Nameless God

Nameless God

By

Hal H. Hargreaves M.Div, Ph.D.

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Nameless God,
by Hal H. Hargreaves M.Div, Ph.D.

This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2707-X, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2707-2

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

Energy for the project started around my daughter's kitchen table. She and her brothers wanted to know how my views had changed. It was a lively conversation and shocked them at the time. They adjusted as my study proceeded. Over time, each has charted his/her sense of the religious domain; there is no consensus among the three and they have followed separate paths for years. The whole family encouraged me throughout, putting up with an ex-Episcopal Chaplain become teacher and skeptic.

The first jolt to my faith came as part of a strong friendship with Maynard Hutchens, a dynamic teacher at Austin. Texas. He had been afflicted with Hodgkin's disease for eleven years when we met. He was gracious enough to spend huge hunks of time discussing the faith—me, a wet behind the ears Barthian, him, a follower of Paul Tillich. A telling exchange occurred as we were walking one day: he said, "God can't be blamed for my disease. If He could, I could not trust Him as much as I trust my own father." The gravity of that statement sank in when I returned to Seminary. Maynard died three weeks later, and I began to question my hidebound system.

A second memory is related to my first teaching assignment. I hired on at Washington State University to teach European philosophy. It was a position flavored with the University's nod to have someone represent European tradition, and it offered me a chance to finish my dissertation. The philosopher Walter Kaufmann was a guest at Washington State, and I was assigned to acquaint him with the campus. He was also a translator of Martin Buber. I made some appreciative remark about Buber and Kaufmann responded impatiently, "You're doting over a dead man; move on." Coming from such a recognized authority, his comment stuck. It marked the beginning of a period in my thinking that was relatively free of religious commitment.

Such a liberation meant becoming accountable for my choices and leaving explanations behind, living life more as a journey without maps. Given time and experience the new direction became a positive influence; I renewed my interest in religion, a field now for study if not for commitment. Teaching world religions taught me a measure of tolerance. As perspectives collided and were so different from the immediate scene, it became clearer to me that the histories were examples of creative

acumen at work, each full of personal and social loyalties, imagination, and energy, but thoroughly human.

The reader will find that I still respect the territory beyond the ordinary which I name the mysterious. The fact that we are thrown into this planetary miracle is enough to incite a sense of wonderment. Be assured that this does not mean that I adhere to a complex of theological superstructures. Once they are in human hands, the human element is pervasive and vocal and always will be.

So back to the kitchen table: the following conversation will not sound like an informal tête-à-tête, but it pretends nothing beyond that. Have a good read.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay could not have been written without the help of four of my favorite people:

Dr. Charles Y. Glock, a recent special friend, is the shadow influence which affected all my writing. He saw the serious flaws and told me of them; that kind of counsel exerted what I hope was corrective surgery, and much appreciated.

Barbara Fairlight was my “comma person” and contributed much in the line of comprehension. Thank you.

My unqualified gratitude to Dr. Nancy Gerth, who edited without compromise in order to speak to a general audience. She was an incredible aid and thoughtful critic.

And to my wife, who endured my long hours in the study: thank you so much, Ruth.

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

At the beginning of the twentieth century, before Albert Schweitzer's substantive book, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, confidence ran high that one could pin down the essentials of Jesus' life and ministry, integrate the various portraits in the gospels, and read them "in harmony." Schweitzer wrote his skeptical study in 1906, and it is still in print today. Its sustained survival alone is testament to its revolutionary nature. His findings provoked students and scholars into a century-long effort to see just what could be known about Jesus the person and his mission: "very little," he had concluded. Scholars addressed Schweitzer's radical ideas and his conclusions, often for their entire careers.

By the middle of the last century, New Testament studies were a frequent choice among serious students. Religion fast became a legitimate topic for scholarly specialization, and findings poured into a collection of new perspectives. Like these students, we shall explore the disagreements and the intense commitments which characterized the birth of the new faith and created an environment for its becoming a new religion.

In this quest for the real person of Jesus, academics in various disciplines made a serious effort to apply their tools to the topic. Vital to those projects were historically-informed studies of scripture. With more credible texts, scholars could build new portraits with sufficient confidence that sources would yield much about the man and the very early years. For some, it led to confidence in painting detailed portraits; for others the New Testament's vast authorial variety led to minimalist views of what could be known from the existing text.

Then came 1947. With the surprise power of a mystery film, two small but history-rich libraries were added to the ancient manuscript list—the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammahdi Texts. The two collections would exercise considerable influence on "old" canonical texts; already existing texts had to be studied in relation to the newly discovered texts. A revolutionary shift in New Testament studies was taking place. Thousands of scraps were analyzed; some would play a role in establishing new and more accurate guides to the historical landscapes of Christian beginnings. Discoveries indicated there was much more to the beginnings of the young faith than had been previously recognized. Dating of the new sources became very important, and as the reader might guess, simple explanations

and unanimity took a holiday. Questions arose about previously unquestioned certainties regarding Christian beginnings, let alone the quest for the "Real Jesus." The field is now crowded with provocative reflections on almost everything having to do with early Christian history, and new finds make the venture even more exciting. The theological debates of the early faith especially captured my interest.

The task I have selected for this study is not the same as trying to find the indisputable facts of Jesus' life. Mine is much more modest. I concentrate on a history of the titles for Jesus, oral and written, canonical and non-canonical, during the first century following his death. But my aim also goes beyond facts: I explore the theological content of these names. It is a study of the controversial titles which portray Jesus as divine. Faith, as I understand it, is heavily influenced by the gospel author's particular viewpoints.

Naming had a long and impressive role in shaping early Christianity. During the century-long period chosen for this study, a cascade of naming took place in the young faith, such as "teacher," "son of God," and "son of Adam." Understanding the uses of these names takes us a long way towards understanding the major themes surrounding Jesus. During the first century – our period for study – names commenced to change with added use. Some became obsolete, while others were embellished with theological lessons and piety. Some names languished and died; no home was found for them. Others flourished, their meaning changing with the changing environment.

It is no secret that naming exerts influence in public life, politics, customs, ethnic values, and theological traditions. Think of the value implications of the alternatives "anti-abortionist" and "right-to-lifer." Plato taught that a word was the sign that presupposed the existence (read "reality") of a thought; the thought was even more real than the sign. Thoughts, he believed, were responsible for the structure of the physical world – not the other way around.

Gospel authors wrote out of reservoirs of faith, and were members of believing communities. What they didn't realize was that by naming Jesus they created the phenomenon we call Christianity. Their naming serves as a gateway to understanding the essence of the faith; it was formative for theology. All our observations rest on this context: that believers had found in Jesus the essence of binding man to God, and a figure who not only taught about the paths to God but personified the relationship. The names they chose to call him came packed chock-full of their faith. Building on the assumption that every name is an expression of faith allows us to interpret and understand the rich diversity of meanings

springing from the many names of Jesus. It also takes us beyond the simplistic view that Jesus was an easily described person.

We will look at the naming of Jesus in the first century following his death. On our present calendar, those are roughly the years 32 CE (Common Era) through ca. 130 CE. Within that hundred-year period there were actually only eighty years during which we can be sure there was literary activity. Most scholars date the commencement of literary activity at ca. 50 CE with Paul, followed by Mark, the earliest writer who most accept as the oldest "biographical" writer. If there is evidence that a given name was introduced in the first century, it falls within our field of interest; if not, we pass it by. It does not matter whether it comes to us from canonical or non-canonical roots, or whether it had great or minimal influence on the future. Its legitimacy is a question we hold open for the summary.

The translation used most heavily is The Scholars' Version, and the sequence suggested there is followed.

I read the first-century documents in calendar fashion; i.e., dating the writers' works in rough chronological sequence, making comparisons accordingly. I have followed most recent scholarship by translators of the Scholar's Version in this study because I believe they have been attentive to the pitfalls and most creative in their insights. Reading the documents as having taken place in the wider context is worth the risks. It opens many doors to fresh insights and offers new models for Christian beginnings. In deciding upon these guides, we draw portraits or snapshots of the birth of a new religion.[1]

The advantages of heeding the newer dating and including the extra-canonical pieces is that they probe the earliest years and bring traditionally foreign influences into the picture that is created. The canon had previously been immune from critical study. By bringing the non-canonical sources into interaction with the traditional canon, a marvelous and different face is presented about how Christianity developed. I believe in being inclusive when sorting and sifting the characteristics of earliest Christian belief and practice, as so many factors and influences play a part in shaping that period. We shall come upon a plethora of cultural options, scenery not bound by ancient tradition. New couplings occur with a calendar reading, and the flows of growth in the churches are more clearly seen.

[1] We may not find the mind of Christ, but we may discover the attitudes of his followers, and that would be sufficient to give us a platform for observations and conclusions.

Two misconceptions about Christian antiquity were common in the nineteen-fifties. With few exceptions, little recognition was given to the Hellenist world of philosophy and its impact upon Hebrew culture when analyzing the New Testament. It was popular then to think that Christian modalities grew in a vacuum. Its walls of influence, its extension into its surroundings, or its possible absorption of pagan culture were thought minimal. Secondly, not only were Roman occupiers enamored with Hebrew ideas and culture, the occupied Hebrews often became articulate in Hellenism as part of their own education. Pronounced diversity was evident in the earliest congregations and would normalize only as doctrinal issues were addressed, the leaders negotiated, and organizational structures emerged.

Naming may have influenced the evolution of the faith, but I focus on it also as an access to a larger issue. I think of naming as a flashpoint that eventually had much to say about our perception of Jesus and God. Names the authors assigned to Jesus are analyzed without attempts at a judgment as to whether they merited permanency or were transient terms that would eventually fade from the scene. I mention the future of many names but not always do I offer suggestions as to their theological value. I refer to Jesus when reading Paul as "Paul's Jesus," and for Thomas' portrayal, "Thomas' Jesus." This may not be a traditional practice, but it conveys a tough truth; i.e., Jesus was known through gospel writers. When we read stories about Jesus, we read through the eyes of the authors. They are the sources responsible for our images of him.

My critique is appreciative of the commitment invested in the search for the historical Jesus, but it is also, in light of the evidence, inevitably critical of that pursuit. When diversity of naming is acknowledged and believers seek conformity for resolution, disagreements grow like mushrooms, and they center about theology-laden names.

Another characteristic of this study is the homage I pay to the historical mindset. The objective or end product of our survey is to articulate a way of dealing with religious questions, and I do not see how we can reach reliable perspectives in that vein unless history is a significant contributor. Historical evidence plays a huge role in sobering the philosophical imagination. It lets us know our limits in the game of adulation. In formal terms, "What is the case?" plays a major part in shaping the values domain—"what ought to be." The concluding chapter draws together what can be regarded as a position. In the end, it is a philosophical argument; it is mine, and I hope it is plausible.

The study of religion is ultimately a matter of the heart and the expression of our deepest loyalties. We may return from a venture into

comparative religion to comfortable ground where we are “at home” with a faith of our own choosing. Or we may respond to the adage that “you can’t go home again.” But if one really learns from the venture into other faiths, one cannot return without having been transformed in the core of one’s being. The change I am talking about is internal. It occurs because the initial attitude of the student is often that other religions must be human constructs. A sacred zone is reserved for one’s home territory. With greater acquaintance comes greater respect for others’ commitments. When the mental journey back to familiar ground occurs, one realizes that one’s own faith has become saturated with human ingenuity and struggle. The effect of experiencing other names can, with attention, return us to the names we ordinarily use with a new self-consciousness. We begin to see our names as a foreigner might. Our comfort has been permanently challenged.

INTRODUCING JESUS

Jesus, the given name of the man who is the focus of this study and around whom all manner of controversy swirls, first bore a quite common name. There were many by the name Jesus, and I suspect that nothing was read into it before he became locally famous for healings and purported miracles.

Almost immediately, however, this name was embellished. Within the hundred years following his death, names and titles sprouted like mushrooms, as we shall see. If we take only one author as an example—Matthew—*this* Jesus was born to the lineage of King David and Abraham. For Matthew, the lineage of this Jesus marked him as the Messiah. We shall detail this later.

The name "Jesus" itself taught a sacred lesson. The Greek name Jesus harks back to the Hebrew "Joshua," which in turn comes from the label "Yahweh is salvation." Jesus is deemed legitimate in every sense – by name and by divine choice.

It seems appropriate, however, to remind ourselves before entering into the complexities of Jesus' names and titles that there was a time when Jesus was a name of common use and familiar meanings.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORAL PERIOD

Setting the Stage

Before attempting to mine the names from biblical sources, we must recognize that there was a period of vocal activity for nearly a generation following the death of Jesus. For our purposes it is noteworthy that a religion that claims nearly a billion adherents began with storytelling and dinner conversations; its origins, most agree, are shrouded in a cloud of informal exchanges, and they are difficult to analyze and evaluate. As the initial topic, the oral period is the most challenging one in the entire study, because in the strict sense there is no text to study. We will have to wait for our first written source to dig out the first name of Jesus. The twenty years between Jesus' death and the first documents is a seemingly silent period. But of course it was not silent; it was full of voice-delivered makings of a new faith.

We shall find many clues to the character of the period through modern examples, but the absence of a written source requires unusual techniques of analysis. Recognizing its importance is vital, however, if we are to gain a grasp of naming and understand the succession of literary activity. Oral transmission is our portal to the explosion of the names for Jesus.

Approximating the crucifixion as our starting point of the years of oral communication, stories about Jesus most likely began with his ministry, i.e., his purported healing and miracle works. But there is no concrete evidence from this period to verify this assumption, so we are left with an arbitrary date. Most scholars agree that the oral period begins approximately 30CE, and that stories about Jesus continued after his death, largely because people believed in his resurrection. Most also think this period lasted, as the major form of transmission, a minimum of twenty years, and perhaps longer.

We are not primarily interested in the period's duration, but we are curious about the characteristics of such a period, namely, how the habits and customs of the oral period affected the explosion of literary efforts of the fifth decade of the CE, and the beginning of a literary tradition.

Imagine a person relating such impressive accounts and having Jesus there to correct and edit them. What would Jesus say? What stories would be most popular? What would most resemble an original rendition? Our efforts are an attempt to get as close as we can to the experience in order to appreciate how the stories are remembered; in short, to appraise just how effective it is to communicate when the oral form is the only form relied upon.

Stories about Jesus were told around campfires and across kitchen tables for nearly a generation. In such an environment the doors are wide open to different forms of expression. Questions to be answered: Were the messengers of the oral period inclined to embellish their impressions? Did memory play any tricks in the time gap? Did the missionaries seek corroboration as reports came in and stories increased? Did some listeners become bards as they converted? Were they inclined to tell things "as is," without editorial dressing? Establishing standards for faith-talk is probably the most difficult job we face in this study. If the non-literary past—two decades of it—is beyond reach, our study of the period is less likely to render solid information. We need to be prepared to accept the condition that a given answer is unprovable, that it is beyond ordinary means for verification, and that proximate judgments are our only option.

In a personal reading, a twenty-year duration, I imagine, passes all too quickly for aging observers. On the other hand, time often "stretches" when everything moves slowly for impatient organizers. If there were a hundred-year period before committing to a written form, we would not expect to retrieve the same level of memory as we would if it were it ten years in length. Duration cannot help but affect our judgments about accuracy, and accuracy is a slippery pig.

Twenty centuries of change cannot be disregarded when attempting to understand the material. Both rendition and reception are affected with such a relentless passing of time; in many respects we are quite different from the authors or early recipients of the stories. The readers of every age bring their biases and preferences to a story, so that there is always more than a single narrative in each rendition. The nature of storytelling involves a complexity of voices.

But even during the first 20 years there is the consideration of change; for example, the "editing" of the animated speaker's delivery on successive occasions. Memorable stories were enshrined in the movement. We assume they were told for a purpose—conversion or consent—and they became the spinal cord for later, literary years. Will we ever know if or how they changed with countless occasions and differing environments?

Since this is a critical and title-focused study, we will restrict our objectives to those hubs of accuracy we can prudently count on in a twenty-year-plus duration. We shall leave the twenty century gap for others to articulate, remaining cognizant of it as a factor in any final evaluation. We shall trim our sails for a stormy ride.

Critical Approach to Oral Sources of the New Testament

Studies of oral transmission go back as far as Hermann Gunkel, who initiated scholarly examination of the scriptures while recognizing the importance of oral transmissions. (See Kee 1970 28) The standard approach in the middle of the 20th century was to see oral tradition as having preceded the letters of Paul and the gospel of Mark; it was usually portrayed as a state of literary silence. The assumption was that storytelling was, in general, reliable.

Ancient storytelling was thought of as establishing a core tradition that was passed on with consistency as the trend toward writing things down gained momentum. During the twentieth century, a popular assumption was that transition from oral to written was smooth—conflicts were absent and the teaching easily achieved.

Alongside the assumption of consistency, the twentieth century viewed the synoptic gospels as written "in harmony." The attitude toward spoken tradition was frequently that it provided the authors of the canon with an unambiguous source for their picture of Jesus. What emerged was a realistic/romantic painting of Jesus, inevitably contemporary, Caucasian, and free of the presence of peasant laborers.

The notion of a coordinated thread running through all the gospels (excepting John) dominated the first half of the twentieth century, but with continued, focused critique of the three synoptic gospels a revolution began. With an increasing use of "form" and "historical" critiques, methods of unlocking the earliest years proliferated. Old harmonies dissolved, and new perceptions were forged in the shops of critical scholarship.[1]

[1] Forms of scholarly activity accelerated and whole new paradigms were introduced throughout the twentieth century. One discovery trumped all others. Through careful reconstruction, a "hidden" document, Q, edited into Matthew and Luke came to light. Q has been located in terms of a communal group and dated as a very early document. Its early date also affects our portrayal of an oral tradition: if Q was written very early and had wide circulation, the oral period may have been shorter, and less purely confined to kitchen or campfire. If Q came later, the forms of oral storytelling may have spanned a longer period. This is but one

We have mentioned some of the influences on oral transmission; in sum, they make for a rich and varied period. The oral character is part of a larger tapestry—woven into a much more complex cultural scene than we first imagined.

* * *

Our brief review of oral exchange is restricted to a theoretical effort. What messages can we expect to emerge from twenty-plus years of reliance upon word of mouth, an embryonic liturgy, and newly formed communities? How strong is the reliability of leaders, disciples/apostles, eyewitnesses, and growing numbers of converts? There is simply no complete record of events. So when we ask, "How did memory behave during this span of time?" we are limited to incomplete information and proximate judgments. The limiting factors in the study should sober and discipline statements of "fact." There is simply no way to bridge the chasm and recreate a fully accurate cultural picture, but there are ways to draw guidelines for the study, and surprising observations are possible.

Plumbing the Contemporary Memory

John D. Crossan draws from contemporary examples to suggest how we might understand the time surrounding the crucifixion.[2] Crossan's first example is situated in the last half of the last century. It seems a peculiar choice at first glance. One would ordinarily assume he would choose a first-century event. But his decision to use our era as a testing ground for ancient memory is well placed. His choice to examine a relatively recent event suggests it is far more open to checking than are the distant events of Jesus' life. Checking details for memory acuity when separated by over twenty centuries is considerably more difficult than with an event that occurred 30 years ago. If memory behaves in unreliable ways when the time lapse is short, it gives fair warning that the ancient account may suffer from the same or similar flaws. The modern period usually has

---

example of the interactions we must confront. Scholars continue to debate this controversial document.

[2] John Dominic Crossan is a New Testament scholar who deals with the phenomenon of memory from an empirical point of view. His massive study, *The Birth of Christianity*, deals with the topic in a complete way. His criteria for the evaluation of memory are openly stated and compared to other scholarly positions. He demands of himself—and recommends that the reader also accept—the need for a credible theory of "orality."

"checking" procedures to assess credibility. That is the major advantage of using contemporary examples.

It is also clear to Crossan that one person's remembering an event is not the same as the behavior of a group or multitude. Crossan deals with that difference. The contemporary examples sometimes have one reporter and many observers, as is true in the New Testament era. The mixture Crossan selects is quite like that in the ancient sources; he is conscious of the different combinations that are possible in the oral form. When he compares different writing environments, he lets us know which conditions apply. His first case study:

> Jack Hamilton was pitching for the California Angels against Tony Conigliaro of the Boston Red Sox….he was hit by a first-pitch fastball from Hamilton. ..It was a Friday-night game, the first of four... (Crossan 1998 60)

Hamilton was interviewed approximately 23 years after the fact. What would he remember of the event—a climactic one for both men?

In Daniel L. Schacter's *Searching for Memory* is the provocative statement: "Experiments have shown that simply repeating a false statement over and over leads people to believe it's true." (Schacter 1996 111) Add to that the widely held confidence that the best witness is an eyewitness and we are ready for Crossan's first assault on the topic: "when fact becomes fiction."

After Conigliaro's death in 1990, Hamilton was interviewed and said his memory was clear: it was a day game. It was the Angel's last game in Boston. It was the sixth inning. The score was 2-1. Conigliaro was the eighth batter in the lineup. Did Hamilton get it right?

Facts: the California Angels were playing the Boston Red Sox, August 18, 1967, at Fenway Park. It was a night game. It was the Angels' first of four games in Boston. It was the fourth inning. The score was 0-0. Joe Hamilton was pitching to Tony Conigliaro, the sixth batter in the lineup. Hamilton's first pitch hit Conigliaro on the left side of his face, damaging his vision among other things, severely enough to terminate his career.

Facts: 7, Hamilton's memory: 2.

Hamilton said, "I've had to live with it; I think about it a lot." (Crossan 1998 61) Of the seven facts Hamilton recalled when attempting to recall the event, he got five were way off base. All of the mistakes were details: which game, the time of day, the score, the batter's line-up, the inning number. The experience was traumatic and the imprint significant for both—the batter's career was effectively ended by the accident. Crossan is convinced that traumatic events, even recent ones, are subject to factual

error—seriously so. Probing the distant past uncovers many of the limits we have just noted.

Our modern story is a reflection of a similar process in the ancient past. First-century followers of Jesus could not have been more closely related or more privy to the details of the crucifixion than Hamilton was on the occasion in which he hit the batter. Not only were both sets of facts askew, but also the psychological aspects. Hamilton's testimony reveals that he not only got the details wrong; he saw the event quite defensively, casting blame, to some extent, on the victim. "He'd been hit a lot of times…He crowded the plate." (Crossan 1998 61) Did Hamilton assume attitudes because he had some agenda? The disciples also misunderstood Jesus' death and fled Jerusalem. When it comes to pinning down the attitudes of the principals in either event, our guesses are ineffectual.

Perhaps to meet the above difficulties head on, Crossan chooses a group's recollection for his next example. Roger Brown and James Kulik in their article "Flashbulb Memories" (Brown and Kulik 1977) state, "A flashbulb memory is very like a photograph that indiscriminately preserves the scene in which each of us found himself when the flashbulb was fired." (Crossan 1998 61) Does such an assertion hold under examination? Will memory play its role as the faithful recorder—or as a trickster? The following example throws even more fog into the mix of reactions.

An experiment conducted by Neisser and Harsch involved 106 psychology students. They were asked to record their first reception of the Challenger tragedy—where, when, etc. The questionnaire was given to them within 24 hours of the event. A second questionnaire was given to 44 of the 106 two years later and compared. A year later still, a third interview questionnaire was given to 40 of the same group who were willing to participate. A scale was devised to grade the responses for accuracy. Seven was scored as quite accurate; 0, completely inaccurate. The mean level of accuracy was 2.95, less than half on the scale. Twenty-five percent scored 0. Fifty percent scored 2 or less. Seven percent scored 7. Conclusions: "None of the enduring memories was entirely correct, and… many were at least as wide of the mark. Those questionnaires revealed a high incidence of substantial errors." (Neisser and Harsch 1992 9, 12) Interesting is the level of confidence and "visual vividness" claimed by the respondents—a mean of 4.17 for confidence and 5 for vividness. The participants' sense of unfailing memory was higher than their scores warranted. Even more interesting is the finding that students who revised their response to the event on the second and third questioning were quite sure that the revised version was the correct one. Even when confronted with the apparent inconsistency, they held firm. "As far as we can tell, the

original memories are just gone. Flashbulbs illuminate but also blind; neither visual vividness nor confident assertion bore any strong relationship to accuracy." (Crossan 1998 63) Flashbulb memories, as far as accuracy goes, do indeed seem like phantoms. Inaccuracies increase with time, and so does the observers' skewed attitude.

Another major issue Crossan suggests: Is oral tradition fixed? Or is it fluid, changing over time and subject to the environment? What are the unique circumstances and conditions of an orally grounded society? He envisions the first century's peculiar condition:

> Oral tradition in which tradition is received orally and transmitted orally (often by illiterates) within the discipline of creative performance is a different world from scribal tradition transmitted orally within the discipline of exact (as best we could) memorization. (Crossan 1998 51)

Differences in the two forms of communication—songs by bards and memorized scripts—are drawn from Crossan's personal experience. His own efforts to recite written poetry are contrasted to hearing illiterate bards perform Irish epic poetry, in other words, bards who were examples of an entirely oral tradition. It is the traditions of the bard which hold sway in his presentation.

Early Christians, figuratively speaking, also belonged to the world of the Irish bard. Their reliance upon spoken word was complete except for the major qualification stated above: the earliest Christians had Hebrew scriptures, and within a generation they would witness the beginning of their own sacred texts. But in the beginning years, as far as we know, these messengers were relying on an informal and spontaneous environment—their instrument, the spoken word. They were part of their culture's revolutionary stirrings, its images of a new order, as well as its dynamics of reform. As vital storytellers, they were not concerned so much with accuracy as communicating effectively with their audience. They were preachers and apologists in the sense that they told stories to gain listener acceptance of the message, not simply to entertain. In many ways, however, they were performers; their message was calculated to meet the needs of the listeners.

Fluidity was a given. Crossan has problems with scholars who presume that oral performances are fixed. When they assign a written text to oral tradition, one that is grammatically identical in Matthew and Luke, but different or absent in Mark, they misidentify the nature of the oral form.

> I ask only whether oral memory has anything to do with solving the problem, and more important, whether claiming such a solution betrays a

> misunderstanding of memory, orality, and literacy… This presumes that oral versions of an event (if such existed) were so syntactically fixed that they could override the syntactically fixed written versions. It presumes, in other words, that those oral versions were so verbally precise that they could add a five word verbatim sequence at one point in a scribally copied version without disturbing its original content. (Crossan 1998 54)

The attribution of such a text to the oral side of the culture is not only unrealistic; it misunderstands the nature of oral activity. Oral transmission which assumes the absence of a written text simply doesn't mimic such fixed repetitions. Instead of being as exacting as the written word—concerned with grammar and syntax—oral forms are "creatively reproductive," more like an improvisational performance, less like a recitation. "Creative reproduction" connotes free expression of the teller, not only in terms of content but also in the storyteller's inclination to be an active interpreter of the content. This pertains especially to events or persons of recognized importance; the storyteller is a conduit for the charismatic event or person. One might think of the storyteller as the live actor, taking on the voice of the protagonist—without a script.

Crossan adds that oral activity is "structural rather than syntactical." "Structural" preservation refers to broader forms of rendition, where the sense of the event or topic is focused upon, rather than exact details. Details are cited, but they are tools to express the power of the personage, clay in the performer's hands. In sum, oral transmission has its own characteristics, and they are quite different from the art of the written word.

When trying to outline the more subtle levels of oral transmission, we come across the propaganda possibilities so easily realized in the process. This is to say that memory has not only preservation-like powers, but also creation-like capacities when dealing with questions of fact. Another look at the Hamilton affair:

Although the remembered details were of scant importance given the trauma of the event and its consequences, the report of Hamilton after fourteen years shows other aspects of memory that support Crossan's thesis. The pitcher frames the report with interpretative comments:

"I've had to live with it; I think about it a lot… I know in my heart I wasn't trying to hit him" and "I had no reason to hit him"… "He'd been hit a lot of times…he crowded the plate."

No matter what the spin or possible shift of blame, whether to support the pitcher or focus on his mental anguish, these items are just as much at issue and part of the event for Hamilton as are the facts he failed to remember correctly. One can see this if the question is, "Does the principal

survivor see himself as a prominent player in the death of the batter?" Even though his remarks are pointed towards establishing his own innocence, his remarks reveal the extent of his involvement; emotions cannot be put on the side burner. Memory is creative and the accuracy of recollection after twenty-three years is tenuous at best. Memory not only embellishes the events; it can and does create its own set of "facts" that are meant to carry historical clout. Schacter again: "The general principle… that memories are not simply activated pictures in the mind but complex constructions… also applies to emotionally traumatic memories." (Crossan 1998 209)

Crossan's much-used example cannot build a complete case, but it helps in the overall effort. His examples have parallels with the ancient events we are concerned with exposing. The pitching accident was traumatic for Hamilton, Conigliaro, reporters, and fans, just as the crucifixion was for Jesus and his followers, and it is reasonable to conclude that the ancients' recollections may have suffered the same distortions that are evident in the pitching example. Accounts of Jesus' ministry and passion were bound to express the beholders' emotional perspectives. Getting the details accurate is not only difficult in ordinary circumstances; it is nearly impossible under stress. Modern and ancient examples share the same burden, an environment of deeply felt surprises and emotional stress.

The ancient/modern similarities seem to me a major factor in determining the levels of accuracy we can expect from the ancient documents. It is also apparent that other disparities, such as the absence of a historical concern for accuracy in the gospel writing era—were also influential. We shall deal with "other factors" as we proceed, but Crossan's observations, so far, lay a good foundation for interpreting ancient conditions.

Whereas a baseline of factuality is unquestioned for the modern examples because we have contemporary written sources for verification, nothing so entirely reliable is available for the life and death of Jesus. We have only the later written sources, which come on the heels of a generation of spoken transmission. Among the earliest written sources there is considerable variation. Whatever the condition of those documents is, they are all we have.

What we do have is the *outcome*, the general effects of a spoken tradition. Crossan's examples are relevant in focusing us on what can be expected from many respondents who retell the story of a traumatic event. It also seems clearer that longer periods of history may suffer the results of the revisionist's oral rendition or pen. We can never know this under present circumstances. Telling the account in many different situations

brings out its power, but its influence is subject to change over time. There is no end to the evolution of a story.

A hard-learned skepticism about the ancients emerges when we compare them with more recent, hence more verifiable, recorded interviews. The level of reliability we can expect from distant Christian oral transmission may at times be quite low, but it was luckily succeeded by the literary era; eventually a scribal tradition would emerge. Copyists would take on the difficult job of keeping the canon intact. Eventually translators would, among other things, attempt to render the most appropriate word or phrase. The day of the bard would become a thing of the past.

The fact remains that we shall never fully know the events of Jesus' crucifixion and the early life of the movement from oral sources. Some stories were eventually defined as sacred scripture, the preferred choices were made, and the canon was closed. Our skepticism is justified not only based on editorial perspectives and the tendency towards revisionism, but on the grounds of the long duration involved. It took only three years for contemporary students to wrongly embrace their errors. Perhaps we need not make too much of this, but it is a haunting consideration that memories of Jesus had much more time for embellishment than did the psychology students' recollection of the Challenger tragedy.

We turn now to another aspect of memory more bizarre than altering the meaning and details of an agreed-upon event. It is the strange occasion "that never happened." Surely this more provocative aspect of our topic is highlighted when it is reported that something occurred that did not in fact happen. With retelling, phantom events are accepted as "factual." Crossan cites the prevailing assumption about memory that makes this curious process plausible. "It is more comforting for us to believe that somewhere within our brain, however well hidden, rests a bedrock of memory that absolutely corresponds with events that have passed." (Loftus and Ketcham 1994 190) The popular term is "memory bank." Whatever occurs is conceptualized as being stored, either as the event itself (naïve realism), or as the emotional/mental image of the event (representational theory). Without going further into memory theory, both of these options teach that the brain can and does store the raw material of experience and that memory is a sort of retrieval service. Do we really possess "ventricles of information" that protect for accuracy and against misjudgment? We are not interested in making final judgments, but the issue is unavoidable. We shall nip at its edges.

Ronald Reagan's campaign story about a B17 pilot who said to his trapped gunner, "Never mind, son, we'll ride it down together," was

related as fact. Soon a headline appeared—"Congressional Medal of Honor posthumously awarded." When a reporter checked the congressional record, there was nothing to suggest a factual baseline for Reagan's story, but there were other sources that could explain how it came to be accepted as "fact". The 1944 movie "Wing and a Prayer" had a scene with the same situation and the same remark by the pilot. The trapped victim was, in this instance, a radioman. A similar story appeared in the New York Herald Tribune but the two figures were both gunners, and the reporter added that such an event could not be confirmed. The Reader's Digest picked up the story but failed to recite its rumor status. Reagan was familiar with both the movie and written sources. Assuming that the president was acting in good faith, it becomes clear that memory invents as well as recollects, invents with confidence and aplomb. Instead of raw experience depositing images into our memory bank, the depositor is most likely our inclination to invent.

Another more fantastic occurrence involving invention is the experiment reported by Loftus and Ketcham in *The Myth of the Repressed Memory: False Memories and Allegations of Sexual Abuse*. They asked, "Would it be possible to make someone believe that they were lost in a shopping mall as a child, when in fact they had never been lost in a shopping mall?" (Loftus and Ketcham 1994 96) Such an experiment seems at best cynical and perhaps destructive for the subjects, so the experimenters created a happy ending to the fantasy event. Would the subjects accept the fantasy as fact? Five subjects were selected, ages eight through forty. They were all told the story as if it were factual.

> In all cases the false memory was accepted as true and embellished immediately with newly invented details. The subjects' willingness to expand on the memory and provide details that were not even hinted at in the initial suggestion seemed to indicate that the memory was very real indeed. (Loftus and Ketcham 1994 99)

They all believed the bogus construct and added to it emotional effects on their lives! We have a hard time accepting the bizarre credulity evident here. The thought process in which listeners accept what is pure fantasy is indeed provocative.

Crossan's conclusions are telling. His argument demonstrates his cautious regard for detailed historical accuracy. And it leads him to a critical evaluation of oral accuracy.

He is not an ideological skeptic: alongside the casual attitudes towards detailed accuracy is his alternative. He gives us a positive appraisal of the performers' role in presenting a general meaning of events in question. It

holds for both ancient and modern communicator. Emphasizing the creative character of oral transmission, he comes across as a skeptic when addressing issues regarding accuracy of details, but he appreciates the artistry of the bard to deliver the sense of the story. He is disciplined in avoiding theological constructs when interpreting a passage and does not assign any grand structure to the authors. He simply thinks that the poetry of the performer does, indeed, capture the essence of the event or personality. Fallible memory and invention may work hand in hand, but credibility is not lost. The ability to reconstruct the essence of the person or event persists.

> …all those preceding cases serve, first, to mitigate the serene complacency of common sense about memory and, second, to warn us that, while we do certainly remember, we remember by a reconstructive process. That reconstructive process mixes recollected facts from an actual happening with ones seen, heard, or imagined from similar happenings. That reconstructive process recalls gist rather than detail, core rather than periphery—and then somebody must decide which is which. …That reconstructive process often claims equal accuracy and veracity for what we actually recall and for what we creatively invent. (Crossan 1998 67)

Such are the essentials for building his theory of memory, and they definitely affect the way we evaluate both the oral period and the literary tradition which eventually dominates. A good summation of Crossan's theory:

> In the beginning is the tradition. It gives performers three structural elements with which they work creatively, dynamically and interactively. First of all, it gives them the general stories, the overall narratives. …Next, it gives them the themes, which can be mixed and matched into those story frames. Finally, and most especially, it gives them hundreds of formulae, set phrases that can also be mixed and matched to form those themes and those stories. (Crossan 1998 71)

He is thinking about a pure form of oral transmission: tradition that is not related in any way to written pieces, live performances. The stories are told as if they were sung, continuing the ways of the illiterate bard.

Of course, in his contemporary examples the performance has been recorded by the researcher. Whereas the story line, the general theme and the culturally specific formulae remain fairly consistent in the examples given, the performances remain "creatively multiform in presentation." (Crossan 1998 75) In other words, there is no sense of repetition from one rendition to another. The singer is free to fashion his own flourishes and