

Yes and No: A Critical Response to F. Gerald Downing

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ABSTRACT:

This essay replies to F. Gerald Downing's critical response to my article, 'The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus: Current Debates, Prior Debates and the Goal of Historical Jesus Research' (Keith 2016: 426–55). I focus on four matters: 'authenticity'; 'memory theory'; 'tradition'; and the concept of going 'behind' the text.

KEYWORDS:

F. Gerald Downing; historical Jesus; social memory theory; misrepresentation

I am grateful for the editorial invitation to respond to F. Gerald Downing's critical response to my article, 'The Narratives of the Gospels and the Historical Jesus: Current Debates, Prior Debates, and the Goal of Historical Jesus Research' (Keith 2016). My response to Downing is necessarily a mixture of agreement and disagreement. After a brief summarization of Downing's critiques, I will elaborate on this response by discussing four matters in detail: the concept of 'authenticity'; social memory theory; the concept of tradition; and the idea of going 'behind' the text.

1. Downing's Critiques

In general, Downing agrees with me that the criteria of authenticity are inadequate (3) and that 'authenticity' is dead (4), but disagrees with me on where that leaves the Jesus scholar. In contrast to my argument that scholars can offer hypotheses about the historical Jesus on the basis of theorizing how early Christians came to view him in the manners that they did,

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Downing argues two points. First, he argues that scholars simply do not know enough about early Christians and how they came to view Jesus in order to offer such hypotheses. Objecting to my claim that ‘scholarly conclusions about the historical Jesus and (in)accuracy of the gospels must arise out of [a] larger process of constructing how early Christianity came to be in light of our current knowledge about it’ (Keith 2016: 444), Downing says, ‘Any result claiming current “knowledge”—knowledge in any strong sense—of the historical early church (with its tradition[s]) is . . . as unobtainable as any firm knowledge of the historical Jesus’ (3–4, emphasis original). As an initial response, I think it will be relatively clear to most readers that my phrase ‘in light of our current knowledge about it’ did not refer to ‘firm knowledge’ in a ‘strong sense’ but to the ever-evolving, contingent, and therefore imperfect, knowledge of the past within which all historians must work in order to offer their hypotheses. I also find it odd that Downing on four occasions seems to think it a goal of mine to ‘assure’ readers of some matter (‘we are assured’, ‘we are assured’, ‘we are also assured’, all on p.2; ‘assurance’, p.4). The words ‘assure’ and ‘assurance’ never occur in my article, and I forwarded my argument with no concern for the reader’s comfort level.

Nevertheless, Downing continues arguing against a level of certainty that I did not assert: ‘There is no basis either for a story of “the” historical Jesus *or* of “the” historical early church(es). . . There is no secure basis that rules out rival reconstructions of either from the start’ (3). Downing therefore asks rhetorical questions about unresolved issues in Gospels studies, such as Mark’s possible sources (7), the literary relationship of the Synoptic Gospels (7–9), the relationship of the Gospel of Thomas to the Synoptics (5, 5 n.4, 7, 9), editorial practice of the Gospel authors (8) or the provenance and date of the composition of the Gospels (6–7, 9). Since he observes repetitively that ‘not everyone’ (6) agrees on these matters, that ‘we do not know’ (7), ‘we do not know enough’ (7), ‘we do not know’ (8), and again that matters are ‘not agreed’ (9), his point is presumably that such a state of scholarship stalls any attempts

to attain his ‘firm knowledge’ of Jesus or the early church. I am not entirely sure how this relates to the argument I actually forward in my article.¹ I never claim that such matters are resolved, nor that offering a proposal for the historical Jesus requires their resolution.

Proceeding from his observations of scholarly disagreement and lack of knowledge, Downing’s second point is that scholars must inevitably ‘venture’ and ‘go behind’ the text (5, 6, 7, 9) in order to find ‘any worthwhile fuller understanding of it’ (7). He claims, ‘The beliefs of early Christians do not lie on the surface of the canonical gospels’ (5; see also 9). This point is seemingly straightforward, if understood in the sense that scholars must interpret the words of the Gospels in order to come to any understanding of them. That does not seem to be Downing’s meaning, however, and I will return to this matter. For now, I note that the statement reflects Downing’s conviction that, for scholars to offer any historical reconstructions, they cannot avoid ‘going behind’ the texts. Indeed, he claims it is a necessity—‘all attempts’ at historical research ‘hav[e] to venture from the start “behind” or “beneath” the available texts’ (12).

I am left wondering which it is for Downing: Are scholars paralyzed by their utter lack of knowledge and lack of agreement or can they gain some understanding by going ‘behind’ the text? Does Downing intend to argue that knowledge of Jesus or the early church is unobtainable (3–4) or is obtainable back there ‘behind’ the text (5, 6, 7, 9)? Stated otherwise, does he fault for me believing we can know something about the historical Jesus or fault me for rejecting the idea that we must dig ‘beneath’ the text to know it?

Although Downing’s two main criticisms of me seem to move in opposite directions, I presume that his overall point is that, although the criteria of authenticity are fallible, my proposed method is also fallible, and therefore we must simply concede that we must get

¹ Downing frequently uses discussion of these issues as opportunities to tally where he has been accepted, rejected, or overlooked by other scholars (3 n.1, 7 n.8, 11 n.17, 11 n.18, 11 n.19; cf. 12 n.20).

‘behind’ the text to know anything worth knowing and can use the ‘old criteria’ (11) to do so. If this understanding is correct, then, as noted, my response is necessarily a mixture of agreement and disagreement. On the one hand, at several points I had the impression that the differences between us were not quite as ‘stark’ (10) as he believes. His proposal for ‘competing global hypotheses’, which must incorporate the socio-historical contexts but are ‘always hypothetical’ (10), and ‘whose overall plausibility will be varyingly appraised by different critical readers’ (12) is not terribly dissimilar from my proposal for allowing decisions about the historical Jesus to emerge out of answering larger questions about early Christianity.² On the other hand, Downing’s concession that we must inevitably ‘go behind’ the texts, and his affirmation of the criteria of authenticity in that capacity, is where we are at a clear difference of opinion. This general difference is clear also in several more specific matters.

2. ‘Authenticity’

An initial more specific response to Downing concerns the concept of ‘authenticity’. According to Downing, ‘A claim to “authenticity” is a claim to certainty’ (4). No, it is not. A claim to certainty is a claim to certainty, but a claim to *authenticity*, at least with regard to the criteria of authenticity, is something else. This point is necessarily nuanced but it is important because Downing is not the only Jesus scholar to give it insufficient attention.³ ‘Authenticity’ in the arguments of the scholars who developed the criteria of authenticity as a formal methodology refers not to the status of the scholar (confident regarding their judgments) but to the status of the tradition (unreflective of early Christian interpretive frameworks that otherwise taint the tradition). I make this point clearly in my article where I detail precisely what *Echtheit*, *echt*, and *unecht* meant for the post-Bultmannians (Keith 2016: 438–40) and find it surprising that

² See further the discussion in Keith 2011b (66–70); Keith 2014 (81–84); cf. Keith 2015b (527–36).

³ See my comments in Keith 2016: 432–33; 449–50 regarding ‘softening claims’ for the criteria of authenticity.

Downing offers his definition for the term with no reference at all to my quite specific explanation.

For those post-Bultmannians, ‘authentic’ Jesus tradition was Jesus tradition that had been recovered *out of* the interpretive frameworks of the written Gospels. It necessarily consisted of decontextualized, individual pieces of the tradition, which was an understanding they inherited directly from Bultmann and the form critics. Recovery of these pieces of tradition was how these scholars believed they got ‘behind’ the Gospels. What they found there was the historical Jesus, free from Christian interpretation: ‘the thing itself’ (Bornkamm 1960: 9); ‘facts which are prior to any pious interpretation’ (Bornkamm 1960: 53); ‘free from all post-resurrection conceptions’ (Hahn 1969: 45); ‘Jesus himself’ (Hahn 1983: 42). This conception of a historical Jesus ‘behind’ the text, accessed by ‘authentic’ tradition liberated from the written narratives is precisely why Käsemann believed he could go beyond Bultmann, who was content with ‘the earliest stratum of primitive Christian proclamation’ (Käsemann 1964: 15–16), and why Bornkamm said he was not satisfied with ‘mere tradition’ (1960: 9). It also explains why Bornkamm is at pains to specify that the historian may have confidence in a tradition that ‘criticism’ might label ‘inauthentic’ (Bornkamm 1960: 21). Again, ‘authentic’ refers to the nature of the tradition, not the confidence of the scholar.

Therefore, when Downing affirms that we can still use ‘the old criteria’ in offering global hypotheses (11), he needs to explain either (a) how the concept of an uninterpreted historical Jesus or uninterpreted Jesus tradition fits within his proposal, and particularly the part of his proposal where he claims that such ‘firm knowledge’ of Jesus is not available to the scholar, or (b) how a methodology whose logic and utility assumes that there is such tradition can be repurposed for other means. It will not suffice, however, simply to offer a different definition of ‘authentic’ when historical Jesus scholars since at least the 1950s have meant a quite specific thing by the term. Downing’s defenses of the criteria of embarrassment (6) and

coherence (9) fail to square with or even address this foundational issue, which is epistemological before it is historiographical. In general, then, ‘yes’, authenticity is dead, but ‘no’, authenticity is not primarily about scholarly certainty.

3. *Social Memory Theory*

Another more specific response to Downing concerns social memory theory. As a minor matter, Downing portrays me as putting more stock in this theory than I actually do. Summarizing my position, he says, ‘One must deploy recent proposals in “memory theory”’ (2). In contrast, I stated explicitly, ‘One does not need social memory theory to come to these conclusions’ (Keith 2016: 442) and proceeded to list related approaches that participate in a broader trend away from atomistic approaches to the historical Jesus.

More significant, Downing misrepresents social memory theory itself. An earlier description, when summarizing my argument, is generally correct (2). Later, however, he suggests that ‘memory theory’ (he does not specify a particular theoretical approach to memory) is concerned with the preservation of the past: ‘There might . . . be much older matter, even matter stemming from very close to Jesus . . . matter *preserved* because *preserving* the old was itself a pressing interest (memory theory)’ (8, emphases added). A full introduction to social memory theory is not necessary here, as I and others have provided such elsewhere,⁴ but I must at least observe that social, cultural, and collective memory theories are categorically not concerned with the *preservation* of the past as such; they are concerned with the *presentation* of the past in the present, whether that is the actual past, a fabricated past, or something in between. I state this point clearly in the article where I criticize Porter and Ong for precisely this erroneous view of sociologically-based memory theories (Keith 2016: 435–36).

⁴ For those interested in sociological approaches to memory, see Hübenthal 2012; Keith 2015a; Keith 2015b; Kirk 2005; Olick, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Levy 2011.

Still later Downing associates ‘memory theory’ with possible concern for eyewitness testimony: ‘Because eyewitness testimony seems to have been important in the wider world of the first Christians, such a valuation of testimony validated by an eyewitness or hearsay at one removed [sic] cannot *a priori* be excluded from a plausible initial list of the (memory theory) concerns of early Christians’ (10). I never suggested that eyewitness testimony should be ‘*a priori* excluded’, or even discussed eyewitness testimony for that matter, and for a reason—social memory theory is not necessarily concerned with what happens neurologically or physiologically in the brain of a person and therefore not concerned (in that sense) with the status of someone as an ‘eyewitness’ to the past. That is presently the realm of cognitive memory studies. Although dialogue has begun between these two types of memory theory,⁵ they are distinct approaches to memory phenomena with sociological approaches much more focused on the role of society upon commemorative activity, even at the level of the individual. Social memory theory is thus also not necessarily antithetical to the concept of eyewitness testimony; its primary concerns are simply elsewhere. From the perspective of social memory theory, eyewitness testimony is still subject to the same dynamic interaction of the past and present that gives hermeneutical significance to any portrayal of the past. In general, then, I respond again with ‘yes and no’. ‘Yes’, social memory theory is helpful to scholars of the historical Jesus, not as a prescriptive methodology like the criteria of authenticity, but as a general theory about the relation of the past and the present in commemorative activity. ‘No’, it is not necessary for Jesus scholars to use it, and it is not primarily concerned with the preservation of the actual past, whether by eyewitnesses or others.

4. ‘Tradition’

⁵ Outside New Testament studies, see the various contributions to *Memory* 16.3 (2008), a special edition of *Memory* dedicated to the relationship between cognitive and collective memory approaches. Inside New Testament studies, see Kirk 2014: 131–60.

Another issue concerns my and Downing's respective conceptions of tradition generally and the Jesus tradition specifically. With regard to my concept, Downing seems irked that I speak with 'apparent confidence' of '*the* Jesus tradition' 'without any qualification or explanation or justification for the definite article' (4; emphasis original). He is equally irked that I have not specified what I would include in 'the tradition' (4). I plead guilty to using artful constructions, but the issues involved here are greater than simply how one might delimit the concept of 'Jesus tradition'.

Despite acknowledging that I have not defined 'tradition', Downing attributes a definition to me: "'Tradition" seems, for Keith and others, to constitute sequences of words' (6; 'sequence of letters-in-words', 9). He proceeds to observe that 'performance of sets of words' play no role in my article, nor do 'habits of dress' or 'patterns of public behaviour' (6), all of which, Downing rightly observes, would have impacted interpretation of words. I did not comment on these issues, however, because I was not writing an article on oral performance, clothing, or public actions. To address the matter directly, *contra* Downing, I do not affirm that 'tradition' only 'constitutes sequences of words', though words can obviously be one actualization of 'tradition'. Downing may be correct that I should have defined the concept better, but I did not narrowly define it because my understanding of 'tradition' is far wider than any concept that would localize only upon written language. I understand 'tradition' as a cultural artifact that can take many media forms but necessarily stands as a touchstone between the past and the present. As other publications of mine have elaborated, I am influenced in this regard heavily by Barry Schwartz, Edward Schils, and Jan Assmann (Keith 2011a; 2015a). In this sense, although 'the Jesus tradition' *can* be more restrictively understood as gospel literature (canonical and non-canonical), it can *also* be broadly understood as any cultural reception of Jesus (see Keith, Bond, Jacobi, and Schröter 2019 forthcoming).

For this reason, Downing's own concepts of 'tradition' and 'Jesus tradition' are problematic. He describes the Jesus tradition as something that antedates the written Gospels, culminates in the written Gospels, but seems not to include the written Gospels. He thus speaks of access to Jesus tradition as occurring only once one penetrates 'beyond', 'behind', 'underneath' or 'beneath' the written Gospels. For example, seemingly summarizing my view but in a way that I would not affirm, Downing refers to the Jesus tradition(s) as 'in due course committed to writing by the gospel writers' (2) and that we must 'remove layers of interpretation to discern it' (4). Later, he refers to 'Jesus tradition' as that which one must recover 'behind' or 'beneath' the written Gospels: 'One has to venture "behind" (or "beneath") the text of each for their take—or takes—on Jesus tradition' (5). Reinforcing this point, he stresses, 'To make sense of the text *as tradition*, we clearly have to "go behind" it' (6, emphasis original). All these statements hold in common a strong association of 'tradition' and 'Jesus tradition' with a pre-literary stage of the Gospels.

By consistently referring to 'tradition' and 'Jesus tradition' as that which resides 'beneath' or 'behind' the written Gospels, and as something eventually committed to writing, Downing advocates a view of the Jesus tradition that is nearly identical to the form-critical conception of it to which my article was responding.⁶ Once more, notable is the failure to identify the written Gospels themselves as 'tradition'. Surely, however, the written Gospels, including their narrative frameworks, are *also* part of the Jesus tradition! When Downing cites 'divergences in the texts of our documents', by which he seems to mean textual variants, and claims that 'these divergences can affect significantly our interpretation of the traditions with which an evangelist dealt' (5), he again associates 'the traditions' with what was before a Gospel author, that is, prior to the written Gospels they produced. Yet the divergences in manuscripts *are* the tradition, or at least part of it, and to make sense of 'the text as tradition',

⁶ For a more recent introduction to the Gospels as tradition, see Rodríguez 2014.

we clearly have to deal *first* with the text itself, not a hypothetical status it held prior to being textualized. Theories of what the Jesus tradition was initially must be able to explain what it was eventually. Therefore, although ‘the Jesus tradition’ far exceeds the Gospels and the manuscripts upon which they are written, it is not less than them.

This point is important because Downing’s restrictive concept of the Jesus tradition directly coheres with his distaste for my affirmation that scholars can use the written Gospels to quest for the historical Jesus. To repeat a quotation presented earlier, Downing claims, ‘The beliefs of early Christians do not lie on the surface of the canonical gospels’ (5). Again, if Downing’s point is that the beliefs of early Christians do not present themselves to the scholar, but require decipherment and interpretation, I agree. That does not seem to be his point, however. His point seems to be that the ‘beliefs of early Christians’ are available only in ‘Jesus tradition’, which he believes is found only ‘behind’ the written Gospels. In response to Downing’s claim regarding the location of the early Christian beliefs, I can only respond that, *contra* Downing, early Christian beliefs are indeed available in the written Gospels. Scholars do not need to go to oral tradition, pre-literary tradition, or hypothetical *Urtexten* to know that early Christians believed Jesus was from Galilee, died on a Roman cross, was a messianic figure, had disciples, taught about the kingdom of God, or any number of things that are open to investigation by historical Jesus scholars. Therefore, ‘yes’, I could have offered more explanation for my view of the Jesus tradition, but, ‘no’, that tradition is not solely found ‘behind’ the written Gospels.

5. ‘Behind’ the Text

This last point relates directly to the final more specific issue that I would like to address—Downing’s understanding of what it means to ‘go behind’ the written Gospels. Downing argues that scholars must draw upon contemporaneous ancient evidence, ‘the wider culture of the imagined or actual audience, or even the elements of it that might illuminate the presented

narrative' (5), in order to help the scholar understand the Gospels themselves. I cannot personally think of any Gospels scholar who would not affirm that this is necessary, and I certainly do as well.

But when Downing characterizes engagement with the socio-historical contexts of the Gospel authors as going 'behind' the Gospels (5), he has fundamentally misunderstood the hermeneutical nature of historical research. For example, he states, 'Whether we like it or not . . . we have again to venture, however tentatively, "behind the text" (or "underneath it") for any worthwhile fuller understanding of it' (7). In this case, Downing is addressing whether the author of Mark's Gospel was 'aware of or influenced by varieties of "lives", or of other genres of authoring . . . ; or whether the imagined, or the actual audience is to be taken to be alert to such matters'. To state the obvious, however, any evidence that would be culled to offer an answer on such issues is not at all 'behind' the Gospel texts. If we are to use a spatial metaphor, it is *alongside* the Gospels. More accurately, such pieces of evidence are simply other 'texts', whether manuscripts, monuments, rituals, customs, or other expressions of identity, and require just as much scholarly interpretation to be understood as the Gospel texts.

Regardless of this matter, appealing to contemporaneous evidence to aid the hermeneutical and historical effort is not how the post-Bultmannians employed the metaphor of going 'behind' the Gospels, and it was their understanding that I was concerned with in my article. For them, going 'behind' the text meant gaining *access* to a stage prior to the tradition, as I detailed carefully in my article. It was precisely to this usage of the metaphor of going 'behind' the written Gospels that I objected. Therefore, Downing is not discussing the same matter as I was with the concept of going 'behind' the text.

In this sense, however, I must note that several of Downing's comments about his concept of going 'behind' the Gospels are not far from my argument about using what evidence we can to account for the interpretations of the Gospels via hypotheses. He says we must 'go

behind’ the Gospels ‘very hypothetically, imaginatively’ (8), ‘tentatively, and hypothetically’ (9), ‘cautiously’ (10). Although I disagree that the scholar is gaining access to something ‘behind’ the Gospels, I agree that scholars must always offer their theories in the knowledge that they are hypothetical, products of their scholarly imaginations, and based on what we can understand about the socio-historical world of Jesus and the early Christians. Drawing upon Schröter, I have elsewhere argued these very points (Keith 2011a: 155–77; 2011b: 175 n.31). Recognizing the contingent nature of our historical hypotheses is not to say that we cannot have confidence in them or that we cannot judge some to be more likely than others; it is simply to recognize the epistemological limits of historians. I even agree with Downing that scholars must be cognizant that their proposals are *their* proposals. He says, ‘A strand, sequence, or pericope that is judged . . . at some point *by me*, is only so in the context of this reconstruction of *mine*, of ‘*my*’ Jesus and of ‘*my*’ early church with its traditions’ (11, emphases added). But the scholar interpreting contemporaneous ancient evidence alongside the Gospels and making proposals about the historical Jesus *is only ever in front of the text*. They are never ‘behind’ it.⁷

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, my response to Downing consists of some level of agreement mixed with fundamental disagreements about the nature of the Jesus tradition, the position of the historian vis-à-vis that tradition, and what going ‘behind’ the text actually involves. Despite Downing’s critiques, I remain confident in my division of historical Jesus studies into general models, one of which attempts to get ‘behind’ the written texts and one of which works with the texts as they stand. The issue at hand is not whether scholars disagree, whether historical knowledge is always contingent, or whether scholars forward their grand theories with a few bits of information that we interpret before a sea of ignorance. All those things are true, and on them I agree with Downing. The issue at hand is whether ‘authentic’ Jesus tradition is available

⁷ Foundational for these matters is Schröter 2013: 9–70.

to scholars, whether scholars can mine behind, beneath, or beyond the interpretations of early Christians to find it. I argue that ‘authentic tradition’, as defined by the architects of the criteria approach to the historical Jesus, is not available and scholars cannot gain access to a reality ‘behind’ early Christian interpretations. They can hypothesize, even with confidence, and thus the quest for the historical Jesus rightly presses on. But scholars cannot gain access to such a reality. In my view, then, one difference between me and the post-Bultmannians, and a difference that Downing fails to appreciate, is that I take seriously that ‘behind the text’ is only a concept, and not a historiographical procedure. The best the scholar can do is try to account for early Christian interpretations with theories that are necessarily contingent and will find various levels of agreement and disagreement among his or her peers. In that light, I extend gratitude to Downing for serving as a peer.

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