

Storytelling and the Composition of Social Space

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"It seems to me, my king, that the present time on earth, compared with that time of which we have no knowledge, is like when you are sitting at dinner with your ealdermen and thanes in winter-time, and the fire lit and your hall heated, and it's raining and snowing and hailing; and there arrives one sparrow from outside and flies swiftly through the hall, and entering through one door, leaving through the other. Now, while it's inside it is not touched by the winter's storm; but that's only a twinkling of an eye and the shortest space of time, and from a winter it immediately returns to a winter. So human life appears for a short interval: what went before it, and what comes after it, we don't know. Therefore, if this new teaching brings forth anything more certain, it is only fitting that we should go after it."¹

This story from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English* provides a symbolic intersection for my thoughts. Many of us, especially the storytellers among us, are quite familiar with this moving comparison. I would like to make at the outset three points that, in turn, will preface the three sections of my reflections.

First, this passage is a graphic example of the growing reach and spinning of the Old World Web, as described by J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill in their monumental view of human history, entitled *The Human Web*.² An eighth century scholar writes of the conversion of Northumbria in 627. King Edwin is persuaded by his councilors to listen to the story of the missionary Bishop Paulinus. Bede's narrative delivers a primary example of the Old World Web's growth of influence. Two worlds of power, communication, and meaning met. While the Christian story won out, the story of Edwin and Northumbria were not forgotten but located within Bede's telling of the ecclesiastical

¹ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English*. 2.13.

‘Talis,’ inquit, ‘mihi uidetur, rex, uita hominum praesens in terris, ad comparationem eius, quod nobis incertum est, temporis, quale cum te residente ad caenam cum ducibus ac ministris tuis tempore brumali, accenso quidem foco in medio, et calido effecto caenaculo, furentibus autem foris per omnia turbinibus hiemalium pluuiarum uel niuium, adueniens unus passeium domum citissime peruolauerit; qui cum per unum ostium ingrediens, mox per aliud exierit. Ipso quidem tempore, quo intus est, hiemis tempestate non tangitur, sed tamen paruissimo spatio serenitatis ad momentum excurso, mox de hieme in hiemem regrediens, tuis oculis elabatur. Ita haec uita hominum ad modicum apparet; quid autem sequatur, quidue praecesserit, prorsus ignoramus. Unde si haec noua doctrina certius aliquid attulit, merito esse sequenda uidetur.’ His similia et ceteri maiores natu ac regis consiliarii diuinitus admoniti prosequerantur.

² J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill, *The Human Web*. W.W. Norton: New York/London. 2003.

story of the English people. This is not a simple story; rather, it is caught in a web of stories, each with significant ramifications.

Second, this narrative gives us an illustration of a decision point in history. The king asks advice on a matter that will determine the future of his people. I would call it a true *crise de conscience*. But I would translate *crise de conscience* as a crisis of “knowing-with.” For the story that wins out, indeed, even the story that persuades the king to listen, is a story for all those involved. In other words, the social dimensions of conscience are set directly in front of us. The king and his thanes explored the possible stories before them. They enlisted additional stories to help them decide their future. This was not a simple calculus or a mechanical application of principles; rather, it was a sifting of stories to come to a decision.

Third, the poignant story of the sparrow in the banqueting hall truly speaks to our human vulnerability. That image from an anonymous advisor has lingered for over 1300 years. Our mortality certainly concentrates the imagination. We also would like to know whether there is any meaning in our passing. And so, we, too, tell stories trying to make sense of that chilled, fluttering creature.

I hope these introductory remarks intimate that storytelling is more than personal expression. Certainly it is that. But I contend that the act of storytelling is a human affair, which connects us to the oldest and widest web of human history. In telling stories the storyteller performs an essential function to sustain and further the human web. Not only does our civilization rest on this action; the planet itself now is part of this spinning. Thus, in the first part of my thoughts I would like to locate storytelling within the vast dimensions of history.

I then move from the macro to the micro, from the evolutionary to the ethical. I do this once again to situate storytelling as a responsible, human act. It is crucial to see that ethical decision making rests upon story. Our society is rife with clichés about values and role models. The current presidential campaigns are awash with ads over family values. Good and evil seem to be the guiding mantra for the present administration. Candidates are eager to hawk images of power and trust. But, of course, our everyday value decisions are not so simple. We are complicated despite ourselves. I shall briefly investigate the necessity to determine the stories that ground and give substance to our ethical principles and values.

In my last section I shall consider a story that was constructed, as it were, to speak to the sparrow’s brief flight. The death story of Jesus needs to be understood among the fictions that humans have constructed to make sense of their mortality. I shall argue that the narrative composition of the death of Jesus was a creative attempt at social imagination. Unfortunately subsequent history and theology have denatured the story of its intrinsic human solidarity. What was once an inclusive story, that illuminated the margins of existence, became an exclusive show trial. A reappraisal of this story demands a consideration of the ethical problems inherent in uncritically conveying the unspoken message of imperial domination.

1. The Evolutionary Position of Storytelling.

The Human Web by J. R. McNeill and William H. McNeill is a masterful retelling of the history of the evolutionary human project. Taking its leading metaphor from the Internet, the McNeills have provided a refreshing and needed “bird’s eye view” of our life on this planet. For them a *web* is a “set of connections that link people to one another.”³ Taking a multitude of forms, a web communicates information and permits the use of that information to guide future behavior. The “shape of history” comes about through “the exchange and spread of information, items, and inconveniences, and the human response to them.”⁴ If human history is driven by human ambition “to alter one’s condition to match one’s hopes,” then what people hope for and how they pursued their hope depend upon the channeling and coordination of the webs of information, ideas, and examples available to them.⁵

The McNeills find that “at its most basic level, the human web dates back at least to the development of human speech. Our distant ancestors created social solidarity within small bands by talking together, and exchanging information and goods.”⁶ This “talking together” involves storytelling.

They then spin their vision of history as wide and as far as humans have left detectable signs. They begin with the first worldwide web (over 12,000 years ago) that can be detected in the bones, stones and charcoal bits found in Africa, and later, Southwest Asia. The next web was the Agricultural (12,000-3,000 year ago), with its major shift in food production and domestication of plants and animals. Next came the Metropolitan web, the beginning of which the McNeills term the “Old World Web.” City life, the rise of bureaucratic empires, military advances, alphabet writing, and portable religions highlight this development. From 3500 BCE to 200 BCE urbanization was the dominant factor, with specialization of labor and differentiation of social strata. A second period in the “Old World Web” ran from 200 BCE to 1000 CE with its enormous shifts in wealth and power, in addition to the appearance of universal religions. The final period of the “Old World Web” (1000 CE – 1500 CE) featured a “thickening of the web, with greater productivity, invention, and social dislocation of village life. This last stage prepared the way for the Cosmopolitan Web (500 years ago) which marked the breakthrough in oceanic navigation, the monetization of relationships, the Gutenberg Bible, and the fusion of the Old and New World webs. For the last 160 years the Cosmopolitan Web has been electrified. We have seen the telegraph (1844), steam, rail, revolutions in industry and politics, the appearance of nationalisms and imperialisms, the concentration of wealth among the few, and multiplication of the poverty among the many, as well as the ecological effects of humanity upon the planet.

All these webs combined cooperation and competition. The McNeills contend that the “ultimate basis for social power is communication that sustains cooperation among

³ *The Human Web* 3.

⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

people.”⁷ They point out that the larger metropolitan webs grew precisely because they had a decided advantage through their specialization of labor, their military advances, and their acquired immunizations. “The power to communicate and cooperate is what brought success in terms of survival and reproduction.”⁸

During the earliest web age, when humanity was gaining its apprenticeship, the full deployment of language becomes the key to survival and advance. Included within this development is the invention of song and dance. Human beings began to “flex their muscles” in achieving the warmth of human solidarity and the rhythmic unity in dancing out the stories that kept them alive.⁹ The McNeills then declare that the construction of the “spirit world” signaled the first great intellectual system, which explained everything that happened.¹⁰ Indeed, they contend it is the most “emotionally accessible worldview that humankind ever created.”¹¹

As already noted, the next developing web – Metropolitan web – which initiated the development of the Old World Web, was marked by urbanization. Cities grew from a specialization of labor that adopted a concept ever since employed in society. The power pyramid became the basic structure of society. Within that power scheme the bureaucratic principle, discovered in that era, worked upon the delegation of authority to an individual who thereby could expect to be obeyed by those around him. The cost of such bureaucratization was the disruption of farm life, a growing social stratification, and experiences of injustice which religions tried to salve.

Now the McNeills see the emergent Jesus movement as a significant, if limited player, in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The early Jesus groups began to provide (among other voluntary associations) a horizontal support system in the oppressive pyramid of Roman power. These small communities began to give a sense of identity to those the bureaucrats of the Empire thought expendable. The face-to-face intimacy first achieved thousands of years before was reaffirmed in the tenements of the Empire. Moreover, after 165-180 CE, when catastrophic epidemics hit the Empire, the followers of the Anointed outdistanced their competitors by the care for the sick as they looked in hope for a future.

In a final essay on the future prospect of the Human Web, William McNeill asks whether human life will survive the numerous catastrophes lurking before us. How can we adapt to radically new circumstances, just as our ancestors did? He takes a cue from the survival strategies of the past.

<We> need face-to-face, primary communities for long-range survival:
communities, like those our predecessors belonged to, within which shared

⁷ *Ibid.* 5.

⁸ *Ibid.* 321.

⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 18.

meanings, shared values, and shared goals made life worth living for everyone, even the humblest and least fortunate. ...

If so, perhaps the most critical question for the human future is how cell-like primary communities can survive and flourish within the global cosmopolitan flows that sustain our present numbers, wealth, and power, without being disrupted by those flows and without disrupting them. In other words, we need a new symbiosis all over again.¹²

McNeill also warns us of the limits of such primary communities.

Radical choices thus impend. Either the gap between cities and villages will somehow be bridged by renegotiating the terms of symbiosis, and/or differently constructed primary communities will arise to counteract the tangled anonymity of urban life. Religious sects and congregations are the principle candidates for this role. But communities of belief must somehow insulate themselves from unbelievers, and that introduces frictions, or active hostilities, into the cosmopolitan web. How then sustain the web and also make room for life-sustaining primary communities?¹³

For McNeill it is not a matter of either/or, of living life in a primary community or in a cosmopolitan web. The challenge is to see that both are interconnected. The larger web feeds, energizes, challenges, and threatens the primary web, which, in turn sustains and locates people in an ever expanding and demanding world. If “luck, intelligence, and awkward tolerance” do not maintain the interwoven web, then it will crash, catastrophically bringing far-reaching impoverishment and global die-off.

I am not being overly dramatic in situating the role of storytelling within this view of history. Rather, it is time for storytellers to claim their place within the evolutionary human project. There is an enormous challenge before us. Can storytelling communities recognize the almost inevitable descent into insulation, border maintenance, and ideological intolerance? Can we learn from the revolutionary breakthroughs of critical thought and political action? Can we learn the craft of multiple storytelling? Can we bear the implications of such cross-fertilization? If not, the human consequences are severe. Without the face-to-face communities, where our dreams and hopes come alive, the cosmopolitan webs will collapse. Without continuing to sing and dance out our stories the webs will lose their fundamental energy. Moreover, the primary communities have proven to be the basic crucibles of hope. In them stories have not only been told, they have been tried. The story communities are not mere transmission stations. They are places where wisdom can be detected and valued; where judgment is discovered and refined; where direction and redirection are debated and decided on. To paraphrase the former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, “all geo-politics is local.” And even the “Tipster” knew that storytelling keeps the political process oiled and moving forward, even in difficult times.

¹² *Ibid.* 326.

¹³ *Ibid.* 327.

2. The Construction of Ethical Space.

Ethics is not a solitary affair. Nor is it a simple transcription of ideals into real life. Ethics occurs always *in medias res*. In our present society we usually begin in an anxiety-ridden situation. The enormous stress upon the individual, the best and worst of which we internalize, often prevents us from noticing that we are heirs of moral communities. We forget that our concern over our convictions comes not simply from moral principles but from moral conversations.

Usually ethical reflection is understood as an exercise in abstraction. Values or principles are the buzzwords. It seems that a simple deduction from our values or principles upon our behavior is enough. In reality arriving at an ethical judgment is much more complicated. Indeed, we discover this when we are “forced to make” a decision. Somehow we find ourselves placed in a situation where mere repetition of our former behavior is not enough. We sense that we are making decisions that do not represent what we are really about. But we feel at a loss to figure out our discomfort.

Moreover, ethical discourse tends to avoid the realm of the imagination. Ethics becomes an exemplary employment of reason upon our existence. Deduction from principles (whether, for example, derived from natural law or discovered in situations) reigns. Ethical imperatives, dictates of reason, historical necessities, and bottom lines are all variations of this abstract discourse.

What disturbs such ethical positioning is our frequent experience: *we discover that to which we are committed only by having our lives challenged by others*. At those times we find that we have often fallen into a routine calculus of life, that we either have forgotten the sense of our actions or never understood their meaning. We even might begin instinctively to ask if we have done “the right thing for the wrong reason.” Those moments of encounter, when we are challenged to “come clean,” to tell what our actions are about, expand the reach of our ethical concern. We find that the obvious question “What ought I to do?” is undermined and refined by the more ambiguous “What ought I to be?”

It is at this point that many will snipe at our puzzlement with the cliché of “relativism.” Whether from within or from others, this term comes from our sensing that we are at sea. Caught even for a moment in a morally open space, we fear ambiguity. The immediate solution offered by the noisy report of “relativism” is the cancellation of thought, the numbing of imagination. It prevents us from inspecting the actual act of ethical construction.

The work of ethical reflection starts in earnest by stepping back from the firefight of our lives. Ethical reflection entails first of all a suspension of judgment, whereby we carve out some imaginative space to listen to the crosscurrents affecting our lives. Just as King Edwin withdrew to consider matters with his councilors, so we need first to let go of any inadequately pre-conceived moral notions in order to allow things play out in our imagination. We need imaginative space to let images in to thrive. Here is where

traditional understandings are explored and inspected, where new insights are tested, where our experience can speak and also be interrogated, where wisdom can play a genuine role. In short, we need imaginative space for a critical dialogue among all the voices contending for meaning and enactment.

Suspension and play thus are hallmarks of serious ethical inquiry. Once we begin to engage in ethical reflection through imaginative dialogue we notice that our principles or values are actually shorthand summaries for meanings embedded in larger imaginative scripts. Images that constellate around values or principles are found to be fragments of deeper stories. Our prejudices, preapprehensions, and intuitions come from unspoken conversations. We usually never express those depths. Rather, we live out of unspoken narratives, often assuming that others share the same.

Ethical reflection then becomes a disciplined, imaginative exploration. We suspend our immediate reactions in order to come to a better, sounder judgment. *We judge better because we can imagine.* This is not a matter of fancy, of fleeing from reality. On the contrary, we use imagination in order to figure out the real. We need the space to see why our principles or values have power. Why do they deliver a sense of self, identity, and purpose? By giving imaginative room we discover that these values or principles have a multi-layered context, entrenched in space and time.

The task entails a close inspection of the images which underline our principles. As we make an inventory of those images [spatial, temporal, cosmic, relational, personal, value, affective, conscious, preconscious, subconscious, unconscious, certain/uncertain, real/unreal, public/private] we see what happens when these images associate with each other. What impact do they have on each other? In seeking to fit the images together in ways that would lead to a morally good choice we further discover that we are actually in a larger or deeper dramatic situation. We detect that we are in a war of myths, involved in the discourse of power, where fear and hope are watchwords. As we imagine these scripts, we begin to rehearse moral judgments. We discern how things fit together, how appropriate they are. We discover the coherence of our judgments through this many-sided dialogue.

The imaginative reach of ethical reflection can be seen quite readily in terms of identity. Earlier we mentioned that the question “What ought I to do?” gives way to “What ought I to be?” in the midst of an ethical confrontation. In fact, an imaginative inspection of the question of “what to do?” leads to a review of the personal story that stands by unspoken. We do things because of the story we have been constantly telling ourselves. By suspending our immediate reaction to a judgment situation, we can hear, perhaps for the first time, the script that has been playing out for some time.

But this personal script is not innocent of other conversations. Indeed, psychological investigation since Freud has shown that we construct our personal scripts from larger templates. A contextual reading of our own scripts reveals that we build our personal stories in the midst of competing overarching stories. Sometimes we fuse versions in imaginative amalgamations; other times we let the larger scripts have their way with us.

What must not be lost in our investigation is that we develop and sustain our ethical inspection in the midst of community conversation. We truly think *in medias res*. We construct our ethical space within the intersecting voices. Communities of meaning meet in us. We derive our words, our images from those communities. Our investigation becomes on a deeper level a critical conversation with those communities of meaning. We begin to see that we can check the story we have been telling ourselves either with the way the community in which we find ourselves is telling it or with markedly other stories within and without our primary community. An honest appraisal of this intersection of stories allows us to see in which community we give fundamental loyalty. What we realize is that this extended and multi-layered conversation is less about discerning some good than maintaining a faithful and critical relation to the fundamental stories.

As we further inspect the scripts and stories that determine our interpretive horizon we recognize the *narrative character of our existence*. This allows us to make claims upon our existence, to test narratives against our experience and our experience against our various narratives. As we live in, with, and against stories we gain insight into the limits, dangers, and challenges of the narratives. Prohibitions, for example, emerge from discovering what the stories entail for the community telling those stories. These, in turn, would be tested against personal and communal experience. We further discern experiences or information for which there is no satisfactory way of understanding them as part of the ongoing narrative of our selves or our community. Inclusion of this new experience or information would effect a basic reconstruction of our *traditio*.

Simply put, the original ethical issue “What ought I to do?” changes to the question of our narrative existence – “What ought I to be?” But even this question is located within the intersection of communities of ethical conversation. We discover that the deeper question becomes: “What world do we want to inhabit together?” If we take the challenge of the McNeills, we must ask whether our primary communities today can continue the task of this ethical conversation. Can we not only accept the multi-layered reality of our ethical locus but also include elements that have not been part of our complicated conversations? How open can we, as storytellers, be to tales that we have no predetermined grid of understanding? How able are we to take critical insights into our work and life? Are we able to fully appreciate and respond to the limits, flaws, and lethal effects of our traditions?

3. The Death of Jesus and the Use of Fictional Space.

3.1 Recent Scholarly Observations on the Death of Jesus Traditions.

Recent scholarship has confirmed that the traditions of the death of Jesus are anything but simple. A complex layering of the historical evidence is a requisite first step in coming to terms with the developing passion traditions. Allow me to outline what I consider to be the major historical stepping stones of the passion narrative traditions. Of course, all

that follows, while subject to immense debate, can serve as the starting point for a critical discussion on the death of Jesus and the construction of fictional space.

1. The Sayings Gospel (Q). If we take the presence of Q seriously we have to take into account that Q does not have a passion narrative. The death of Jesus becomes absorbed into the tradition of prophets' deaths (cf. Luke 11:49-51). There is nothing beyond an allusion to his death.¹⁴ The Gospel of Thomas continues evidently in this tradition. There is no mention at all of the death of Jesus in Thomas.
2. Paul already knows a tradition, which speaks of the death of Jesus. We can say briefly two things. First, the death of Jesus was understood as a heroic death, a martyr's sacrifice (Rom 3:21-26). Second, the Jewish sacred writings were invoked and applied in some fashion in speaking of his fate (1 Cor 15:3-5).
3. It has been noted for some time that the passion narrative of Mark displays the elements of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One.¹⁵
4. More recently Crossan and Dewey have independently argued for an earlier version of the GosPet. Dewey has shown that the entire first layer of P can be located on the template of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One.¹⁶
5. The Synoptic followers of Mark apparently have utilized the Markan base, adding further material, while typically reworking and eliminating other pieces.
6. The Gospel of John shows a remarkable reworking of the passion narrative. If the writer of John knew of Mark, or an earlier version of the passion narrative, he, in his singularly creative way, has revised the passion narrative into a highly dramatic version.

With these observations in mind, it is important to point out that the long-standing assumption that there must have been some primitive passion narrative at the very outset of the Jesus Movement appears just that when faced with the evidence in the Sayings Gospel. Neither does Paul help sustain that assumption. Rather, it would seem that the evidence for a passion narrative comes somewhat later with either an early version of the Gospel of Peter (55-65 CE) or the Gospel of Mark (70+ CE). With Paul there is evidence of the use of scriptural citations to touch on Jesus' fate. But there is no evidence for any interest in a narrative unfolding of his death. We can also note that the Gospel of Thomas

¹⁴ For more on each of the 6 points, see my "Can We Let Jesus Die?" in Karen Armstrong et al., *The Once And Future Faith*. Santa Rosa: Polebridge. 2001. 135-159.

¹⁵ George W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative," *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980) 153-80. Mack, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke: The Origins Of The Passion And Resurrection Narratives*. San Francisco: Harper. 1988. Arthur J. Dewey, "The Passion Narrative of the Gospel of Peter," *Forum New Series* 1.1. 1998. 53-69.

argues for at least some of the tradition progressing without any concern over such a narrative.

A second point comes from my own recent work on the Passion Narrative in John.¹⁷ I have argued that in the Fourth Gospel “history” is not what we moderns would want it to be. The account of the final hours of Jesus is actually a creative invention that allows the listener the chance to participate, to “see” the meaning in the death scene of Jesus (cf. John 19:35-37). This recognition of the creative “memory” of the writer of the Fourth Gospel has led me to rethink a number of presuppositions regarding the critical apprehension of the death stories of Jesus.

A further note comes from the sort of acoustic world of the First Century. As we are well aware, we are dealing with an oral culture. This means that the worth and workings of memory are crucial, for, without some scheme, some memory device, there is no survival of the meaning. This raises the question: Do the synoptic passion narratives display any clues to some sort of memory scheme? Indeed, in contemplating the use of a memory scheme, we must further wonder about the “invention” of that scheme.

There is further observation to be made. When the various traditions are considered, can we begin to see that imaginative acts were underway to give some sort of “location” to the fate of Jesus? The Q material apparently locates the death of Jesus within the familiar typology of the deaths of Jewish Prophets (Luke 11:49-51). On the other hand, the Pauline material can be read as going in a number of directions. One can argue that a pre-Pauline understanding of the death of Jesus locates the fate of Jesus within the orbit of heroic Jewish martyrs. Yet noting that in 1 Cor 15:3-5 Jewish sacred writings were used to interpret Jesus’ death does not help us very much, except to indicate the connection of Jesus’ fate to a written tradition.¹⁸

The matter of location becomes explicit when we reach the first evidence of extended passion narratives. Now it is either in the first layer of Peter (P) or in Mark that we have the first extended narrative of the death of Jesus. Here we see that the story is, in fact, structured along the lines of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One. The meticulous effort of Nicklesburg has demonstrated not only the presence of such a pattern for Hellenistic Judaism but also the constituent elements of that story pattern within the passion narrative of Mark. It should be noted that, unlike Mack who follows Nicklesburg, Nicklesburg himself thinks that a pre-Markan passion narrative existed.

¹⁷ Arthur J. Dewey, “The Eyewitness of History,” in *Jesus In Johannine Tradition*, eds., Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher. Louisville: Westminster John Know. 2001. 59-70.

¹⁸ There is also the further issue of what Paul did to what he heard about the death of Jesus. Does he, for instance, in Gal 3:10-14 introduce the notion of shame, as well as blessing and curse to the death of Jesus (that he has “graphically portrayed”) to locate the fate of Jesus within the current debate over gentile acceptability?

I have argued elsewhere that the earliest layer (P) of Peter provides this pre-Markan source.¹⁹ But this is not the place to defend that thesis. What I would underline is the emergence of the pattern of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One. I contend that with this pattern of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One we have evidence of a social memory scheme.²⁰ What does this suggest? It indicates that, for the author of P (the earliest level of Gospel of Peter) to remember, he had to find a “place” or schema to locate memory; he had to re-member by going back to the imaginative repertoires of his time. Of course, the work of George Nicklesburg has shown this repertoire of memory to be the enormous tradition of the Tale of the Persecution and Vindication of the Innocent One. I would further contend that this scheme of the Tale of the Innocent One has been the memory bed for Matthew and Luke, and perhaps, for John.

b. Carruthers and the Invention of Memory

In her two books²¹ Mary Carruthers has pointed the way to understanding ancient memory as an active craft. Carruthers has made a major advance in the understanding of ancient memory. While appreciative of the contributions of Frances Yates to the study of memory,²² Carruthers differs with Yates’ assessment of memory. For Yates the art of memory was to repeat previously stored material. There is a static quality to memory despite its fascinating, if not preposterous, constructions. Carruthers counters by arguing:

The goal of rhetorical mnemotechnical craft was not to give students a prodigious memory for all the information they might be asked to repeat in an examination, but to give an orator the means and wherewithal to invent his material, both beforehand and – crucially – on the spot. *Memoria* is most usefully thought of as a compositional art.²³

Carruthers places the creative act of memory within the domain of ancient rhetoric, not psychology. In effect, memory for Carruthers is implicitly social, embedded in the discourse of the day. The act of memory starts with rhetorical *inventio*. This means that memory is not what we moderns usually consider it to be. It is not a reiteration or a representation. Instead, it is a crafting of images as well as a construction of a place for the images to inhabit. *Inventio* means both the construction of something new (the memory-store) and the storage of what is remembered.²⁴ For Carruthers then *memoria* is a

¹⁹ Arthur J. Dewey, “Time to Murder and Create: Visions and Revisions in the Gospel of Peter,” in *THE APOCRYPHAL JESUS AND CHRISTIAN ORIGINS.*, ed., Ron Cameron, *SEMEIA* 49 (1990) 101-27.

²⁰ For those who would dispute the priority of an early level (P) of the Gospel of Peter and see Mark as issuing the earliest passion narrative, the point still stands. The scheme of the Innocent Sufferer has surfaced in the Jesus tradition.

²¹ *THE BOOK OF MEMORY*. Cambridge: University Press. 1990; *THE CRAFT OF THOUGHT*. Cambridge: University Press. 1998.

²² Frances Yates, *THE ART OF MEMORY*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 1966.

²³ Carruthers, op. cit. 9.

²⁴ Ibid. 11.

locational memory. Further, *the shape or foundation of a composition must be thought of as a place-where-one-invents.*²⁵

There is also the matter of forgetting. Carruthers quite clearly has argued that forgetting is not erasure. Rather, forgetting is essentially a displacement.²⁶ Within the oral competition of the ancient world, there was a struggle for space. This also included memory space, especially the location of public memories. When forgetting occurs it comes about through a displacement or trans-lation of images. A better pattern has been invented to locate and order the images.

This superstructure or memory location can be called by another name: a commonplace. I use this because it alludes to those things that are shared. It also can mean a public memory. The Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. is a recent example of the construction of a “commonplace” where memories can be located and where future memory construction is “authorized” by the location itself. Jewish midrash is another example of creating a commonplace. One can construct a tale in which to locate and remember various scriptural lines.

Finally, in contrast to the modern assumptions about ancient memory, it should be noted that ancient memory was heuristic not simply mimetic. The work of memory was not to re-present, not to reduplicate but to construct, to deliver a place for images. Of course this contrasts greatly with the assumptions of many modern biblical scholars. They would look at the passion narratives as documents, recording what was essentially “the facts.” While most would distinguish between the editorial hand and the original report or witness, there would be, nevertheless, the assumption that the nature of the text is that of a document. Indeed, one can certainly note that the modern familiarity with both the photograph and the phonograph has contributed to this sense that the evidence has a documentary nature to it.

The modern distinction between fact and fiction, between memory as reiteration and an unreal imagination was just not that crucial to the ancients. The very texture of the evidence, I would submit, points in a rather different direction. Carruthers puts it this way:

The Biblical notion of remembering has tended to be dismissed, until quite recently, as “re-created memory,” scarcely different from outright lying, and of no interest in the philosophy of mind at all. Instead, a “storehouse” model of memory, and the idea that memory is “of the past,” has been emphasized to such a degree that memory has been accorded only a reiterative, reduplicative role – all else is “unreal” and thus “untruthful.” Western ideas of memory have been concerned at least since the Enlightenment with what the philosopher Mary Warnock calls “the crucial distinction, with which we are all familiar in real life, between memory and the imagination (close though these may often be to one

²⁵ Ibid. 21.

²⁶ Ibid. 57.

another). . . [w]hat distinguishes memory from imagination is not some particular feature of the [mental] image but the fact that memory is, while imagination is not, concerned with the real.²⁷

c. Consequences for Retelling the Passion Tradition

From what has been presented it becomes possible to re-envision the growth and dynamics of the traditions about the death of Jesus. First, one can say that it is not simply a matter of recalling the death of Jesus; rather, it was the effort to find, first of all, a location in which one can perform the craft of memory. The basic task was to “invent” a *locus* for his death. It was not a matter of simply relating the facts. Instead it was a matter of invention and inventory. Specifically this means that one should not look immediately for “the facts,” for a simple representation of what happened. One should look, rather, for how the memory has been crafted and structured. One can then see what has been enfolded in that memory structure. It would only be after this assessment that one could begin to determine indirectly at best what are the “facts of the case.”

Let us go back to my earlier observations about the Sayings Gospel’s version of the fate of Jesus. The writer of the Sayings Gospel has placed the death of Jesus within the typological structure of the deaths of Jewish prophets (Luke 11:49-51). This does not necessarily lend itself to an extensive elaboration. Indeed, the focus of the Sayings Gospel lies elsewhere. The teachings and sayings of Jesus seem to carry the tradition forward.

The pre-Pauline material also seems to be located within the commonplace of the Hellenistic Jewish martyrs. Paul seems to be dislodging this memory pattern by translating the fate of Jesus into a more imperial location. Yet for Paul the story of the vindication of Jesus does not focus upon the extended story pattern found in the Tale of the Suffering Innocent One.

It was, indeed, the choice of the overarching story pattern of the Suffering Innocent One that carried the day for the social crafting of the memory of the death of Jesus. The earlier version (P) of Peter may well have been the first attempt at locating the various scriptural conjunctions within the overarching Tale. But it is Mark that provides the authorizing locus and commonplace. The explicit use of citation formulae indicates that the writer can comfortably place the citations tradition within the pattern of the Suffering Innocent One. Moreover, this structure authorizes, that is, it gives the basis for further re-telling and elaboration, as the story pattern gets filled in and revised. Matthew and Luke recognized the valuable structure provided by Mark. Their revisions are proof that the memory gamble worked. Whether it was P or Mark an imaginative commonplace has been constructed and in which the memory work on the death of Jesus can continue. The story pattern of the Suffering Innocent One is true, not because of the particulars of its content (mimetic memory) but because its form can allow the one remembering to find things out, because it can cue “new” memories. Matthew and Luke engage in trans-

²⁷ *Ibid.* 68.

lating other material into this story pattern. Whether they created this other material or it existed prior to their application, these writers have essentially taken the Suffering Innocent Tale as the template for crafting their memories. Thus, for example, the notorious “blood curse” passage in Matthew 27:24-25 has been inserted into the scene already constructed by Mark 15:6-15. Matthew is not adding a new fact, thereby correcting or updating the historical record. Rather, he is elaborating upon one of the elements of the Tale of the Suffering Innocent One as well as directing his gaze at his contemporary fellow Jews at the end of the First Century. Such an insertion into the memory structure of Mark points up the “intentio” of Matthew.

In light of our earlier considerations the crafting of the death story of Jesus emerged from the primary communities of the late first century movement of the Anointed. The tellers of this tale were not recounting “facts,” nor were they establishing non-negotiable lines for future generations. The writer of Mark, for example, linked the Tale of this Suffering Innocent with the doom of Jerusalem. He crafted (or re-crafted GPet) to make sense of the deaths of those in his community. Another way of saying this is that the extended narrative of the death of Jesus came into play as a means of delivering meaning to those who were on the edge of death. The Markan writer, for example, not only constructed the Gethsemane scene, he placed the utterance of the community (“Abba”) upon Jesus’ lips. Their experience filled in the narrative gaps.

What should not be lost in this assessment is that the Tale of the Suffering Innocent was told by Jews when confronted by events that caused them to question why the innocent should suffer. The story was uttered from the time of Antiochus Epiphanes IV to speak out of the conviction that God is just and will not forget the faithful ones. In effect, the story was one of solidarity with those who go unjustly to their deaths. It was not told to distance the sufferer from the questions, aspirations, anxieties, and fears of the tellers of the tale. They found in the telling of that story lines of fundamental hope and common assurance. Sadly the story of Jesus as the suffering innocent one has long since been cast from its historical and imaginations moorings. Centuries of subsequent reinterpretation have transmogrified a story of Jewish solidarity into a triumphant pageant of Christian sadism. Genuine solidarity has been replaced by the virtual reality of vicarious atonement. More ironic is the fact that a tale, generated by Jews to speak of their sense of solidarity with this innocent one, has long since been used as a lethal weapon against his people.

In reconsidering the death story of Jesus we have begun to re-envision how the early followers came up with the very shape of their story. A tale that gave meaning in the face-to-face encounters of their lives within the Imperial system must also be inspected for the viral elements of that system. All too often tellers of the death story of Jesus overlook a telltale scar. They fail to see that each telling of the story not only can convey unwittingly the infection of anti-Semitism but it also can subtly reconfirm the domination system that killed Jesus. This is perhaps the cruelest irony of the transmission of the story of the death of Jesus. How often is the story told today in ways, which sanction the perpetuation of the domination system of Rome? Just because our ancestors in faith hit upon a narrative structure that spoke to their condition does not justify our uncritical

forwarding of the story in the same way. They had choices, a repertoire out of which they constructed this tale. The question before us today is whether we can tell the story that way anymore. The telling of the death of Jesus is inherently an ethical and evolutionary issue. It is not simply a matter of trying to fully express this story. Rather, the prior question is: should we keep this script intact? Does this story contribute to the cooperation of life within the primary communities of trust? Or does it serve as a vehicle of competition or exclusion? Does it maintain the momentum of systems of power whose time has gone and which fail to catch the evolutionary challenge of life together on this planet?

More constructively we can ask: Can we learn from the creative leads of our ancestors? Do we see that the traditions about the death of Jesus actually are unfinished and ongoing? As we talk with one another and tell the stories that come alive in our hearts, are we able to discover that tradition is not an unchanging sediment but an ongoing task of invention that we make up as we move together into the future?