# Excerpt, Jesus Darkly

# Distortions and Truth

In May, 1995Mayor Richard Arrington Jr. dedicated a statue in Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama. The park sits across the street from the landmark 16th Street Baptist Church. Both the church and the park served as a staging ground for many of the pivotal events of the mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights Movement. Today, the park boasts a number of statues commemorating those heady and turbulent days. Arrington, the first African American mayor of Birmingham, commissioned a statue by Ronald “Mac” McDowell that would memorialize the iconic photograph of police officer Richard Middleton and his German Shepherd, Leo, attacking Walter Gadsden, a 17-year-old high school student. That photograph, taken by photojournalist Bill Hudson, appeared in newspapers across the country (including on the front cover of *The New York Times*) is credited with helping to galvanize public support for civil rights protesters nation- and worldwide. [**see book for Bill Hudson photograph and photo of Ronald McDowell statue**]

If we compare Hudson’s photograph with McDowell’s statue, we quickly encounter the difference between disinterested representation and commemorative expression of an historic moment. McDowell, an artist and sculptor, freely acknowledges that he altered details of Hudson’s photograph in order to draw out the meaning of the encounter between White officer and Black teen. “Well,” explains McDowell, “I saw that the boy was maybe 6'4". The officer is maybe 5'10", 5'9", and I said, ‘This is a movement about power,’ so I made the little boy younger and smaller, and the officer taller and stronger.”[[1]](#footnote-1) When Malcolm Gladwell asks McDowell about the boy’s posture (“In the photograph I noticed the boy is leaning in, and in your sculpture he’s leaning back. Tell me about that”), McDowell explains:

He’s leaning back because I wanted to depict him showing that, “I’m not going to fight you, I’m not leaving, I’m not moving, I’m standing, but I’m not gonna fight you. This is a non-violent protest.” That’s why his hands are open and he’s going back, like, “Do whatever you’re gonna do. Put the dog on me, beat me with the club, whatever you wanna do.” And I saw all of that when I saw the photograph.

McDowell makes Officer Middleton’s sunglasses larger and more un-seeing in order to portray him as blind to the injustice he polices, and his representation of the dog Leo becomes less German Shepherd and more vicious wolf.

McDowell’s interpretive and artistic changes are not the isolated products of an active imagination. We all see what McDowell sees. For example, the Associated Press article announcing Bill Hudson’s death in June 2010 offers the following description of Hudson’s photograph:

His most enduring photograph of the [Civil Rights] era, taken on May 3, 1963, shows an officer in dark sunglasses in Birmingham grabbing a young black man by his sweater and letting a police dog lunge at the man’s stomach. The man, Walter Gadsden, with his eyes lowered, has a passive look.[[2]](#footnote-2)

“Grabbing.” “Letting.” “Lunge.” “Passive.” Bill Hudson’s Wikipedia page prominently features his photo of Gadsden and Middleton, with the caption, “Bill Hudson’s image of Parker High School student Walter Gadsden being attacked by dogs was published in *The New York Times* on May 4, 1963.”[[3]](#footnote-3) The Associated Press and Wikipedia interpret Hudson’s picture along the same lines as McDowell’s artistic recreation of that encounter, even if they do so less dramatically. I suspect we all see what McDowell sees: a vicious dog-almost-wolf, a dispassionate police officer blind to injustice, and a child caught in the teeth of an oppressive system.

McDowell’s statue tells a story that is much larger than the single event Bill Hudson recorded in his photograph. First, we need to acknowledge that McDowell’s commemorative statue distorts the encounter between officer Middleton and the young Walter Gadsden. For one thing, Walter Gadsden never participated in the Civil Rights Movement. A year after the unveiling of McDowell’s statue, Gadsden gave an interview about his memory of the events of May 3, 1963. When asked how he got involved in the Movement, Gadsden says, “Now that’s, that’s one thing that, uh . . . I always had a problem with. I never did get involved with the Civil Rights Movement.” This is a bombshell! Walter Gadsden, the boy at the heart of one of the most iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement, claims never to have been a part of or involved with that Movement!

But there are other surprises. In addition to Gadsden’s disassociation with the most important domestic social movement in twentieth-century America, Officer Middleton wasn’t the cold, unseeing instrument of injustice we see in Hudson’s photo. Middleton wasn’t *unleashing* his dog on Gadsden; he was *protecting* Gadsden, who had ducked behind some barricades in order to avoid the approaching protestors.[[4]](#footnote-4) Malcolm Gladwell summarizes the entire scenario: “The most famous photograph of the Civil Rights Movement is of a startled cop trying desperately to hold his dog back from biting a bystander who wasn’t that much of a fan of the Civil Rights Movement.”

The commemorative statue in Kelly Ingram Park certainly doesn’t tell *this* story. Not even a little bit.

In light of these surprising details, there’s no denying that McDowell’s sculpture misrepresents a specific moment in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 3, 1963. We could even argue, somewhat counter intuitively, that the photograph behind the commemorative sculpture also fails to tell the actual story of the encounter between Gadsden and Officer Middleton. This should seem impossible; after all, unaltered film photographs don’t lie. How could anyone possibly claim that a photograph misrepresents the events it captures? And yet, what we see in the photograph and in the sculpture simply didn’t happen, and what actually happened isn’t what we see, whether in the photograph or in the sculpture.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The problem isn’t the image in the photograph. The problem is our *interpretation* of the photograph.

Let’s return to McDowell’s sculpture. Even after we acknowledge the problematic representation of Walter Gadsden’s encounter with Officer Middleton, we still can’t escape the fact that the Foot Soldier of Birmingham statue is a powerful—and powerfully authentic—commemoration of the struggle for civil rights reform in the American South during the Jim Crow era. How should we explain McDowell’s sculpture, especially the tension between its acknowledged distortions and its undeniable ability to express the realities of racial injustice? This question is bigger than simply, “Why did the artist change the details of the photograph?” McDowell has already explained why he changed what he did, and his explanation clarifies the motivations behind the *production* of the commemorative statue.

But we also need to understand the sculpture’s *reception*, its interpretation. We’ve already observed how viewers of Bill Hudson’s photograph already mis-see the confrontation between Gadsden and Officer Middleton. On one hand, McDowell’s sculpture is simply another example of this “mis-seeing.” On the other hand, when we look at McDowell’s commemorative representation of Bill Hudson’s photograph, we see our own interpretive angles confirmed and incorporated into the image itself. When we look at Hudson’s photograph of a White police officer trying to protect a Black teen from his lunging police dog, we see an act of racial oppression and brutality.

But why do we misread, or “miss-see,” Hudson’s photograph so dramatically? Why do McDowell’s vicious near-wolf, his unfeeling cop, and his self-sacrificing victim—all of whom unquestionably misrepresent the figures in Hudson’s picture—authentically express our own interpretations of the photograph?

Part of the answer must be that McDowell’s sculpture doesn’t simply commemorate a moment caught on film. It also expresses the values and struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Walter Gadsden and Officer Middleton were characters in a riveting drama. Even if we have misunderstood the parts played by these two men, we have not misunderstood the larger drama in which they appear. Birmingham in 1963 was ground zero of the confrontation between a racialized system of government and the men and women who suffered injustice under that system. Black people in the American South—and not just in the South—had been the objects of abuse, oppression, and terror. Less than four months after Hudson photographed Gadsden and Officer Middleton, four members of the Ku Klux Klan bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four young girls who are themselves commemorated in a statue in Kelly Ingram Park.

In this context, reading Hudson’s picture as documentation of racial violence makes sense. The subject of Bill Hudson’s photograph isn’t Walter Gadsden and Officer Middleton. Hudson’s photograph chronicled what Diane McWhorter called “the Big Truth about segregation, evil in black and white.” This “Big Truth” survives even if Hudson’s photograph, under the influence of our interpretive prejudices, is “as much a fiction as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel [*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*].”[[6]](#footnote-6) The photograph was useful to the Civil Rights Movement not because it showed the world how one White police officer treated one Black teen. Hudson’s photograph was useful because it was able to “grasp and communicate present realities that the language of history can’t express.”[[7]](#footnote-7) McDowell’s statue, which effaced the “particulars” of the encounter between Officer Middleton and Walter Gadsden, brought out the “present realities” of Birmingham in 1963.

McDowell’s artistic distortions of Hudson’s photograph are actually the vehicles through which the “present realities” of the Jim Crow South are brought to expression. The broader social and moral truths are conveyed through the distortion of details. This isn’t uncommon.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Chapter 1 we saw that Paul “thinks with” Jesus, even if his letters don’t give us many examples of him “thinking about” Jesus. As we move on to the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and the two-volume narrative, Luke-Acts, we come to the earliest examples of extended “thinking about” Jesus. The Gospels and Acts are extended commemorative accounts of Jesus’ life and teaching. They offer representations of Jesus not unlike a figure sitting for a portrait in oil on canvas. The authors offer us an image—a portrait—of Jesus, here teaching his followers, there healing the crowds; here clearing the temple courts, there sharing a meal with the disciples. The Gospels and Acts are about Jesus in a way Paul’s letters were not.

Before we turn to the Gospels and Acts, we need to put them into historical context. These texts may be about Jesus and—in the case of Acts—the experiences of his earliest followers, but they were written years after the events they narrate. As such, they bear signs of later contexts (later, that is, than Jesus’ ministry in the 20s–30s ce). For example, in Mark’s account of Jesus’ debate about handwashing before meals, the Markan narrator breaks in to explain to his readers (in the second half of the first century ce) the significance of what Jesus did (in the first half of the century). Whereas Jesus says, “Don’t you know that nothing from the outside that enters a person has the power to contaminate? That’s because it doesn’t enter into the heart but into the stomach, and it goes out into the sewer,” the author of Mark adds, “By saying this, Jesus declared that no food could contaminate a person in God’s sight” (Mark 7:18–19). Understanding the Gospels, then, requires us to know something about when and under what circumstances they were written. This is the task of the next section.

# <B>Approaching the Gospels and Acts

The NT includes four Gospels, each of which is named for the individual whom the Church credits with writing them. Ecclesial tradition attributes two of the Gospels to Jesus’ disciples (Matthew and John) and the other two to associates of the apostles (Mark and Luke, who are linked with Peter and Paul, respectively).

The Gospels themselves, however, don’tdon’t identify who wrote them. Though none of the original copies of our Gospels still exists, we think those original copies didn’t have the titles we associate with them (“According to Matthew,” “According to Mark,” etc.). At some point in the second century ce, the Church gave the Gospels their names. Compare this situation with the thirteen letters that claim Paul as their author. All thirteen begin, “From Paul.”[[9]](#footnote-9) None of the Gospels begin this way. The closest we get to a claim of authorship is the preface to Luke’s Gospel:

Many people have already applied themselves to the task of compiling an account of the events that have been fulfilled among us. They used what the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word handed down to us. Now, after having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, I have also decided to write a carefully ordered account for you, most honorable Theophilus. I want you to have confidence in the soundness of the instruction you have received. (Luke 1:1–4)

The author specifically addresses one of his readers, Theophilus (perhaps his patron, or sponsor, who assisted in the publication and dissemination of the text), and he explains the reason he is writing another “account of the events that have been fulfilled among us.” The author never identifies himself, beyond referring to himself as “I” and, importantly, making a distinction between himself and “the original eyewitnesses and servants of the word.”[[10]](#footnote-10) We get no indication that the author’s name is “Luke,” and we get explicit confirmation that the author was not an actual eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus.

None of the Gospels appear to have been written by Jesus’ eyewitnesses, though perhaps our authors, called “evangelists,” had access to some of those eyewitnesses and included stories and information they learned from them.[[11]](#footnote-11) Luke’s Gospel, as we have seen, plainly says it isn’t written by an eyewitness to Jesus’ life and teaching. Neither Matthew nor Mark claim they were written by one of Jesus’ disciples, though Christians in the second century ce would identify the author of Matthew as the disciple of the same name (see Mark 3:18 parr.). The Gospel of John makes two references to eyewitness testimony. First, after he recounts how Jesus died, the narrator says, “The one who saw this has testified, and his testimony is true. He knows that he speaks the truth, and he has testified so that you also can believe” (John 19:35). Then, after Jesus tells Peter to feed his sheep,[[12]](#footnote-12) he sees “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and asks about him. The narrator says, “This is the disciple who testifies concerning these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true” (21:24). It isn’t clear whether either of these verses intends to claim that the so-called Beloved Disciple (= “the disciple whom Jesus loved”; see John 13:23; 19:26; 21:7, 20) wrote the Fourth Gospel, or whether the author is claiming to have recorded the Beloved Disciple’s testimony. In my view, the author is claiming that he knows the Beloved Disciple and is writing down his testimony; he isn’t claiming to *be* the Beloved Disciple.

Whether or not the Gospels preserve eyewitness testimony to Jesus’ life and teachings, they are anonymous texts (i.e., their authors don’tdon’t identify themselves within the texts). Even if their traditional names—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—preserve accurate information about their actual authors, the texts themselves don’tdon’t emphasize their authors’ identity. Their anonymity, in fact, serves to focus the readers’ attention not on their respective evangelist but rather on their subject: “Jesus Christ, God’s Son” (Mark 1:1).[[13]](#footnote-13) If, however, none of the Gospels were written by Jesus’ closest associates, that would not erode the confidence we put in their representations of Jesus. The Church didn’t canonize the four NT Gospels because of their judgments about who wrote them. The Church attributed these Gospels to apostolic figures or their associates because they were already valued as inspired texts. In other words, the conclusion that the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ ministry didn’t write the Gospels isn’t a theological conclusion but an historical conclusion, one that doesn’t affect the question of their accuracy or their inspiration.

Another historical conclusion: Mark’s Gospel is the oldest of the four NT Gospels; it was written before Matthew, Luke–Acts, and John, and the authors of the later Gospels (at least Matthew and Luke, but perhaps also John) were well acquainted with Mark. This conclusion, known as “Markan priority,” is broadly accepted among scholars for reasons we don’t have time to get into here.[[14]](#footnote-14) Briefly stated, those reasons include: (i) almost all of Mark’s material appears in Luke and, especially, Matthew, (ii) Mark’s Greek as well as his portrayal of Jesus and the disciples seem rougher and less refined than Matthew’s and, especially, Luke’s, (iii) it is easier to explain Matthew’s and Luke’s additions to Mark than to explain Mark’s curious decision, if he were familiar with Matthew and/or Luke, to omit so much material in the longer Gospels, and (iv) though Mark is the shortest Gospel, his stories are longer and more detailed than the parallel versions on the other Gospels.[[15]](#footnote-15) For these and other reasons, NT scholars are convinced that Mark was written before its longer and more famous companions.

None of the Gospels say when they were written, so scholars piece together clues from within the texts in order to make educated guesses. Mark’s Gospel is usually dated around the Jewish war with Rome (66–70 ce), which ended with the catastrophic destruction of the Jerusalem temple. The majority of scholars date Mark to the build-up to the war (c. 65–70 ce), though a strong plurality of scholars date Mark to the immediate aftermath of the war (c. 71–75 ce).[[16]](#footnote-16) If Matthew and Luke (and Acts) were written after Mark and were familiar with Mark as a written Gospel, then they may have been written c. 80–95 ce, though no compelling reason exists why Matthew and/or Luke could not have been written even in the 70s.[[17]](#footnote-17) The first three Gospels (and Acts), then, were likely written sometime during the years 65–95 ce, a full generation or two after the events they narrate.

We should take seriously that the Gospels, as stories *about* Jesus, do in fact reflect the conditions *in which* they were written (in addition to reflecting the conditions *of which* they speak). Research on social memory helps explain this situation, in which the Gospels maintain their quality as stories about Jesus even as they also bear the marks of being texts from later in the first century. The early Christians could not but remember Jesus with the questions, concerns, and cares of their own present in mind, and their memory of Jesus could not but bear the marks of their present in its portrayals and representations of Jesus.[[18]](#footnote-18) As Mark narrated the story of Jesus in the 60s or 70s of the first century, his narration was shaped by and addressed the uncertainties of life in those later decades even as he told stories of the 20s and 30s. The same is true of the later Gospels.

Sometimes, however, Gospels scholarship misses the fact that narrations of the past *in* the present are, nevertheless, narrations *of* the past. Social memory theory refuses “to authorize any sharp distinction between memory and tradition.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Memory fuses past and present. That is, memory makes the challenges and questions of the present understandable and gives them meaning by aligning them with the perspectives and values of the past. The challenges and questions of the present undoubtedly affect how people remember and understand the past, but past perspectives and values also affect how people understand and live in the present. The present is rendered manageable because of its connection to the past, a past that already defines a society’s identity, their values, their hopes and fears.

At the same time, memory and commemoration make the past relevant to the present by selectively and creatively shaping the past to speak to present concerns. These are distorting dynamics; memory dis- or re-figures both the present and the past even as it preserves and interprets them both. Recall the distortion—the preservation and interpretation—of the past and the present that we saw in Ronald McDowell’s *Foot Soldier* statue. Without the larger social injustices of the Jim Crow South, Bill Hudson’s photograph of a White police officer keeping his dog off a young Black teen would not have caught anyone’s eye. But within the context of those injustices, Hudson’s photograph became meaningful and would eventually inspire McDowell’s commemorative sculpture in Kelly Ingram Park.

1. Gladwell, *The Foot Soldier of Birmingham*. All quotations come from Gladwell’s podcast. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Associated Press, “Bill Hudson, a Photojournalist During the Civil Rights Era, Dies at 77,” *The New York Times*, 26 June 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/27/us/27hudson.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill\_Hudson\_(photographer). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Officer Middleton’s colleague, Bobby Hayes, explains: “If you look at the picture, you can tell he’s holding the dog back. But that, that line’s taut, the dog’s feet are in the air, the best I recall, and Dick’s got him here. He’s holding that line. He’s not gonna let him bite that guy” (Gladwell, *The Foot Soldier of Birmingham*). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Bill Hudson’s editor says later that he picked that particular photo out of the many taken that day because he was riveted by the saintly calm of the young man and the snarling jaws of the German shepherd” (Gladwell, *The Foot Soldier of Birmingham*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Diane McWhorter, “The Moment That Made a Movement,” *Washington Post*, 2 May 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1993/05/02/the-moment-that-made-a-movement/20eef454-daa6-45f3-a29a-4b03b9d16097 (accessed 10 October 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Barry Schwartz begins his discussion of Abraham Lincoln in American memory with U.S. Representative Fred Schwengel’s distortion of Lincoln into a “civil rights champion” (see *Forge of National Memory*, 1–5). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Greek, the texts begin simply by identifying their author: *Paulos* (lit., just “Paul”). The CEB translation clarifies that this is the standard Hellenistic way writers of letters would identify themselves. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For a technical treatment of Luke’s preface, see Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1*, SNTSMS 78 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a clear and succinct expression of the standard scholarly view, see Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3–4. Perhaps the strongest scholarly argument for a connection between eyewitness memory and the Gospels is put forward by Richard Bauckham (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2nd ed. [Eerdmans, 2017]), though his work been subject to considerable criticism (e.g., see Judith C. S. Redman, “How Accurate Are Eyewitnesses? Bauckham and the Eyewitnesses in the Light of Psychological Research,” *JBL* [2010]: 177–97). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. We will discuss this passage in more detail in Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I am grateful to Joel Green for this way of assessing the Gospels’ anonymity. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Arthur J. Bellinzoni Jr., ed., *The Two-Source Hypothesis: A Critical Appraisal* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), which includes essays that make “the case for the priority of Mark” (pp. 21–93) as well as essays that argue “against the priority of Mark” (pp. 95–217). See also Mark Goodacre’s argument for Markan priority in *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 19–45. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Compare Mark’s version of the story of the Gadarene demoniac, which takes about 325 words in the Greek text and spans twenty verses (5:1–20), with the shorter versions in Matt 8:28–34 (135 words; seven verses) and Luke 8:26–39 (293 words, fourteen verses). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. James Crossley (*The Date of Mark’s Gospel: Insight from the Law in Earliest Christianity*, JSNTSup 266 [London: T&T Clark, 2004]) dates Mark very early, c. 41 ce, on the basis of Mark’s treatment of Jewish Law. His discussion of the Law in “earliest Christianity” is very good, though his proposal for dating Mark has not convinced many others. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Scholars typically want to leave enough time for Mark to have circulated throughout the Roman Empire in order for the authors of Matthew and Luke to become familiar with it, but we have no idea if “enough time,” in this instance, means one year or ten. These are, in other words, little more than guesses. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory,” in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, SemeiaSt 52 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 25–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Kirk and Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition,” 32. In this context, the word “memory” refers to recollection of events in the past. The word “tradition,” as distinct from memory, refers to changes, expansions, and developments in how memory is recalled and expressed. The point here, then, is that memory and tradition are not two distinct concepts. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)