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## **Social Memory and Biblical Studies: Theory, Method, and Application**

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## Social Memory and Biblical Studies: Theory, Method, and Application

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There are different kinds of remembering—what we had for breakfast this morning, the usual route we took to work, what happened to us in childhood, how we continue to speak our native tongue, and even how we stroke a golf ball consistently (or not so consistently!). Fascination with various aspects of memory is not new. The ancient Greeks and Romans observed that we often remember events in relation to *where* something happened, that is, in relation to *place* or *space*; in the rhetorical schools this human associative tendency was used to develop mnemonic techniques for remembering speeches (Yates). Through the centuries philosophers have continued to think about the function and meaning of memory.

In recent years remarkable and fascinating research on the human brain has tackled memory issues such as “photographic memories,” amnesia, dementia, and everyday forgetfulness (Rose; Carter). One of the major controversies, frequently highlighted in charges of child abuse, is whether traumatic memories are repressed and later recovered in therapy (Recovered Memory Therapy, or RMT). RMT has its advocates. Yet, some analysts caution that traumatic events are precisely the ones that are usually remembered, that therefore many cases of supposedly repressed events never took place, but have been suggested to the memory by other people’s stories, newspaper articles, or even overly zealous therapists (“false memory”; “pseudo-memory”). Although there is no simple solution to this complex controversy, a number of prominent neurologists claim that people do not remember actual events; rather, each time “memory retrieval” takes place, what is retrieved is a previous memory. Memory is thus constructed and reconstructed in a cascading effect. From this perspective, the mind is not a simple recording device; it constantly reinterprets—and thus (re)constructs—the past for the present. While some researchers maintain that the mind retrieves more than *just* its previous constructions, “false memory” must be taken seriously (Loftus 1980; 1993; 2005).

These aspects of neurological research on memory have psychological implications and legal ramifications. They are usually conceived as issues of the individual human mind. However, there is another dimension of memory that has great significance and growing fascination, namely, “collective memory,” or what is now more often called *social memory* (usually in reference to smaller social units) or *cultural memory* (usually in reference to larger social units). The acknowledged father of this approach to memory is the French scholar Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945). Halbwachs had studied with renowned psychologically-oriented

philosopher Henri Bergson, but then fell under the spell of the great pioneer of French sociology, Emile Durkheim. One of Halbwachs’ classic statements reads: “. . . we will surely realize that the greatest number of memories come back to us when our parents, our friends or other persons recall them to us . . . it is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). Thus, while Halbwachs did not totally dispense with individual aspects of memory, his convictions about the social context of memory increasingly led him to reject Bergson’s individualism in favor of a “collective” view.

The revival of Halbwachs’ views has accompanied the revival of study of a broad variety of *social* memory phenomena, from oral recitation and religious ritual to the building of museums, memorials, and national monuments. Excitement about social memory phenomena is cross-disciplinary. It includes the fields of literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and political science, as well as history and anthropology (Climao & Cattell). In an excellent overview Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins call this rapidly expanding discipline-encompassing field Social Memory Studies (1998).

Social Memory Studies are making their mark on Biblical studies. Here are a few examples:

- In 2000 and 2005 Mario Aguilar contributed two articles for BTB on memory.
- In 2001 J. Dominic Crossan included sections on social memory and false memory in his recent work, *THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY*.
- In 2003 Alan Kirk of Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, and Tom Thatcher of Cincinnati Christian University, organized a Special Session on social memory for the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in Atlanta, Georgia. They invited prominent social memory theorist, sociologist Barry Schwartz, professor emeritus of Sociology at the University of Georgia, to give the keynote address (Schwartz 2005a).
- In 2005 Kirk and Thatcher edited and published *MEMORY, TRADITION, AND TEXT. USES OF THE PAST IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY*, which included not only the SBL papers of Schwartz, Kirk, Thatcher, and Esler, but also papers by Holly Hearon, Arthur J. Dewey, Georgia Masters Keightley, Antoinette Clark Wire, and April DeConick, with responses by Werner H. Kelber (2005a) and, again, Barry Schwartz (cf. 2005b).
- Kelber, well known for his pioneering studies on the related subject of orality, has been promoting the work of his friends and

colleagues, Jan and Aleida Assmann, famous in Europe for their publications on cultural memory (e.g., J. Assmann 1997).

- Kirk and Thatcher have organized a new section for the Society of Biblical Literature (Philadelphia, 2005) and its first meeting, titled “Mapping Memory: Tradition, Texts, and Identity,” featured a keynote address by Yael Zerubavel; it also included papers by Richard Horsley (2005), and, again, Kelber (2005b), the latter two focusing on memory and the gospel traditions. Thatcher chaired and Kirk was a panelist.

- From the very different perspective of traditional Form Critical and Redaction Critical work, Robert K. McIver and Marie Carroll have published their experiments with students’ ability to remember narratives (a) with no written text, (b) with a written text studied and then removed, and (c) with a written text; they then drew inferences about the synoptic tradition (McIver & Carroll). The 2002 article drew a critique two years later from John C. Poirier.

Social memory is a social phenomenon and therefore has great significance for social-scientific critics. There are networks, of course. Alan Kirk gave a paper in the Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament Section in 2000. Philip Esler has been a prominent proponent of Social-Scientific Criticism. Esler and I co-chaired the Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament section at the SBL from 2002 through 2005. With our encouragement, the section’s Steering Committee organized a session on Social Memory for the 2004 SBL meetings in San Antonio, Texas, titled “Social Memory: Theory and Application.” At the suggestion of Barry Schwartz, we invited as a keynote speaker one of the foremost younger scholars of Social Memory Studies noted above, sociologist Jeffrey Olick of the University of Virginia, who developed a general paper on the field. Then came three “application” papers by Biblical scholars, one each by Werner H. Kelber, Philip F. Esler, and Ritva Williams. A lively discussion followed; so I asked David M. Bossman, a scholar with commitments to the social sciences and the editor of BTB, if he would be willing to devote an issue to these papers. He was eager to do so, and this issue is the result.

The revised papers on social memory that grew out of the 2004 session of the Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament Section of the Society of Biblical Literature at San Antonio are featured in this issue. They are as follows:

**Jeffrey Olick** of the University of Virginia in *Products, Processes, and Practices: A Non-Reificatory Approach to Collective Memory* provides a general introductory overview of Social Memory Studies, the field in which he is a leading specialist, and stresses the special problems of definition, orientation, and method.

**Werner H. Kelber** of Rice University in *The Generative Force of Memory: Early Christian Traditions as Processes of Re-*

*membering* offers a further orientation in relation to his area of specialization, orality, which has obvious correlations with, and implications for, social memory.

**Philip F. Esler** of the University of St. Andrews in *Paul’s Contestation of Israel’s (Ethnic) Memory of Abraham in Galatians 3* applies social memory theory to Paul’s construction of Abraham as it conflicts with other memories of Abraham among Israelites of his day.

**Ritva Williams** of Augustana College in *Social Memory and the DIDACHĒ* then applies Social Memory Studies, especially the work of Olick, to a book of the early church, the DIDACHĒ.

In short, this issue of BTB presents the fruits of the Society of Biblical Literature’s Social-Scientific Criticism of the New Testament section in 2004, titled “Social Memory Studies, Theory and Application.” It becomes part of the growing “archive” of Social Memory Studies as they relate to the Bible.

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