THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF THE EARLY TRANSMISSION OF THE JESUS TRADITION

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1 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUALISING THE TRADITION PROCESS

Conceptualising the various processes underlying the development of the Gospels is of considerable importance. Firstly, every historical Jesus study has a built-in concept of the synoptic problem and proceeds from certain assumptions concerning the methods and difficulties of the transmission of the gospel traditions. To understand our sources and how to use them responsibly for historical or religious purposes we need to know about their origins and the development of the traditions that constitute these writings.

Secondly, understanding the transmission of the Jesus traditions is also fundamental to understanding the Jesus movement, as form and redaction criticism have taught us. Thirdly, one's view of the history of the gospel traditions determines one's understanding of the Gospels themselves.

Study of this subject is important, not only because the Gospels shed light on the history of primitive Christianity, but also because light is shed back on the understanding of the very gospel writings. Indeed through a historical understanding of these writings, their process of formation in the history of primitive Christianity cannot be neglected (Simonsen 1983: 15).

It is relevant to be reminded that the origins of the Jesus stories and how they were transmitted must be understood within the context of ancient communication, that is, within the setting of the particular forms and interplay of literacy.
and orality at the time.

In order to set the scene for the perspective proposed in this paper, some aspects of the conventional approaches should be discussed. The focus in this article will be mainly on the narrative material.

2 APPROACHES TO THE JESUS TRADITIONS

There has been a phenomenal upsurge in historical Jesus studies in recent times. But, as Boring (1991:18) rightly remarks, ‘What has been neglected in recent study is the period between Jesus and the Gospels. For this crucial period in the development of early Christianity and the formation of the Gospels, the appropriate starting point is still that of the classical form critics.’ It is because the classic approaches are still so fundamental that it is worth our while to reflect on their underlying problems.

2.1 Form criticism

2.1.1 Bultmann saw the process (or history) of the gospel traditions as a dynamic one, the traditions being ‘open’ and freely developing. To Bultmann,

Was uns die Quellen bieten, ist ja zunächst die Verkündigung der Gemeinde, die sie freilich zum größten Teil auf Jesus zurückführt. Das beweis aber natürlich nicht, daß alle Worte, die sie ihm in den Mund legt, wirklich von ihm gesprochen worden sind. Bei vielen Worten läßt sich der Nachweis führen, daß sie vielmehr erst in der Gemeinde entstanden sind, bei anderen, daß sie von der Gemeinde bearbeitet sind (Bultmann 1926:13).

The process of transmission presupposed by Bultmann is clearly one of informal and uncontrolled oral tradition. The people involved in this retelling were not interested in either accurately preserving or controlling the tradition. ‘Denn freilich bin ich der Meinung, daß wir vom Leben und von der Persönlichkeit Jesu so gut wie nichts mehr wissen können, da die christlichen Quellen sich dafür nicht interessiert haben, außerdem sehr fragmentarisch und von der Legende überwuchert sind, und da andere Quellen über Jesus nicht existieren’ (Bultmann 1926:10).

Bultmann was strongly criticised for his presuppositions. Of particular

1 The discussion above is limited to a few relevant aspects. Other important issues, such as the supposed heuristic value of the categories of Palestinian versus Hellenistic (which is very problematic), will not be considered. Reference should also be made to the influential notion of the original form and its supposed compulsory development into progressively more complex and hybrid formations, to the thesis of an intrinsic gravitational or teleological pull toward the final gospel compositions, to the paradigm of linearity dominating source criticism, to the idea of anonymous collectivity as the shaping force both of oral materials and gospel textuality (which is a very romantic concept of storytelling), to the concept of ‘setting in life’ as the sociological determinant of oral forms and
relevance is the famous distinction between pre- and post-Easter traditions: the belief in the Easter events as the watershed and real point of departure for the traditions of the synoptic gospels.  

However, the idea of a 'rupture' in the history of the synoptic tradition cannot be maintained. In various ways and on many levels there must have been continuity between Jesus the teacher and the Jesus movement: 'It is indisputable that this continuity existed on the personal level (the group of disciples from the period before Easter handed on the faith after Easter); it is also the case that the disciples continued their mode of life as travelling preachers. In this way they continued the activity of Jesus as wandering charismatic' (Theissen 1978:121). Reicke (1986:45-67) has developed an interesting argument that the basic structure of the synoptic gospels, the consistency of the self-contained pericopes and sequences of the triple tradition reflect the reminiscences of eye-witnesses and extensive continuity between Jesus and the oral tradition.

It is interesting to note how influential the basic idea of some break or sharp change in the development of the gospels is in contemporary gospel criticism. This can be seen with particular clarity in the work of Kelber. Although Kelber (1983:2-8) criticises the Bultmannian model of the pre-canonical synoptic transmission quite competently, he maintains that a radical change characterises the history of the gospel traditions. Kelber (1983:207-211) simply moves the point of rupture: he grants the continuity of the historical Jesus and the oral tradition, but sees a drastic change in the development of the gospel traditions at the point of their inscripturation. With this radical separation of oral and written tradition Kelber underestimates the role of orality in Greco-Roman society and romanticises writing.

2.1.2 In distinct contrast, Dibelius saw the history of the synoptic gospels as a static, controlled process.


2 To Bultmann, 'the essential thing to see' is the fact that 'The proclaimer had become the proclaimed' (1952:33). 'All that went before appears in a new light—new since the Easter faith in Jesus's resurrection and founded upon this faith' (1952:42-43). See also his famous theological discussion in response to the 'new quest' (Bultmann 1960, esp p27).

3 However, I doubt Reicke's general method in that he, despite a clear claim and intention to attend fully to the implications of oral tradition (1986:16-24), still adheres to conventions underlying source critical theories. Problematic also is the assumption of preaching and teaching within sacramental communion as Sitz for the whole of the synoptic gospel traditions. See further Botha 1991a:322-323.

4 Henderson (1992:283) rightly refers to 'ideological dichotomies', and argues, distinctly differently to Kelber, that 'orality is...an exceptionally appropriate criterion for describing and comparing other early Christian texts—and not only for dissolving them into reconstructed oral traditions and social settings'. I refer to some of my own work for further discussion and literature: 1991b; 1992a; 1992b; 1993b.
To Dibelius, it is obvious that there must have been some form of restrain inherent in the oral transmission of Jesus traditions: 'man hatte in dieser Epoche, da noch Augenzeugen Jesu am Leben waren, gar nicht die Möglichkeit, das Bild Jesu in der Überlieferung zu entstellen' (Dibelius 1959:293). We can see, in various ways, 'that Jesus' sayings were handed down with great fidelity, thanks to the unencumbered memory of his unspoiled followers and to their reverence for their Master's word' (Dibelius 1963:23).

Probably the most famous exponent of the controlled tradition process is Birger Gerhardsson.\(^5\) Whereas Bultmann and Dibelius both see the Sitz im Leben of the gospel traditions as early Christian worship, Gerhardsson sees the primary situation within the community for the transmission of Jesus tradition as tradition itself, that is, tradition as a conscious technical act of instruction. This perspective therefore has a distinct advantage over form criticism in that it is based on a historical analogy, rather than on a romantic notion of creative communities. The analogy is the transmission of the oral Torah in rabbinic Judaism: the 'ministry of the word' (ἡ διακονία τοῦ λόγου—Acts 6.4) exercised by the disciples of Jesus parallel the Jewish traditionists.\(^6\)

Several problems with this perspective do remain. It is significant that Gerhardsson's argument depends more on Paul and Acts than on the gospels themselves. The theory does not explain our data, such as the significant differences between the Gospels.

### 2.2 Proposal

There seems to be two basic approaches to the development of the Gospels. On the one hand, we have a view of oral tradition that Bailey (1991:35) characterises as informal uncontrolled tradition, and Kelber (1983:7) as evolutionary progression. On the other hand, we find a view that can be described as formal controlled tradition, or passive transmission. Much of the discussion surrounding the oral phase of the Jesus traditions focuses on which of these two approaches should be adopted.

There are, however, strengths in both positions. Clearly, the origins of the gospels lie with Jesus himself, and his disciples played a major role in the development of the gospels. But we also need to account for the obvious diversity and apparent unconcern with fidelity—that is, the general failure to preserve the ipsissima verba of Jesus—as regards the several strands of the Jesus

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\(^6\) The basic idea of a formal, supervised process of transmission is also defended by Chilton 1989:160-167; Dungan 1971:141-143; Riesner 1991:191 ('a teach-and-learn situation') and Zimmermann 1984:23.

Adding to the problems of these well known approaches to the gospel traditions is the tendency to project (anachronistic) concepts onto the traditions themselves.

My chief objection to the form-critical scholars...is that their work is not sufficiently historical. They do not show sufficient energy in anchoring the question of the origin of the Gospel tradition within the framework of the question how holy, authoritative tradition was transmitted in the Jewish milieu of Palestine and elsewhere at the time of the New Testament. This must surely be the starting point if one wants to understand the origins of the early Christian tradition historically (Gerhardsson 1979:8-9)

Gerhardsson himself assumes that all the Jesus traditions can be categorised as 'holy, authoritative tradition'. No doubt, parts, and eventually a great many of these stories, anecdotes and sayings of Jesus were considered holy and authoritative, but the description creates as many new problems as it solves. The point, however, that the transmission process should be pictured in a realistic, historical way remains valid.

The complexities of the origins, transmission and development of the Jesus traditions are well known. Various attempts have been made, and all have been criticised. There are, however, some areas of comparative research that have not been used extensively to understand (in the sense of interpretive, explanatory descriptions) aspects of the gospel traditions, and those are orality research and folklore scholarship.

Elsewhere I have suggested how we could apply the idea of a more formal, controlled model to the development of the Markan stories in a historically responsible manner, making use of orality research in a constructive manner (1991a). Here I want to turn to the possibility of re-applying the concept of informal, evolutionary models in a social-scientifically responsible way to parts of the tradition process underlying some of the gospel traditions. This paper suggests that rumour research can meaningfully illuminate facets of the history of the gospel traditions.

3 THE STUDY OF RUMOUR

Although I am not the first to suggest that the study of rumour is relevant to gospel criticism,7 it is noteworthy how little use has been made of

7 Abel (1971), in a perceptive study, refers to scientific literature dealing with memory and rumour transmission. These studies offer an opportunity to assess the validity of the conclusions of Form Criticism (Abel 1971:273). Similarly, Gager (1974:247-256) also utilises the work of Vansina (1965) and Allport & Postman (1947) in his discussion of the oral tradition. Gager is doubtful of the validity of much of form-critical conclusions: 'all previous attempts at the [historical Jesus] quest have proceeded on ill-founded and mis-
available literature. Consequently, an argument utilising rumour research for understanding the gospel tradition process must also include an explanation why this research has not been applied before.

3.1 Prejudice against folklore research

One need not document the fact that New Testament scholarship shares in the widespread prejudice against the study of folklore. For reasons difficult to fathom, folklore research is deemed to be frivolous stuff, and it is believed that little can be learned from it. This prejudice springs from a lack of conceptual clarity with regard to early Christian history, in that interest is usually maintained in texts and theology. New Testament scholars often pay more attention to the texts than to the live processes by and through which those texts communicated and created meaning. The viewpoint adopted for this study is an attempt to provide a partial remedy for that situation by urging an attitude toward the gospel writings that stresses 'the folk' and the dynamics of their conventional communicative activities and traditional expressions.

The possible relevance of rumour research is obscured by the attitude that such study would cast doubt on the historicity of the gospels. This (ideological) concern with regard to historical Jesus research proceeds from the starting point that rumour is necessarily unreliable. Consequently, the assumption seems to be that the only worthwhile information must be information that can be directly controlled: the only good communication is authoritative, approved (by whom?) communication. But is a rumour by definition a lie? Could we not understand the oral traditions better if we gained some insight into the origins and strengths of rumour?

3.2 Understanding rumour

The idea of rumour is often ruled by a negative conception: rumours are taken to be necessarily false, fanciful, or irrational. Thus rumours—and anything smacking of rumour—are deplored, and treated like fleeting aberrations or momentary folly. In popular opinion—and sometimes also in scholarly circles—the word 'rumour' connotes a mysterious, almost magical phenomenon. Their effect on people seems to be analogous to that of hypnosis: they fascinate, subjugate, seduce and set them ablaze (see the overview in Koenig 1985:9-17).

This popular, but negative view is untenable. Rumour phenomena can be understood and explained. Far from being mysterious, rumours comply with a logic of which the operation can be demonstrated. In fact, as we shall see, the importance of understanding rumour is immense. Underlying the logic of ru-

8 Useful discussions of developments in folklore research in Ben-Amos 1971; Bauman 1975; Bennett 1987:1-22.
mourn lies the fundamental phenomenon of belief.

Rumours exist because people speak. A dogmatic prejudice and moralising concern are the true sources of a negative attitude towards rumour phenomena. Indeed, if rumours were but incredible stories that circulate without any grounds whatsoever for their existence, their presence would be evidence of unreasonableableness and a sign of madness. They must then be the sociological counterpart of hallucination. The association of rumours with affliction and even delusion appears logical but is misleading. ‘Far from being pathological, rumor is part and parcel of the efforts of [persons] to come to terms with the exigencies of life’ (Shibutani 1966:62). The sheer force of rumours, their ‘omnipresence’, their immense sociological importance and the seriousness with which they are taken by all people belie the popular conception.9

3.2.1 Rumour and truth
Rumours rarely arise out of ‘reality’. If the relationship between rumours and evidence had been straightforward, rumour mongering would have been an insignificant and irrelevant activity of a few bored and unoccupied persons. They spring, rather, from raw, confused facts: a rumour’s purpose is precisely that of explaining these raw facts, to posit a reality. Rumours do not take off from the truth but rather seek out the truth; ‘fueled by a desire for meaning, a quest for clarification and closure’ (Rosnow & Fine 1976:4).

A first step towards a responsible understanding of the dynamics of rumours, therefore, is to realise that defining rumours as stories (or lies) circulating as ‘unverified’ information ignores the fact that rumours generally present themselves with the pretensions of ideal verification. Rumours always reach us through a friend, colleague or relative (who is a friend of the first-hand witness).10 Who is more believable than a first-hand witness? Or someone that one has known intimately for a long time? What better proof can one expect? ‘Social life is based on confidence and on the delegation of the task of verification’.11

A useful definition of rumours in terms of their dynamics is that of Shibutani

9 Informative studies, on which my analysis is based, are Shibutani 1966; Rosnow & Fine 1976; Rosnow 1980, 1988; Fine 1985; Kapferer 1990.
11 Kapferer 1990:5. The development of human knowledge is a social process. Or put differently, all knowledge is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann 1967:33-61). Rumours, therefore, are not unlike any other information we come across in our lives: we believe or reject rumours at people’s word. ‘So many people cannot be wrong: rumors acquire their credibility from our confidence in a mechanism of information-related natural selection. Were the rumor false, it wouldn’t have gotten beyond the innumerable other people—like us but who came before us—who heard it’ (Kapferer 1990:103). To believe a rumour is to manifest one’s allegiance to the group’s voice, to identify with collective opinion.
Important, ambiguous events give rise to rumours. Rumours are improvised news resulting from a process of collective discussion entailing both an information-spreading procedure and a process of interpretation and commentary. In spreading and commenting upon presumed or ambiguous facts a group constructs one or two acceptable and valuable explanations. Changes in a rumour's content are not due to the failings of human memory, but rather to the development and contribution of commentaries made throughout the rumour's process. The reality to be studied, then, is not distortion in serial transmission but the social interaction of people caught in inadequately defined situations (Shibutani 1966:17).

This definition of rumour can be summarised in a simple model:

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\text{Rumour} = \text{Importance} \times \text{Ambiguity}. \]

Where events carry no importance whatsoever or appear to be totally devoid of ambiguity, there would be no rumour. Generally speaking, all mysterious symbols/stories/events provide an ideal springboard for rumours: they are ambiguous and thus fertile ground for speculation. Whenever a group of people endeavours to understand but receives no official answers, or they receive unbelievable ones, rumours arise. Rumours, in a manner of speaking, is like an informational black market.

Not all rumours relate to a concrete event which needs explanation. Rumours often arise due to faulty interpretations of messages. Misunderstandings relate to one person's report on what another person reported, and to a difference between what was transmitted and what was decoded; consequently certain rumours literally create events. Of this type of rumour, described as 'exemplary stories' or 'urban legends' by communication theorists and folklorists, we find stories that crop up without precipitating fact. These phenomena are related to the obscurity of the borderline between fantasy and reality. It is a well documented fact that we find stories that, once convincingly told as if they were true, take on lives of their own.

All rumours are the product of both fact and imagination. Different types of

12 Reflecting on this exposition we discover another reason for reference to rumour research: many studies of the gospel traditions assume a similar process of distortion and the failure of memory in the history of the traditions. These assumptions should be measured against comparative research.

13 Underlying this model lies the identification of the essential conditions for a rumour by Allport & Postman. Allport & Postman (1947:33-34) attempted to formulate the elements of a rumour in a quantitative manner: \( R = i \times a \). Their attempt has drawn extensive criticism; the model suggested above is based on the considerable research that developed from their insights. See Shibutani 1968:577 ('the formula does specify the important variables'); Rosnow & Fine 1976:72; Kapferer 1991; Rosnow 1980 (who criticises the supposed predictive power of the formula) for discussion.
Rumours reflect the dominance of either realism or imagination and subjectivity in the production of a rumour's content. Some rumours dwell almost exclusively on the 'social imagination', that is, the collective experience of symbols and myths and shared (myth related) motives. At the other end of the spectrum, we find rumours with a predominantly realistic slant (but even there one should not underestimate nor slight the role of subjectivity).

Societies are on-going things. The world is in a state of continuous flux, and as life conditions change, or are perceived to be endangered, knowledge and understanding must keep pace. Crisis situations arise whenever new events or information are incomprehensible in terms of established assumptions. New sensitivities must be created, and in order that they may continue to act in association with one another humans alter their orientations together. The emergence of hypotheses and explanations and their acceptance is a social process. It is in this process of transformation that rumour usually plays an important part. A rumour is a form of human behaviour: it is a way of understanding and maintaining reality—a point that Kapferer (1991) emphasises.

### 3.2.2 Constructive process

The first few investigations into rumour phenomena utilised the famous 'telephone' simulation experiments, of which the classic study is Allport & Postman (1947). This approach assumed that rumour transmission is a system not unlike a message travelling along a telephone line: person A tells B who tells C and so forth. It was found that, in such a routine, right from the very first relays most of the details are omitted, the message being seriously reduced in length. Then it becomes stable in length and form, changing little in subsequent retellings. The counterpart of the reduction in length is the accentuating of certain details. As particular details survive they acquire considerable visibility and importance in the reduced message. The action involved, or numbers and sizes, the details are magnified: ten turns into a hundred, fast becomes very fast, a few women become five hundred brethren. As the message evolves, it tends to acquire a 'good form': that of a well-constructed narrative respecting the stereotypes that are prevalent in the group in which the rumour circulates.

Despite the considerable value of these conclusions, several problems are built into this type of investigation as subsequent research has amply demonstrated (see Shibutani 1966:99-100; Fine 1985:227-228; Koenig 1985:105-120). Rumours do not necessarily become less accurate, nor do they necessarily become shorter, or are details readily forgotten. In fact, details often accumu-

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14 This is true particularly when the rumour content is highly important. Studies of informal communication among soldiers, for example, found that men involved in dangerous situations are not gullible (Shibutani 1966:63-94). In countries with strong news censorship rumour usually reflects truth more accurately than other news channels.
late. Underlying the problems of the conclusions by the simulation experiments is the concept of a linear, one-directional communication procedure.

In real life contexts the term 'relay' is inappropriate with regard to the rumour process, as no information is passed on unidirectionally. Everyday communication, and thus exchange of rumours, is an interactional, reflective process and not like a linear relay line. Various concerned parties converse with each other, and the rumour is the final consensus of their collective deliberations seeking out a convincing, encompassing explanation. Rumours entail a subjective construction of reality.

In the following, this discussion of some of the elements of the origins of rumours and their transmission will be related to the history of the gospel tradition.

4 THE DYNAMICS OF SOME JESUS STORIES

It must be emphasised that I am not equating all the Jesus stories as we now know them with rumours, nor am I suggesting that we can know nothing about the historical Jesus. Rumour research provides us with useful instruments with which to conceptualise aspects of oral tradition—which by definition include hearsay. In fact, we can still discover traces of the origins of possible rumour processes within the synoptic gospels themselves, for example Mark 1:45 and 5:14. The Gospels are very complex documents. The aim is to understand some of the social dynamics underlying parts of the Gospels.

4.1 Early Christian rumour mongers

It seems as if rumours often fulfil a need for ritual, carrying almost ceremonial functions. Rumours are a form of transactional communication: they incite moral commentary, personal opinions and emotional reactions. Rumours and gossip marvelously fill up the empty spaces that must of necessity be part of communication with our in-group. Rumours are engaged when both ambiguity and importance correlate, and these social forces only become manifest where people interact.

Consequently, communal places and activities are the hubs of rumours. There people create or transmit a host of information, whether false or true, born of the need to arouse interest, converse, say something entertaining or to find intellectual 'closure' with regard to something poorly understood. ‘To speak about a rumor with someone is to invite him to “rumor” with oneself’ (Kapferer 1990:50).

Almost by definition rumour mongers are people at the crossroad of many communication networks. How does information spread? Via people most likely to play a bridging role, people who are allowed to move in different strata: slaves and craftworkers, or public officials such as scribes. That is, individuals
whose occupations bring them into contact with a variety of social categories.

Of primary interest within our current investigation is, of course, the social characterisation of the disciples. Social information, though, is obvious for only four of them. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen, an occupation of which the social reputation was traditionally very low and sometimes even despised.

The increased demand for fish in the first century led to different systems of commercial ventures. Fish-salting seems to have been a prominent enterprise around the Sea of Galilee. Fishermen contracted with the wealthy for a specified amount of fish or they leased fishing rights from tax collectors (who acted as investment brokers) for a percentage of the catch (30-40%, assuming similarity of conditions between Egypt and Palestine, cf Rostovtzeff 1953b:1387 n101). Levied fishermen often worked with partners (μέτοχοι, cf Lk 5:7), and the fishing done by the four may have been of this type as Mark specifies that James and John left their father with the hired hands (1:20). In any case, the four disciples we can locate socially are clearly members of the lower class who also had extensive contact with other social and economic classes.

Even more relevant is to realise that they were people of liminal status. The very contact across social strata that they enjoyed probably contributed to limited acceptance on both sides of social barriers. These men were considered persons of dubious and indeterminate standing by most of the people who had dealings with them.

People in such a situation, described in social-psychological terms as 'isolates' are often highly motivated to initiate the transmission of rumours (Koenig 1985:114). Because communication is also a continuous process of proposing various relationships between those taking part in the conversation, rumours represent opportunities to transform or influence relationships.

It is possible to extend the group of people of undefined and problematic social status as relevant to the transmission of gospel stories. In a continuum from the lower echelons of the elite and ranging downward toward non-elite levels were those whom social scientists call retainers (Saldarini 1989:37-42). These included lower level military officers, educators, religious functionaries, scribes, and lower level aristocrats. In agrarian societies the 'governing class and its retainers seldom exceeded 5 to 7% of the population' (Saldarini 1989:38). Reference should also be made to the non-elite people of the cities which included merchants, artisans, day labourers and service workers. Some

among these accumulated considerable wealth, yet even they were not the bearers of much social influence.

We find a remarkable incidence of people from these circles depicted by the gospel (and early Christian) traditions as having contact with, or being involved with Jesus and his followers: servants (such as those from Jairus' house), Galilean and Judean priests, tax collectors, money changers and traders in the temple, doorkeepers, centurions and others. These persons worked primarily in the service of the elite and acted as mediators for both governmental and religious functions to the lower classes and to village areas, and were heavily dependent on their relationships with the urban elite.

Such functionaries possibly played key roles in the development of the gospel traditions. Significantly we find several people from this group who are followers of Jesus such as the people from Jairus' house, Levi, Judas Iscariot, tax collectors and several (or at least two) centurions. We even find among this group some Pharisees and scribes—who are in particular examples of persons caught 'in between'.

Pharisees (or proto-Pharisees) depended with the scribes on the wealthy upper classes for their livelihood while functioning as intermediaries between the populace and the upper echelons of society. They were most likely literate local village leaders (Saldarini 1988:71).

A scribe was more than a mere copyist and rather a middle level official, participating in a wide range of community activities (Saldarini 1989:241-276; Orton 1989:40-118). 'Their position gave them some power and influence, but they were subordinate to and dependent on the priests and leading families in Jerusalem and Herod Antipas in Galilee during the time of Jesus' (Saldarini 1989:274).

Despite the general negativeness with which scribes are usually portrayed in the synoptic tradition we find some noteworthy exceptions, for example the scribe who is 'not far from the kingdom' (Mk 12:34), Joseph of Arimethea (Mk 15:43) and Jairus (Mk 5:21-43). The first two are clearly urbanites, though the latter is more likely to be part of some village leadership.

Rumours that are introduced into a subsystem of interpersonal relations often exhibit the pattern of a network (cf Rosnow & Fine 1976:32, 132). Interpersonal networks involve multiple interactions in which messages diffuse in numerous patterns. As a message is sent and received from several sources, various complicated patterns result, and several persons play prominent roles in the process.

People such as scribes probably played a significant role in early Christian rumours. The development and transmission of a rumour can be likened to a two step process, in which the system is initiated by 'isolates'. The story is then transmitted by opinion-leaders to the prestigious members of a group. The
acceptance or rejection of a story by perceived specialists contributes strongly to whether a story will be labelled as rumour or as useful information. Various studies have described this process in which the ‘influentials’ with prestige and specialised ‘expertise’ in certain areas of knowledge play an important part (cf Jaeger, Anthony & Rosnow 1980; Fine 1979, 1985:232; Buckner 1965).

4.2 Coping with anxiety and stress
Rumours can provide people throughout a society who feel frustrated, threatened and disturbed with answers or explanations in a wider sense. Stressful times can also bring about the frustration-aggression reaction mechanism, with hostile rumours being one of such possible aggressive responses. Stress contributes to a person’s anxiety, and anxiety is a major factor in rumour activity (Anthony 1973; Rosnow 1980; Rosnow, Esposito & Gibney 1988:30-31, 38-39).

Rumour mongers, as several studies point out, have often found themselves in an adversarial position within a group or even within society, particularly concerning customs related to the role of religion. Such persons may feel under attack and threatened. Also, unemployment and economic depression seem to characterise regions that are the centres of the rumour activity (cf Koenig 1985:62-69).

Rumours flourish when people have the feeling that they are not in control of their lives; when everything is perceived as being decided externally, without their own input. To cope with such anxiety-producing situations persons collectively define a distinct group identity. Anxiety is also reduced when fear can be objectified (Kapferer 1990:172-173, 183-184).

In the following, three general factors that created stress and anxiety in first-century Palestine will be discussed, and the possible role of rumours related to Jesus traditions briefly indicated.

4.2.1 Health
Given the prominence of healing stories in the gospels, some mention should be made of general physical welfare in antiquity. The birth and death rate both approximated forty per thousand per year. Infant mortality rates have been estimated to average thirty per cent in many peasant societies, and life expectancies were extremely short by contemporary, Western standards. Children in general suffered from disease, malnutrition and poverty and many never made it to adulthood before their parents were sick or dead. About sixty per cent of those who survived their first year of life were dead by age sixteen and in few families both parents would still be living when the youngest child reached puberty (Carney 1975:88). A child born among the lower classes during the first century had a life expectancy of little more than twenty years (cf Stark

Obviously disease and high death rates were not evenly spread across all elements of the population, but for most people who did make it to adulthood health would have been atrocious. 'Infectious disease was undoubtedly the single greatest threat to life in antiquity, with epidemics killing half or more of the populations of the world's larger cities' (Zias 1991:149). Parasites were also very common.16 Most of the lower classes lived with the debilitating results of protein deficiency since childhood. Taking into account the paleopathological examination of skeletal remains from the Herodian period and infant mortality rates (by examining the ratio of children to adults in tombs), it is clear that particularly those of poorer socio-economic conditions suffered from malnutrition (Fiensy 1991:97-98).

In summary, poor housing, non-existent sanitation, economically inaccessible medical care and bad diet—as much as one-fourth of a male Palestinian peasant's calorie intake came from alcohol (Broshi 1986)—all adds up to an experience of everyday life, by common people, as frightening and often incomprehensible. Given the belief in the activities of evil spiritual powers (cf Pilch 1991:196-197) and the widespread physical suffering prevalent within the context of ancient cosmology, one can readily detect the ubiquitous fear and anxiety characterising the period (cf also Dodds 1965). That many situations, for instance the activities, news and reports of a powerful healer from Nazareth, could have given rise to experiences of ambiguity and enigmatic reports is highly plausible.

4.2.2 Violence and conflict
Palestinian society, in the period 20-70 CE was caught up in serious socio-economic and religio-political conflicts.

A variety of events created and/or contributed to stress, anxiety and ambiguity: several military conquests, decades of legislation causing economic impoverishment, many acts of destruction, a whole series of violations of the traditional Jewish way of life, and a variety of incidents aimed at strict repressive control of people's lives under illegitimate/foreign rulers (cf Rhoads 1976; Horsley & Hanson 1985).

Furthermore, fraud, robbery, forced imprisonment or labour, beatings, inheritance disputes and forceful removal of rent were all common events in village life. Oakman (1991:168), in his study of the countryside in Luke, writes that violence 'became a regular part of village experience and rural consciousness'. Life in the countryside of antiquity, and life among the peasants were characterised by violence; it approached 'a state of endemic warfare, from

16 Fifty percent of the hair combs from Qumran, Masada and Murabhat were infected with lice and lice eggs, probably reflecting conditions elsewhere (Zias 1991:148).
which only a stout cudgel, a fast horse, or a well-built little fortress gave protection' (MacMullen 1974:4).

4.2.3 Taxes and poverty
We read in Acts 2:46-47 that the earliest followers of Jesus enjoyed 'the good will of all the people'. Who were 'all' these people? Predominantly, they would have been peasants, and that meant poor people. In any traditional agrarian society the peasantry composed seventy per cent or more of the population and included all those living in towns or villages and engaged in working the soil or related activities, in contrast to the rulers, their retainers, supporting artisans, merchants, and so on, who lived in the cities. Among the urban non-elite, poverty was also common. The peasants should be seen as rural cultivators whose surpluses are transferred to a dominant group of rulers that uses the surpluses both to underwrite its own standard of living and to distribute the remainder to groups in society that do not farm but must be fed for their specific goods and services in turn (Wolf 1966:3-4; cf also Fiensy 1991:vi-vii).

Thus the high-priestly government and Temple apparatus in Jerusalem, the extensive Herodian and Roman governmental structure, the elaborate development projects and the tribute taken by the Romans were all dependent on what was produced by the Palestinian peasantry.

Life was harsh for the peasants, with the day labourers struggling even more. The demands for rents and taxes left most with a barely manageable, subsistence level of living (Fiensy 1991:105; Applebaum 1976:664-667, 1977:365, 377). Even Herod realised that his heavy demands on his subjects were becoming counterproductive and were simply killing off his producers (Josephus Antiquities 15.365).

Due to aristocratic control of major portions of the arable land tenant farming was quite characteristic of Palestine. Rents for tenants could be as high as two-thirds of a crop, though in Rabbinic sources the figures one-half, one-third, and one fourth appear (Fiensy 1991:81). While all day-labourers were not necessarily without property, people who were without land were near the bottom of the social-economic scale. Commonly they were either peasants who had lost land through debt or non-inheriting sons whom small peasant plots

17 See Garnsey & Saller 1982:28-34; Saldarini 1989:35-39; Stambaugh & Balch 1986:63-81. Note Josephus' description: '...ours is not a maritime country; neither commerce nor the intercourse which it promotes with the outside world has any attraction for us. Our cities are built inland, remote from the sea; and we devote ourselves to the cultivation of the productive country with which we are blessed' (Against Apion 1.60). Cf. also Jewish War 3.41-50.
The general tension between the Roman imperial rule and the Palestinian Jewish people was focused on the tribute that Rome demanded. This tension, I suggest, is the frame, the underlying condition for the story of Jesus' birth in Luke 2:1-20.

The inability to solve the supposed historical problems posed by the character and chronology of the census under Quirinius is well known (Brown 1977:395-396, 547-556; Fitzmyer 1981:392-394, 401-405). These very difficulties prompt us to think in terms of social dynamics: ambiguity within a complex, stressful situation. The impact of Roman taxation on common people (such as Joseph and Mary, the fishermen, the narrators of Jesus stories) as well as what the birth of a 'saviour' may have meant to them in relation to that taxation, are problems which are probably very close to the intention of this story.

Far from being 'a purely literary device' (Fitzmyer 1981:393) to get Jesus born in Bethlehem, the story of the census probably reflects a response rumour: it responds to personal needs where there were distress, severe economic hardship and hostility. Through interaction and communication, people making up a social group, define for one another what is 'real' and what 'could have been'.

Similarly, Matthew's story about the flight to Egypt by Mary and Joseph can also be seen to reflect the social relationships and political conditions that prevailed in Palestine under Roman (and earlier, Herodian) rule. To understand the story we need not search for the actual event. The story reflects rumours related to a historical situation in which, whether because of the steady impact of economic pressures or because of the direct effect of violence, often politically inspired, many people were forced to flee their homes in order to avoid being killed.

4.3 Ambiguity

'Rumour is a substitute for news; in fact, it is news that does not develop in institutional channels' (Shibutani 1966:62). Ambiguity exists where there is an unsatisfied demand for news; where there is a discrepancy between information needed to come to terms with a changing environment and what is provided by formal news channels (or available knowledge). Ambiguity arises when one is confronted with an unexpected event, an unexplained incident or incomplete report. When customary or commonplace activity is interrupted for want of more satisfying information, tension and frustration result. Rumour is the collective transaction through which humans try to fill the gap created by am-

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18 Many such landless people migrated to urban areas which were in frequent need of new labour. The need for labour was created not because of economic opportunity but because of urban mortality due to the atrocious health conditions among the urban non-elite (Stark 1991:194-195).
One can readily imagine the widespread unsatisfied demand for news in antiquity by simply considering communication technology. In a community at a low level of technology most communications are private and person to person with information disseminating in irregular fashion. ‘If one were close to an important person, he would know far more of what was going on than would another man who was closer to the scene of the action but not well connected’ (Carney 1975:111-112).

An important source of ambiguity lies within the early Jesus movement itself. Many of the authoritative informants of the Jesus stories, such as Peter, were itinerant (Theissen 1978:8-16; Botha 1993a). That is, they were present in a community for a limited period: a few days, maybe a few weeks at the most. The very way of spreading the Jesus stories contributed to considerable ambiguity—a problem not unknown to Paul either (cf his problems with Christians in Thessalonica and Corinth).

In the following, four rumour ‘devices’ for dealing with ambiguity will briefly be related to some gospel traditions.

4.3.1 Seeking out truth
Rumours are not necessarily ‘false’: they are, however, necessarily unofficial. Rumours constitute an alternative source of information, a source that is perforce uncontrolled.19

An instance conducive to the development of rumours in search of truth that immediately comes to mind is the ‘final’ events surrounding Pilate’s career (Josephus Antiquities 18.85-89). In 35 CE a Samaritan prophet promised to produce the sacred Temple vessels (which, according to Samaritan beliefs had been buried on the Mount Gerizim since the time of Moses) if the people would assemble on that mountain. Great crowds of (armed) Samaritans flocked to Tirathana, ready to climb the mountain and watch the spectacle. Before they could carry out their intention, they were stopped by a detachment of cavalry and heavy-armed infantry in the village; some were killed, some put to flight, and still others were captured. Of these, Pilate executed the most respected and distinguished. After protests were made to Vitellius, the legate of Syria, Pilate was consequently sent to Rome to answer for his conduct.

The point is simple: we see these events through the lenses of Josephus, a historian’s written works. The people involved, and others in Palestine were

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19 Something that is often overlooked is the fact that informal oral tradition is usually more reliable than formal ones: ‘an official tradition is less trustworthy as a historical source... in so far as it is official, but more trustworthy in so far as it is much more carefully transmitted’ (Vansina 1965:85). That is, formal oral tradition is more trustworthy as to care in transmission, less so as to historical reliability (Vansina 1985:29-32, 107, 172, 190-193). This has implications for Gerhardsson’s thesis.
simply faced with ambiguous, conflicting and exaggerated oral reports. (Bear in mind that it took Pilate about a year to arrive in Rome—and how long after that for reports to reach Palestine?—so that one can easily understand the rise of a variety of rumours concerning Pilate himself. Cf Brandon 1969:254-267). The whole series of events caused situations of extreme anxiety, and gave rise to the possible perception of highly ambiguous events: the appearance of a 'messiah', the killing of innocents, etcetera.

It is not difficult to relate the origins of the story of the killing of the infants (Mt 2:16-18) to such a situation. It is against the background of Herod's, Pilate's and other aristocratically inspired exploitation and tyranny that the pre-Matthean and Matthean story(-ies) of 'the massacre of the innocents' and the stories depicting the birth of the newborn king of the Jews originated and was cultivated. The activities of a variety of 'kings' (or even powerful Roman officials) could have constituted the problem (from which liberation was sought), and the (historical) birth of Jesus combined with messianic and Davidic belief systems provided the ambiguity.

Another series of events can be related to the origins and development of the story about the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus, namely the reminiscences associated with Tiridates.20

First we need more information about the 'Magi'. They were a priestly caste acting as political and religious advisers to the Persian courts and were famous for their communication with and propitiation of the gods.21 They were also instrumental in divine revelation as the interpreters of royal dreams or extraordinary natural phenomena. In this sense we sometimes find the term mavgo extended to magicians, astrologers and dream interpreters. In their official duties the Magi may well have been stationed in outlying administrative centres; at least, these centres were visited by them on various occasions. Because of their special stake in and attachment to the former Persian rule as the divinely ordained order and their wide dispersion under Hellenistic rule, the Magi are prime candidates to have been instigators or heralds of religiously inspired resistance against Roman imperial domination.22

The travels of Tiridates shed light on the role of, and the widespread fascination with (and consequently their contribution to the existence of equivocal

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20 Dio Cassius Roman History 63.1.1-63.7.2 (cf 62.21.2-62.23.6); Suetonius Nero 13; Pliny Natural History 30.4.23-30.6.18.
21 Bickerman & Tadmor 1978:250-259; Hengel & Merkel 1973:142-146; Aus 1987:110-113; all with many references to source material, of which Strabo 15.3.13-15 and Pliny Nat Hist 24.102.160,164-165; 25.5.13; 25.79.106 are particularly relevant.
22 Cicero tells us that, 'Everybody knows that on the same night that in which Olympias was delivered of Alexander the temple of Diana at Ephesus was burned, and that the Magi began to cry out as the day was breaking: "Asia's deadly curse was born last night"' (On divination 1.23.47).
and mystifying information), the Magi. In 66 CE Rome agreed to accept the Parthian candidate for king in Armenia if he would receive his crown from the hands of the Roman emperor. Thus the Armenian king Tiridates, accompanied by the sons of three neighboring Parthian rulers, made a nine month journey from the Euphrates to Naples to visit Nero. With an entourage of relatives, servants, three thousand horsemen and numerous Romans this triumphal procession was greeted with pomp and occasion in various cities along the route. (Picture the impact of such a group travelling through rural areas, confiscating supplies and commandeering assistance). The senior Pliny describes this Tiridates as a *Magus* (*Natural History* 30.6.16), and says that Tiridates brought Magi with him and initiated Nero into their banquets.

We have here prime circumstances for the development of rumours, particularly rumours that, while seeking the truth, attempt to express hoped-for liberation from foreign domination. Stories not unlike that which we find in Matthew 2:1-12.

4.3.2 Political rumours

According to Kapferer (1990:215-225) political rumours amount to infinite variations on a small number of themes, such as the invisible hand, power or secret society that is controlling the flow of events, the revelation of the hidden or true meaning or agenda of things or persons, concern about morality and the movement of people.

In this type of rumour stories we see a distinctive form of reality creation. When marginalised and perceived to be at times in the opposition, people challenge official reality by proposing other realities. In this sense we find that rumours are not substitutes; they constitute, rather, a complementary media—that of proposing an alternative reality.

These rumours aim at provocation. They attempt to create a more favourable psychological climate and thereby to put pressure on those in power. One can also find instances of wish fulfilment in political rumours.

A powerful stimulus for political rumours would be the configuration of eschatological myths, imperial propaganda, *adventus* coins and hearsay about Nero *Redivivus* (cf Kreitzer 1988:95-99, 1989). A case related to the synoptic tradition that comes to mind is the prophecies of the destruction of the Temple by Jesus, and the related eschatological speech(es). The many source and tradition critical problems with these sayings of Jesus are well-known, and the hypothesis that there is an ‘apocalyptic flysheet’ (*ein apokalyptisches Flugblatt*) underlying Mk 13 has found new support.23

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A relevant example of an important (given a ‘Jewish’ context and the concomitant social/religious values) yet ambiguous series of events is the sequence of negotiations between Gaius and Petronius, winter 39/40 until April 41 CE.

These events took place during the reign of Gaius Caligula (37-41) about whom all rejoiced at first, the Jews included. Though the first eighteen months—with regard to relationships with Jewish people—went peacefully, a bloody pogrom broke out in Alexandria, with considerable consequences for the relationship between Jews and imperial power (Balsdon 1934:111-145). Despite severe suffering and various efforts to appease matters, affairs remained unsettled until the death of Gaius Caligula, after which Claudius immediately restored the right to practice Jewish customs in Alexandria.

At the same time, in Palestine, a storm broke out at Jamnia (a town in the coastal plain inhabited mainly by Jews) when an altar dedicated to the emperor was destroyed. The procurator (or imperial tax collector) of the city, Herennius Capito, reported this to the emperor. Gaius saw this as an act of audacious disloyalty and promptly ordered that a statue with his effigy be set up in the temple in Jerusalem (Philo Embassy to Gaius 30.230). The emperor knew perfectly well that there would be considerable resistance to the idea, and Publius Petronius, governor of Syria, was ordered to proceed with half the army stationed in Syria to Palestine to enforce compliance to Gaius’ will. Petronius, apparently a capable and reasonable administrator, tried to deal with these commands as responsibly as possible (winter 39/40—Philo Embassy to Gaius 31.207-223; Josephus Antiquities 18.261-268). While the statue was being prepared in Sidon, he sent for various Jewish leaders and tried to persuade them to accept the situation, without success.

The news of what was in store soon spread all over Palestine and people gathered in great masses at Ptolemais, where Petronius had his headquarters. ‘The multitude of Jews covered all Phoenicia like a cloud’ (Philo Embassy 32.226).

A large deputation appeared before Petronius and he did his utmost to postpone the execution of the imperial orders through various means. When Gaius received Petronius’ report (arguing for the postponement of the erection of the statue), he wrote Petronius a letter of acknowledgement congratulating him on his prudence but urging him to proceed as soon as possible. Petronius prolonged matters (Philo says βραδύς ἤν ἐγχειρήτης, Embassy 31.213), led his

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24 ‘When Gaius succeeded to the sovereignty, we were the first of the inhabitants of Syria to show our joy. Vitellius...during his stay in our city received the news, and it was from our city that the glad tidings (εὐαγγελιωμένη) spread. Our Temple was the first to accept sacrifices on behalf of Gaius’s reign’ (Philo Embassy to Gaius 32.231-232. On the oath of loyalty: Josephus Antiquities 18.124).

25 Philo (Embassy 30.199) calls him the tax-collector (ἐκλογεύς) for Judaea. Josephus (Antiquities 18.158) describes him as the procurator of Jamnia.
army back to Antioch (autumn 40) and wrote to Gaius arguing the prudence of revoking the edict, after extensive negotiations with Jewish leaders.

At that very moment Gaius sent a letter to Petronius informing him that nothing was to be changed in the Jerusalem Temple. Right after this letter, the emperor regretted and gave orders for a new statue to be made in Rome that would be taken by himself to Palestine. In January 41 Gaius received Petronius' petition and responded with an order that Petronius should commit suicide. On the 24th of January 41 Gaius was murdered. Petronius received the news of the emperor's death in March, and the command to commit suicide in April.26

In all this we have distinct evidence of the interplay of both importance and ambiguity: the impact of emperor worship, important cultural values27 and little knowledge of and insight into official doings and arrangements (particularly without hindsight and written sources like we have) among the majority of people who felt affected by all this. The rise of apocalyptic rumours within the Jesus movement, based upon sayings understood to be relevant to these events are quite likely. Like other political rumours, Mk 13 has attention-getting and dramatic ingredients. It legitimates a cosmology for members of some strands of the early Jesus movement, justifies their fears and explains their anxieties.

4.3.3 Counter-rumour

Sometimes, rumours come into being with the aim of countering well-known and accepted hearsay, or of engaging disinformation. A possible example of such a reaction story could be the foundation for parts of the resurrection stories. Mt 28.11-15 reflects an example of an 'official' report and Mt 28.1-10, 16-20 the Christian response.

A form of counter-rumour that probably contributed to the development of the gospel traditions are hostile rumours. These are rumours that sow dissension in a larger group and are sometimes based on fear and anxiety that find an outlet in aggression directed at a scapegoat.

The New Testament is inundated with polemical and even defamatory traditions, and the role of 'opponent' studies and anti-Jewish polemic is considered fundamental to reconstructing the 'theologies' of the various early Christian authors. However, it is quite plausible that at least aspects of these polemical traditions could be related to the social dynamics of groups attempting self-

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26 For this, see Josephus Jewish War 2.184-203, Antiquities 18.298-18.309; Philo Embassy 32.225-33.253. It is not easy to elucidate the sequence of events, as 'the story has been much embroidered in the telling' (Balsdon 1934:136).

27 Philo writes that 'the Jews would willingly endure to die not once but a thousand times, if it were possible, rather than allow any of the prohibited actions to be committed. For all men guard their customs, but this is especially true of the Jewish nation' (Embassy 31.209-210).
definition and responding to criticism (and slanderous rumours\textsuperscript{28}). For a variety of reasons, many stories circulating in the Jesus movement targeted the (proto-) pharisaic rabbis—who, although they were a minority group pre-70, were probably often admired and/or feared and therefore perfect targets for rumours.

This type of information constitutes news: we expect negative people to commit negative acts. Negative acts are considered such because they are perceived to endanger the collectivity. A rumour of this kind feeds stereotypes: it justifies prejudices about the ‘other’ (‘them’) and those who are not integrated into the community. It authorises the open expression of aggressiveness in a safe way. Information in the form of hostile rumours has not only an alerting function, but also one of expressing and strengthening prejudices. A group becomes aware of its own existence and power as the rumour spreads farther and wider. A negative rumour is a powerful lever with which to reconstitute threatened social cohesion.

4.3.4 Numinous places and events
The confession of Peter and the transfiguration of Jesus (Mk 8:27-9:10, Mt 16:13-17:9, Lk 9:18-36) have defied all attempts at sorting out the synoptic relationships or possible sources and traditions. It is possible to suggest a scenario that could explain the extensive divergences in a tradition manifestly of great importance to early Christianity.

When one comes into contact with a powerful, charismatic person, or stays at a place perceived as numinous, one is easily confronted with ambiguity. Nickelsburg has pointed out that the immediate environment of Tell Dan in upper Galilee has a long history as sacred territory. Mount Hermon, in particular, was considered to be a numinous area (Nickelsburg 1981:582-583).

Given the appearance of a powerful teacher/healer, reports of a messianic confession, the overlay of economic and religious tensions, all connected to a geographical region believed to be sacred, rumours about epiphanic commissioning would summarise all these elements convincingly.

5 SOME IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The trajectories underlying the gospel traditions are of fundamental importance to understanding earliest Christianity. Despite several shortcomings, the informal, freely developing concept of tradition transmission still

\textsuperscript{28} Some early Christian groups tended to emphasise their separation and to reinforce their exclusiveness (to which Paul made no small contribution—e.g. 1 Cor 10). ‘They met in private houses, discreetly closed off from the street, and what went on in those meetings reinforced their sense that their true allegiance lay here rather than...outside’ (Stambaugh & Balch 1986:58-59). This style naturally encourages rumours: see Wilken 1984:1-62.
merits attention. This paper presents an argument for analysing the transmission process with a social-scientific model developed from rumour research.

The elements of rumour are part of the social dynamics with which a group of people cope with changing circumstances, maintain or re-create reality and relieve anxiety. The proposed model was matched to aspects of the origins, background and evolution of parts of the synoptic gospel traditions, such as the birth narratives, healing and resurrection stories.

Besides the illustrative descriptive power generated by applying rumour research to the transmission of the Jesus stories, some general conclusions can also be drawn.

The first would obviously be with regard to the synoptic problem. A long time ago Westcott had argued for the relative independence of the Gospels, against theories of literary dependence, by referring to ‘the successive remoulding of the oral Gospel according to the peculiar requirements of different classes of hearers’ (1896:214). Right up to this day, many New Testament scholars still fail to engage the extensive body of knowledge with regard to orality and informal communication, in order to do better source and tradition criticism. What often happens is that ‘oral tradition’ gets smuggled into the discussion without a formal examination of that category, merely in order to cover up difficulties with a purely documentary solution. This paper attempts to counter that tendency.

The context of an informal, evolutionary process also aids in explaining, in part at least, the anonymity of the Gospels. The anonymity of the Gospels makes it extremely difficult to say what the position of the gospel writer is in relation to the community tradition which he collects and edits (Simonsen 1983:4)—a fact of severe implication for redaction criticism and narratological analyses of the Gospels. Utilising relevant research about oral tradition (and also rumour research) shows how inappropriate many of the categories of established gospel criticism are.

Finally, the study of rumours confronts us with a question of vast epistemological—and consequently of theological—importance: why do we believe what we believe?

A rumour process is, in the end, only a speeded up version of the comprehensive, imperceptible process through which we acquire all of our ideas, opinions, images and beliefs. Rumour research leads us once more to the realisation that reality is socially constructed. Certainty, in a final sense, is social: what the group to which we belong considers to be true is true. Truth is not something in itself: it is there, but always stands in relation to people.

Unfounded information can circulate in society as easily as established knowledge and has the same mobilising effects.
A substantial percentage of our knowledge is, perhaps, unbeknownst to us, totally ungrounded. Rumors reconfirm something that is self-evident: we do not believe what we know because it is true, founded or proven. With all due measure we can affirm the opposite: it is true because we believe it (Kapferer 1990:264).

Therefore, understanding rumour leads us to religion. Like rumours, religion has its strength due to contagious beliefs. What matters to us is what someone we trust told us about. Truly, in the beginning was the word...

Knowledge is a fragile thing, and our vigilance and honesty are our only protection.

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