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Remembering, Changing, Inventing: How Stories About Jesus Were Told

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One of my favorite college classes was “Jesus and the Gospels.” Ironically, though, one of my strongest memories from the class was not a lesson the professor intended. During a series of presentations toward the end of the semester, one student denounced everything we had learned that semester as heretical and concluded by quoting Hebrews 13:8, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The professor restrained herself for the most part, and limited herself to saying with a calm sternness, something along the lines of: “Get out. You have clearly learned nothing. Please leave the room now.”

From the perspective of orthodox Christianity, the student was right. We had been learning heresy. But **the root of the word heresy simply means “to choose”** — as in “to choose” for oneself what to believe or do, as opposed to believing or doing something because of what an authority figure tells you.

Another strong memory from that class was a quote from the historical Jesus scholar John Dominic Crossan, who said: **“The issue is whether the passion accounts are prophecy historicized or history remembered.** Raymond Brown [an orthodox Roman Catholic scholar] is 80% in the direction of history remembered. I’m 80% in the opposite direction.” Those statistics are in line with the headline-grabbing press releases from the Jesus Seminar in the 1990s that the historical Jesus only said about 20% of the words attributed to him.

My classmate, in contrast, was making the argument that Jesus said and did 100% of what the Bible says. (That the Christian scriptures are 100% “history remembered.”) But the

more I have researched, the more convinced I am of Crossan's perspective: the Gospels are, for the most part, "prophecy historicized." In other words, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John evolved from decades of Christians reading ancient Jewish prophecies, telling and re-telling oral traditions, and weaving those ingredients into "history." (If you are interested in exploring this process further, the best starting point I've found is Crossan's book Who Killed Jesus?)

When seeking to separate "History Remembered" from "Prophecy Historicized" in the "Quest for the Historical Jesus," one detail that I can't emphasize strongly enough is the importance of keeping in mind that **Jesus of Nazareth was a peasant from an obscure village.** Jesus was *not* royalty about whom we often have historical records. Rather, we only have a general range of years for when he was born and for when he died. (We know the *time of year* he died—around the annual Jewish holiday of Passover—but *not* the year, which is often estimated as 27-30 C.E.) Moreover, **there is a forty year gap between Jesus's death and the writing of the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the canonical Gospels.**

Keep in mind that both **Jesus and his disciples were "lower-class, illiterate peasants who spoke Aramaic,"** whereas the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), "were written by highly educated Greek-speaking Christians forty to sixty-five years later" (Ehrman 70). Being able to write a text like one of the Gospels was a rare talent. As the scholar Catherine Hezser has shown in her landmark study Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine, **approximately "97 percent of the people in Palestine in Jesus's day could not read or write."** And of that three percent, more could read than write (80).

Regarding that forty-year gap between the life of the historical Jesus and the earliest Gospel record, two of the biggest myths that need to be debunked are (1) that the Gospels are eyewitness accounts and (2) that people in oral cultures have better memories than we do today. First, **the Gospels are almost entirely written in the third-person and do not claim to be composed by eyewitnesses to the historical Jesus** (106). Second, "The consensus among both anthropologists and cultural historians" is that **people in oral cultures "generally forget about as much as other people"** (182). Indeed, rather than having better memories, the situation is more dire: if something is forgotten in an oral culture, it is "lost forever"; whereas, in our Information Age, we can just "Google it" (182).

Along these lines, there's a lot to be learned about the Quest for the Historical Jesus from the "Quest for the Historical Homer," which has many parallel issues. The most important book in this regard is Albert Lord's 1960 classic The Singer of Tales (1961). What this study of oral cultures documented is that, **"In an oral context, every time a story is told it is changed. The 'gist' remains pretty much the same, but the details get changed. Often they get changed massively"** (1961). The real paradigm shift from an Oral Culture to a Written Culture is *not* that people's memories are superior in an oral culture. Rather, in an oral culture, the relation to tradition is different since there is no written original to compare. Researchers who make transcripts of oral cultures over time have shown that in an oral culture, "Every performance is and always has been different. . . . Whoever performs the tradition alters it in light of his [or her] own interests, the sense of what the audience wants to hear, the amount of time [available] to tell or sing it, and numerous other factors" (1961).

That being said, if you ask performers in an oral culture if the song is the same over time, many will insistently say "yes." But what they are really referring to is the "gist" of the song because studies have exposed that **word choice and overall length vary widely from performance to performance**. This dynamic would also have been the case with Jesus's teachings, which would've varied in the details, even as the gist would have remained fairly constant—similar to the stump speeches of politicians, which has constant themes whose details vary depending on the audience. These variances would also have been the case as stories about Jesus were passed from person to person during the forty-year gap between his death and the earliest Gospel. So when you hear that the historical Jesus only said about twenty percent of the words attributed to him by the Gospels, underneath that claim is the insight that the "gist" that remained most constant is often the "punchline" at the heart of the stories attributed to Jesus — whereas the surrounding details vary widely even from Gospel to Gospel.

Relatedly, consider this parable from the theologian Catherine Keller:

A man died. The people who knew him gathered to share memories. Finally, a portrait was commissioned. But as generations passed, the painting did not seem fine enough. The heirs of the portrait, who had become wealthy, created a new golden frame, immense, carved with motifs from the portrait and encrusted with

jewels. People began to feel that the old portrait of that dark fellow with the haunting eyes pulled the effect down. As it began to peel from age, they extended the frame inward. **One day the frame covered the whole canvas.** (133)

The Quest for the Historical Jesus requires carefully stripping away the frame that has expanded over two millennia.

Regarding how we should approach that process, the historical Jesus scholar Bart Ehrman has published an important new book titled Jesus Before the Gospels: How the Earliest Christians Remembered, Changed, and Invented Their Stories of the Savior. The most significant contribution of this book is **applying what we have learned from twenty-first century neuroscience to the Quest for the Historical Jesus**. Ehrman's goal is to separate what we might wish we had (accurate eyewitness accounts that reflect 100% of "history remembered" about the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth) from what we do have (written records from decades after the fact that reflect "prophecy historicized").

Perhaps the most damning way in which modern science challenges the accuracy of "history remembered" is that even if the Christian Gospels were written by eyewitness (which they do not claim to be), it is devastating to discover that **in criminal cases whose convictions have been overturned by DNA evidence, "in about 75 percent of those reversed judgements the person charged with the crime was convicted solely on the basis of eyewitness testimony"** (89). Sometimes that may be because the eyewitness lied to get a conviction, but it is also likely that the eyewitnesses sometimes missed important details or misremembered the event even though they witnessed it firsthand.

Consider three examples. First, in 1902 a criminologist named Franz von Liszt staged a fight at one of his lectures in which two students faked an argument that escalated until one of them pulled out a gun and fired it. After revealing that it was all an act, Professor Liszt assigned a group of students to record what they had witnessed. Another group of students was given the same assignment the next day, and a final group was asked to record their memories of the episode a week later (87). **"The most accurate accounts were in error in 26 percent of the details reported. Others were in error in as many as 80 percent"** (88). This experiment was one of the earliest scientific tests of eyewitness testimony.

Here's a second example: when the space shuttle Challenger exploded in 1986, two psychologists at Emory University had the idea of administering a seven-question survey the next day to the 106 students in an undergraduate psychology class about "where they were when they heard the news, what time of day it was, what they were doing at the time, whom they learned it from, etc." A year-and-a-half-later, they were able to find forty-four of the students and administer the same questionnaire. Another six months later, they interviewed forty of the original students:

75 percent of those who took the second questionnaire were certain they had never taken the first one. That was obviously wrong.... Twenty-five percent of the participants got every single answer wrong on the second questionnaire, even though their memories were vivid and they were highly confident in their answers. Another 50 percent got only two of the seven questions correct. Only three of the forty-four got all the answers right the second time, and even in those cases there were mistakes in some of the details. When the participants' confidence in their answers was ranked in relation to their accuracy there was **"no relation between confidence and accuracy at all"** in forty-two of the forty-four instances.... When confronted with evidence of what really took place, they consistently denied it and said that their present memories were the correct one. In the words of the researchers, **"No one who had given an incorrect account in the interview even pretended that they now recalled what was stated on the original record. As far as we can tell, the original memories are just gone."** (141-142)

These findings, which have been replicated in other studies, are significant both for understanding our own memories as well as how Jesus—and other famous figures—were and are remembered.

Among many other significant scientific studies of memory, here's a third and final example from a study called **"Do You Remember Proposing Marriage to the Pepsi Machine?"**:

Psychologists at Wesleyan University took forty students to different locations around the campus. "In each location they were instructed either to perform an

action, to imagine performing it for ten seconds, to watch the experimenter performing the action, or to imagine the experimenter performing it. The actions were either normal or bizarre. For example, if they were in the library, they were asked to look up a word in a dictionary; or they were asked to pat the dictionary and ask how it was doing. Elsewhere they were asked to check the Pepsi machine for change or to go down on one knee and propose marriage to it.

When interviewed two weeks later, **“Whether the action was normal or bizarre, participants who imagined it often remember doing it..... Imagining the action vividly, but just one time, could produce the false memory.** Moreover, imagining someone else performing the action led to just as many false memories as imagining doing it oneself” (94).

These modern, scientific understandings of memory are among the many factors that should be considered in studying how stories about Jesus were remembered, changed, and invented. As I say each Sunday at the beginning of the service, “We seek to encourage spiritual growth by drawing wisdom from all the world’s religions, balanced with the insights of modern science.”

The Christian tradition continues to be an important source of wisdom for many contemporary Unitarian Universalists, including myself. But I invite you to consider that **the authority of the Christian tradition does not rest solely on whether Jesus of Nazareth did or did not say or do something two thousand years ago.** I continue to be interested in that historical investigation, but the more important question may well be whether a saying or action from the Christian tradition—or from any other source—helps us today to lead a more compassionate, grounded, and generous life. If it does, then I am grateful—whether it came from the historical Jesus or whether it was changed, misattributed, or invented by a later person. May we be grateful for wisdom from any source if it leads to an increase of love and joy, peace and justice.