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Abstract: This paper argues that the Gospels are ancient biographies of a recent figure. Ancient biographies of recent figures normally preserved a significant amount of accurate information about those figures, so our default expectation should be the same for the Gospels. The paper also argues that the Gospels are biographies of a sage and that this may strengthen the expectation further. Almost no one today doubts that Jesus was a sage with disciples. Yet disciples in this period normally carefully preserved and propagated their masters' teachings. Thus our default expectation, barring strong evidence to the contrary, should be the same for Jesus' disciples.

Introduction

Studies of Gospel genre and oral tradition have multiplied in recent decades. Many of these findings are helpful for us in exploring how accurately the Gospels depicted Jesus. Far from being novels fabricated by the composers' imaginations, the Gospels reflect significant information about their primary figure, who was active one or at most two generations earlier.

Until recently readers have traditionally approached the Gospels as biographies. This classification appeared more problematic in the early twentieth century when scholars recognized that the Gospels differed from modern biographies. In recent decades, however, the consensus has shifted back toward viewing the Gospels as biographies, so long as one recognizes them as ancient rather than modern biographies. Scholars influential in this debate include Talbert (1977), Burridge (1992), Shuler (1982), Aune (1987:46-76) and Frickenschmidt (1997).

Ancient readers would also approach a volume about a recent historical character in these terms, especially if it was clear that it employed recent sources (or was trusted as such a source by its near successors.) Novels, which flourished more fully in the late second and early third centuries, usually involved fictitious figures. When they did, less frequently, involve historical figures, they virtually never, in contrast to biographies, include a figure as recent as Jesus was to the writers of the first-century Gospels. Nor did they employ sources as we find in the Gospels (see Keener 2009a:76-78 and 2012).¹

After carefully defining the criteria for identifying genre and establishing the characteristic features of Greco-Roman *bioi*, or lives, Richard Burridge shows how the Gospels fit this genre (1992:191-239).² So forceful is Burridge's work on gospel genre as biography that one reviewer concluded, "This volume ought to end any legitimate denials of the canonical Gospels' biographical character" (Talbert 1993:715). Reversing his prior published position, Graham Stanton regarded as "surprisingly inaccurate" the older views of Bultmann and others that the Gospels were not biographies (1993:63; 1995:137).

The Nature of Ancient Biography

Those who have judged the Gospels harshly have often done so because they misapprehend their genres, evaluating them by criteria better used for modern biographies than ancient ones. For example, some critics complain that events sometimes vary in sequence among the Gospels; ancient biographies, however, were more often composed in topical rather than chronological order.³ Similarly, the same sayings in different Gospels sometimes appear with different wording. Ancient writers, however, valued paraphrase so long as one retained the central idea.⁴ Two of the Gospels open, after introductory comments, with John the Baptist and Jesus' public ministry; but ancient biographies often opened with a person's adult career (e.g., Plutarch *Caesar* 1.1-4).

While the nature of ancient biography explains the flexibility that we find among the Gospels, it also supports our trust in their offering an essentially reliable picture of Jesus. Many classicists argue that in this period biographies were essentially historical works, related to historiography (e.g., Bravo 2007:516); the boundaries between these two genres are quite 'fluid' (Stadter 2007:528; Burridge 1992:63-67; Aune 1988:125). Some scholars treat them, in fact, as a special category within the larger genre of ancient historiography (Kennedy 1978:136).

A Comparison with Other Biographies of a Recent Figure

Contrary to what some have assumed, ancient writers were well aware of the difference between fiction and historiography, and expected the latter to deal with facts.⁵ Granted, when historians and biographers wrote about the distant past, they sometimes had to depend on legends; they themselves noted that more recent sources were more reliable than these older ones.⁶ But what about when they wrote about more recent figures, figures of the preceding generation or two, as in the case of Jesus? In only a minority of cases did biographers write surviving biographies of figures as close to their own time as Jesus was to the writers of the Gospels. That minority of cases that have survived, however, are instructive. I compared three versions of Otho's life, composed roughly half a

century after his death. Although these versions, like the Gospels, each include some information unique to them, they also include considerable material that overlaps with the other surviving accounts.

Because I am publishing the fuller study on Otho elsewhere (Keener 2011b), I will merely sample and summarize some of the results here. Even a brief sample, however, should make obvious that the biographers did not engage in free composition. Whatever the relationship among our three contemporary sources (the biographies of Suetonius and Plutarch and the historical work of Tacitus), it is clear that they understood the genre as requiring historical information. Even if two of them borrowed from the other (despite more widespread sources; see comment below), they viewed their own work and that of their source as bound to historical information. Otho's final days in these documents are compared in Table 1.

These comparisons represent only a sample of the clear overlap in these documents. In Suetonius's brief biography of Otho, fewer than two thousand words, I found roughly fifty points of comparison with each of the other two authors. For a point of comparison with our Gospels as biographies: Mark, often dated to roughly four decades after Jesus's public ministry, is more than five times the length of Suetonius's account of Otho. If Mark's biographic approach is comparable to that of his contemporaries, we might therefore have expected more than two hundred and fifty points of comparison with any other biographies written at the same time. This estimate takes into account only places where Suetonius overlaps with his contemporaries, but if Suetonius depends on prior information where we can test him, it is logical to presume that he also does so where we cannot test him. Suetonius (and the other sources) gave indications of depending on oral and sometimes written sources even closer to the events. These observations simply demonstrate that biographies in this period written about recent figures (as opposed to those of the distant past) depended on substantial information.

In most cases we cannot know precisely what earlier sources these writers had available, but some hints remain. For example, Tacitus drew on Fabius Rusticus (cf. Tacitus *Ann.* 13.20.2; 14.2; 15.61), and Suetonius may have done so as well.⁷ Certainly we know that written sources often circulated in antiquity earlier than the historical reports that remain extant. Josephus, for example, wrote only about three decades after Nero's death, yet notes the proliferation of contemporary histories about Nero (*Ant.* 20.154), though he did not like them. Plutarch consulted witnesses, including an officer who described to him what he saw while Plutarch was touring the site with him (Plutarch *Otho* 14.1). Among Suetonius's sources, his own father Suetonius Laetus was a tribune serving under Otho, and shared with him information about Otho's character and actions (*Otho* 10.1). It was normal for writers about historical events to prefer contemporary sources and even to consult, where available, eyewitnesses. For example,

historians normally sought to consult with families of relevant individuals (see the sources in Byrskog 2002:82-83). Why should we assume the case to be different with the Gospels, which in fact sometimes make reference to such sources? There is a trend in some Gospels studies toward recognizing eyewitnesses (Riesner 2007).

Differences and Perspectives in Sources

These contemporary biographies yield differences as well as similarities. The differences range from minor variations, sometimes reconcilable, to stronger variations that appear difficult to reconcile. Ancient readers expected differences in sequence, and omitting material could be simply a matter of arrangement. Sometimes, however, differences appear more significant. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that even in these cases the differences involve matters of detail rather than major differences in the larger story.

Thus, for example, Suetonius may garble details when condensing information (probably the case in *Otho* 6.2; 8.2-3). Suetonius designates the name of Otho's supportive astrologer as Seleucus (*Otho* 4.1), whereas Tacitus and Plutarch designate him Ptolemy (Tacitus *Hist.* 1.22; Plutarch *Galba* 23.4). Likewise, Plutarch contradicts Tacitus in having the centurion Sempronius Densus bravely defend Galba himself (Plutarch *Galba* 26.5), whereas Tacitus has him defending Galba's adoptive son Piso (*Hist.* 1.43). The three writers diverge in their details when they recount soldiers nearly killing senators after some weapons were moved (Suetonius *Otho* 8.1-2; Tacitus *Hist.* 1.80-82; Plutarch *Otho* 3.3-7). In this case, comparing all three of our sources allows us to better reconstruct the larger context that makes sense of some details, though minor conflicts remain.

Ancient biographers varied in their degree of fidelity to their sources, so sampling biographic and historical treatments of Otho within a half century of his death provides only a general range of the sorts of differences that appear. The point that is important for the present study is that the differences in the sources cannot obscure the vast areas of agreement among them. That is, even in works with a significant range of variation (such as Gospels scholars usually claim for the Gospels), the degree of overlap is too substantial to ignore. No competent historian would ignore the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch when reconstructing Otho's life; instead they would likely exploit these sources for their information more confidently than do many scholars with the Gospels. Of course, they would approach them critically, working back from the variations to try to reconstruct the likeliest details. My point is that they would recognize that these sources provide us substantial historical information in what they report about the figure they treat.

But do not the Gospels teach theology as well as history? Indeed they do, but this approach does not remove them from the sphere of ancient historiography or biography. Ancient biographers did expect readers to draw moral

Suetonius	Tacitus	Plutarch
Otho's soldiers were not ready to give up the war (<i>Otho</i> 9.3), and initially refused to believe the report that they had experienced a defeat (10.1)	His soldiers were not ready to give up the war (<i>Hist.</i> 2.46)	The soldiers with him pledged their continuing loyalty (<i>Otho</i> 15.1-3)
Otho wanted to spare his followers further suffering on his behalf (<i>Otho</i> 9.3; 10.1; cf. 10.2—11.1)	Otho wanted to spare his followers further suffering on his behalf (<i>Hist.</i> 2.47)	Otho wanted to spare his followers further suffering on his behalf (<i>Otho</i> 15.3-6)
Otho's final instructions, summarized (<i>Otho</i> 10.2)	Otho's final speeches and instructions (<i>Hist.</i> 2.47-48)	Otho's final speech and instructions (<i>Otho</i> 15.3—17.2)
Otho gave final instructions for the safety of several people whom he addressed, including his nephew (<i>Otho</i> 10.2)	Otho consoled his nephew Salvius Cocceianus, noting that Otho had spared Vitellius' family hence mercy should be expected, and warning him to remember neither too much nor too little that Otho had been his uncle (<i>Hist.</i> 2.48)	Otho consoled his nephew Cocceianus, noting that Otho had spared Vitellius' family hence mercy should be expected, and warning him to remember neither too much nor too little that Otho had been his uncle (<i>Otho</i> 16.2)
Otho destroyed any letters that could incriminate his friends to Vitellius (<i>Otho</i> 10.2)	Otho destroyed any letters that could incriminate his friends to Vitellius (<i>Hist.</i> 2.48)	-
He distributed money to his servants (<i>Otho</i> 11.1)	He distributed money, though frugally (<i>Hist.</i> 2.48)	He distributed money to his servants, but carefully rather than lavishly (<i>Otho</i> 17.1)
Those beginning to leave the camp were being detained as deserters, but Otho prohibited harming them, and met with friends until late (<i>Otho</i> 11.1)	He urged his friends to depart and provided means (<i>Hist.</i> 2.48); the soldiers tried to prevent those departing, requiring his harsh intervention, and he met with those departing until late (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Otho persuaded his friends, especially those of rank, to depart (<i>Otho</i> 16.1-2), and provided means for their departure (17.2); the soldiers threatened to kill them unless they remained, forcing Otho to intervene harshly (16.3)
At a late hour Otho quenched his thirst with cold water (<i>gelidae aquae</i> , <i>Otho</i> 11.2)	Near evening Otho quenched his thirst with cold water (<i>gelidae aquae</i> , <i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	That evening, Otho quenched his thirst with some water (<i>Otho</i> 17.1)
Otho chose the sharper of two daggers to place under his pillow (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	Otho chose the sharper of two daggers to place under his head (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Otho chose the sharper of two daggers to place under his head (<i>Otho</i> 17.1)
Otho then slept soundly one more night (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	Otho then spent a quiet night, reportedly even sleeping some (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Otho then slept so deeply for the rest of the night that his attendants heard his breathing (<i>Otho</i> 17.1)
At dawn he stabbed himself to death (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	At dawn he fell on his weapon (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Just before dawn Otho fell on his sword (<i>Otho</i> 17.3)
People rushed in when he groaned, as he was dying from a single wound (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	People rushed in when he groaned, as he was dying from a single wound (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Hearing his groan the servants hurried in (<i>Otho</i> 17.3, leaving the implication that the single blow was sufficient to end his life)
He was quickly buried at his request (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	He was quickly buried at his request, to prevent disfigurement by his enemies (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Plutarch implies that he was buried quickly (<i>Otho</i> 17.3-4)
Many soldiers killed themselves in mourning by his bier (<i>Otho</i> 12.2)	Some soldiers killed themselves in mourning by his bier (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	Some soldiers killed themselves at his funeral pyre (<i>Otho</i> 17.4)
He died in his thirty-eighth year (<i>Otho</i> 11.2)	He died in his thirty-seventh year (<i>Hist.</i> 2.49)	He lived 37 years (<i>Otho</i> 18.2)

Table 1: A comparison of Ortho's final days in Suetonius and Plutarch and the historical work of Tacitus

lessons from their accounts; this expectation characterized ancient biography far more than it characterized ancient novels. Biographers often had strong perspectives; Tacitus and Suetonius, for example, loathed Domitian, a perspective that undoubtedly facilitated their crediting the worst reports about him. Likewise, ancient historians often had moral, political, and theological agendas; they illustrated and supported these agendas through narration of information, however, not through creating fictitious stories.⁸ Other genres existed for those who wished merely

to preach without information, or to have a free hand in imaginative composition (cf. the comments of Vermes 1984:20). The Gospel writers, who cite earlier biblical tradition profusely, also knew well ancient Israelite historiography, which Jewish people believed conveyed both historical information and the divinely inspired interpretation of it. Some other Jewish people in this period continued to affirm the possibility of inspired historiography (Hall 1991).

Oral Tradition

Granted that biographers depended on prior information wherever possible, how accurate was this information? Some information remained in wide oral circulation; thus, for example, Tacitus sees no need to report most of Seneca's dying words, recorded by the latter's secretaries, because in his day they remained too well-known to bear repeating (*Ann.* 15.63). Some scholars protest that the comparison with biographies of Otho is unfair at this point, because Otho was an emperor, a public figure in the Roman Empire, whereas Jesus was merely a sage. Such a concern underestimates, however, the care with which information could be preserved in schools of sages. Oral tradition within schools of sages was in fact more likely to be preserved (on matters of detail like sayings) than in most other kinds of settings.

Memory in Mediterranean Antiquity

In our modern age of ready access to information, most westerners lack exposure to the extent to which oral memory can be trained and developed. The case is different in some other societies, and was quite different in Mediterranean antiquity.⁹ Such recall tends to be thematic rather than verbatim, but can include entire epics or other material unexpected by modern western audiences (Harvey 1998:41). Variation characterizes much oral performance, so it should not surprise us to find variations in wording among the Gospels (Dunn 2005:110, 112, 118, 122).¹⁰

Among the uneducated, ancient bards could recite epics hours in length; among the educated, ancient orators memorized their speeches, again often hours in length.¹¹ Some persons developed such exceptional memories that they put them on display. Seneca the Elder, for example, claims that in his youth he could repeat back two thousand names in sequence immediately after hearing them (Seneca the Elder *Controv.* 1.pref.2). After lamenting the decline of his mnemonic abilities in his old age, he then proceeds to repeat back long sections of more than a hundred declamations that he heard in his youth (*Controv.* passim). Nor was Seneca alone; we hear of other such feats, for example, the man who could repeat back all the details of a day-long auction from memory at the end of the day, or the man who, having heard a poem once, could recite it back verbatim (*Controv.* 1.pref.19).

Memory was most important, however, in academic settings.¹² Memorization characterized elementary education,¹³ but, combined with other skills, also continued to be important at more advanced levels of education (most common in later teenage years), that is, among teachers' disciples. Members of Greek schools passed on sayings attributed to the schools' founders from one generation to the next.¹⁴ The founders themselves seem to have encouraged this practice.¹⁵ Indeed, in all schools "teaching was passed down from master to pupils, who in turn passed it on to their own pupils" (Alexander 2001:112); the founder's teachings often functioned as canonical for their communities (Alexander 2001:112-13).

Students laboured to learn their teachers' lectures, often with careful repetition.¹⁶ After a teacher died, former students might collectively recall the teachings, reconstructing with the benefit of the group's memory rather than merely that of an individual (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.524). In reference to traditional Middle Eastern culture, Dunn points out that group ('net') transmission can retain and communicate more information than individual ('chain') transmission (2005:43-46, 114-15). Although less care was required, they also transmitted accounts of the teachers' behaviour to subsequent generations (e.g., Eunapius *Lives* 458; Philostratus *Lives* 1.22.524; *t. Piska* 2:15-16; *Sipre Deut.* 221.1.1.).

All our evidence from rabbinic schools suggests that if anything, advanced Jewish education in the Torah emphasized oral memory more than, rather than less than, typical Greek schools.¹⁷ Some object that the rabbinic evidence is later; while the objection is technically true, we have earlier Jewish evidence for emphasizing careful memory practices and strong education (see Josephus *Life* 8; *Apion* 1.60; 2.171-73, 204). Moreover, we should consider the usual expectation behind this objection. Extant evidence is always limited, but virtually all the extant evidence points in the same direction. If some scholars wish to explain away all Greek evidence as foreign and Jewish evidence as late, and then argue the opposite of where this evidence almost unanimously points, they are explaining away all extant evidence and making an argument from silence based on the fact that no evidence remains. Is it not the more usual practice in ancient historiography to work from the limited surviving evidence we do have rather than to argue the opposite based on the limitations of our evidence? Levinskaya (1997: ix-x) is in favour of using available extant evidence, despite its limitations, while Donaldson (1997:51) discusses the value of depending on a diverse range of our limited sources.

By definition, Jesus' disciples were not only long-term eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry, but also had been his *disciples*, those who learned from him as students learn from a teacher. Like many advanced disciples, they had only one main teacher. It is also difficult to dispute (see 1 Cor 15:5-7; Gal 1:18-19; 2:8-9) that they assumed prominent roles in the early Christian movement, in which they would have been teaching and doing what disciples were trained to do: to pass on the master's teachings. One might forget some material over the years, but if one is continually teaching, hence rehearsing, the words of one's master, one is far more likely than otherwise to preserve a greater amount of information (on factors supporting more accurate memory, see Bauckham 2006:331-34).

Literacy and Memory?

Some object that Jesus' followers, unlike disciples of most teachers, were illiterate Galilean peasants. Several problems exist concerning this objection. First, we do not know that all of Jesus' disciples were illiterate. Admiring Jewish emphasis on education, some counted the Jewish

people a nation of philosophers (see Stern 1974:8-11, 46-50; Gager 1983:39). Some have argued for wider literacy among them (Millard 2000, 2003), although the matter remains disputed. Moreover, fishermen (the largest named profession among Jesus' followers) were not peasants, and many have argued that they had more income, hence more access to education, than many others (see e.g., Freyne 1988:241).

Finally, one of Jesus' named followers was a tax collector (Mark 2:14), who probably would have been literate. Later tradition in fact suggests that other writers after him made use of his material (Eddy and Boyd 2007:250, noting Papias' testimony in Eusebius *H.E.* 3.39.16). To respect this tradition does not require the rejection of Markan priority, which I also hold. This suggestion is not as unusual as some scholars have insisted. Note-taking was standard practice in Greek education, and the students' notes were often both thorough and accurate.¹⁸ Teachers often left the matter of publishing their views to their followers (Kennedy 1978:129). If even one of Jesus' disciples took notes, characterizing them all as illiterate is inaccurate. Confronted with a classicist's evidence of note-taking in antiquity, one traditional form critic conceded that such evidence would require revision in the scepticism of some of his more radical peers (Fuller 1978:179).

Second, in some societies literacy is inversely proportional to oral memory. It is oral cultures that usually emphasize memory cultivation the most (Byrskog 2002:110-11). Scholars who belittle these possibilities based on our own culture should consider the oral memorization of the Qur'an in some societies today.¹⁹ My wife, who is Congolese, has a Ph.D. in history and spent most of her childhood in African villages, also emphasizes that oral memory was often strongest before the spread of literacy.²⁰

Third, in the concrete setting of Mediterranean antiquity, we know that oral memory did flourish even among the illiterate. The bards who could recite Homer from memory were largely illiterate, and were criticized by intellectuals for merely memorizing rather than engaging the traditions critically. Disciples of some kinds of teachers could come from largely illiterate backgrounds.²¹ Though disciples of rabbis were probably expected to be able to read (certainly to recite) the Torah, their preservation of post-Torah tradition in this period seems to have been largely oral, and some may not have come from very literate backgrounds.²²

In short, we have good reason to trust that the eyewitnesses, who were in positions of church leadership, would have remembered large amounts of Jesus' teaching. We should also assume that, like virtually all other disciples in this period, they would have viewed it as a duty to accurately communicate their master's teachings. Those writing about history normally consulted eyewitnesses first (Byrskog 2002:82-83). The amount of time depend-

ent on oral memory before biographies began to be written is also fairly short. By the time that Luke writes his Gospel, 'many' had already written about Jesus (Luke 1:1). Indeed, as W. D. Davies pointed out, probably only a single lifespan 'separates Jesus from the last New Testament document' (1966:115-16).

Traits Suggesting Early Tradition

One could multiply an extensive list of traits suggesting early tradition in the first-century Gospels (as opposed to later works that some have compared with these Gospels). Here, however, to avoid redundancy, I provide merely a brief sample (see further Keener 2010; also in 2009b passim):

- Story parables, common in Jesus' teaching, are a teaching form especially characteristic of Jewish sages (see Johnston 1977)²³
- The first half of the 'Lord's Prayer' (Matt 6:9-10//Luke 11:2) resembles and undoubtedly echoes the early Jewish prayers, especially and most obviously the Kaddish (see e.g., Jeremias 1964:98; 1971:21; Vermes 1984:43; Luz 1989:371)
- The question that the Pharisees ask about divorce, and that Jesus answers, reflects a debate reported between the two schools of Pharisees precisely in Jesus' day (especially clear in Matthew; see *m. Git.* 9:10; *Sipre Deut.* 269.1.1; Keener 2009b:463-64)
- Later Babylonian Jewish teachers, not likely influenced by Jesus, could depict what was impossible or close to impossible as 'an elephant passing through a needle's eye'; in Palestine the equivalent would have been a camel (Mark 10:25) (Abrahams 1924:208; Dalman 1929:230; Jeremias 1972:195; Bailey 1980:166)
- Jesus played on debates between the two schools of Pharisees in his day as to whether one must clean the inside of the cup first (Matt 23:25-26//Luke 11:39-41; see Neusner 1976:492-94; McNamara 1983:197)
- removing the beam from one's eye before trying to remove the chip from another's (Matt 7:3-5//Lk 6:41-42; see Vermes 1993:80; Lachs 1987:137)
- the phrase, 'to what shall I/we compare?' (Matt 11:16//Lk 7:31) was common in Jewish rhetoric, especially to introduce parables²⁴
- the phrase, 'So-and-so is like' (Matt 11:16; 13:24; 25:1; cf. also Mk 4:26, 31; 13:34; Lk 6:48-49) is common in Jewish rhetoric²⁵

None of this is meant to deny that the Gospel writers and their tradition often updated their language for their own audiences. It is simply to note that, despite that practice, a significant amount of primitive features survive, revealing at these points the persistence of early tradition. Because the one language intelligible to everyone in Antioch, and probably already in Jerusalem, was Greek, the Aramaic features such as *ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου*, 'the son of the

man,' which makes no sense in Greek, probably go back to the earliest bilingual community. Likewise, reports that reflect Galilean customs or other Palestinian Jewish features undoubtedly date to the earliest period of the church, when memories of Jesus and the dominance of the eyewitnesses' voices would remain strongest.

The Objection about Miracles

Many scholars would accept the Gospels as more reliable biographies except for a philosophic obstacle: the Gospels contain miracle accounts, which many modern western readers deem implausible. These objections, formulated especially by some deists but popularized by David Hume, are debated much more vigorously today than in the past century.

For the purposes of typical historical analysis, what is relevant is not one's philosophic view about the possibility of miracles, but whether eyewitnesses can report what they believe to have been miracles. Especially in the case of miraculous cures, the evidence is overwhelming that eyewitnesses through history and today experience what they believe to be supernatural cures and that they report them accordingly (see in detail Keener 2011a). Not only Jesus' followers but also others reported the belief that he performed wonders (see e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 18.63, as understood by Vermes 1973:79; 1987). Most historical Jesus scholars today acknowledge that Jesus' contemporaries experienced him as a healer and an exorcist however we might wish to explain those experiences (Blackburn 1994:362; Eve 2002:16-17; Welch 2006:360; Licona and Van der Watt 2009:2; Dunn 2003:670; Hultgren 2009:134-35).

If this is the case, one cannot count the presence of miracle accounts against the genre of the Gospels or the reliability of the traditions behind them. Biographies of sages included teaching; a biography of one reported as a miracle worker would necessarily include miracle reports. This pattern remains true in historical analysis of other figures associated with miracle reports (see MacMullen 1984:7, 23-24; Eve 2002:357-59; McClymond 2004:83).

Conclusion

The Gospels are ancient biographies of a recent figure. Ancient biographies of recent figures normally preserved a significant amount of accurate information about those figures. Why would anyone expect otherwise about the Gospels? Almost no one today doubts that Jesus was a sage with disciples. Yet disciples in this period normally carefully preserved and propagated their masters' teachings. Why would anyone expect otherwise about Jesus' disciples? One might wonder if, when some scholars approach the Gospels with radical scepticism, concerns other than mere balanced historical analogy are at work.

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- 55; *Ant. rom.* 1.1.2-4; 1.4.2.
- 6 E.g., Thucydides 1.21.1; Livy 6.1.2-3; 7.6.6; Diodorus Siculus 1.6.2; 1.9.2; 4.1.1; 4.8.3-5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. rom.* 1.12.3; *Thuc.* 5.
- 7 For Fabius Rusticus as a source for Tacitus, cf. Martin 2003:1470.
- 8 E.g., Polybius 1.1.1; 8.8.3-6; 10.26.9; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. rom.* 1.2.1; 1.6.3-5; Diodorus Siculus 15.1.1; 37.4.1; Val. Max. 2.pref.; Tac. *Agr.* 1; Lucian *Hist.* 59; cf. also Pliny *Ep.* 5.8.1-2.
- 9 For oral memory in other societies, see e.g., Lewis 1975:43; Vansina 1986:10.
- 10 On retention of the gist, despite variation in detail, see also Bauckham 2006:333-34.
- 11 For bards, see West 2003; Xenophon *Symp.* 3.5-6; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 36.9; on speeches, see e.g., Quintilian *Inst.* 11.2.1-51; Satterthwaite 1993:344; cf. Olbricht 1997:159, 163.
- 12 See e.g., Quintilian *Inst.* 1.3.1; 2.4.15; Plutarch *Educ.* 13, *Mor.* 9E; Diogenes Laertius 6.2.31; Eunapius *Lives* 481.
- 13 See e.g., Musonius Rufus *frg.* 51, p. 144.3-7; Theon *Progymn.* 2.5-8 (Butts).
- 14 Culpepper 1975:193; Aulus Gellius 7.10.1; Socrates *Ep.* 20.
- 15 Diogenes Laertius 10.1.12, on Epicurus, according to Diocles; on followers of Pythagoras, cf. Culpepper 1975:50.
- 16 E.g., Lucian *Hermot.* 1. Pythagoreans reportedly emphasized this practice to the greatest extent (Iamblichus *V.P.* 20.94; 29.165; 35.256; Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 1.14; 2.30; 3.16; Diodorus Siculus 10.5.1).
- 17 See e.g., information in Goodman 1983:79; Gerhardtsson 1961:113-21, 127-29, 168-70. For the emphasis on careful traditioning, see further *tos. Yeb.* 3:1; *Mek. Pisha* 1.135-36; *Sipre Deut.* 48.2.6; *Ab. R. Nat.* 24 A.
- 18 Quintilian *Inst.* 1.pref. 7-8; Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 108.6; Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.preface; Lucian *Hermot.* 2.
- 19 For the interplay with literacy, cf. e.g., Wagner and Lotfi 1983:111-21.
- 20 Cf. discussions in various sources on African oral historiography, e.g., Hoeree and Hoogbergen 1984:245-89.
- 21 See e.g., Alciphron *Farm.* 11 (Sitalces to Oenopion, his son), 3.14; 38 (Euthydicus to Philiscus), 3.40. Although the characters are fictitious, Alciphron depends on his audience recognizing the accounts' resemblance to social reality.
- 22 For some key sages from poorer backgrounds, at least according to later tradition, see *b. Ned.* 50a; *Pes.* 49b.
- 23 Although twentieth-century scholars often disputed the Gospels' reports that Jesus frequently provided interpretations for his parables, these appear frequently in ancient Jewish parables; see Stern 1991:24; Johnston 1977:561-62, 565-67, 637-38; Vermes, *Religion*, 92-99.
- 24 See e.g., *m. Ab.* 3:17; *Suk.* 2:10; *tos. Ber.* 1:11; 6:18; *B.K.* 7:2-4; *Hag.* 2:5; *Sanh.* 1:2; 8:9; *Sipra Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim* 99.2.5; *Behuq.* pq. 2.262.1.9; *Sipre Num.* 84.2.1; 93.1.3; *Sipre Deut.* 1.9.2; 1.10.1; 308.2.1; 308.3.1; 309.1.1; 309.2.1.
- 25 See e.g., *tos. Suk.* 2:6; *Sipra Shemini Mekhilta deMiluim* 99.2.2; *Behuq.* pq.3.263.1.5, 8; *Sipre Num.* 84.1.1; 86.1.1; 89.4.2; *Sipre Deut.* 3.1.1; 11.1.2; 26.3.1; 28.1.1; 29.4.1; 36.4.5; 40.6.1; 43.8.1; 43.16.1; 45.1.2; 48.1.3; 53.1.3; 306.4.1; 306.7.1; 309.5.1; 312.1.1; 313.1.1; 343.1.2; 343.5.2.

Endnotes

- 1 I discuss this genre question more extensively in the second chapter of the introduction in Keener 2012.
- 2 For criteria for genre, see Burridge 1992:109-27; for pre-Christian Greco-Roman biographies, 128-53; for later ones, 154-90. Although I am citing from the original Cambridge University Press edition, he interacts more fully with subsequent works in his second edition published by Eerdmans (2004).
- 3 See e.g., Suetonius *Aug.* 9; *Calig.* 22.1; *Nero* 19.3; Keener 2009a:82; Stanton 1974:119-21; Görgemanns 2003.
- 4 As a standard rhetorical exercise, see Theon *Progymn.* 1.93-171; Hermogenes *Method* 24.440; Libanius *Anecdote* 1.4; 2.3; *Maxim* 1.2-5; 2.3; 3.2.
- 5 See e.g., Aristotle *Poet.* 9.2-3, 1451b; Pliny *Ep.* 5.5.3; 5.8.5; 7.17.3; 7.33.10; 8.4.1; 9.19.5; Arrian *Ind.* 7.1; even the rhetorical historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thuc.*