

DRAFT

Synopsis of *The Historiographical Jesus*¹

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There is German proverb that teaches “Dein erste Buch ist kein Meisterwerk.” With this in mind, I am very grateful for this opportunity to learn from a panel of reviewers whose careers take seniority over my own. I trust that their candid critique will help to shape my forthcoming research. For the sake of time and because I am eager to leave room at the end of this session for dialogue, I will jump right into the heart of my thesis.

Typology, most commonly understood as a literary device, mirrors an aspect of memory distortion called “conventionalization,” and more specifically “narrativization.” Building from the premise that all memory (including historical memory) is memory distortion, I have attempted to locate and explain the most plausible relationships between several distortion trajectories concerning the title Son of David. I argue that this title most often manifests a dual typological appeal to David and Solomon. Moreover, this typology represents a cultural memory which informed communicative memories contemporary to Jesus and his interpreters. The conceptual undergirding of my thesis adapts the works of James Fentress, Chris Wickham, Aleida and Jan Assmann in terms of social memory, Jens Schröter, Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter in terms of plausibility and continuity, and Michael Schudson in terms of distortion.²

Every memory is a reframing of a previous mnemonic category. Even when we are intently focused to remember the past “accurately” we locate and infuse previous mnemonic subjects with the priorities and agendas of the present. In fact, the more effort we use to “focus,”

¹ A. Le Donne, *The Historiographical Jesus: Memory, Typology, and the Son of David* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010).

² J. Fentress and C. Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); A. Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition: Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer* (Beiträge zur Geschichtskultur 15; Köln: Böhlau, 1999); J. Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–33; J. Schröter, “Von der Historizität der Evangelien: Ein Beitrag zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion um den historischen Jesus,” in *Der historische Jesus: Tendenzen und Perspektiven der gegenwärtigen Forschung* (ed. by J. Schröter and R. Brucher; BZNW 114; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002), 163–212; G. Theissen and D. Winter, *The Quest for the Plausible Jesus: The Question of Criteria* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002); M. Schudson, “Dynamics of Distortion in Collective Memory,” in *Memory Distortion* (ed. D. Schachter; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 346–64.

the more we reinforce previous perceptions within present frameworks. This process is socially framed on every level. This recognition cuts in two directions:

(1) Its first implication is that no memory is ever preserved objectively – in order for it to become a memory, it must evolve to remain intelligible and significant to the cognitive present. If a perception is not intelligible on some level, it will be obscured and forgotten. This is why memory theorists like Michael Schudson and Jan Assmann say that all memory is memory distortion.³ I have tried to avoid the term distortion in favor of the metaphor of “memory refraction” – more on that later – but I agree that previous models of accurate memories filed in the “banks” of memory need to be jarred from popular conception and perhaps the word distortion is sufficiently jarring.

To quote Pierre Nora, memory “remains in permanent evolution;” by which he means that memory is always at work to uphold the completion of the present.⁴

As I have said, this recognition cuts in two directions. (2) The second implication of memory’s continuously evolving character is the presupposition of continuity. Most memories evolve gradually and imperceptibly. Indeed, most often, if we notice that a memory has changed, we will deem it “contaminated” and bracket it as “unreliable” or “false”. No doubt, historians are in the business of pointing to incidences of revisionist history, just like psychologists are in the business of isolating the odd case of false memory. In both cases, strategies are at work to replace previous interpretations with more advantageous interpretations. Indeed, memory theorists are often more interested in counter-memory than they are in memory. But, most often, memory evolves slowly enough to have continuity with the frames that precede and follow them. If a memory is to survive into the present, it must not only be intelligible to the present, it must have been intelligible within each interconnected frame it inhabited along the way.

I consider my argument for mnemonic intelligibility to be small but a necessary advance within social memory theory as it balances two camps within memory studies: the “presentist”

³ Schudson, “Dynamics,” 348; J. Assmann, “Ancient Egyptian Antijudaism: A Case of Distorted Memory,” in *Memory Distortion* (ed. D. Schachter; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 365–78, esp 366.

⁴ P. Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–25.

approach (emphasizing synchronic analysis) and the “traditionalist” approach (incorporating diachronic analysis). My thanks to Barry Schwartz for his assessment of these two camps.⁵

So, on the one hand, memory is always evolving and never accurately preserved; on the other, this evolution is most often imperceptible and thus memories remain continuously intelligible. If the historiographer is motivated to defend the frailty of memory, she will emphasize part one. If the historiographer is motivated to defend the reliability of memory, he will emphasize part two.

In this book, I have tried my best to balance both aspects. No doubt, I lapse into overcorrection in either direction at times. But I have tried as best I could to live within the tension of the memory’s circular nature. The result was the counterbalance of two models. The first is the metaphor of a telescope lens. The second is an adaptation of the hermeneutical spiral.

Memory distortion, in its most prevalent form, is like the convex shape of a lens that receives and refracts light. When performing its proper function, a telescope lens “distorts” a focused object in order to magnify it. Depending on the quality of the lens, we can perceive an approximate distortion of objects not visible to the naked eye. The fact that the lens does not “report” the object’s image exactly how it was received is exactly its design. In the same way, the past is not available to the naked eye, but a refracted image of the past can be rendered intelligibly (notice here the important role that imagination plays in this process). For this reason, I prefer the term “memory refraction” over “memory distortion”.

I emphasize again for clarity that the past can never be conjured up to measure against our so-called accurate reconstructions. However, we ought not shed all confidence in our refracted images. History was always about memory, even when we thought we were interested in the past, we were always interested in how the past was represented in memory. I define the historian’s task as the judicious accounting of multiple interpretive trajectories with an eye to explaining the most plausible early perception or perceptions that set these memories in motion and infused them with significance.

Another way to describe memory begins with the model of the hermeneutical circle. Here I think specifically of what Schleiermacher called the psychological aspect of the

⁵ B. Schwartz, “What Difference does the Medium Make?” in *The Fourth Gospel in First-Century Media Culture* (eds. A. Le Donne and T. Thatcher; LNTS 426; London/New York: T & T Clark/Continuum, 2010), 227-40, esp.228.

hermeneutical circle.⁶ In an extension of the thesis that interpretation moves from part to whole and back again, the psychological aspect moves from preconceived thought category to new perception and then back again. Or, to put a Heideggarian concept as simply as possible, we perceive in approximation to what we have already perceived.⁷ This concept, in my mind, runs parallel to what French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (celebrated as the father of social memory theory⁸) called the “localization” of impressions of the past within the mental frameworks of the present.⁹ In keeping with the model of a circle, we could say that memory is the process whereby established thought categories dance with the novum, each providing momentum for the other.

Thus the novum is ever framed by established thought-categories and established thought-categories are ever reframed to accommodate the novum.

Because both poles of this interpretive process create momentum for the evolution of memory, the model of a spiral is preferable to that of a circle. In this way, memory theorists ought to have interest in both synchronic analysis and diachronic analysis; not only are particular mnemonic frameworks relevant, but also the complex network of relationships along a trajectory of frameworks. To my view this reinforces the concept of the “effects-history” in work of Gadamer and the more recently, nuanced advances of Schröter, Theissen, Winter and others.

So what tools are at our disposal to describe the relationships of these mnemonic frameworks as they spiral from one social frame to the next? How does one chart historical memory? Michael Schudson suggests four categories of memory distortion, what I would call patterns of memory refraction.¹⁰ These are

- (1) *distanciation*: the tendency for memories to become vague or for details to be forgotten;
- (2) *instrumentalization*: the tendency for memories to be reinterpreted to serve the present better;
- (3) *conventionalization*: the tendency for memories to conform to socio-typical experiences; and
- (4) *narrativization*: the tendency for memories to be conventionalized through the constraints of storytelling.

⁶ F.D.E. Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics, the Handwritten Manuscripts* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 150–51.

⁷ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM, 1962 [1927]), 194.

⁸ M. Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925).

⁹ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (trans. L. A. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

¹⁰ “Dynamics”, 348.

I have added a fifth, (5) *articulation*: the tendency for memories to conform to language conventions. I believe this is fifth category represents Halbwachs' conception of social memory and reinforces the more recent work of Fentress and Wickham.¹¹

If memory evolves from one social framework to the next, and if this process betrays recognizable patterns, historical memory can be charted. I hasten to reiterate the tension between memory's fragile and but necessarily intelligible nature. To advocate a method that charts memory is to walk a very fine line. Still, to an extent, repeated patterns of memory refraction allow us to plausibly reconstruct the mnemonic frameworks related to extant artifacts (this case, texts acting as sites of social memory).

Upon this foundation, I argue that patterns of memory refraction are recognizable in the commemorations of Jesus. By using the title "Son of David", I attempt to locate early and widespread perceptions of Jesus as they most plausibly relate to multiple mnemonic trajectories within Second Temple Judaism.

Of interest is the development of Solomon and David as exorcists *par excellence*. Of interest is the snowballing archetype of Solomonic wisdom. Of interest is the ideology implicit in this title as it was first employed by the Chronicler to paint an idealized portrait of Solomon and his kingdom. Of interest the fountainhead of Davidic messianism: 2 Sam 7 which is a promise to David about Solomon concerning the Jerusalem Temple. Of interest is the unique commemoration of Solomon as he balances both his political office and sacral duties.

I argue that the title Son of David is most often typological in character and emphasizes the relationship between David and Solomon. That the title is Solomonic can be seen from Chronicles, to Psalm of Solomon 17, to the Testament of Solomon, to 5th and 6th century CE incantation bowls. Importantly, the title is only extant once at Qumran and refers to Solomon (). Finally, it is most interesting that this title and its Solomonic significance do not find an easy home in the Christologies of the New Testament. Matthew, it seems, is the only remembrancer to appropriate this title Christologically, making intelligible his counter-memory of *die Davidssonfrage* (Mk 12:35-7 // Matt 22:41-46). My purpose here is to illustrate how extremely valuable counter-memory is for the historians task.

As applied to Jesus, the title Son of David is explained most plausibly not as an early interpretation of Jesus; nor is it explained most plausibly as wholesale invention of the Early

¹¹ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 45; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 85.

Church. *As applied to Jesus, this title is most plausibly explained as a lens that refocused early (socially framed) interpretations of Jesus, rendering them intelligible to later social frameworks.*

Whereas many previous treatments of the Jesus tradition would point to its interpretive evolution as evidence of Christological creativity and lament historical uncertainty, I take the opposite stance. If all historical memory is bent through socially spurred and constrained lenses, then the evidence of memory refraction is our best hope of postulating the trajectories of commemoration.

It is only when these commemorations show evidence of memory refraction that we can explain how they relate to the early perceptions which set them in motion. The historical Jesus is the figure who emerges from the most plausible family of perceptions connecting him to the cultural memories of Second Temple Judaism and the communicative memories of the Early Church.

As Jesus' contemporaries interpreted his historical significance within the frameworks of cultural memory, we locate this interpretive move along the trajectory of typology. The parameters of the cultural memories intelligible to Jesus contemporaries provide our first categories of socially spurred and constrained memory. The earliest perceptions of Jesus set in motion a pattern of mnemonic refraction. When two or more mnemonic trajectories can be seen reacting (often contrarily) to a communicative memory, I juxtapose these against the relevant cultural memories. In this way I "triangulate" the most plausible mnemonic sphere by explaining the most plausible relationship(s) of these mnemonic trajectories. By speaking of triangulation and trajectory, I do not suppose that I can pinpoint Jesus as he was. Rather, I postulate a historical portrait within the mnemonic sphere that best explains Jesus in his context and the impact created by multiple and varied perceptions of him. This, I argue, is the task of the historian.