

Introduction

Memory and Hermeneutics

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One of the most memorable literary scenes about memory is the little madeleine that is dunked in tea by the narrator of Marcel Proust's (1871–1922) *In Search of Lost Time* – a scene that is perhaps better known from its repeated retelling than from the pages on which it is found (at least speaking for myself!). Closer to our own time, questions of memory have proved popular as well as provocative. Karl Ove Knausgård caused controversies over memory as a result of his six-volume book, *Min Kamp*, showcasing the tensions around how events and encounters are remembered and represented differently by the people who were engaged in them. The recent Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Annie Ernaux, raises questions about personal and communal memory in her use of “we” in the autobiographical novel *The Years*. At least in current debates, then, memory seems to be tantalizing because it troubles distinctions between the private and the public, the remembered and reality, story and history – as well as troubling these very terms. This special issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* is dedicated to the theme “Memory and Hermeneutics”. It is published in honour of Samuel Byrskog, Professor of New Testament at Lund University, in gratitude for the time he spent as editor of the journal between 2017 and 2021, and as a member of the editorial board for many years.

Byrskog's scholarship continues to be pioneering for our understanding of ancient texts and their relationship to memory. Probing the relationship between oral communication and written text, he has urged attention to how traditions are formed in dynamic ways that are not always immediately clear from the text as a finished product. Byrskog examines the Jesus tradition as it is reflected in the Gospels by drawing on theories of memory, thus opening up for a better understanding of how early Christians remembered Jesus and narrativized these memories. As he states in a 2018 article, he is not interested in trying to get behind or beyond memory to some "pure" historical origin of Jesus himself or the earliest Christian communities. "The past is always the remembered past."¹ At the same time, this does not mean that memories are just the product of personal fabrications or communal fictions. Byrskog writes in *Story as History – History as Story* that the past does not dissipate or disappear entirely, rather it "participates in the present, the present recapitulates it, and the future finds itself determined by it."² The attempt to discern how memory works, and how hermeneutical approaches can help us to understand the past in its relationship to the present is what makes Byrskog's work both fascinating and highly relevant.

The contributors to this special issue are internationally renowned New Testament and early Christianity scholars who have all worked on questions relating to memory and hermeneutics. All draw on Byrskog's work, sometimes more explicitly and sometimes more implicitly. Together with Byrskog's response, the articles gathered in this issue present an on-going scholarly conversation. This conversation builds on previous exchanges and opens up for new ones. The issue starts with "Text as Tradition – Tradition as Text: Early Christian Memory and Jesus' Threat against the Temple", by Rafael Rodríguez. Rodríguez presents the challenge of textuality in working on the origins of Christianity. New Testament and early Christianity scholars work with texts. But focusing on texts obscures the fact that these texts were part of, as Byrskog has put it, "a broader spectrum of oral performance and communication". Neglecting this "wider spectrum of orality" is misleading for the interpreter of the written text.³ Rodríguez builds on Byrskog's reflections on the form-critical concept of the *Sitz im Leben* in order to probe traces in texts that connect them to their prior performative and traditional contexts. Rodríguez explores how to read oral-derived

1. Samuel Byrskog, "Memory and Narrative – and Time: Towards a Hermeneutics of Memory", *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 16 (2018), 134, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01602003>.

2. Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History*, Tübingen 2000, 299.

3. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 301.

texts in relation to tradition and the performance of tradition. He does so through a reading of the commemoration of Jesus' threat against the Jerusalem Temple in the years between Jesus' public life and the destruction of the temple. As Rodríguez points out, Byrskog has highlighted the role of eyewitnesses and tradents in transforming experiences and testimonies about experiences into historical narratives, but Rodríguez illuminates also the resistance to reshaping tradition amongst Jesus' tradents.

Next, Eve-Marie Becker turns to the theme of crisis in "Facing Violence and War: How Mark Memorizes Contemporary History". Becker builds on Byrskog's work on early Christian memorial and transmission processes, focusing on the *function* of literary memory. She asks how Mark's Gospel, and the Gospels that follow, grapple with experiences of crises in the authors' composition of literary memory. More specifically, focusing on violence and war, she asks how Mark's Gospel memorizes, reflects, and construes contemporary history. Becker discusses the way the gospel narratives function potentially as coping mechanisms: disaster management for Christ-believers who attempted to make sense of traumatic experiences in the wake of the Temple-destruction and the devastation of the city of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Engaging with trauma studies and empire-critical studies of the Gospels, Becker outlines the complexity of Mark's multifaceted reflections on contemporary history. She proposes different research perspectives in which the relationship of Mark's Gospel to contemporary history can be described, and shows how the gospel writer approaches contemporary history in a multidimensional and manifold manner.

Sandra Huebenthal shifts the focus to cultural studies (*Kulturwissenschaft*) and memory as identity construction. In "Memory and Hermeneutics – Current Conversations", Huebenthal begins her article with the reminder that context matters, both for the production and the reception of texts. Book-ending her article with Byrskog's seminal influence on memory studies, she discusses the current state of the field. Beginning with her own context as a female German-speaking Roman Catholic New Testament scholar, she reflects on the way different lived experiences and different notions of cultural memory impact the hermeneutical perspectives brought to biblical scholarship. Huebenthal welcomes social memory theories in biblical studies, but argues that it is problematic that such theories have normally been centred on historical questions, posed in accordance with the historical-critical paradigm. Coming from a cultural studies point of view, she proposes that what such perspectives bring is not primarily historical or theological conclusions, but a crucial attention to contextualization and identity construction. She prompts us to ask: What kinds of identity constructions

do the New Testament texts invite? What kinds of identities emerge from memories about Jesus? Narratives mediate collective memories rather than reflecting historical realities. Calling her approach *Kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese*, Huebenthal proposes that we can read early Christian texts as media of social memory. They can be analyzed with narrative methods and a cultural studies framework, which can help to explain the generation and alteration of these media.

In the final article, “Hayden White and the Problem of Historical Referentiality in Markan Narrative”, Alan Kirk brings us back to the question of historicity and to what extent – and in what way – we can know the past. Kirk opens his article with a reflection on Byrskog’s contribution to his own thinking, particularly the tricky relationship between narrative formation and historical referentiality elaborated in Byrskog’s *Story as History – History as Story*. Kirk is critical of models that are indebted to Hayden White’s (1928–2018) influential views of narrative historiography. Kirk presents critiques of White, arguing along the lines that White fails to note that historical events are not just chaos, but are always already imbued with moral and cultural meanings. Through memory, the historian grapples with the past. The past therefore already has certain forms and patterns, not just according to individual memory but due to the way memories themselves are shaped by social structures and according to cultural topoi. It is true that a historical narrative is a particular representation of reality rather than reality itself, but that does not mean, Kirk argues, that it is not possible to rank different narrative representations and to pass ethical judgements on different versions of events. These critiques of White help also with understanding the relationship between memory, narrative, and history in Mark’s Gospel. Returning to Byrskog at the end of his article, Kirk reflects on Byrskog’s scepticism about getting beyond the difficulties involved in moving from Markan narrative formations to historical reconstruction. Ultimately, he argues against a firm and fast binary distinction between historical reality and narrative representation, or between history and the history of memory. Kirk calls for renewed and revitalized scholarly attention to Byrskog’s inquiry into how “history becomes story”.⁴

Byrskog’s response, “Memory and Hermeneutics – Concluding Reflections”, addresses each of the four articles, discussing the different positions and perspectives, and providing in turn new points of departure. Responding to prompts about context, he reflects on his own background and influences. Wondering what might have prompted his approach to memory and hermeneutics, he thinks for instance about his experiences as a father,

4. Byrskog, *Story as History – History as Story*, 255.

where everyday occurrences with his children are turned into stories they tell each other in the future. As Byrskog insists, memory is a fundamentally hermeneutical category. It is also a deeply existential category that enables us to navigate time, shape identity, and provide understanding of our experiences. He highlights in particular three categories that are crucial for memory: referentiality, narrativity, and temporality. Memory, as he puts it, “is referential in that its images come from outside memory itself, it is narrative because it stems from and pictures a socially conditioned reality and it is temporal because it depends on time in order to navigate between the past and the present”.

Mentioning the commentary on Paul’s letter to the Romans that he is currently finishing, Byrskog raises questions about Paul’s grappling with his past and present experiences in Corinth and the hopes for the future in Rome and Spain. Scholars of memory can extend beyond the historical Jesus and the Gospel narratives to focus in further on other New Testament texts, such as the Pauline corpus. As Byrskog and the contributors to this special issue demonstrate, questions of memory and hermeneutics continue to be productive and promising avenues for research in New Testament studies.

Scholarly conversations that move the field forward through the push and pull of different perspectives and positions are not guaranteed in the academy. Anyone looking back over the editorials Byrskog penned for *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* – available online – will see a scholar and an editor of a journal that is seeking to open up theology and the study of religion to the future, while not discarding the past. In a 2017 edition of the journal, Byrskog commends the fact that Paula Fredriksen’s article on Paul and Augustine – and her own memories of being inspired by Krister Stendahl (1921–2008) – sits alongside Joel Kuhlin’s article on Giorgio Agamben’s book *Pilate and Jesus*. As Byrskog writes, it is only right that our journal can contribute to the aspiration of research to melt together old and new in an attempt to move towards a future that is waiting for us.⁵ It is easy to make such statements. It is much harder to put them into practice. Byrskog does exactly that, when for instance in a 2018 issue of *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, he welcomes a lively debate about the role and relevance of biblical studies.⁶ Later, in a 2019 editorial, he reflects on his attendance at a conference in Marburg the previous summer. In Marburg, he could not help but recall the agenda-setting scholarship of figures who spent time there in the past, such as Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), Martin Heidegger

5. Samuel Byrskog, “Ledare”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 93 (2017), 123–124.

6. Samuel Byrskog, “Ledare”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 94 (2018), 205–206.

(1889–1976), and Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) – figures who continue to affect the present. As Byrskog points out, none of these thinkers were afraid of difficult questions. Nor were they afraid of touching on existential issues about what makes for a meaningful life.⁷ Similar questions about life, its meaning, and the contribution of philosophy, theology, and religious studies are raised in his editorial from the spring of 2020, where Byrskog reflects on the COVID-19 pandemic and the possibilities for a sustainable future.⁸

If there is a Swedish version of the famous madeleine scene, it must surely be prompted by what Swedes call *fika*, where conversations over coffee and pastries take place on a regular basis. What hermeneutical reflections on *fika* might divulge, I do not know. But if the spirit of generous and critical interchange that Byrskog’s scholarly writings and conversations in this issue and beyond are anything to go by, there is good reason to hope for a lot more to write, talk about, and remember in the future. ▲

7. Samuel Byrskog, “Ledare”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 95 (2019), 145–146.

8. Samuel Byrskog, “Ledare”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 117–118.