

What Difference Does the Medium Make?

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Chapter 12 in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture*, Edited by Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher, T& T Clark International, 2011

Provocation and proof are the traditional means of scholarly progress. The contributors to this volume are nothing if not provocative and persuasive. This valuable collection not only assesses first-century media culture in terms of its role in the written and oral propagation of John's Gospel; its assessment generalizes to other Gospels and other first-century events as well.

Reading this volume's chapters on media culture from the standpoint of social memory theory leads me, unwittingly, to an argument about an important aspect of the development of early Christianity, namely, reaction to the delay of the Parousia. Before Jesus dies, he declares that the Kingdom of God will be established during the lifetimes of most of his contemporaries. That his prophecy fails is a challenge to the very core of first-century Christian belief. Reinterpreting Jesus's words, or rather, finding in these very words the reason for the delay, resolves the problem; but this new understanding is not based on a change in media culture. Narratives of Jesus's life and teachings change over time within the same oral culture, and essential aspects of these narratives remain unchanged as predominantly oral cultures convert into predominantly print cultures. There is, as I shall argue and hope to demonstrate here, a weak correspondence between changes in media culture and changes in Gospel content.

In the pages that follow, I proceed in three steps, each inspired by one or more related chapters in the present volume. First, I raise the issue of how oral traditions get started in the first place, and how memories of those who knew Jesus were transformed into a tradition that transcended the lives of the individuals who formed it. The second part of my argument asks and provides provisional answers to the question of how oral traditions, once established, are consolidated and passed across communities and generations. I focus on the lectors (whom contemporary communication scholars would call 'opinion-leaders') who conveyed to an illiterate public the written Gospels. In the third and longest phase of my argument, I defend the assumption that changes in Gospel content from Mark to John reflect changes in the way Jesus was popularly conceived in the first century. Many popular conceptions distorted the life of Jesus, as remembered by his closest contemporaries. An unambiguous account of social memory is required to identify these distortions and determine whether oral communication is more susceptible to them than is written communication. Emphasis will be placed on the two great perspectives of social memory theory, namely, the *presentist* perspective, wherein changes in the social memory are related to changes in the problems and concerns of the environment in which the past is invoked, and the traditionalist perspective, whose models align memory more closely to historical realities than to subsequent

social developments. This third phase of discussion concludes with an explanation of why biblical studies' pre-eminent concept of social memory, namely Jan Assmann's generational *traditionsbruch*, must be supplemented in order to understand why media culture alone cannot explain the Gospels' changing content and representation. The *traditionsbruch*, as will be shown, resulted from a creedal crisis, not a media change. Knowing how Christian leaders managed the delay of the Parousia leads to a keener understanding of the role of media and memory in the rapidly changing beliefs of the first century.

How Oral Traditions Begin

The apostles probably knew most about Jesus and his ministry, but when he died, it is fair to assume that nothing was left to keep them together. 'Men who have been brought close together' to learn new ways of religious thinking, observed Maurice Halbwachs, 'may disperse afterwards into various groups...Once separated, not one of them can reproduce the total content of the original thought' (1992: 32). This is what Halbwachs meant when he said that social memory disappears when the group changes or ceases to exist (1950 [1980]: 80). Of course, individual memories continue to exist, but unless one individual's memories supplement or support another's, no oral tradition can be established.

To supplement does not mean to duplicate. Different versions of a narrative may, in the aggregate, make for a perfectly coherent message. Edmund Leach's description of the variant expressions of myth applies to the variant stories of those who knew Jesus personally:

Let us imagine the situation of an individual A who is trying to get a message to a friend B who is almost out of earshot, and let us suppose that communication is further hampered by various kinds of interference — noise from wind, passing cars, and so on. What will A Do? If he is sensible he will not be satisfied with shouting his message just once; he will shout it several times, and give a different wording to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end B may likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and the mutual consistencies and inconsistencies will make it quite clear what is 'really' being said. (Leach 1970: 63-4)

The meaning of the message is not in any one of its versions but in all taken together. In the case that concerns us, let the apostles' messages to acquaintances and fellow Christians represent A and B; we then realize that each need not tell the same story in order for a fair estimate of the original reality to appear at the 'receiving end'. Nor do we need to know which shout is the original, any more than we need to know which text is original. Chris Keith's 'A Performance of the Text' is right to deny that an original Johannine text would necessarily tell a more authentic story than a later one. The first 'shout' might, indeed, be no better than the last.

Redundant oral communication is at the root of every oral tradition—not only in the first century but in all. Several examples can illustrate the point. No one knew much

about Abraham Lincoln's young adulthood when he died. William Herndon, Lincoln's former law partner, located and interviewed as many former New Salem residents as he could find who had known Lincoln while he lived there in the 1830s. Because thirty-five to forty years had passed since these people last saw Lincoln, Herndon had to weed out distortions, rumours and mistakes from their testimony in order to identify its truth value. As a second case, the Works Progress Administration, seventy years after the Civil War ended, provided for interviews of African Americans born into slave families. The oral history project covered all slave-holding states during the Civil War and resulted in a vast collection titled *The Slave Narratives*, which can be found in any university library. Based on the memory of very elderly people remembering their childhood on the plantation, these narratives are in themselves imperfect sources, but the thick methodological literature that forms around them defines their contribution to our understanding of slave life. As a third example, Katsuichi Honda in 1971 interviewed survivors of the December 1937-February 1938 Nanjing Massacre. These illiterate victims could not have written their own stories, but their oral retellings, after almost forty years, were essential to reconstructing what had happened in Nanjing during the Japanese occupation. Memory thus solidifies when a collectivity tells its story, even after the passing of decades.

An obvious parallel may be drawn between the witnesses to life in New Salem, slave narratives, stories by survivors of Nanjing, and early traditions about Jesus's ministry: all are characterized by discrepancy and overlap. Before individuals spoke to any interviewer; they spoke to one another; and it was this interaction that converted overlap among individual memories into an oral tradition. When individual recollections react directly upon one another; they combine according to their own principles; they become realities which, while maintaining their dependence on individual memory; are independent of the memory of any one individual. Social memory cannot be reduced to the individual memories composing it, simply because the collective remembrance remains after these individuals disappear. Social memory is therefore something that individuals produce but do not constitute. This 'collective representation', as Emile Durkheim has named it, is what biblical scholars refer to as a 'tradition'. But we must avoid the way this volume's Introduction states the matter: it is not that 'oral recollections tend to move toward fixed and durable forms as the core of a tradition stabilizes'. This is a definition of tradition's 'surface structure'. Stable tradition is composed of fixed and durable forms, and these exist latently in social memory, actualized in individual beliefs about the past, just as, in de Saussure's (1987) model of linguistics, langue is realized in the 'surface structure' of parole, the spoken word. The 'thick autonomy of memory' (Casey 1987: 286), not its separate manifestations, thus defines tradition. The key point for present purposes is that no single individual, not even those who wield writing instruments, can 'silence' collective representations of the past.

How Oral Tradition Flows

The Fourth Gospel and First-Century Media Culture is inspired by Werner Kelber's groundbreaking *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (1983), which projected (then) recent discoveries about oral culture (Havelock 1963; Parry 1991; Ong 1992) to first-century Christianity. The current volume's own insights into the qualities and power of oral communication are stunning, but the project would tell us even more about orality, writing and memory if its contributors recognized the limits of Kelber's argument and widened their own intellectual scope.

The same elements of redundancy and collective representation that result in the *origin* of a tradition are at play in its maintenance and transmission. Multiple writers and speakers convey discrepant but overlapping information which, in its assemblage, is coherent to most readers and listeners. Traditions begin, subsist and change, however, under different conditions. Elihu Katz (1954) and his colleagues have established that public communication flow, which would include first-century communication about Jesus, involves two steps: first, information is disseminated; secondly, it is received by 'opinion-leaders', interpreted by them, then passed on to their associates and friends. More attuned to the media than their contemporaries, opinion-leaders are not content to learn what is happening around them; they seek to convince others of their understanding of events. Because opinion-leaders' influence is related to who they are and what and whom they know, the information they convey does more than instruct; it is a source of social pressure to conform to community leanings, and provides *social support* for doing so. Gospel writers therefore have less direct influence on individuals than do the opinion-leaders, the lectors, who bring their text to the public.

This two-step theory of communication—dissemination to opinion-leaders; interpretation and further distribution—describes the stream of first-century gospel tradition. But it is important to understand this transmission at a deeper level. It is by now common knowledge that modern mass media, in the process of transmitting information, introduced the era of 'celebrity', and today's celebrities include not only entertainers but also transmitters of secular news (syndicated writers, television 'news anchors') and sacred information ('television preachers' and clergymen). Although lectors were, for many, the only source of information about Jesus and his message, their fame, in John's time, was for the most part confined to the local communities where they lived or visited. One of the virtues of the present collection is to tell us something about these people, although, given its emphasis on orality, it fails to tell us enough.

In Jeffrey Brickle's essay, the crucial link between Gospel authors and their audiences is the lector, 'the person who reads or describes texts and scripture to illiterate congregations'. Ancient lectors and modern opinion-leaders play analogous roles. Gospel authors make their texts 'lector-friendly' with repetition, regular use of figurative language, analogy, emphasis and de-emphasis, passionate assertion and

declaration, aphorism, parallelism, marking of beginnings and endings, appropriate pitch, stress, rhythm, pace, and other fixed language patterns that promote listeners' understanding and remembering. These formulaic patterns, Antoinette Wire adds, not only give coherence to texts: the performer mediating divine voices and prophetic writings is inclined toward hyperbole, or 'inspired speech'. However, prophecy, the passing of a message from a divine sender to designated recipients, often fails. Without talented lectors, text alone, even for the literate, lacks rhetorical power. Behind every written Gospel, then, are performers who bring words to life. As with musical compositions, Wire tells us, the player or singer makes a difference. The lector therefore enhances the message he conveys. Jesus appears more wondrous in the words of a gifted lector than in those of a mediocre one. But Wire understates her case. Even the Gutenberg press, the first great turning point of scribal communication, probably made printed messages available to a much smaller percentage of people than did lectors presenting the same messages orally.

Tom Thatcher's two essays enlarge Brickle's and Wire's remarks. Lectors, he contends, 'smooth' discontinuities in the text: that which is anomalous in written form, including John's Prologue, appears well-connected in oral presentation. Thatcher also identifies dual vocalizations: the lector plays the role of Jesus speaking to his contemporaries, and the role of himself speaking to his own audience. In the process speakers come to be admired, even identified with Jesus and venerated. Lectors also succeed by tailoring their remarks to specific social and political situations. In contrast to readers learning in isolation, oral performance is situated in homes, markets, synagogues and other social places, making the story of Jesus part of the lives of its listeners. Thirteen of the seventeen speeches in John, explains Tom Boomershine, were read to Jews gathered in these places. The situations in which spoken words are lodged define their meaning, but this is not to say, as Chris Keith makes clear that the written word is trans-situational or subject to narrower interpretation than the spoken word.

This volume's essays, indeed, demonstrate lectors' dependence on text, and it is this relation that tells us most about the way people thought and felt about Jesus. Many written portrayals of Jesus during this period, it is true, reflected the people's taste; some writers shared that taste; some exploited it, dealing mainly with the features of Jesus's life that would interest their audience. Other writers, however, believed their efforts would be of no significance if they did not in some way affect as well as reflect their audiences' conceptions of Jesus. Writers explained that Jesus's life and words revealed God's plan and their fate, and for that reason the sacred story had to be accurately recorded and faithfully conveyed. For the most part, the carriers of Jesus's story, writers and lectors alike, did their best to get it right. The relationship between writer, lector and audience—between memory and society—however strong or weak, probably remained the same throughout the first century. Given this assumption, the difference between Mark's mid-century and John's late-century portrayals can be taken as an index of change in the way ordinary men and women perceived Jesus.

This premise takes us to this book's most significant shortcoming, its ambiguity on the role of memory. The stories conveyed by John's lectors, no less than Mark's, Matthew's and Luke's, were stories about the past, stories ultimately based on memories of Jesus's contemporaries. At question is the extent to which these stories were distorted with the passage of time, what parts were distorted, what motivated the distortions, and what were their social functions. Above all, were spoken distortions more or less common than written ones? Does that which makes scripture permanent also make it more likely to be true? These questions concern the changing image of Jesus in first-century Christian memory.

Two Faces of Social Memory

According to Le Donne and Thatcher's Introduction, our memory of all historical events is subject to multiple interpretations and constant redefinitions, all driven by values, ideal interests and power relations. 'Ultimately, then, social memory theorists are less concerned with the content of social memory and its potential historical value than in the ways that specific artifacts of memory (such as the Johannine writings) reflect the structure, values and identity of the groups that produced them.' This statement applies to part, but by no means the entire field, of social memory studies. I take nothing away from the authors' present work by calling this particular statement misleading, and insisting that it underestimates the value of social memory theory for historical Jesus scholarship.

This book's concluding section, 'Memory as Medium', is a continuation of Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher's pioneering volume on *Memory Tradition, and Text* (2005). Le Donne initiates the discussion by distinguishing individual memory, which he correctly identifies as 'literal memory', from social memory, which marks past events through such physical objects as texts and commemorative symbols - hence Le Donne's reference to social memory as a 'metaphor'. This is a correct and useful distinction, so long as we understand that social memory and individual memory perform different functions.

'Social memory' refers to the distribution throughout society of individual knowledge, belief, feeling and moral judgement of the past as well as identification with past actors and events. Only individuals, as Le Donne notes, possess the capacity to contemplate the past, but this does not mean that such capacity originates in the individual alone or can be explained solely on the basis of his or her experience. Individuals do not know the past singly; they know it with and against others situated in different groups, and through the knowledge and traditions that predecessors and contemporaries transmit to them (Halbwachs 1926; 1980 [1950]; Shils 1981).

During the last three decades, two perspectives on social memory have emerged, each of which is defined by analytical models that depict the way memory works. In the 'presentist' perspective, articulated by constructionist, postmodern, political and pragmatist models of memory, beliefs about the past are construed as hostage to present circumstances, with different elements of the past becoming more or less

relevant as circumstances change. This volume's editors and most of its contributors are drawn to the presentist model. In its extreme form, presentism holds that contemporary events alone are real and that the past is construed according to its present relevance. However extreme or understated, I use the most inclusive term, 'presentist', in order to emphasize what its analytical models have in common, namely, a focus on current situations, including political, economic and ideological predicaments, as the basis of the past's perception. In this light, social memory becomes a dependent variable as the political and knowledge elites of each new generation, and in each community, forge a past compatible with their own circumstances and with minimal regard for historical truth (see, for example, Halbwachs 1926; 1980 [1950]; Coser 1992; Zerubavel 2003).

Of the three chapters in this volume's social memory section, Catrin Williams' analysis conforms most closely to the presentist model. After her reference to Halbwachs's observation on how groups determine what is remembered and forgotten, and Olick's account of memory as a conflictual reconstruction of the past, she explains how storytelling about Jesus reflected disagreements between Christians and Jews. Her case in point is John's account of Abraham. One can hardly think of a better example. John denies that descent from Abraham is descent from God. Abraham is part of Jewish beginnings, but descent from God begins with Jesus alone. Accordingly, Jesus can say, 'Before Abraham was, I am.' When asked whether he is greater than Abraham, Jesus replies, 'Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day.' John thus reconfigures Abraham to meet the claims and challenges of his potential Jewish converts and opponents.

The strength of presentist analysis is that it focuses on the situation in which events are remembered and forgotten, and this is a great strength indeed, for we cannot grasp the meaning of any event or gesture without knowing the context in which it occurs. One might borrow from Clifford Geertz (1973: 3-30) and define context-driven accounts as 'thick descriptions' of social memory. A problem arises, however, when the past becomes a captive of the present. When presentist insights, however profound, focus on the reconstructive (and deconstructive) potential of social memory research, they minimize memory's relevance to biblical studies by ignoring the ways in which the past resists revision. 'There are limits to the pasts that can be reconstructed, and there is an integrity to the past that deserves respect' (Schudson 1993: 221). Social memory scholarship, with its full range of analytical tools, promotes appreciation of this resistance and this integrity; it recognizes the conservation as well as distortion of the past.

Whereas presentism conceives the past according to a 'relevance principle', culturalism works according to a 'reality principle'. The cultural perspective on social memory manifests itself in realist and traditionalist models that define memory as an ordered system of information and symbols, activated by cultural values supplying standards and frames of reference for the present. Because values, standards and reference frames vary from one group to another and from one generation to another, cultural theory itself is inherently presentist. But if memory becomes so

malleable as to be dismissive of the realities of the past, history becomes superfluous and social memory loses its survival value. Societies whose idea of history is warped are then no worse off than societies which acknowledge their history. To possess the truth is to possess no advantage.

The term 'cultural memory' is used here in the realist sense: the past is no less objective than the present and exists independently of the concepts we use to describe it. In this tradition, which broadens Jan Assmann's conception of memory, culture's roots in individual activity are recognized, but culture's 'emergence' from these roots is deemed a fact rather than an exercise in 'reification' (Berger and Luckmann 1966: 79-92). Cultural memory, then, remains stable as it is modified across generations and nations (Shils 1981: 1-62; 162-94). Cultural memory is a source of moral direction, an independent variable, a distinguishing, formative aspect of culture (see Burke 1790; Durkheim [1915] 1965; Pelikan 1984, 1985; Schudson 1989, 1992; Assmann 2006; Yerushalmi [1982] 1996). In this light, the work of memory agents and entrepreneurs (Fine 1996) account for nothing; the success of their activities is itself to be explained, and part of that explanation involves an estimate of the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* ('as it actually happened').

Michael Labahn's 'Scripture Talks because Jesus Talks' touches on the premises of the cultural perspective by declaring that written biblical texts are inherently authoritative, not only because they are written but because they bear witness to the authority of Jesus. True, the community only *hears* the Gospel, but the ultimate authority behind the spoken word is the text; behind the text, the actuality. The written Gospel, then, does not silence orality, as Kelber and others insist. Rather, it achieves fulfilment through oral narration. Indeed, the lector gains authority by displaying to his audience the manuscript he is reciting (Shiner 2003).

Among the several contributors to this volume, James Dunn, with his emphasis on tradition remaining 'the same yet different', gives cultural memory its clearest articulation. Dunn is compelling, as long as we take his work as a point of departure rather than conclusion. W V O. Quine's (1998) famous statement about the under-determination of theory by facts—his belief that science is full of instances in which two or more plausible theories can be derived from the same body of data—is a version of Dunn's 'same but different' concept of tradition. Neither Dunn nor Quine means that one theory is as valid as another. Both believe that every theory, however derived, is testable, and that from these tests emerges truth.

In sum, the memory chapters in this volume demonstrate not only external conditions causing writers and lectors to misrepresent reality; they also show the past resisting revision. Memories, as the editors claim, subordinate reality to 'the structure, values and identity of the group that produced them', but this can only be affirmed if reality is known. Such knowledge need only consist of fundamental features, but the more accurate it is, the more (1) we can know whether accounts of a historical event have been distorted or accurately represented; (2) we can tell what

kind of distortion is occurring; (3) we can identify accretions to and deletions from historical accounts; and (4) we can adjudicate among competing interpretations.

Reciprocally, deviations from historical reality illuminate reality itself. To take but one major example of interest to this collection: a major change from Mark to John concerns the theme of apocalypticism, and because this theme eroded from the time of Jesus's death to John's day, we may infer (not conclude) that the apocalyptic Jesus resonated more strongly among his contemporaries than among John's. Of course, one must always ask whether the passage of time gives society a clearer view of the kind of man Jesus had been. The answer is simple: time clarifies when it provides the opportunity to gather new, or supplement existing, evidence.

The presentist and cultural perspectives are the two great ideas of social memory scholarship. But if presentist and cultural perspectives are known, they have not been fully investigated. In particular, neither perspective gives us an adequate understanding of symbolic formulation. Much is said about memory being 'invented' or its providing a controlling 'blueprint for experience, but we know little about how either is accomplished. The link between the causes and consequences of memory is weak because the 'connecting element, the process of symbolic formulation', as Geertz (1973:207) would call it, is passed over. The singular contribution of this volume is to explore one of the most important of these formulations: lectors telling the story of Jesus to illiterate listeners. But how did the story of Jesus, the first written account of which appeared thirty to forty years after Jesus's death, remain plausible?

Orality Literacy and the Real Traditionsbruch

The present volume fails to trace continuity and change from Mark to John in their respective portrayals of Jesus. Its general theme is more concerned, as Jan Assmann (2006) would put it, with the consequence of 'communicative memory' mutating into 'cultural memory'—that is to say, how the oral claims which people (including lectors) make about the past differ from what people write about the past in order to perpetuate it.

Assmann's statement resonates perfectly with the assumptions of orality scholarship, but to follow him is to take memory scholarship down the wrong path. First-century Christianity's major crisis is not the disappearance of the generation that saw and knew Jesus or the problem of committing their experience and memories to writing; rather, it is the failure of a prophecy that Joseph Ratzinger (1988: 19-45) deems the essential, although ambiguous, core of Christianity. The new Christians embraced Jesus's declaration that the kingdom of heaven was at hand, that the Son of man was about to come to earth on a cloud of glory and rid the world of evil. On this matter the present volume is almost silent, but because it was a primary concern of first-century Christian communities, the failure of Jesus's prophecy constituted a grave threat to their belief. Maurice Halbwachs had already said as much: in the early to mid first century, 'the hope for the return of Christ and

the appearance of the heavenly Jerusalem had not yet been turned aside'; past and present, the old Judaism and the new Christianity, remained fused (1992 [1926]: 94). All Christian writings, canonical or apocryphal, testify to the same thing: 'We are approaching the end of things; God will have his vengeance; his Messiah will appear or reappear. There is no doubt that it was this element in Jewish thought that the Christians retained above all' (Halbwachs 1992 [1926]:96). In Jaroslav Pelikan's more recent *Words*, Jesus's 'teaching and preaching had as its central content "the gospel of God... The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel"' (1987: 21). The generation to which Jesus, and before him John the Baptist, addressed their proclamation was, we are told, a generation 'standing on tiptoes in expectation' (Pelikan 1987: 24). In all three Synoptic Gospels, Jesus declares that his generation will not pass away before the kingdom of God is established. But then Pelikan asks a key question: 'How could, and how did, the person of Jesus retain hold on an authority whose validity had apparently depended on the announcement of the impending end of history?' (1987:25). Many writers and lecturers addressed this question, to which no Christian community anywhere could have been indifferent.

This crisis must not be exaggerated. Even Mark, whose apocalyptic warnings are most vivid, revealed that not even the angels knew when the Parousia would arrive. Many of Jesus's statements could be used to explain the Parousia's delay (see, for example, Ratzinger 1988: 32); but if uncertainty about the Parousia's timing comforted some, the imminence of the Great Judgement was certain to almost everyone. Thus, by the second century, what might have been a fatal disconfirmation of Christianity's core belief resolved itself into a two-phase doctrine: Jesus's prophecy was reinterpreted to mean that the Kingdom of God, the eschaton, had already established itself through the Resurrection and the advent of Christianity; however, after a long continuation of earthly history, Jesus would reappear, the virtuous would then be rewarded and the sinner punished. By the turn of the second century, this formulation had replaced the earlier vision of an imminent apocalypse. But John's Gospel hardly mentions it.

Why did most first-century Christian communities accept this explanation of the Parousia's delay? Not media culture but a psychological tendency, confirmed and reconfirmed in twentieth-century psychology laboratories, provides the most credible explanation.

When Prophecy Fails, a mid-twentieth-century analysis of a doomsday cult,¹ explains how 'cognitive dissonance', occasioned by failure of the prophecy of catastrophe, actually increases the commitment of cult members and intensifies the recruiting activity of those inwardly committed to the cultic belief. If the truly faithful are in contact with and in a position to support one another; they easily and convincingly rationalize the failure, then work harder to convince others to believe as

¹ Leon Festinger, Henry W Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

they do, which reduces, even eliminates, the dissonance of their experience. Some element of this process, as Festinger and his colleagues suggest, may well have been at play among first-century Christians.

The delay of the Parousia is important to us because it is a case study of the way tensions and doubts of early Christianity were faced and resolved through written and oral media. Media culture, however, indicates how stories, questions and doubts about Jesus were *told*, not how orality and writing led to different *conceptions* of his life and teachings. Readers and listeners, it is true, *experienced* Jesus differently, but did they *conceive* him in significantly different ways? Thatcher and Le Donne's assumption is that the unique dynamics of oral communication distort reality and render everyone less likely to apprehend it as it was—just as linguistic determinists, like Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, would insist that original Aramaic meanings must be inevitably warped in the written Greek Gospels. The dilemma is clear: on the one hand, there can be no unmediated perception; on the other, mediated perception distorts reality.

The dilemma would be insoluble if the Great Divide between writing and speaking were not an exaggeration. Few scholars have outdone Alan Kirk in documenting the interdependency of first-century oral and scribal elements. There never has been a sphere of pure orality where an oral world view and ethos prevails. Each of the four oral Gospel traditions is set within a scriptural frame and saturated with scriptural content (Kirk 2008). Chris Keith, using as his case the adulteress's story inserted into an earlier version of the Gospel of John, expands on Kirk. He not only demonstrates that there was no 'Great Divide' between scribal and oral media cultures but also shows texts to be as malleable and responsive to extrinsic pressures, including the pressure to portray a literate Jesus, as are oral performances.

My impression builds on Keith's: first-century media were mixed unevenly (which this book emphasizes), but it was still a mixed-media culture, and the mixing process had minimal effect upon media content. Suppose the percentage and distribution of literate and illiterate people were identical throughout the first century. In that case, changes in the Gospels, specifically the change from an apocalyptic Jesus in Mark and Matthew to a non-apocalyptic Jesus in John (not to mention the Gospel of Thomas in the early second century) could not be attributed to media culture change. This proposition makes media culture constant by stipulation. I assume it was constant in fact: there was no significant surge in literacy during the first century. Written and oral communications, in truth, portrayed Jesus differently, but that difference was relatively trivial. The literate person reading a story of Jesus and the illiterate person (of comparable intelligence) hearing a story of Jesus formed essentially the same conceptions.

As we move toward this section's conclusion, let us again assume what many biblical scholars take for granted: that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet. Neither oral nor written culture reveal why the apocalyptic message of Jesus was

emphasized in Mark and Matthew, muted in Luke, absent in John, and opposed by Thomas. As Gospel commentary on the imminence of God's kingdom diminished, the early Christian churches—small, temporary communities founded by charismatic leaders - became large, permanent hierarchies led by an establishment of elites and oriented toward an indefinite future. Changing expectations of the Parousia, not changes in orality or scribal media, make this institutional transformation meaningful. If the end were believed imminent, permanent structures would have been superfluous.

Let us assume, further, that mid-first-century Christians had no interest in or basis for setting a date for the Parousia, but believed that the eschaton had already begun with the ministry of Jesus. In Jewish eschatology, resurrection is the eschaton's defining feature, and few Christians doubted it. But if Christians were *indifferent* to the delay of the Parousia, then we would find no steep decline in the frequency with which writers and lecturers mention it as we approach the end of the first century. The decline does not reflect indifference but rather successful *explanation* of the delay. A great achievement of John's Gospel, the only Gospel to portray Jesus as a non-apocalyptic prophet, is its distinctive approach to the delay of the Parousia, one that merges future into present eschatology while retaining belief in, although scarcely mentioning, the Parousia itself. Thus, John foreshadows the Christian world's new idea of their Messiah's return.

What, at last, is to be said of John? If Jesus were actually an apocalyptic prophet, then late-first-century portrayals of him must be less valid than earlier ones. By any of the standard criteria, in fact, Mark and Matthew are more historically dependable than John. Mark's and Matthew's apocalyptic portraits pass the tests of dissimilarity, independent attestation, contextual credibility, and closeness in time to the original events (Ehrman 1999). They also pass the tests of concomitant variation (reduced emphasis on apocalypticism as the Parousia's delay lengthens). Because early Christian media culture did not change significantly during this period, it cannot account for these diminishing references to the promised kingdom.

That John's Gospel is anomalous is well known. James Dunn recognizes John's uniqueness as well as anyone, but he gives John's version of the life of Jesus the benefit of the doubt. He finds the miracles that John alone attributes to Jesus to be ways of saying something true about him: '[H]e had to retell the tradition in bolder ways.' Although Dunn's listing of the differences between John's and the Synoptic Gospels is fundamental, it is not exhaustive. One can also say that, in John, (1) Jesus is portrayed as a divinity, existing with God from the beginning; (2) Jesus himself, not his message, is the object of veneration; (3) Jesus conducts miracles to prove his own identity rather than to help his followers; (4) Jesus rarely mentions the Parousia. Perhaps the reason John wrote a Gospel—to gain the support of friends and weaken enemies—is the reason why that Gospel is the least valid source of information about the historical Jesus.

If John is an inferior source of information, does his overestimation of written communication explain why? If not, then why is the topic of orality so extraordinarily relevant to present scholarship? That question is difficult to answer on the basis of evidence. Indeed, the appeal of the orality hypothesis depends in part on its romantic as well as its evidential qualities. Werner Kelber's 'Great Divide' between orality and literacy resembles, in this regard, Pierre Nora's distinction between the *milieux de memoire* and the *lieux de memoire*. The *milieux* of which Nora speaks relate to peasant culture, 'the quintessential repository of memory'. These societies long assured the conservation and transmission of memory, smoothing the passage from past through present and future. The memory of peasant culture is 'integrated, dictatorial memory—unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing ... linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth'. However, memory and history are in fundamental opposition. 'Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and approbation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.' In contrast, history, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. 'At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it' (Nora 1989: 8-9). In Nora's work, like Kelber's, one detects a certain sympathy for the earliest forms of social memory, earmarked by the traditional elements of romanticism, including sentiment over reason, primitivism, authenticity of feeling, reaction against form, boldness, freedom and release.

'Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name.' This phrase captures as well as any other Nora's romantic attraction to oral culture. It might or might not capture Kelber's and Thatcher's, too. It should be stressed that Nora's *lieux de memoire* are thought to be entities whose very existence testify to the diminished relevance of the past. By contrast, orality, the culture of the *milieux de memoire*, reminds us of the living past that modernity has taken from us. Orality is the warm media culture of our family, of our friendship circles, and of our lives.

Nora's distinction, like Kelber's, between warm memory and cold history, is too fierce to capture first-century Christianity (see Thatcher 2008: 10-14, 23-4, and citations therein). In Alan Kirk's words, the 'reification of the written word distinct from its embodiment in speech, the separation of the visual and aural aspects of the text that enable us to treat print and speech differently, was not established in antiquity... Written artifacts enjoyed an essentially oral cultural life' while orality itself was rooted in writing (2008:217). If oral tradition (the memory of peasant culture) is the means by which Scripture (the memory of elite culture) is transmitted, then there can be no *theoretical* difference between the two—which means that social experience will bend written and oral history in the same directions. Writing and orality are, and, we have good reason to believe, always have been, different codings of one and the same message.