

Accuracy of the record, memories

We live in a culture where we do not do remember accurately. We record, document, what needs to be remembered. Since we do not, we think others did not, could not. The documented record of the Talmud, Mishnah and in many other places shows this was not so. People remembered with accuracy far beyond what we can imagine. It would have been possible for conversations to have been remembered accurately. We can believe or not believe, there is no way to “prove” they were.

A professor of mine met about 1960 a Yemeni Jewish boy just after he emigrated to Israel. He could recite the entire Old Testament in Hebrew. It was not considered unusual. He had been from a small village. After a few years in Israel, he learned to read and began to forget what he had memorized.

If you read old books, there are many quotes from earlier works, council rulings, and the like. The authors did not go to their library, make note cards so they could use the quotes. They remembered what they read a long time before. Scholars today look for the places they misquote. Sometimes they did. It is amazing how often they are correct. The Talmud and Mishnah report hundreds of years later, many statements from earlier teachers that had been passed down orally, with accuracy. Homer, the early Greeks report diverse legends the same way.

In the centuries just before Jesus there was a great increase in popular piety among his people. It was the beginning of the synagog. It lifted up knowledge of the text in addition to rituals of sacrifice. The diaspora, the people spread across the known world: Gaul, central Asia, India, Ethiopia, Alexandria and Mesopotamia, kept their faith connection through the synagog and pilgrimage. Pilgrims were continually returning. Synagogs for prayer, study, worship did not require special buildings. They gathered in houses or even outside.

The vast majority of the people were peasant farmers and had a lot of free time in the off seasons. Talking about religion fills the time, no TV, radio, movies. Some might collect money to buy a scroll for the village. There was a great increase in publishing even though scrolls were very expensive. They could read and study it, trade it with other villages for different ones. After a while they could work their way through the whole Old Testament and other writings, Apocrypha and commentaries. Children have a lot of free time. Some would be interested in finding out what their parents are talking about. The local leader who teaches them is going to be given more money by the villagers. This is a self organizing religious practice, not worth recording. It is the same today in third world Islamic Maktab¹.

They learned the Hebrew scrolls by rote repetition and discussion. It was the basic way of learning until recently. Learn the Hebrew alphabet and it is easy to read what was already memorized. Reading was fairly common. We think reading and writing are two sides of a coin. They are not. Until recently writing was expensive, both what was written on and the ink. That is why there are few things written in archeology. The exception that proves the rule: there are hoards of cuneiform clay tablets, cheap and durable. Popular writing in the Roman world was on wax covered wood boards, smoothed and reused like a chalk board. Papyrus, leather, ink were very expensive and decay. The average person had little reason to write anything durable.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maktab>

Examples of how accurately words were passed on are the daily prayers Jesus knew and used. The Shema² still commonly said daily in Jewish homes is over 2000 years old. The Amidah³, Synagog Prayer had a petition added after the destruction of the Temple 70 AD. The Aleinu⁴ has a reference to prostration which stopped when the Temple was destroyed. These were not recorded for hundreds of years. The Dead Sea scrolls cross a gap of more than 1000 years to earlier documents with few minor changes. There is much there for scholars to study but the accuracy of the hand copying is amazing. Homer, Beowulf were transmitted for centuries orally. After thousands of years the Navaho remembered they came from a cold dark land. Their language is related to Alaskan tribes. The following quote is from authoritative scholarship.

“That these methods have been effective, is testified to by the preservation of the most ancient Indian religious text, the *Rgveda* (ca. 1500 BCE), as a single text, without any variant readings. Similar methods were used for memorizing mathematical texts, whose transmission remained exclusively oral until the end of the *Vedic period* (ca. 500 BCE).”⁵

All of the above simply says it could have been possible for the conversations and messages reported in the Gospels to have been accurately stated. Therefore in my work I repeat them as recorded. All this, of course, proves nothing.

It is especially interesting that the Bible records variants of the most important words: the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the words of Institution of the Last Supper. Luke records the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus three times in Acts, twice quoting Paul as he tells the story. The three can not be reconciled. The variants are deliberate, or at least they tell us something very important about what “Historical accuracy” meant. Or perhaps the God of Scripture is telling us something. An almighty and all wise, omniscient, God could, if He wanted, had a single account recorded. It is the way we would do it, if we were god. Personally I consider it wiser to think God perfectly does whatever He wants. God wanted the story told the way it is written. The idea that God can’t, that God is unable to perfectly tell His own story, is hubris. Pride that challenges God.

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² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shema>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amidah>

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aleinu>

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oral_literature <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rigveda>