Memory and Old Testament Theology

Over recent decades, memory has become a topic of interest in a wide range of disciplines,[[1]](#footnote-1) including Jewish Studies, New Testament studies, and Old Testament studies. It has suggested the possibility of looking at the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings as a deposit of Israel’s memory.

Sometime in the first millennium of our era the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings became in a Christian context the Old Testament; then a thousand years later books such as Kings and Chronicles became histories; and then at the end of the second millennium they became narratives, while the collection as a whole became the Hebrew Bible. These frameworks (Old Testament, histories, narratives, Hebrew Bible) sometimes skewed and sometimes facilitated the interpretation of the books. The framework of memory lacks some of the disadvantages of those frameworks; further, memory is a category that explicitly appears in the material, which may mean it might help us get inside an aspect of its own way of thinking. While the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings do not begin with an instruction to remember, they begin with a huge exercise in memory, in Genesis to Kings. The scriptural position and order of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah is less fixed, but that other set of narratives also implies an instruction to remember. Both sequences are exercises in memory, whose form results from the recycling of earlier memories.

As there is a difference between Israelite ethics and Old Testament ethics, or Israelite religion and Old Testament religion, or Israelite theology and Old Testament theology, so there is a difference between Israel’s memory and Old Testament memory. In this paper I am concerned with the way the Old Testament as we have it remembers, and talks about memory. I want to think about the relationship of memory and Old Testament theology, and specifically to consider how memory relates to Israel’s faith, its hope, and its ethics—in each case not Israel as it actually was, but Israel as the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings wish it to be or wish it had been. I shall follow Christian convention in referring to these scriptures as “The Old Testament,” though I hope to say nothing that is not faithful to the Tanak in its own right.

# Memory and Israel’s Faith

First, then, memory as an important element in the way the Old Testament portrays Israel’s faith. Deuteronomy is the great book of explicit exhortation to remember. “Remember the days of old, consider the years of generations long past, ask your father, and he will explain to you, your elders, and they will tell you” (32:7). “Take care for yourself and be very careful of yourself so you do not forget the things your eyes have seen, and so they do not turn aside from your mind all the days of your life. Make them known to your children and your grandchildren” (4:9). “Take care for yourself so that you do not forget Yahweh who got you out of the country of Egypt, out of a household of serfs” (6:12).[[2]](#footnote-2) Getting the Israelites out of Egypt constituted an assertion and a reaffirmation of Yahweh’s ownership of Israel. Israel is now under double obligation to be committed to Yahweh and not to rebel. The point finds expression in the first of the Ten Commandments, since it was Yahweh who asserted ownership in this way,[[3]](#footnote-3) and in the second commandment, about making images, even of Yahweh, because the acts of Yahweh associated with the exodus and Sinai show that Yahweh is not a deity who can be imaged.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Israel also needs to remember the long way Yahweh led it in the wilderness, to humble it and discover whether it would keep his commandments, and to remember its acts of rebellion during that time and their negative consequences.[[5]](#footnote-5) As Ezekiel puts it, there thus is something to be said for remembering one’s shame.[[6]](#footnote-6) Paradoxically, in the land the pressure of abundance, too, will mean Israel will need to cultivate memory.[[7]](#footnote-7) Jan Assmann comments that the people must “master the trick of remembering privation in the midst of abundance.” It will be one of the reasons why they will need “a counterfactual memory” such as “keeps present to the mind a yesterday that conflicts with every today,”[[8]](#footnote-8) and specifically to ensure that they live in the world without feeling at home in it. Because this memory, far from making you feel at home, denies you a home, it is greatly at risk. In Israel the Rekabites fulfill an important role in connection with maintaining this memory.

Commenting on Deuteronomy’s “theory of individual, collective, and cultural memory,” Assmann thus declares that “the entire book is based on the deep fear of forgetting.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Paul Ricoeur likewise describes memory as a struggle against forgetting,[[10]](#footnote-10) and Yosef Yerushalmi observes that in the Bible forgetting is always a terror.[[11]](#footnote-11) Yet Yerushalmi thus contradicts something he said earlier (perhaps he had forgotten it) in noting that Israel is not commissioned to remember everything, only certain things.[[12]](#footnote-12) Deuteronomy, too, presupposes the importance of forgetting. The Old Testament incorporates many exhortations to forget, to put out of mind. Remembering involves forgetting.[[13]](#footnote-13) Memory has to negotiate with forgetting, to remember the right things and forget the right things.[[14]](#footnote-14)

While history in the sense of the events of the past incorporates everything that has happened, memory could not do so, nor should it do so if it is to fulfill its function. Forgetting is the companion of remembering, in a good sense as well as a bad sense. There can be no such thing as an exhaustive narrative, and no such thing as an exhaustive memory. There has to be omission. Two contrary assertions are thus appropriate to the relationship between remembering and forgetting. Remembering excludes forgetting; remembering involves forgetting.

You remember more if you forget some, if you focus. The Jerusalem court had an official called a *mazkȋr*,[[15]](#footnote-15) whose title might suggest a recorder whose task included making sure that things were remembered, some of which would take the form of the annals that are referenced elsewhere. This understanding of the *mazkȋr*’srole may rely too much on etymology,[[16]](#footnote-16) but presumably *someone* had the task of keeping those annals. Yet ironically, they were the place you could go for hard information about events as opposed to the kind of story the books of Kings told; those books refers you to the annals for those hard facts.[[17]](#footnote-17) You would go there for facts as opposed to memories. Israel didn’t preserve the annals; it preserved the narratives.[[18]](#footnote-18) It forgot some of the bare facts, and kept the narratives that made the connection between past and present in which it was interested. So while memory preserves less than history, in another sense it incorporates more than history, by interpreting what it remembers, and also by the selectivity that focuses on things that seem especially important.

Whereas other religions might have to be wary of ignoring an important deity, Israel has to forget some allegedly important deities. In this connection, the verb *shakah* virtually means “repress.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Such forgetting is hard because the gods of everyday life who are to be renounced have been evidenced to people’s senses.[[20]](#footnote-20) Collective memory, or rather collective amnesia, Mark Smith comments, “helped Israel forget about its own polytheistic past, and in turn it served to induce a collective amnesia about the other gods, namely, that many of these had been Israel’s in the first place.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus archeology tells us about aspects of Israelite religion that its memory does not tell us, because its official memory as preserved in the Old Testament did not wish them to be remembered. Kings and Chronicles tell a story that indicates what people should remember and how they should remember it, and also what they should forget.

One should not overstate the point; the memory of Israel’s adherence to other gods is preserved in the text. It does not have to be excavated. The texts do not have to be read against the grain; they themselves tell the history of monotheism in Israel as a history of “memory, remembrance, forgetting, and the repressed, of trauma and guilt.”[[22]](#footnote-22) But the texts do such an effective job of commending what should be remembered that they succeed in getting readers not to notice the things that they report but do not commend.

Memory is often contested. “Remind me,” Yahweh challenges Israel, confrontationally.[[23]](#footnote-23) The same prophecy also urges people to “remember” Abraham and Sarah.[[24]](#footnote-24) Yet when they had encouraged themselves by the memory of Abraham at an earlier point, Ezekiel had warned them not to do so.[[25]](#footnote-25) Ronald Hendel notes that “the memory of Abraham serves in varying measures to articulate Israelite identity, to motivate the remembering agent to take appropriate actions, to give solace, and to activate social, religious, or political ideals. These memories also serve to mask ambiguities and to create new fissures and oppositions where none were apparent previously. Some of these conditions of memory obtain when God is the rememberer, others when humans are; the importance of remembering Abraham embraces both God and Israel. The implications of remembering Abraham are mutable.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

That comment leads into a further observation. Memory is capable of preserving ambiguity. The date and the social context of Genesis to Kings and of Chronicles-Era-Nehemiah in the form in which we have them, and of the earlier memories that they preserve, are matters of disagreement, and I do not see any sign that this disagreement will ever be resolved.[[27]](#footnote-27) But Fentress and Wickham note that the study of social memory recognizes that memories need to be interpreted on two levels. “Memories have their own specific grammars, and can (must) be analysed as narratives” even though “they also have functions, and can (must) be analysed in a functionalist manner, as guides… to social identity.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The documents that make up the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, and the earlier works that lie behind them, originally functioned to shape memory in particular contexts to particular ends, but some community thought they could also do so outside the contexts in which they emerged. One way of dealing with the aporia over determining the origin and context of works such as Genesis to Kings and Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, then, is to focus on the text that we have, working with the way it has concealed the context out of which it emerged, rather than resisting this concealing, as is appropriate in other forms of study. In other words, Old Testament theology can work primarily with the memory that the Old Testament preserves, and with what the Old Testament has to say about memory. Mark Smith comments, “from a theological perspective, the Bible is the revelation of what God selected to be remembered and forgotten of God’s relationship to Israel and to the world” and of “God’s own character and configuration.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Replacing history by memory doesn’t exactly solve the difficulties involved in asking historical questions, but it does provide another way of approaching them or of sidestepping them when they look as if they lead into a marsh, and of avoiding being hamstrung by the question in what sense the books are ideological, whether they serve the winners or the losers, the powerful or the weak. Like recalling Abraham, recalling the exodus can have many kinds of significance. Teresa Staneck comments that it can aim to admonish and present moral demands, effect joy and gratitude, bring hope in distress, affirm Yahweh’s actuality, and justify cultic and administrative enterprises. The description of exodus and covenant “presents not so much the tangled meanders of human memories but, rather, a variety of theological interpretations.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Frank Polak: “Biblical narrative embodies significant parts of the cultural memory of ancient Israelite society…. It provides a picture of the past that bonds the community, provides the charter for its various ways of life and its visions of the future, and thus constructs and confirms a view of Israel’s communal identity.” In doing so, he goes on, it “incorporates an endless variety of different voices.”[[31]](#footnote-31) It remembers things in ways that express their significance for the people who do the remembering. The plural is deliberate: it remembers them in *ways* that are deliberate. Philip Davies: “Biblical ‘history’ is not just one memory… but a memory that is really a combination of collective memories…. The Bible is dialogical: it represents dominant, but also submerged voices, identities, and recollections.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In considering Israel’s memories, then, Old Testament theology brings together differing memories. Mark Smith notes how the Old Testament often declares that it is impossible or inadvisable to see God, yet in Exodus 24:9-11 preserves a memory about Moses and his entourage seeing God.[[33]](#footnote-33) Sometimes Israel was happy to affirm conflicting memories. There were other points at which it was unwilling to do so. It felt differently concerning that memory about seeing God from the way it felt about the memory of treating Yahweh as having a consort. Archeological discoveries suggest that Yahweh could be understood to have a consort, and that this understanding was not merely as part of unofficial or private religion but part of public, official religion.[[34]](#footnote-34) In Israel, the memory of the community’s worshiping Yahweh’s consort is construed differently by the people whose memory is reported in Jeremiah 44 and by the people who wrote that narrative. It is indeed regularly the case that memory is contested. While the Old Testament preserves reference to Israel’s acknowledging other deities, male and female, it has eliminated this memory from its account of what counted as proper Israelite religion.

Michel Foucault argues that “Since memory is actually a very important factor in struggle…, if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles…. It is vital to have possession of this memory.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Yet how far is it possible to control people’s memory? Memory can surely subvert the powers that seek control. In the short term, at least, the account of Israel’s story in the Books of Kings failed to determine how people would now relate to Yahweh and to other deities. Judah as a whole did not submit to the perspective commended by the books. Richard Terdiman: “Although memory sustains hegemony, it also subverts it through its capacity to recollect and to restore the alternative discourses the dominant would simply bleach out and forget.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Assmann notes the contrast between canonization from below against the monarchy (in Deuteronomy), canonization from below against the hegemony of the imperial culture (in exilic writings), and canonization from above by the authorization of the imperial authority (in Ezra).[[37]](#footnote-37) Further, there is an ambiguity within these embodiments of memory. The attitude taken to the Persian authorities in Ezra-Nehemiah is both positive and negative. Narrative memory is indeed capable of preserving ambiguity. Writing supports memory and creates a symbolic order that undergirds the state;[[38]](#footnote-38) yet Isaiah and Jeremiah have their words written down, to subvert the state. Memory can preserve plurality, complexity, and ambiguity.

# Memory and Israel’s Hope

I come to memory and hope. Elie Wiesel has said that “remember” is the most frequent command in the Bible.[[39]](#footnote-39) It’s an exaggeration; indeed, my wife thought that “Don’t be afraid” was the most frequent command in the Bible. Then we realized that these two commands can be connected: one key to avoiding fear is to remember. Deuteronomy bids Israel not to be afraid of the Canaanites but to remember carefully what Yahweh did to Egypt.[[40]](#footnote-40) In keeping with the complementary nature of remembering and forgetting, forgetting can also be a safeguard against fear. In Isaiah 54, the promise that people will be able to forget their past shame is a key to avoiding fear.[[41]](#footnote-41) What Assmann describes as Deuteronomy’s “elaborate set of cultural memory techniques” to ensure that Yahweh’s acts and the revelation of Yahweh’s expectations “are handed down to future generations and are not forgotten” reinforce memory when the present offers it no support. They reinforce memory’s “counterfactual” nature.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Memory encourages or discourages hope, depending on what you remember. According to Lamentations, after the fall of Jerusalem the city remembered its great past and remembered its more recent experience of distress but it did not “remember” its future.[[43]](#footnote-43) In such contexts, human remembering is both painful and hopeful, Psalm 77 suggests: “I shall remember God and complain…. I shall remember my song at night…. I shall cause Yahweh’s deeds to be remembered; I shall remember your wonders of old.”[[44]](#footnote-44) Memory can help people cope with disaster or disappointment.

Given that the ability to influence if not to control social memory is associated with power and status, who gets to tell the story has important consequences. Social memory is malleable, vulnerable to manipulation, neglect, and loss. The Psalms are an official version of how people are encouraged to pray, but that fact makes it the more striking that they incorporate so much material that undercuts the power and authority of people in power, not least God. Indeed, they thus embody or at least parallel what Foucault, again, calls “counter-memory,” an individual or a small group’s resistance to the official versions of the past as it affects the present.[[45]](#footnote-45) The prayer in Isaiah 63:7—64:12 [11] begins, “I will cause Yahweh’s acts of commitment to be remembered,” but the intention is to face Yahweh with the tension between those past acts and the present neglect. The pressure of deprivation often issued in Israel’s rebellions, and that pressure is a reality in Canaan. “Here [says Assmann] we are concerned with a memory that finds no confirmation in the existing framework of the present, and, indeed, that even contradicts it.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

 “Remember his covenant forever,” the Asaphites thus urge in 1 Chronicles 16:15, in a hymn of praise that also appears in the Psalms. Neatly, however, the version in Psalm 105:8 declares that “*Yahweh* *has* remembered his covenant forever.” It is the other side of the coin. We are to remember; God remembers. Israel is to remember Abraham;[[47]](#footnote-47) God remembers Abraham or promises to do so.[[48]](#footnote-48) “He will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them,” Moses promises.[[49]](#footnote-49) As God urges us to remember, so we urge God to remember. On Sinai, Moses urges God to remember the ancestors and the oath he swore to them to multiply their descendants and give them a country of their own,[[50]](#footnote-50) rather than remembering the people’s sins of the past.[[51]](#footnote-51) Nehemiah even asks God to remember his good actions.[[52]](#footnote-52) Childs notes that “the phrase ‘God remembers’… appears to have its original context within the structure of the hymn,” while the imperative “remember” characteristically appears in protest psalms;[[53]](#footnote-53) the practice of remembering is at least as integral to thanksgiving psalms. The fall of Jerusalem was an occasion when Yahweh did not remember his footstool.[[54]](#footnote-54) Only near the end of Lamentations do people bid Yahweh remember what has happened to the city, but they also go on to ask there why he has utterly forgotten them.[[55]](#footnote-55)

A prayer for Jewish fast days recalls the many occasions when God has answered his people’s prayers, and thus asks,

May the One who answered Abraham our father on Mount Moriah,

May the One who answered Sarah our mother at the door of the tent,

May the One who answered our ancestors at the Sea of Reeds,

May the One who answered Joshua at Gilgal,

May the One who answered Deborah at Mount Tabor

May the One who answered Samuel at Mizpah

May the One who answered David and Solomon in Jerusalem

May the One who answered Elijah on Mount Carmel

May the One who answered Jonah in the insides of the fish

May the One who answered Mordecai and Esther in Susa

(and so on)

…may he “answer you and hearken to the sound of your cry this day.”[[56]](#footnote-56) The memories shape the hope and the prayers. It is in light of the way the scriptures provide so much insight on God’s involvement with his people and so much recollection of it, Yerushalmi comments, that after Josephus Jews did not write historiography for centuries. Reading through scripture each year in the lectionary means that their ancestor Joseph did not get imprisoned and released only once in the long-gone past. At Passover, people declare that “this *is* the bread of affliction”: memory is not simply recollection but reactualization. While the events happened once for all, they are experienced atemporally. Medieval Jews knew the Babylonians and the Romans as the destroyers of the temple, but neither Babylon nor Rome were historical realities for them. As they remembered the events, they experienced it. A lament for Tisha be’Av, which fell last week, has a refrain that speaks of when “I” experienced the fall of Jerusalem. Memory makes that process possible.[[57]](#footnote-57) In the context of the Crusades, Yerushalmi also notes, the story of the offering of Isaac resonated afresh. “While the horror remained vivid, it was no longer absurd, and grief, though profound, could be at least partly assuaged.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Michael V. Fox provides a parallel in describing his annual involvement in the reading of Esther.

Although I doubt the historicity of the Esther story…, every year at Purim when I hear the Scroll read in the synagogue, I know that it is *true*, whatever the historical accuracy of its details. Almost without an effort of imagination, I feel something of the anxiety that seized the Jews of Persia upon hearing of Haman's threat to their lives, and I join in their exhilaration at their deliverance. Except that I do not think “their,” but “my.”

Fox goes on to describe some of the “antisemitic horrors” of the twentieth century that his family narrowly escaped. “I know the sense of precariousness that impelled Esther's author to insist on the inner powers of a vulnerable people but also—somewhat irrationally—on the certainty of their deliverance.”[[59]](#footnote-59) In remembering events in this way, Jews have been continuing to relate to them in the way Moses commends in his introduction to the Decalogue: Yahweh made the covenant at Horeb with his hearers, not with their parents or ancestors.[[60]](#footnote-60)

After the fall of Jerusalem, the community that has been overwhelmed by disaster looks to the past for understanding. However many editions of the Books of Kings there were, I assume that an important one was produced in this context. Gerhard von Rad called this work a *Gerichtsdoxologie*, an act of praise at the justice of God’s judgment,[[61]](#footnote-61) which is an illuminating description, but in a formal sense the books are not an act of praise but a story, and stories address people. They are an account of Israel’s story that indeed portrays it as God’s just judgment, but addresses the Judahite community, to encourage it to remember its story, and to remember it in a certain way. They sought to shape Judah’s collective memory, the memory of the past that the authors wanted to mold people’s attitudes in the present. The construction of memory they express is the means whereby the past might frame the present. They explain how the present emerged from the past and thus enable people to understand the present and begin to hope for the future. Ritva Williams summarizes the way social memory works, by continuously condensing, sorting, re-sorting, organizing and re-organizing the data it receives to connect where we are now to where we have been in the past. It recalls events that have unified, animated, oriented or re-oriented the community in fundamental ways, and presents these watershed moments as frameworks for evaluating and navigating through current circumstances.[[62]](#footnote-62)

It might seem that remembering your past as a story of disobedience would be discouraging. The implication of Kings’ portrayal is the opposite. It invites the community to face facts. Only when people have done so is there the possibility of facing the future and of having hope for a future. God may grant them a future simply because of his grace and not because they have faced facts, and indeed God seems to have done so (the epilogue to Kings in 2 Kings 25:27-30 points in this direction). But if they want to make any movement themselves towards having a future, remembering the past in a way that does justice to the facts is a place to start.

Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah does not reflect a situation of disaster and tragedy. Chronicles knows more than Kings about the process whereby God manifested that mercy, as it shows by its own epilogue, and Ezra-Nehemiah can go on to remember the rebuilding of the temple and the work of Ezra and Nehemiah themselves. Yet the books do reflect a situation of disappointment and failure. The weeping in Ezra 3 is commonly read to reflect disappointment with the Second Temple as it being built. The prayers in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 express disappointment with the commitment of the Second Temple community, and with its continuing subjection to foreign kings, while Nehemiah is disappointed with the state of the city and with the division within the community.

The discouraging state of things encourages Chronicles to reframe the community’s memory in a different way from that which appears in Kings. Chronicles invites it to remember the way David set up the worship of the temple, in which the Judahites are privileged to take part. It has often been assumed that Chronicles’ account of David is implicitly messianic, and I wonder whether this assumption issues from puzzlement about what other point the emphasis on David might have. Reflection on the significance of memory may help. Remembering David in the way Chronicles does helps the community understand itself as a worshiping community.

 What of the fact that much of Chronicles’ account of David is imaginary? While memory incorporates less than history (it can forget), memory also incorporates more than history; it can embellish, in interpreting in light of its own day. The framework of memory may help us rethink the hoary question of the relationship between theology and history—not to resolve the question, but to think about it differently.

When there is an interpretation of past events that both reflects and shapes the way current events are perceived and lived with, so that it becomes a lens through which the community perceives reality and looks to the future, we may call it the community’s myth.[[63]](#footnote-63) But “myth”can suggest something that never happened. We do talk about remembering something as having happened in a certain way when it did not, but then we are using the word “remember”in a Pickwickian fashion. In theory, by its nature memory refers to things that happened. The Jewish historian of Amos Funkenstein describes Ruth, Job, Jonah, and Esther as historical novels, but then as reflexive literature.[[64]](#footnote-64) While I can imagine that the author of Jonah knew he was writing a piece of fiction, even though writing about a real prophet, I do not think of Jonah as an exercise in memory. But I think it less likely that the authors of Chronicles thought in a parallel way. Chronicles was surely written and received as a story that reminded people of who they were on the basis of reminding them of who they had been. Fictionalized history functions similarly in our culture. The recent movies *Lincoln*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* (about the capture of Osama bin Laden), for instance seek to tell Americans something about themselves. The authors of such stories base them on fact, but using their imagination helps them get purchase in the present. Talk in terms of memory preserves the distinction between Chronicles and Jonah. Both sought to shape people’s thinking and lives, but they did so on different bases.

Deuteronomy, while urging the importance of memory and implicitly claiming to be in continuity with the past, is in some ways expounding novel teaching, in the manner of Harold Bloom’s bold rereading of texts.[[65]](#footnote-65) But if Deuteronomy is a revisionist exercise in memory, it is surely claiming to be one that Moses or the author of the covenant code would recognize. Or if it was not making this claim, the authors of the Pentateuch were implying that they believed it to be so, though other Israelites would contest the point. Chronicles illustrates more clearly than Kings how the reformulating of memory can involve a fictionalizing of facts that is part of what makes possible the bridging of past and present. If one is trying to chart with accuracy the history of the events to which the story refers, the fictionalizing process is an unfortunate consequence of this bridging, but in terms of its own aim it is a positive aspect of the work.

The fact that alleged past events have significance in the present may mean that they were invented to that end. Yet it is also the present significance of real past events that causes them to be remembered. Present relevance encourages both false memory and true memory.[[66]](#footnote-66) Encouraging people to remember David doing things he did not do may involve the assumption that there was enough of a link between his historical acts and the worship of the Second Temple to justify this reformulating of his memory. Barry Schwartz, in his writing on memory, has also reflected on the memory of Abraham Lincoln in a way that provides a parallel. In the 1960s, he argues, Lincoln’s support was invoked for the granting of civil rights to African Americans, but Lincoln’s support for the abolition of slavery did not extend to the granting of civil rights. Yet there is some validity in the claim that in a twentieth-century context the granting of civil rights coheres with Lincoln’s commitment to abolition. It is hard to imagine a 1960s Lincoln opposing civil rights.

So memory bridges past and present in a way that may falsify history but may also be true to history. One cannot prove the point about Lincoln, or Chronicles’ point about David. All one can say is that the Second Temple community was sufficiently persuaded by Chronicles’ memory to incorporate it into its Scriptures. “Considering Lincoln’s image as a mere projection of present problems is as wrong as taking it as a literal account of his life and character,” Schwartz comments.[[67]](#footnote-67) It selects from the real Lincoln and then projects it forward to reject later convictions or ideals. I assume that likewise it is mistaken to treat the Old Testament narratives either as pure fact or as pure fiction. Minimalism emphasizes how the past is shaped by the present; maximalism works on the hypothesis that the present is shaped by the past. I guess that both minimalists and maximalists (if anyone is happy to be described by either term) would grant that past and present are mutually influential.

In a study of the memory of the exodus, Teresa Staneck has commented that “some actual experiences hide concealed beyond those descriptions; however, it is impossible to recognise what exactly had happened.” I acknowledge the truth in that statement. “From the perspective of sacred texts,” she goes on, “the reality of events behind the narratives is irrelevant.”[[68]](#footnote-68) That second statement seems implausible. In general, Paul Ricoeur comments, “The truthful status of memory… will later have to be confronted with the truth claims of history.”[[69]](#footnote-69) The having-happened-ness of the exodus surely mattered to the authors and readers of these sacred texts. It’s a stretch for me to imagine that the story of the exodus issued simply from the reworking of memories concerning an escape from quasi-Egyptian rule within Canaan, though I wouldn’t fight over the question. Maybe the actual event had enough significance to carry the theological freight of the way the story came to be told.

# Memory and Israel’s Ethics

Finally, memory and ethics. I teach a PhD seminar on Old Testament Ethics, in which both Old Testament students and Ethics students take part. One of the Ethics students once commented that there didn’t seem to be much work on memory and Old Testament ethics, and in light of the focus in our president’s work I should finally consider this link.

Assmann, again: cultural memory establishes who we are, and also what we should do.[[70]](#footnote-70) He goes on to summarize Nietzsche’s work in *The Genealogy of Morals*: “the human animal… has been given memory so that it is capable of keeping a promise and undertaking responsibilities. Man needs a memory in order to live in a community.” [[71]](#footnote-71) Schwartz, again: “As a model *of* society, collective memory reflects past events in terms of needs, interest, fears, and aspirations of the present. As a model *for* society, collective memory performs two functions: it embodies a *template* that organizes and animates behavior and a *frame* with which people locate and find meaning for their present experience. Collective memory affects social reality by *reflecting, shaping, and framing* it.”[[72]](#footnote-72)

In the Old Testament, one importance of remembering the exodus was its ethical implications. When Deuteronomy reworks the Sabbath command, it both underscores the aim that your *‘abadim* should be able to rest in the same way as you, and replaces the reference to creation in the Exodus version by an exhortation to remember that you were an *‘ebed* in Egypt and that Yahweh acted to bring you out from there.[[73]](#footnote-73) The challenge to “remember that you were an *‘ebed* in Egypt” recurs in connection with the requirement that you should provide your *‘ebed* with flocks, grain, and wine when you free him at the end of his six-year term, in connection with the incorporation of *‘abadim* in the observance of Sukkot, and in connection with the avoidance of taking legal advantage of alien, orphan, and widow and with leaving gleanings for them.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The exhortation to remember occurs once more in Deuteronomy in a quite different connection. Israel is to remember Amalek’s attacking it on the way from Egypt when people were exhausted, its cutting down stragglers and thus showing no reverence for God. Israel is to blot out Amalek’s memory from under the heavens, and not to forget to do so (Deut 25:17-19). Deuteronomy has again developed the Exodus version of the story, where Amalek’s attack is apparently unprovoked and Yahweh commissions the writing of a document to keep alive the memory of Yahweh’s oath to blot out Amalek’s memory. It is not explicit there that *Israel* is to remember; Exodus is reminding Israel of a promise concerning what Yahweh will do.

Deuteronomy’s exhortation contrasts with a conviction implied elsewhere in the Old Testament that one should be prepared to forgive and forget wrongdoing. Shimei urges David, "May my lord not count waywardness to me or remember how your servant went astray on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem,” and David agrees, though on his deathbed he points out to Solomon that his son is not bound by his father’s oath (2 Sam 19:19 [20]; 1 Kings 2:9). The Joseph story does not use the words *remember* or *forget*, but Joseph shows himself willing not to remember his brothers’ wrongdoing.

The Amalek exhortation about memory has been an embarrassment to Jews and Christians for two thousand years.[[75]](#footnote-75) Can it have any positive significance in connection with Old Testament theology and ethics? Can it make us think as well as provoke our indignation? Christians have sometimes identified other Christian groups as new embodiments of Amalek that should therefore be annihilated, but the Old Testament does not suggest that Israel might or did look at adversaries other than Amalek in this way. The nearest is the identification of Haman in Esther as an Agagite; there is then also the irony that the Jewish people end up behaving the same way as Haman in the story.[[76]](#footnote-76) One should have some sympathy with Jewish identification of Nazi Germany as an embodiment of Amalek, and the question of remembering and forgetting the Holocaust is a lively one. Yerushalmi comments that the problem about memory is how much to remember and how much to forget, and asks whether the antonym of forgetting is not remembering but justice.[[77]](#footnote-77) Ricoeur notes that forgetting can be ideological, like the European memory of the mid-twentieth century, and that the ambiguity of forgetting extends to the question of the obligation to forgive and the relationship of forgetting and forgiving.[[78]](#footnote-78)

That question makes one wonder whether the difference between the attitude of Joseph to his brothers and of Moses to Amalek, and the difference between David’s attitude to Shimei when he is returning to Jerusalem and when he is on his deathbed, relates to the difference between the attitude we may properly take individually to people who have wronged us and the attitude that a society may properly take to wrongdoing. Individuals turn the other cheek; societies punish the striker. When wrong is done, it throws the world out of kilter, and action taken against wrong reaffirms what is right.

Deuteronomy bases its argument for remembering Amalek on its having been the strong attacking the weak. Social memory can be presented as a realm of resistance against the public, dominant version of memory that is known as “history.” If traditional history was a discourse about the past produced by the victors and privileging those who had generated written evidence, memory might be seen as the repository of knowledge of “people without history,” or traumatized communities for whom remembering is an “act of faith.”[[79]](#footnote-79) One of our difficulties with the Amalek story as Western people is that we are Amalek. It’s not in our interest for Amalek to be remembered in the way Deuteronomy encourages.

The trouble is that “collective memory is particularly susceptible to politicized forms of remembering.” Remembering the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the Battle of the Boyne 1690, as well as the fall of Masada and Auschwitz, has fueled conflicts.[[80]](#footnote-80) Many conflicts persist because we cannot forget the past. Ernest Renan declared that “forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Memory both stabilizes and destabilizes.[[82]](#footnote-82) Nietzsche and Freud correlate memory with guilt and conscience. It’s “the wound that does not cease to hurt.” [[83]](#footnote-83) Ideally, the responsibility to remember lies upon third parties, to remember on behalf of both the victims and the perpetrators, as it is their responsibility to pray the protest psalms on behalf of both victims and perpetrators. In theory, at least, if the perpetrators and the third parties don’t forget, the victims can afford to do so and should do so, though they would be unwise to assume that this remembering will always persist, or will persist as long as it needs to (which is perhaps forever) to inhibit other perpetrators from repeating the same wrong.

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By means of its festivals and other observances, but also by means of its scriptures, Israel, says Assmann, “constructs itself as a community of learning and remembering.” [[84]](#footnote-84) The Old Testament thus sees remembering and forgetting as deliberate purposeful acts. It perhaps does not imply that they are always deliberate, and I’m not sure whether it is so. I suspect that some of my memories are random, but many are significant and in that sense deliberate. Perhaps some things that Israel remembers are random, but it certainly remembers things because they seem important and illuminating. They shape its faith, its hope, and its life—or at least, they are meant to do so.

1. Indeed, Kerwin Lee Klein speaks of “the memory industry” (“On the Emergence of *Memory* in Historical Discourse,” *Representations* 69 [2000], 127-50 [127]). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also (e.g.) Deut 8:11; also Exod 10:2; 13:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Deut 8:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. Deut 4:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deut 8:2; 9:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.g., Ezek 16:63. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Deut 8:11-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 2004), 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (reprinted New York: Schocken, 1989), 108-9. Klein (loc cit.) traces the beginning of the “scholarly boom” in memory studies to the original publication of *Zakhor* in 1982*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Zakhor*,10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jonathan Crewe, “Recalling Adamastor,” summarizing Maurice Halbwachs (see his *On Collective Memory*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1992), in Mieke Bal and others (eds.), *Acts of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 75-86 (75). Cf. James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford, UK/Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 39, referring to Mary Warnock, *Memory* (London: Faber, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. E.g., 1 Kings 4:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. Eising, *TDOT* 4:75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. E.g., 1 Kings 14:19, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mark S. Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Isa 43:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Isa 51:1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ezek 33:23-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2005), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. One can read the Pentateuch as the product of the selective memory that formed the Second Temple community (cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Memory, Tradition and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 [1997]: 76–82 [80]). But this understanding explains only elements of the Pentateuch; and anyway, Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are more certainly designed fulfill this function for the Second Temple community. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 88; cf. Ritva Williams, “Social Memory,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 41 *(*2011), 189-200 (192). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *The Memoirs of God*, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. “Exodus-Covenant,” in *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond* (eds. Athalya Brenner and Frank H. Polak; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2009), 106-25 (113, 106-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Frank H. Polak, “Negotiations, Social Drama and Voices of Memory in Some Samuel Tales,” in *Performing Memory*, 46-71 (46).. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Philip R. Davies, “Story, Memory, Identity: Benjamin,” in *Performing Memory*, 35-45 (44). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See Smith, *The Memoirs of God*, 141-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cf. Smith, “Remembering God,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 631–51; Smith speaks of Israel’s “conceptual amnesia about divinity” (649). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Michel Foucault, “Film and Popular Memory,” in *Foucault Live* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 89-106 (92). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Present Past* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1993), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. “Hope, Despair and Memory.” http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\_prizes/peace/laureates/1986/wiesel-lecture.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Deut 7:18; cf. Josh 1:13. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Isa 54:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 55, 10-11, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Lam 1:7, 9; 3:19-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Ps 77:3, 6, 11 [4, 7, 12] (I follow the ketib’s hiphil in v. 11a [12a], assuming that the qere has assimilated to the recurrence of the qal in the psalm); cf. 42:4, if its “remembering” relates to the past rather than to the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. E.g., Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1977). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Isa 51:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Exod 2:24; Lev 26:42. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Deut 4:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Exod 32:13; cf. Deut 9:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Ps 79:8; cf. 25:7; Neh 1:8. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Neh 5:19; 13:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (London: SCM, 1962), 41, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Lam 2:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Lam 5:1, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. The motif goes back to the Mishnah (Moed Taanit 2) but it can be expanded in different ways (cf. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 16, 22, 31, 34, 41-42, 43, 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK, 2001), 11, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Deut 5:2-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *Old Testament Theology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd/New York: Harper, 1965) 1:357-58; cf. “Gerichtsdoxologie,” *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Kaiser, 1973) 2:245-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. “Social Memory,” 189-200. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Natalia Bratova, “The Myth of St Petersburg in the Contemporary Russian Cinema. Balabanov’s *Brother*,” inJohanna Lindbladh (ed.), *The Poetics of Memory in Post-Totalitarian Narration* (Lund: Lund University, 2008), 121-25 (25). [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley/Oxford: University of California, 1993), 57. Does he use *reflexive* in the sense of *reflective*? [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. See *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford/New York: OUP, 1973; 2nd ed., 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Cf. Rafael Rodriguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory* (London/New York: Clark, 2010), 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Teresa Staneck, “Exodus-Covenant,” *Performing Memory*, 106-25 (106-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 53, summarizing Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Modern Library, [no date] 40-47). [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory*, 18. Cf. Rodriguez, 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Deut 5:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Deut 15:12-15; 16:12; 24:17-22. The earlier exhortation to “remember the day of your departure from the country of Egypt” (16:3) by observing the flatbread festival does not incorporate reference to *‘abadim* or to the experience of being an *‘ebed*. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. On the history of Jewish interpretation, see Avi Sagi, “The Punishment of Amalek in Jewish Tradition,” *HTR* 87 (1994), 323-46. For examples of Christian appropriation of the texts, see Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword* (New York: HarperOne, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Cf. Stan Goldman, “Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther,” *JSOT* 47 (1990), 15-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. *Zakhor*, 114, 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ricoeur *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 448, 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. [J. Pollman?] “Memory: Concepts and Theory,” <http://www.hum.leiden.edu/history/talesoftherevolt/approach/approach-1.html>, with references to scholars such as Yerushalmi. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. “What Is a Nation?” in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), 8-22 (11); cf. Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham*  (Oxford/New York: OUP, 2005), x. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Cf. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past* (Ithaca/London: Cornell UP, 1993), vii-viii. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory,* 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)