

THE ROLE OF EYEWITNESSES IN THE
FORMATION OF THE GOSPEL TRADITION.
A REVIEW ARTICLE OF SAMUEL BYRSKOG, *STORY
AS HISTORY – HISTORY AS STORY*¹

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Summary

The place of eyewitness reports within the formation of the gospel tradition remains controversial in contemporary gospel scholarship. This review article explains and engages critically with an important recent attempt to examine this subject, Samuel Byrskog's, Story as History – History as Story. The introduction highlights the importance of the subject, and the lack of thorough treatments. We turn firstly to consider Byrskog's first book, Jesus the Only Teacher, and then turn to a detailed exposition of the arguments, strengths and weaknesses of his new book.

I. Introduction

Over against the historically sceptical stance of the radical form critics (especially Schmidt, Dibelius and Bultmann), Taylor, who virtually pioneered the study of forms within British scholarship, is often quoted as a helpful and historically plausible antidote:

It is on this question of eyewitnesses that Form-Criticism presents a very vulnerable front. If the Form-Critics are right, the disciples must have been translated to heaven immediately after the Resurrection. As Bultmann sees it, the primitive community exists *in vacuo*, cut off from its founders by the walls of an inexplicable ignorance. Like Robinson Crusoe it must do the best it can. Unable to turn to any one for information, it must invent situations for the words of Jesus, and put into His lips sayings which personal memory cannot check.²

¹ S. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (WUNT 123; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

² V. Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition: Eight Lectures* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1933, 1935 2nd ed.), 41.

Taylor goes on to discuss some of the reasons why the form-critics did not take the presence of eyewitnesses into account, suggesting that the form-critics were (over)reacting to exaggerated understandings of the role of eyewitnesses, but essentially accusing the form-critics of ignoring evidence which complicated their theories.³ The presence of eyewitnesses is not really compatible with the development of those 'laws of tradition' which reflect the development of anonymous oral traditions about Jesus. Taylor continued:

However disturbing to the smooth working of theories the influence of eyewitnesses on the formation of the tradition cannot possibly be ignored. The one hundred and twenty at Pentecost did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation they moved among the young Palestinian communities, and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information. . . . When all qualifications have been made, the presence of personal testimony is an element in the formative process which it is folly to ignore. By its neglect of this factor Form-Criticism gains in internal coherence, but it loses its power to accomplish its main task which is to describe the *Sitz im Leben* of the tradition.⁴

Taylor's understanding of the development of the oral tradition stemmed from his conviction that 'the principal agents who shaped the tradition were eyewitnesses and others who had knowledge of the original facts.'⁵ The tendency of the tradition was best expressed by analogy: over time the stories become shorter and more conventional, like 'pebbles on the seashore which are made smaller and round by the ceaseless beat of the waves'.⁶ The presence of numerous details in the early traditions (Mark, Q, and L) suggested that they stood closer to the eyewitness originators of the traditions. This generally conservative view was carried over into his commentary on Mark.⁷

Many scholars have wrestled with the crucial issue of discovering, or at least modelling, the nature of the continuity of memory of the Jesus tradition from the pre-Easter ministry of Jesus through to the

³ M. Dibelius allowed an important role for eyewitnesses in the genesis of the tradition. Of the presence in the narrative of an unnamed young man (Mk. 14:51) and Simon of Cyrene (15:21), he wrote: 'these remarks would draw the readers' attention to the actual eyewitness of the events', *From Tradition to Gospel* (ET; London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1934), 183; cf. Byrskog, *Story*, 34-37.

⁴ Taylor, *Formation*, 42 & 43.

⁵ Taylor, *Formation*, 170.

⁶ Taylor, *Formation*, 124 (cf. Appendix B: 'The Tendencies of Oral Transmission', 202-209; hardly a scientific experiment).

⁷ V. Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark. The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indexes* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1952), see esp. 130-149 on 'The Historical Value of the Gospel'.

post-Easter church. In 1957 Riesenfeld argued that the source of the Gospel tradition was to be found not in missionary proclamation nor communal instruction but in a separate, carefully controlled, oral tradition of the ‘holy’ words of Jesus, basically analogous to rabbinic transmission processes.⁸ The apostles had an important role:

... to be an apostle or witness of the Resurrection it was not sufficient to have met the Risen Christ, but that person had to possess such a living impression of the life and work of Jesus as to make him qualified to transmit the holy tradition of the words and deeds of Jesus.⁹

Following Riesenfeld’s lead, Gerhardsson offered a detailed treatment of the analogies between rabbinic and early Christian transmission of oral traditions.¹⁰ Gerhardsson supported the idea that the early oral tradition was developed by the apostles in Jerusalem and passed down in a carefully controlled manner.¹¹ From a different angle, but following another of Riesenfeld’s observations, Riesner argued from the prophetic and messianic authority of Jesus to a plausible setting for very early interest in remembering his words.¹²

Given the widespread perception that Gerhardsson in particular was carelessly reading back later rabbinic practice into the early period, and given the rather conservative conclusions of the Scandinavian school, it is not surprising that other approaches have also been developed.¹³ For example, Bailey’s model of an ‘informal controlled tradition’, centred on community control of the tradition,

⁸ H. Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings: A Study in the Limits of ‘Formgeschichte’* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd, 1957).

⁹ Riesenfeld, *The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*, 21.

¹⁰ B. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (ASNU XXII; Lund: Gleerup, 1961).

¹¹ E.g. Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, 224f. Cf. further his *Tradition and Transmission in Early Christianity* (CN 20; Lund: Gleerup, 1964) and the more popular work, *The Origins of the Gospel Traditions* (London: SCM, 1979).

¹² R. Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer: Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung* (WUNT 2.7; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988, 3rd ed.). Riesenfeld had said: ‘In view of the Old Testament background and the Messianic hopes of the Jews, we can legitimately assume that Jesus entrusted to his disciples, and hence to the eschatological people of God, an already formulated holy Word for it to transmit, and that this was the starting point of a tradition’ (*The Gospel Tradition and its Beginnings*, 29). Details relevant to each of these claims (Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would teach God’s truth and wisdom, the deliberately memorable mode of much of Jesus’ teaching, the importance of teaching and teachers in early Christianity and its setting) are provided by Riesner.

¹³ For some reflections on the inadequacy of this perception see Jacob Neusner’s repentant foreword to the reprint of Gerhardsson’s two major works under the title *Memory and Manuscript* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), xxv–xlvi.

has been adopted by Wright as his working hypothesis, and supported recently by Dunn.¹⁴ Others have appealed to the likelihood of early written traditions.¹⁵ But little has been written on the nature of eyewitness testimony and its possible role in the formation of the gospel tradition. Until now that is. In his major new work, *Story as History – History as Story*, Byrskog has returned to the observations of Taylor, informed by the recent work of Riesenfeld, Gerhardsson and Riesner, and seeks to address the way in which eyewitness traditions were used and incorporated into historical writings of antiquity as background to understanding the processes associated with the composition of the gospels. Since *Story* relates in significant ways to his earlier book, it is necessary to spend some time examining Byrskog's first book, before turning in more detail to the new book.

II. The First Book: *Jesus the Only Teacher*

In his first book Byrskog attempted an investigation which went beyond Gerhardsson's general comparison with rabbinic transmission, and built on Riesner's important discussion, by studying the way in which the concentration on Jesus as the only teacher (as characterised in Matthew and expressed explicitly in 23:8) relates to the transmission of Jesus tradition within the Matthean community.¹⁶

As background to his study of Matthew, Byrskog investigated the way in which, among a variety of Jewish groups, the authority of an individual teacher, such as ben Sirach, the teacher of righteousness and prominent rabbis, 'constituted the essential identity marker for the

¹⁴ K. Bailey, 'Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels' *Asia Jour. of Theol.* 5(1991), 34-54 [rep. *Themelios* 20.2(1995), 4-11]. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 136 (and elsewhere). J.D.G. Dunn, 'Jesus in Oral Memory: The Initial Stages of the Jesus Tradition' in *Jesus: A Colloquium in the Holy Land* (ed. D. Donnelly; New York & London: Continuum, 2001), 84-145. Important details of Bailey's field research have recently been subjected to devastating criticism by T. Weeden (as yet unpublished).

¹⁵ E.E. Ellis, 'New Directions in Form Criticism' *Jesus Christus in Historie und Theologie* (ed. G. Strecker; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1975), 299-315; cf. also G.N. Stanton, 'Form Criticism Revisited' in *What About the New Testament?* (ed. M. Hooker & C. Hickling; London: SCM, 1975), 13-27; W. Schmithals, 'Vom Ursprung der synoptischen Tradition', *ZTK* 94(1997), 288-316; A. Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).

¹⁶ *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (CBNT 24; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994). This was a doctoral dissertation under Gerhardsson at Lund University. In addition to Mt. 23:8, explicit affirmations of Jesus the only teacher are found in Ignatius, Eph 15.1; Magn 9.1; Clement, *Strom* I.12.3 (see pp. 13-14).

settings of transmission' (p. 77). Byrskog argued that in relation to the transmission of material about the teachers a variety of motivations could be discerned. In ben Sirach and the rabbinic literature it is the inherent value of the teaching itself, basically independent of the status and person and life of the teacher, that motivated its transmission. Among prophetic narratives biographical material, reflecting the integration of the teaching with the life of the teacher, were formed. The Dead Sea Scrolls reflect a situation in which the elevation of the Teacher to an exclusive authority is enhanced in various ways, especially by labelling, reflecting particular convictions about the status of the Teacher. A similar variety is reflected in material relating to the transmission process.

The bulk of the book is then devoted to a study of Matthew. Byrskog shows clearly that the Matthean narrative introduces and amplifies the characterisation of Jesus as teacher of his disciples, who might be described as his group of pupils.¹⁷ This suggests to Byrskog the possibility that Matthew, along with other readers of his text, may have identified himself and other Christians with the role of disciples or pupils in the school of Jesus.¹⁸ Byrskog argues that in terms of motivation, the Matthean material reflects aspects of all three motives previously discovered in Jewish circles: didactic, didactic-biographical and didactic-labelling, generalised by Byrskog as a 'person-oriented' perspective. In other words, Matthew perceived an inherent value to reside in Jesus' teaching, that this teaching was necessarily located within the context of Jesus' life and ministry, and that Matthew used a variety of labels designed to validate Jesus' status as teacher.¹⁹ In a crucial passage he draws two corollaries from the conclusion that Matthew 'adhered to Jesus as the qualitatively and quantitatively one and only normative teacher':

¹⁷ Byrskog underplays those facets of Matthew's presentation which focus on Jesus teaching crowds, or Jesus as teacher of Israel, in favour of a focus on Jesus as teacher of the disciples (see pp. 224-28 on the speeches of Jesus in Matthew).

¹⁸ *Jesus*, 235-36. In additional support Byrskog notes that Stendahl's argument for the existence of a Matthean school (derived in his part from a consideration of the exegetical methods exhibited in Matthew's use of the OT) 'is not historically implausible at all' (*Jesus*, 235; cf. K. Stendahl, *The School of Matthew and its Use of the Old Testament* (ASNU 20; Lund: Gleerup, 1968, 2nd)).

¹⁹ The crucial evidence for this last category are: a) the use of ἐξουσία of Jesus' teaching (esp. in Mt. 7:29; 21:23-27; 28:18); b) the positive depiction of Jesus as καθηγητής (23:10); c) the divine status accorded to Jesus' teaching (5:19; 7:24, 26; 24:35; also the authoritative ἐγώ of 5:21-48); d) the isolation of Jesus as 'the only teacher' (23:8-10); and e) the presentation of Jesus as teacher of divine wisdom (11:25-30; cf. 8:19f; 12:42), *Jesus*, 279-306.

Since Jesus was a qualitatively unique teacher, it must have been generally essential to transmit his words and deeds. And since Jesus was also a quantitatively unique teacher, it must have been important to transmit his words and deeds as if they were isolated from the utterances and actions of other persons inside and outside of the community. (p. 307)

These assertions are not, however, demonstrated in the investigation up to this point. They certainly sound plausible enough, but need to be discussed in relation to what can actually be determined about Matthew's handling of the Jesus tradition.

In the final chapter Byrskog notes the frequency with which Matthew includes specific attributions to 'Jesus' in introducing his sayings (in 76 out of 137 instances, generally strengthening the attribution rate of his sources, sometimes quite emphatically). The function of such attributions is to root the sayings in the historical person so named. By contrast, sayings attributed by Matthew to thirty-four other characters are brief, almost uniformly subordinated to words of Jesus that follow (or giving direct testimony to Jesus). This suggests a clear concern to differentiate between teaching of Jesus and teaching of others.²⁰ Byrskog also notes the Matthean emphasis on hearing words of Jesus (ἀκούειν occurs in this context 28 times), which may suggest that memorisation of Jesus' teaching took place. Also important for Matthew is the 'doing' of Jesus' teaching (using ποιεῖν): two types of evidence are discussed, firstly a number of passages (5:19; 5:16; 7:15–20; 21:23–27; 23:2–5) which correlate verbal and behavioural acts of teaching; secondly a further series of passages which highlight the importance of doing, or practising, the words of Jesus (e.g. 7:24–27) and others which call for imitation of Jesus in various ways (e.g. 10:7, 27; 20:26–28, etc.).

Consideration of this material leads Byrskog to the conclusion that the transmitters of the Jesus tradition in Matthean circles lived out the tradition in practical obedience. The words of the Jesus tradition, words which themselves constituted something essential to the existence and life of the community, were embodied and materialised in the activities of the community. It is therefore impossible to think of

²⁰ Byrskog draws two preliminary conclusions at this point: a) 'the Jesus tradition was in its main elements transmitted isolated from the sayings of other characters', from which it follows that 'there was no entirely free incorporation and integration of traditions from other persons into the Jesus tradition'; and b) 'the sayings from other characters did not carry a status independent of Jesus' teaching during the transmission' (*Jesus*, 319). The apparent contradiction between these two statements is unfortunately not addressed.

the transmission of Jesus tradition occurring in *total* isolation from the life of the community (p. 329).

Adopting a fairly straightforward form of the two source hypothesis, Byrskog next examines the actual nature of the transmission process as revealed in Matthew's treatment of written sources, that is Markan material as well as the Q material, and his own special, probably oral sources, the so-called M material. Basically this reveals both a 'broad and basic adherence to the written traditions' alongside 'a significant amount of creativity' (p. 342). The creativity is expressed especially in relocations and alterations, which reflect, according to Byrskog, 'a process of re-oralization in various ways' which means that Matthew did not simply read and reproduce written traditions passively, but heard them and recomposed them (p. 348). This conception of a re-oralising of written traditions within the redactional process is a suggestive and important one. The actual evidence in support of it is, however, not completely compelling. Byrskog invokes the idea of a distinction between the written and oral traditions: the written media objectify and de-personalise the relationship between tradition and transmitter so as even to effect an alienation from the Jesus tradition. Orality, on the other hand, 'is empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced' (p. 338). It is primarily because of these conceptions, rather than textual evidence, that Byrskog suggests that the oral M material is Matthew's 'own' tradition, available in its oral form as a living text in which he continuously heard and internalized the voice of Jesus, his only teacher' (p. 341). This then leads directly into the assumption that becomes a conclusion about re-oralisation:

If Matthew preferred to transmit his "own" tradition with oral media, it is conceivable that he adopted also the written traditions through a process containing a certain oral hermeneutic. (pp. 341–42)

In addition to its slim textual basis, this argument falls foul of Byrskog's own earlier refusal to credit the clear cut dichotomy of oral and written means of transmission.²¹

In the final section Byrskog argues against the view that sayings from post-Easter Christian prophets have been incorporated into the gospel tradition (as proposed by Boring in relation to Mt. 5:3–12, 18;

²¹ See, e.g. p. 24 against 'the strict dichotomy' proposed by W.H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); also p. 163: 'the distinction between oral and written media was fluid in ancient Israel – even within the whole ancient Oriental culture' (on the same page he later refers to 'the constant lack of a clear differentiation between written and oral media').

7:20–23; 10:23; 18:18),²² although accepting the principle of prophetic interpretation of the tradition:

It is indeed possible that the prophets did utter new and independent oracles. But Matthew did apparently not allow them to enter into the Jesus tradition as pre-Easter Jesus-sayings. *There was no entirely free incorporation and integration of new and independent oracles into the Jesus tradition.* Within the creativity, there was the aim of preserve. (p. 360)

Nevertheless, elaboration of the tradition did take place, both structurally and argumentatively. Structural elaborations involve increasing the importance of sayings of Jesus within pericopes, sharpening the dialogical situation in various ways, and generalising and summarising comments of various sorts. Argumentative elaboration involves alterations, by expansion and/or rearrangement, in OT quotations on the lips of Jesus (Mt. 11:10; 15:4, 8f; 19:4f, 18f; 21:42; 22:32, 44; 26:31), or by adding an OT quotation to a Jesus saying (9:13; 12:7; 13:14f; 21:16), or by creating an antithetical construction which utilises the OT in relation to an authoritative utterance of Jesus (5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

The outcome of the investigation is thus basically conservative:

Within a setting where transmission is a specific act motivated by a special interest in the teaching as integrated within the past history of Jesus, the aim to preserve and protect the Jesus tradition remained essential. (p. 397)

This seems to preclude the creation of new sayings and incidents, but does not preclude elaboration in various ways, as we have already noted. Byrskog's conclusions are thus broadly in line with those reached previously by Gerhardsson: the setting of the transmission is separate from the everyday life of the Christian community and oriented by non-practical motives, that is, it went beyond concern for immediate relevance, and actually reflected a belief informed by the pastness of the tradition of Jesus, within a school setting, and probably involving '*transmitters highly able and motivated to preserve the tradition faithfully*' (p. 400). The transmission was, in Byrskog's words, 'careful and controlled' (p. 401).

Overall the book is an impressive achievement and reviewers have generally appreciated it, most especially Neusner who offered a laudatory review.²³ A number of questions have been posed about the

²² M. E. Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (SNTSMS; Cambridge: CUP, 1982).

²³ J. Neusner in *JSJ* 27(1996), 75-76; cf. also G.N. Stanton in *EQ* 70(1998), 153; D. Marguerat in *Biblica* 77(1996), 438-441.

work, firstly, that the relationship between the two main sections is not transparent, since most of the fundamental results are arrived at in the section on the gospel itself.²⁴ This does not invalidate the arguments drawn in the second half of the work, although this too is not without weaknesses. The argument for gospel-traditioning schools is a deduction that does not flow naturally from the evidence adduced.²⁵ Most fundamental is whether the concentration on Matthew alone allows any generalisations to be made about the processing of the gospel traditions more generally. This is perhaps a vulnerable point in the argument (as Byrskog himself acknowledges in his concluding reflections): Matthew could function within a generally conservative framework, but his sources may have already included material treated in a more creative way. Several reviewers wondered whether the lack of any sustained treatment of Graeco-Roman approaches to the issue may have hindered or biased the investigation.²⁶ This question struck the author as well, who wondered on the last page whether an investigation of Graeco-Roman sources might complement or challenge the terms and results of this study.

III. The Second Book: *Story as History*

In the preface to the new book Byrskog writes that ‘the present work employs and develops insights of my dissertation *Jesus the Only Teacher*’ (*Story*, ix). Several of the issues raised in the first book are dealt with here, for example, the relationship between oral and written sources, and the perspective of Graeco-Roman sources that reviewers picked up on. A glance at the contents and indices of each book shows that while the first is predominantly a discussion illuminated by Jewish sources, the second is almost entirely focused on Graeco-Roman literary sources. The overall conception of *Story* is reflected in the title, but the substantive content is reflected in the subtitle and more especially in the concept of ‘autopsy’, which features in four of the six chapter titles. The title, *Story as History – History as Story*, reflects Byrskog’s concern to move beyond purely synchronic literary approaches to the gospels by crediting the essentially diachronic and referential nature of the stories which are the gospels: they are

²⁴ Cf. A.G. Hunter in *JTS* 48(1997), 180-82.

²⁵ Cf. also A.J. Saldirini in *CBQ* 57(1995), 383-84.

²⁶ E.g. R.K. McIver in *JBL* 114(1995), 734-36; A.G. Hunter in *JTS* 48(1997), 180-82; R.A. Burridge in *ExpT* 106(1995), 309-10.

‘stories’ but they are stories with a history and about historically specific events (as Luke’s prologue attests). As he notes with emphasis after some brief comments about the Third Quest, ‘*the kerygma, the story of the present Lord, remains, after all, intrinsically linked with the Jesus of the past.*’ (p. 6) In one of his few autobiographical comments the author writes: ‘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’ (p. 1), that is between the study of the gospels as story and the study of the gospels as history. This project ‘*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.*’ (p. 6)

The subtitle, *The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, identifies the concept of ‘oral history’ as crucial to this investigation. Here is a method which, in Byrskog’s view, poses precisely the sorts of questions which will enable him to probe the relationship between past and present. As we have already noted, NT scholars have regularly discussed the issue of oral tradition, that is the process whereby oral material could be transmitted from an active reciter of the tradition to a (relatively) passive recipient, and this has been illumined (or not as the case might be) from parallels in the oral folklore, rabbinic practices or Middle Eastern village life. ‘Oral history’ is something quite different in which the recipient is active as investigator and interviewer of the subject. ‘The oral historian’, in Byrskog’s view, ‘is not so much concerned with her or his own conception of how things actually have been as with hearing and documenting the living voice of the people themselves’ (p. 24). Byrskog articulates some of the key features of oral history in dialogue with two of the most important theoretical discussions of the subject.²⁷ For Byrskog, contemporary oral history offers an approach which ‘helps us to understand the ancient way of relating to the past’ (p. 26). The oral historian is not a bookish don in search of objective facts (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), but an active participant, working from below, alive to the social setting of his or her material, attuned to the importance of involvement in accurate memory of past events, and taking seriously the perceptions and imaginations of his informants.

²⁷ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past. Oral History* (Oxford: OUP, 1988, 2nd ed.) and Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (London: James Currey, 1985).

A brief survey treating Dibelius, Taylor, Nineham and Reicke, highlights different conceptions of the role of eyewitnesses in the formation and transmission of the gospel traditions, and suggests to Byrskog that this is the most appropriate starting point for his investigation. The project thus becomes an investigation into how ancient Greek and Roman historians, as the primary representatives of how people in antiquity related to the past, reflected on the place of eyewitness testimony in the process of investigating, interpreting and re-presenting the pastness of the past to their contemporaries in their own present. The key term for this is ‘autopsy’ defined as ‘*a visual means to gather information concerning a certain object*’ (p. 48).

The structure of the book is sometimes rather difficult to follow, since the ancient historians are appealed to in different connections in each chapter. A more global treatment of the role of autopsy in ancient historiography may well have made easier reading.²⁸

Chapter two (‘Story as History: Autopsy as a Means of Inquiry’) is an examination of the role of autopsy in ancient historiography from Heraclitus on through the claims made in relation to eyewitness observation by Herodotus, Thucydides, Polybius, Josephus and Tacitus.²⁹ Byrskog concludes that all these historians adhered to the dictum of Heraclitus, ‘eyes are surer witnesses than ears’:

The ancient historians exercised autopsy directly and/or indirectly, by being present themselves and/or by seeking out and interrogating other eyewitnesses; they related to the past visually. Autopsy was the essential means to reach back to the past. They acted very much like oral historians, aiming to hear the living voices of those who were present. (p. 64)

Whether such a level of generalisation is sustainable on the basis of a brief fourteen page overview is debatable, especially since Byrskog does not discuss the overall historical method of each historian, and since he holds back discussion of their treatment of other sources (oral and written) for subsequent chapters. Byrskog’s interpretative comment that ancient historians ‘related to the past visually’, is not really sustained by the information he provides about their actual practice, where the emphasis, especially in Polybius and Josephus, is

²⁸ Cf. A.W. Mosley, ‘Historical Reporting in the Ancient World’ *NTS* 12(1965f), 10-26; C.J. Hemer [ed. C.H. Gempf], *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic Historiography* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 63-100.

²⁹ Byrskog’s coverage is broader than that of L.C.A. Alexander, who focused on passages which actually used the terminology of *αὐτόπτης*, which is ‘not as common in Greek historiography as is often supposed’, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary convention and social context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 35.

on personal presence and experience of the events. Nevertheless the importance of sight and eyewitness testimony, at least as one of the primary sources upon which the historian must draw, is well taken.

Byrskog then turns to the NT to assess whether eyewitnesses existed, whether they functioned as informants, and who would be likely candidates. Noting the references within the gospels to local rumours and stories about Jesus (e.g. Mk. 5:27; 6:14; 10:47), Byrskog appeals also to Theissen's arguments for 'local colouring' within the tradition;³⁰ this suggests 'the importance of some local eyewitness-accounts as the gospel tradition emerged and developed' (p. 69). He further argues that although it has often been assumed that the disciples might have formed a decisive body of eyewitnesses and informants, the evidence of the NT rather suggests a focus on a few leading individuals, most particularly Peter, who has a narrative role as spokesman for the disciples, is often mentioned as present at important moments in the gospels, and is twice associated with 'remembering' (Mk. 11:21; 14:72), a perspective that is clearly reinforced in Acts and elsewhere.³¹ An important place is given to the witness of the women in the gospel traditions (e.g. Mk. 15:40f, 47; 16:1, 4f and parallels), Byrskog suggests that it is plausible to see here a genuine memory of their role as observers of Jesus' death, burial and empty tomb. Of the group of women Mary Magdalene is singled out: a) as identified not by her family relations but by her locale; b) as usually mentioned first in lists (Mk. 15:40 pars., 47 pars.; 16:1 pars.; Lk. 8:2; Jn. 19:25 is the exception); and c) as having seen the risen Jesus (Mt. 28:9f; Jn. 20:14–28; cf. Mk. 16.9–11). This aspect of the tradition, preserved against the androcentric tendency of the transmission, suggests the influence of a group of witnessing women in the early community. Another important group are the family of Jesus. Although they do not play a significant role, it is possible that both James, the brother of Jesus, and Mary, his mother, who both have some prominence within the NT, may have functioned as informants for some aspects of the tradition.³² The conclusion is positive:

We find the local people, Peter as the most prominent representative of the group of disciples, the women with Mary Magdalene, and the family of

³⁰ G. Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (ET L. M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).

³¹ *Story*, 71-73 (e.g. the witness motif in Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:20; 5:32; 10:39; also Peter remembers Jesus' teaching in 11:16; also Gal. 1:18).

³² The sayings that Mary treasured up things concerning Jesus' birth (Lk. 2:19; 51b) at least suggests some basis for this in Luke's tradition (*Story*, 89-90).

Jesus with James and Mary, Jesus' mother – all presented partly as eyewitnesses and informants. (p. 91)

Chapter three ('Between the past and the present: Autopsy as Orality') examines the different ways in which eyewitness observations might be verbalised and communicated in antiquity. In particular there is an interest in relating oral and written modes of communication. Given the general primacy of visual observation, Polybius recognises:

It is impossible for one man to be in several places at one time, and likewise it is not possible for one man to have been an eyewitness of every place in the world and of all the peculiarities of the places. (XII 4c.4)

Byrskog discusses the use of oral sources and local hearsay to supplement direct personal involvement in historians and writers such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Isocrates and Strabo.³³

Turning briefly to the gospel tradition Byrskog notes the interaction of orality and autopsy in even the Q material such as Luke 7:22: 'go and tell John what you have seen and heard'; and Luke 10:23f: 'Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!' Of the latter Byrskog writes: 'Seeing is here evidently a comprehensive idiom for experiencing a decisive eschatological moment which holds together words and deeds in one grand event. As it seems, sight has a basic primacy, as in ancient Greece, but it includes in itself the act of hearing' (p. 103). Since in the first instance, Jesus' mighty acts were appropriated by seeing and his words by hearing (Matthew 5–7; 8–9), and since teaching is a matter of both what Jesus says and what he does (e.g. Mt. 21:23–27), there is no basis for a strict distinction even in Matthew between the words and deeds of Jesus.

The general conclusions to be drawn from this is simply that the process of formation and development of the gospel tradition must be conceived of as involving both autopsy and orality:

The historical Jesus event was experienced through their eyes and their ears and soon became historic by entering into the present, oral currencies of observers such as Peter, the women, James and Mary; it became their own oral history which they proclaimed to others. (p. 106)

The discussion raises the further question about the relationship of written sources to oral sources. Byrskog documents the fact that some circles exhibited a scepticism towards the written word in favour of a well cultivated memory, arguing that 'writing was usually seen as

³³ Byrskog argues that the apparent Jewish preference for hearing over against seeing, suggested particularly by the importance of the *Shema* (Dt. 6:4f), has more to do with the character of the material: the verbal halakhic tradition than a specifically Hebrew mode of thinking (*Story*, 100-101).

supplementary to the oral discourse' (p. 116). This also applied, Byrskog argues, to the historians. Of course their own writings functioned as a means of fixing the record of past events for the future. Herodotus, for example, wrote 'in order that so the [memory of] past things may not be blotted out from among mankind by time' (1.1).³⁴ It is the permanent character of the written source that distinguished it from the oral source in antiquity.

Turning to the gospel tradition Byrskog is here critical of Kelber's sharp distinction between the oral gospel tradition, which exhibits no interest in past history and is always contemporary, and its written literary expression in the gospels (pp. 127–37). Parallels in prophetic circles set alongside the evidence of Q suggests that concern for the contemporary situation can co-exist with a real sense of the pastness of the past. Most likely the early stages of the gospel tradition saw constant interaction between oral and written traditions of various sorts. Here he returns to the idea of 're-oralisation':

This constant interaction of written and oral material in a process of re-oralization is thus an essential ingredient of the gospel tradition during all stages of its formation. (p. 143; cf. note 253 on p. 142)

It is precisely this interaction which stands behind his title: *Story as History – History as Story*. The first half of the title encapsulates his argument that the oral tradition, 'story', is actually involved in presenting 'history'. The second half of the title encapsulates the argument of the second half of the book, that 'history', i.e. the written down presentation of the gospel traditions, also functions as 'story'.

The final three chapters attempt to deal with the question of how the present (meaning the present setting, concerns, attitudes) affect the notion or perception of the past during: a) the process of inquiry (chapter four: 'The Present in the Past: Autopsy Interpreted'); b) the process of composition (chapter five: 'History Entering Into Story: Autopsy Narrativized'); and c) the process of narrativisation (chapter six: 'History as Story: Narrativizing One's Existence'). Again oral history is the starting point: it is concerned less with events than with perceptions about the meaning of events. A fundamental question is

³⁴ *Story*, 123. Cf. Thucydides, whose work 'is indeed composed as a possession for all time rather than as a prize essay to be heard for the moment' (I.22.4); Quintilian said that history was not written for immediate effect 'but for the memory of posterity and the fame of its author's genius' (A 1.31). Josephus wrote: 'the work of committing to memory those things which have [not] previously been investigated and of commending to posterity the things of one's own time is one which merits praise and acknowledgement' (*JW* 1.15).

how the involvements and subjective interpretative preferences of the informants affected the emerging gospel traditions (p. 146).

Chapter four begins with a helpful examination of the role of ancient writers' positive perspectives on informants. Very often such informants, be they local people, family members or others are identified in such a way as to define their social setting. While this might suggest some sort of value judgement on their tradition it also suggests, as Byrskog notes, that 'it is the "social memory" of that larger setting which constantly nourishes the interpretative drive of the eyewitnesses' (p. 153), as for example when family members can understand isolated pieces of information within a broader framework of relationships. Another important observation is that 'the eyewitness is a participant, and her or his understanding of the event is coloured by that participation' (p. 153). Ancient historians did not regard this as an obstacle to historical accuracy (not least because many portrayed themselves as eyewitnesses and participants, e.g. Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Josephus), rather for them, '*the ideal eyewitness is the one who is closest to the events, involved and participating*' (p. 157).³⁵ Byrskog argues that a good memory was widely valued, and that recall of stored memories generally involved the recollection of visual images.

Turning to the gospel tradition Byrskog makes the point that the modern search for objective, impartial observers did not characterise antiquity. Rather personal involvement was basically required from oral informants. He turns to the letter of James (after a brief defence of its attribution to the brother of the Lord, or at least a circle associated directly with him) for a brief case study of what he describes as 'eyewitness testimony in epistolary form' (p. 171). Byrskog takes the many parallels to the Jesus tradition in James as evidence that James knew blocks of traditional material (e.g. a Sermon on the Mount block); this is surely right (in some form), and he further draws the conclusion that as an eyewitness James integrated his own memories with definable blocks of traditional material, rather than adding his own personal memories to the tradition.³⁶ Surely, however, this depends on the extent to which James could be regarded as an

³⁵ E.g. Thucydides II 48.3; Xenophon, *Historia Graeca*; Polybius III.4.13 (for himself); Josephus, *Apion* 1.55; *JW* 1.1-3; *Ant.* 1.1-4.

³⁶ Byrskog wrote: 'The influence of this eyewitness in the development of the gospel tradition did not, in effect, mean the free incorporation of various scattered and personal memories of his.' (*Story*, 173).

eyewitness or informant of Jesus' teaching. It is generally plausible, but not specifically supported by the evidence adduced.

The second half of this chapter deals with suspicions of eyewitnesses in antiquity. Byrskog shows that historians such as Thucydides and Polybius were deeply aware of biased and inaccurate recollection among eyewitness informants. Of course this very concern shows the historians' concern for historical accuracy.

The historian's preference for the involved and participating eyewitness, coupled with their sensitivity to the biased character of the eyewitness accounts, challenged them therefore sometimes to insist more clearly and emphatically on the importance of truth.³⁷ (p. 180)

The role of the historian was to interrogate the informants and the evidence to legitimate (or otherwise) his own interpretation of the events. At this point Byrskog returns to the witness of the women in early Christianity. Byrskog argues that their role as witnesses was weakened in the course of transmission because of embarrassment over their social identity as women, and their testimony was elaborated and supplemented in various ways. The men who investigated the informants would have regarded the women as unreliable witnesses. But if this were true it would be hard to account for the prominence of the women's witness in the gospel tradition!³⁸

Chapter five moves on from the historical inquiry to the composition of a historical narrative and the communication of past history. Once again we have a survey of the function of references to autopsy in ancient historical narratives with a particular emphasis on the use of persuasive rhetoric to communicate the historian's overall

³⁷ This is demonstrated in relation to Xenophon, Thucydides and Polybius before he concludes that 'some ancient historians guided their actual research with an uttermost concern to find out the factual truth of history' (*Story*, 183).

³⁸ Byrskog over-interprets variations between Mt. 27:55 and Lk. 23:49 from Mk. 15:40f as evidence that their role as eyewitnesses and informants was weakened (*Story*, 191). He takes Matthew's use of aorist tense-forms in 27:55 (cf. Mark's imperfects) as describing 'the simple physical act of following Jesus in order to provide for him at a certain point of time'. But this overplays the supposed punctiliar aorist, hardly credits such significant Matthean vocabulary (ἀκολουθέω and διακονέω), and devalues the meaning of the whole sentence. He regards Luke similarly, because he omits 'serving' and uses the supposedly ambiguous συνακολουθεῖν (23:49). This seems arbitrary, and does not deal with Luke's emphatic repetition of information about these women not only in v49 (where the omission of 'serving' actually heightens their role as witnesses), but also in v55 (where the women are the guardians of continuity of witness). Nor is it clear that the disbelief of the disciples in Lk. 24:11 is 'linked to the fact that the informers were women' (p. 196); this rather reflects badly on the unbelief of the disciples, who later find the women's testimony vindicated (24:22-24).

point. While this could lead to accusations of bias and inaccuracy it was precisely through references to autopsy that historians defended the reliability of their accounts. If claims to autopsy are apologetically motivated, they cannot all be taken at face value as statements of historical method (p. 215, although Byrskog himself seems to have fallen foul of this point). Writers such as Strabo, Plutarch and Lucian complained about historians and others who have used autopsy as a literary cliché to construct implausible narratives.

Within the NT Byrskog finds autopsy used in a variety of ways. Paul's claims to have seen the Lord (1 Cor. 9:1; 1 Cor. 15:5–8; Gal. 1:16) legitimate his apostleship and his proclamation of the resurrection. Luke's references to eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:1–4; Acts 1:21f; 10:39–41) underline the Lukan claim that the tradition available to him was 'rooted in its entirety in the oral history of persons present at the events themselves' (p. 232). Johannine claims to autopsy (especially Jn. 19:35; 21:24; 1 Jn. 1:1–4) legitimate his status as author and link 'the faith that the written narrative is to encourage (cf. 20:31) to the history of the past' (p. 238). The collective autopsy of 1 John 1:1–4 grounds the argument of the letter in the reality of the life of Jesus in history. The claim of 2 Peter 1:16 attempts to legitimate a pseudonymous writing. He also has a brief discussion of Papias' preference for the testimony of 'a living and enduring voice' (Eus., *HE* III.39.4).

Should these claims be credited, or should they be taken as literary cliché or historical fraud? Byrskog argues that they should be credited, since informants would have been both available and valued. Additionally the writers use such claims rather sparsely and somewhat timidly when compared with extra-Biblical authors. Although such claims emerge only in later strands of the NT, they reflect the practice underlying the whole gospel tradition. References to eyewitnesses become more explicit due to the lapse of time from the event:

... one can not escape the impression that an ancient author of the first century, who was in close contact with various oral and written traditions about Jesus, conceptualized large parts of the development of the gospel tradition in terms of oral history (p. 252).

The final chapter deals with the impact of autopsy on the construction of a whole narrative, based on the assumption that 'as one produced a story about the past, one narrativized and interpreted not merely history, but essentially one's own present existence' (p. 255). Ancient historians had tools available for encoding their own interpretative framework into the story: selection of materials, the

desire to explain historical causes and events both involves interpretative judgements. Byrskog argues that the NT downplays the oral histories of local people, of some women, and of Jesus' relatives and when they are heard they are shaped and supplemented by other traditions. There is a Galilean and even Petrine perspective which seems to have shaped the passion narrative (NB the prominence of Peter in Mk. 8:29, 32f.; 9:2, 5; 11:21; 14:29, 33, 37, 54, 66–72; 16:7; and the parallels with 1 Peter reflecting Is. 53). The passion narrative is plausibly attributed to Peter's own narrativising influence,

the oral history of an eyewitness was not buried under the influence of other perspectives, but served early as a decisive factor in the creation of a written tradition. The evangelist, on this occasion, found the living voice of the apostle in a textualized form which probably had been re-oralized in particular settings. (p. 272)

Papias' note about the Petrine background to Mark (Eus., *HE* III.39.15) is also taken seriously by Byrskog, precisely because it coheres with the type of oral history treatment that he has found in the rest of the NT (it is also supported by 1 Pet. 5:13; Ac. 13:5; 12:12; pp. 272–80). The common argument against this view, that an eyewitness source would not have so much interpreted theology, misunderstands the interpreted nature of autopsy. With others Byrskog finds in Peter's sermon (Ac. 10:34–43) an outline of the Petrine *kerygma* which structurally anticipates Mark's outline (pp. 284–88). Mark also incorporated a number of Petrine *chreiai* (1:21–39; 8:27–9:29; 14:32–42, 54, 66–72). He concludes:

While a Petrine influence behind the Markan narrative is likely, in my view, the evangelist, in accordance with the ancient practice, incorporated Peter's oral history into his story by means of a subtle interchange between the eyewitness testimony and other traditional material available to him, on the one hand, and his personal, selective and interpretative perspective, on the other hand, at the end thus narrativizing his own existence by presenting history as story. (p. 292)³⁹

IV. General Evaluation and Conclusion

This book offers an important contribution to the study of the gospel traditions. It manages to bring the subject of eyewitness testimony, a subject that is quite fundamental in terms of the historical basis of the gospels' witness to Jesus, right into the foreground yet without the clamour and apologetic overstatement that is sometimes associated

³⁹ Matthew may also have used some Petrine reminiscences (*Story*, 292–97).

with discussions of the subject. Together with his earlier book our author has offered two works of considerable scale and scholarship which together, in complementary ways, propose a much more conservative model for the transmission of the gospel traditions than much contemporary scholarship will allow. The general conclusion maintained across both books is that the traditions about Jesus were remembered accurately and handled carefully within early Christianity. The incorporation of such traditions into the gospels, granted it occurs with selection, elaboration and amplification in various ways, does not in any way justify scepticism about the historical worth of the material. In particular the prominence accorded here to Peter as eyewitness informant behind Mark, an idea that does not suffering the frailty of novelty, but is here set within a much more fully worked out conception of how such informants may have informed those who listened, helps to secure a strong line of continuity between the Gospel of Mark as 'story' and Jesus of Nazareth as 'history'.

The investigation shows that eyewitness tradition was never uninterpreted brute fact. The eyewitness interprets what she sees even in the act of observing it, let alone when she speaks about it to someone else, the historian interprets what he hears from his informants, and then places it within a broader interpretative narrative framework. This conclusion will have to moderate simple appeals to eyewitness sources from conservatives, just as it also takes the wind out of the sails of those who would point to the theological nature of the gospel traditions as proof that it could not have come from eyewitnesses.

More critically, there are a number of disputed details which may need fine tuning at various points, a number of occasions where the conclusions drawn by the author did not seem to flow smoothly from the evidence provided, and quite a few occasions when the exegesis and interpretation of NT texts did not appear (to me) particularly convincing. Certainly it would be good to see the model here presented applied in detail to the understanding of particular gospel texts. Nevertheless, we are grateful for the common sense that the author so often brings to bear on a variety of subjects.

As will be clear to any reader, the fundamental comparison throughout is with Graeco-Roman historiography. This was mentioned at the close of his first book as an opportunity for further research (and highlighted as a glaring absence by a number of reviewers). The result however is one book in dialogue with Jewish sources and a second book in dialogue with Graeco-Roman sources. A more integrated

approach might have proven more useful. In particular it would be important to determine whether a thorough investigation of Jewish historiography might offer more illumination than is suggested here (Josephus is dealt with at several points, but the concept of Jewish historiography is dismissed briefly, p. 43 n. 97).

A further issue is signalled by 'historiography'. The genre distinction (with the possible exception of Luke) between the gospels and ancient historiography is not really adequately reckoned with. Byrskog, quite plausibly, accepts that the gospels are best understood as *bioi*, lives of Jesus (pp. 44f). Elsewhere, however, he suggests that historiography had higher demands for factual comprehensiveness and thoroughness than *bioi* (p. 216). Other differentiations between these genres are not considered at all, and yet it would appear to be rather important to the matters under discussion. It is surprising, and even damaging to his case, that this is not dealt with more thoroughly. It might even offer some further support to the idea of the direct involvement of eyewitness informants at every stage of the process of transmission, as this seems to be a characteristic of many *bioi*. Five of the ten lives chosen by BurrIDGE as a representative sample of the genre were written by authors who had definite and close personal connections with the subject of the biography (Isocrates taught Nicocles, son of Evagoras; Xenophon served as a soldier under Agesilaus; Atticus was a patron of Nepos; Agricola was Tacitus' father-in-law; Demonax was a teacher of Lucian). Two of the other authors may have had such connections (Satyrus may have been contemporary of Aristotle, Suetonius was contemporary with some of his subjects), one was a life of Moses (by Philo), the other two were written by professional scholars on the basis of written sources (Plutarch and Philostratus).⁴⁰ This is only suggestive, but it appears that biographies by non-professionals were most likely to have been written by someone with a personal acquaintance with the subject. In this context, and encouraged by this treatment of eyewitness informants, it could be worth another look at the question of the traditional authorships of the gospels.

⁴⁰ R.A. BurrIDGE, *What are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (SNTSMS 70; Cambridge: CUP, 1992). The ancient biographies are: i) Isocrates (436-338 BC), *Evagoras*; ii) Xenophon (428/7 - 354 BC), *Agesilaus*; iii) Satyrus (III BC), *Euripides*; iv) Nepos (99-24 BC), *Atticus*; v) Philo (30 BC - AD 45), *Moses*; vi) Tacitus, *Agricola* [written in AD 98]; vii) Plutarch (AD 45-120s), *Cato Minor*; viii) Suetonius (AD 69-130s), *Lives of the Caesars*; ix) Lucian (AD 120-180s), *Demonax*; x) Philostratus (AD 170-250), *Appolonius of Tyana*.