Revista JESUSHISTÓRICO
Revista de Estudos sobre o Jesus Histórico e sua Recepção
ISSN 1983-4810

Artigo recebido em: 09/05/2014
Artigo aceito em: 25/06/2014

Finding a lost sheep – human memory, oral tradition and the historical Jesus[1]

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Abstract: The differences between parallel passages in the gospels – both in the canon and between the canon and *Gospel of Thomas* – have traditionally been attributed to scribal redaction, with significant energy having been devoted to a determination of which is the "original" or "more authentic" version. This paper examines how work on oral transmission, human memory and (to a lesser extent) social memory theory affect our understanding of how the similarities and differences between gospel parallels in general may have come about, examines their implications for historical Jesus studies, and applies the findings to the parable of the lost sheep as it appears in Matthew, Luke and Thomas. It concludes that, while it is possible that differences were introduced due to authorial redaction, this is not the only possible source of variation. At least some of the differences between gospel parallels could be the result of the normal processes of human memory, including slippage over the oral transmission period and/or to Jesus having used variations of certain stories in different contexts.

Keywords: Human memory, oral transmission, lost sheep, social memory theory, gospel parallels

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Fellowship for Biblical Studies inaugural conference in Melbourne, Australia in 2012. I am grateful to the members of the audience who provided suggestions for its improvement.

[2] Doctoral candidate, University of New England, NSW, Australia. Supervisor: Prof Lynda Garland. Research title: A Comparison of the Parables of the Reign of God in the Gospel of Thomas and the Canonical Synoptic Gospels.

Resumo: As diferenças entre passagens paralelas nos evangelhos – tanto no cânone como entre o cânone e o *Evangelho de Tomé* – têm sido tradicionalmente atribuídas à redação dos escribas, com significativa energia tendo sido gasta para a determinação de qual é a versão "original" ou "mais autêntica". Este artigo examina como as pesquisas sobre transmissão oral, memória humana e (em menor medida) teoria da memória social afetam nosso entendimento de como similaridades e diferenças entre os paralelos evangélicos em geral podem ter surgido; examina suas implicações para os estudos do Jesus histórico e aplica tais métodos à parábola da ovelha perdida, tal qual aparece em Mateus, Lucas e Tomé. Concluímos que, embora possível que as diferenças sejam introduzidas por redação autoral, esta não é a única fonte possível de variação. Ao menos algumas das diferenças entre paralelos nos evangelhos poderiam resultar de processos normais da memória humana, incluindo lapsos durante o período de transmissão oral e/ou a que Jesus tenha usado variações de certas histórias em diferentes contextos.

Palavras-chave: Memória humana; transmissão oral; ovelha perdida; teoria da memória social; paralelos nos evangelhos.

In the last decade or two, significant scholarly attention has been focussed on the role of memory in the transmission of the gospels. Material like Richard Bauckham's (2006) book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses,* which suggests that the gospels are closer to eyewitness testimony than contemporary scholarship would have us believe, has refocussed attention on the problems inherent in form criticism. One response has been an exploration of contemporary psychological study of eyewitness testimony and human memory (see, for example, Redman, 2010; McIver, 2011; McIver, 2012 for overviews of the work in this area). Another has focussed on Social Memory Theory (SMT), building on the work of Maurice Halbwachs (beginning with Halbwachs, 1992). Anthony Le Donne (Le Donne, 2007; 2009, 41-64), Chris Keith (2013, 50-70) and Rafael Rodríguez (2009, 59-123) all provide useful summaries of how biblical scholars are thinking about SMT and the historical Jesus.

Although these two strands of work begin with different assumptions and theoretical bases, many of the conclusions they reach about the nature of the gospel materials are very similar, providing valuable triangulation of the theory. In short, psychological research concludes that both individual and group memory work to shape what is remembered in ways that make it impossible to determine which parts of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life might be accurate and which might have been reshaped in various ways by the normal effects of memory, while SMT provides further evidence of the effect of group interaction on memory. Samuel Byrskog (2000; 2008) also affirms from yet another perspective that we cannot expect uninterpreted facts from accounts of first century events. There is, however, significant difference of opinion among scholars about how these insights apply to our understanding of the gospels and what this means for our ability to access the historical Jesus.

This paper will focus on one aspect of the implications of this work for historical Jesus scholarship; namely, what light it might shed on the existence of multiple versions of the same story in various gospels, both canonical and non-canonical. It will look primarily at the evidence provided by psychological studies of eyewitness testimony, oral transmission and human memory, with some reference to SMT. This material has the capacity to change our understanding of the reasons for and motivation behind how these differences came into being.

Most redaction-critical study assumes that the theological emphases of an evangelist can be known by "noting how his gospel differs from that of his supposed source or sources, in so far as they are available for comparison" (Gregory, 2008, 110), that is, that the author has deliberately changed his sources to reflect his

theology. We normally attribute variations in wording, word order and context to deliberate attempts by gospel authors, either canonical or non-canonical, to manipulate the doctrine and theology of their audiences and various scholars have developed criteria for differentiating between "authentic" Jesus material and redaction (see, for example Funk, Hoover *et al.*, 1993, 16-34). It seems, however, that at least some of the differences between gospel parallels can be explained by what we know about eyewitness testimony, oral transmission and human memory. This paper sketches out how this might be the case and then takes the parable of the lost sheep in the gospels of Matthew, Luke and Thomas as a practical example. Although some of the findings will have wider implications, this paper only examines representations of Jesus' teachings and in particular his parables.

The model of redaction that is traditionally presented by biblical scholars provides an unsatisfactory explanation for the formation of the text of the gospels on at least two levels.

The first is at the level of authorial motivation. While it is true that when people are trying to convince someone of a particular position, they will emphasise those points that support their argument and omit or qualify or otherwise try to minimise those that do not, people of good will and integrity do not normally deliberately change facts to advance their cases. They do not, for example, normally assert that events that occurred in different places and different times all happened on the one day at the same time. Nor do they say "If person A had said Y instead of X, that would support my case, so I will tell everyone that s/he said Y". This is nevertheless the way that form and redaction criticism present authorial motivation. One of the unspoken articles of the Christian faith is that the authors of Scripture were people of integrity, inspired by the Holy Spirit to record what they did, yet many descriptions of the work of the gospel writers makes them sound like deliberate manipulators of the truth for their own theological ends. It seems much more likely that what they wrote is what they believed to be true.

The second issue is that, at the more technical level, the mechanics as described in traditional redaction criticism are very text-based and do not by themselves take into account that the Jesus stories in the texts circulated in the various faith communities in oral form for decades before they were written down, in a society where the majority of people were functionally illiterate. This period of oral transmission has significant consequences for the shape of the material that was eventually written down, but much of the work on comparison between gospels has been focussed on the Synoptic Problem, which has as its central hypothesis the literary dependence of the Synoptic texts on one another. While the level of

verbatim correspondence between these texts makes it virtually impossible to provide a credible explanation that does not involve text-based transmission, this does not rule out the possibility that oral transmission also had an important role in the development of the gospels (Gregory, 2008, 104-107). An adequate transmission theory needs to take into account *both* an oral transmission phase *and* a text-based transmission phase. Significant work has been done on the mechanics of oral transmission, starting with Walter Ong's (1982) and Werner Kelber's (1983) applications of the work of Milman Parry (1971) and Albert B Lord (1960; 1978) on transmission of tradition in oral societies, but the application to the study of early Christianity of both the psychological research on eyewitness testimony and human memory beginning with the work of Elizabeth Loftus (1979) and the sociological research on collective memory (which has developed into social memory theory) beginning with Maurice Halbwachs (1992) is still relatively new.

The nature of gospels and naming their relationship with one another

Let us look first at the nature of the material with which we are working. In the canon, there are four gospels. Most scholars seem now to accept Richard Burridge's (2004) contention that each of them takes the form of a specialised *βίος,* or biography, of Jesus, but there are significant differences between accounts. Clearly, the leaders of the early church did not see this as a problem because they included all four in the canon.

No gospel purports to be an exhaustive account of Jesus' life and ministry, so omissions are not problematic. The presence, in what appear to be accounts of the same events, of significant differences in detail about what happened and when and where events occurred creates difficulties, however, especially given the way many parts of the Christian Church use Scripture. The *Gospel of Thomas* (*GTh*) offers an additional version of a significant number of Jesus' sayings. Although it describes itself as a collection of sayings of Jesus that one needs to understand in order to gain eternal life, rather than a *βίος,* its presentation of Jesus' words still creates challenges for the biblical scholar.

The language used when describing the relationship between parallel passages in the gospels is important as it can bias the conclusions being made. Commentators often say that Thomas is "dependent on" or "independent of" Matthew or Luke and/or that one is "less authentic than" (see, for example, Waller, 1979, 102) or "inferior to" the other (see, for example, Schoedel, 1972, 554; Davies & Allison, 2004, 424). Mark Goodacre (2012, 5-7) has recently drawn attention to the problems of using the term "dependence" in reference to the

relationship between *GTh* and the Synoptics because something that is dependent can be seen as derivative and yet about half of *GTh* is new material, and may be more important than the Synoptic parallels that it contains. Even in comparing Synoptic texts, Andrew Gregory (2008) articulates the problems associated with categorising material as dependent on other material without copies of the original material, and the complications that arise because the texts come from oral tradition. Goodacre points out that the terms "literary dependence" and "independence" can be unhelpful because they bring to mind images of scribes, books and copying especially for *GTh* which "gives so clear an impression of orality and aurality" (2012, 6). He recommends instead "familiarity", "knowledge" or "use", although in practice he tends to use "familiarity" most frequently.

In making this recommendation, he draws parallels between discussions about the relationship between John and the Synoptics and suggests that authors of second-century texts (which he holds *GTh* to be (Goodacre, 2012, 154-171)) can be familiar with the canonical Gospels without their texts necessarily be dependent on the canon (Goodacre, 2012, 7).

The alternatives that Goodacre suggests are not, however, wholly successful because, like dependence, his suggested alternatives are all imprecise terms that are open to a range of interpretations. Depending on the context in which it is used, "know" can imply anything from an intimate understanding of a person or idea through to simply being familiar with a name. I would say that I know my husband, but I might also say that I know Mark Goodacre, when in the latter case all I am indicating is that I am familiar with his academic work. "Familiarity" has a similar number of different levels of meaning. Even "use" is open to interpretation, since it is possible to use things in ways and for purposes for which they were not intended. In addition, "familiarity", "knowledge" and "use" do not overcome the negative connotations of "dependence" without a satisfactory substitute for "independent". Hearers and readers too readily substitute "dependence" in their minds.

It is, however, difficult to come up with a simple alternative, and that may point to another problem with the debate. It is usually not clear exactly what scholars who say that Thomas is independent of the Synoptics actually mean. Do they think that: the author of Thomas did not have a copy of the manuscripts in front of him as he wrote; or that the author had never heard of the Synoptics and had no idea what they contained; or that he knew the content but did not deliberately consult the tradition in the preparation of his own manuscript?

It might be more helpful to categorise the relationship between two or more parallel texts as "direct" or "indirect" and then to describe likely trajectories through

which they have travelled to reach their current forms. One might say, for example, that there is a direct literary relationship between two texts, with the author of the earlier having had a written copy of the other in front of her/him during the composition of the later work; or that it is an indirect literary relationship, with both authors using a common written source which they may have been quoting from memory; or that there is a direct oral relationship; or that the relationship is indirect, with shared oral sources; or that we cannot be at all sure, given the evidence available.

It is very clear (and unsurprising) that Thomas, John and the Synoptics are familiar with some of the same traditions about Jesus – it is far less clear what their relationship with one another is. As far as possible, this paper will describe relationships between texts more specifically and when necessary will use the less loaded terms suggested by Goodacre.

Memory and oral transmission

All scholars agree that none of the gospels were written during Jesus' life. The earliest credible dating of Mark has the material circulating in oral form for more than a decade after Jesus' death. Even if Matthew and John were the apostles of those names, at least some of their material and all of Mark's and Luke's will have been drawn from the memories of others. While there is a general assumption within our community that an eyewitness to an event must know what happened, it is also widely acknowledged that each eyewitness will give a somewhat different account of what happened. All the information may well be correct, but no-one will provide a complete account of what happened. Clearly this phenomenon must have come into play in the passing on of Jesus' teachings and the accounts of his life. Let us now look at what that might mean.

A number of factors determine how eyewitnesses will remember and retell the story of events which they have witnessed. The first is *what they have encoded of the event*. Our brains are incapable of taking in and processing all the details of everything that happens around us, so we subconsciously make choices about what we notice, what we remember and how we remember it. What we perceive and how we understand it are shaped by what we expect to see, by our previous experiences, by our physical vantage points, by how we believe the world works, by what interests us and by what we find surprising (see Redman, 2010 for a fuller account of factors affecting encoding of memories).

Events that have been encoded in our memories do not remain unchanged. Psychological research demonstrates that *memories slip over time*. There is more

involved in this than simply forgetting whole events. *Actual details disappear* and *are replaced* by details from the "rememberer's" "schemas" – what the person concerned considers to be "normal" for the kind of event being remembered (Bartlett, 1932, 199-204; Rubin, 1995, 22). *Order* also *changes* to emphasise what the teller considers to be the most important points (Bartlett, 1932, 93-94).

Information gathered later can be incorporated into a memory (see, for example, Schacter, 2001, 88-111). Memories *can be enhanced* by discussion of the event with other eyewitnesses – individuals can be reminded of things they did not notice or have since forgotten (Loftus, 1979, 55-56; Weldon & Bellinger, 1997; Weldon, 2000; Paterson & Kemp, 2006). Discussion with others can, however, also result in the *replacement of an accurate recollection with an error* (Loftus, 1979, 56-58; Buckhout, 1982, 122; Roediger, Meade *et al.*, 2001).

Over time, *memories can even be repackaged* so that they reinforce rather than challenge the "rememberer's" world view (Barclay, 1999). As Haber and Haber (2000, 1066) point out, people rarely remember events simply to preserve an accurate record of the past. Memories help people to make sense of the world in which they live and their place in it, and to understand what happened to them and what that meant and means for them. It is this aspect of the psychological research that links with SMT (see McIver, 2011, 539-41) and provides triangulation. Social memory theorists hold that all memory is an interpretation of the actual events, but that "*how* Jesus was remembered allows informed speculation about the historical Jesus who produced those memories" (Keith, 2013, 64).

Furthermore, what *eyewitnesses have told other people affects what they remember*. Things they have told others tend to be more reliably remembered than those they have not spoken about (Marsh, 2007, 16-20), and most of us tend to tell our audiences only the details we think they will find interesting or convincing.

All of these things happen unconsciously. Normal people simply do not consciously reshape their memories into more comfortable or politically correct forms, but research evidence reveals that these kinds of changes happen all the time. Slippages and adjustments can occur within days or even hours of witnessing an event, although after five years memories tend to stabilise and undergo very little change until ageing effects intervene (see Redman, 2010; McIver, 2011, especially pp 21-40).

In addition, actual words are not as well remembered as general content. One researcher found that his participants could usually remember 70% of the content but only 30% of the actual words (Kay, 1955). Furthermore, in oral transmission

words are ephemeral – slippage occurs quite easily because there is no original account with which to compare. Much is made of the ability of people in oral cultures to remember much larger amounts of information than can people from text-based cultures such as our own (see, for example Riesenfeld, 1957; Riesner, 1991; Gerhardsson, 1998). While this is quite true, the emphasis on verbatim reproduction is of much more interest to literate than oral cultures. Lord (1960) provides evidence that at least amongst the oral tradents with whom he worked, "exactly the same" does not mean "verbatim correspondence" (28) – that is, oral tradents are generally not *trying* to produce verbatim accounts each time they retell a story. This is reinforced by Hunter (1985) in his analysis of the work of Lord, Parry and a number of other researchers on transmission of long "texts" in non-literate societies. He looks at lengthy verbatim recall (LVR), that is, passages of 50 words or more, and concludes that: in both literate and non-literate cultures, when recalling large amounts of verbal material, it is common for people to use flexible wording and paraphrase combined with short often-repeated phrases which are not bonded into LVR; and there is no good evidence that LVR ever occurs in non-literate societies (234).

The foregoing makes it not at all surprising that four different authors would produce four different versions of the events surrounding Jesus' ministry simply through normal processes of memory and transmission. What *is* surprising is that much of the scholarship about parallel passages of Jesus' teachings seems to assume that Jesus only said anything once during his ministry, so any similar sayings in different gospels must be adjustments of what happened at this one time (although see Hultgren, 2000, 49), and that only one can be accurate. Given that Jesus moved around from place to place as he taught, this seems unlikely, so reuse of his own material becomes another factor with the potential to result in variant versions of a text.

If Jesus had a core set of teachings that were relevant to most hearers in most places, surely he would have used the same illustrations in each place. Hunter's (1985) research, cited above, suggests that he would not see the need to repeat them verbatim each time. Further, if there was a story that audiences seemed to like and relate to, it could be adjusted slightly and used to illustrate a similar point in a different place. In other words, it is very likely that at least some variations in detail and context came about because Jesus actually used several variations of the story in different contexts. Each author may be reproducing a faithful account of a different event. Jesus himself may therefore have been one of the sources of variation between gospel sayings.

Moreover, Jesus' ministry was clearly compelling, so people who encountered him would have told other people. Their stories would have had the same gist, but different details and those varied stories would have been passed on, being changed further as they went. Almost certainly no-one deliberately set out to reshape the story in order to convince someone else of their own particular point of view, but the changes would have been made, nevertheless (see Figure 1).

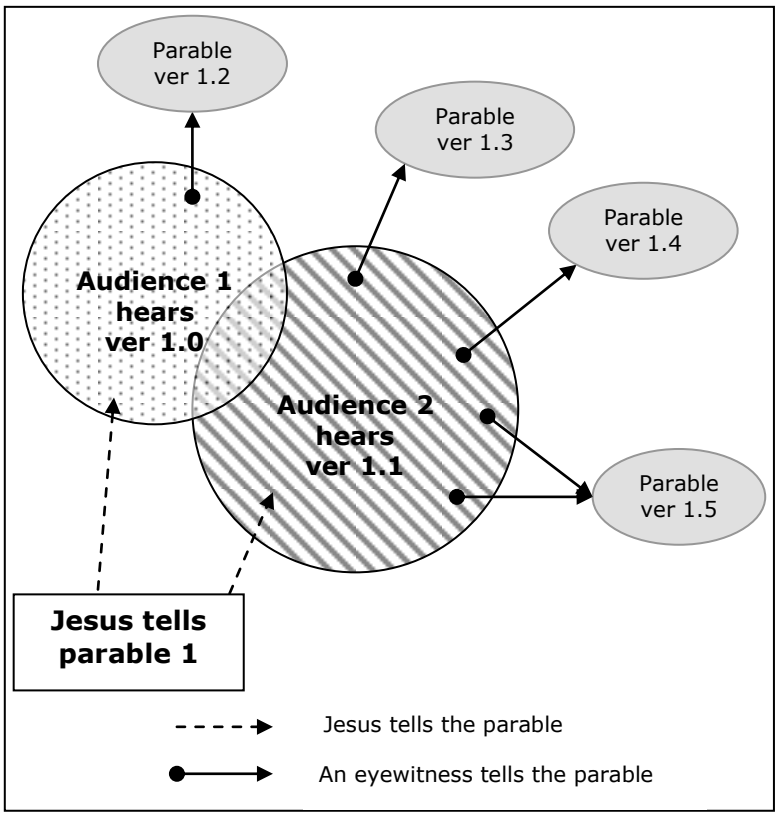

Figure 1: Transmission of Jesus' parables

When text is being transmitted in written form, the "original" version is the first one to be written down, that is, the one that Jesus told to the first audience in Figure 1. The concept of an "original" version, however, takes on different meaning when the text is being transmitted orally. As Werner Kelber says, a subsequent audience in a different place would not have perceived the version they heard as "second hand", nor would any one version of a saying be given the position of Jesus' original words, since each telling was autonomous (1994, 147). In fact, Albert Lord argues that the concepts of "original" and "variant" make no sense in oral tradition (1960, 101). It should also be noted that a larger audience, such as Audience 2 in the diagram, is likely to result in there being more versions in circulation based on what its members heard. Thus the most common version is not necessarily closest to the first telling.

After a fairly short time quite a number of different versions of any particular Jesus event would have been circulating in the community, but at some point a stabilising factor entered the mix – the notion that this material was important and needed to be preserved. Once this happened, certain people have been seen as the authorised communicators of the tradition, and the community would probably have

seen it as their role to draw attention to any changes. Bailey (1991; 1995) provides examples of how this might take place. Theodore Weedon Sr (2009), criticised this as being anecdotal, rather than research based, but it comes from observation in a real oral community, and this kind of information could not be obtained in a controlled experimental environment. It provides an excellent explanation of the character of the Synoptic tradition (Dunn, 2009). By this stage, however, different communities would have had different stories, each the product of its own original event and unconscious editing and each *shaped to some extent by* the theological perspective of its community, but none deliberately altered to *convince people of* a particular theological or doctrinal agenda.

Thus, variation between parallel passages in the canon and Thomas could well have come from Jesus himself and/or from the memories of the people who transmitted the stories in oral form. Both of these are independent of the gospels' authors.

The nature of the relationship

All the texts have a common source at some level because they are all accounts of the life, ministry and death of the same person. The question is: what is the nature of their relationship with one another? A number of scholars argue for a direct literary relationship – that is, that the author of Thomas had access to a written copy of one or more of the canonical gospels from which he copied when preparing his own manuscript. Often this kind of claim is based on strings of the same words and Goodacre (2012, 26-48) provides a comprehensive outline of the argument, but there are two problems with it when working with any two or more accounts and a third which is peculiar to comparing *GTh* with the canon.

The first is that in order to rule out the correspondence having happened by chance, there needs to be quite long strings of words or a very high proportion of words in a large block that are the same, preferably with one or two or more unusual words in them. There are extended passages of verbatim or near verbatim correspondence (some in the range of 50-60 words or more) in the Synoptics, but both Goodacre (2012, 44) and Gathercole (2012, 142) suggest that using this level of correspondence as a criterion for a literary relationship between two texts is unnecessarily stringent in determining the relationship between *GTh* and the Synoptics. Significantly shorter passages can, however, occur by chance, especially when addressing fairly common topics. For example, TurnItIn (originality software used by many universities) once recognised a 10 word section of my writing on early Christianity as also occurring in an article in a journal of management theory!

Care also needs to be taken in calling on the presence of shared uncommon words as evidence of a text-based relationship. An uncommon word is more likely to be evidence of a text-based relationship when it expresses a common concept than it is when it talks about something unusual. For example, Meier (2012, 726-727) argues that there is significance in the fact that both Matt (13:24-30) and *GTh* (S 57) use *ζιζάνιον* (darnel) to describe the seed planted in the field of wheat, and that in the NT it only occurs in this parable. Darnel, however, is the only weed virtually indistinguishable from wheat in the early stages of growth, so it is required for the sense of the parable and since there is nowhere else in the NT where this point needs to be made, it is rather unsurprising both that it is used only once in the NT and that it appears in Thomas' version of the story. It provides evidence that Matthew and Thomas knew the same story, but not necessarily that one knew the text of the other.

The second is that although people generally have a limited ability to reproduce long passages verbatim, McIver and Carroll (2002; 2004) found that with adequate incentive Australian undergraduate students can manage 14 or 15 word strings. The usual offering of isolated strings of five or six words that are common between two texts is thus unconvincing, since, in an oral society, people in general are able to memorise longer strings of words than does the average text-based undergraduate student.

The third complexity that comes into play with the addition of *GTh* is that a comparison is being made between a Greek original and a Coptic text that has been translated from another language, which may or may not have been Greek. Translating the Coptic text into a Greek version that contains sections of verbatim correspondence with the Synoptic texts merely demonstrates that this is possible, not that the original text has been accurately reconstructed. There is no guarantee the retroversion was not influenced by the translator's familiarity with the Greek Synoptic text. Bearing these things in mind, let us move on to our text.

The lost sheep

There are four versions of the parable known as the Lost Sheep in early Christian literature: Matthew 18: 10-14; Luke 15:3-7; saying 107 in the *Gospel of Thomas;* and pages 31 & 32 Nag Hammadi Codex1 in the *Gospel of Truth*. The *Gospel of Truth,* however, is more akin to a very long sermon than to a gospel in the canonical sense (Grobel, 1960, 18-19). It presents the Lost Sheep as a literary allusion, not a quotation from Jesus, so I will not deal with it in any depth.

Matthew 18: 10-14	**Luke 15: 1-7**	**Gospel of Thomas 107**
[10] "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.	Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. [2] And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."	Jesus says: "It is to a shepherd who had a hundred sheep that the kingdom is compared. One of them went astray, the largest. He left the ninety-nine, (and) he sought after the one until he came upon it. Having toiled/been troubled, he said to the sheep: 'I love you more than the ninety-nine.'" *(Redman)*
[12] What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? [13] And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.	[3] So he told them this parable: [4] "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? [5] When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. [6] And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'	
[14] So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. *(NRSV)*	[7] Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. *(NRSV)*	

Both Matthew and Luke provide contexts which give their readers clues about how they should understand the parable. Thomas, as is usual in his gospel, does not. He warns his readers at the beginning that they need to find the meaning of the sayings for themselves (Incipit & S1). This parable is generally considered to be authentic Jesus material (Davies & Allison, 2004, 768; Snodgrass, 2008, 103) yet the two synoptic authors understand it differently and Thomas has a third perspective.

Does this story fit one or more of the frameworks I have sketched? Could Jesus have used it as a multipurpose story, might the adjustments have come from memory slippage, or do we have to assume editorial adjustment at the point of composition?

Is it a multipurpose story?

Could Jesus have tailored the basic outline of this story to illustrate different points?

Matthew presents it as part of a discussion about who will be the greatest in the kingdom. The reader is told that the great have a responsibility to care for the "little ones" because God rejoices more over one little one who is lost and found than over 99 others who never go astray. It is followed by instructions about dealing with conflict between members of the church. This version clearly informs the leaders of faith community about their responsibility to look after even seemingly unimportant people assigned to their care. This context thus seems to be a post-resurrection transformation, since during the period of Jesus' ministry it is not likely that the disciples would have been in the kind of relationship with other believers that this context implies.

In Luke, the parable is introduced to counter an argument by the Pharisees and scribes that Jesus should not be associating with sinners. The reader is told that the inhabitants of heaven are happier about sinners who repent than they are about righteous people who do not need to repent. Jesus wanted the scribes and Pharisees to understand that all people are important to God, not just "good" Jews. This is an entirely believable slant for Jesus to put on this story, given that it is addressing the issue of the legalistic and elitist way that the Pharisees and scribes practised Judaism and this teaching is also documented in other places. In Matthew and Mark, Jesus' response to the criticism of these groups when he ate with sinners and tax collectors was to use the saying "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick," and to say, "Indeed, I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners" (Matt 9: 12-13 || Mark 2: 17, *Jerusalem Bible.*). All three of the Synoptics contain passages about the disciples' interest in who is the greatest among them (Mark 9: 34-47; Luke 9:46-48; Luke 24: 24-27), so it is by no means impossible that Jesus told them a parable that indicated that this was a misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom. The Lukan context is more likely to be one in which Jesus told it (Jeremias, 1972, 40, affirms it as the original setting), although it may be that Jesus did not tell all three of the "lostness" parables one after another as Luke does.

The context is, however, secondary to the parable itself (ie Mt 18:12-13 and Lk 15:3-6), because if it is a multipurpose story, it will have been told in multiple contexts. The differences between the Lukan and Matthean versions of the core story are not great and most appear to be simply a matter of storytelling technique. Both begin by encouraging the hearers to think about what they are hearing. The

exact location of the sheep is unimportant; the shepherd leaves them in an unsafe place. The significant point of variance is in the ending. In the Matthean version, the shepherd rejoices when he finds the sheep, whereas in the Lukan version, the shepherd encourages the neighbours to rejoice with him. Neither of these endings is particularly unbelievable and both fit with other records of Jesus' teaching. Furthermore, taken out of its setting within chapter 18 where Matthew refers specifically to the church, the Matthean version could well simply have been a warning to the disciples not to dismiss any of the people trying to see or follow Jesus as unimportant.

In Thomas, the differences are more significant. First, Thomas presents this parable as a story about the Kingdom, and the grammatical construction (the use of the Second/Focalising Present) makes it clear that it is the action of the man to which the kingdom is compared. This fits with the way in which Thomas presents the Kingdom in other parts of the text, but it seems likely that this, like the Matthean introduction (v 12) is an adaptation of the original.

Thomas' ending is the other point of significant divergence from the other two versions. The sheep here represents someone or something that the shepherd regards more highly than others and suggests that God or Jesus has favourites, which is the opposite message to the one in Matthew and Luke. Petersen (1981) and Scott (1990, 405-417), amongst others, suggest that the "biggest sheep" in the context of Jesus' ministry is Israel, who were still God's favourite people despite the corrupt religious practices of the Judaism of their day. This is difficult to sustain as authentic Jesus material, however, because in Jesus' time, there is no obvious identity for the other 99 sheep. Commentators who see *GTh* as Gnostic suggest that the biggest sheep represents Gnostic Christians (see, for example Grant & Freedman, 1960, 181; Montefiore, 1961, 240), but this would also represent a post-Easter transformation.

It seems, therefore, that the two canonical versions of the parable (but not necessarily the Matthean context) could well be examples of Jesus using the parable as a multi-purpose story, but the Thomasine version of the story was adapted by someone other than Jesus at a later date. This does not necessarily mean that *GTh* was written later than the Synoptics or that the adapter was its author.

Could the differences have arisen from memory slippage?

Could any of the differences be accounted for by the kind of slippage that normally occurs when stories are retold over time?

One of the most significant aspects of psychological research in this area is how quickly stories can be transformed to fit the teller's expectations of normality without any obvious motivation or intent to deceive. Allport and Postman (1947) showed subjects a scene in a subway where an Anglo person was holding a razor whilst talking to an African American, and asked them to describe the scene to someone who could not see it, who then described it to another person and so on through a six or seven person "rumour chain". Over half the chains ended with the African American holding the knife, even though the people involved had no reason to change the story. This effect could easily explain the shift in the Matthean context from Jesus' ministry to a setting within the early church. In chapter 3 of *Recovering the Original Gospel of Thomas,* April DeConick (2005) outlines the major situational changes which would have altered what the early Christian community considered normal and how this might affect their memories of Jesus' words.

Two striking features of the Lukan account in its context are first, as noted above, that it is situated with two other parables about something that is lost, and second that all three parables finish with the request that someone "rejoice with me". While both could be the result of Matthean redaction, they could also have been grouped to facilitate remembering in an oral sayings source, or simply have been remembered together because of their similar teaching points, without any particular intentionality in grouping them.

The part of the parable that has caused most concern for commentators is that the 99 sheep are left in the wilderness (Luke) or on the mountain (Matt) – thus suggesting that the "good" sheep are of minimal value. This is so problematic that many commentators have provided explanations about the care that the shepherd would have put in place before leaving (see, for example Jeremias, 1972, 133; Snodgrass, 2008, 104-105). Snodgrass also argues that the nature of parables is that they do not bother with details that are irrelevant to the main point of the story.

The Thomas account shows signs of possible slippage in the addition of the big, favourite sheep. This description makes the shepherd's action more logical, but suggests more explicitly that God has favourites. It may have arisen due to speculation by members of the audience about why the shepherd left the 99 sheep unattended and have slipped into the account. A post-resurrection version which portrayed Israel as needing to return to the Kingdom would probably have been quite attractive to the members of the Thomas community. The explanation that the big sheep represents Gnostic Christians seems less likely because it is difficult

to imagine that Gnostic Christians saw themselves as deliberately going outside the Kingdom or even becoming lost by accident. In addition, the size of the sheep is not mentioned in the patently Gnostic *Gos Truth*.

The sheep's size being the reason for the favouritism may, however, be specifically Thomasine. Thomas also compares the kingdom to a mustard seed which grows big branches that the birds can perch in (S20), and to a woman who takes yeast and makes big loaves (S96). In the Thomasine version of the wise angler, the angler does not divide his catch into good and bad fish as he does in the canonical version – he finds one big fish and keeps it, throwing all the rest back (S8).

Conclusion

Psychological and sociological research about human memory, eyewitness testimony and oral transmission does not, unfortunately, provide us with greater confidence about which parts of the gospel witness might be authentic Jesus material. It does, however, indicate that many of the differences between the three versions of the parable of the lost sheep could be the result of factors other than authorial redaction. Jesus could have told the story in several different contexts to achieve slightly different ends; they could have come from oral collections of Jesus' sayings that had been (re)inserted into written *βίοι* when the early church felt the need to preserve them; or slippage could have occurred due to storage in and retrieval from fallible human memory during the oral transmission phase.

Bauckham's (2006) contention that the writers of the gospels would have used the same methods to obtain their data as did the secular historians of their time, including eyewitness testimony whenever it was available, is doubtless correct. Burridge (2004) certainly demonstrates that they fit the pattern of biographies of their time.

The fact that these stories were in circulation in oral form for a considerable time is not, of itself, of concern because researchers working with oral poets have demonstrated that the content of long sagas can be preserved remarkably accurately over long periods. At the same time, however, psychological and sociological research into human memory at the individual and community level make it quite clear that while some of Jesus' actual words may have been preserved in the gospels, it is impossible to know conclusively which they might be. Furthermore, the notion that Jesus' early followers might have intentionally tried to preserve them verbatim is a misunderstanding of the process of oral transmission. Thus, traditional approaches for determining which parts of the gospel accounts

might be "accurate" or "authentic" cannot work, and other means of determining the sources of difference between parallel accounts in the gospels need to be found. One such approach has been demonstrated above.

While any approach that takes seriously psychological and sociological research into human memory makes it clear that we cannot be certain about what actually happened and what Jesus actually said, such approaches affirm that the texts that we have available to us present what their authors believed to be true, albeit shaped by their personal life experiences and theologies, rather than material that has been deliberately adjusted to provide support for their particular theological understandings.

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