

# Memory and Hermeneutics – Current Conversations

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I have been reading and investigating the Bible with social memory theory for almost fifteen years. Initially introduced to the hermeneutical approach by Aleida and Jan Assmann at a workshop for graduate students in Berlin in 2003, memory and memory theory have continued to intrigue me up to the point that I worked with social memory theory in my second book, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*.<sup>1</sup> My first paper about the theory and how it contributes to reading the Bible at the 2008 SBL Annual Meeting in Boston was the beginning of a fascinating journey. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss memory theory with pioneers and experts in the field, learn from their experiences and benefit from their knowledge. Thus, I was happy to accept the invitation to honour Samuel Byrskog and to contribute with my impression about the current state of the field and its hermeneutical questions.

## Context Matters

One of the most important lessons *Kulturwissenschaft* has taught biblical exegesis is that *context matters* and that it does not only matter for the

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1. Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*, Grand Rapids, MI 2020. It is the English translation of my *Habilitationschrift*: Sandra Huebenthal, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis*, 2nd ed., Göttingen 2018, <https://doi.org/10.13109/9783666540325>.

production but also for the reception of text. Fernando F. Segovia coined the axiom that “for cultural studies, the reader does not and cannot ever remain faceless”,<sup>2</sup> in other words, detached from his or her particular context. Being a scholar who works *kulturwissenschaftlich* rather than *historisch*, I begin with my own context, which provides a unique perspective on the debate. My *lived experience* is that of a female German-speaking Roman Catholic New Testament scholar whose mother’s family were Roman Catholic *Sudetendeutsche* – both lay people and priests. After the Second World War, they were expelled from their homelands and had to start over as expellees in refugee camps in West Germany.<sup>3</sup> Questions about existential crises, memory, and identity are thus part of my DNA as a scholar, and I am naturally attracted to the generation and crisis models of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) and Aleida and Jan Assmann. The other part of my scholarly heritage is Roman Catholicism with its strong focus on tradition as the second source of revelation besides Scripture.<sup>4</sup> It makes me particularly open to orality, ritual communication, and media changes.

I make a point about my perspective, because the discourse in the field of social memory theory in biblical studies is not – as some would call it – dominated by white males but rather by *Protestant* white males, most of them English-speaking. The reformed principle of *sola scriptura* with its focus on written and stable traditions and its reservation regarding oral tradition are the elephant in the room – and they largely go unnoticed. Apart from a few exceptions, social memory theory in biblical studies is centred around historical questions and rarely married with *Kulturwissenschaft* or media theory. The luggage of the reformed tradition is a burden for the discussion as *sola scriptura* and *orality/tradition* can easily be seen as antipodes or even exclusive.<sup>5</sup> Scholars from the reformed tradition do not only have different *lived experiences* but also a different tradition and thus a different *cultural memory*, which impacts their hermeneutical framework – or as

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2. Fernando F. Segovia, “Cultural Studies and Contemporary Bible Criticism: Ideological Criticism as Mode of Discourse”, in Fernando F. Segovia & Mary A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from this Place: 2. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, Minneapolis, MN 1995, 12. See also Christian Strecker, “Kulturwissenschaften und Neues Testament”, *Verkündigung und Forschung* 55 (2010), 4–19, <https://doi.org/10.14315/vf-2010-55-1-4>.

3. The impact of such a biography and family heritage was recently illustrated in Frank M. Yamada. “What Does Manzanar Have to Do with Eden? A Japanese American Interpretation of Genesis 2–3”, in Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew & Fernando F. Segovia (eds.), *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Atlanta, GA 2009, 97–117, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1fx4hdx.10>.

4. See the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* 9.

5. As pointed out by Werner Kelber, “The ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’ and the Historical Study of the New Testament”, *Oral History Journal of South Africa* 5:2 (2017), 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.25159/2309-5792/3328>.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) would say, their *Vorverständnis*. Roman Catholics like myself are much more comfortable with orality due to our heritage of Scripture and Tradition as two sources of revelation.<sup>6</sup> I am stressing the point of my Roman Catholic heritage because I am convinced that it is not only a key to what makes for a unique understanding of social memory theory in biblical studies but also offers a potential.<sup>7</sup> There is a treasure in the field only waiting to be recovered.

### The Landscape of Memory Approaches and Typical Areas of Discussion

Social memory theory was first introduced to New Testament exegesis in the field of Jesus studies and some of the most important and groundbreaking contributions originate from there. The majority of the studies in this field still focus on questions of *Erinnerung* and *Erinnerungsweitergabe/tradition, den erinnerten Jesus* (Jesus remembered), or other early Christian *Erinnerungsfiguren*. The focus of *Erinnerung*, in other words, is on process.<sup>8</sup>

Using the findings of social memory theory (*kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorie*) as a hermeneutical lens for a better understanding of biblical texts as *Gedächtnistexte* (that is, as externalizations of collective memories) – and thus, products – is different from what the memory approach in historical Jesus studies tries to achieve. Unlike the different Jesus memory approaches,<sup>9</sup> this way of using memory theory in biblical studies neither considers the actual processes of remembering nor focuses on the origin of texts or the historical reliability of the texts' testimony of Jesus. There is no

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6. A point nicely driven home in Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*, Paris 1680, 1.4: “Les Catholiques qui sont persuadés que leur Religion ne depend pas seulement du Texte de l'Écriture, mais aussi de la Tradition de l'Église, ne sont point scandalisés de voir que le Malheur des temps & la negligence des Copistes ayent rapporté des changements aux Lives Sacrés, aussi-bien qu'aux Livres prophanes. Il n'y a que des Protestants préoccupés ou ignorans qui puissant s'en scandaliser.”

7. Recently pointed out in Gilberto A. Ruiz, “Examining the Role of the Reader: A Necessary Task for Catholic Biblical Interpretation”, *Horizons* 44 (2017), 28–55, <https://doi.org/10.1017/HOR.2017.1>.

8. For an introduction to the differences between “Gedächtnis” and “Erinnerung”, see Mathias Berek, *Kollektives Gedächtnis und die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Erinnerungskulturen*, Wiesbaden 2009, 30–34.

9. As lined out in Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel*, 523–546, we can distinguish three different approaches to memory research in current studies of the early Christian literature. They have different hermeneutical foundations, methodologies, and research questions, but also points of contact and at times even overlap with regard to questions and methodology. I have called them (1) Memory, tradition, and formation of the Gospels (Jesus remembered I), (2) Memory approach (Jesus remembered II), and (3) New Testament texts as externalizations of collective memories. I have dealt with the three different approaches in greater detail in the epilogue of my book and in Sandra Huebenthal, “Die Büchse der Memoria: Evangelium, Erinnerung und der Historische Jesus”, in Gerd Häfner, Konrad Huber & Stefan Schreiber (eds.), *Die historische Rückfrage in der neutestamentlichen Exegese*, Freiburg 2021, 28–77.

digging in the texts to find the object(s) of remembrance. The texts themselves are media of memory, “frozen moments”, or snapshots in the family album of early Christian identity constructions and can be read accordingly.<sup>10</sup> I particularly like the image of the family album as it not only shows the ephemeral character but also the necessity to look at each picture as a whole and relate it to its context. Even though some details might be particularly intriguing, it is important to keep in mind that they are part of the overall composition and gain their relevance and meaning within this composition and context.

My perception is that the memory discourse in New Testament and cognate studies currently deals with four basic sets of questions. These are:

1. Hermeneutical questions about the memory approach and its relationship to history.
2. Methodological questions how memory theory can be applied to readings of biblical texts.
3. Special questions about the interpretation of particular biblical texts.
4. Meta-reflexive questions about the impact of cultural studies on our field.

Some questions surface more often than others. Thus, some areas are in the centre of attention while others are more on the margins. This has to do with the general direction of the discourse in our discipline. At a rough estimate I would say that 50 percent of the discussion is about memory and history, 25 percent about memory and method, 20 percent about the application to biblical texts, and 5 percent touches on meta-reflexive questions about cultural studies and their impact on theology and biblical studies.

It seems that at least half of the discourse is on the question of memory and history. This is also where the bulk of the publications come from, no matter if they – as Pavel Langhammer points out<sup>11</sup> – relate to the *microscopic* or *macroscopic* dimension. In other words: No matter if contributions discuss individual pericopes, the entire canon, Jesus, or a specific book, at least half of them are about memory and history or memory and hermeneutics.<sup>12</sup>

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10. See Sandra Huebenthal, “‘Frozen Moments’: Early Christianity through the Lens of Social Memory Theory”, in Simon Buttica & Enrico Norelli (eds.), *Memory and Memories in Early Christianity*, Tübingen 2018, 17–43.

11. Pavel Langhammer explained this in his paper “Social Memory Theory and New Testament: Dimensions of Intersections” at the European Association of Biblical Studies (EABS) Meeting in Warsaw 2019. I am indebted to the author for sharing the unpublished work with me.

12. Samuel Byrskog recently touched on the question of memory, history, and hermeneutics

The discussion what social memory theory can contribute to biblical studies also belongs into that category. Most of the Jesus memory research focuses on this area, too, as do the questions about the origin and genre of the Gospels, as well as orality and historical referentiality. The entire debate about (oral) tradition and its relation to Scripture as well as the questions of transmission processes belong here.<sup>13</sup> Most of the research projects, conferences, and seminars at international societies work in that area.

Compared to that, memory and method or the question of how exactly to apply the approach to New Testament and early Christian texts seem much less important. This affects questions about the relationship between social memory theory and *Formgeschichte* or *Redaktionskritik*,<sup>14</sup> or what social memory theory adds to narrative criticism, to name just two. The EABS Research Unit “Memory, Method, and Text” is dedicated to explore the methodological potential of the approach.<sup>15</sup> Even if roughly 25 percent of the discussion is somehow located in this area, there is a lot of work left. We have still not seen a proper set of methods as to how to read the *Gedächtnisbilder* or frozen moments of our early Christian family album. The textbook *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament* is the first contribution to this field and I hope to see more projects going in that direction.<sup>16</sup>

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in Samuel Byrskog, “Memory and Narrative – and Time: Towards a Hermeneutics of Memory”, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 16 (2018), 108–135, <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-01602003>.

13. Samuel Byrskog has greatly contributed to this discussion and it is impossible to engage with all his work here. Regarding his position on the relationship between history and memory, always with a nod to hermeneutics, see most recently Samuel Byrskog, “What is Historical about the Mission of the Historical Jesus? Rudolf Bultmann and the Hermeneutics of Memory”, in Samuel Byrskog & Tobias Hägerland (eds.), *The Mission of Jesus: Second Nordic Symposium on the Historical Jesus*, Tübingen 2015, 41–58; Samuel Byrskog, “Philosophical Aspects on Memory: Aristotle, Augustine and Bultmann”, in Samuel Byrskog, Raimo Hakola & Jutta Maria Jokiranta (eds.), *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity*, Göttingen 2016, 23–47.

14. See Ernest van Eck, “Memory and Historical Jesus Studies: *Formgeschichte* in a New Dress?”, *HTS Theologische Studies / Theological Studies* 71:1 (2015), 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i1.2837>.

15. The Research Unit was initiated in 2018 by Jiří Lukeš, Pavel Langhammer, and myself and aims both to explore how social memory theory can inform methodology and develop tools for reading and understanding early Christian traditions and texts based on the interdisciplinary theoretical work of social scientists like Maurice Halbwachs and experts on particular cultures like Jan and Aleida Assmann and others. The goal is to move beyond traditional historical questions that aim to uncover earlier sources and reconstruct the past to an understanding of these traditions and texts as diverse processes of receptions of the past among groups of Jesus followers within their different cultural contexts. Since 2022, it is chaired by Pavel Langhammer, Kyle Parsons, and Christian Handschuh.

16. Sandra Huebenthal, *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament: Eine methodisch-hermeneutische Einführung*, Tübingen 2022, <https://doi.org/10.36198/9783838559049>.

For the remaining quarter of the discussion I see two different categories. Another 20 percent of the questions are about the application of social memory theory to specific texts without contributing to the general hermeneutical discussion. Plain application so to say. These are the occasions when we rather talk theology than memory and reflect upon specific questions and issues in particular New Testament books and how memory theory could be a contribution.

Only 5 percent of the discussion is on the meta-level and discusses questions such as: What do the cultural turn and the implementation of *kulturwissenschaftliche Hermeneutik* mean for theology, humanities, and biblical studies? How does our reading, understanding, and – to use an expression from Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) – self-understanding in front of the text change? Questions that are rarely discussed.<sup>17</sup> The general tendency to incorporate social memory theory into a historical-critical or theological mindset and set of methods without paying tribute to its origin in cultural studies explains why the explosive force of the approach is often watered down and the change of perspective it demands is seldom conducted. Many so-called “memory approaches” are in fact historical-critical or theological interpretations in a new dress.

### **Historical Referentiality, *Kulturwissenschaft*, and Theological Questions**

The largest point of discussion are questions about historical referentiality, tradition, transmission processes, and their reliability. The question what history is and what historical facts are is highly controversial even in the different approaches to Jesus research. My starting point is, however, neither theology nor history, but *Kulturwissenschaft*. *Kulturwissenschaft* is not primarily concerned with historical and theological questions. The focus is on contextualization and identity constructions at particular points in time. As stated in *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*, I deem it

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17. I admit that these 5 percent intrigue me. I am generally interested in questions on the meta-levels and how they inform context. The question what *Kulturwissenschaft* has to add to our field is the most interesting aspect of my work and the driving force behind my approach and asks for further reflection. This is particularly interesting because *kulturwissenschaftliche Gedächtnistheorie* and social memory theory are different concepts – and are one reason for different discourses in German- and English-speaking scholarship. While cultural studies are more about the cancellation of high culture and an active reorganization of canon, *Kulturwissenschaft* sees culture as an object of research and is more about the contextualization of what has become canon. This difference explains why cultural studies have become part of a social movement and are often pushed forward by activists, while *Kulturwissenschaft* is limited to academic institutions and carried out in critical reflection rather than in action and is interested in investigating the contexts of texts rather than deconstructing them. For a general introduction, see Aleida Assmann, *Einführung in die Kulturwissenschaft: Grundbegriffe, Themen, Fragestellungen*, 4th ed., Berlin 2017, 16–26.

much more important to identify to what kind of identity constructions the text invites and which identity or identities that can come into existence on the basis of memories about Jesus.<sup>18</sup> I am aware that this necessarily touches on history as I am dealing with the past. *Kulturwissenschaft*, however, does not imply historical amnesia.

It might offend the historian in us when I claim that from a *kulturwissenschaftliche* perspective history is not what has happened, but what is being remembered,<sup>19</sup> and an identity-concrete text does not explain the events themselves but their significance for a particular group. Historical analysis would say that it is possible to get historical information out of a source and to add this information to the acquired knowledge, while *kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse* remains sceptical. Yet there are points of contact. The crucial part is the relationship between historical reality and experience. Gerd Häfner has convincingly argued that it is not possible to communicate experience without interpretation.<sup>20</sup> His conclusion that fact and interpretation cannot be separated is in line with the findings of interdisciplinary memory research. Over time, memories change, as does the evaluation and interpretation of experiences in different contexts and cultural frames. The process is inherently social, as research on family memories and intergenerational recollection has proven. Stories are shaped according to social patterns. They say a lot about the person telling the stories and maybe even more about the person than what he or she actually remembers.

Most Jesus scholars agree that the past is always mediated and never pure or directly accessible. The question is rather how to decide in which way it is mediated. In other words: What criteria can we safely apply to get behind the principles of mediation or distortion in order to explain the shape of particular texts? I share Häfner's scepticism of the memory approach as well as the memory approach's scepticism of the criteria approach.<sup>21</sup> This is one of the points where *Kulturwissenschaft* and historical enquiry can meet. *Kulturwissenschaft* would add questions like:

- Is the commemorative impulse driven by the historical reality or the experience of the group?

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18. Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel*, 514.

19. See Allen Feldman, *Formation of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*, Chicago 1991, 14.

20. Gerd Häfner, "Konstruktion und Referenz: Impulse aus der neueren geschichtstheoretischen Diskussion", in Knut Backhaus & Gerd Häfner (eds.), *Historiographie und fiktionales Erzählen: Zur Konstruktivität in Geschichtstheorie und Exegese*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2007, 71–72.

21. For a nuanced discussion, see Chris Keith & Anthony Le Donne (eds.), *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, London 2012.

- What is the point of literary criticism, redaction criticism, and source tracking – and what is the ultimate goal of establishing the earliest layer of the text if not historical questions?
- If we all agree that history is always mediated and never pure, how can we believe that one can reconstruct Jesus’ original words, the *ipsissima verba*?
- If we realize that the remembered Jesus is very much the same as the narrated Jesus of each Gospel, where does this leave us?

I can accept the idea of the Gospels as four different – even historical – narrations read in their own contexts. What I see as problematic is the move from the texts to historical conclusions apart from general observations as well as naive mirror-reading and the augmentation of the texts into reality. There is a difference between a narrative that mediates collective memory and a historical narrative that claims to stand instead of the past. Collective memory does not represent the past, only a perspective on this past. In addition, a memory narrative is identity-concrete or emic while a historical narrative often has an etic ring to it. In this area, my approach of reading New Testament and early Christian texts as media of memory and the Jesus remembered approaches will continue to have difficulties.<sup>22</sup>

### **Social Memory Theory as a Method?**

When we assume that 75 percent of the discourse is about historical and methodological questions, this also explains why most of the studies are on the microscopic and macroscopic levels. We are either dealing with overall hermeneutical questions, usually with a historical twist, or concrete case studies, often on the level of pericopes. The choice seems to stand between flyover or fragmentation.

Building on Pavel Langhammer’s heuristics, I conclude that the microscopic and macroscopic levels are suitable to study hermeneutical questions, questions of tradition, orality, historical inquiry, which are tested either on the whole New Testament or on a small excerpt. Single pericopes and synoptic comparisons serve to illustrate the general theory. Work on both the microscopic and macroscopic levels is found in historical-critical and diachronic approaches, in pastoral and theological readings, and serves to explain the approach itself. Traditionally, historical-critical exegesis works at the microscopic or macroscopic level rather than the mesoscopic level, because it is primarily interested in textual growth rather than the final text.

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22. See Huebenthal, *Reading Mark’s Gospel*, 534–540; Huebenthal, “Die Büchse der Memoria”, 54–62.

The mesoscopic level, on the other hand, is perfectly suited for concrete methodological work. This is, unfortunately, hardly ever done. As working on the mesoscopic level especially invites synchronic approaches (sometimes deprecatingly labelled “end-text exegesis”), historical-critical exegesis and the Jesus remembered approaches are not interested. Their questions are predominantly diachronic.

This brings us to the question of method. Social memory theory has been welcomed to New Testament exegesis on a broad level and its basic ideas are generally well received. The major theories – whether working with Halbwachs and Assmann or Halbwachs and Barry Schwartz – are widely received and considered fundamentally plausible. The crucial question remains: What does this mean for the concrete text?

The agenda I pursue for text analysis consists of a mix of narratological and historical methods: Narrative and rhetorical analyses, motif and tradition analyses, intertextual analyses, social-historical analysis, and historical contextualization.<sup>23</sup> Most of the steps are self-explanatory. Exhaustive narrative analysis shows that especially when we read narrative texts we are dealing with founding stories with a leading perspective with which the reader is invited to engage. The analysis of the perspectives is given much space in order to grasp the leading perspective and understand the experiences, discussions, and conflicts associated with it. Comparisons of perspectives and levels of the narrative point in the same direction: they address the unique perspective and profile of this particular text.

The analyses of the different intertextual references, cultural frames, and motifs, that are part of the methodological toolkit, might be the easiest to understand and at the same time the greatest step away from traditional methods in biblical studies. Social memory theory expects a perspective narration that is oriented towards forms and patterns available in its context, with these forms and patterns being evident in the text. In other words, we are searching for what Halbwachs called the social frames that shape perception and memory. Other than just cross-referencing or proof-texting, I expect patterns and intertextual references to engage with the overall social or cultural frame and to use them to understand the experiences described in the text. As I expect an externalization from collective memory (in this case, a text) not only to engage with existing social frames but also to create new frames for understanding and, in turn, future identity constructions, this part is particularly interesting. In traditional terminology this would be called the “theology” of the respective text. With this set of methods, it is

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23. Huebenthal, *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament*, 125–135.

crucial to read entire biblical books, not just individual pericopes or a set of chapters. In other words: to look at the full picture.

I must confess, when I wrote *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory*, I also fell into the trap of the usual blend of microscopic and macroscopic levels that is so common in New Testament exegesis. The mix of a broad hermeneutical perspective and a small unit as a test case provided a first idea of the potential of such a reading, looking at even the tiniest details. Unfortunately, it holds the danger of losing sight of the forest for the trees. When I started to work on my contribution on Mark's Gospel for the multivolume project *Jesus Traditions in the First Three Centuries*,<sup>24</sup> I realized that I had overlooked the Isaian frame of Mark's understanding and presentation of Jesus because I only looked at Mark 6:7–8:26. It felt like I had overlooked that the family photo was taken on a cruiser, and this explains some of the rather odd accessories and lifejackets. The lesson I learned was that there is no way around the mesoscopic level – the entire biblical book – if we aim for proper results. Context matters. Another lesson was that social memory theory does not lend itself to the analysis of texts, at any level, without adding further methods. This explains why most studies attempt to clarify historical questions or illuminate textual growth rather than to read them as media of memory.

The insights, methods, and criteria of the Jesus remembered approaches are of little help, because they cannot tell us what this means for the interpretation of the text – just as historical critical exegesis can be a failure for the preparation of sermons. We have to accept that a proper memory approach does not go with a historical-critical mindset and methodology. It cannot help us get behind the texts. Holly Hearon has clearly driven home this point.<sup>25</sup> Textual growth cannot be explained without additional sources. Social memory theory does point to memory distortion and social processes of various kinds, but these can neither help explain the growth and shaping of a particular text nor prove that a particular tradition is not prone to disruption. On the contrary, it rather demonstrates the susceptibility of interference between memory and transmission processes.

Memory research, combined with oral history research and textual criticism, has thoroughly shaken and corrected naive theories of authentic and stable (oral) traditions. It also shows how contingent the origins of

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24. Sandra Huebenthal, "The Gospel of Mark", in Helen K. Bond (ed.), *Jesus Traditions in the First Three Centuries: 1. From Paul to Josephus: Literary Receptions of Jesus in the First Century CE*, London 2019, 41–72.

25. Holly Hearon, "The Story of 'The Woman Who Anointed Jesus' as Social Memory: A Methodological Proposal for the Study of Tradition as Memory", in Alan Kirk & Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, Atlanta, GA 2005, 99–118.

biblical texts and the biblical canon are. Close reading of the texts of the New Testament and the emerging Christianity, informed by cultural studies, shows above all that we are dealing with identity texts, which must be understood and read as identity texts. Just as we have learned that the creation narratives must be brought into conversation not with scientific texts but with other creation myths, because they are not models of the origin of the world but approaches to explaining the world, the early Christian texts, canonical and non-canonical, are not to be understood primarily as historical but as identity-concrete texts. They are not about what happened, but about what is remembered because it is important for one's self-understanding. It is not about history, but about identity.

### **From Social Memory Theory to *kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese***

In the paper I presented at the 2008 SBL Annual Meeting, I developed the above idea using Luke 24. The story of the Emmaus disciples with Jesus exemplifies how people come to a stable identity because of the location of their experiences and memories in a social framework, and how they use their own memory story to access an existing memory community.<sup>26</sup> Luke tells the story in such a way that Jesus helps Cleopas and his companion to locate their experience in existing social frames – the scriptures of Israel – in order to make sense of them. Halbwachs would call that *social memory*. At the same time, Luke-Acts provides a new social framework for the identity construction of Jesus' followers in the third (Luke) and fourth (Acts) early Christian generation. Halbwachs would call that *collective memory*.<sup>27</sup> Simply asking whether a text uses existing frames (social memory) or constructs new frames (collective memory) helps to better place a text in time. The same applies to the question how a text deals with different perspectives: are they treated equally or do we see a guiding perspective?

*Kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese*, as I am tempted to call my approach, does not ask what happened and does not allow going back behind the texts, but examines what is told and how it is told and balances the results with the findings of interdisciplinary memory research. Its characteristic feature is the evaluation of the results within the framework of interdisciplinary memory research and cultural memory theory, which allows for different questions than historical-critical approaches. This happens when settings where memory in its cognitive expression interfaces with cultural media of memory, the cultural repertoire of narrative and sayings genres. Looking at

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26. Sandra Huebenthal, "Luke 24:13–35 and Social Memory in Luke", in Thomas R. Hatina (ed.), *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels: 3. The Gospel of Luke*, London 2010, 85–95.

27. Huebenthal, *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament*, 195–234.

the media of memory rather than reading the text in order to find the object of remembrance, I read early Christian texts as media of *social memory*. They can be analyzed with narrative methods, and the larger *kulturwissenschaftliches* framework helps to explain the generation and alteration of these media.

*Kulturwissenschaftliche Analyse* can provide new insights independent from historical-critical inquiry or *Einleitungswissenschaft*. Bringing together insights from both fields can spark new and refined discussions. The goal is not to replace historical-critical inquiry but to complement it. The power of *kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese* lies in its potential to de-canonize and re-contextualize New Testament texts and empower readers to connect the texts with their own *lived* experiences. This goes hand in hand with a de-emphasizing of *historical* and *theological* terminology and a one-sided fixation of *historical* and *theological* questions. *Kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese* can help to regain *tradition* as a living social process beyond the scribal paradigm, beyond history, and beyond dogma.

A key element is to regain the mesoscopic level and work with the individual book in its context. Equipped with the appropriate methodology that I outline in *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament*, we are ready for the adventure of the full programme: the analysis of New Testament and early Christian texts as media of memory on the microscopic, mesoscopic, and macroscopic levels.

When I started working in this field fifteen years ago, the tools for such analysis were not yet available. We had to collectively explore lots of dead ends in biblical scholarship.<sup>28</sup> My impression is that the discipline is ready and we can devote ourselves to the work on concrete texts, instead of losing ourselves further in hermeneutic arguments, which are met with less understanding from the outside the longer they last. Samuel Byrskog was right in assuming that “the social memory approach may provide a ‘memory-critical’ repertoire which opens up a new framework for studying the social dynamics reflected in the Gospel narrative”.<sup>29</sup> The notion that context matters has recently been followed up by the *Next Quest*, which does not explore the historical Jesus but the context(s) of Jesus and Jesus images.<sup>30</sup> It

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28. As not only Holly Hearon has shown. Cilliers Breytenbach even called it a *cul-de-sac*. Cilliers Breytenbach, “From Mark’s Son of God to Jesus of Nazareth – *un cul-de-sac?*”, in Jan van der Watt (ed.), *The Quest for the Real Jesus: Radboud Prestige Lectures by Prof. Dr. Michael Wolter*, Leiden 2013, 19–56, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004254800\\_003](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004254800_003).

29. Samuel Byrskog, “A New Quest for the *Sitz im Leben*: Social Memory, the Jesus Tradition and the Gospel of Matthew”, *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006), 321, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688506000178>.

30. James Crossley announced this new approach to Jesus studies in his editorial “The Next Quest for the Historical Jesus”, *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 19 (2021), 261–264,

will be intriguing to see what the *Next Quest* contributes to the methodical discussion and how it adds to our understanding of the memory texts in the early Christian family album. ▲

#### SUMMARY

This article investigates the current state of the memory debate in biblical studies from a Roman-Catholic point of view. It differentiates four areas: hermeneutical questions about the memory approach and its relationship to history, methodological questions of how memory theory can be applied to reading biblical texts, special questions about the interpretation of particular biblical texts, and meta-reflexive questions about the impact of cultural studies. It argues for a step towards a *kulturwissenschaftliche Exegese*, in order to embrace social memory theory as a hermeneutics and methodology for reading biblical text on the microscopic (pericope), mesoscopic (book), and macroscopic (canon) level.

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<https://doi.org/10.1163/17455197-19030003>. Building on the *Demise of Authenticity* and the importance of context(s), the *Next Quest* seeks for a way beyond the search for the reality behind the texts and approaches the historical Jesus through the analysis and interpretation of his context as well as cultural and historical processes that form and pass on Jesus images. In July 2022, the Centre for the Critical Study of the Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements (CenSAMM), together with the Enoch Seminar and Eerdmans, sponsored a conference on the Next Quest for the Historical Jesus.