

In this week's Readers' Mailbag I will deal with three questions, all of them having to do with the historical Jesus: how has memory studies affected my understanding of Jesus; whether the claim that the Gospels are based eyewitnesses is a new or an ancient attempt to "guarantee" their accuracy; and whether Jesus can be relevant today if his basic apocalyptic view was proven to be wrong.

Good questions, all of them! If you have any questions about anything involving the New Testament or the history and literature of Christianity in the first four centuries, let me know!

QUESTION:

Has your view of the historical Jesus changed at all after your studies into memory?

RESPONSE:

My basic view of Jesus has not changed at all. I continue to think that he was an apocalyptic preacher who proclaimed that he and his listeners were living at the end of the age and that God was (very) soon to intervene and overthrow the evil powers who were in charge of this world in order to bring in a good kingdom in which God himself would rule supreme. What "memory studies" have done is deepen my understanding of who Jesus was and, more important, helped me understand much better the nature of the Gospels and the traditions they contain. Among other things, the study of memory has helped me recognize what parts of the Gospel stories are more likely "distorted" memories rather than accurate ones.

Let me give just two quick examples. The first is from Jesus' life. When thinking about memory I started reflecting on the traditions of Jesus' sayings. Take the Sermon on the Mount. It is found only in Matthew 5-7 - three chapters filled with Jesus' teachings, as if written down at the time, word for word allegedly what Jesus said. But how could all this material be remembered, verbatim, for the 50 years or so between the time Jesus taught and the time Matthew wrote his account?

Think of it this way: suppose you had to reconstruct ...

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