

The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus: Current Debates, Prior Debates, and the Goal of Historical Jesus Research

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ABSTRACT:

The article argues that current debates over method in historical Jesus studies reveal two competing 'models' for how to use the gospel tradition in order to approach the historical Jesus. These models differ over their treatments of the narrative frameworks of the Gospels and, concomitantly, their views of the development of the Jesus tradition. A first model, inspired by form criticism and still advocated today, attempts to attain a historical Jesus 'behind' the interpretations of early Christians. A second model, inspired by advances in historiography and memory theory, posits an unattainable historical Jesus on the basis of the interpretations of the early Christians, and as part of a larger process of accounting for how and why early Christians came to view Jesus in the ways that they did. Advocating the latter approach to the historical Jesus and responding to previous criticism, this essay argues further that these two models are methodologically and epistemologically incompatible. It therefore challenges the suggestion that one can affirm the goals of the second model while maintaining the methods of the first model.

KEYWORDS:

Historical Jesus; memory approach; criteria approach; post-Bultmannians; narrative and historiography

In recent years we have become aware that *all* reporting
is inevitably influenced in one way or another.
But this only means that the problem has been
more precisely posed, rather than solved
(Hahn 1969: 10; emphasis original).

This essay will argue that several recent debates in contemporary Jesus studies have at their base a rather simple disagreement over whether the interpretations of Jesus in the Gospels

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enable or inhibit a quest for the historical Jesus.² This disagreement is, however, only seemingly simple. It masks complex and interrelated methodological and epistemological issues concerning (1) the nature and development of the Jesus tradition and (2) the task of the historian employing that tradition in order to approach the historical Jesus.

Differing opinions on these matters yield two general ‘models’ for historical Jesus research, which, as we will see, are not unique to contemporary Jesus studies. At the conceptual center of the first model is a past reality that is assumed to be attainable. Under this model, the historian attempts to get ‘behind’ early Christian interpretations of Jesus. At the conceptual center of the second model are the narratives of the Gospels, which are understood to be receptions—in all varieties of accuracy and inaccuracy—of a past reality that is assumed to be unattainable. Under this model, the historian may posit the historical Jesus as a by-product of attempts to explain why early Christians came to interpret Jesus in the manners that they did. I will argue that only the second model is methodologically defensible.

There are, of course, similarities between these two general models for historical Jesus research. What follows, however, will give detailed attention to the significant

² Nomenclature for the ‘historical Jesus’ is notoriously difficult. For the sake of convenience, I will use ‘historical Jesus’ in the general sense reflected in the phrase ‘historical Jesus research’, which takes as its primary focus the man who lived and taught in Galilee and Judea in the first century CE. Among many others proposing similar distinctions, Schröter (2014: 9) is correct that any portrayal of the ‘historical Jesus’ is always a product of the modern historian and not, therefore, able to be equated with the ‘earthly Jesus’ who, as a figure of the past, is no longer directly accessible to historians. Despite affirming Schröter, I here use ‘historical Jesus’ in the more general sense for two reasons. First, some contemporary scholars continue to affirm, in either explicit statement or methodology, the scholar’s ability to reach an unmediated Jesus. For the sake of engaging such work, it is necessary to allow the phrase ‘historical Jesus’ a wide set of referents. Secondly, Günther Bornkamm and Ferdinand Hahn use ‘historical Jesus’ (*historische Jesus*) and ‘earthly Jesus’ (*irdische Jesus*) in a different manner from Schröter, and one that is important for my argument.

difference between these two models of historical Jesus research when it comes specifically to their employment (or not) of the kerygmatic narratives of the Gospels. I will argue that this difference of approach to the historical Jesus stems ultimately from, and is thus inseparable from, their respective understandings of the nature of the Jesus tradition itself and its transmission.³ A related further goal of this essay is to offer greater clarity about the proper contribution of social memory theory to historical Jesus research by responding to some criticisms of my and others' previous work.

After first providing an overview of pertinent issues in two contemporary debates, I will consider the work of Ernst Käsemann, Günther Bornkamm, and Ferdinand Hahn in the 1950s and 1960s. Their treatments of the kerygmatic narratives of the Gospels, which became foundational for subsequent Jesus scholars, provide important perspectives from which to view the two rival models for the quest for the historical Jesus today. The key issue in all of this discussion is, as stated earlier, whether historians consider the early Christian interpretations as necessary aids in *hypothesizing* a historical Jesus or as hindrances for *getting to* a historical Jesus.

1. Debates in the 2010s

Two recent debates in Jesus studies are relevant to the present discussion. The first debate concerns the legitimacy of criteria of authenticity as a historiographical method. The second debate concerns the relationship between social memory theory and tradition criticism as it relates to historical Jesus research.

³ Cf. David du Toit (2001: 123), who noted a 'complete lack of consensus on one of the most fundamental questions of the whole enterprise [of historical Jesus research], namely on the question of the process of transmission of Jesus traditions'. This observation is just as applicable in 2016.

1.1 The Demise of Authenticity and Its Critics

Debate over the usefulness of the criteria of authenticity has now raged for at least forty years, dating to Morna Hooker's arguments with Norman Perrin and R. H. Fuller in the 1970s (see especially Perrin 1967: 39–49; 1970: 70–74; Hooker 1970: 480–87; 1972: 570–81; 1975: 28–44; Fuller 1982: 42–48). Criticisms of the criteria reached a crescendo in 2012 with the publication of *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, which Anthony Le Donne and I edited. Although unified in the belief that the criteria of authenticity as traditionally used were no longer a viable historiographical method for Jesus scholars, the contributors expressed a variety of opinions, sometimes conflicting, about precisely why they do not work and whether the proper response is to abandon them or rehabilitate them.

My contribution to that volume (Keith 2012) argued that attempts to rehabilitate the criteria of authenticity by N. T. Wright (1996), Gerd Theissen and Dagmar Winter (2002), and Anthony Le Donne (2009; 2011a) had not faced fully the implications of the fact that the concept of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' Jesus tradition is built upon form criticism's understanding of the Jesus tradition.⁴ When criteria of authenticity came together as a formal methodology in historical Jesus studies among post-Bultmannian scholars (see further below), those scholars imported form-critical categories for the tradition and identified 'authentic' tradition as uninterpreted history from Jesus' life and 'inauthentic' tradition as anything that cohered with early Christian interpretive categories in the Gospels (or, in the case of dissimilarity, also Second Temple Jewish interpretive categories; Keith 2011a: 35 n.33). Among other methodologies, social memory theory, which stems from the work of Maurice Halbwachs in the 1920s (English translations 1980; 1992), asserts that all reflection on the past, whether at the level of the individual or the group, is an indissoluble mix of the

⁴ On the dependence of the post-Bultmannians on form criticism's definition of the gospel tradition, see similarly du Toit 2001: 100, 122–3, of which I was unfortunately unaware in previous research.

past and present insofar as the past is always interpreted via the frameworks of the present.⁵ Thus, dividing any commemorative artifact or expression into constituent parts, some of which reflect solely the past and some of which reflect solely the present, is tendentious since memory (whether historically accurate or inaccurate) simply is not formed, retained, or expressed in those manners.⁶ From a variety of perspectives, Wright, Theissen, Winter, and Le Donne had each offered astute historiographical advances that seemed to preclude an affirmation of the form-critical model, but nevertheless retained the criteria of authenticity. I concluded, therefore, that future Jesus studies must attend to the nature of the Jesus tradition ‘before deciding how it is to be used in historical reconstruction’ and that ‘criteria of authenticity’ is a problematic concept (Keith 2011a: 47; emphasis original). As should be clear, then, my argument was not and is not against ‘criteria’ in a general sense of methodological principles—for I am not advocating a methodological free-for-all—but specifically against the concept of ‘authenticity’ and the tradition model for the Jesus tradition that generates it.

Some responses to *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* have been very positive (Bond 2014; Simpson 2014; Crossley 2015: 35 n.1). As with any book that challenges a reigning paradigm, however, there have been expected critical reactions.⁷ Tobias

⁵ One must note that, in this context, ‘the past’ does not refer directly to ‘the actual past’ or ‘what really happened’.

⁶ Halbwachs 1992: 38: ‘There is no point in seeking where [memories] are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them’. Halbwachs thus conceptualizes his approach to memory (‘collective memory’) in contrast to cognitive approaches to memory that study it as a physiological phenomenon (1992: 40 n.3).

⁷ In addition to those addressed below, see Evans 2013 and van Eck 2015. As brief responses, Evans has misunderstood the contributors’ skepticism about the criteria of authenticity specifically as skepticism about the

Hägerland's recent article (2015), upon which I focus here, is an important critical response that argues for the continued legitimacy of the criteria approach. Hägerland concedes that my essay and other essays in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity* demonstrate that 'authenticity' is a problematic concept that needs further attention (2015: 62–63; cf. 65). He spends much of the first part of his discussion, though, summarizing and criticizing my claim that the criteria approach grew out of form criticism (2015: 49–53). Some of Hägerland's description of my position is correct but in some important places he has either misrepresented my claims or portrayed me as less nuanced than I have been. These instances have a bearing on the legitimacy of both my claims and his responses.

In general, Hägerland fails to give sufficient attention to the fact that my arguments have addressed quite specifically the model of 'authenticity' that accompanied the rise of the criteria approach as a formal methodology in Jesus studies in the 1950s and 1960s, not all of form criticism or the full history of every single criterion of authenticity. Thus, he endeavors to disprove my claim about the form-critical origins of the criteria approach by demonstrating that 'individual authenticity criteria' pre-date form criticism (2015: 51). He thus claims, 'Keith never attends to the methodological discussions in historical Jesus research prior to the emergence of form criticism', and cites the works of Strauss and Schmiedel, as well as

quest for the historical Jesus generally. None of the contributors believes the quest to be impossible or unproductive, however, and the equating of the quest for the historical Jesus with the criteria of authenticity is precisely what most of the essays are trying to overcome. Van Eck's claim that I have argued that 'memory studies' are 'the way forward in establishing the historicity of the Gospel traditions' (2015: 1) attributes to me an argument that I have nowhere made and do not affirm. I have argued precisely the opposite, that social memory theory itself does not prove historical accuracy or inaccuracy (Keith 2012: 204–5). I also cannot understand how he concludes that I am a historical positivist simply for arguing in favor of social memory theory's usage or for arguing that there were only ever interpretations of Jesus from the beginning (van Eck 2015: 3 n.7). It is difficult to affirm that van Eck has understood what he is criticizing.

Theissen and Winter's history of the criterion of dissimilarity (2015: 51). I, however, not only cite Strauss's and Schmiedel's discussions of authenticity in my work (Keith 2011a: 9, 28 [Strauss]; 2012: 34 n.38 [Schmiedel]), but also point to Theissen and Winter's demonstration of the age of the criterion of dissimilarity and Le Donne's demonstration of the age of the criterion of coherence (Keith 2012: 28, 30 n.21; 2014 73 n.12), having co-edited a book in which Winter and Le Donne make these points (Keith and Le Donne 2012). Furthermore, *contra* Hägerland, I have never argued that every individual criterion of authenticity grew directly from form criticism. Rather, I argued that the 'criteria approach' grew from form criticism, by which I meant the coalescence of various criteria into a formal methodology in Jesus studies to the extent that scholars of various subsequent periods presented the criteria of authenticity as simply the means by which one conducts historical Jesus research.⁸ I have consistently signalled this focus upon the convergence of the criteria into a formal methodology by referring to the 'criteria approach' or the 'enterprise of criteria of authenticity' (Keith 2011a: 30), their 'formative development as a methodology in historical Jesus research' (2011a: 30), and 'the criteria approach as a formal methodology' (2014: 74). I even explicitly state at one point that my argument 'offers a macro-level criticism of the criteria approach rather than addressing individual criteria of authenticity' (2012: 26). I also likewise note that, 'despite the fact that the sustained development of the criteria approach occurred in the period of the New Quest . . . , the appeal to criteria of authenticity is not beholden to any particular quest' (2012: 28). Thus, although Hägerland is entirely correct that some individual criteria emerged earlier than form criticism, I have never claimed otherwise. Another reviewer correctly noted that my argument was not about the criteria's individual

⁸ As a sample of such later presentations, see Perrin 1967: 39–49; Perrin 1970: 70–72; Meier 1991: 167–95; Becker 1998: 13–15; Ehrman 1999: 89–96; Schnelle 2009: 68–72; Keener 2009: 155–59; Hägerland 2012: 17–28.

genetic origins, but ‘the later adoption of the criteria by the New Quest historians’ (Simpson 2014: 378).

A related misrepresentation of my claim occurs when Hägerland states, ‘The fact that mere association with form criticism seems to be enough to invalidate the use of authenticity criteria’ (2015: 51). This description is an exaggeration of my argument, presumably intended to portray me as having carelessly thrown out the baby with the bathwater.⁹ My argument, however, is more nuanced than simply asserting guilt-by-association and, again, has never concerned every facet of form criticism, but particularly its model for the transmission of the Jesus tradition. (I have also pointed out form criticism’s lasting contributions to New Testament scholarship and social memory theory’s affirmation of those contributions.¹⁰)

As to the criteria approach’s indebtedness to form criticism for that tradition model, *contra* Hägerland, I do not consider this issue to be debatable. Hägerland acknowledges the accuracy of two of my arguments in this regard: (1) Bultmann’s advocacy of a form of the criterion of dissimilarity and (2) the fact that form criticism’s assumptions about the Jesus tradition and the criteria approach’s assumptions about the Jesus tradition ‘mirror’ each other (2015: 51). He has, however, overlooked a third argument of mine concerning the indebtedness of the criteria approach’s architects to form criticism—their outright admission of the fact.¹¹ Käsemann stated explicitly that he developed his search for ‘the genuineness of the individual unit of material’ on the basis of ‘the work of the Form-Critics’ (1964: 34).¹²

⁹ Cf. Hägerland 2015: 65: ‘If one can avoid going to the extreme of doing away with the wisdom of our scholarly forbears along with their follies. . .’.

¹⁰ See especially Keith 2015: 523–5, but also earlier Keith 2011a: 61–62, 69; 2012: 37. Similarly Kirk and Thatcher 2005: 32.

¹¹ Van Eck makes the same mistake in claiming curiously, and erroneously, that ‘the ‘criteria approach’ does not make use of *Formgeschichte*’ (2015: 4).

¹² I have slightly modified the first translation from that of the translator. For German, see Käsemann 1970: 203.

Bornkamm, too, stated explicitly that it was on the basis of ‘form criticism’ that ‘the critical exegete and the historian is therefore obliged, in questions concerning the history of tradition, to speak often of ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ words of Jesus and thus to distinguish words of the historical Jesus from ‘creations by the Church’ (1960: 20; see also 218). Fuller claimed that he developed his version of the criterion of dissimilarity directly from Bultmann (1982: 42). Perrin claimed that he and Fuller both ‘worked in full knowledge of the impact of form criticism’ and that this was their starting point: ‘We must follow in the path of R. Bultmann in his *History of the Synoptic Tradition* or J. Jeremias in his *Parables of Jesus*. . . . When we have reached that form of the material [‘the primary stratum’] we must then devise criteria by means of which we can test its authenticity’ (1970: 70–71). Hahn claimed that his investigation of the pre-Easter Jesus assumed the ‘fairly dependable results from the work of form and tradition criticism’ among others, and that his method ‘no doubt . . . builds on the results that they produce’ (1983: 47).

In this light, although I am appreciative of Hägerland’s engagement with my work, he has not only misrepresented several of my key claims but avoided addressing fully what is for me the central concern. This central concern is not the entire edifice of form criticism but specifically the manner in which it defines the written Gospels as the culmination of a transmission process whereby the Jesus tradition circulated as de-contextualized individual units of tradition, and the concomitant view that one can therefore attain a pre-literary stage of the tradition by isolating those units from their narrative contexts. This transmission theory provided the methodological grounding for the idea that scholars could access an uninterpreted ‘authentic’ historical Jesus ‘behind’ the kerygma of the early Church, as we can see in the comments above and will see further below. For now, I note that this is why it will not suffice for Hägerland to concede that ‘authenticity’ can no longer ‘mean anything like a state of non-remembered, non-interpreted hard facts of the past’ but continue to argue that, if

‘the concept of authenticity is handled with caution’, the criteria approach is still useful to historical Jesus researchers (2015: 62, 65, respectively). A similar issue emerges with Häfner’s claim that the criteria are not designed ‘vergangene Wirklichkeit wiederherzustellen’ but only as ‘eine methodische Kontrolle’ (2007: 124–25),¹³ Webb’s claim that ‘judgments of authenticity or historicity are matters of greater or lesser probability’ (2009: 73), and Evans’s statement that the criteria of authenticity continue to be useful if ‘properly applied’ in a search for probability rather than authenticity (2013: 366).¹⁴ Such softening claims for the criteria approach do not align with the logic by which the criteria work to recover the historical Jesus and thus pass too easily over a fundamental theoretical and epistemological difference over how Jesus scholars can approach the historical Jesus and how they use the Gospels to do so. Before returning to that issue, I consider briefly a second debate in current historical Jesus studies.

1.2 Social Memory Theory, Tradition, and the Historical Jesus

In 2012, Paul Foster published an article in which he argued that social memory theory, orality studies, and the Gospel of John all constitute ‘dead-ends’ in historical Jesus research (191–227). In 2014, Porter and Ong published a response (143–64), and, in the same issue, Foster offered a rebuttal (2014: 165–83). Although the debate over social memory theory and Jesus research is much wider than this interchange, and the interchange itself contains many aspects worthy of comment, I here focus on Foster, Porter, and Ong’s differing opinions on

¹³ For a similar softening of the criteria’s function, see Söding 2011: 88.

¹⁴ Similarly, Hägerland 2015: 65 concludes by suggesting that researchers need simply to be ‘careful’ in their usage of the criteria of authenticity. Are the suggestions here really that in the previous hundred or so years of Jesus research no one was ‘careful’ enough to apply the criteria ‘properly’?

the relationship between social memory theory, tradition criticism, and historical Jesus research.

1.2.1 The Foster, Porter, Ong Debate

In Foster's original essay, he defends form criticism against charges from some scholars employing memory theories. He argues that social memory theory's total contribution involves understanding the transmission of tradition, not the tradition's connection to the historical Jesus, and is thus restricted to what form criticism has already contributed:

Where social memory theory may provide insights into the Jesus tradition is by analysing how such memories were received, and by reflecting upon what their pastoral or pedagogical function might have been in the early believing communities—but surely this is quite similar to tracing the *Sitz im Leben* of a tradition—and that is hardly a new perspective (2012: 202).

Foster lauds the form critics' efforts to apply their theories to 'individual pericopae to test the[ir] formation and historical genealogy' (198) and maintains that, in contrast to social memory theory, form and redaction criticism are 'still the most appropriate tools for historical Jesus research' (227).¹⁵ Therefore, for Foster, social memory theory's relationship to historical Jesus research is questionable because social memory theory is limited to answering questions about the transmission of the tradition.

Porter and Ong's assessment of Foster's treatment of social memory theory is quite strong, offering eight specific criticisms. Most important for present purposes is their fourth criticism. They claim, 'There is a serious question about how social-memory theory is

¹⁵ Foster is correct that redaction criticism continues to be a useful tool in historical Jesus studies. Unfortunately, he overlooks the similarities between this method and social memory theory. Le Donne makes precisely this point in a study with which Foster does not engage (Le Donne 2009: 83).

relevant to the question of the transmission of tradition—which question is what is actually relevant to historical Jesus research’ (2014: 151). For them, this problem stems from the fact that social memory theory offers a ‘synchronic view’ and is ‘concerned primarily with the preservation of memory’ (2014: 151). In contrast, ‘transmission of the Jesus and Gospel traditions is necessarily concerned with a diachronic account . . . of transmission from one to another down a historical chain of receipt and delivery’ (2014: 151). They also claim that ‘most social memory theory’ has been developed in reference to literate cultures, not illiterate/oral cultures like early Christianity (2014: 151). Elsewhere, Porter has independently stated these points again (2014: 15). Therefore, for Porter and Ong, social memory theory’s relationship to historical Jesus research is questionable because social memory theory is not clearly related to the transmission of tradition at all.

In Foster’s response to Porter and Ong, he reiterates, contrary to their opinion: ‘Memory studies are of value especially in terms of tracing the transmission and mutation of Jesus traditions. . . . [but] such research, important as it is, is not historical Jesus research, at least as it has typically been understood’ (2014: 169). Foster then seeks to buttress this latter claim by providing an overview of scholarly descriptions of the field. With the exception of Allison’s 2010 *Constructing Jesus*, all the studies he cites are from the 1980s and 1990s, the earliest of which (Sanders’s *Jesus and Judaism*) was published in 1985 and the most recent of which (Theissen and Merz’s *The Historical Jesus*) was published in 1998 (Foster 2014: 169–72). He especially privileges Meier’s ‘unpapal conclave’ as a ‘fairly standard’ definition for historical Jesus research (2014: 170; see Meier 1991: 1–2). Foster thus defines the goals of the field as ‘analysing which traditions can be demonstrably linked to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth with a high degree of probability’ (2014: 170, 171, respectively). Although this suggestion is fairly uncontroversial, two initial and related points can be made. First, not insignificant is the fact that the definition for historical Jesus research that Foster takes as

‘standard’ (Meier’s) is now almost twenty-five years old. Second, in keeping with Foster’s earlier continued advocacy for form criticism as the most useful tool in historical Jesus research, his definition focuses upon individual traditions. This emphasis also emerges elsewhere in his work. For example, he praises Blomberg for focusing ‘on the claims of historicity *for each pericope*’ (2012: 224; emphasis added) and faults social memory theory for not enabling ‘*specific traditions* to be traced back to the Jesus of history’ (2012: 198; emphasis added)

Foster claims that there is no such thing as a ‘pristine version of the past that can be accessed by the application of more rigorous and objective methods’ (2014: 172). Nevertheless, he argues against affirming ‘the entire postmodern agenda’ and ‘post-modern historiographical approach[es]’ (2014: 172). He instead argues for taking what he calls a ‘modernist’ approach, by which he means that one can ‘argue for the reality of an historical event or fact’ (2014: 172). Since social memory theory, as he understands it, does not enable this, it is not ‘solid’ historical Jesus studies or, for him, historical Jesus studies at all (2014: 172).

1.2.1 Assessment

A number of observations and clarifications are necessary. First, the field of Jesus studies obviously attests a degree of disagreement concerning the proper goal of historical Jesus studies, the transmission of the Jesus tradition, and the role of social memory theory as it relates to both matters. Foster maintains that social memory theory is highly relevant for understanding the transmission of the Jesus tradition (but not relevant for historical Jesus research). In contrast, Porter and Ong maintain that social memory theory is not relevant for the transmission of the Jesus tradition.

Secondly, neither Foster nor Porter and Ong have described social memory theory or its relation to historical Jesus studies in an entirely accurate manner. I have elsewhere addressed Foster's description of the field (Keith 2015: 523–5; 532–6). Perhaps even more surprising, however, are Porter and Ong's claims that social memory theory (1) takes only a synchronic view that is concerned with the preservation of memory, (2) is not concerned with diachronic transmission of tradition, and (3) has mainly emerged from studies of literate cultures. This assessment is categorically incorrect at the first two points and misrepresentative at the third, ignoring the contributions of perhaps the two biggest names in the field of social memory theory—Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann—despite the fact that Porter and Ong display some familiarity with both scholars (even claiming to follow Assmann at one point) (Porter and Ong 2014: 151 n.20). Halbwachs, the founder of collective memory theory, explicitly states that his approach to memory is not related to psychological, cognitive, or neuro-physiological approaches to memory that are concerned with the preservation of the past in the brain:

I do not in any way dispute that our impressions perdure for some time. . . .

But this 'resonance' of impressions is not to be confused at all with the preservation of memories. This resonance varies from individual to individual, just as it undoubtedly does from type to type, completely aside from social influence. It relates to psycho-physiology, which has its domain, just as social psychology has its own (Halbwachs 1992: 40 n.3).

Furthermore, not only did Halbwachs carry out collective memory studies on the diachronic transmission of tradition, he did so on early Christianity and even identified the Gospels themselves—'and the oral traditions that informed them'—as a form of collective memory

(1992: 84–119; 193–235 [quotation from p. 193]).¹⁶ In dialogue with Halbwachs, Assmann, too, deals with the transmission of tradition in early Christianity and refers to ‘the Jesus memory’ (2010: 27). Assmann’s entire research program for decades has tracked the long-term transmission of cultural memory¹⁷—‘institutionalized mnemotechnics’ (2010: 37) or, in more general terms, tradition—across multiple generations in illiterate cultures of the Ancient Near East, including and especially ancient Israel.¹⁸ He explicitly describes his approach as ‘diachronic’: ‘Mnemohistory . . . surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the *diachronic* continuities and discontinuities of reading the past’ (1997: 9; emphasis added).

Thirdly, although Foster is correct that social memory theory is primarily concerned with the transmission of tradition, I will argue below that, in separating tradition criticism and historical Jesus studies cleanly, he has perhaps underestimated the degree to which tradition criticism is relevant to the work of historical Jesus studies. This point relates directly to his stated preference for a model of historical Jesus studies exemplified by Meier, whom Hägerland also considers ‘the fullest expression’ of a historical Jesus procedure that ‘begin[s] with the analysis and authentication of singular components of the tradition, and then . . . reconstruct[s] the historical Jesus from those components that have passed the criteria for

¹⁶ The first set of pages refers to a chapter on religious collective memory in Halbwachs’s *The Social Frameworks of Memory*, while the second set refers to the translation of the conclusion of Halbwachs’s *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Lands*, both of which are included in *On Collective Memory*. Consider also 1992: 194: ‘The Gospels already represent a memory or a collection of memories held in common by a group’.

¹⁷ Assmann conceptualizes ‘cultural memory’ as Halbwachs’s ‘collective memory’ stretched temporally across generations (Assmann 2006: 8).

¹⁸ See his brief overview of ‘cultural memory’ in Assmann 2010: 37–44.

authenticity' (Hägerland 2012: 18).¹⁹ In order to see this point most clearly, we must first consider the state of Jesus studies in the 1950s and 1960s in Germany.

2. *The Debate in the 1950s and 1960s*²⁰

In order to provide some much-needed perspective on these debates in current Jesus research, this section will focus upon the emergence of the criteria approach as a formal methodology in the works of three post-Bultmannians—Käsemann, Bornkamm, and Hahn. Käsemann and Bornkamm were both students of Bultmann, while Hahn was a student of Käsemann and Bornkamm. As mentioned above, this particular era of Jesus research is crucial for the current discussion because the criteria 'approach' came together as a formal methodology during it (similarly, Holmén 2010; Hooker 1970: 480; Söding 2011: 47). Most important at present is the manner in which these scholars' theory of the nature and transmission of the Jesus tradition, which they received from form criticism, enabled their approach to the historical Jesus. This is not to claim that there were no other important impetuses at work in the development of these scholars' thoughts. But it is to observe that the method played a determinative role in their definition of historical Jesus research, a definition that continues to have advocates today.

2.1 *Form Criticism, Individual Traditions, and the Authentic/Inauthentic Dichotomy*

Clearly, these scholars were not the first to use the terms 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' for the Jesus tradition, just as they were not the first to formulate criteria for determining either

¹⁹ Meier defines his approach as follows: 'As much as possible to let any overarching interpretation of Jesus and his work emerge gradually and naturally out of the convergence of the data judged historical' (1994: 14 n.6).

²⁰ For the argument of this section in greater detail, see Keith 2016. Note also that the dates in the citations often reflect later German editions or later English translations of earlier works.

category.²¹ It nevertheless remains the case that the specific meanings they assign to these terms, as well as their method for assigning Jesus tradition to either category, are directly dependent upon form criticism. As noted above, Käsemann, Bornkamm, and Hahn state this dependence explicitly (Käsemann 1964: 34–35; Bornkamm 1960: 20; Hahn 1969: 41–44; Hahn 1983: 47). Käsemann considered this search for ‘authentic’ tradition to be a new stage in Jesus research (1964: 35). This new stage of enquiry was necessary because the form critics had successfully altered the scholarly *communis opinio* concerning the historical worth of the Gospels: ‘Historical criticism has shattered this good faith as far as we are concerned. We can no longer assume the general reliability of the Synoptic tradition about Jesus’ (1964: 34). Form criticism had accomplished this feat by demonstrating that the Gospels were primarily kerygmatic narratives whose shape was attributable not to the past of Jesus but to the present life circumstances of early Christians. In the words of Bornkamm, ‘The tradition about Jesus is servant to the faith and . . . has been from the beginning’ (1960: 219).

For Käsemann, Bornkamm, and Hahn, however, this did not mean that the quest for the historical Jesus was a lost cause. Each one vehemently asserts that only the goal of the nineteenth-century *Leben Jesu* movement is impossible, not the quest itself (Käsemann 1964: 19, 23–25; Bornkamm 1969: 73–76; Hahn 1969: 43, 46–47). There were at least two reasons why the quest was still viable from their perspective. The first reason is that the kerygma itself preserved a role for the pre-Easter Jesus (Käsemann 1964: 24–25, 45–46; Bornkamm 1960: 22–23, 174, 188; Hahn 1969: 45). The second reason is that, in the midst of the unhistorical Gospel narratives, there remained ‘authentic’ tradition that one could recover.²²

²¹ As noted above, in the second edition of his *Leben Jesu* in the 1830s, Strauss formulated criteria for identifying unhistorical material in the Gospels (Strauss 1973: 87–92). I thank Tobias Hägerland for reminding me of this point.

²² The language of Käsemann is precise in this regard; the kerygma was inauthentic ‘for the most part’ (1964: 15) and the life of the historical Jesus was ‘almost’ swallowed up (1964: 23, 30, 46), but not entirely.

In their works, each of these scholars developed and employed versions of what would come to be called the criteria of dissimilarity, embarrassment, multiple attestation, Semitic influence, contrary-to-tradition, and others, in order to excavate authentic tradition from the written Gospels (see further Keith 2016: n.p.; on the similar development of criteria of authenticity by other post-Bultmannians [Perrin, Fuller, et al.], see Holmén 2010: 43–44).

Two aspects of their form-critical indebtedness are particularly relevant to current debates in Jesus research. First, on account of form criticism, Käsemann, Bornkamm, and Hahn were convinced that the search for historical Jesus material in the Gospels had to proceed by investigating individual units of tradition rather than the narratives themselves. Käsemann, for example, specifies that one may investigate the ‘the authenticity of the individual unit of material’ (*die Echtheit des Einzelgutes*) (Käsemann 1964: 34, author translation; for German, see Käsemann 1970: 203). Bornkamm likewise not only claims that form criticism’s ‘laws of tradition’ are ‘an excellent aid in distinguishing the essential (*echten*) from the non-essential (*unechten*) in any passage’, but also claims that each individual pericope in the Gospels stands on its own, context-less (1960: 20 [quotation], 25; for German, see 1995: 17). Elsewhere in *Jesus of Nazareth*, he again highlights the significance of these findings by the form critics in this regard:

The question of the literary sources of the Gospels is . . . only a stage on the road to the illumination of the beginnings of the tradition about Jesus. So-called form criticism has been the first to follow this road methodically (M. Dibelius, R. Bultmann and others). It has shown that from the character of the Gospel tradition we can recognise reasonably clearly laws and forms of the pre-literary oral tradition. One observation is of special significance. It is that at the beginning of the tradition we find, not a historical sequence of events, but the individual pericope (*die einzelne Perikope*)—the individual

parable, the individual saying or story, which only in the Gospels, often in very different ways, is given its setting and, with a very modest editing, arranged coherently. These little individual parts of the tradition (*kleinen Einheiten der Tradition*) have to be considered by themselves (1960: 218; for German, see 1995: 194).

Similarly, in reference to the Gospels, Hahn says, ‘The dominant feature in them is not historical interest in our sense, a fact which may be deduced even from the way they were passed on in fragments and strictly isolated pieces (*der fragmentarischen Überlieferungsart in lauter Einzelstücken*)’ (1969: 42; for German, see 1966: 35). In a subsequent study, Hahn emphasises the significance of early Christianity’s transmission of ‘individual pieces of tradition’ for historical Jesus enquiry (1983: 42; see also 41, 44, 48, 51, 52, 54, 56). These individual pieces are important because they allow one to get ‘behind’ the Gospel narratives on account of the fact that, in the words of Hahn and Bornkamm, they are ‘isolated’ and ‘not dependent upon context for [their] meaning’ (Hahn 1969: 42; Bornkamm 1960: 25, respectively). This conception of the Jesus tradition is what rendered the individual units easily portable into an alternative schema for the transmission of the tradition, one which replaced the Gospel narratives as the organizing principle with the *Sitze im Leben*.

The second important aspect of form-critical indebtedness is directly related to the first—the meaning of ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’. ‘Inauthentic’ tradition is any tradition that reflects the interpretations of the early church and is thus understood in terms of the *Sitze im Leben* of early Christians, which determined their interpretive categories. ‘Authentic’ tradition, in contrast, is any tradition that is devoid of early Christian interpretation and is therefore understood in terms of the historical Jesus. In this sense, there is a direct parallel between the present of early Christians and ‘inauthenticity’, just as there is a direct parallel between the past of the historical Jesus and ‘authenticity’.

Revealing precisely these connections, Käsemann defines form criticism's greatest contribution to the quest for the historical Jesus as 'eliminat[ing] as unauthentic anything which must be ruled out of court because of its *Sitz-im-Leben*' (1964: 35). Similarly, Bornkamm states that, on the basis of form criticism, one must 'speak often of "authentic" or "inauthentic" words of Jesus and thus . . . distinguish words of the historical Jesus from "creations by the Church"' (1960: 20). In like fashion, Hahn defines the relationship between authentic and inauthentic individual pieces of tradition as a relationship between 'pre-Easter and post-Easter elements' in the tradition (1983: 48–49).

2.2 The Goal of the Quest for Authenticity

The parallels between inauthenticity and early Christian interpretation on the one hand and authenticity and lack of early Christian interpretation on the other hand are also revealed in these scholars' explicit statements about the goal of historical Jesus research and the means of accomplishing it. Although deriding the nineteenth-century questers' search for brute facts, Bornkamm nevertheless believed that he was capable of getting 'behind' the kerygma in order 'to see the thing itself' (1960: 9). He claims that, with 'the greatest critical caution', he can reach 'those facts which are prior to any pious interpretation and which manifest themselves as undistorted and primary' (1960: 53). Similarly, Hahn says,

When I speak of the historical Jesus I go behind all the statements of the community, limit myself to the facts of his earthly life, his ministry and proclamation, and attempt to gain a picture which is free from all post-resurrection conceptions, in order to grasp the history of Jesus on its own terms (1969: 45).

Elsewhere, Hahn speaks of ‘authentic traditions about Jesus’ in terms of ‘gain[ing] access to Jesus himself’ (1983: 41–42). From these statements, it is clear that these scholars saw the goal of their quest for authenticity as the uninterpreted historical Jesus himself.

2.3 Summary

Before proceeding, it is important to note the interlocking nature of this logic, and specifically the means by which these scholars’ concepts of the historical Jesus, and how to reach him, grew from the theory of the gospel tradition’s transmission that they espoused. The logic for how one attains ‘authenticity’ is necessarily tied to the assumption that it is there to be found.

By their own admission, these scholars learned from form criticism that the narrative frameworks of the Gospels had no relation to the actual past of Jesus or the earliest stage of the tradition, which consisted not of early Christian interpretive categories but individual and contextually independent units of tradition. Isolation of the individual unit of tradition, devoid of interpretive context, thus became the means by which one could get ‘behind’ the narrative contexts of the written Gospels in which those traditions were embedded. Based upon the same logic, they explicitly stated that, behind the Gospels resided an uninterpreted, undistorted Jesus, ‘authentic’ and thus ‘historical’ because this Jesus was constructed in contradistinction from Christian interpretation.

Therefore, despite Hägerland’s protestations, I reiterate my earlier claim: The convergence of the criteria of authenticity into a coherent approach to the historical Jesus grew directly from form-critical soil, which furnished its designers not only the meaning of ‘authentic’ as free from later Christian interpretation but also provided the means for attaining it via isolated traditions. For the same reason I would challenge Foster’s dissociation of tradition criticism and historical Jesus research. We would agree that they are not the same

(similarly Hahn 1983: 47). But this is not the full story, since how one conceptualizes the transmission of the tradition can play a determinative role in how one uses it to take the further step of historical Jesus enquiry.

3. Two Models for Historical Jesus Research in Contemporary Discussion

On this basis, I return to the issue with which this essay began—the two rival models for historical Jesus research in contemporary discussion. In the hope of furthering this exciting discussion in the discipline, I offer the following remarks.

3.1 The Persistence of the Form-Critical Model

First, the form-critical historical Jesus method of the post-Bultmannians is alive and well in contemporary research among those who continue to advocate the criteria approach or similar approaches that focus on the historical value of individual pericopae. As noted above, Foster especially privileges this method as the ‘standard’ definition of historical Jesus research and supports it primarily with scholars who were publishing in the 1980s and 1990s. In reality, however, this approach sits at the cutting edge of Jesus research in the 1950s. Foster is hardly alone in advocating this model, however, as his admonitions of Meier and Blomberg indicate. Similarly, Becker states that this is the ‘only’ way we can proceed: ‘We must submit both general skepticism and general trust to trial by fire and . . . we can do that only in the analysis of each individual tradition’ (1998: 15).²³

²³ Cf. also Hägerland, who, in reference specifically to his study of the historical Jesus and the forgiveness of sins, claims that ‘analysis and authentication of singular components of the tradition’ is the most ‘promising’ approach (2012: 18).

3.2 Approaches in the 'New Historiography'

Secondly, this focus upon individual units of tradition in order to mitigate or remove entirely the narrative frameworks of the Gospels from historical Jesus research is precisely where recent postmodern historiographical approaches demur. The distinction between the two models involves a different view of the transmission of the Jesus tradition but also a difference of epistemology. The practical outcome of these differences is that, whereas adherents to the form-critical model for historical Jesus research tend to discuss the historical accuracy of *units of tradition*, adherents to a postmodern model for historical Jesus research tend to discuss the historical accuracy of broad *claims* made by the Gospel authors. This point requires further explanation.

As was noted above, the conviction that the Jesus tradition circulated as isolated units of tradition that were independent of Christian interpretation bolstered the post-Bultmannians's further conviction that they could access a past reality behind those present interpretations. The implications of social memory theory are significant for these intertwined convictions. If any act of presenting the past necessarily and inextricably requires the frameworks of the present in order to render it intelligible and significant to an individual or group, then *no* tradition circulates independently of present interpretive frameworks—for those frameworks are the very means by which it circulates (see further Kirk 2009: 169). Stated otherwise, all memory is, *at one level or another*, in continuity with the interpretive frameworks of the present; else it would be forgotten. This furthermore means that there is no way to 'get behind' those interpretive frameworks. We may speculate about what could reside behind them, even speculate with strong conviction, but we cannot access it. In short, if Halbwachs, Assmann, and others are correct about the nature of 'memory' (whether historically accurate or inaccurate), both the end goal of 'authentic' tradition and the means

of attaining it in the post-Bultmannian's model are methodologically and epistemologically impossible.

3.2.1 Social Memory Theory as One of Many Postmodern Historiographies

One does not need social memory theory to come to these conclusions, however.²⁴ Many New Testament scholars have arrived at this epistemological destination by other means. At the forefront of this larger epistemological shift away from historical positivism in historical Jesus studies for almost twenty years has been Jens Schröter (cf. Zimmermann 2011: 417, referring to Schröter 2003; see also du Toit 2001: 124 n.164). Although he privileges the category of 'memory' and occasionally cites appreciatively the cultural memory theory of Jan and Aleida Assmann, Schröter is equally influenced by the theories of history found in the works of Johann Gustav Droysen, Reinhart Koselleck, and Paul Ricoeur, among others.²⁵

Already in an article of 1996 and the publication of his *Erinnerung an Jesu Worte* in 1997, Schröter was advocating a move away from atomistic approaches to the Jesus tradition and historical Jesus that privilege discontinuity between the two (1996: 151–68; 1997). In the latter study, he concludes by arguing for an approach to the Jesus tradition that moves away from a 'gesicherten 'Minimalbestand' als erster Rezeptionsstufe' and toward tracing 'die Geschichte der Verkündigung Jesu als Geschichte ihrer Rezeption' (1997: 485; emphasis removed). As he explains, this approach to the tradition leads to an approach to the historical Jesus that is the exact opposite of one that necessarily assumes discontinuity between the present of the transmitters of the tradition and what has gone before them:

²⁴ *Contra* Eck 2015: 2, I have never claimed that 'memory studies is *the* way forward', only that it is *a* way forward.

²⁵ For a recent and succinct presentation, see Schröter 2012: 59–65.

Damit wäre zugleich gewährleistet, daß die in den frühen Konzeption zur Sprache gebrachten *Erinnerungen* nicht *neben* ein Bild des ‘historischen Jesus’ zu stehen kommen und somit die methodisch und historisch unsachgemäße Diastase von Verkündigung Jesu und ihrer Rezeption wieder aufbricht. Ein plausibler Weg kann vielmehr nur darin bestehen, beides als einander bedingende Komponenten zu verstehen, die nicht voneinander gelöst, sondern in ihrer gegenseitigen Bezogenheit aufeinander dargestellt werden müssen (1997: 485; emphases original).

Schröter’s subsequent publications have continued to reflect an insistence upon the work of the historian as a hermeneutical enterprise whereby the past is re-presented in the present, in light of present epistemological conditions, on the basis of the portrayals of Jesus in the Gospels, and via scholarly informed historical imagination (as a sample, see 2002: 163–212; 2003: 855–66; 2006: 71–85; 2009a: 905–28; 2009b: 36–40; 2010: 14–36). He notes precisely how this differs from Bultmann’s approach of replacing the frameworks of the Gospel narratives with the *Sitz im Leben*:

It is . . . thoroughly questionable whether one can attain to *historical* knowledge with such a category [*Sitz im Leben*] and whether the narrative reworking of the Gospels can be left out of consideration for this. The insight into their character as Jesus narratives based on faith convictions in no way disqualifies them as historical witnesses that are to be invalidated in favor of an orientation to the ‘*Sitz im Leben*’ (2013: 28).

He again explicitly states that we are not to answer ‘the historical question’ about the Gospels ‘without regard for the ‘framework’ and not to restrict it to the individual units’ (2013: 30; see also 42, 76, 110–11). The precise issue is that only through narrative interpretation is a link between the past and the present possible: ‘Historical reality is never to be had apart

from such interpretations, which piece together what is handed on, fill out gaps, and thus place past, present, and future in relation to one another' (2013: 42). Thus,

a quest for the 'real Jesus' behind the sources that is detached from such presentations would be unsatisfactory from a methodology-of-history perspective, for it could not make comprehensible the emergence of early Christian interpretation of history from the connection to the activity and fate of Jesus (2013: 48).

Some critics have speculated that Schröter (among others) is avoiding 'the unwelcome implications of historical criticism' (Wedderburn 2010: v [quotation], vi–vii, 13–32).²⁶ This is, however, a misunderstanding. Schröter's point is precisely that historical criticism and scholarly assessments of the historical Jesus can and must proceed with their decisions about historical (in)accuracy, but only on the basis of the sources and with the assumption that one is re-presenting the past via a scholarly narration of historical possibilities and plausibilities, not against the sources or behind them and with the assumption that one can attain raw historical data (Schröter 2012: 59 n.35).²⁷

Social memory theory is therefore only one recent approach to the historical Jesus to assert (1) that historical Jesus research properly consists of scholarly narration of what could have been, not an attainment of what necessarily was, and (2) that scholars should begin the

²⁶ Cf. Hooker, who responded to the possible embrace of her rejection of the criteria approach by theologically conservative scholars: 'I venture to suggest I am being more radical than those who are commonly labelled "radical". For it seems to me that conservative and radical alike have both succumbed to the temptation to seek for certainty—and to believe that it can be achieved' (1972: 580).

²⁷ Similarly Schröter 2013: 14: 'For the methodological foundation of the concept of history the insight into the *not-to-be-separated* processes of critical source study and historical imagination is indispensable, because only in this way can history come into being from sources in a methodologically considered manner' (emphasis original).

process of hypothesizing the historical Jesus by explaining how early Christians came to think what they did about him instead of dismissing those thoughts. One could also point to Dunn's 'Jesus remembered' approach that is based upon oral hermeneutics and which foregrounds the impact of the historical Jesus (Dunn 2003: 99–136; 2013: 267–89), Holmén's 'Jesus in continuum' (2014), *Wirkungsgeschichte* approaches based upon Gadamerian hermeneutics (Hays 2013), Allison's emphasis upon 'gist' and recurrent attestation (Allison 2010: 21), or Thate's memory-informed social history approach to Jesus research (Thate 2013: 238). In an important 2011 article, Zimmermann noted similar themes in other methodological approaches such as discourse theology and cultural anthropology, which, along with advances in memory theory, he relates to historical narratology (417–44).

My claim is not that these various approaches do not have differences or even that their advocates would necessarily agree with all that I have said here. My claim is that they share an undergirding conviction that historical Jesus scholarship does not fundamentally need to escape the interpretive work of the Gospel authors but rather work with it and 'account for it sensibly' (Allison 2010: 21).²⁸ Accounting for early Christian interpretations of Jesus sensibly does not mean, for Allison, Schröter, myself, or any of these other scholars (to my knowledge), conflating those interpretations with the historical Jesus.²⁹ It means that scholarly conclusions about the historical Jesus and (in)accuracy of the Gospels must arise out of this larger process of constructing how early Christianity came to be in light of our current knowledge about it. First efforts to carry out historical Jesus research along these lines can be found in the work of Le Donne (2009: 248–57; 2011a: 120–32; 2011b: 186–

²⁸ Similarly Holmén 2014: 206: 'Scholarship is obliged to *account* for the elements of both discontinuity and continuity' (emphasis added).

²⁹ For a collection of statements asserting this point explicitly, see Keith 2015: 533.

204), Keith (2011a: 165–92; 2014: 111–57), Bond (2013: 461–75), and Thate (2013: 247–89).³⁰

3.2.3 *The Post-Bultmannians and the Quest for the Inauthentic Jesus*

At this point, however, it is important to return to the post-Bultmannians, for they are not without their contributions on this matter. In the 1960s, Bornkamm and Hahn already recognized the problem with which their method left them. I will refer to this as the problem of continuity since it centers upon the fact that their search for ‘authentic’ tradition could not account for connections between Jesus and later Christians.³¹

In interesting statements, Bornkamm and Hahn preserve roles for the ‘inauthentic’ tradition in scholarly consideration of Jesus, and here it must be remembered that ‘inauthentic’ for them derives its meaning from alignment with Christian *Sitze im Leben*, not necessarily historical inaccuracy. According to Bornkamm, ‘It is not apparent why a word or a story which was first formulated by the Church should not in content possess historical genuineness’ (1960: 11). He thus claims, ‘We should not, therefore, dismiss as mere fancy or invention what criticism might term “inauthentic” and “creations by the Church”’ (1960: 20–21). In a later publication, he even claims that their ‘inauthentic’ views might be due to Jesus: ‘Jesus himself, his history and personality, imposed and forced this method of presentation upon the bearers of the first tradition and the gospel writers’ (1969: 76). This is a fairly fascinating line of thought on the part of Bornkamm, one that deserves to be highlighted—‘Jesus himself’ may be responsible for producing the interpretive categories of the early

³⁰ Foster’s continued insistence that no such work is being carried out (2012: 198, 202, 226–27; 2014: 174–75), apparently accepted by Porter and Ong (2014:153), is simply incorrect.

³¹ What follows will qualify du Toit 2001: 104: ‘For during the Second Quest Jesus research did not focus on the possible continuities that could have determined the life of Jesus’. In general, du Toit is correct, but this issue itself was openly discussed by some scholars of the period.

Christians that prohibit the consideration of traditions reflecting those categories as historical Jesus material according to ‘criticism.’ Clearly, this type of continuity between Jesus and the Gospel authors is precisely what his earlier statements about ‘authenticity’ and ‘inauthenticity’ preclude, and he knows this. Significantly, he does not deny the appropriateness of criticism’s labelling of the tradition as ‘inauthentic’.³² He rather indicates that enquiry into the past of Jesus is broader than the discontinuity between Jesus and the early Church that ‘criticism’ privileges. From this perspective, one can understand how Bornkamm affirms that Jesus foresaw his death in Jerusalem but rejects the historical value of the passion predictions (1960: 154–55).³³ One can see in this formulation a methodological distinction between assessing a general claim of the Gospels and assessing individual traditions.

Hahn, too, affirms continuity between Jesus and the early church and also asserts that distinctions between ‘original and secondary’ sayings of Jesus have ‘nothing at all to say about the true worth of the biblical sayings of Jesus’ (1969: 30, 32 [quotation], 33). In a manner similar to Bornkamm’s distinction between ‘criticism’ and other considerations of Jesus, however, Hahn conceptualizes this type of approach as an entirely different quest. Just before his quotation cited above concerning going ‘behind’ the Gospels to ‘grasp the history of Jesus in its own terms’, he too places an accent mark upon the problem of continuity:

The historical method . . . does not help us grasp more precisely the relationship between the history of Jesus before Easter and the proclamation of the community after Easter (the so-called *kerygma*).

³² ‘No one who participates or is interested in historical research is spared any of these questions in his daily work, and everyone must conscientiously discuss the reasons for positive or negative answers’ (1969: 77).

³³ In a similar fashion, Bultmann does not in principle deny some of the claims of the controversy narratives about Jesus, but nevertheless considers all the narratives themselves to be imaginary (1963: 40–41, 54).

Thus when we take up the quest of the historical Jesus (*historischen Jesus*) we must also take up anew the quest of the earthly Jesus (*irdischen Jesus*). We must realize that these quests are not simply identical. We can speak of the earthly Jesus, as the gospels show, in presupposing and demonstrating a unity with the testimony of faith, while on the other hand, we can only speak of the historical Jesus when we accept those premises which are determinative for the modern idea of history (1969: 44–45).

For Hahn, the ‘earthly Jesus’ (*irdische Jesus*) is the pre-Easter Jesus as he is portrayed in the kerygma, which demonstrates that the early Christians did have an interest in the ‘historical Jesus’ as far as they were able to conceive him.³⁴ But the differences between their epistemological presuppositions and those of the modern historian mean, for Hahn, that one has to restrict discussion of continuity between the past of Jesus and the present of early Christians to this earthly Jesus *in the kerygma*, not the historical Jesus extracted from the kerygma. The above statement of Hahn is thus worth citing in full because it encapsulates the main argument of this essay: A search for the historical Jesus that utilizes the Gospel narratives as a means of hypothesizing the historical Jesus is epistemologically and methodologically distinct from a search for the historical Jesus that dismisses the Gospel narratives in order to reach an uninterpreted historical Jesus, to the extent that Hahn describes it as a separate quest with a separate object of pursuit (the earthly Jesus), and as a quest that dwells outside the ‘premises which are determinative for the modern idea of history’.

Twelve years later in 1974, Hahn published an important essay in which the problem of continuity continues to play a primary role (1983 [1974]: 35–105). Although he continues to affirm the quest for the authentic Jesus via individual units of tradition, and the work of the

³⁴ See, more fully, Hahn 1983: 74; similarly, Käsemann 1964: 24–25; Bornkamm 1960: 22–23, 174, 188.

form critics upon which it is built (41–44, 47), he is even more explicit about the limitations and troubles of such a quest. For example, he states that, in reality, the Jesus tradition is, as a whole, ‘thoroughly “inauthentic”’, that ‘so-called church creations cannot from the outset be distinguished from authentic sayings’, that historians should not ‘usually’ believe themselves capable of ‘extricating the basic stock by carefully removing later layers’, and that even tradition rendered ‘inauthentic’ may still be reflective of the historical Jesus (48, 45, 51, 52, respectively). Hahn thus re-envisioned the criteria of dissimilarity, coherence, and multiple attestation as general principles, placing them alongside ‘individual criteria’ such as Jesus’ usage of *amen* or *abba* (51–54). Nevertheless, he subordinates these criteria to the need for a scholar to produce a ‘total picture’ or ‘comprehensive outline’, which he or she must always hold in flux (54–57).

Hahn thus ultimately emphasizes the crucial role of producing a scholarly informed *narration* of the plausible past, and it is significant that, as his essay proceeds to describe such a possible narrative outline, Hahn speaks substantially less of testing the authenticity of individual units of tradition and substantially more of explaining how early Christians came to interpret Jesus in the manners that they did as a ‘process of reception’, eventually giving way to a nascent theory of historical Jesus research as tracing the reception of Jesus and Jesus tradition.³⁵ As he notes—and this is a crucial difference between the criteria approach and more recent approaches such as the memory approach—this scholarly endeavor does not lead directly to the historical Jesus, but rather to a context in which answers about him can be formulated:

As we strive to deal with all this in connection with the process of reception, the historical investigation of Jesus must in no way be

³⁵ Hahn 1983: 79: ‘It ought to be possible for us not only to understand better the answers that were given, but also to discover the original questions underlying them’.

curtailed; but it will be given an orientation which not only does justice to the New Testament, but also allows many elements in the history of Jesus to be seen more clearly (80).

Toward the end of the essay, he states explicitly that scholars must posit the historical Jesus *on the basis of* the kerygma: ‘We must always look for the essential connection between the kerygma and the history of Jesus. . . . That does not deprive us of the right to probe critically behind the kerygma, but we must begin from the specific starting point of the early Christian preaching’ (85). As was mentioned earlier, Hahn was not oblivious to the fact that this was a different model for historical Jesus research. Thus, at the beginning of this 1974 essay, he describes the reception-history model for historical Jesus research with which he will end the study as an ‘other path’ from the criteria approach.³⁶

As with others, including some contemporary scholars, Hahn views these two models as distinct but compatible. It has been the burden of the present essay to argue that they are, at the levels of methodology and epistemology, less compatible than Hahn allows. At the level of methodology, and as Hahn’s essay implicitly demonstrates, seeking answers to historical Jesus questions on the basis of the kerygma is not the same as seeking those answers on the basis of individual units of tradition purposefully removed from that kerygma. At the level of epistemology, assuming that one can *attain* an uninterpreted historical Jesus *behind* the Gospels is not the same as assuming that one can *hypothesize* a historical Jesus *in light of* the Gospels.

Hahn, however, was, like all of us, a product of his time. With the benefit of hindsight, he appears nearly prophetic for his own time and a clear bridge between the

³⁶ Hahn 1983: 51: ‘We cannot avoid the question of criteria. It is they that permit us to attain results on particular points, and to fit these into a larger context, even if still other paths must be pursued when we attempt a reconstruction’.

atomistic form-critical model of historical Jesus research into which he came and current reception-history models like those of Schröter. In the time since Hahn, the epistemological underpinnings of ‘the premises which are determinative for the modern idea of history’ (Hahn 1983: 45) have altered even more, as is perhaps most clearly seen in the work of Jens Schröter. Postmodern historiography in its various shapes and sizes has demonstrated that what Hahn and Bornkamm conceptualized as an inferior back door or ‘other path’ to the discussion is, in reality, the only point of entry. If an ‘authentic’ historical Jesus ‘behind’ the Gospels and ‘free from all post-resurrection conceptions’ (Hahn 1983: 45) is impossible for historians to attain—and it is—the quest can and must proceed by hypothesizing the historical Jesus in light of so-called ‘inauthentic’ tradition.³⁷ As Le Donne has convincingly demonstrated, however, this should not be lamented but embraced as the manner in which scholarly speculation about an irrecoverable past must necessarily always occur (2011a; similarly Crossley 2015: 44).

3.3 The Incompatibility (or Not) of the Two Models

My third remark simply reaffirms a point made in passing above. These two general models for historical Jesus research—(1) building up a historical Jesus out of sanitized isolated units of tradition and (2) hypothesizing the historical Jesus on the basis of early Christian interpretation—are incompatible methods. What they seek and how they seek it do not align; they are doing something different. Because I am convinced of the unfeasibility of the first

³⁷ Hooker 1972: 580: ‘All the material comes to us *via* the Church, and is likely to have been coloured by the beliefs of those who have handed it on’. Hahn (1983) was so very close to acknowledging this point: ‘The so-called church creations cannot from the outset be distinguished from authentic sayings, because they were handed on indiscriminately as sayings of the Lord’ (45); ‘We must begin by assuming that, in a certain sense, the Jesus-tradition is thoroughly ‘inauthentic’’ (48). As discussed above, however, Hahn maintained that one could determine ‘authentic’ traditions eventually.

method, I reiterate my earlier criticisms of scholars who sought to rehabilitate the criteria approach in light of historiographical advances, though this time I include Hägerland and Foster, who acknowledge that there is no such thing as a pristine version of the past ('authenticity' as Käsemann, Bornkamm, and Hahn conceived it), but continue to affirm an approach whose foundational assumption is that such a past is accessible to the historian. When one removes 'authenticity' as a goal for the historical endeavor but continues the means of attaining that goal, it raises the question of where the criteria then lead. All the care and meticulousness in the world will not aid a driver in arriving at a destination that does not exist.

I am, however, fully aware that several scholars, many of whose work I hold in high regard, believe the integration of these two methods possible. The degree to which they integrate them varies, however, and it is worth observing that I have always held open the possibility that various *aspects* of the criteria approach are recoverable and usable in the forwarding of scholarly narratives of past plausibility (2012: 47–48). I have, for example, found the notion that early Christians could have been embarrassed about various issues concerning Jesus to be useful in narrating a possible historical development (2011a: 169 n.16; 2012: 48 n.93; 2014: 91–98). The important point, however, is that I do not believe the concept of early Christian embarrassment to be a means of dispensing with Christian interpretations and directly accessing the actual past; the historian has work yet to do even if Christians were embarrassed about something. Crossley has recently made the same point: 'If a saying or deed is embarrassing, why does it have to be Jesus who created the embarrassing moment? Why not someone else earlier in the tradition? Or, that which is embarrassing to one need not necessarily be embarrassing to another' (2015: 39). Thus, 'embarrassment' cannot function as a criterion to yield directly 'authenticity'; it can only point historians toward the types of phenomena for which they must account, while leaving the manner in

which they account for them open to scholarly argumentation.³⁸ I submit that, in the least, those scholars who desire to integrate the criteria approach with more recent advances in historiography should give further attention to this matter as well as the methodological and epistemological differences between these two models.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that at least two current debates reflect competing models for how to conduct historical Jesus research. The first model, which came to a particularly forceful and lasting expression in the period of Bultmann and his followers and assumed form criticism's understanding of the transmission of the Jesus tradition, views the historian's task as building a historical Jesus from individual units of gospel tradition that have been broken from the narratives of the written Gospels. In this model, the kerygmatic narratives of the Gospels are a hindrance that scholars must get 'behind' in order to reach the historical Jesus. The second model, which has come to a particularly forceful expression in the work of scholars employing social memory theory or postmodern theories of history, views the historian's task as proposing a historical narrative that explains how early Christians came to conceptualize Jesus in the manners that they did and generates theories of the historical Jesus

³⁸ I suspect that this precise point is where Wedderburn is confused by Schröter: 'The methods, and the questions asked, the criteria applied so often seem to be similar to those already employed in New Testament studies that one is forced to ask what change this supposedly new epistemology has in fact introduced' (Wedderburn 2010: 32). To state what should now be obvious, what have changed are both the goals of historical Jesus research and the means of accomplishing them, resulting in foregrounding the 'sources' rather than dispensing with them. See also van Eck's confusion in taking my argument that social memory theory provides a better foundation for 'postulating' the historical Jesus (Keith 2011b: 156) as a claim that social memory theory 'establish[es] the historicity of the Gospel traditions' (van Eck 2015: 1). As noted above, I have *never* made such a claim.

on the basis of that process. In this model, the narratives of the Gospels are an indispensable aid that scholars must embrace as the primary means by which one can discuss an unattainable actual past.

I have furthermore argued that only the second model for historical Jesus research is feasible. I have done so by noting how each model builds respectively from differing theories of the transmission of the Jesus tradition, which necessarily lead them to differing convictions about what a historian can know and what his or her task is. Despite the efforts of several scholars to integrate these two models, in my judgment they are incompatible at the levels of method and epistemology. As Bornkamm and Hahn rightly observed, these differences are most clear in considering the role that continuity between Jesus and the kerygmatic narratives of the Gospels plays in historical Jesus research.

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