider them distinct events.

Matthew's version of the pericope appears the most distinct from those found in Mark and Luke. To start, the names of the areas appear to be different and there are two demoniacs instead of one, neither of which identify themselves as the infamous Legion. However, the similarities are obvious: these two men live amongst the tombs and possess superhuman strength which intimidates anyone who tries to pass by; both come out to meet Jesus and question him about his intentions for them; and they ask to be transferred into a nearby herd of pigs, which then throw themselves into the sea.

Mark and Luke's versions have more in common with regard to situational content. Jesus exits his boat and is immediately confronted by a man who had been living amongst the tombs. This man had been cutting himself with rocks and possessed superhuman strength, which he used to overpower anyone who tried to help him. The demons within the man question Jesus and identify themselves as Legion. They then implore Jesus not to destroy them and are transferred into a herd of pigs that rush off a nearby cliff into the sea.

With regard to syntax, even more discrepancies begin to emerge. Take, for example, the verbal structure within the introductory lines of each version:

| Matthew 8.28  | Mark 5.1-2   | Luke 8.26-27  |
|---|--|---|
| Καὶ ἐλθόντος αὐτοῦ εἰς τὸ πέραν εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γαδαρηνῶν ὑπήντησαν αὐτῷ δύο δαιμονιζόμενοι ἐκ τῶν μνημείων ἐξερχόμενοι, χαλεποὶ λίαν, ὥστε μὴ ἰσχύειν τινὰ παρελθεῖν διὰ τῆς ὁδοῦ ἐκείνης. | Καὶ ἦλθον εἰς τὸ πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν. καὶ ἐξελθόντος αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου εὐθὺς ὑπήντησεν αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν μνημείων ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ | Καὶ κατέπλευσαν εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν, ἣτις ἐστὶν ἀντιπέρα τῆς Γαλιλαίας. ἐξελθόντι δὲ αὐτῷ ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ὑπήντησεν ἀνὴρ τις ἐκ τῆς πόλεως ἔχων δαιμόνια: καὶ χρόνῳ ἰκανῷ οὐκ ἐνεδύσατο ἱμάτιον, καὶ ἐν οἰκίᾳ οὐκ ἔμενεν ἀλλ' ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν. |

Comparison of Mt. 8.28, Mk 5.1-2 and Lk. 8.26-27

Each begins, more or less, with a description of the area (χώραν) to which Jesus is travelling next. All three versions introduce the pericope with an aorist, though Matthew chooses the participle to Mark and Luke's indicative moods (ἐλθόντος/ἦλθον/κατέπλευσαν). In terms of prominence, each author chooses the least marked aorist, which provides background information.

From here, Mark is the only version that focuses on Jesus' exit of the boat in the background with an aorist tense-form (within a Genitive Absolute), whereas Matthew and Luke have the demoniac(s) as the subject of the aorist verb. Mark and Luke use aorist participles (ἐξεληθόντος/ἐξεληθόντι) whereas Matthew employs a present, and therefore more prominent, middle-passive participle (ἐξερχόμενοι). It appears that Matthew wants to emphasize the demoniacs' exit from the tombs.

Each version uses the aorist ὑπήντησαν to denote an aggressive approach by the demoniac(s), but it is only Matthew who reverts to a more prominent present tense-form when describing that no one attempting to pass along the road was strong enough to presumably overpower the men (ἰσχύειν).

As in the case of the temptation narrative above, the grammatical differences are vast enough to dismiss a theory of literary dependence due to a very low correspondence rate. The only shared grammatical feature in these verses is the manner by which the demoniac(s) approach Jesus. However, the introductory verses do show that the pericope does contain a high level of correspondence with regard to situational content. This is consistent with the theory of memory discussed above and it is more plausible to suggest that the oral source(s) behind the pericope is a more valid means for understanding how and why the versions are so different.

#### *Who Do People Say That I Am?*

The final section that is examined here is that of Peter's confession (Mt. 16.13-20; Mk 8.27-30; Lk. 9.18-20). As in the examples above, a difference of verbal construction is to be expected, which equates to a low grammatical correspondence rate. On the other hand, we should expect to see similarities in the situational correspondence that denotes the residue of oral tradition:

| Matthew 16.13-16   | Mark 8.27-29   | Luke 9.18-20  |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Ἐλθὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς τὰ μέρη Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου ἠρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων, Τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Οἱ μὲν Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν, ἄλλοι δὲ Ἡλίαν, ἕτεροι δὲ Ἱερεμίαν ἢ ἓνα τῶν προφητῶν. λέγει αὐτοῖς, Ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν, Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ζῶντος.</p> | <p>Καὶ ἐξῆλθεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς καὶ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ εἰς τὰς κώμας Καισαρείας τῆς Φιλίππου: καὶ ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ ἐπηρώτα τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ λέγων αὐτοῖς, Τίνα με λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι; οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ λέγοντες [ὅτι] Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν, καὶ ἄλλοι, Ἡλίαν, ἄλλοι δὲ ὅτι εἷς τῶν προφητῶν. καὶ αὐτὸς ἐπηρώτα αὐτούς, Ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Πέτρος λέγει αὐτῷ, Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστὸς.</p> | <p>Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν προσευχόμενον κατὰ μόνας συνῆσαν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταί, καὶ ἐπηρώτησεν αὐτοὺς λέγων, Τίνα με λέγουσιν οἱ ὄχλοι εἶναι; οἱ δὲ ἀποκριθέντες εἶπαν, Ἰωάννην τὸν βαπτιστὴν, ἄλλοι δὲ Ἡλίαν, ἄλλοι δὲ ὅτι προφήτης τις τῶν ἀρχαίων ἀνέστη. εἶπεν δὲ αὐτοῖς, Ὑμεῖς δὲ τίνα με λέγετε εἶναι; Πέτρος δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν, Τὸν Χριστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ.</p> |

Comparison of Mt. 16.13-16, Mk 8.27-29 and Lk. 9.18-20

In terms of situational content, Mark and Matthew follow closely together with each other whereas Luke lacks a more obvious locational feature (Caesarea Philippi). Another difference occurs in the placement of the pericope. Luke places this pericope between the feeding of 5,000 people and the transfiguration, whereas Mark places it after the feeding of the 4,000 and the transfiguration. Matthew places it sometime after the feeding of 4,000 people, after a number of speeches concerning the Pharisees, and before a number of speeches concerning discipleship, which led to the transfiguration. Despite a number of differences (4,000/5,000 people fed; addition of speeches in Matthew; and locational vagueness in Luke), there is enough situational correspondence among the pericopes to conclude that each Gospel is recording the same instance. For example, each account contains a discussion between Jesus and the disciples, a question as to Jesus' identity, speculation concerning Jesus' identity as either John the Baptist or Elijah, and a

confession; each of these examples lends itself to a high level of situational content.

With regard to grammatical correspondence, the rate is very low. Not only this, Jesus constructs his questions rather differently. For example, Matthew's account has Jesus asking who the disciples think the Son of Man is (Τίνα λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου;), while Mark omits the use of the epithet (Τίνα με λέγουσιν οἱ ἄνθρωποι εἶναι;). Luke also omits the epithet but chooses the noun οἱ ὄχλοι instead of οἱ ἄνθρωποι. The introduction to the response is slightly different as well. Matthew uses the article with an aorist verb (οἱ δὲ εἶπαν), whereas Mark and Luke add different auxiliary participles (λέγουσιν//ἀποκριθέντες).

More differences appear in the extended explanation. Matthew adds the noun 'Jeremiah' (Ἰερεμίαν) though Mark and Luke do not. Matthew has the disciples relating the opinion that Jesus could be one of the prophets (ένα τῶν προφητῶν), whereas Mark uses a different numerical lexeme (ὅτι εἷς τῶν προφητῶν). Luke departs completely from these options and has the disciples saying that Jesus could be one of the prophets of old (ὅτι προφήτης τις τῶν ἀρχαίων ἀνέστη).

With regard to the confession itself, Mark's account follows an obvious pattern leading up to the confession: background information is represented by the aorist tense with a change in aspect signaled by a shift to the present tense-form, represented by words of saying (λέγων, λέγοντες). The only time this does not occur is directly before the confession: ὁ Πέτρος λέγει αὐτῷ, Σὺ εἶ ὁ Χριστός. One should expect Mark to retain the aorist as he does previously (καὶ ἐν τῇ ὁδοῦ ἐπηρώτα τοὺς μαθητάς//οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ) but he maintains use of the present to draw attention to his confession.

In the same example, both Matthew and Luke's accounts retain the aorist, unlike Mark (ἀποκριθεὶς δὲ Σίμων Πέτρος εἶπεν//Πέτρος δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν), which indicates that Mark's use of the Present raises the level of prominence. Again, this may dismiss the idea of Markan priority—or any other theory of priority—on the basis of evidence that authors usually do not revert to a less marked or prominent tense as shown in the work of Porter above.<sup>32</sup>

However, the grammatical correspondence rate is quite low, despite the situational correspondence. As shown above, there is no consistent pattern of aspectual changes between Matthew, Mark and Luke, and the aspectual

32. Porter, *Linguistic Analysis*, pp. 268-71.

difference among the accounts raises reasonable doubt with regard to literary dependence. Instead, it is much more plausible to infer that each writer is referring to an oral source that maintains the gist of the narrative, without appealing to strict correspondence between grammatical constructions.

The argument within this section has posited three theories. The first is that there exists evidence of the residue of the oral traditions that lay behind the composition of the Gospel accounts. If this is so, it is much more plausible to explain the differences we see in the above pericopes by way of an oral source retelling the story slightly differently to each writer. The second relates to how an oral source would have done this. It is argued here that the pericopes here have a high rate of situational correspondence; that is, there are key elements present in each of the accounts that imply a positive correlation among instances. In other words, there are enough common elements in these pericopes to consider them the same event. This leads to the third theory, which is that each pericope, despite a high level of situational correspondence, contains a low level of grammatical correspondence. These findings show that these accounts are not literarily dependent upon one another and rely upon an oral source instead.

### *Conclusions*

This study has attempted to accomplish four things. First, it has drawn attention to the question surrounding the composition of the Synoptic Gospels by questioning whether the theory of literary dependence is adequate enough to explain what is found in the Synoptic tradition. Secondly, it has posited a theory of reliance upon an oral tradition as a satisfactory explanation of the differences that can be observed across similar pericopes within the Synoptic tradition. Thirdly, it has promulgated this theory by establishing a theory of memory which is based on a large number of studies within the fields of psychology and neuroscience. Fourthly, it has applied a grammatical analysis of certain shared pericopes in order to establish the differences in a coherent manner.

What has been found is that there are a large number of linguistic differences between certain shared pericopes within the Synoptic tradition. These differences are in keeping with the data supplied by the aforementioned studies concerning human memory. The conclusion here is that the Synoptic Gospels are not literarily dependent upon one another and are instead reliant upon

oral tradition for the material that each presents. It is my opinion, therefore, that a careful examination of the oral traditions that lie behind the written text are a more adequate means to explain what we find in the Synoptic Gospels than are theories based on literary dependence.