

Text as Tradition – Tradition as Text

Early Christian Memory and Jesus' Threat against the Temple

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Our perception of the textualized version of [past] history is severely distorted the moment we isolate it from its living roots. One imprisons the text in notions of textuality [...] Once we recognize a diachronic, oral dimension of the gospel tradition, we encounter immediately a context of interaction between living people and between oral accounts and written texts.

The past is not gone forever, nor is it entirely swallowed up by the present. It participates in the present, the present recapitulates it, and the future finds itself determined by it.

When written texts were employed as sources, they were never regarded as textual, semantic entities unto themselves, but were part of a broader spectrum of oral performance and communication. [...] A consistent neglect of the wider spectrum of orality misleads therefore the interpreter of the written text.¹

Written Texts and the Problem of Christian Origins

Twenty-first-century scholars of Christian origins find themselves in a peculiar situation.² On the one hand, we rely on written, *textual* remains for

1. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Tübingen 2000, 129, 299, 301.

2. In 2004, as I was just beginning to research questions of oral history and tradition, my

nearly everything we know about earliest Christianity. On the other hand, important voices in the field claim that written texts are all but irrelevant to earliest Christianity, that written texts exhibit little more than totemic significance among communities for whom literacy was rare and, at best, unnecessary for navigating their social, cultural, and theological discursive needs. Only later, certainly after the first generation and perhaps not until after the first century, did written texts – so it is claimed – come to play a significant role in the very thing we are interested to investigate: Christian origins.³

The relevant data support two sides of a growing debate about the nature, role, and significance of literacy, scribality, and textuality among the earliest Christians.⁴ The evidence for the distribution of skills of literacy and decoding written texts – especially literary texts, such as those that would come to comprise the Hebrew Bible (including its Greek expression, the Septuagint) – suggests that such skills were rare and unevenly distributed, being concentrated especially among the elite and their slaves, in cities, among men.⁵ And yet, beginning from the very earliest period, Christian cultures were text-producing phenomena and issued a large number of texts across a broad range of genres.⁶ Moreover, multiple features of early Christian manuscripts suggest they were read by readers; these manuscripts were produced for readers and, once written, continued to be altered and emended to facilitate the act of reading.⁷

doctoral supervisor, Loveday Alexander, handed me her copy of *Story as History – History as Story* to help me sharpen my reactions – both appreciative and critical – to Werner Kelber’s seminal *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul, and Q*, Philadelphia, PA 1983. That transaction was one of the top three formative events in my own development as a media critic of early Christianity. I am grateful to offer this essay in honour of Samuel Byrskog and his work on the character and transmission of the Jesus tradition. Nathan Shedd read an earlier draft of this essay and helped to identify and correct some of its more egregious shortcomings.

3. Joanna Dewey, “Textuality in an Oral Culture: A Survey of the Pauline Traditions”, *Semeia* 65 (1994), 37–65.

4. See, for example, Larry W. Hurtado, “Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? ‘Orality’, ‘Performance’ and Reading Texts in Early Christianity”, *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014), 321–340, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688514000058>, and the rejoinder in Kelly R. Iverson, “Oral Fixation or Oral Corrective? A Response to Larry Hurtado”, *New Testament Studies* 62 (2016), 183–200, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688515000430>.

5. The classic work is William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, Cambridge, MA 1989, which has been surpassed by Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen 2001.

6. Rafael Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed*, London 2014, 5. See also Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts*, New Haven, CT 1995.

7. See Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins*, Grand Rapids, MI 2006.

The data, then, do not require historians to choose between a literate/textual early Christianity and an oral Christianity but to recognize the various ways early Christianity comprised variegated textual communities.⁸ These communities navigated a world filled with written texts, ranging from public graffiti and quotidian economic and legal documents to personal and official correspondence to lengthy literary and/or sacred texts. Even so, the textual dynamics of the early Roman imperial period were not like those of the post-industrial, information-era societies we inhabit. In fact, it was possible to navigate one's social, political, and religious needs in relation to texts without necessarily reading those texts, as Chris Keith especially has explored.⁹ Textual communities are not necessarily *literate* communities; they are, instead, communities with distinctive interpretive and performative traditions centred on written texts.¹⁰ The present essay attempts to encounter the written remains of the earliest Jesus tradition within the broader social “context of interaction between living people and between oral accounts and written texts”, with a particular focus on the traditions of Jesus' threat against the temple, so that we might be better interpreters of written expressions of the Jesus tradition.¹¹

Beyond the Bounds of the Written Text *Per Se*

The rise of narrative criticism of the Gospels in the 1970s and 1980s produced myriad insights about the texts and offered important correctives to previous generations' historically motivated dissection of the texts. The programmatic neglect of extratextual information, however, would turn out to be an excess in its own right.¹² There are no historically or culturally unconditioned authors or readers. The decision, therefore, to ignore “historical information about the culture and biographical information about the author” and audience is, at best, a distortion of the text itself and, at worst,

8. The concepts “textuality” and “textual community” come from Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*, Princeton, NJ 1983.

9. See especially Chris Keith, *Jesus' Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee*, London 2011; Chris Keith, *Jesus against the Scribal Elite: The Origins of the Conflict*, Grand Rapids, MI 2014.

10. See Rafael Rodríguez, “Reading and Hearing in Ancient Contexts”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32 (2009), 151–178, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064X09351056>.

11. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 129, 301.

12. See Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, “Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean?”, in Janice Capel Anderson & Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Mark and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, Minneapolis, MN 1992, 30–32. In contrast, see David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey & Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, 3rd ed., Minneapolis, MN 2012, 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt22nm9t2>.

a colonial act that effaces our texts' authors and audiences and replaces them with, usually, Western academic readers.¹³

The indispensability of extratextual information is, in fact, one of the key differences between the early Christians' models of textuality and contemporary academic textuality. In the closing paragraph of *Story as History – History as Story*, Byrskog makes a significant observation:

The printed word tends to objectify the written text, which leads, on occasion, to the apotheosis of the text as a closed system. In “high-context” societies, however, with the strong oral/aural currencies of communication such as those we find in the ancient Mediterranean world, the semantic codes of understanding are to a large extent to be found outside of the written text; they are taken for granted, encoded in the culture, but not necessarily in the text.¹⁴

John Miles Foley (1947–2012) explains this taken-for-grantedness in terms of the history shared by performer and audience of a tradition that is iteratively expressed, especially in an oral-performative event. When a performer and an audience come together to experience shared tradition, they cooperate in the composition and interpretation of that tradition in the live performance. The performance's “text” – the words spoken during the performative occasion – evokes the broader tradition that transcends any of its individual performances.¹⁵ Foley encapsulates the relationships between performance, text, and tradition with the axiom “tradition is the enabling referent, performance the enabling event”.¹⁶

The primary feature of *tradition*, as an analytical concept, is its re-creation and/or re-presentation of something from the past in the present.¹⁷ As a

13. Malbon, “Narrative Criticism”, 30.

14. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 306.

15. John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, Bloomington, IN 1995, 48, n. 44, refers to a “tale within a tale”, a performative text contextualized within a “larger, implied tale – itself unformed (and unperformable) but metonymically present to the performer and audience”. This is identical to Albert B. Lord's (1912–1991) distinction between “songs and the song”. Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, MA 1960, 99–123. Similarly, see Ruben Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus: Methods and Interpretation*, Minneapolis, MN 2015, 84.

16. Foley, *The Singer of Tales*, xiii.

17. Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community*, Stockholm 1994, 20, draws our attention to the basic quality of tradition as being handed down from the past: “[Tradition is] that which comes from the past [...] those who transmit at a certain time understand the material as older than themselves. [...] Transmission is always of something that existed already before the situation arises.” A decade and a half later, Byrskog emphasized the same point: “The decisive criterion is temporal.” Samuel Byrskog, “When Eyewitness Testimony and Oral

thing “handed down” (Latin *trado*; see also παραδίδωμι), *tradition* is iterative, repetitive, and the site in which multiple events or expressions are fused together into a single entity. This “single entity” becomes the larger, untextualizable context within which individual utterances become meaningful.¹⁸ As a modern analogy, studio and live versions of music are often very different in sound, structure, instrumentation, and so on, but audiences nevertheless experience them as instances of the same thing, of “the song”.¹⁹ This larger, contextualizing approach to *tradition* sits alongside the more established sense among biblical scholars of *tradition* as individual sayings, pericope, and scenes. The term *tradition*, then, refers to both “context” and “content” of expressions – written, oral, and otherwise – of material from and/or about Jesus.

Historians of Christian origins, of course, do not encounter or interpret the spoken words of actual oral performance events. We deal with written textual remains from the first century CE as preserved in later (especially third- through sixteenth-century) handwritten manuscripts. Our texts do not arise from the interaction between performer and audience. Scholars are largely agreed that the Gospels’ written texts bear some relation to pre-Gospel tradition.²⁰ Accounting for that relation has been a challenge. In *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, Foley turns from actual oral performances to “the endemically more problematic area of the oral-derived text, that is, the text with roots in oral tradition”.²¹ Our interest here is less textual and more sociological: how do the social groups experienced with the Jesus tradition in actual oral performances perceive and interpret the written expression of the Jesus tradition? We need, then, to make two points about the early reception of the Gospels as oral-derived texts.

First, even the experience of the *written* Jesus tradition involved a performance event. Despite Paul J. Achtemeier’s (1927–2013) exaggeration that

Tradition Become Written Text”, *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 74 (2009), 43.

18. See Foley, *The Singer of Tales*, 54.

19. On the 1994 live acoustic recording of The Eagles’ “Hotel California”, the audience does not recognize the song for nearly ninety seconds; when it finally does, it cheers for almost half a minute. Despite dramatic differences between them, the 1994 acoustic version did not displace the 1977 studio version of “Hotel California”. Both are and continue to be, inarguably, the same song.

20. This was programmatic to twentieth-century New Testament *Formgeschichte* (form criticism). Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, challenged the form critics’ – especially Rudolf Bultmann’s (1884–1976) – assumption of evolutionary development from oral pre-Gospel tradition to written Gospel tradition. For a mediating response, see Rafael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text*, London 2010, especially 4 (n. 3), 130.

21. Foley, *The Singer of Tales*, 60–98. Quotation from p. 60. See also Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition*.

omne verbum sonat, literary and/or scriptural texts nevertheless were often, even usually, read aloud before groups.²² Performance critics highlight the oral experience of the written word; Richard A. Horsley, for example, even prefers to translate Hebrew and Greek verbs for reading with “recite”.²³ The significance of the written word’s continuing oral qualities is often attributed to some nebulous “oral mentality” or “oral culture”. The present point, however, is simply that the *experience* of the written word in antiquity continued to be a *social* experience. The earliest readers did not typically experience the written Gospels silently and individually. They experienced the texts with others, perhaps in very similar oral performative events as they experienced prior to their encounters with written Gospel texts.²⁴ Despite the different potentialities of the written medium *vis-à-vis* oral media, the Jesus tradition continued to be recognizable *as* the Jesus tradition even in its new medium. In other words, the significant change in the tradition’s *form* (or *medium*) did not necessarily change the tradition *as context*. The experience of the written text continued to resemble the experience of the oral tradition in terms of the reading or performance event.

Second, inasmuch as the written Gospels’ earliest readers and hearers were largely the same people who gathered to hear the pre-Gospel Jesus tradition spoken in performative events, their prior experiences with the oral tradition provided the context within which they received and interpreted the written Gospel.²⁵ This is the point of the first half of Foley’s axiom cited

22. Paul J. Achtemeier, “*Omne verbum sonat*: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990), 3–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267326>. For a corrective, see William A. Johnson, *Readers and Reading Culture in the High Roman Empire: A Study of Elite Communities*, Oxford 2010, 4–9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195176407.001.0001>.

23. This is a regular aspect of Horsley’s work. See, for example, Richard A. Horsley, *Text and Tradition in Performance and Writing*, Eugene, OR 2013.

24. This explains some of the “inertia” referred to in John S. Kloppenborg, “Sources, Methods and Discursive Locations in the Quest of the Historical Jesus”, in Tom Holmén & Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: 1. How to Study the Historical Jesus*, Leiden 2011, 241–290, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004210219_010: “It would require more effort to overcome the inertia of received usage and interpretation and to give to a saying of Jesus or anecdote about Jesus a radically different meaning” (pp. 259–260). Reformulations and reinterpretations of past traditions and sayings *do*, in fact, occur, as Kloppenborg notes, but even these reformulations and reinterpretations take place within a context comprised of “received usage and interpretation”.

25. In Gospels scholarship, the idea of a “community” has taken on connotations of a defined social group, often with a distinctive theology, whose features and concerns can be read off the surface of a Gospel produced by or for them. Without wading into that area of academic debate, my references to “the same people” (or, below, “the community”) experiencing the tradition in oral and written media highlight only the social experience of the Jesus tradition (namely that it was experienced with others rather than in isolation), something akin to terms like “social setting” or “group setting” in Sarah E. Rollens, “The Anachronism of ‘Early Christian Communities’”, in Nickolas P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing “Religion” in*

above: “*Tradition is the enabling referent*, performance the enabling event.” The oral-derived written text, like the text of an oral performance before the written text, was rendered meaningful to both its author and its earliest audiences in reference to the larger tradition it brought to expression.

In other words, the history of commemorating Jesus and performing the tradition was itself part of the composition processes producing written Gospels.²⁶ This history was also itself part of interpreting the written Gospels. The Gospels were written for readers and audiences already familiar with and/or interested in the Jesus tradition; “tradition is enacted within a group knowledgeable of and existentially identified with it; its performance is a shared ritual rehearsal of the cultural memory”.²⁷ Their authors, too, must have had prior experience performing or recounting the Jesus tradition and so have learned which performative elements in which contexts resonated well with audiences, which fell flat, and so on. The people involved in writing, reading, listening to, and understanding the Gospels could draw on their own experiences with the oral Jesus tradition to fill in the texts’ narrative gaps. Both the production and the reception of the tradition were iterative experiences. The written tradition, therefore, was subject to a “continuity of reception across the supposed gulf between oral traditional performance and manuscript record” because the people experiencing the manuscript record, at least initially, were the same as those who experienced tradition in oral performance.²⁸ The continuity of the tradition was rooted in and related to the continuity of the community’s commemoration of Jesus.²⁹

Recall our quote, above, from the closing paragraph of *Story as History – History as Story*. We have now offered some explanation of the dynamics by which “the semantic codes of understanding” that are “found outside the

Antiquity, Sheffield 2019, 310. See also Robyn Faith Walsh, *The Origins of Early Christian Literature: Contextualizing the New Testament within Greco-Roman Literary Culture*, Cambridge 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108883573>.

26. Once Mark was composed, other Gospels were also influenced by the textuality of the Jesus tradition. If there were written sources prior to Mark (for example Q, but perhaps others as well), these may also have been a part of Mark’s compositional dynamics.

27. Alan Kirk, “Memory Theory and Jesus Research”, in Tom Holmén & Stanley E. Porter (eds.), *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus: 1. How to Study the Historical Jesus*, Leiden 2011, 823.

28. Foley, *The Singer of Tales*, 75. As time passed, the function of the experience of the pre-written oral Jesus tradition diminished. As Byrskog emphasizes throughout *Story as History – History as Story* and in *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 341–349, written texts went through processes of re-oralization. Even today, the experience of the written texts is not isolated from oral and other media; for one of the few scholars to recognize this point, see Mark Goodacre, *Thomas and the Gospels: The Case for Thomas’s Familiarity with the Synoptics*, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, 132–134, 136–137.

29. See Kirk, “Memory Theory”, 816.

text” are implicated in the production, reception, and interpretation of the written texts.³⁰ Foley offered a similar insight about traditional texts:

As a rule of thumb, the more densely coded and functionally focused a speech act, the more “additional” information is required to receive it in something approaching its cultural context. For members of the society, and especially for those skilled in performance of the particular genre, that enabling context is never “additional” but always implied, always immanent. Whether it constitutes a part of the utterance amounts, in other words, to a phenomenological question: for outsiders no, for insiders yes.³¹

At least some of the complication of reading the Gospels well is that we are outsiders, isolated from the communal performative traditions surrounding the production and earliest receptions of the written texts and informing their interpretations. These are the “living roots” Byrskog spoke of in this essay’s first epigraph, roots which are operative in the “interaction between living people”.³² That interaction is the vehicle through which the “never ‘additional’ but always implied” context of an oral-derived text has its hermeneutical effect upon the reception and interpretation of the text. For those of us lacking this interaction, this context appears to be beyond the text per se; for those steeped in this interaction, it is indistinguishable from the text.³³

Recurrent Performance of the Jesus Tradition

We thus find ourselves caught in a dilemma. The social interaction of an oral performative event is irrecoverable, and our access to the details of any single performance – let alone our ability to generalize and categorize various performative events – is lost. At the same time, we distort the texts we *do* have when we sever their connections to the “broader spectrum of oral performance and communication” that formed their originating context.³⁴ The oral-performative traditions by which the earliest Christians

30. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 306.

31. Foley, *The Singer of Tales*, 133.

32. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 129.

33. Martin S. Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE–400 CE*, Oxford 2001, 8, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195140672.001.0001>, notes that “text-interpretive traditions” – the self-evident, commonsensical interpretation of a textual tradition – “come to be so closely associated with public renderings of a text as to constitute its self-evident meaning”. Moreover, this tradition “exists in the memories of both the textual performers and their auditors”.

34. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 301.

actualized the Jesus tradition are not available to us, but ignoring those traditions means ignoring vital aspects of our texts' composition and earliest receptions.³⁵ How can we proceed?

Samuel Byrskog's work recovering the form-critical concept of the *Sitz im Leben* spurs us to look for any remaining traces of our texts' connections to their originating performative and traditional contexts.³⁶ Byrskog defines *Sitz im Leben* as "that recurrent type of mnemonic occasion within the life of early Christian communities when certain people cared about the Jesus tradition in a special way and performed and narrated it orally and in writing".³⁷ We can clearly see Byrskog's concern to isolate situations in which early Christian tradents worked *on* the Jesus tradition from other activities (including working *with* the tradition) that do not affect the shape or content of the Jesus tradition.³⁸ We also can see Byrskog's belief – correct, in my eyes – that we are looking for iterative, *recurrent* activities in which the tradition itself – that is, the tradition as *content* – was the focus for at least part of the activity.

The repeated nature of these activities fuses them together into a single event in human memory, in which the unique details of a single event typically get assimilated to the regular contours of the events taken as a whole. Cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser (1928–2012) refers to this kind of memory as "episodic memory" (a neologism meant to be distinguished from "episodic memory"), memory not of a unique, individual moment (or episode) but of "common themes that remained invariant across [...] many experiences".³⁹ The once-fashionable (but hopefully now-outdated) analogy of the "the telephone game", in which a word or phrase is whispered from one person to another, *seriatim*, until the original message is unrecognizable at the end of the chain, is a poor model for this kind of recurrent event. In recurrent events, the past and the present are fused together, with the past

35. For "oral-performative tradition", see Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*, 8.

36. Samuel Byrskog, "A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*: From Form-Critical Setting to Gospel Community and Beyond", *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (2007), 1–27, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZNTW.2007.001>. See also Samuel Byrskog, "The Early Church as a Narrative Fellowship: An Exploratory Study of the Performance of the *Chreia*", *Tidsskrift for Teologi og Kirke* 78 (2007), 207–226, <https://doi.org/10.18261/ISSN1504-2952-2007-03-04>; Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus*, 82–85.

37. Byrskog, "A Century with the *Sitz im Leben*", 20.

38. Byrskog follows his teacher, Birger Gerhardsson (1926–2013), in differentiating "transmission as a *deliberate act* within a special setting on one hand, and the *use* of the traditions within various activities on the other". Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, 19, italics in original. Byrskog cites Birger Gerhardsson, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*, Lund 1964, 43, but see also Birger Gerhardsson, *The Reliability of the Gospel Tradition*, Peabody, MA 2001, 59–87.

39. Ulric Neisser, "John Dean's Memory: A Case Study", in Richard P. Honeck (ed.), *Introductory Readings for Cognitive Psychology*, Guilford, CT 1994, 114.

defining the present, giving it shape and meaning and clarifying potential courses of action within the present, even as the present provides the motivations for turning to the past and the questions such turns must address.⁴⁰ Yes, the past (or, similarly, tradition-as-content, which is “handed down” from the past) shifts and morphs as the perspective of the present moves and changes, but such shifts enable both the past and tradition to continue being relevant to the group defined by them.⁴¹ If we expect the past to remain static and increasingly irrelevant to a dynamic present, we risk missing one of the important mechanisms by which the past (and, again, tradition) performs its constitutive functions in the present.

Jesus and the Temple in Early Christian Memory

Traditions about Jesus were performed and transmitted among people who identified themselves as followers of Jesus in the forty years or so between the events of Jesus’ public activities and the writing of the Synoptic Gospels. During this same time, those traditions had to make sense of and orient Jesus’ followers to the traumatic events in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee as relations between the Jewish (or Judean) *ἔθνος* and the Romans deteriorated, leading ultimately to war (66–70 CE). Whether or not these later circumstances provided the creative, generative impulse behind any of the Jesus tradition’s content, certainly the shape and form of the tradition during this time reflected broader social, cultural, and political realities.⁴² (That is, whether or not new traditions were created as relations between Rome and Judea worsened, this worsening provided the context within which older traditions were expressed, received, and interpreted.) This would appear to be a potentially fruitful place to look for “fresh enactments of the tradition in [changing] contemporary social and cultural frameworks”, to see in the written remains of the tradition “a new kind of connection with the past” forged from “quite different vistas”.⁴³

The present question is how the iterative commemorative practices of the earliest Christian communities provided a sense of temporal continuity through time (the stability of the past) even as those practices (re)shaped

40. The examples of this kind of argument among social memory theorists are legion. See, for example, Michael Schudson, “The Present in the Past versus the Past in the Present”, *Communication 11* (1989), 105–113; Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *The Masada Myth: Collective Memory and Mythmaking in Israel*, Madison, WI 1995; Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, Chicago 2000.

41. See the important study by Edward Shils, *Tradition*, Chicago 1981.

42. For the distinction between *generative force* and *formative contexts*, see Alan Kirk & Tom Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory”, in Alan Kirk & Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, Atlanta, GA 2005, 30.

43. Kirk, “Memory Theory”, 842.

and (re)formed their images of the past to reflect and/or address new needs (the malleability of the past). For present purposes, the “fusion of past and present” refers to the synthesis of the past’s stability and its malleability in the unfolding, unceasing experience of the present. We will focus our question on the commemoration of Jesus’ critique of and threat against the institution of the Jerusalem Temple. We will begin with Paul Connerton’s (1940–2019) claim that “our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past”.⁴⁴ Understanding present events requires an interpretive framework that renders those events intelligible. Ruben Zimmermann’s definition of memory – “a process of interpretation that classifies contingent experiences into defined patterns of thought and comprehension”⁴⁵ – provides a space for us to see how traditions about Jesus’ threat against the temple provided Christians a schema for perceiving and understanding the traumatic and cataclysmic events of 70 CE.

All three Synoptic Gospels (and, of course, John) record traditions that level some sort of threat against the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus says directly to one of the disciples: “Do you see these large buildings? Not one stone here will remain upon another; each will certainly be destroyed!” (Mark 13:2; compare Matt. 24:2; Luke 21:6).⁴⁶ In the Synoptic Gospels, this follows the events of a day or two previous, in which Jesus ejected those buying and selling in the temple and overturned the tables and chairs of those exchanging coins or selling doves (Mark 11:15–17; Matt. 21:12–13; compare Luke 19:45–46; see also John 2:13–22).⁴⁷ Jesus’ threat against the temple comes up in his trial before the Sanhedrin, though the tradition insists the claim that Jesus said, “I will destroy this sanctuary made with hands and, in three days, build another, not made with hands”, is false (Mark 14:58; compare Matt. 26:61). According to Mark and Matthew, the tradition is capable of rejecting this claim; the Sanhedrin, however, does not, so Jesus is condemned for blasphemy.

Once Jesus has been condemned and crucified, nameless passers-by mock Jesus as “he who would destroy the sanctuary and build [another] in three days” (Mark 15:29; Matt. 27:40). Luke lacks any parallel to these passages, but he reflects knowledge of them in his account of the accusation against Stephen (see Acts 6:14). It is not clear if this is related to certain aspects of

44. Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge 1989, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628061>.

45. Zimmermann, *Puzzling the Parables of Jesus*, 83.

46. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

47. E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, Philadelphia, PA 1985, has persuasively argued that Jesus’ action in the temple was a symbolic demonstration of its impending destruction (and, by implication, restoration, though this latter point is more controversial).

Luke that seem to reflect a post-war perspective.⁴⁸ In John, when οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι (“the Jews/Judeans”) ask Jesus for a sign to justify the temple tantrum, he invites/dares them to destroy the sanctuary before promising, “and in three days I will raise it” (John 2:19). The Evangelists’ varying portrayals here creates a nuanced distinction within the tradition: Jesus *did* announce the temple’s destruction, but the testimony that he claimed *he* would destroy the temple is emphatically false.⁴⁹

Perhaps we ought to notice that nowhere in the extant written Jesus tradition do tradents break in to point out to readers/hearers that Vespasian’s son, Titus, fulfilled the prediction of the temple’s destruction. Arguments from silence are notoriously problematic, and we should refrain from leaning too heavily on this observation. But Mark – the earliest of our extant written Gospels, which is often dated after the temple’s destruction in 70 CE – employs a number of asides from the narrator, whether to interpret a scene (Mark 7:19b) or a Semitic phrase (5:41; 7:34; 15:34) or practice (7:3–4) or to address the reader directly (13:14). Luke may more likely reflect a post-70 situation when he has Jesus refer to besieging armies encamped around Jerusalem (κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων Ἰερουσαλήμ; Luke 21:20). The Johannine narrator offers two asides to the audience during the temple incident (John 2:22, and probably 2:17). It would not be surprising, therefore, if tradents writing after 70 CE interrupted their narratives to point out to readers: “This was fulfilled in the first year of Emperor Vespasian, when Titus, his son, burned and plundered the sanctuary.”⁵⁰ None of them do.⁵¹

48. For example, where Jesus in Mark and Matthew prophesies the disciples will hear of πολέμους καὶ ἀκοὰς πολέμων (Mark 13:7; Matt. 24:6), in Luke he prophesies of πολέμους καὶ ἀκαταστασίας (Luke 21:9). Also, where Jesus in Mark and Matthew prophesies τὸ βδέλυγμα τῆς ἐρημώσεως spoken of by Daniel (Mark 13:14; Matt. 24:15), in Luke he prophesies the disciples will see κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων Ἰερουσαλήμ, which will be the signal of Jerusalem’s impending ἐρήμωσις (Luke 21:20). For discussion, see François Bovon, *Luke*, vol. 3, Minneapolis, MN 2002, 115.

49. See Rafael Rodríguez, “Ancient Media”, in Chris Keith & James Crossley (eds.), *The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI, forthcoming, where I suggest the Gospels reject the claim that Jesus would destroy the temple.

50. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–339) brings Josephus’s (c. 37–c. 100) history and Jesus’ prophecy together to verify the passing of the old covenant and the inauguration of the new (see *Demonstratio Evangelica* 8.2.402–403; I am grateful to Ken Olson for this reference). In the autumn of 387, John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) gave his fifth homily *Against the Jews*, which explicitly cited Jesus’ words against the temple and the fulfillment of those words to validate Christ’s claims over and against the Jews’ (see *Adversus Judaeos* 5.1.6–7, 5.2.1, 5.3.13–14; my thanks to Ben Kolbeck for these references). For a discussion of this latter text, see J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, Grand Rapids, MI 1995, 62–66.

51. Writers such as Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165), Origen (c. 185–c. 253), and Tertullian (c. 155–c. 220) tend to pull from older (scriptural) prophecies found in the Christian Old Testament to explain the temple’s destruction rather than Jesus’ prediction of its destruction in the Gospels. See Christine Shepardson, “Paschal Politics: Deploying the Temple’s Destruction

This is certainly not conclusive evidence for any scheme for dating the Gospels; it is certainly insufficient for dating the Gospels before 70 CE.⁵² If, however, the Gospels were written after the temple's destruction, this is an example of tradents resisting the pressure to reshape or re-interpret the tradition in light of present exigencies. Inasmuch as Jesus' predictions against the temple are re-expressed in the aftermath of its destruction, extant expressions of the tradition leave the fulfillment of Jesus' predictions regarding the destruction of the temple implied and implicit.

We might also note the Gospels' presentation of Jesus taking up the mantle of John's critique of the temple administration and its perceived corruption.⁵³ In the Synoptics, John is primarily presented as a herald of repentance and immersion, though his preparatory role is highlighted especially through the anticipation of a "one who is stronger than me" who also is "coming after me" (ἔρχεται ὁ ἰσχυρότερός μου ὀπίσω μου; Mark 1:7; compare Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; see also John 1:27). Despite the common claim that the Gospels portray John as specifically *Jesus'* forerunner, instances of the tradition are at least initially reluctant to identify explicitly the one (or One) who comes after John.⁵⁴ The ambiguity is useful for Jesus' tradents, and the question whether Jesus is John's coming one will arise naturally enough (see Matt. 11:2–6; Luke 7:18–23 [= Q?]⁵⁵). Regardless whom the historical John the Baptist thought would come after him, the Fourth Gospel

against Fourth-Century Judaizers", *Vigiliae Christianae* 62 (2008), 233–260.

52. Though see James G. Crossley, *The Date of Mark's Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity*, London 2004, for an argument for dating Mark early ("between the mid to late thirties and mid-forties", p. 208). For dating all four canonical Gospels before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, see Jonathan Bernier, *Rethinking the Dates of the New Testament: The Evidence for Early Composition*, Grand Rapids, MI 2022.

53. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, I am not commenting on the historical John the Baptist; instead, I am commenting on John the Baptist as a character within the Jesus tradition. As noted by Dale Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History*, Grand Rapids, MI 2010, 205, "we know far less about John the Baptist than we are wont to imagine". Joan E. Taylor, "John the Baptist on the Jordan River: Localities and Their Significance", *ARAM Periodical* 29 (2017), 1, similarly makes a distinction between, (1) "[John] and his message", and (2) "the different literary sources [and] their narrative concerns". See also Joan E. Taylor & Federico Adinolfi, "John the Baptist and Jesus the Baptist: A Narrative Critical Approach", *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 10 (2012), 247–284, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01003003>. Whether the historical John offered criticism of the temple, à la Qumran, or he understood his message of repentance and immersion apart from any such critique, the Jesus tradition portrays John as a critic of corruption in the temple, as we will see below.

54. See Rafael Rodríguez, "Betwixt Past and Present: Jesus and John in Tradition, Text, and History", in Werner H. Kelber & Neil Elliott (eds.), *Bridges in New Testament Interpretation: Interdisciplinary Advances*, Lanham, MD 2018, 97–117, especially 103–108.

55. See Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory*, 117–137.

identifies John primarily as a witness for the light that is (in) Jesus (John 1:7–8, 15, 19–36).

Unlike the Fourth Gospel, however, the Markan John's message of repentance and immersion in the wilderness, apart from the temple, can be read as a critique of Jerusalem's temple. To be sure, nothing requires this reading, at least not in the account of John's message in Mark 1:4–8. Perhaps the scribes' unstated question, "Who other than the one God is able to forgive sins?" (Mark 2:7), in the story of the forgiveness and healing of the παραλυτικός (2:1–12), reminds the reader that John's message along the Jordan was at least potentially controversial. Whether or not the reader has picked up on these connotations, we can hardly miss the appeal to John in Mark 11, where Jesus explicitly roots his own opposition to the corruption of the temple leadership and its administration of the sacred rites and precincts in the divine warrant for John's baptism (see Mark 11:27–33; Matt. 21:23–27; Luke 20:1–8; the parallel passage in John 2:18–22 makes a riddling reference to the crucifixion and resurrection rather than to John's baptism⁵⁶). Whence comes Jesus' authority to disrupt the temple courts and its proceedings? From the same source – so Mark implies – as John's authority to call people to repentance without reference to the atoning mechanisms of Jerusalem's temple.

Matthew draws this aspect of Mark's representation of the Baptist forward into his account of John's public activity by narrating a confrontation between John and "many of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matt. 3:7). The Sadducees, of course, are centered in Jerusalem and, especially, the temple. Mark and Luke only mention them in their accounts of Jesus' confrontation with the Sadducees in Jerusalem (Mark 12:18–27; Luke 20:27–40).⁵⁷ Matthew includes this story (Matt. 22:23–33); he also replaces Mark's Herodians (see Mark 8:14–21) with Sadducees (see Matt. 16:5–12), a move he anticipates by inserting the Sadducees into his account of the Pharisees' request for a sign (Matt. 16:1–4; compare Mark 8:11–13). These latter passages are unusual for portraying (or even referring to!) Sadducees outside Jerusalem and Judea.⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that, in Matthew, John confronts the

56. Tom Thatcher, *The Riddles of Jesus in John: A Study in Tradition and Folklore*, Atlanta, GA 2000, 234–238, classifies John 2:16, 19 as "mission riddles", that is, riddles that "play on the Johannine understanding of Jesus' identity and mission" (p. 210). See also Thatcher's discussion of John's theory of memory in Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus, Memory, History*, Louisville, KY 2006, especially 24–32.

57. In Acts, the Sadducees are always located in Jerusalem. See Acts 4:1; 5:17; 23:6–8.

58. Josephus's references to Sadducees, besides those places where he is describing them *vis-à-vis* the Pharisees and the Essenes (*Antiquities* 13.171–173; 18.11, 16–17; *Life* 10; *War* 2.119, 164–166), are located in Jerusalem; see his account of Hyrcanus's move towards the Sadducees (*Antiquities* 13.293–298) and his account of the murder of James, Jesus' brother (*Antiquities* 20.199–201). In *Antiquities* 13.298, Josephus portrays the Sadducees as having influence "only among the wealthy" (τοὺς εὐπόρους μόνον), but even here the Sadducees' influence appears

Jerusalem Temple leadership directly for their corruption, and this somewhere just a few kilometers from Jericho, perhaps near Bethany on the east side of the Jordan.⁵⁹

Thus far we have described the written Jesus tradition without any attempt at reconstructing hypothetical tradition histories behind the texts. For over five decades, we have known – or ought to have known – that we lack the knowledge and tools to differentiate older from later utterances of the tradition, even that the tradition – as content – did not develop in ways that permit us to make such judgements.⁶⁰ The fusion of past and present that we are looking for, therefore, is not found in identifying our earliest extant forms of the tradition and then reconstructing even earlier forms.⁶¹ Instead, we use our historically informed imaginations to hypothesize and think through various scenarios that can explain the extant data and why it looks the way it does.⁶² Byrskog’s work highlights the roles of eyewitnesses and committed tradents in translating direct experience or testimony about experience (= history) into historical narratives (= story); Richard Bauckham has also worked from a similar hypothetical basis.⁶³ Their work is an important corrective to the history of New Testament scholarship that

to be restricted to Jerusalem’s wealthy.

59. Taylor, “John the Baptist”, 15–16, 18. The parallel passage in Luke 3:7–9 (= Q?) mentions neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees. In both the Two Source Hypothesis and the Farrer Hypothesis, Matthew’s πολλοὺς τῶν Φαρισαίων καὶ Σαδδουκαίων is considered Matthean in origin.

60. “There are no hard and fast laws of the development of the Synoptic tradition. On all counts the tradition developed in opposite directions. It became both longer and shorter, both more and less detailed, and both more and less Semitic. [...] For this reason, *dogmatic statements that a certain characteristic proves a certain passage to be earlier than another are never justified.*” E.P. Sanders, *The Tendencies of the Synoptic Tradition*, Cambridge 1969, 272, italics in original. For media-critical arguments against the utility of tradition-critical reconstructions, see Werner H. Kelber, “Jesus and Tradition: Words in Time, Words in Space”, in Joanna Dewey (ed.), *Orality and Textuality in Early Christian Literature*, Atlanta, GA 1995, 139–167; Rodríguez, “Ancient Media”.

61. See Kirk, “Memory Theory”, 814, who refers to “the end of the form-critical project of arriving at memory traces of the historical Jesus thought to lie near the bottom of a multilayered oral tradition”. In form-critical analyses, “earlier” describes ideas and formulations in the texts and not the texts themselves. So, for example, the adherents to the Two Source Hypothesis may generally judge Matthew earlier than Luke, but that does not preclude Luke from containing earlier traditions than Matthew.

62. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford 1994. See, for example, John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City*, New Haven, CT 2019, who regularly (and rightly) invokes the role of the historians’ imagination (and the importance of disciplining historians’ imaginations). See also Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 460; Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans’ Apostle*, New Haven, CT 2017, xii. My thanks to Bill Heroman, Nathan Shedd, Michael Barber, Matthew Thiessen, and Paul Sloan for help with these references.

63. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, MI 2017.

has too easily assumed a rupture between the on-going influence of eyewitnesses and the shape and content of the extant written tradition. I am, however, less persuaded by the specifics of their reconstructions. Byrskog highlights the role of James, the brother of Jesus, as an eyewitness, relying especially on the letter attributed to James.⁶⁴ Bauckham pays insufficient attention to the research showing that eyewitness testimony is subject to the same schematic and interpretive dynamics as other forms of narrativization.⁶⁵

I suggest a different hypothetical scenario. If the historical John the Baptist summoned people to repentance and the waters of the Jordan river in an act of critique of the temple and its corruption, the historical Jesus of Nazareth apparently heard this critique and resonated with it.⁶⁶ During the course of his own public activity, Jesus took up this critique, though the evidence is insufficient for us to know whether or how he differed from John in this regard.⁶⁷ If the historical John the Baptist did not intend any criticism of the temple administration (and/or was not regarded as offering any such critique), then Jesus and/or his tradents bent his memory in that direction in support of his or their own criticisms of the temple.⁶⁸ When Jesus died, he was portrayed as one who threatened to destroy the temple – perhaps (as in Mark) as critiquing the temple as a place “made with hands”

64. See Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 86–89, 167–75; Samuel Byrskog, “The Transmission of the Jesus Tradition: Old and New Insights”, *Early Christianity* 1 (2010), 449–451.

65. See, for example, Judith C.S. Redman, “How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research”, *Journal of Biblical Literature* (2010), 177–197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27821012>. The response to Redman in Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 610, does not address the substance of her essay. See also Samuel Byrskog, “Eyewitnesses as Interpreters of the Past: Reflections on Richard Bauckham’s, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*”, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 6 (2008), 157–168, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17451908X349653>; Byrskog, “When Eyewitness Testimony and Oral Tradition Become Written Text”.

66. This sentence’s references to “historical” figures refer to the actual people who lived in the early first century CE.

67. That Jesus was killed for his activities in and threats against the temple, and John was not, may simply be a consequence of John staying in Antipas’s territory (at least as Josephus portrays him; see *Antiquities* 18.116–119; Taylor, “John the Baptist”, 5), while Jesus, during his final week, was active in the temple itself. It is not necessarily evidence that John’s criticisms of the temple – if he offered any – were less pointed than Jesus’.

68. As is evident from Taylor, “John the Baptist”, 11, John’s baptism was an act of *ritual* purification, and ritual immersions were practiced throughout the land (not only in Jerusalem). See, for example, Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels’ Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism*, Grand Rapids, MI 2020. The Gospels, of course, present John’s baptism in terms of repentance (βάπτισμα μετανοίας; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; compare Matt. 3:11) and release of sins (εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). This may be part of the Jesus tradition’s bending of John’s prophetic activity towards and against the temple and its administration.

(χειροποίητος) and promising to replace it with one “not made with hands” (ἀχειροποίητος; Mark 14:58)⁶⁹ – and he was mocked as such even as he hung dying on the cross.

As his followers continued to express, perform, transmit, write, read, and apply traditions from and about Jesus in the decades between his death and the catastrophic events of 70 CE, this aspect of Jesus’ message was neither neglected nor forgotten. Our perception of the earliest Christians’ views of the temple are complicated by the distorting effects of our knowledge of the events of 70 CE and the continued non-existence of the temple, as well as questions about dating certain important texts (for example, Hebrews). But the evidence seems to indicate that the earliest Christians continued to view the temple as a holy place and to offer prayer and sacrifices in the temple.⁷⁰ During this period, therefore, Jesus’ followers lived in the tension of venerating the temple as a holy place even as they commemorated Jesus’ (and John’s?) critique of the temple and its administration. Also during this period, Paul used the language of Jesus’ critique of the temple to express both his experience of suffering and his ongoing trust in God and in Christ. “For we know that even if our earthly house (ἡ ἐπίγειος ἡμῶν οἰκία) – this ‘tabernacle’ (τοῦ σκίηνου) – is being destroyed (καταλυθῆ), we have a dwelling from God (οἰκοδομὴν ἐκ θεοῦ), an eternal house not made with hands (οἰκίαν ἀχειροποίητον αἰώνιον) in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1). In John 2:19, Jesus says “destroy this sanctuary” (λύσατε τὸν ναὸν τοῦτον), but he himself does not threaten to destroy it.⁷¹ Paul, similarly, observes the destruction (καταλύω) of Christians’ bodies without attributing that destruction to Jesus. Like the Johannine Jesus, though via different means, Paul exhibits confidence in the preservation of the threatened house or sanctuary.⁷² We

69. In the Septuagint, χειροποίητος referred to “hand-made” gods and their images (see Lev. 26:1, 30; Isa. 2:18; 10:11; 16:12; 19:1; 21:9; 31:7; 46:6; Dan. [OG] 5:4, 23; 6:28; Wis. 14:8; Jdth. 8:18). With the exception of Hebrews and, perhaps, 2 Cor. 5:1 and/or Eph. 2:11 (but not Col. 2:11!), the use of χειροποίητος and its opposite, ἀχειροποίητος (not found in the Septuagint) retains resonances of this anti-idolatry polemic.

70. See, for example, Matt. 5:23–24 (though this may reflect the time of Jesus rather than the behaviour of Jesus’ followers at any point between 30 and 70 CE). See also the regular portrayals in Acts of Christian activity, including worship and prayer, in the temple. Paul’s desire to spend Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 20:16; see also Rom. 15:25) also suggests that the early Christians, including Paul, did not scorn the temple in lieu of identifying Jesus as its replacement prior to 70 CE. For discussion, see Eyal Regev, *The Temple in Early Christianity: Experiencing the Sacred*, New Haven, CT 2019.

71. Only the Coptic Gospel of Thomas preserves a fragmentary tradition in which Jesus affirmatively threatens to destroy the temple himself: †ⲛⲁⲩⲟⲣ[ⲱⲣ̅ ⲛⲓⲣⲉ]ⲙⲉⲓ ⲁⲩⲱ ⲙ̅ⲛ̅ ⲗⲁⲁⲅ ⲛⲁⲩⲟⲕⲟⲩⲧⲉ (Gos. Thom. 71). See Simon Gathercole, *The Gospel of Thomas: Introduction and Commentary*, Leiden 2014, 477–480, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004273252>.

72. The Johannine Jesus promises to raise the temple anew (ἐγερῶ αὐτόν; John 2:19). Paul expresses an assurance that he and his readers continue to have (ἔχομεν) a dwelling from God

may see here in Paul an example of Jesus' critique against the temple being applied to a new situation: placing the experience of persecution into proper perspective.

Jesus' tradents either preserved or created the idea that Jesus' critique of the temple was rooted in and continued John's critique; his authority to overturn tables and chairs and to disrupt temple activities was of the same source as John's authority to summon people to repentance and immersion in the wilderness (Mark 11:27–33; see also Matt. 21:23–27; Luke 20:1–8). My own view is that John, like the community at Qumran, understood himself to be critiquing the temple administration in Jerusalem and also calling (or simply hoping) for its reform and renewal.⁷³ Whether this was John's view or not, Matthew extends the tradition in this direction by bringing the Sadducees within the sphere of John's critique. Either way, the Jesus tradition did not erase John's voice from its own critique of the temple and its leadership; it either conscripted John into that critique or, as in my view, it preserved the memory that Jesus' own views of the temple were shaped by his predecessor's.

The Obdurate Past in a Malleable Tradition

In light of our tradents' tendencies to narrow the focus on Jesus and to exclude other sources of authority,⁷⁴ this is a surprisingly retentive and stable feature of the tradition. Once the temple was destroyed and Jesus' criticisms of the temple were seen to be particularly prophetic for prefiguring its destruction, it might be especially surprising that Jesus' tradents apparently resisted reshaping the tradition – except on the margins (for example, Luke 21:20) – to vindicate his critique. It was sufficient that readers and hearers could make the connection between Jesus' words and the current state – post 70 CE – of Jerusalem and her temple. As Byrskog noted in this essay's second epigraph, the past of Jesus' tradents was not, apparently, entirely swallowed up by their present circumstances or interests.⁷⁵ ▲

despite the destruction of their earthly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:1).

73. I agree completely with Eyal Regev that many of the New Testament texts often interpreted as condemnations of the temple *per se* aim, instead, “to create a *continuation* of contemporary Jewish ideas relating to the Temple”, and that “the NT authors do not simply react to the Temple as a ‘Jewish’ (namely, external or remote) cultic institution and symbol. They treat it as a place and a concept that are inherent to their thinking about Jesus and their own identity”. Regev, *The Temple in Early Christianity*, 314, italics in original. I would add that the temple was inherent also to the New Testament authors' thinking about God.

74. This was a major theme in Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, for example: “the constant focus on Jesus was *the* characteristic feature of the Jesus tradition” (p. 21, italics in original).

75. See Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 299.

SUMMARY

From its inception, early Christianity exhibited a kind of textuality that differs in striking ways from modern, academic textuality. While the various skills comprising literacy (reading, writing, and so on) were rare and unevenly distributed in the early Roman imperial period, nevertheless the early Christians and other Jews lived in a world crowded with texts. Many of these texts existed in some relation to traditions that already enjoyed a history of performance and interpretation. These traditions, which predated their expression in written texts, perform critical functions in the composition, reception, and interpretation of "oral-derived texts", or texts with roots in an active oral tradition. This essay applies the work of John Miles Foley and, especially, Samuel Byrskog to explore how to read oral-derived texts within the context of their encompassing tradition and the history of that tradition's performance. The commemoration of Jesus' threat against the Jerusalem Temple in the years between Jesus' public life and the destruction of the temple provides an example of such a reading.