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ABSTRACT

Despite the extensive attention that has been given to Philippians 2:6-11 in relation to its Christology, the possibility that v8 alludes to the story about Jesus in Gethsemane has received only cursory mention when it has been considered at all. Philippians 2:8 and the Gospel tradition converge in depicting Jesus choosing to be obedient to God even to the point of death, in the absence of an interpretation of that death as itself salvific. The historical allusion, offered in the midst of a heavily theologized Christological statement, offers an excellent test case for an approach to history which accepts that fact and interpretation are inseparable, and yet still proceeds under the conviction that critical historiography remains possible.

KEYWORDS

Gethsemane, prayer, epistles, methodology, historiography

The “hymnic” passage in Philippians 2:6-11 has obviously been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention. The majority of that work has focused on matters of Christology (in particular the question of whether Jesus is depicted as pre-existent, and whether the final

exalted status mirrors or exceeds what he had at some earlier point), and/or on whether the passage is quoting a pre-Pauline hymn, and if so, whether there are identifiable Pauline additions to that hymn. It is much rarer to have the text mentioned in relation to the quest for the historical Jesus, except perhaps by way of contrast. Yet there is a striking convergence between the decisive turning point of the Philippians passage, at v8, and material in our earliest (as well as later) Gospel sources. The question of whether the midpoint of the passage represents the lowest point on “a divine parabola of descent from eternal glory to the cross and ascent back again to eternal glory” is not an unimportant one.¹ However, as a result of the intensity of focus on the beginning of the hymn on the one hand, with accompanying questions about pre-existence and possible history of religions backgrounds, and the concluding exaltation on the other, relatively little attention has been given to the possibility that at the hymn’s centerpiece lies an allusion to the narrative traditions about Jesus that later came to be recorded in the Gospels.

This very fact makes the passage a perfect test case for the newer approach to historical Jesus studies which various scholars have been advocating in recent years. If the remembered and interpreted Jesus is all we have, then what becomes of the historical Jesus as traditionally understood?² Can a text which embeds an event in Jesus’ life into a framework which is thickly overlaid with theological interpretation offered from a vantage point of hindsight, also give us a glimpse of the historical figure whose life inspired that interpretation? In order to make the case for Paul’s awareness of the Gethsemane story, we

¹ G. Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. p.124. See the diagrams as well as the discussion in John H. P. Reumann, *Philippians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 334-337.

² Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2003, pp.130-136.

shall need to explore terminological, narrative, conceptual, and symbolic connections between Philippians, other letters of Paul, and the Gospels, many of which have long been understood as overlay upon a historical Jesus who did not himself subscribe to an interpretation of unfolding events in terms that in any way resembled what his disciples would later formulate. The present study will offer evidence suggesting that, if there is indeed later reflection, and an addition of narrative detail that introduces innovation, it is at least sometimes possible to detect these. It will also be argued that, woven together with such later perspectives into the fabric of these texts, there are also lines of continuity which can still be traced back from Paul, through Mark, to Jesus himself.

Before considering whether Paul may have alluded the story of Jesus at Gethsemane in Phil.2:8, other evidence for Paul's awareness of the story should be mentioned. Although Phil. 2:8 may represent the most direct allusion to the Gethsemane story in summary form, other passages offer clearer connections in the form of distinctive vocabulary, even where little of the Gethsemane narrative as known from the Gospels appears to be in view. In the New Testament, the transliterated Aramaic word *abba*, "father," is found only in Mark 14:36 and then twice in Paul's letters, in Galatians 4:6 and Romans 8:15. In both these Pauline letters, reference is made in the broader context to the Spirit (contrasted with the flesh), the status of children of God, being heirs, slavery, crying, and prayer.³ In Mark 14, Jesus is depicted as making a contrast between the willingness of the spirit and the weakness of the flesh.⁴ And while there is no reference to Jesus crying out in Mark (he

³ Note the intersection between Paul's statement that the Romans are "not in the flesh" and Hebrews' reference to "the days of his flesh."

⁴ Paul also refers to "flesh" in Galatians and Romans with a relatively higher degree of frequency than elsewhere in his letters, and the contrast between flesh and spirit is more direct in those letters. The contrast

merely “says” the words attributed to him), Jesus is depicted as saying that he is sorrowful *unto death* (ἕως θανάτου, 14:34), a phrase that is essentially synonymous with that found in Philippians 2:8 (μέχρι θανάτου). The appearance of a transliterated Aramaic word in precisely these two authors is significant, and renders Paul’s familiarity with the Gethsemane story – in unwritten form, of course – inherently plausible.⁵ The fact that a number of other resonances with the Gethsemane appear in close proximity with Paul’s use of *abba* strengthens the likelihood of a connection.

The broader context of the letter to the Philippians also represents an important part of the broader Pauline context of Phil.2:6-11, in terms of the evidence for an allusion to the Gethsemane story. Modern commentaries on Philippians rarely mention the Gethsemane story at all. If they do so, however, it is typically to note that the term ἄδημονῶν, which Paul uses to describe Epaphroditus’ distress in Phil. 2:26, only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in the Gethsemane story, in Mark 14:33 and Matthew 26:37. The possibility that Paul had the story of Gethsemane in mind earlier in the chapter, and that it influenced his word choice in v26, therefore needs to be considered.⁶ The repetition of language from 2:8 again in 2:30 in relation to Epaphroditus’ suffering – for the sake of the work of Christ, Paul says, he came near “unto death” (μέχρι θανάτου) – reinforces the impression that Paul is continuing to recall not just the Gethsemane story, but that story as expressed in Phil.2:8.

also appears in Philippians 3:3. That Paul refers to Jesus in Phil.2:6-11 as “man” rather than “flesh” may perhaps also be significant.

⁵ For more points of contact between the Markan Gethsemane story and the passages in Galatians and Romans, see Dale Allison, *Constructing Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), pp.417-418.

⁶ J. B. Lightfoot mentions Gethsemane in commenting on Phil. 3:10. See his *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1888), p.151.

Daniel Migliore has detected points of intersection between the Gethsemane story and Paul's view of his impending death in the section immediately before the "hymnic" passage. If correct, this would indicate that there is an even more extensive intertextual subtext from the passion narrative in Philippians.⁷ In support of this is not only the mention of a choice between life and death, and ultimate submission to God's will, but the reference to prayers offered in conjunction with the help of the Spirit, specifically aimed at accomplishing deliverance from death. There are thus also echoes that resonate with Romans 8:15-17,23,26, with its reference to the Spirit facilitating prayer, which in turn is connected with the prayer of Jesus to God as *abba*, bringing the connections full circle back to the Gethsemane story.⁸ Thus, both in the broader corpus of Pauline writings, and in the immediate context in Philippians, we find evidence for Paul's awareness of the Gethsemane story, both at the thematic level and on the level of specific vocabulary. Such evidence deserves to be kept in mind as we turn to the question of an allusion in Philippians 2:8.

While it has been rare for scholars commenting specifically on Philippians 2:8 to make reference to the Gethsemane story in that context, there have been exceptions. Alfred Plummer noted in passing the possibility of a connection with Philippians 2:8, "The prayers in Gethsemane may be in St. Paul's mind."⁹ Markus Bockmuehl also notes that the prayer at Gethsemane provides the "canonical context" of the terminology "unto death" in this verse.¹⁰ Carolyn Osiek devotes slightly more attention to this possibility, and draws a

⁷ Daniel L. Migliore, *Philippians and Philemon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), p.59.

⁸ It is interesting that groaning, prayer, and the use of an Aramaic word also converge in Mark 7:34. And in 2 Corinthians 4-5, we also find reference to groaning in the context of looking ahead to the possibility of death, and the emulation of Jesus' example.

⁹ Alfred Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to The Philippians* (London: Robert Scott, 1919), p.47.

¹⁰ Markus Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A & C Black, 1997), p.139.

connection at the same time with Hebrews.¹¹ Joel Marcus likewise makes an important three-way connection between Philippians, Mark, and Hebrews 5:7-10. The latter offers a more explicit allusion to the Gethsemane story than Philippians does, in a context that at the same time includes striking thematic and structural similarities to Philippians 2:6-11.¹² The possibility we are considering here has thus not been entirely neglected; yet neither has it been given the attention that it is due. Be that as it may, the aforementioned treatments have been focused on the light that Gethsemane might shed on Paul's thought, whereas our present concern is the reverse, namely the possibility that Paul might be relevant to the investigation of the historical Jesus, representing our earliest testimony to this tradition.¹³

The connection with Hebrews is important, because the parallels between Hebrews 5:7-10 and Philippians 2:6-11 not only provide potential supporting evidence for an allusion to the Gethsemane story in Philippians, but may further offer clues as to the character of the oral tradition that lies behind both epistles.¹⁴ There are few direct verbal parallels between the two passages, and yet there are interesting conceptual and structural links. In both, there is obedience through suffering. The emphasis on sonship is more

¹¹ Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians and Philemon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), p.62-63.

¹² Joel Marcus, "Identity and Ambiguity in Markan Christology," in Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *Seeking the Identity of Jesus: A Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp.133-147 (here p.142).

¹³ On the possibility of discerning pre-Markan sources behind our earliest Gospel, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "What Really Happened at Gethsemane?" *Bible Review* 14:2 (April 1998), pp. 28-39,52, reprinted in *Keys to Jerusalem: Collected Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.77-106. On the passion tradition in Paul see Marion L. Soards, "Oral Tradition Before, In, and Outside the Canonical Passion Narratives," in Henry Wansborough (ed.), *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp.334-350 (especially p.346); contrast Traugott Holtz, "Paul and the Oral Gospel Tradition" in the same volume, pp.380-393 (here p.380 n.3).

¹⁴ On the connection see also Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah.vol.1* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), pp.228-233; Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), p.131.

explicit in Hebrews, but is present at the beginning and the end of the Philippians passage, as Jesus is said to be both “in the form of God” (perhaps recalling the notion of “image and likeness” which is applied to Adam and to children by biological descent in Genesis 1:26; 5:3) and to be highly exalted “to the glory of God the Father.” Both lack any specific focus on the suffering and death of Jesus as itself salvific, despite the cross being viewed in those terms elsewhere by these authors. And both in turn view Jesus as being appointed into an exalted position as anointed one. Even though Hebrews emphasizes the priestly character of Jesus’ role, it is the priesthood according to Melchizedek, which made it possible to connect with Jesus with priestly functions as an anointed one of Davidic rather than Aaronic descent.

It is noteworthy that, while both Hebrews and Paul are aware of interpretations of Jesus’ death as accomplishing salvation in sacrificial terms, and Paul tends to focus on a participatory understanding of the relevance of Jesus’ death for the salvation of those “in Christ,” neither author introduces those elements of atonement into the obedience of Jesus through suffering unto death, either as motivation or as direct effect thereof. The obedience of Jesus in both epistolary passages is the means whereby Jesus is tested and, having successfully passed through the test in obedience, is rewarded by God and exalted. This is precisely what is found in the Synoptic Gospels as well, which may elsewhere hint at ideas such as that the death of Jesus is a ransom, but within the confines of the Gethsemane story itself, do not depict Jesus as aware that his death will accomplish anything of the sort. Rather, he is simply persuaded that there is suffering that he must endure because God wills it. That Jesus asks to be spared what is to come is a detail that has proven to be quite disconcerting for some Christian readers, if it is presupposed that this meant Jesus was

seeking not to go through with accomplishing salvation for humankind. Yet for this very reason, the story is likely to represent an early tradition, known to three of what may be our earliest New Testament sources, depending on the dating of Hebrews, which did not reflect the more developed theology of the cross that each developed. This in turn can account for how these three early authors can all know the same narrative tradition, without sharing in common a particular view of the atonement. The story of Gethsemane predates not only these texts, but the theological systems of their authors.

There is a long history of comparing the Garden of Gethsemane to the Garden of Eden, stretching from the ancient church right down to the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, in which Jesus in the Gethsemane stamps on the serpent's head.¹⁵ Indeed, there is such a long tradition of identifying Gethsemane as a *garden* that it would be easy to miss that it is the Gospel of John which alone provides this detail in the New Testament. In fact, the Gospel of John introduces "garden" into the passion narrative in more than one place where other Gospels lack such a detail. The word used in both John 18:1,26 and 19:41 is *κῆπος*, which can also mean an orchard or enclosure, and that might at first glance be considered the better sense when used in reference to a place where olives are grown. Yet that meaning is impossible in 19:41, since a tomb would never be situated in an orchard. Note as well that John 20:15 is the sole place where the risen Jesus is misidentified as being a *κηπουρός*, "gardener." There seems to be little reason for the specificity of the misidentification unless it is, on the one hand, to highlight the setting of the story in a

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, 34, compares the tree of disobedience with Jesus' tree of obedience. The stamping on the snake recalls Genesis 3:15.

garden, while on the other, to make clearer still that it is precisely a garden that is intended.¹⁶

Exploring this theme in the Gospel of John would take us further afield than this article permits. Nevertheless, it is worth noting this additional example of an early Christian author connecting the story of Gethsemane with Adamic tradition, and that for John as apparently also for Paul, the obedience of Jesus exemplified in (but by no means confined to) the garden was closely tied to his exaltation, his “lifting up.” And for Paul explicitly, but perhaps also for the author of the Fourth Gospel as well, Jesus’ resurrection was closely tied to his identity as the “last Adam.” The relationship between Paul and John, however, is not merely one of intersection and the possibility of interdependence, but also one of contrast. In the Philippians passage, Jesus is depicted as not grasping at the equality with God that would be bestowed upon him precisely in response to his obedience, and which included the giving to him of the divine name. In John, on the other hand, Jesus utters “I am” in the garden, which most interpreters understand to be – or to stand in for – the name which the Father had given to Jesus before the foundation of the world, along with accompanying glory (John 17:5,12,22-24). The Fourth Gospel also rejects precisely the element of the Gethsemane story that Paul seems to allude to, making Jesus earlier contemplate only to reject the possibility of asking to be saved from this hour (John 12:27).

¹⁶ For further possible connections with and allusions to the Garden of Eden story in John 20, see Ruben Zimmermann, “Symbolic Communication between John and His Reader: The Garden Symbolism in John 19-20,” in Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore (eds.), *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), pp.221-236 (here pp.230-232); Mary Coloe, “The Cosmological Vision of John: The Evangelist as Observer and Interpreter,” in Jan G. van der Watt and R. Alan Culpepper (eds.), *Creation Stories in Dialogue: The Bible, Science, and Folk Traditions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015), pp.271-286 (here pp.278-283); Anthony M. Moore, *Signs of Salvation: The Theme of Creation in John's Gospel* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2013), pp.55-74.

And so there can be no question of Paul depending on a version of the story akin to that in John. More likely, therefore, is that Paul has drawn on the Gethsemane tradition, and the Adamic framing of the story (whether introduced for the first time by Paul or someone prior to him) has in turn influenced the telling of the story in the Gospel of John.

If Paul recalled the Gethsemane story in the context of his comparison between Jesus and Adam, many intriguing resonances would likely become apparent. The language of temptation/testing is explicitly used in Mark 14:38 – the disciples are succumbing where Jesus is managing to persevere faithfully.¹⁷ For Jesus in Gethsemane, viewed through an Adamic lens, the olive serves as a highly suitable “forbidden fruit,” since olive oil was used for anointing kings. And it is the very decision not to grasp the kingship, but to allow God to be the one to make him king after he suffers, that represents Jesus’ obedience unto death. It is not merely the willingness to die, but precisely the choice to follow that route rather than grasp by other means at equality with God, i.e. the exalted status of the Messiah that would bestow on him the divine name, celestial enthronement, and universal acclaim and worship. The choice was between the path of violence that went along with self-appointment as Messiah, depicted in the resort to armed resistance by one of Jesus’ disciples in the Gethsemane story, and the path of humility. Anointing could be understood as involving the divinization of the Davidic king, who was understood to be begotten on the day he was anointed, according to Psalm 2:7. The use of this Psalm in early Christianity is consistent in some respects, and yet quite diverse in others. In some manuscripts of Luke it is associated with the baptism of Jesus. Yet in Mark 10:38, the cup which Jesus will drink

¹⁷ On testing and temptation in Mark’s depiction of Jesus, see Susan R. Garrett, *The Temptations of Jesus in Mark’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp.91-136; Jeffrey Gibson, *Temptations of Jesus in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), pp.222-254.

(mentioned again in Gethsemane as referring to his imminent suffering) is also referred to as a baptism. In Hebrews 5:5, the Psalm is associated with Jesus being made priest, immediately before that letter's allusion to the Gethsemane story. Acts 13:33 associates the verse with the resurrection. Yet even if some early Christians viewed Jesus as having been "appointed as the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4), other evidence - including the use of *abba* in the Gethsemane story - makes it unlikely that anyone thought that Jesus only took on a relationship of sonship to God for the first time after God raised him from the dead. Be that as it may, all of these varied uses of Psalm 2:7 reflect the assumption that the anointing in question represented a bestowal of exalted status. In Paul's interpretation of the story of Jesus in Gethsemane, it is this exalted status that Jesus refuses to grasp, and the olives whose oil served the purpose of anointing would have symbolized this choice nicely. Whether the transformation of Gethsemane into a "garden" results from or influenced the parallels that Paul himself drew is impossible to determine.

In the Apocalypse of Moses (13:1-2; 40:2), the tree of life is presented as one that produces oil, and thus at least resembles an olive tree. A similar idea is encountered in the Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions:

Him first God anointed with oil which was taken from the wood of the tree of life: from that anointing therefore He is called Christ. Thence, moreover, He Himself also, according to the appointment of His Father, anoints with similar oil every one of the pious when they come to His kingdom, for their refreshment after their labours, as

having got over the difficulties of the way; so that their light may shine, and being filled with the Holy Spirit, they may be endowed with immortality.¹⁸

If such traditions were known in Paul's time, then there would be both a similarity, and an implicit contrast, between the stories of Adam and Christ, and the trees and forbidden fruit each encountered. In the Babylonian Talmud, R. Meir identifies the tree which bore the forbidden fruit from which Adam ate as the vine.¹⁹ Although its contents are not specified, Jesus' willingness to be obedient unto death in the Gethsemane story is symbolized in terms of a cup from which he must drink, making for a contrast with Adam's choice to partake of a fruit as the sin in the Genesis story. The connections between olive and vine, wine and oil, horn of anointing and cup from which one drinks, make for a potentially confusing confluence of imagery.²⁰ Nonetheless, the existence of points of both similarity and difference, comparison and contrast, would likely have been clear enough to anyone familiar with these traditions. And in turn, they may have influenced Paul's mention of his own life being poured out like a drink offering in Phil.2:17.

The reference to Jesus humbling himself in obedience to God even unto death meshes with the physical posture attributed to Jesus in the Gethsemane story. It was typical to stand in prayer, except in extreme circumstances.²¹ The prostration of Jesus before God in Gethsemane, in turn, contrasts with and yet leads to the universal prostration before him at the end of the passage. In light of the Gethsemane story, the reference to

¹⁸ Book I chapter 45. Translation by Thomas Smith, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers vol.8* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p.89; online in CCEL: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf08.pdf> [accessed 21 September 2016] p.184.

¹⁹ b. Berakoth 40a.

²⁰ They converge in Psalm 23:5, where mention is made of the head being anointed and the cup overflowing.

²¹ Ralph P. Martin, *A Hymn of Christ* (previously published as *Carmen Christi*; Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1997), p.265.

taking on “the form of a servant” need not be interpreted in incarnational terms, but might envisage more concretely his being led away in captivity from Gethsemane.²²

In the past, all of the aforementioned discussion of symbolism and intertextual resonances would have seemed out of place in a study focused on the historical Jesus. Recent historiographical work, however, has consistently reminded us that we cannot hope to find a historical Jesus disconnected from notions of messiahship, a meaningful death, and theology, or to completely disentangle Jesus’ own views and interpretations from others that were subsequently overlaid onto the memory of him. In light of such work, the appropriate task of the historian is to note where new details are introduced over the course of time, to trace trajectories backwards, and to ask whether any of those trajectories may in fact connect us with the historical figure of Jesus, rather than representing a departure from him.²³ While there have always been some who have despaired at the possibility of answering such questions, this example, rich in symbolism and theology, can disabuse us of extreme pessimism in this regard. Even when the combined evidence is evaluated with a high degree of skepticism, it remains not only plausible, but likely, that Jesus foresaw himself having to suffer, and shortly before his arrest prayed that he might be spared that experience.²⁴ In theory, the failure of the disciples to remain awake and keep

²² In suggesting this, the possibility that 2:7 also had in view Jesus taking “the form of the Servant” from the Isaianic Servant Songs need not be excluded. The Philippians passage does not explicitly mention a celestial existence or descent from heaven, and given our narrow focus on connections between Philippians and Gethsemane, we must set aside those controversies about Philippians 2:6-7 as not germane to our present enquiry.

²³ See further James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp.22-34, 121.

²⁴ It is intentional that we have refrained from specifying that Jesus foresaw that he would die, although in the right circumstances it is entirely possible for someone to become aware of the likelihood that they will meet their end. The wording of Hebrews 5:7, however, leaves open the possibility that Jesus hoped to be saved from death in the more conventional sense of being rescued so as not to die on that particular occasion. In connection with Hebrews 11, he could be understood to have died in hope without receiving what he had

watch might be understood to have prevented Jesus from being alerted in time to the approach of those who wished to apprehend him, in which case his arrest could be considered a result of misfortune rather than deliberate resolve. Yet the vantage provided by the Mount of Olives would have allowed him even on his own to spot a crowd coming from Jerusalem. Unless Jesus ignored the ancient custom of praying *facing* Jerusalem, and deliberately kept his back towards it, it is unlikely that the falling asleep of the disciples foiled a planned getaway by Jesus. Thus Jerome Murphy-O'Connor's argument that Jesus knew that he would be apprehended and chose to allow this to happen, when he could have escaped had he wished to, is compelling when all factors are considered.²⁵ Indeed, the fact that Jesus was arrested in a location that provided the maximum possible escape advantage may have symbolized, for those telling the story who knew the local geography, that in the end Jesus was arrested only because Jesus himself had decided to accept what he understood to be God's will. Turning the setting into a garden might have highlighted the contrast between his obedient choice and Adam's disobedience. But it was the setting on a mountain with a good view of the city that, taken on its own, most strongly symbolized Jesus' deliberate choice to submit to what he understood to be the Father's will.

Jesus deciding to embrace his fate is therefore part of very early tradition, going back earlier than the epistles and Gospels. What, if anything, can be said about *why* Jesus believed he was called by God to die? There is no hint of sacrificial atonement in this specific episode. Nor does the Gethsemane story itself, or even the Philippians passage,

hoped for (rescue before being killed), but his receiving of deliverance from death subsequently was then viewed as inaugurating the age of fulfillment, in which the hope and faith of those listed in Heb.11 would also reach its goal.

²⁵ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* (Oxford University Press, 2008), p.146.

suggest that the comparison with Adam's choice was something that the historical figure of Jesus might have had in mind on that occasion.²⁶ Interesting possibilities present themselves when one explores what "this cup" might have alluded to, but those take us well beyond anything that is clearly hinted at in the interconnected traditions which are the focus of this study, or even in the literary and epistolary works that frame them.²⁷ One rather simple possibility, however, remains extremely plausible, namely that Jesus believed it was necessary for him to embrace rejection, and to leave it to God to deliver him and install him as anointed one, because that was what was entailed in following his own teachings. The Q tradition attributes to Jesus the statements that whoever exalts himself will be humbled, while the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Matthew 23:12//Luke 14:11), and that the last shall be first, and the first last (Luke 13:30; Matthew 19:30; 20:16). The narratives in the Jewish scriptures concerning those whom God had appointed to positions of leadership in the past, such as Moses and David, also involved a willingness to be exiled and persecuted before God eventually brought about their elevation. And so, while there may be significantly more that Jesus envisaged, in terms of the role of his suffering and perhaps death in relation to the dawn of the kingdom of God, it is surely not implausible in the least to envisage him following his own ethical teachings in relation to his royal role.

²⁶ See however John Downing, "Jesus and Martyrdom," *JTS* n.s. 14:2 (1963), pp. 279-293 (here p.286), who thinks that Jesus' self-understanding as prophet would have led naturally to his expectation of martyrdom, and then to reflection on the eschatological significance of that martyrdom.

²⁷ See Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), pp.127-128, for the cup, at various places throughout the Jewish Scriptures, as symbol of divine judgment, and thus the "Final Ordeal." Also Downing, "Jesus and Martyrdom," p.287, on the imagery as it appears in the Martyrdom of Isaiah.

Paul's awareness of the Gethsemane tradition is itself a significant topic that merits further attention, both for the light it sheds on the historical Jesus, and for the added layers of resonance it may allow us to detect in his letters. However, the greatest significance of this particular topic may lie in how it allows us to exemplify, test, and otherwise explore certain methodological matters, ones that are quite pressing concerns as the focus of debate in connection with the study of the historical figure of Jesus. Foremost among these is the question of what it means to practice due historical skepticism in a postmodern context in which the older positivistic approach to history has been challenged. For some, this shift has seemed to result in an *abandonment* of historical criticism, in favor of an approach that is happy to merely speak of memories and portraits of Jesus, without attempting to assess their comparative historical value. Although there is often discussion of historians and historiography, this approach aligns more closely with those who have eschewed historical critical approaches to the Gospels altogether in favor of literary ones.²⁸ Some, however, have sought to find a new approach along a middle path which recognizes the impossibility of absolute certainty in nearly all matters of history, yet considers it possible nevertheless to evaluate stories and memories about the past as involving greater or lesser degrees of distortion.²⁹ For instance, the Johannine rejection of the notion that Jesus would pray to be saved from the hour reflects a framework which had begun to be imposed on Jesus quite early, and yet which did not succeed in obliterating from the source material – or from the historian's view – the fact that Jesus prayed in something like the

²⁸ Cf. McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, pp.6-7; Michael J. Thate, *Remembrance of Things Past?: Albert Schweitzer, the Anxiety of Influence, and the Untidy Jesus of Markan Memory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), pp.297-302; Joel L. Watts, *Mimetic Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), pp.33,234.

²⁹ See Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, *Jesus and the Historians* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010), pp.130-131.

manner that the Fourth Gospel denies. Indeed, the very insistence of the Gospel of John, considered in conjunction with other sources, makes the case for the historicity of the Gethsemane incident stronger. While the traditional criteria of authenticity have received deserved criticism, once again it seems to be a matter of achieving balance rather than discarding altogether the work undertaken by previous generations. In particular, the criterion of embarrassment – the recognition that authors often include details that do not support their own viewpoint precisely because those details are known to the author and readers already, and cannot be easily swept under the carpet – is a well-established principle of historical investigation, and if it does not guarantee historicity, neither is it without value in assessing probability.³⁰ When considerations such as multiple early attestation are added into the mix, as provided by Philippians and Hebrews together with the Gospel tradition, the overall case for a historical core to the story becomes even more compelling.

If we cannot reach a consensus that there is more probably than not a historical core to the Gethsemane story, then the historical-critical endeavor to evaluate evidence concerning the past must be declared obsolete. We have here a story about Jesus himself falling short of a cultural ideal concerning martyrdom, and asking to get out of going through with drinking a cup that he earlier challenged two of his disciples to drink (Mark 10:38).³¹ It will always be possible to posit contexts in which a story *could in theory* have

³⁰ On this point see the discussion between Christopher Skinner and Chris Keith in *Syndicate* (September/October 2015), also available online at <http://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/jesus-against-the-scribal-elite/> [accessed 21 September 2016].

³¹ See Karl Olav Sandnes, *Early Christian Discourses on Jesus' Prayer at Gethsemane* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2015), p.114. In addition to the words and behavior of Jesus, the failure of the disciples also adds to the probability that the story has a historical basis. See for instance Joel B. Green, "Gethsemane," in Craig A. Evans (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp.224-225.

been invented – for instance, if Mark were written to combat an overenthusiastic embrace of martyrdom, then the author could well have chosen to depict Jesus as responding to his impending death in a manner that contrasts with his misguided disciples who were eager to drink the cup, and yet in the end fled. But then we must confront the fact that, on the one hand, we find no evidence for that eager pursuit of martyrdom in the time Mark was written, and on the other hand, some interpreters understand Mark to be *encouraging* those who follow Jesus to embrace martyrdom.³² There will always be possibilities, but they do not change the fact that, given the evidence we have, one conclusion may seem to the majority of historians and scholars to be more probable than others. Material which does not merely seem “embarrassing” to authors, but in other ways goes against the grain of their overall outlook and emphases, is likely to continue to play an important role in historians’ assessment of these probabilities. So, while it is absolutely true that we cannot strip away all layers of interpretation to see a purportedly uninterpreted, purely historical Jesus, we can ask which frameworks for remembering and interpreting the Gethsemane story are likely to go back to Jesus, and why. And we can ask – to use Anthony Le Donne’s helpful analogy – not whether we have undistorted access to the past (we do not), but whether the lenses various interpreters provide serve to magnify what happened and bring it into clearer focus.³³ Magnification is but one of many kinds of distortion that lenses can bring about, and historians, scientists, detectives, and other investigators have regularly found that this particular kind of distortion can play a positive role in uncovering the truth.

³² Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p.158. See also Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution* (New York: Harper One, 2013), pp.56-65.

³³ Anthony Le Donne, *Historical Jesus: What can we know and how can we know it?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p.134.

The considerations traditionally included under the heading of the “criterion of embarrassment” have never provided a means to certainty absolute. If some in the past have unrealistically thought otherwise, this should not prevent historians in our time from using well-tested principles of reasoning as part of their probabilistic assessment of historical evidence.

Likewise, a postmodernist or chastened modernist approach ought not to be understood as allowing a historian to import the supernatural into history, as though it had become any less true in our time that miracles are inherently unlikely, and thus would require a higher standard of evidence than is expected in the case of unusual but still mundane and natural occurrences. However, the time has perhaps come for a recognition that there may be different ways of being skeptical, which all work legitimately within the framework of a critical approach to historical investigation. Once again, the Gethsemane story provides a useful test case. In the past, the possibility that Jesus might have foreseen his death and interpreted it before it happened seemed to involve the positing of miraculous foreknowledge.³⁴ In response, many have preferred to view the New Testament interpretations of Jesus’ death as entirely *post facto* efforts by Christians to make sense of what transpired, often in conjunction with powerful religious experiences that might account for why they did not merely abandon their belief that Jesus had been the messiah. Yet it is necessary to point out that the positing of powerful religious experiences can serve interests of faith as well as of historical skepticism; and, conversely, positing that Jesus predicted his own future death and vindication, which could have led his followers to

³⁴ See the discussion in James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp.17-20.

persuade themselves that what Jesus predicted had come about in the days after the crucifixion, can be an expression of skepticism rather than faith. The suggestion that one view represents objective historiography, or at least stands further along the continuum in that direction, is to be rejected. When there is strong (and, for the ancient Christian authors who preserved it, disconcerting) evidence that Jesus struggled with and even tried to avoid a particular fate, and could have escaped it had he wished to even at the last moment, then the historian can have good reason to conclude that Jesus himself anticipated the likelihood of his own death before it happened. Many historical figures besides Jesus show evidence of having done likewise.

This also connects with the point (emphasized in particular by Dale Allison) that an approach to historical investigation of Jesus undertaken in light of the study of memory must ask about *gist* in the first instance, rather than dealing atomistically with pericopes.³⁵ Nevertheless, the question “the gist of what?” still needs to be asked. Is it the gist of the Jesus tradition as a whole that is most likely correct on a given point? Or might the gist of individual stories about Jesus also represent an appropriate place to look for authentic memory? In this instance, both possibilities can be usefully explored. On the one hand, we have found good reason to think that the gist of the Gethsemane story is likely historical, and perhaps even that the gist of Jesus’ prayer likewise conveys an accurate sense of the decision Jesus made on that occasion (irrespective of whether any disciple heard him pray something like the words attributed to him in Mark). On the other hand, this conclusion in turn contributes to the impression that an aspect of the gist of the portrait of Jesus as a

³⁵ Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, pp.13-17; Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, p.884; Dunn, *New Perspective*, pp.69-70.

whole in the Gospels – that he understood himself to be destined to suffer before becoming king, and that his disciples had trouble grasping this at the time – is likely to be correct. The threefold passion predictions in Mark may well be composed in light of the events that subsequently transpired, rather than representing things that Jesus said. And yet a holistic approach to the question will recognize that, if later Christians made Jesus' forecasts more specific in light of what happened, the overall impression - that Jesus predicted that he would meet with rejection and suffering - may still be accurate. Individual stories and sayings must still be assessed, in a manner appropriate to our current understanding of memory and orality, before we speak of the gist of the tradition.³⁶ And a confirmation of the gist of the Gospel tradition may lead in turn to a reevaluation of individual periscopes (in this case, for instance, the Q saying Matthew 23:37 // Luke 13:34, the Nazirite vow in Mark 14:25, or the Johannine footwashing scene).³⁷ And these, in turn, may serve to serve to further confirm an impression of the gist of the overall Jesus tradition. This circular move from the details to the big picture, far from representing a fatal flaw in this approach, is an inherent and appropriate aspect of making sense of a historical tradition.

The Pauline evidence for the early existence of the Gethsemane tradition, later incorporated into the Gospel of Mark, also provides a useful test case in relation to attempts to undercut the historical quest by appeal to *mimesis*.³⁸ This is one major reason

³⁶ For an overview of the subject of oral tradition prior to the Gospels, see Eric Eve, *Behind the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

³⁷ Note that this Johannine story has been compared with Philippians 2:6-11 by Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (Dallas: Word, 1983), p.79, and that it in turn serves as the narrative precursor for the Johannine Gethsemane story.

³⁸ On this approach to the Gospel of Mark, see Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), esp. p.190; Watts, *Mimetic Criticism*, pp.234-235. For the extreme to which it is possible to go in denying historicity on the basis of perceived literary dependencies, see Thomas L. Brodie, *Beyond the Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), pp.120-125. See also the present author's evaluation of Brodie's approach in "Mythicism and the Mainstream: The Rhetoric

why we continued our exploration of the resonances between the Gethsemane story and Pauline theology beyond what is explicitly articulated in either the epistles or the Gospels. Such intertextual connections must be considered, as a prelude to asking whether the Markan story could not simply represent a narrative created from whole cloth to illustrate the Adam-Christ comparison that was so important to Paul's thought. In other words, might not there be a resemblance between Philippians and Mark because the former inspired the latter? The answer is summarized well by Scot McKnight, when he writes of Mark 14:35-38, "The Christology of this text, to the degree that we know it, swims upstream against the flow of early Christian christological reflection."³⁹ We have detected the existence of trajectories across time in the sources, both in the interpretation of Jesus' death in sacrificial terms, and in the highlighting of Adamic resonances in the Gethsemane tradition. Tracing the trajectories backwards, the evidence points to the Gethsemane story having a historical core or origin which was not uninterpreted even the first time it was written, but which was nonetheless increasingly overlaid with still further layers of symbolic interpretation as time went on. It is, as a result, still possible to do critical history. But in order to do so in a way that takes completely seriously the ultimate inseparability of history and interpretation, we need to explore Paul's literary and theological imagery in our search for the historical Jesus. If memory and interpretation are intertwined in the way recent work on historiography insists, then such material cannot simply be set aside. As this example illustrates, historians proceeding in the older manner were liable to miss important historical allusions in the process.

and Realities of Academic Freedom," *The Bible and Interpretation* (March 2014). Online: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2014/03/mcg388024.shtml> [accessed 21 September 2016].

³⁹McKnight, *Jesus and His Death*, p.116.

In the past, Paul's Adam-Christ typological contrast would have been pitted against the case for historicity, as an either/or choice. But Paul can be viewing a historical event through that lens, and the lens itself may be fashioned out of historical events even as in turn it refracts and perhaps distorts them. That very distortion, moreover, may bring some genuine historical details into sharper focus, magnifying them even as other details are obscured from clear view. It might well be the Adam-Christ contrast that builds a wall around the olive grove in which Jesus was arrested, turning Gethsemane into a "garden" – a garden on a mountain.⁴⁰ That possibility does not, however, render it unlikely that Jesus was remembered by his earliest disciples to have wrestled with his course of action on the Mount of Olives, just prior to his arrest. In view of the evidence we have considered here, Paul in his letters – including but not limited to the letter that he wrote to the church in Philippi – provides our earliest attestation to that memory, and to the resonances it provoked in the minds of some early Christians.

⁴⁰ Ezekiel 28:13-14 locates the Garden of Eden on the "Mountain of God."