

SAMUEL BYRSKOG

Story as History –  
History as Story

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament*

123

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**Mohr Siebeck**

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament

Herausgegeben von  
Martin Hengel und Otfried Hofius

123





Samuel Byrskog

# Story as History – History as Story

The Gospel Tradition  
in the Context of Ancient Oral History

Mohr Siebeck

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*For Michael and Jessica*



## Foreword

In 1961 Birger Gerhardsson published his standard work *Memory and Manuscript* on how the Torah was handed down in its written and, above all, its oral form in pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism, and the consequences of this for the transmission of the gospel tradition in early Christianity. This work criticized the form criticism that had originated in Germany at the end of the first world war and which was rooted in the older folkloristic research influenced by romanticism. In his book Gerhardsson contests the view that had prevailed for decades: an anonymous, collective and at the same time uninhibitedly “creative” transmission of the Jesus tradition, most of which emerged as later creations of the communities. This in my opinion revolutionary work did not at that time receive the attention it deserved. It was reprinted in 1964, and in the same year Gerhardsson published a small study, *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity*. This important study was out of print for almost 35 years, until W. B. Eerdmans and Dove Booksellers published a reprint of both studies a little over a year ago, in 1998. The scholarship can still learn much from this superb work.

Having received a Humboldt research fellowship in Tübingen, a highly talented Gerhardsson student, Samuel Byrskog, who has already written an excellent monograph on Matthew (*Jesus the Only Teacher. Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* [Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994]), has now taken on his teacher’s major subject, working from a completely different angle and at the same time in another area. He examines very thoroughly the question of the significance of eyewitness accounts and oral tradition in the ancient literature, a subject which has been severely neglected in New Testament research up to now. Byrskog deals in particular with this subject as it relates to Greek and Roman historians, studying it against the background of “oral history”, which has become an independent branch of research in the last decades, and, linked closely to this, against the background of narrative research, which is not confined strictly to narrative fiction, as many people believe. In this un-



usual work the author carries on with and often confirms his teacher's approaches in a different field and in a completely new manner. Current research, today often appearing to be worn out and sometimes tending only to repeat old theories, will be provided with new stimuli. It could even stimulate research on the early church, which, as far as I can see, has dealt very inadequately with the ubiquitous subject of "oral history", eyewitness testimony and oral transmission. Oral transmission among the rabbis is only a conspicuous exception, on which the sources have given us particularly detailed information and which is close in time to the early church.

Basing his study on a very wide spectrum of sources, the author demonstrates with great clarity that oral tradition and eyewitness testimony imply not simply faithful transmission, but rather that faithful transmission and theological interpretation, that is, history and faith, must not necessarily conflict. Their connection to one another is, on the contrary, of a positive nature in the entire early Christian literature, not only in the gospels, but also in the Acts of the Apostles and in most of the letters.

In the introductory sentence of Plato's dialogue "Phaedo", rendering both Socrates' farewell speeches and his "passion story", Echecrates' question to his friend Phaedo also points to a problem in New Testament transmission:

Ἄυτός, ὃ Φαίδων, παρεγένου Σωκράτει ἐκείνη τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἢ τὸ φάρμακον ἔπιεν ἐν τῷ δεσμωτηρίῳ, ἢ ἄλλου του ἤκουσας;

Ἄυτός, ὃ Ἐχέκρατες.

"Were you, Phaidon, there yourself with Socrates, on the day when he drank the poison in the prison, or did you hear about it from someone else?"

"I was there myself, Echecrates!"

Martin Hengel

## Preface

The present book constitutes, to a significant extent, a convergence of personal and academic interests and experiences. It seeks to explicate some of the dynamics involved as people of antiquity sought ways to commemorate and conceptualize the past within their various modes of existence. As I have repeatedly realized during the course of this study, my early experience of hearing the texts of Scripture being read aloud and interpreted anew in the peculiar context of the tight communities on the country-side of northern Sweden, has left a deep and lasting impression on me. The worship of these groups never allowed the texts of Scripture to remain texts unto themselves, but fostered a sense of ongoing dialogue across the centuries, a dialogue between the reality of the past and the reality of the present. The texts were living texts, one believed, carrying the voices and experiences of ancient people and challenging the believers to interpretation and application. It has been strange but rewarding to discover what seems to be the basic human need to locate our own different stories within some broader perceptions of the past.

The academic setting moulded these experiences into various forms of questioning and analytic models. The theological seminaries of Örebro (Sweden) and Rüşchlikon (Switzerland) gave me invaluable tools for how to work with ancient texts in a disciplined fashion without losing myself in complicated strategies of literary models. During my early years as a student at Lund university, I was introduced to the vast field of oral tradition and transmission. These years determined in large measure my academic interests and mode of inquiry. The present work employs and develops insights of my dissertation *Jesus the Only Teacher*, which was researched, written and defended in Lund. The memories from the tight communities in northern Sweden have remained with me through the years; and I do not wish for a moment to deny their influence on what I have done and what I am doing in this book. The scientific work with Scripture will always, it seems, be inextricably intertwined with our own different life stories!

I am grateful to the different institutions and people that have helped me and stimulated the present work. The Humboldt foundation sponsored a year of research at the Evangelical Faculty of Tübingen university. Its understanding for the conditions of scientific work is a rare asset to the international scholarly community. The staff and colleagues in Tübingen facilitated my stay and work there in every way they could. In addition, the Department of Religion and the Faculty of Arts of Göteborg university offered me the ideal conditions of research and writing. Rarely is a scholar employed at a state university given such freedom! A generous grant from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences financed the final preparations of the manuscript for publication.

Much of this work has been developed and written in the wonderful setting of a small village outside of Lund. I have enjoyed the company of friends and colleagues at Lund university. In particular, it has been a true privilege to share my thoughts and feelings about this work – and many other things – with professor Birger Gerhardsson. I have learned much from him through the years.

It was professor Martin Hengel who invited me to Tübingen and encouraged me to work in the field of oral history and ancient historiography. I have benefited immensely from his broad knowledge of the ancient sources. He and his wife Marianne Hengel were always ready to open their home for enjoyable seminars and conversations. His keen interest in the topic of the present investigation gave me the courage to carry on. I feel especially honoured by his recommendation of this study for publication and by his willingness to contribute a foreword.

I am also grateful to Mr. Georg Siebeck for his invitation to publish the present volume in the series of WUNT and for his kind arrangements in Tübingen. Ms. Ilse König has, in addition, patiently shared her professional advice during the course of preparing the manuscript for publication.

My deepest thanks go to my family. Angela, my wife, is a true companion in life. She has given us two children, Michael and Jessica. I have seen them grow and develop, being reminded again of how history becomes story and how our stories will be filled with the memories of the past. To them I dedicate this book.

Revingeby, December 1999

Samuel Byrskog

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## Abbreviations

I have used the abbreviations listed in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998), pp. 555–579. For sources and periodicals not included there, I have used Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 9 vols. and index compiled by Ronald E. Pitkin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), I, pp. xvi–xxxix, and Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (revised and augmented by Sir Henry Stuart Jones; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), pp. xvi–xlv. In addition, the following abbreviations occur:

AASF	Annales Academiæ Scientiarum Fennicæ
<i>Ad Brut.</i>	Cicero, <i>Epistulae ad Brutum</i>
AGSU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des Spätjudentums und Urchristentums
AIARS	Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciæ
<i>Ann.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Annales</i>
<i>AnS</i>	<i>Ancient Society</i>
<i>Antid.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Antidosis</i>
<i>Apol.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Apologeticus</i>
ASA	Association of Social Anthropologists
ASLG	Auctoritate Societatis Litterarum Gottingensis
ATS	Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien
CCR	Cambridge Companions to Religion
CCS	Cambridge Classical Studies
CCWJCW	Cambridge Commentaries on Writings of the Jewish and Christian World 200 BC to AD 200
<i>ClassQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
CMG	Corpus Medicorum Graecorum
CompNT	Companions to the New Testament
<i>Conf.</i>	Augustin, <i>Confessiones</i>
CR	Colloquium Rauricum
<i>CR:BS</i>	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
CSMS	Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature
CSOLC	Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Cultures
<i>De Inv.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Inventione</i>
<i>De Leg.</i>	Cicero, <i>De Legibus</i>

<i>EDNT</i>	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
EEM	East European Monographs
EevT	Einführung in die evangelische Theologie
<i>Ep. Mor.</i>	Seneca, <i>Epistulae Morales</i>
ESH	Exeter Studies in History
<i>FrGrHist</i>	<i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i>
GAB	Göppinger Akademische Beiträge
GüT	Gütersloher Taschenausgaben
HCS	Hellenistic Culture and Society
<i>Her.</i>	<i>Rhetorica ad Herennium</i>
HF	Historische Forschungen
<i>Hipp. victu acut.</i>	Galen, <i>In Hippocratis de victu acutorum</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Historiae</i>
<i>Hom. in Luc.</i>	Origen, <i>Homiliae in Lucam</i>
HSCL	Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature
<i>HSCP</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
HZ	<i>Historische Zeitschrift</i>
<i>JAF</i>	<i>Journal of American Folklore</i>
JC	Judaica et Christiana
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
JRASup	Journal of Roman Archaeology. Supplementary Series
KBANT	Kommentare und Beiträge zum Alten und Neuen Testament
KHVLÅ	Kungliga humanistiska vetenskapssamfundets i Lund årsberättelse
KNT	Kommentar till Nya Testamentet
LAI	Library of Ancient Israel
MAAAS	Memoirs of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences
MQSHI	McGill-Queens Studies in the History of Ideas
NHMS	Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies
NTR	New Testament Readings
NWA	Neue Wege zur Antike
OCM	Oxford Classical Monographs
OPSNKF	Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
<i>Panathen.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Panathenaicus</i>
<i>Paneg.</i>	Isocrates, <i>Panegyricus</i>
PhM	Philological Monographs
PNTC	The Pelican New Testament Commentaries
PP	Päpste und Papsttum
<i>Ps.-Cl. Hom.</i>	<i>Pseudo-Clementine Homilies</i>
PTS	Patristische Texte und Studien
PU	Philologische Untersuchungen
<i>RevPh</i>	<i>Revue de Philologie</i>
SAC	Studies in Antiquity and Christianity
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SPNT	Studies on Personalities of the New Testament
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter

TTS	Trier theologische Studien
TUGAL	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
TUMSR	Trinity University Monograph Series in Religion
TVG	Theologische Verlagsgemeinschaft
UALG	Untersuchungen zur antiken Literatur und Geschichte
<i>Vir.</i>	Jerome, <i>Liber de viris inlustribus</i>
VL	Vetus Latina
WdF	Wege der Forschung
WZKMUL	<i>Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl-Marx-Universität Leipzig.</i>



# Introduction

## A. Defining the Problem

### 1. Story as History – History as Story

“Story as history – history as story”, a seemingly strange pair of phrases. Story is story and history is history, one is accustomed to think today. The two should not be mingled, lest one fuses the narrative and fictional world with the extratextual and real world.

The initial impulse of the present study arose from a somewhat confusing frustration with the methodological paradigms that force a sharp distinction between the two. To read narrative texts both as “mirrors” reflecting self-contained worlds and as “windows” opening up to extratextual and diachronic levels of history is often considered to be a violation of proper hermeneutical conduct. Methods or perspectives easily become power structures, I realized, oppositional and eclectic, enslaving the scholars in labels which disqualify the attempts toward more comprehensive approaches. Ancient texts, some people say, are to be seen merely from one conceptual viewpoint at a time; other conceptual perspectives are to be left aside for the moment or, at the best, permitted to figure as obscure and remote shades, all in the name of scientific objectivity. How easily we become the victims of our own methodological vigour!

It is a matter of course that the gospel narratives present stories with inherent dynamics representing the “inner texture” of the fiction.<sup>1</sup> Narrative and rhetorical criticism has provided valuable and lasting results in this direction, which are to be fully affirmed. But by the same token, the gospels are historical documents reflecting the socio-cultural matrix of

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term “narrative” in a broad, untechnical sense, for any oral or written text that explicitly or implicitly mediates some kind of plot. I do not distinguish it sharply from the term “story”, though the latter often carries more of an aspect of what is signified – the content – while the former stands for the signifier.

the time. The traditional methods, such as form- and redaction criticism, coupled with more recent attention to sociology and cultural anthropology, have provided ample evidence of the “intertexture” as well as the “social and cultural texture” of the gospels.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely this double character of the gospel narratives calls for a more comprehensive approach. They are, *as stories*, filled with diachronic dimensions. History is intrinsic to them precisely as stories. It was partly this insight that caused Hans W. Frei, as a development of Erich Auerbach’s suggestions, to employ the famous and influential label “realistic narrative”.<sup>3</sup> The gospel narratives are not like fictions telling a story in such a way that the narrative setting in place and time can be replaced by another place and another time without effecting a significant loss as to the characteristic plot of the story; no, they are, as stories, uniquely bound to the past as a once and for all event. Without that decisive, diachronic dimension they might be good stories, but not Gospel stories. In addition, they are, despite Frei’s influential hermeneutical program, more than inherently “realistic narratives”. Already Justin Martyr, as we all know, conceived of the gospels as “reminiscences”,<sup>4</sup> memoirs of the past; the theme of “remembrance” was central to them. And as we realize today, they are – when we, as modern hearers/readers, approach them from the horizon of the authors – the outcome of the redactional composition of traditions which had been transmitted over a period of time. The Lukan prologue even encodes this extrafictional dimension of pastness into the narrative, thus focalizing at the very beginning around the author’s work with the traditions from history.<sup>5</sup> We have a story, but it is story as history.

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<sup>2</sup> The expressions “inner texture”, “intertexture” and “social and cultural texture” are taken from Vernon K. Robbins’ version of socio-rhetorical criticism. He explains them most fully in his books *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, pp. 7–94, and *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse*, pp. 44–191. See further below Introd., B:2.

<sup>3</sup> Frei defines this label as concisely as possible: “Realistic narrative is that kind in which subject and social setting belong together, and characters and external circumstances fitly render each other” (*The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 13).

<sup>4</sup> For texts and discussion, see Abramowski, “Die ‘Erinnerungen der Apostel’ bei Justinus”, pp. 341–353; Hengel, *Earliest Christianity*, pp. 27–29.

<sup>5</sup> Coleridge omits Luke 1:1–4 in his attempt to account for the beginning of the Lukan narrative. “Lk. 1.5–25 is the beginning of the beginning”, he asserts (*The Birth of the Lukan Narrative*, p. 28). As it seems, in Coleridge’s notion of narrative criticism, the focalization around the reception of extrafictional material from the past is external to the story – Coleridge employs the term “narrative” – proper (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 215–216, 232–233).

Likewise, the history that is reported in the gospel narratives, *as histories*, is put within the framework of synchronic relations emerging as a coherent story. The time is over when the gospels were regarded as mere collections of formal units, as “Perikopenbücher”, like beautiful pearls held together only by the thread of the necklace. Today we see the necklace as a piece of art in itself; and the individual pearls, no matter how beautifully designed each of them appears to be, are closely related to make up a compositional and semantic whole. There are historical items; there is history, but history has become story; it has become present.

## 2. Kerygma as History – History as Kerygma

This problem of story versus history has to do with the problem of the present versus the past and is as such somewhat reminiscent of the theological discussion of an earlier, German generation of scholars. History has always been an allusive object of study! As against the early form-critical school represented by Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, we can also speak of “kerygma as history – history as kerygma”.

Of course, we detect a substantial difference here from today’s concern, which arose primarily from modern literary considerations.<sup>6</sup> There was, to be sure, certain literary aspects involved in the old form-critical approach as well, especially in its sustained insistence on “Gattung” and “Sitz im Leben”. This provided a means to move from the text to the extratextual world of the communities.<sup>7</sup> But the old debate was primarily a theological one, where the role of the past in the early church was felt to be problematic; scholars of the form-critical school ignored or rejected it altogether. And the early form-critics certainly worked diachronically with the texts, because their object was ultimately not a literary item in itself, but the theology of a community.

Nevertheless, there are interesting similarities. It is vital to realize that both approaches represent perspectives with related inherent presuppositions.<sup>8</sup> No method, no approach, is ideologically neutral! Both are in es-

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vorster, “Kerygma/History and the Gospel Genre”, pp. 87–95. However, as I have already indicated, and as will be evident throughout the course of the present study, I do not agree with Vorster’s strict distinction between “real world” and “narrated world” as far as ancient “realistic narratives” are concerned.

<sup>7</sup> That move was usually rather one-dimensional – one “Gattung” correlated to one “Sitz im Leben” – and has as such been revised. Cf. Sellin, “‘Gattung’ und ‘Sitz im Leben’”, pp. 311–331.

<sup>8</sup> This is rarely realized in the modern debate on literary methods. But cf. the recent



sence to be seen as perspectives that diminish the role played by past history, either in a literary work or in a community. The discourse is the story of a gospel narrative; the kerygma was the story of the early church. The discourse of the story and the kerygma of the church lack inherent relations to history in its pastness. The present time of the story, or the present time of the community, is the all-determining factor. As Dibelius acclaimed: “das Kommende, dessen sie gewiß waren und das sie in nächster Zukunft erwarteten, war doch viel herrlicher als alles Vergangene!”<sup>9</sup> Yes, “history is swallowed up in eschatology”, even, “history is identical with eschatology”, the retired Bultmann lectured.<sup>10</sup> What remained for Bultmann was “die Geschichtlichkeit” of the individual, which means, as he said a few years later, “nicht seine Abhängigkeit von der Geschichte, sondern die Tatsache, daß der Mensch je seine eigene Geschichte hat, in der er sein wahres Wesen zu verwirklichen hat”.<sup>11</sup> History in its pastness is absorbed by the present existence and vanishes as an extra-existential reality. As we shall see in the next chapter, Dibelius was more nuanced than Bultmann when it came to the gospel tradition. But generally speaking, whatever was before the discourse, whatever was before the eschatological belief of the community, was of little or no importance.<sup>12</sup>

Not many scholars of today maintain the same view as the early form-critics did. It was perhaps not by accident that Germany was the home of the form-critical approach. Germany was also the country of the pure “historicism” of the eighteenth century;<sup>13</sup> and it was here that the reaction against that kind of “historicism” was most intense. British scholarship, generally speaking, never quite committed itself to this reaction, as C. H. Dodd pointed out already in 1937.<sup>14</sup> It is significant that as late as in

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comments of Morgan, “The Bible and Christian theology”, pp. 124–125 (on Barth and Bultmann *vis-à-vis* reader-response approaches and speech-act theory).

<sup>9</sup> Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann, *History and Eschatology*, pp. 37, 136.

<sup>11</sup> Bultmann, “Das Verständnis der Geschichte”, p. 68.

<sup>12</sup> It is another matter that both these perspectives deal with something that occurred within what is past history from the viewpoint of the modern researcher, either with a story embedded in a certain cultural matrix or with a community influenced by the religious ideas of the time. Here the interaction of past and present – with its “Vorverständnis” – in creating meaning is also indeed an intriguing challenge to scholarship; but it is beyond the scope of the present inquiry.

<sup>13</sup> See below Chap. 1, A:1.

<sup>14</sup> Dodd, “The Gospels as History”, pp. 122–123. Dodd elaborated the broader implications of his article a year later, in *History and the Gospel*.

1985, C. F. D. Moule, in a Festschrift to Werner Georg Kümmel, Bultmann's student and successor in Marburg, finds it necessary to insist that the synoptic gospels were intended to be ancillary to, and only part of, the full Christian kerygma. There was a sincere historical interest in Jesus, and the material emerging from that interest was essential and integral to the kerygma, but not the whole of it, according to Moule.<sup>15</sup> Even in Germany the situation was to change. Hans Conzelmann was one of the few among Bultmann's followers who held on to the kerygma as the decisive element of theology,<sup>16</sup> but at the same university in Göttingen Joachim Jeremias insisted strongly on the historical Jesus as the all-important matter.<sup>17</sup> As is well-known, there was an early return to past history among Bultmann's own students.<sup>18</sup> In his famous lecture delivered on 20 October 1953 to a group of former Bultmann students, Ernst Käsemann, at the time professor at the university of Göttingen, became known for initiating a new quest back to history, back to the historical Jesus.<sup>19</sup> The early Christians, he argued, were engaged in a warfare on two fronts. "Das Evangelium steht immer in einem Zweifrontenkrieg", he insisted.<sup>20</sup> They contended, on the one hand, against an enthusiastic docetism and, on the other hand, against an historicizing doctrine of *kenosis*. From that perspective he deemed it strange that we in the New Testament find any writings like the gospels, explaining it by the need to maintain the tension and connection between the "once upon a time" of history and the "once for all" of eschatological reality. Only the Lukan author, with his historicizing tendency, falls out of this pattern.

More recent scholarly work around the world has now been labelled a "third quest".<sup>21</sup> This label implies that Albert Schweitzer initiated a first quest already before the early form-critics made their impact, and that Käsemann initiated a second quest as a reaction against the dominating view of the early 1950s. "And the pursuit of truth – historical truth – is

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<sup>15</sup> Moule, "The Function of the Synoptic Gospels", pp. 199–208.

<sup>16</sup> Conzelmann's emphatic statement is famous: "Ich glaube ... dennoch darauf bestehen zu müssen, daß der 'historische Jesus' kein Thema der neutestamentlichen Theologie ist" (*Grundriss der Theologie*, p. 16).

<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps most evident in his *Neutestamentliche Theologie*.

<sup>18</sup> I am speaking here of history as a past matter to be distinguished from history as receiving its meaning from the present existential circumstances of the individual person. In that latter regard, as we just noticed, history was indeed important to Bultmann.

<sup>19</sup> Käsemann, "Das Problem des historischen Jesus", pp. 125–153.

<sup>20</sup> Käsemann, "Das Problem des historischen Jesus", p. 134.

<sup>21</sup> Neill/Wright, *Interpretation of the New Testament*, pp. 379–403; Wright, *Christian Origins*, pp. 83–124.

what the Third Quest is all about”, Thomas N. Wright says in a sense which goes far beyond what Käsemann ever intended.<sup>22</sup> Yet, despite the various differences, scholars cannot avoid the impression, it seems, that *the kerygma, the story of the present Lord, remains, after all, intrinsically linked with the Jesus of the past.*<sup>23</sup>

### 3. The General Problem at Hand

This book is not another attempt to defend the reliability of the gospel tradition.<sup>24</sup> It has rather been triggered and challenged by the lack of nuanced reasoning concerning concepts such as “past and present”, “tradition”, “transmission”, “history”, “historicity”, “reliability”, “objectivity”, “subjectivity”, etc.<sup>25</sup> Even the “third quest”, in all its emphasis on history, has its own agenda and master narrative.<sup>26</sup> The present study has emerged within the framework of the scholarly discussion of recent as well as former times as sketched above;<sup>27</sup> and it has been much informed by various attempts to overcome the inherent dichotomy of the literary and theological spectrum concerning story versus history. *It has the general purpose of better understanding the dynamics involved behind the past in the present and the present in the past as the gospel tradition evolved.*

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<sup>22</sup> Wright, *Christian Origins*, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> The book of Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, which rejects the theological value of the Jesus of the past, is surprising in its almost total neglect of European scholarship. Johnson is not alone in his neglect, to be sure, but one wonders how it is possible to write chapters on topics such as “history challenging faith”, “the limitations of history”, “what’s historical about Jesus?”, etc., without informing the readers that these matters were intensely debated by leading European philosophers and theologians already about half a century ago. I understand Johnson’s arguments and thesis as an American reaction against the American Jesus seminar aimed for a broad American audience, but I fail to see that they bring a new dimension to the international scholarly debate of this century.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., e.g., the comprehensive survey by Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*.

<sup>25</sup> A laudible exception is Meyer, “Objectivity and Subjectivity”, pp. 546–560, 564–565. Cf. also Hemer, *The Book of Acts*, pp. 43–49.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Moxnes, “The Historical Jesus”, pp. 135–149.

<sup>27</sup> Our Old Testament colleagues have been struggling with similar issues. It suffices to mention Barr, “Story and History”, pp. 1–17; Roberts, “Myth *versus* History”, pp. 1–13. The more recent turn of the debate concerning Israelite historiography is seen in the work of Van Seters, *In Search of History*. Further literature is surveyed in the volume edited by Millard, Hoffmeier and Baker, *Faith, Tradition, and History*, and in the study of Nielsen, *The Tragedy of History*, pp. 13–18.

In a previous study dealing with the transmission of the Jesus tradition in the Matthean community, I tried – somewhat boldly – to combine insights of recent literary theories with models of sociology and cultural anthropology, stressing the need to see the transmission of traditions about the past within the social and existential situation of the transmitters.<sup>28</sup> But I did not, as yet, find a comprehensive way of integrating these matters into a conceptual and methodological whole. This study does not aim at that grand task, but *it looks for a more comprehensive approach than the mere accumulation and combination of a number of variegating approaches and perspectives taken from literary and historical disciplines.*

## B. Towards a Synthesis

There have been several attempts, of course, to overcome the alleged dichotomy between story and history, the present and the past. I have selected three of them as they relate to recent scholarly research of exegetical character and have stimulated my own thinking significantly: those by Ulrich Luz, Vernon K. Robbins and Francis Watson.

### 1. Ulrich Luz

As for the use of narrative criticism, with its potential links to the diachronic dimensions of a story, I was already at the time of preparation for my previous study much influenced by the various publications of Ulrich Luz.<sup>29</sup> The extreme forms of reader-oriented literary studies never gained full acceptance in the scholarly world of German-speaking Europe, and Luz, in his work on the Matthean narrative, consistently clinged to the author as an historical figure with certain literary and theological ambitions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See especially the brief methodological discussion in Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher*, pp. 27–31. Cf also Byrskog, “Matthew 5:17–18”, pp. 557–571; Byrskog, “Slutet gott, allting gott”, pp. 85–98.

<sup>29</sup> The major study is, of course, Luz’s commentary on Matthew, three volumes of which have been published to date. See, e.g., Luz, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus*, II, pp. 64–68. The discussion of interest here is also put to use also in several other publications, e.g., “Geschichte”, pp. 595–604; “Die Wundergeschichten”, pp. 149–165; “Eine thetische Skizze der matthäischen Christologie”, pp. 221–222; *The theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, p. 143.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. his review of Howell’s study in *TLZ* 117 (1992), cols. 189–191.

While the author perceived by Luz indeed wished to create a comprehensive narrative, that narrative is made up of written and oral traditions – Matthew is an exponent of his community and a close follower of Mark and Q, according to Luz – and its story contains intrinsically a historical dimension that is directly and indirectly transparent for the present time of the community. History is history in its pastness, but as such it is transparent for the present. Methodologically Luz thus combines a narratological approach with the more traditional work of form- and redaction criticism. Yet one needs, it seems, to distinguish between the intrinsic past historical dimension of the story and the author’s sensitivity to past history as he actually composed his story. In that latter work, Luz’s author, while being faithful to tradition, betrays little or no awareness of the problem inherent in the addition of fictional elements, the reason being, Luz explains, that they had already been fused with reality in the living, oral transmission of the community.<sup>31</sup> The collective oral synthesis of the present, one might say, thus absorbed the “otherness” and pastness of history within the present time of the community. So in a sense, story is history, while history is story only at the cost of its objectifying pastness.

The admirable contribution of Luz lies, in my view, partly in the consistent attempt to relate story and history. In the German speaking part of Europe, he was among the pioneers in his use of the insights from literary theories, especially narratology; and by the same token, his insistence on relating narrative criticism to the extratextual aspects of a story, taking seriously the role of the real author and the real hearers/readers, makes him a pioneer within the paradigm of the narrative practitioners themselves.<sup>32</sup> His studies also teach us that one cannot speak of story and history without distinguishing between the historical dimension inherent within the story, the gospels as “realistic narratives”, on the one hand, and the role of past history in the process of composing the story, on the other hand, that is, between the intratextual and the extratextual function of past history. Moreover, as to the dynamics behind the past in the present and the present in the past as the gospel tradition evolved, Luz’s reference to some kind of oral modes of transmission promises a context where the two may somehow concur.

These important insights also raise issues for debate. One wonders, to begin with, how an author who evidently regarded the past history as a

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<sup>31</sup> Luz, “Fiktivität und Traditionstreue”, pp. 153–177.

<sup>32</sup> The extreme forms of reader-oriented versions of narrative criticism are now, it seems, being abandoned more and more, even by biblical scholars. Cf. already Howell, *Matthew’s Inclusive Story*.

vital ingredient of the story itself and adhered faithfully to tradition could ignore the pastness of the traditions in his own creative enterprise of composing that same story, in Luz's view adding freely, as an exponent of a larger community's collective memory, various fictional elements with no roots in factual history. Does this not imply, after all, a strange rift between the intratextual and the extratextual function of past history in the conception of the author, between a "realistic narrative", in the terms of Hans W. Frei, and a "historical narrative"?<sup>33</sup> And is there not an unresolvable tension even within the extratextual function of past history in the author's apparent faithfulness to tradition, on the one hand, and his allegedly unreflective use and addition of fictional elements, on the other?

A second point of debate is Luz's use of orality. What are the dynamics within an oral mode of transmission that legitimize Luz's explanation as he refers to a complete fusion of past and present, history and fiction, within the community? Are there any at all? Luz accepts the notion of Wolfgang Rösler,<sup>34</sup> that the consciousness of fictivity is conditioned by the existence of a culture of literacy, because oral cultures have no notion of private reading and no notion of genre, and thus no notion of fiction.<sup>35</sup>

This position, as presented by Luz, is questionable for several reasons. To begin with, its simplified attitude to the concepts of truth and fiction in oral cultures should be clear already from the utterances of some early Greek singers. "You sing of the fate of the Achaeans excellently well, how much the Achaeans did and suffered and how much they toiled, as if you had been present yourself or heard it from someone else",<sup>36</sup> Odysseus says to the bard Demodocus (*Od.* 8:489–491);<sup>37</sup> and "we know how to speak many false things like real things, and we know, when we wish, to

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<sup>33</sup> Luz' view is very similar to Hans Frei's "realistic narrative". Also Frei distinguishes a "realistic narrative" from what we normally call a historical account. Something might be "realistic or history-like" within the narrative without being historical according to the criteria of almost universal modern consent. Cf. *e.g.*, Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Rösler, "Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität", pp. 283–319.

<sup>35</sup> Luz, "Fiktivität und Traditionstreue", pp. 162–164, 174–175.

<sup>36</sup> λίην γὰρ κατὰ κόσμον Ἀχαιῶν οἶτον αἰεῖεις, ὅσος ἔρξαν τ' ἔπαθόν τε καὶ ὅσος ἐμώγησαν Ἀχαιοί, ὡς τέ που ἦ αὐτὸς παρεὼν ἢ ἄλλου ἀκούσας.

<sup>37</sup> Latacz, professor of Greek philology, comments: "Die Reputation des *oral poet* bemißt sich also nach dem Autentizitätsgrad seiner Darstellung. Unter Autentizitätsgrad ist dabei nicht nur objektive Faktenwiedergabe verstanden, sondern darüber hinaus auch 'stimmige' Wiedergabe der Faktenwirkung" ("Zu Umfang und Art der Vergangenheitsbewahrung", p. 168).

utter true things”,<sup>38</sup> the Muses of the “prehistoric” Olympus sing for the shepherding Hesiod (*Theog.* 27–28).<sup>39</sup> While the ancient fiction as a genre must be measured by categories that are beyond our modern notions of true and untrue, as Rösler does teach us, one cannot escape the impression that the singers were aware of certain boundaries concerning to what extent the poetry represents what they perceived of as the true reality.<sup>40</sup> Not everything that was sung was considered true, as one would have expected if there was no notion of fictional elements at all; and yet, not everything was considered false, as one would have expected if poetry was measured solely in its function of representing reality. Even in oral cultures there might indeed occur a subtle awareness of questions concerning what is true and what is false, and this awareness lends itself to some non-generic notions of fictionality.

Moreover, with Luz’s view it is unclear if there existed any notion of fiction at all in antiquity, because private reading was a rare thing even in ancient settings of literacy. It is impossible to verify an extensive practice of private reading in Greek antiquity, as Rösler acknowledges.<sup>41</sup> The normal procedure was reading aloud to others.<sup>42</sup> Although he exaggerates the implication of his insight, A. K. Gavrilov has quite recently pointed out that the well-known silent reading of Bishop Ambrose was considered an obstacle precisely because he read privately in the presence of others (*Aug., Conf.* 6:3).<sup>43</sup> Reading was not to be done in privacy. Most people would thus hear rather than see the text, also in cases where a certain amount of literacy can be assumed.

And thirdly, we do have ample evidence from cultural anthropology that oral cultures possess a rich awareness of genres. Although that awareness is sometimes difficult to estimate due to the culture bound character of the genres, it is noteworthy that the genre definition of a certain

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<sup>38</sup> ἴδμεν ψεύδα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα, ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι.

<sup>39</sup> Kullmann comments: “Auch wenn es den Begriff Fiktion nicht gibt, ist doch klar, daß von Hesiod nicht alles so geglaubt wird, wie es im Epos erzählt wird” (“Der Übergang von der Mündlichkeit zur Schriftlichkeit”, p. 73). For a different understanding of this passage, cf. Rösler, “Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität”, pp. 296–297.

<sup>40</sup> There were of course various notions of truth, as especially *Theog.* 27–28 shows, with its interplay between ἔτυμα (corresponding to reality) and ἀληθέα (corresponding to what is revealed). For this distinction, see Simondon, *La mémoire*, pp. 112–115.

<sup>41</sup> Rösler, “Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität”, p. 316 n. 92. At this point Rösler abandons his reliance on ancient texts and adduces modern theories of reading in support.

<sup>42</sup> See Balogh, “‘Voces Paginarum’”, pp. 84–109, 202–240.

<sup>43</sup> Gavrilov, “Techniques of reading in classical antiquity”, pp. 56–73.

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