

QUESTION: You have stated in your various works that there are some things that we can accept as likely historically true concerning Jesus' life; his origin in Galilee, his association with John the Baptizer, his crucifixion, etc. For the rest of the episodes in Jesus' life do we have to content ourselves with contemplation of what this or that gospel tells us about its author and community? Should we just "get over" this desire to know what really happened two thousand years ago?

RESPONSE: Yes, this is a very important question. Of paramount importance! Here is a sample of how I deal with it in my just-finished-and-ready-to-send-to-my-readers book. This is from Chapter 5, "False Memories and the Life of Jesus." This is the chapter where I discuss what anthropologists have told us about oral cultures and the way they preserve their traditions; it's a crucial chapter since so many people seem to think that in oral cultures people have better memories that we do, and that they make sure not to change traditions that are passed along. After discussing what we know about oral cultures, I say the following:

In summing up this assessment of what we now know from such anthropological studies, I think it is fair to say that people in oral cultures do not preserve their traditions intact with verbatim accuracy from one telling to the next. They not only do not do so, they do not care to do so. Story-tellers in oral cultures tell their tales in order to communicate with their audiences in very specific contexts. Both the audience and the context will affect how the story is told or the teaching is recounted - whether it is told expansively or briefly; which entire episodes will be added or deleted; which details will be changed, expanded, or passed over completely. Someone who then hears that version of the story or teaching will later tell her own version. Whoever hears that version will tell his own version. And on it goes, until someone writes it down. The gist of these stories is more likely to survive relatively intact over the course of time, but not always. Elements are constantly added to the stories and other elements are deleted or altered. For that reason it is extremely difficult to separate out the elements that have been added or altered to an "original testimony" (to use Vansina's term) from the gist that represents a "true memory" of the past.

Still, as we saw in the last chapter, there are ways to do so. If ...

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