CHAPTER 5

Collective Memory and the Reliability of the Gospel Traditions

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In this chapter a case will be made that the traditions found in the Gospels should be considered products of collective memory. We will explore the implications that this conclusion has for the accuracy with which the traditions preserve the teachings and activities of Jesus. This shall be done by looking at four significant processes in the formation, preservation and transmission of the memories of Jesus over the thirty to sixty years between the events of his earthly ministry and the writing of the Gospels. The processes considered are as follows: (1) the formation of the initial memories of eyewitnesses; (2) the formation of the earliest collective memories of Jesus; (3) the survival of eyewitnesses up to the period in which the Gospels were written; (4) the retention of memories of Jesus over thirty to sixty-year periods. As each of these is considered in turn, attention will be given to the factors that influence the reliability of memory during that process.

THE FORMATION OF THE INITIAL MEMORIES OF EYEWITNESSES OF JESUS

Evaluations of the Contribution of Eyewitness Memories to the Gospel Traditions

Very few would attempt to deny that Jesus lived in Palestine, gathered followers, came into conflict with the Jewish authorities, was crucified, and that subsequently a movement arose in which people claimed he was a teacher and miracle worker.[1] Events in Jesus's life and ministry were of a nature that would

1. Among those few who would argue against the possibility that Jesus did, in fact, live in Palestine, taught, healed, and was crucified, is Robert M. Price, who says, "For me the Christ of faith has all the more

have left vivid memories in the minds of those who witnessed them. They would have been moments of great personal significance, moments they would have reflected on as they decided whether or not to become followers of Jesus.[2] Any part of the gospel traditions that is an accurate account of what happened during the life of Jesus relies on events and sayings having been accurately remembered. But how accurate is human memory? Can it be relied upon? Does it persist for a long time? Can the events found in human memory be reliably passed from one individual to another?

Assessments of how much credence should be attributed to the contribution made by eyewitnesses to the traditions about Jesus vary considerably. Richard Bauckham finds the incorporation of eyewitness testimony into the gospel traditions and the eyewitnesses continued availability right up to the time that the Gospels were written to be strong evidence that the gospel accounts are accurate, the accuracy of the transmission of Jesus teaching being enhanced by memorization of the traditions by the disciples and other early followers of Jesus. "Memorization," Bauckham claims, is a means of preserving the tradition "faithfully with a minimum of change."[3]

Judith C. S. Redman protests strongly against Bauckham's too quick endorsement of the preservative powers of human memory.[4] She points out that psychological research has led to the identification of many factors that can change eyewitnesses' memory of an event. She notes that (i) facets of another individual's report may be unconsciously incorporated into eyewitnesses' memory of that event; (ii) witnesses tend to avoid conflicting with reports from others and usually choose a culturally appropriate version of the event; (iii) post-event information can influence what elements of an event are retained in memory;

Point," *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009], 56). See the "Response to Robert M. Price" by John Dominic Crossan (ibid., 86), who suggests a list of facts that almost nobody denies to be true of Jesus. Nor does this exhaust what Crossan considers to be able to be known about Jesus. See also Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), and idem, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). A position of outright skepticism concerning the existence of Jesus, such as that advocated by Price, is held by a very small number of academics.

2. David Pillemer considers memories of personal trauma, flashbulb memories, memories of critical incidents, and moments of insight to be but varieties of a phenomenon he describes as a "personal event memory." Such events evoke a strong emotional response and are likely to form memories of the personal circumstances occurring at the time of the formation of the memory, together with vivid sensory memories, which enable the re-living of the event in the imagination (David Pillemer, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998]).

3. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 305.

4. Judith C. S. Redman, "How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the

(iv) eyewitnesses guess some elements of their report, and over time these guesses become treated as part of the original memory; (v) errors become frozen into memories; and, most importantly, (vi) while group memories are more stable than individual memories, group memories incorporate from a very early time the mistakes made by individual eyewitnesses; and furthermore, (vii) these group memories will be further shaped by theological considerations within the community. These and other considerations led Redman to conclude, "The continued presence in Christian communities of eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry until the time when these events were recorded is a guarantee only of the community's agreed version, not of the exact details of the event itself." Her overall view of what can be known of Jesus and his teachings appears to be quite negative. She concludes, "In other words, it seems likely that the answer to the question How much can we reliably know about the Jesus of history from the Gospels in the light of Bauckhams work? is still 'not much.'"[5]

Redman raises some very important issues regarding the accuracy of eyewitnesses, including the very real possibility that false memories may have been incorporated into the eyewitnesses' memories of Jesus's ministry. Research into false memories has enabled an assessment to be made of the potential impact such memory frailties might have had on the Jesus traditions.

False Memories and Bias

Psychologists have been studying qualities of human memory since the beginning of the discipline.[6] The specific issue of the reliability of eyewitness memories was considered as early as 1908 in the collection of essays, *On the Witness Stand*, by Hugo Münsterberg, and much research has been devoted to the topic in the years since that time.[7] Particular attention has been given to the study of the circumstances in which a false memory can be generated in eyewitnesses,

5. Redman, "How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses?," 193, 197.

6. Many consider that the origins of experimental psychology should be traced to the work of Herman Ebbinghaus, in which he experimented on his own memory retention. His findings were published as *Über das Gedächtnis* (Leipzig: Duncker and Humblot, 1885); translated into English by 1913, and published as *Memory: A Contribution to Experimental Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1964).

7. For example, Renate Volbert and Max Steller, "Is this Testimony Truthful, Fabricated, or Based on False Memory? Credibility Assessment 25 Years after Steller and Köhnken (1989)," *European Psychologist* 19 (2014): 207–20. See also the summary of consensus in Saul M. Kassin, V. Anne Tubb, Harmon M. Hosch, and Amina Memon, "On the 'General Acceptance' of Eyewitness Testimony Research: A New Survey of the Experts," *American Psychologist* 56 (2001): 405–16 (see esp. tables 1 and 5). In addition see the summary comments of Gary L. Wells, Roy S. Malpass, R. C. L. Lindsay, Ronald P. Fisher, John W. Turtle, Solomon M. Fulero, "From the Lab to the Police Station: A Successful Application of Eyewitness Research," *American Psychologist* 55 (2000): 581–98; Gary L. Wells and Elizabeth A. Olson, "Eyewitness Testimony," *Annual Review of Psychology* 54 (2003): 277–94; Elizabeth F. Loftus, "Memory in Canadian Courts of Law," *Canadian Psychology* 44 (2003): 207–12; Elizabeth F. Loftus and Katherine Ketcham, *Witness for the Defense:*

and many experiments have been designed to demonstrate the processes by which false memories might be generated and communicated to others.

A widely used method of generating false memories in psychology laboratories is the Deese, Roediger, and McDermott False Memory Procedure (DRM).[8] Roediger and McDermott discovered that if experimental participants were asked to recall the following list of words, "bed, rest, awake, tired, dream, wake, snooze, blanket, doze, slumber, snore, nap, peace, yawn, drowsy," that the word "sleep" would be "remembered" as frequently as any of the words in the middle of the list. This should not be surprising, given that the word "sleep" has strong associations with all the other words in the list, and memory retrieval is a reconstructive process. Roediger and McDermott published several lists of words with strong associations that have been used by a great number of other researchers investigating memory. The DRM procedure has been found to be a very robust method of generating false memories under a wide variety of circumstances.[9] Yet one must note what kind of an error it is to include "sleep" in a list comprised of "bed, rest, dream," etc. It is true that "sleep" is not part of the list. But it is *consistent* with the list. While many participants remember "sleep" being part of the list, nobody remembers completely unrelated words such as "whale" or "microwave." "Sleep" is a mistake, but one that is consistent with what was actually on the list. In making sense of the world around it, human memory makes associations between linked things. One could question whether "sleep" is a *false* memory, or just memory working in its usual way as it endeavors to bring out the underlying meaning of experiences.

8. Henry L. Roediger III and Kathleen B. McDermott, "Creating False Memories: Remembering Words Not Presented in Lists," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory & Cognition* 21 (1995): 803–14. Cf. also the analysis of 55 fifteen-word lists with their associated critical items, together with figures for backward associative strength, and forward associative strengths, in Henry L. Roediger III, Jason M. Watson, Kathleen B. McDermott, and David Gallo, "Factors that Determine False Recall: A Multiple Regression Analysis," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 8 (2001): 385–407, esp. 399–407.

9. For example: Luciano Grüdtner Buratto, Carlos Falcão de Azevedo Gomes, Thiago da Silva Prusokowski, and Lilian Milnitsky Stein, "Inter-Item Associations for the Brazilian Version of the Deese/Roediger-McDermott Paradigm," *Psicologia: Reflexão e Crítica* 26 (2013): 367–75; Joanna Ulatowska and Justyna Olszewska, "Creating Associative Memory Distortions—A Polish Adaption of the DRM Paradigm," *Polish Psychological Bulletin* 44 (2013): 449–56; Mark J. Huff, Jennifer H. Coane, Keith A. Hutchison, Elisabeth B. Grasser, and Jessica E. Blais, "Interpolated Task Effects on Direct and Mediated False Recognition: Effects of Initial Recall, Recognition, and the Ironic Effect of Guessing," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 38 (2012): 1720–30; Lauren M. Knott, Emma Threadgold, and Mark L. Howe, "Negative Mood State Impairs False Memory Priming When Problem-Solving," *Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 26 (2014): 580–87; Ederaldo José Lopes and Ricardo Basso Garcia, "On the Possibility of Using Reaction Time to Study False Memories," *Psychology & Neuroscience* 7 (2014): 393–97. See also the long list of experimental conditions which have been investigated in John G. Seamon, Madeleine S. Goodkind, Adam D. Dumey, Ester Dick, Marla S. Aufseeser, Sarah E. Strickland, Jeffrey R. Woulfin, and Nicholas S. Fung, "'If I Didn't Write It, Why Would I Remember It?' Effects of Encoding, Attention, and Practice on

Redman mentions that "facets of another individual's report may be unconsciously incorporated into eyewitnesses' memory of that event." This has indeed been verified experimentally and is often described as the social contagion of memory.[10] For example, Mark J. Huff, Sara D. Davis and Michelle L. Meade report an experiment in which they showed participants six photographs of common household scenes sequentially on a screen for fifteen seconds each. Each photograph was preceded by a heading: "The Toolbox," "The Bathroom," "The Kitchen," "The Bedroom," "The Closet," and "The Desk." In a fictitious recall test, participants were asked to remember items they had seen in the photographs on two separate occasions. First, after completing a filler task, they were given six pages with the respective headings, "The Toolbox," etc., and given two minutes for each of them to write down as many of the items in each picture as possible. Next—the part of the experiment that simulated social interaction—participants were told that an additional purpose of the experiment was to see how much pleasantness affected whether a particular item was remembered. They were then given five sets of responses that they were informed were answers from other participants and invited to identify those items on the answers that were pleasant, a process that ensured attention was given to each of the items. Some of the participants saw "answers from other participants" that were seeded with contagion items, some whose presence might be highly expected, others less so, according to an experimental protocol (e.g., some participants saw lists of remembered objects from the kitchen scene that included "toaster" and "napkins," items absent from the photo). When asked a second time to recall what had been seen in the photographs, many of the participants "recalled" the items that had been added as contagion items to the "answers from other participants." This was true of both the control group, who had not had the contagion items on any list that they had seen (i.e., were self-generated), and the experimental group who had. Noteworthy, though, is that the incidence of contagion items was significantly higher (statistically) in the group that had been shown lists with the contagion items on them.[11]

Huff, David, and Meade based their experimental protocol on earlier experiments by Henry L. Roediger III, Michelle L. Meade, and Erik T. Bergman, who had used a similar set of six photographs, but used a confederate of the researchers to act

10. For example, Jonathan Koppel, Dana Wohl, Robert Meksin, and William Hirst, "The Effect of Listening to Others Remember on Subsequent Memory: The Roles of Expertise and Trust in Socially Shared Retrieval-Induced Forgetting and Social Contagion," *Social Cognition* 32 (2014): 148–80; Aileen Oeberst and Julienne Seidemann, "Will Your Words Become Mine? Underlying Processes and Cowitness Intimacy in the Memory Conformity Paradigm," *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology / Revue canadienne de psychologie expérimentale* 68 (2014): 84–96.

11. Mark J. Huff, Sara D. Davis, and Michelle L. Meade, "The Effects of Initial Testing on False Recall and

the role of experimental participant.[12] The confederate and one other participant took turns at remembering items from the photographs, during which process the confederate would introduce a high-expectancy and low-expectancy contagion item. When later asked to recall items from the photographs, even the control group who had not been provided with the contagion item occasionally reported high-expectancy contagion items (e.g., a toaster in the kitchen scene). But the group who had been in a social situation where a contagion item was suggested recalled them with a statistically significant higher frequency than the control group.

What is to be made of this "social contagion" of memory? Strictly speaking, "remembering" a contagion item that was not in the original photograph is a memory error. But while some incorrectly remembered a "toaster" as part of the kitchen scene, nobody remembered a "hippopotamus" as being in the kitchen scene. Once again, "false memories" have been generated, but they are in fact memories that are consistent with what was actually present. The "false memory" is generated as part of the human brain's ability to make sense of its environment by linking together similar items that are usually found together.

Other experimental protocols have been used to generate false memories,[13] but they almost all share a common trait: false memories may be induced, but they are memories that are consistent with the stimulus. Social contagion may introduce a false memory, but that false memory is, to a degree, consistent with what actually is being remembered.

Redman also raises the issue of bias when she says that post-event information can influence which elements of an event are retained in memory. A key element of the process she mentions is that of *hindsight bias*, which might be defined as the change between how one estimated the likelihood of a certain outcome before the event had occurred and how in hindsight one remembers what one considered to be the likelihood of a particular outcome after the outcome is known.[14] Hindsight bias has been studied in such diverse contexts as an auditor's judgment of whether or not a company would survive after one year, investor behavior, age, the law courts, history, and sporting events.[15] It should be noted,

12. Henry L. Roediger III, Michelle L. Meade, and Erik T. Bergman, "Social Contagion of Memory," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 8 (2001): 365–71; Michelle L. Meade and Henry L. Roediger III, "Explorations in the Social Contagion of Memory," *Memory & Cognition* 30 (2002): 995–1009.

13. A number of these are described in Robert K. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 60–70. See also idem, "Eyewitnesses as Guarantors of the Accuracy of the Gospel Traditions in the Light of Psychological Research," *JBL* 131 (2012): 530–33.

14. Alisha Coolin, Edgar Erdfielder, Daniel M. Bernstein, Allen E. Thornton, Wendy Loken Thornton, "Explaining Individual Differences in Cognitive Processes Underlying Hindsight Bias," *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 22 (2015): 328–48; Matúš Konečný and Viera Bačová, "Hindsight Bias and Its Reversal: What Will Time Reveal?" *Studia Psychologica* 454 (2012): 251–58.

however, that even though the significance attached to memories of the past is adjusted to account for subsequent events, this process does not introduce memories of things that did not happen. They are still based on real events.

Accuracy of Eyewitness Memory

The brain's attempts to derive meaning, significance, and causation from memories of past events allows the incorporation of elements of bias, and even memories of things that were not actually seen or heard by the eyewitness. Hindsight bias and suggestibility are but two of what Daniel Schacter has described as *The Seven Sins of Memory*.[16] Even so, memory should not be dismissed as arbitrary. It is capable of remarkable feats of recall, as is illustrated in one of the very few studies of eyewitness memory that has been able to make use of police interviews of an actual crime.

In an attempted robbery of a gun store in Burnaby, Vancouver, Canada, a robber with a handgun held up a gun store. He tied up the owner, picked up several weapons, and left. The owner managed to release himself rather quickly and rushed outside, hoping at least to get a description of the getaway car. Once outside, he surprised the thief, who was still loading the stolen merchandise into his car. The gun store owner and thief exchanged shots, leaving the thief dead and the owner of the gun store injured. The police interviewed available witnesses, and a decision was made to not prosecute the owner of the gun store. Researchers are not usually able to approach witnesses directly, and quite rightly so, given the possibility of introducing bias into memories. But because this case was not going to prosecution, John C. Yuille and Judith L. Cutshall were given access to the records of the police interviews and crime-scene photos. In addition, they were given permission to contact the witnesses, which they were able to do three months after the crime. From the photos and other evidential data, Yuille and Cutshall were able to determine a number of factual matters that could

Relevance Ratings of Adverse Factors Versus Mitigating Factors," *Journal of Business & Economics Research* 12 (2014): 199–208; Rasoul Sadi, Hassan Ghalibaf Asl, Mohammad Reza Rostami, Aryan Gholipour, and Fattaneh Gholipour, "Behavioral Finance: The Explanation of Investors' Personality and Perceptual Biases Effects on Financial Decisions," *International Journal of Economics and Finance* 3 (2011): 234–41; Julia Groß and Ute J. Bayen, "Adult Age Differences in Hindsight Bias: The Role of Recall Ability," *Psychology and Aging* 30 (2015): 253–58; Merrie Jo Stallard and Debra L. Worthington, "Reducing the Hindsight Bias Utilizing Attorney Closing Arguments," *Law and Human Behavior* 22 (1998): 671–83; Baruch Fischhoff, "Hindsight ≠ Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Perception and Performance* 1 (1975): 288–99; Jennifer M. Bonds-Raacke, Lakeysha S. Freyer, Sandra D. Nicks, and Rena T. Durr, "Hindsight Bias Demonstrated in the Prediction of a Sporting Event," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 141 (2001): 349–52.

16. Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001). Schacter lists the seven sins of memory as transience, absent-mindedness, blocking,

be tested in the police interviews and in the follow-up interviews. They set up rather strict criteria for considering a memory accurate and discovered that, on average, witnesses were entirely accurate in 80 percent of the details that they recounted of the crime, at least up to three months after the event.[17] All the witnesses remembered the gist of what had taken place.

How should this result be judged? Is it lamentable that eyewitnesses were only 80 percent accurate in the details they remembered? Or should we celebrate that they were only 20 percent erroneous? What should not be overlooked, however, is that even the 20 percent of incorrect details were consistent with what actually happened. The core of the memory was preserved, even if some of the details were not entirely accurate.

Accuracy of Memories of Individual Eyewitnesses of Jesus

The memories of the initial eyewitnesses to Jesus's activities during his earthly ministry would have been subject to the same vicissitudes that beset all human memory. Their memories would have been partial, largely composed of individual actions or sayings, and subject to the intrusion of false memories. If it is legitimate to apply the results of Yuille and Cutshall's research to the recollections of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus's activities, one might expect their memories to have been accurate in 80 percent of the details. From the point of view of reliability, one would wish that the memories of the eyewitnesses of Jesus would be 100 percent accurate in what they remembered. What is of significance, though, is that the 20 percent of the details that are not remembered accurately are nevertheless *consistent* with what was said and done. The gist of Jesus's sayings as well as the general trend of his actions and activities would have been preserved. These memories would be framed by the cultural expectations and life experiences of the witnesses, but they would retain the essence of what happened, particularly when added to the memories of other eyewitnesses, as the various groups who knew Jesus formed a collective memory of him.

FORMATION OF INITIAL COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF JESUS

Some of the experiments just recounted have revealed the influence a group can have on an individual's memory of events as a collective memory of an event is formed. Collective memory may be described as follows:

> Collective memory is an elusive concept that suggests that groups and nations have sets of common memories that contribute to the group's self-understanding and identity. Naturally, these memories have no independent existence outside the memories of individuals, be they in the group or not. Nevertheless, such memories are "collective" in the sense that they are common to all the individuals that form the group. These collective memories can also represent the esoteric knowledge that provides the theoretical basis for the professional conduct of groups such as judges, doctors, and priests.[18]

The Social Circumstances of First-Century Palestine and the Formation of Collective Memory

That memories of Jesus, his teaching, and his activities would become part of the collective memory of those amongst whom he lived is inevitable, particularly given the social circumstances in which he lived. Archaeology has revealed much about the physical layout of Nazareth, Capernaum, and Jerusalem, the towns and city most associated with Jesus in the gospel accounts.

Jesus's public ministry was centered on Capernaum (Matt 4:13; Mark 2:1). In the first century, Capernaum was a small fishing village on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee, about six to ten hectares in extent. It had a population of between six hundred and one thousand five hundred people and interesting things that were done and said would have circulated with great freedom, particularly given the living conditions. Many of the inhabitants of the small village would meet regularly at the synagogue (Mark 1:21; Luke 4:16), but the village had no theatre or public forums.[19] It seems almost trivial to point out that modern methods of home entertainment such as reading, radio, and television were not available. Furthermore, what lighting was available after dark would have been provided by fires and very inefficient lamps. Thus, most of the evenings would have been spent engaged in talk of one kind or another. Stories of interesting events would have circulated, and stories of particular significance to the group

17. John C. Yuille and Judith L. Cutshall, "A Case Study of Eyewitness Memory of a Crime," *Journal*

18. McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, 82–83; see also further discussion pp. 81–94. Most modern uses of the concept of collective memory can be traced back to the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who began to use the term in 1925. Read today, Halbwachs's work (e.g., Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]) is a fascinating mixture of very useful insights and rather idiosyncratic arguments, and assessments of Halbwachs's writings on the topic range from an enthusiastic, if selective, account of those parts of his general theory subsequently found to have been useful (e.g., Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* [Hanover, VT: University Press of New England, 1993], 73–90) to a discrediting of his work by a hostile concentration of those parts of his arguments that few take seriously (e.g., Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, "Collective Memory—What Is It?," *History and Memory* 8 [1996]: 30–50).

19. Jonathan L. Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2000), 139–69; Robert K. McIver, "The Archaeology of Galilee," in *The Content and Setting of the Gospel Tradition*, ed.

sharing them would have been repeated often. What Jesus said and did would have been the topic of many conversations, and each social group at Capernaum would have developed a "collective memory" of him and his doings, particularly those groups that modeled their own behavior and beliefs on his teachings.

Apart from the birth narratives, few stories in the gospel accounts relate to Nazareth. But given that the town was much smaller than Capernaum,[20] it is again inevitable that everybody who lived there would have known him well. First-century Jerusalem was much larger than either Nazareth or Capernaum. At the time of Jesus, it is estimated that the population was between forty thousand and eighty thousand,[21] the higher number reached in 66 CE, just prior to the Jewish revolt. The numbers of those in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus's crucifixion would have swelled considerably by pilgrims visiting the city for Passover. Yet, even though he spent but a small part of his ministry there, few in the city would have been unaware of his activities around the temple and the circumstances of his death. The Roman authorities, as was their wont, took care to parade him past as many of those in the city as possible on the way to his death, and the place of crucifixion was chosen so that many would be aware of the fate of those who rebelled against Rome (Mark 15:21–22; Luke 23:26–33; John 19:16–17). These events would have been part of the collective memory of most who lived in Jerusalem. In particular, it would have been the topic of extended conversation by those who considered themselves to be his followers. Many groups in Jerusalem would have formed strong collective memories of Jesus's death from such conversations.

The Twelve Disciples

One group would have had a particularly strong and relatively well-defined collective memory of Jesus's teachings: the twelve men who were known as his inner group of disciples. These men spent much time with Jesus during his ministry and, shortly before the events that culminated in his crucifixion, were given a task which would have required them to formulate and commit to memory a coherent body of teaching.

Jesus was known as a teacher (Matt 7:28–29; Mark 4:38; 5:34; 9:17; John 6:59, etc.).[22] As such, he would have followed the practice of all teachers found in the

20. Robert K. McIver, "First-Century Nazareth," in *Glaube und Zukunftsgestaltung: Festschrift zum hundertjährigen Bestehen der Theologischen Hochschule Friedensau: Aufsätze zu Theologie, Sozialwissenschaften und Musik*, ed. Bernhard Oestreich, Horst Rolly, and Wolfgang Kabus (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1999), 139–59; Willibald Bösen, *Galiläa: Lebensraum und Wirkungsfeld Jesu* (Freiburg: Herder, 1998), 97–110.

21. Magen Broshi, "Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem," *BAR* 4 (1978): 10–15.

ancient Near East—he would have taught his disciples to memorize his teaching.[23] The term *memorizing* has a different meaning for modern readers from that which it probably had for ancient teachers and students. Verbatim memorization of longer texts is only possible with the ability to reference a written text.[24] It is known that the poems of Homer were memorized verbatim on the basis of the written text that existed in the Greco-Roman period.[25] But for oral material, such as that memorized by the Rabbis and their students—and no doubt Jesus and his disciples—a saying or parable would have been considered sufficiently memorized if the disciple was able to repeat its core meaning. Some types of material lend themselves to verbatim or near-verbatim memorization. These include short aphorisms, particularly those aphorisms of two or more lines that have strong thematic parallels between the lines. It is perhaps significant that much of Jesus's teaching material preserved in the Synoptic Gospels comes in the form of easily memorized aphorisms or parables, which convey their meaning with a coherent story and a punchline, often expressed in an aphorism.

The gospel accounts record that as Jesus was making his way to Jerusalem, he sent his disciples ahead of him to share his teachings in the villages he was about to enter (Matt 10:5–8; Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1–6; 10:1). By this stage of his public ministry, Jesus had been instructing his disciples for some time and one would expect that the disciples would have been well prepared to share the fundamental tenets Jesus had been teaching them. Their having to teach on their own would have provided additional impetus for the disciples to establish Jesus's teachings quite firmly in their own memories.[26] As they taught, they would have continuously rehearsed the things they had learned.

confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. . . . Yet there are only three occurrences of the title Savior, referring to Jesus, in the four Gospels (Luke 1:69 [lit., "a horn of salvation"], 2:11; John 4:42). Yet they speak frequently of Jesus as Lord and rabbi. Jesus is addressed as Lord no fewer than 83 times, and as rabbi or teacher 56 times. (The next most frequently used title for Jesus is the enigmatic Son of Man, found no fewer than 37 times.)" So Stephen D. Jones, *Rabbi Jesus: Learning from the Master Teacher* (Macon, GA: Peake Road, 1997), 1.

23. Rainer Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 186–87. Education, both in the Greco-Roman context and within Judaism, relied heavily on memorization. As it developed among the Greeks, "Basic education relies heavily on memory and recitation, limits attendance to those who can pay, offers strictly restricted instruction in writing, and defines grammar in terms of the sounds of the spoken language" (Tony M. Lentz, *Orality and Literacy in Ancient Greece* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989], 56). For the place of memorization in Jewish education one can profitably consult Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory & Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* with *Tradition & Transmission in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

24. Ian M. L. Hunter, "Lengthy Verbatim Recall: The Role of Text," in *Progress in the Psychology of Language*, ed. Andrew W. Ellis, vol. 1 (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1985), 207–35. Hunter carefully defines lengthy verbatim recall as "complete word-for-word fidelity of a sequence of 50 words or longer" (p. 207). By doing so, he excludes proverbs and stock phrases.

25. Lentz, *Orality and Literacy*, 35–45, esp. 42.

The Synoptic Gospels record more than just the aphorisms and parables of Jesus, however. It is difficult to imagine Jesus teaching his disciples about his own miracles and his other deeds recorded in the Gospels. One can only speculate as to when the disciples started to recount the stories about Jesus. Some of the miracle stories of Jesus's ministry could well have formed part of what the twelve disciples shared in their teachings prior to the events of Easter. They are likely to have been repeated often by Jesus's followers when they began to recognize themselves as a group of fellow travelers linked by their joint understanding of the importance of Jesus in their lives. Furthermore, the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus must have been the topic of many conversations among both Jesus's followers and his enemies. In this manner, many versions of collective memory concerning Jesus would have developed among different groups. Although travel was arduous, many did travel in the ancient world, and the book of Acts recounts some of those early Christians who travelled widely—Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, and others. As Christians met during their travels, they would have inevitably discussed their memories and understanding of Jesus. In doing so, the various collective memories of Jesus would have taken shape, and common themes would have emerged.

The Survival of Eyewitnesses until the Gospels Were Written

The New Testament emphasizes the importance of eyewitnesses as guarantors of the Christian traditions in several places (Luke 1:2; Acts 1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 1 Pet 5:1; 2 Pet 1:16). Researchers have shown that there is a qualitative difference between the memories of eyewitnesses of events that occurred in the distant past and those who learned about an event that they had not witnessed.[27] Thus, the presence of eyewitnesses at the time the Gospels were written acted as a stabilizer of the traditions included in them. Yet, given the likely date the Gospels were written, how likely is it that eyewitnesses were still alive?

Dating the writing of the Gospels is problematic. Aside from the fact that Luke-Acts must have been written after Paul's arrival in Rome sometime in 59 CE,[28] there is very little hard evidence which allows an accurate dating of

der kerygmatische Christus, ed. Helmut Ristow and Karl Matthiae (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1960), 361–69. Cf. Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, WUNT 2/7 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981), 453–75, 500–501; idem, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher," 197–201.

27. See, for example, Dorthe Berntsen and Dorthe K. Thomsen, "Personal Memories for Remote Historical Events: Accuracy and Clarity of Flashbulb Memories Related to World War II," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 134 (2005): 242–57.

28. Udo Schnelle gives 59 CE as the date for Paul's arrival in Rome, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002], 45), and other possible dates are canvassed in Rainer

the writing of any of the Gospels. Such evidence that exists leads most scholars to posit a gap of between thirty and sixty years between the time of Jesus's death and the writing of the Gospels.[29]

Given that the average life expectancy at birth in the Roman Empire was approximately 23 years, at first sight it might appear that all eyewitnesses would have been long dead only thirty years later. But the demographics of populations comparable to those of the first century Roman Empire reveal that while life expectancy at birth might have only been 23, this average is much influenced by high infant mortality rates. It appears likely that at the time of the Roman Empire only 51 percent of people lived to the age of 10, but those who did lived an additional 38 years, on average, resulting in an average lifespan of 48 years for the population as a whole. Some particularly robust and lucky individuals lived into their 70s (about 8 percent of the population) and a very few into their 80s (1.6 percent).[30] Admittedly, 1.6 percent is a very small part of the population, but some did live to reach 80 years of age and older.

If one takes into account the age profile of the population, and the likely number of those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus's ministry in Capernaum and Galilee, and of his death and resurrection in Jerusalem, it is possible to estimate the number of surviving eyewitnesses at various intervals after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The estimates are given in Table 1.[31]

29. In his monograph, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 352, John A. T. Robinson proposed dates as early as "40–60+" CE for Matthew, 45–60 CE for Mark, "57–60+" CE for the Gospel of Luke, and similar dates have been suggested by John Wenham (*Redating Matthew, Mark and Luke: A Fresh Assault on the Synoptic Problem* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1991], xxv, 223–44) and Bo Reicke (*The Roots of the Synoptic Gospels* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 174–80). Reicke explicitly dates Luke to around 60 CE (p. 180). Robertson, Wenham, and Reicke represent some of the earliest dating that has been seriously proposed, but nevertheless, even by their dating, there is a period of 10 to 35 years between the events of the life of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. Most who work with the Synoptic Gospels, however, tend to use dates closer to those suggested by Werner Georg Kümmel in his *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 98, 120, 151, 246, of between 64 and 70 CE for Mark, 80 and 100 CE for Matthew, 70 and 90 CE for Luke, and 90 and 100 CE for John); or those suggested by Schnelle, of shortly before or after 70 CE for Mark, about 90 CE for Matthew and Luke, and between 100 and 110 CE for John (*Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 244, 266, 288).

30. On the challenges of using the existing evidence to formulate and understand the demographics of the population of the Roman Empire and associated life expectancies, see McIver, *Memory, Jesus, and the Synoptic Gospels*, 189–202; Walter Scheidel, *Measuring Sex, Age and Death in the Roman Empire: Explorations in Ancient Demography*, JRA Supplementary Series (Ann Arbor, MI: Journal of Roman Archaeology, 1996); and idem, "Progress and Problems in Roman Demography," in *Debating Roman Demography*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1–81. See also Jonathan L. Reed, "Instability in Jesus' Galilee: A Demographic Perspective," *JBL* 129 (2010): 343–65. The figures cited in the text reflect Coale-Demeny West Model, level 3 (female), from Ansley J. Coale and Paul Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations*, 2nd ed. (New York: Academic Press, 1983).

31. A number of estimates and approximations have had to be used to arrive at the figures in Table 1. For example, archaeologists have been able to estimate the number of inhabitants in Capernaum and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus (see comments on population sizes in 2(a) in main text). The first approximation that has

TABLE 1: *Surviving Eyewitnesses of Jesus at Later Time Periods*
According to the Coale-Demeny West Model, for Level 3 Females

	Capernaum	Large Crowds	Jerusalem	Subtotals
Yr 0	1,005	10,000	51,750	62,755
Yr +5	847	8,636	44,692	54,175
Yr +10	701	7,356	38,069	46,126
Yr + 15	573	6,174	31,952	38,700
Yr + 20	466	5,094	26,360	31,919
Yr + 25	374	4,117	21,307	25,799
Yr + 30	294	3,244	16,787	20,326
Yr + 35	224	2,469	12,775	15,467
Yr + 40	162	1,786	9,243	11,191
Yr + 45	110	1,208	6,250	7,568
Yr + 50	67	740	3,830	4,637
Yr + 55	36	399	2,067	2,502
Yr + 60	16	177	918	1,111

As may be seen from Table 1, conservative estimates reveal that of the approximately 60,000 eyewitnesses of Jesus's ministry, death, or resurrection who were aged 15 years or older, at least 20,000 would likely have been alive 30 years later, and over 1,000 up to 60 years later. Thus, it might be reasonably concluded that living eyewitnesses would have been able to contribute to the traditions that formed the basis of the Gospels and that their continued presence in the communities out of which the Gospels arose would have served to ensure

Jesus of the type that would survive for 30 or more years. The Coale-Demeny West Model level 3 life tables were then used to estimate the number of those in Capernaum and Jerusalem who were aged at least 15 years in about 30 CE. The loosest approximation in the table is the number in the large crowds that followed Jesus for parts of his ministry (e.g. Matt 4:25; 5:11; 20:29; Mark 4:1; Luke 7:12; 14:25–26; John 6:2). The number 10,000 was chosen arbitrarily, in part because of the mention of 5,000 men besides women and children on one occasion where crowds were present (Matt 14:21; Mark 6:44; Luke 9:14; John 6:10). The numbers in the various crowds that followed Jesus could well have been much higher, but conservative estimates have been used in the table. From the beginning, the life table has been used to estimate the number of survivors of each age. It should be noted that, while exact numbers are given in the table (so that the process of iteration does not add to much additional error), in reality these are but poor estimates of the numbers of survivors.

that what was said about Jesus corresponded to their actual memories of him—memories that corresponded to what Jesus had actually done and said.

THE RETENTION OF MEMORIES OF JESUS FOR PERIODS OF THIRTY TO SIXTY YEARS

What Happens to Individual Human Memory over Thirty to Sixty Years?

It appears that a number of eyewitnesses of Jesus and his activities were still alive when the Gospels were written, but given the nature of human memory, we might ask: How much would they have remembered of Jesus? And how accurate would that memory have been?

A great volume of published research investigating human memory appears each year, but most of it reports research on memory intervals that are of a very short duration—seconds, minutes, hours, days—and not the thirty-plus years that elapsed between the ministry of Jesus and the writing of the Gospels. This should not be surprising, given the methodological challenges of studying memory over long periods of time. Nevertheless, some experiments trace what happens to human memory over longer periods of time.

Willem A. Wagenaar, for example, studied his own memory over a period of six years.[32] While this is not a period in excess of thirty years, when combined with information that will be reported later, his experiment provides a way to estimate what happens to memories of events over longer periods of time. For a period of six years, at the end of each day, Wagenaar filled out one or two pre-printed forms headed with a random number. On each form he recorded one event that, based on the categories who/what/where/when, were "at the time of recording, unique and fully distinguishable from all other things that happened before" (p. 229). He also wrote down a question about a critical detail that, if answered correctly, would provide evidence that he was actually remembering the event rather than something like it. In his article he gave a sample of a filled-in form, which had the following information: random number: 3329; who: Leonardo da Vinci; what: I went to see his "last supper"; where: in a church in

32. Willem A. Wagenaar, "My Memory: A Study of Autobiographic Memory over Six Years," *Cognitive Psychology* 18 (1986): 225–52. Wagenaar was able to benefit from earlier studies, such as Marigold Linton, "Memory for Real World Events," in *Explorations in Cognition*, ed. Donald A. Norman and David E. Rumelhart (San Francisco: Freeman, 1975), 376–404; idem, "Real World Memory after Six Years: An in vivo Study of Very long Term Memory," in *Practical Aspects of Memory*, ed. M. M. Gruneberg, P. E. Morris, and R. N. Sykes (London: Academic Press, 1978), 69–76; and Richard T. White, "Memory for Personal Events," *Human Learning* 1 (1982): 171–83. Linton's study of her own autobiographical

Milano; when: Saturday, September 10, 1983; salience: 1/month; involvement: nothing; pleasantness: pleasant; question about a critical detail: Who was with me?; answer: Beth Loftus and Jim Reason. Waganaar then had somebody else turn his forms into a series of questions and tried to identify an incident on the basis of one or more of the cues. The cue most likely to produce a memory was "what," the cue least likely to produce a memory was "when." He discovered that after thinking about the four cues and answering the question relating to the critical detail, his longer-term memory of events showed a decay rate somewhat similar to the decay rate of his shorter-term memories. After six months he was able to remember over 90 percent of events. His memories decayed from that point, but over time showed less and less decay. After five years he was still able to recall just under 40 percent of the incidents he had noted.[33]

Harry P. Bahrick devised an experiment that traced human memory for languages over a period of fifty years.[34] He compensated for the impossibility of following the same group of individuals over this time period by using a large sample. In that sample were individuals who had studied Spanish at school and/or university and who had subsequently done little with the language. Bahrick discovered that over the first three to five years after cessation of studies, the loss of language followed a pattern not dissimilar to that of Wagenaar's memory for events in his life. Indeed, this loss was so severe that those who had not studied Spanish for an extended length of time or who had poor grades in their language classes had lost all of their knowledge of Spanish. But after three years, those who had studied longer and who had good grades essentially kept the same competency levels for the next thirty years, after which time there was a gradual decay.[35]

These results tend to lead to the conclusion that the first three to five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus would have been critical to the preservation of memories about him. Those memories that were retained for this length of time would have been available up to the time period in which it is likely the Gospels were written. If Wagenaar's experiment is any guide, approximately 40 percent of the deeds and sayings of Jesus could potentially have been remembered during the time the Gospels were written.

33. Wagenaar, "My Memory," figure 3.

34. Harry P. Bahrick, "Semantic Memory Content in Permastore: Fifty Years of Memory for Spanish Learned in School," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 113 (1984): 1–29; see also idem, "Long Term Maintenance of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Memory*, ed. Endel Tulving and Fergus I. M. Craik (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 247–362, in which Bahrick outlines not only his own research on

RELIABILITY

How "Reliable" is Collective Memory?

So far it has been argued that there would have been a significant pool of eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus when the Gospels were written thirty or more years after his death and that there is evidence that a substantial percentage of memories of Jesus could have survived for this length of time. Many of these memories would likely have been held within groups as collective memories, especially within groups of Jesus's followers.

The collective memory of the past is often fiercely contested because of the importance it plays in the present group identity.[36] The past is remembered precisely because of its relevance to the present, and those who have a different viewpoint regarding what the present identity of a group should be often argue it in terms of how their view best fits the past.[37] Because of the pressure brought to bear on collective memory, it is clear that collective memory is not necessarily a dispassionate and accurate rendition of the past. Yet examination of how the past has been shaped in collective memory shows that there are limits to the malleability of collective memory. This may be illustrated in the realm of politics and nation building.[38]

Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings have examined the kinds of changes that have taken place in collective memory.[39] In some cases, there is selective omission of disagreeable facts in collective memories of heroes of the past or in events of national significance in the past.[40] They give as an example the

36. "The past, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has suggested, is a 'scarce resource,' and conflict over its ownership is recurrent . . . Contest, conflict, controversy—these are the hallmark of studies of collective memory" (Michael Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*, ed. Daniel L. Schacter [Cambridge: Harvard University, 1995], 361).

37. "Memory selects and distorts in the service of present interests [a process Schudson describes as "Instrumentalization"] . . . Examples of instrumentalization are legion. Indeed, the problem may be to find cases of cultural memory that cannot be readily understood as the triumph of present interests over truth" (Schudson, "Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory," 351).

38. Alin Coman, Adam D. Brown, Jonathan Koppel, and William Hirst, "Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 22 (2009): 125–141, begin their article by highlighting that, despite the burgeoning study of collective memory, and the importance of memory to the discipline of psychology, relatively little research on the phenomenon has taken place within the discipline. In their article they trace those experiments that deal with social interaction and mechanisms of remembering and forgetting in groups. Their point is well made. The most useful studies about the malleability of collective memory have been done in the disciplines of history and politics.

39. Roy F. Baumeister and Stephen Hastings, "Distortions of Collective Memory: How Groups Flatter and Deceive Themselves," in *Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, and Bernard Rimé (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1997), 282.

40. Rafi Nets-Zehngut documents what might be considered to be an example of selective omission in collective memory (he uses the term, "collective amnesia"), when he notes that between 1948 and 1967

absence in collective memory of the pro-slavery actions and speeches of Thomas Jefferson, one of the significant contributors to the American Declaration of Independence, which states that "all men are created equal." Another change cited by Baumeister and Hastings is that of exaggeration and embellishment. They cite several examples, such as the exaggeration of the war efforts in World War II of the British and American armies when compared to the much greater numbers of troops involved in the battles in Russia. Other strategies they document include connecting one event to other events, blaming the enemy, blaming circumstances, and contextual framing. These are but some of the means by which collective memories are transmuted to fit the needs of the present.

One of the strategies that Baumeister and Hastings canvas is outright fabrication. While they find the occasional use of outright fabrication in the shaping of collective memory,[41] they conclude:

> Still, it seems that by and large outright fabrication of collective memory is rare. The implication may be that collective memories are constrained by the facts. Facts may be deleted, altered, shaded, reinterpreted, exaggerated, and placed in favorable contexts, but wholesale fabrication seems to lie beyond what most groups can accomplish. Presumably, a thorough historical search would eventually uncover an example or two of fabrication, but these would be extreme exceptions. Fabrication is thus not one of the standard techniques of altering collective memory for self-serving ends.[42]

This conclusion fits that of the substantive two-volume analysis of the collective memory of Abraham Lincoln by Barry Schwartz.[43] He demonstrates that Abraham Lincoln has indeed been remade in collective memory to fit the needs of contemporary society. This has been done by ignoring those parts of his writings and actions that do not fit today's memories of him and by emphasizing those aspects that do. Yet Schwarz concludes, "The remaking of

relation to the war of independence of 1948 ("The Israeli Army's Official Memory of the 1948 Palestinian Exodus, 1949–2004," *War in History* 22 [2015]: 211–34, esp. 228–29).

41. Baumeister and Hastings, "Distortions of Collective Memory," cite one example, that of Betsy Ross being asked by George Washington to create a new flag for the new nation (the United States of America). This is, in fact, a story "invented in 1876 by some of her descendants in order to create a tourist attraction in Philadelphia" (p. 281).

42. Baumeister and Hastings, "Distortions of Collective Memory," 282.

43. Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), and idem, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). See also his comments on George Washington in,

Abraham Lincoln, although based on some invention and much exaggeration, is nonetheless constrained by the historical record."[44]

One must conclude, then, that while collective memory is always shaped to meet the needs of the present by such processes as selective omission of irrelevant or inconvenient data and the emphasis of those traits that best fit the needs of the present, there is a basic historic kernel that is almost impossible to erase. When recalling the life of an individual, the important characteristics of that individual are preserved.

Reliability of the Gospel Accounts

If anything in the gospel accounts of Jesus sayings and activities is historically reliable, it will have been preserved in fallible human memory for periods of thirty or more years. So far in this chapter several "moments" in the transmission of such memories have been considered, and research and other evidence has been cited that allow an assessment to be made of the accuracy of the memories that would have been formed and preserved at each of these stages.

Those that knew and saw Jesus during his earthly ministry would have formed vivid memories of him.[45] Such memories are not immune from the usual vicissitudes normally attached to human memory: transience, bias, and openness to suggestion. In fact, the investigation of eyewitness memories by Yuille and Cutshall cited earlier in this chapter reveals that eyewitness memories are only 80 percent accurate in recalling details. Yet this does not mean that these memories are worthless. The 20 percent of memories that are inaccurate are nonetheless consistent with the gist of what happened. Likewise, other research showed that while it was possible to create errors in memory in the laboratory, almost all of these errors were consistent with what was actually there in the original stimulus. Thus, one can conclude with some confidence that while the earliest followers of Jesus were forming their personal memories of him, it is more than likely that, although some details were incorrect, what they did remember would have been highly consistent with what Jesus actually did and said. These memories

44. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era*, 234. Schwartz insists, one must "appreciate the limits of Lincoln's reconstructability." "To make a good symbol to help us think and feel," we must start "'with an actual personality which more or less meets this need,' and we improve it by omitting the inessential and adding 'whatever is necessary to round out the ideal' . . . The 'actual personality' that we start with . . . limits the range of things the collective memory can do. . . . From the initial conception of Lincoln as a man of the people we know that later generations subtracted little; they only superimposed new traits" (Schwartz *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, 104; Schwartz is citing the words of Charles Horton Cooley).

45. In his book, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), David Pillemer describes the vivid memories that individuals form of significant events in their lives as

were shaped further in the process of forming collective memories about Jesus. The collective memory of the eleven surviving apostles of Jesus is a special case, given their close association with Jesus over an extended period of time. Their memories of Jesus would have been particularly strong and resilient, given that they had been taught by Jesus in a manner recognizable to their own generation (i.e., by memorizing what Jesus was teaching them), and by having their memories consolidated as they were sent out to preach and teach about Jesus while he was still alive.

Despite the lower life expectancy of those living in the Roman Empire compared to most modern populations, during the period in which the Gospels were likely to have been written there would still have been a substantial number of living eyewitnesses to his ministry. It has been shown in research by others that such memories are of a measurably higher quality than those based only on hearsay. The results of other research also suggests that not everything that was known about Jesus would have survived the thirty or more years over which this was retained in human memories. Yet a significant proportion would have been available to the Gospel writers.

In summary, the argument of this chapter is that the Gospels are in large part a product of a process that developed and preserved collective memories of Jesus's activities and teaching. Collective memories are selective in that they are shaped to fit the present needs of those that use them. It is important to note, however, that while collective memories are selective, what is selected is likely to be based on memories of actual events. Furthermore, while such memories may incorporate inaccurate details, even the inaccuracies are most likely to be consistent with what Jesus did and said. In other words, like the substance of other collective memories, the gist of the gospel traditions is reliable and provides a sound general picture of Jesus's sayings and doings.