

Short Paper

Getting to the Gist—Reflections on Allison’s Proposal to Focus on Generalised Themes within the Bible at the Expense of Forensic Details

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Abstract

The task before the biblical scholar is daunting given the temporal expanse between modern-day and ancient data sources. Indeed, imbuing ancient memory with a contemporary voice would dismay even the most stoic of researchers. Allison’s (2010) proposal of “Getting to the Gist” of what happened provides not only an economical way of identifying and recalling only the most relevant details of an event, but it also liberates the historian from quarrying for specifics that often are not available. Moreso, it reminds us that what is “original” does not necessarily represent best and historically, looking forensic for details across time, has often failed to yield the required information, but produced only more questions so therefore let us look for the “gist”.

Keywords

Biblical Research, Getting to the Gist, Dale Allison, Historical Research, Historical Methodology

Getting to the “Gist”

“The frailty of human memory should distress all who quest for the so-called historical Jesus”
(Allison, 2010, p. 1).



Figure 1. The 4 Gospels Meme

Note. From [Meme of Jesus discussing the four Gospels], n.d. (<https://reasonablefaithadelaidel.org.au/the-feeding-of-the-5000/>)

In undertaking my first ancient document study, I could not escape Errante’s vision (2000, p. 26) of an ethnographic researcher chasing oral memories with a scholarly “butterfly net”. However, the deeper truth was even more nebulous and disturbing – that his audience was at least *living* whereas my work relies on imbuing the ghosts of the past with voice. Yet rather than being dismayed at the temporal expanse between my thesis and ancient data sources, I was encouraged at the information that *has* been preserved and the research that has advanced across the gap of over two millennia. The scholarly robustness of my study rests its foundation heavily on notions of ancient “memory” and its capacity to convey data between firsthand “witnesses” accounts to pen, thence from original to copy, thence from copy to translation in other languages, always with breath held in apprehension of the potential threat of any data spillage that might compound errors exponentially across a score of centuries. This need not be so, and in many cases may constitute nothing but a pessimistic “worst case scenario”. Memories and oral traditions can *also* be notoriously accurate. It would be wrong to presume that these same

translational concerns escaped our colleagues of the past. Much evidence exists for the placement of preventative safeguards to thwart their most cherished traditions being eroded into “Chinese whispers”.

Augustine tells the story of how, when a new Latin translation for the “gourd” of Jonah 4:6 was read, a translation different from “that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church,” there arose a “tumult” in a congregation: people –not the priest and teachers but the laity –corrected and denounced what they had heard. (Augustine, Ep. 75.21-22 – quoted in Allison, 2010, p. 29)

Similarly, I incorporated several foundational safeguards into my research, case in point, I drew heavily upon a methodology employed by Dale Allison who quotes Schacter and Addis (2007, p. 7) in disseminating his foundational proposition (2010):

One proposal ... is that “remembering the gist of what happened is an economical way of storing the most important aspects of our experiences without cluttering memory with trivial details”. (p. 12)

Triangulating the “gist” liberates a historian from the arduous task of sweating over the exact details and wrestling with the erroneous notion of “what is the original” and therefore the best, which is a complete falsehood. Allison points out that looking for details (across time and culture) has failed to answer fundamental questions and indeed often only produces more questions. I worked with his view that therefore, interrogatives that demand of the past exact details, maybe the wrong way to proceed, so therefore let us look for the “gist”. A scenario might serve to illustrate the importance of this concept. Imagine a group of armed assailants storming into an education lecture and proceeding to physically relieve students and their professor of cash and valuables. Police arrive after the incident and take statements but are dismayed to find conflicting reports regarding height, type of weapons, number of assailants, accents, and even the time the incident took place varies by up to 20 minutes. Yet, every single account emphatically reports:

- The room was broken into by armed assailants.
- Violence ensued as they made their demands heard.
- People were robbed of their cash and valuables.

To the police investigators, contradictions in exact details, particularly in descriptions, would be frustrating and greatly hinder their ability to, not only know what happened but certainly their chance of apprehending the armed offenders (although, from their perspective, exact repeated eyewitness accounts often indicate an attempt to shape the account or “stitch it up” – showing that sometimes difference confirms validity!). However, to the historian, the high degree of corroboration on these three essential core elements in the dot points above is more than sufficient to provide a concise account of what transpired with a high degree of validity. Allison defines the “forensic” implications for the contemporary historian:

If general impressions are typically more trustworthy than details, then it makes little sense to reconstruct Jesus by starting with a few of the latter – perhaps some incidents and sayings that survive the gauntlet of our authenticating criteria – while setting aside the general impressions that our primary sources instil in us. The larger the generalization and the more data upon which it is based, the greater our confidence. The more specific the detail and the fewer the supporting data, the greater our uncertainty. We should after reading Thucydides, be assured that there was indeed a Peloponnesian War, even if we may well wonder about many of the details in the account. If, however, we were to doubt that there was a Peloponnesian War, how could we not be dubious of all the details?

(Allison, 2010, p. 14)

Allison neatly summarises his position, “The letter can be false, the spirit true”. One student of human memory has justifiably asserted that “the Gospels are more likely to be deeply true than superficially exact” (2010, pp. 13-14). As a second exercise, consider archaeological historians two millennia from now exploring the teachings of the current Head of Education at the University of Newcastle. In particular, they are interested in the second lecture he gives to students in his EDUC 101 class. They have uncovered documents from some of the students in 2022. They corroborate internally with each other, and a similar set of documents is attributed to students who undertook the same 14-week course between 2019 and 2024. A similar investigation at the Central Coast and Port Macquarie campuses yielded the following core resonances with the Newcastle campus:

- The definition of education is “a permanent change in behaviour”.
- The primary role of a teacher should be that of “facilitator”.
- “Holistic education” is the only way to equip school-aged students.

Hence, congruence and cohesion are ascertained within the student cohorts, across different cohorts and between separate campuses and, the central, foundational, and critical facts enjoy a high level of validity. Whether isolated particulars agree or not, such as whether the Head of School was tardy to lectures, dressed appropriately, or walked with a limp are of no consequence. Even other details that might seem of small pedagogical relevance will have no bearing on a study seeking a snapshot of scholarly practice in Lecture 2 of EDUC 101 for this period.

When we consider that Jesus Christ was not and did not behave as a modern-day church minister/priest/pastor i.e., He was NOT required to produce a new message to bring to his congregation each week, but that his ministry was more reminiscent of an itinerant preacher, we can discern similarities with the latter example. According to the only evidence we possess, Jesus was a “journeyman” moving between campuses, repeating and refining the same static lectures. Over 3 years of ministry, we can assume that he would have recycled sayings and anecdotes at various locations for different audiences and settings. This would also mean that Jesus’ disciples and immediate followers would have heard the same message multiple times, so improving the reliability of their accounts and suggesting that such aphorisms would have been dispersed by His early church after his resurrection.

Validation is further strengthened when we consider triangulation from the three synoptic Gospel accounts, the Gospel of Saint John and the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. If we consider discrepancies to be inconsequential, we might also consider multiple agreements on core issues to hold considerable academic traction. In addition, much confidence can be gleaned internally within the accounts. Allison offers the following:

The first-century traditions about Jesus are not an amorphous mess. On the contrary, certain themes, motifs, and rhetorical strategies recur again and again throughout the primary sources; and it must be in those themes and motifs and rhetorical strategies – which, taken together, leave some distinct impressions – if it is anywhere, that we will find memory? (2010, p. 15)

Allison (2010) continues with a powerful exemplar that connects the spirit of the historical “gist” with the modern practice of medical trials – a critically intense and regimented practice that necessarily ensures rigorous validity and reliability coefficients are established specifically to safeguard human life:

Modern medical experiments supply an analogy to my approach. Even a perfectly devised double-blind, randomized trial counts for little if taken by itself. What matters is replication. And for highly controverted issues, what finally matters is meta-analysis, the evaluation of a large, bundled number of individual studies, including those with possible design flaws. The tendency of the whole is what instils conviction, not any one trial or single piece of evidence, why should it be any different with research about Jesus? (p. 15)

Conclusion

For the historical researcher, Alison’s proposal of “remembering the gist” (p. 12) provides a release for the historical researcher from the arduous burden of uncovering exacting details. Often looking for such details across an expanse of time has failed to provide the answers we are looking for and may potentially lead us down unproductive tangents as we follow the flawed assumption that what is original and what is exacting is best. His gift remains that triangulating the gist -relying on cultural artefacts and memory- is a reliable way of imbuing ancient documents with voice and arriving at deep historical truth.

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