Moltmann, *Church in the Power of the Spirit*, 281-82.

Memory is the place where faith resides (Gutierrez, p. 5)

People need to shape their thinking more by the story and less by what has happened to them.

The psalms retell the story.

Sing a song of the hard path

Gratitude, thanksgiving

MacDonald, Nathan. *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism.”* Tübingen: Mohr, 2003. Ch. 4.

# Spirituality, Ethics, and Memory

# John Goldingay

Remembering is a key to spiritual and ethical life. In a class on Old Testament Ethics, a student happened to comment that there did not seem to be any thinking about the link between ethics and memory. He rightly implied that there surely was a link, not least because both the Old Testament and the New Testament make one. So I tried to discover if anything had been written on the connection, and I found just one book, *The Ethics of Memory*,by a Jewish philosopher, Avishai Margalit.[[1]](#footnote-1) So what set me thinking about memory was the question of the connection between memory and ethics, but I soon realized that Scripture relates memory at least as much to spirituality. Of course neither ethics nor spirituality is a category that the Bible itself uses; nor is theology. These categories came out of Western thinking rather than biblical thinking. That fact does not in itself mean we are wrong to work with such categories; when Europeans came to think about biblical faith in the centuries after biblical times, it was not wrong for them to seek to understand the faith in their categories. But that kind of translation has its dangers, and categories such as ethics, spirituality, and theology are inclined to conceptualize things and divide things up in a way that loses aspects of the way biblical thinking works. They are inclined to divide things that belong together. In biblical thinking, what we call spirituality and ethics are both aspects of relating to God, to one another, and to life. You cannot think about spirituality without thinking about ethics; you cannot think about ethics without thinking about spirituality. And in the twenty-first century in the West, it is particularly important not to let spirituality and ethics be separate.

I want to note four aspects of the relationship between spirituality, ethics, and memory – four things for us to remember

## 1 Remember the story on which the faith is based

First, we need to take account of the importance for spirituality of remembering the story on which our faith is based.

The Hebrew verb translated “remember” is *zākar*, but its meaning is broader than the English word “remember.” For instance, in Hebrew you can “remember” something that has not happened yet (e.g., Isa 47:7; Lam 1:9). Now people who are old enough to remember the movie *Back to the Future* will not have any problem with the idea of remembering the future, but the way Hebrew uses the verb rather indicates that *zākar* means “be mindful of” or “think about.” So you can “remember” the future or “remember” God or be mindful of God in the sense of being mindful of the future or of God ; but I’m not going to talk about this kind of mindfulness. I’m focusing on remembering that relates to the past.

Yet the way the Old Testament uses the word “remember” does draw our attention to the fact that sees remembering as a deliberate business. Spirituality and ethics are mindful acts. They involve using the mind. Paul says in Romans 12 that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds, and that very point in his argument in Romans illustrates how it is so. “I beseech you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies to God,” he says. He has spent eleven chapters expounding the operation of the mercies of God, and now he says, “therefore.” Apply your mind to the argument of these eleven chapters, will you, if you want to get your spiritual lives in order, he says. That’s the way you will get transformed by the renewing of your mind. The Romans are not to make the mistake Ezekiel 16 draws attention to, when in its history in the land, it did not remember the sad state it was in when Yahweh took up with it (Ezek 16:22, 43).

So I’m concerned with a particular kind of mindfulness, with when you apply your mind to the past. And obviously we can learn something about the way the Bible thinks about memory by looking at its use of the actual verb “remember,” but you do not necessarily get to the heart of how the Bible thinks by looking at individual words out of the context of sentences, and the Bible can be dealing with some theme or other without focusing on the use of a particular word. The first indicator that remembering is an important theme in the Bible is the fact that Scripture is dominated by the story of what God did with Israel over the centuries and what God did in Jesus and in the early church. Neither Genesis nor Matthew begins, “Remember this story,” but that is the implication of their telling their story, and it is the implication of the Jewish and Christian community’s letting this story dominate their Scriptures. It presupposes the importance of being mindful of the story on which your faith is based. But in addition, the Scriptures tell the story on which the faith is based in such a way as to write into it the story’s significance for the people who tell the story and the people who listen to it.

A few weeks ago, my wife and I went to hear two singer-songwriters who we knew were Christians but who were playing in an ordinary Hollywood club. One of the singers had made a song out of the story of Jesus’ stilling the storm, but the song simply paraphrased the story, without making any point of contact with twenty-first century California. The other singer sang a song about hope that she introduced by telling us that her aim in her singing was to give people hope, but she made no reference to the fact that Jesus is the reason for our hope; her song thus contrasts with the way the Scriptures speak little about hope but speak much about what we hope for. It seemed to us that expressing the gospel in song required something that combines the strength of retelling with the strength of contemporary linkage – not just retelling, like the first song, and not just contemporary application, but the two combined.

That’s the nature of memory as the Scriptures understand it, to judge from the way they tell their story. In the Old Testament, the clearest example comes in the Books of Samuel and Kings on one hand, and the Books of Chronicles on the other. Both these tell the story of Israel from Saul and David down to when the people of Judah were taken off into exile, but they tell the story differently because they are telling it for people in different situations. Samuel and Kings tell the story for the people who have experienced the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of many of its people, and they tell it in such a way as to draw people into acknowledging that this had happened because of the way they had turned away from God. Chronicles is a new version of the story, written in the time when God has made it possible for the people to rebuild the temple but when life is still pretty discouraging, so it tells the story in such a way as to encourage the people. In both versions of the story, there is memory and there is insight on how the story of the past relates to where people are now in their relationship with God.

Something similar is true about the Gospels. Their importance to us links with the fact that Christian faith is not whatever particular groups or people who call themselves Christian happen or decide to believe and do. Christian faith involves belief and action that match what Christ was and taught. The New Testament is thus concerned with the passing on of what Christ was and taught. Each of the Gospels is passing on the story of something that happened. But the Gospels do so in a way that shows the significance of Jesus for different groups of people. Mark puts the emphasis on the way God’s reign arrived in Jesus. Matthew makes Jesus Act II to the Old Testament’s Act I and has Jesus interpreting Torah. Luke makes Jesus Act I to an Act II in the church’s life. John presupposes the way the Holy Spirit interprets Jesus in the life of the church. Richard Horsley puts it this way: “The words and deeds of Jesus… transmitted to us depend upon and involve the active role of people who heard and witnessed Jesus. More than that, however, what was remembered was remembered because it was significant for the people who remembered it…. ‘What lives on in memory is what is necessary for present life.’”[[2]](#footnote-2)

A question you could think about is whether you resemble one or other of those two singer-songwriters. One of them, you see, was really good at thinking about the past story of Jesus but did not get into what it meant for us in our lives in 2011. The other was very good at trying to relate to the lives of people in California in 2011 but did not get into how the story of Jesus connected with those lives. Often the study of theology drives you into the first of those forms of study – it is just the investigation of something that happened historically. You may then live your life on a wholly other basis, on the basis of the natural instincts of someone in the United States in 2011. Which means you end up in the same place as that other singer-songwriter, who was more obviously conforming to her culture. It is easy for spirituality to conform to our culture. For instance, our concern is with ourselves as individuals and with our desire to look inside ourselves. So we make spirituality conform to those interests of ours. We need the application of our memory to the story on which our faith is based to rescue us from the concerns that we have because of the context in which we live.

Suppose you want to live in hope, as that second singer-songwriter wanted people to do. And suppose you want to encourage people to act in the conviction that they may achieve something, as every go-getting United States citizen who wants to make a difference desires to do. Remembering is of foundational importance. I like this other quote from Richard Horsley. He’s talking about the context of Jesus’ ministry. “The memory of God’s promises of blessings to the people, particularly of the great divine acts of //deliverance from foreign bondage and domestic exploitation and of their earlier independence in their own land, informed the apocalyptic imagination.” By the apocalyptic imagination he means people’s vision of the way God’s purpose could turn things upside down. Remembering what God had done for the people in the past enabled them to have a vision for the future, because “if life had not always been lived in subjection, then it need not remain in subjection for ever…. In placing the then-current situation in historical perspective the apocalyptic imagination… also involved a *critical demystifying* of the pretensions and practices of the established order. Emperors were not divine, and high priests were not sacrosanct.” In other words, remembering how God defeated the Egyptians and the Babylonians reminded them that God could defeat the Romans.

The festival of Passover each year brought that fact home. Many peoples’ festivals “functioned mainly to integrate human life into the sacred annual natural cycle,” Horsley goes on. It is the same in our culture, where our festivals are New Year, the Superbowl, Valentine’s Day, Spring Break, Mother’s Day, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving. In contrast, Horsley notes, “the Jewish Passover celebrated the people’s historical liberation…. Thus the memory evoked and celebrated in the festival came face to face with the very imperial order from which they hoped for deliverance.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For us, the equivalent would be observing Advent Sunday, Christmas, Epiphany, Ash Wednesday, Moundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day, and Pentecost. In Jesus’ day, Horsley notes, people were under the oppression of the power of Rome and also of their own religious establishment. How could they know whether there was any escape from that bondage? They could know because they used their memory, not their personal memory of things that had happened to them, but their community memory of what God had done with them in the past. It was the corporate memory preserved in the Scriptures that told them of how they had not always been a subject people and thus opened up the possibility that they might not always be in subjection.

It was the Scriptures that told them that this was so, but it was not only the Scriptures. The story of Passover was not only preserved in the Scriptures but brought home in that celebration each year. Remembering is not just something that happens in the mind. “Do this is remembrance of me,” Jesus said at his last dinner with his disciples, when they celebrated Passover. Memory involves doing as well as thinking. We celebrate the Lord’s Supper so that it becomes part of us – it involves eating, drinking, moving, as well as thinking. The outward expression to our coming to belong to Christ is baptism, and that event brings home the memory of Christ’s baptism in water and the baptism involved in his dying.

The Israelites had other aides-memoires, aids to memory. They wore garments that had tassels with purple cords to help them remember Yahweh’s commands, to stay faithful to Yahweh, and thus to give themselves to holiness (Num 15:37-40). How did these garments do so? One significance it has had for Jews emerges from the purple color, which reminds them of their royal status as a people. Another is the fact that the garments combined wool and linen, which was generally forbidden in the Torah but was allowed in some priestly garments, so that these garments reminded Israelites of their priestly status as a people.[[4]](#footnote-4)

A question we might think about is what aides-memoires we might adopt is order to make our remembering the story on which our faith is based part of our bodily lives. Remember the story on which your faith is based.

## 2 Remember the way God has related to you before

Second, remember the way God has related to you before.

When I watch a thriller such as *The Bourne Identity* trilogy, I wonder what it would be like to have everyone against me, to be able to trust no one, and then I come out of the story at the end and it is just a story. But recently we watched a movie called *Fair Game*, about a C.I.A. agent and her ex-ambassador husband who accidentally got involved in exposing the untruths about the intelligence concerning weapons of mass destruction on which our invasion of Iraq was based. Once again someone has everyone against her: people in the White House, her former colleagues in the C.I.A., the reporters camped on her doorstep, the people who send her death threats, the friends to whom she cannot explain things, the husband from whom she splits for a while…. This time the movie was “based on true events” rather than being pure fiction. Admittedly “inspired by true events” also implies not pure history, so you cannot press the story’s details. But being paranoid does not rule out the possibility that in real life everyone is against you.

Many of the Psalms are written for people who have everyone against them and who are seeking to cope with that experience before God. One of the coping mechanisms they presuppose is that you remind yourself and God and anyone else who is listening of the truths about God that can slip out of your mind in a crisis. You remind yourself about God’s power and God’s faithfulness and about the way God listens to prayers and the way God acts.

Yet suppose you are tempted to wonder whether those convictions about God are simply fancies that someone thought up. Is there any basis for them? One of the bases that the Psalms then refer to is your memory. We’ve considered that already in thinking about remembering the story on which the faith is based. But in addition, you remind yourself of your own, personal past experience. It is easy for a crisis to make us forget everything that has gone before, but the Psalms know the importance of being mindful of what God has done with us before. Those are facts to be kept in mind. “I remember the days of old,” Psalm 143 says, the occasions when God acted on our behalf, and this encourages my prayer now (Ps 143:5).

The first psalm in the book of Psalms that’s actually a prayer is Psalm 3, and it illustrates the point. Psalms 1 and 2, you see, are not prayers to God, they are more like promises to people, so Psalm 3 is the first psalm that’s a prayer. It starts off by telling God how many people are attacking the psalmist; it looks like a prayer for the king to pray, or for a leader like Nehemiah. It talks about the way people are saying to one another, “God’s not going to rescue *him*.” And part of the trouble with listening to people saying those words, “God’s not going to rescue *him*,” is that it is exactly what you are thinking. So you have to get into an argument with yourself about that statement. First the psalm does that thing I just mentioned – it affirms some key truths about God, about God being a shield and someone who lifts my head high. But it also implies an uncertainty about whether that is really true, because it goes on to talk about how things have been in the past, in the person’s own experience.

With my voice I would call to Yahweh, and he has answered me from his holy mountain.

I myself have laid down and slept; I have woken up, because Yahweh sustains me.

So I’m not afraid of a company of myriads that has taken its stand against me all around.

The psalm presupposes that the leader has been through crises before – it is easy to see how that would be true if a leader were praying this psalm. So it gets the leader to recall how he has known in the past what it is like to call out to God and to have God respond. He has known what it is like to go to bed not knowing whether you may get killed in the night, but then to wake up in the morning alive and well. He goes on to remember how has not had to smash his enemies on the jaw; he has been able to watch God do so. He can turn the other cheek. He can pray for God’s deliverance with confidence.

It has been said that no biblical command is as persistent as the command to “remember.” [[5]](#footnote-5) It is an overstatement, but it is not much of an overstatement. My wife tells me she has heard it said that actually the most common command in Scripture is “Do not be afraid” (I should tell you that I have discussed the topic of this paper with Kathleen a number of times, and the good bits come from her). There would be a link between these two commands, remember and do not be afraid. The person who remembers the wrong things, who remembers how much the enemy has achieved and forgets what God has done before, may be the person who is afraid. The person who remembers the right things may be the person who can avoid being afraid. Faced by the Canaanites, Moses tells the Israelites to remember what God did to the Egyptians (Deut 7:18). In the wilderness, they had failed to remember the wonders God had done and they had resolved to return to Egypt (Neh 9:17; cf. Ps 78:42; 106:7). Failing to remember imperiled their entire vocation as God’s people. They needed to remember God as the one who had acted in their lives and thus to safeguard against other deities, Judges says (Judges 8:33-34); but they failed to do so. There are other forms of misguided remembering of the past. In the wilderness they did remember the fish and the leeks and onions and garlic that they had in Egypt (Num 11:5): this shows they knew about cooking, but it meant they were remembering their time in Egypt in very selective fashion. “Remember that I am your own flesh and blood,” says Abimelech when he is planning a coup (Judg 9:2) and trying to highjack their memories to his own ends.

So it is not merely important to remember things; it is important to remember selectively. Many therapists encourage us to relive our memories, and such reliving can indeed be a means of healing. Yet a continual reliving of past memories can be a means of prolonging trauma rather than moving beyond it. It is said that depression comes from living too much in the past, while anxiety comes from living too much in the future. Maybe we should reformulate the aphorism. Depression comes from living in the wrong aspects of the past, anxiety comes from living in the wrong aspects of the future, or from living in the future in a way that ignores certain kinds of fact about the present and the past.

Memory is always selective. There’s a song called *The Way We Were[[6]](#footnote-6)* that looks back on a relationship and talks about memories as misty watercolors, scattered images. Was it all so simple then, as it seems when you think about it, the song asks, “or has time rewritten every line”? In Jeremiah 2:2, God remembers what things were like at a more idyllic stage in the relationship between God and Israel, when they were first married: “I remember the commitment of your youth,” God says. But that kind of remembering is just the kind that is selective; “a history of [one’s] emotions [Margalit comments] tends to become revisionist history.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It transpires that even God’s memory is selective, because sometimes God’s recalling of the early days of the relationship with Israel makes for a more aggressive memory than the one I just noted. Memories may be beautiful, the lyric of that song says, but “What's too painful to remember we simply choose to forget.” We’ll choose to remember the laughter, not the tears, when we remember “the way we were.” So we have to train our memories to be selective in a wholesome way. An alcoholic told me that alcoholics are inclined to remember the good things about drinking, and they have to be trained to remember the bad things about drinking.

Admittedly that selectivity is a complicated business. In Isaiah 46 God tells the Israelites, “Remember the former events, long ago, because I am God, there is no other” (Isa 46:9). Fifty years previously, God had walked out on Jerusalem and let the Babylonians destroy the city, and some of the survivors of that event and their descendants are still living in Judah, while some are living in Babylon. But a turning point in history is now happening. The army of Cyrus, the king of Persia, is about to conquer Babylon. For the average Babylonian this is clearly bad news, and it is hard for the Israelites to see it as good news, still less to believe that it might be God’s way of bringing about a new era in which God will return to Jerusalem and free the Israelites in Babylon to go back, a new era in which the temple will be rebuilt. They need to have their faith built up so that they can believe such an event might be possible, and for the prophet one of the keys to that upbuilding is memory. There are events in their past that establish that Yahweh is God, and there is no other, and therefore that God can be and is behind the political events taking place now. The prophet is not explicit about which earlier events God wants them to think about it. Maybe the prophecy refers to the wonders of God’s creation of the world – elsewhere it sometimes refers to these events. Or maybe the earlier events are God’s delivering the Israelites from Egypt and rescuing them from the Egyptians at the Red Sea. Or maybe they are other wonders in Israel’s history. Maybe we do not have to choose. The point is that the people’s own past provides evidence that Yahweh is God, and that looking to what God has done in their past as a people is key to faith in the present.

That might seem clear enough. To complicate the picture, the trouble is that Isaiah 43 has already also bidden people,

Do not remember the former events, do not think about earlier events.

There: I am doing something new. (Isa 43:18-19)

Memory, you see, can hold you back. It can discourage you from expecting God to do something new, or disable you from recognizing something new when God does it.

If the earlier events in their story as a people that the prophecy has in mind are God’s delivering them from Egypt and rescuing them from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, then it is shocking to tell the people to forget about them. It is almost like a Christian preacher telling you to forget about Jesus’ resurrection. But maybe the preacher might do so to get you to focus on the fact that Jesus is coming again. And the prophet might tell people to forget about God’s delivering people from Egypt centuries ago in order to get them to focus on the new act of deliverance that God is going to do, in delivering the people from the power of Babylon. You can fail to focus enough on what God has done for you before, or you can focus on it in such a way that you cannot imagine God acting now.

There are other senses in which the prophet might want people to forget earlier events. The earlier events might be the first stages of Cyrus’s creating his empire, so that the prophecy is saying to the Israelites, “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” Or maybe it is going behind that event to that time fifty years previously when God had walked out of Jerusalem and let the Babylonians destroy it. It would not be surprising if many Israelites in Babylon could not imagine God going back to Jerusalem and the temple being rebuilt. Jerusalem remembers the precious things she once had, Lamentations says (Lam 1:7). It cannot imagine a future. In that kind of connection, the prophet says, “Don’t think about the past.” Whether it is the distant past or the recent past, God’s acts of blessing or God’s acts of destruction, do not let the past limit what you can believe could happen in the future.

## 3 Remember the obligations that the past places upon you

Third, remember the obligations that the past places upon you. I’ve been suggesting that remembering what God has done for you is of key importance to your looking to the future; I want now to point out that it is of key importance to your living a good life, a holy life, in relation to other people and more broadly in relation to God.

Human relationships involve remembering one another. Joseph challenges his fellow-prisoner to remember him when he gets released; but he does not (Gen 40:14, 23). Abigail urges David to remember her when God has fulfilled his good purpose for him (1 Sam 25:31). Joash fails to remember the commitment of Jehoiada and kills his son (2 Chron 24:22). The wicked person does not remember to act with commitment to other people (Ps 109:16). Edom did not remember the covenant of brotherhood (Amos 1:9). If you want to be holy, you need to cultivate your memory.

In this connection, while there is something to be said for forgetting the sufferings of the past, there is something to be said for remembering them, too. Israelites are urged to remember their past suffering. They are to remember that they were servants in Egypt, so as to be able to take this experience into account in the way they treat their servants and other needy people (Deut 5:12-15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22). They are to remember the long way Yahweh led them on a forty-year journey through the wilderness to test them and teach them and discipline them (Deut 8:2-6). They are to remember how Yahweh provided for them through the wilderness, so that they still look to Yahweh as provider and not think they can look after themselves, or look to other gods (Deut 8:11-20).

The same issue arises in Isaiah 58, which talks about loosing faithless chains, untying the cords of the yoke, letting the broken go free, and smashing yokes (Isa 58:6). The community has had God do that freeing for it, in liberating it from the domination of Babylon. But what is Israel doing now? Instead of modeling or facilitating that liberation in relation to other peoples, it is failing even to embody it in its own life (which would perhaps be the way it brought freedom to other peoples). People fail to recognize how their behavior contrasts with the way Yhwh had treated the community in releasing it from bondage to Babylon. There needs to be a connection between experiencing such acts of deliverance by God and the lives we then live. Mark Gray comments, “As people who had an experience and a memory of ‘the yoke’ of exile themselves and who, further, had felt that yoke broken by God in their release from captivity, they should have been the people committed to maintaining and extending the freedom of others, especially the freedom of their neighbors.”[[8]](#footnote-8) But they are not.

Part of the background of the Lord’s Meal is the practice of table fellowship in Jesus’ ministry.

The problem in Corinth is that their celebration of the Lord’s Meal rather too closely follows social convention in the way well-to-do people and ordinary people took part. For Paul the bread and the wine are then “the primary expressions of the unity of the congregation and… the means to that unity.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

As there is something to be said for forgetting the suffering of the past but also something to be said for remembering it, so it is with the shame of the past. Isaiah 54 exhorts people,

Don’t be afraid, because you will not be shamed; do not be humiliated, because you will not be disgraced.

Because you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will not remember any more.

Because your maker is your lord. (Isa 54:4-5)

The prophecy looks back to the time when Israel was young as a people. That could go back to the time of Moses and the subsequently century or two, a time when Israel was often unfaithful to God and paid for it. But the prophecy is actually addressing Jerusalem, so perhaps it is referring especially to the time of the kings, which was also a time of recurrent unfaithfulness and of invasion and defeat – so a time of shame for the unfaithfulness and for the humiliation. That’s what the prophet calls the time of Israel’s youth. The prophet then refers to the time of Jerusalem’s widowhood, the time when Yahweh divorced the city, walked out on it because of that unfaithfulness, and let it be destroyed. You can forget all that now, the prophet says. It is not going to be like that anymore.

So there is something to be said for forgetting the sin and the shame. But there is also something to be said for remembering them. “Remember how you provoked God in the wilderness,” Moses urges the Israelites (Deut 9:7). In response to Yahweh’s remembering, Israel is to remember its wrongdoing and feel the shame of it (Ezek 16:63; cf. 20:43; 36:31). “It is hard to remember a past humiliation without reliving it,” Margalit comments.[[10]](#footnote-10) And that can be a good thing. There are one or two sins in my life that I still especially remember and am ashamed of, even though I know they are forgiven, but the memory holds me back from committing those sins again.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The obligation of memory extends to people who are themselves past. After my death I would quite like to be remembered; to remember me will be an act of love. After my first wife died two years ago, I wrote a kind of memoir about here which I called *Remembering Ann*, partly because I thought the significant ministry she had deserved to be remembered. It deserved remembering for her sake, but it deserved remembering for the sake of people who might be blessed by reading her story. Hebrews 11 speaks of Abel as someone who was dead, but still speaks; and it had been observed to me that the same was true of Ann.

Avishal Margalit opens his book on the ethics of memory with an anecdote about the outrage expressed at an army commander who had forgotten the name of one of his soldiers who had been killed.[[12]](#footnote-12) To forget the name is to forget the person. It is not to care. The Jewish or Armenian community’s commitment to keeping alive the memory of their destroyed past communities is an act of love. It denies the destroyers the fulfillment of their aim. Further, whereas it might be thought that the Jewish community and the Armenian community should now put out of mind the genocide of their people in the first half of the twentieth century, it is noteworthy that these two communities are prominently active in supporting anti-genocide activists in the present century, such as people seeking to make known the needs of the people of Darfur. Another link between memory and ethics emerges.

Remember the Amalekites’ wrongdoing, Moses tells Israel (Deut 25:17). Admittedly, preserving the memory of the people who were destroyed also preserves the memory of the destroyer; but the first is an act of love, the second an act of judgment. Maybe remembering also reduces the possibility of a repetition of the event, though it is less clear whether this is so when you are remembering someone else’s wrongdoing than when you are remembering your own. Further, such an argument turns the remembering into a utilitarian act, as happens when we argue for capital punishment on the basis of its being a deterrent to murder or other serious crimes. If there is an argument for capital punishment, it is not that it is a deterrent but that it punishes the person who has acted, it honors the victim of the action, and it honors the values and standards of the offender’s society.

There is a biblical concern with blotting out people’s name and also a concern with causing the name to be remembered (e.g., Deut 29:20; 1 Sam 24:21; 2 Sam 18:18). It suggests that there can be two stages to an act of murder, the destruction of the person and then the destruction of the name. The Jerusalem Holocaust memorial is called Yad Vashem, A Monument and a Name (the phrase comes from Isaiah 56:5), because it seeks to ensure a remembering of the names of the victims, and thus of the people themselves. Yet there is something in the phrase “forgive and forget.” Individuals who spend years seeking to recover their lost memories of the past may find healing in doing so, but may not. People who keep reliving traumas from the past may perpetuate their trauma rather than escaping it. It is sometimes said that awareness of the Holocaust holds back the state of Israel in its relationships in the Middle East rather than protecting it, and that for some people, at least, South Africa’s “Truth and Reconciliation” Commission may be based on a false premise, in that for them its proceedings prolong the memory of the horror of the past that people were trying to forget.

These examples show how remembering is not merely individual. My local Episcopalian church is mostly African-American. It was founded nearly a century ago as a result of the first great migration of African-Americans out of the South, which mostly took people to northern cities but also brought people to California. Some of them sought to join three Episcopal churches in the Los Angeles area, but they were rebuffed one way or another. In Pasadena, the members of the big Episcopal church arranged for the building of a small Episcopal church in the part of town where African-Americans had settled, so that the white people in the church could send their black servants there. Hardly anyone now alive was old enough to be involved in those events, but they are part of the collective memory, the shared memory, of Episcopalians in our diocese and in our city. Just a few months ago we had a service of repentance in our cathedral center for the way we had behaved in relation to the African-American community. Although I was not born when this story began and I have lived in Los Angeles for only fourteen years, I am part of the white “we” that needed to remember and repent, and also part of the African-American community that remembers, because I am priest-in-charge of that largely African-American parish. Churches, dioceses, religious communities, seminaries, families, clans, are communities of memory.[[13]](#footnote-13) Memory depends on relationship and relationship depends on memory. If we are content to be isolated individuals, we need not concern ourselves with memory.[[14]](#footnote-14) But if we want to be fully human, we will need to remember the way God has related to us in the past, related to us individually and related to us as communities.

## 4 Remember that God remembers

Fourth, remember that God remembers. In fact, the Bible’s first explicit references to memory refer to God’s remembering. After the flood, “God remembered Noah” (Gen 8:1). Then, when God made a commitment to Noah and the new humanity after the flood, God promised, “I will remember my covenant between me and you” (Gen 9:15-16). God remembers the afflicted, Psalm 9 says (Ps 9:12 [13]). Other psalms declare that God has remembered his commitment (Ps 98:3), remembered his covenant (Ps 105:8), remembered his holy word [of promise] (Ps 105:42). God has remembered us and will bless us (Ps 115:12). Thus the story of Hannah, one of my absolute favorite stories in the entire Bible, shows how prayer involves appealing to God’s capacity to remember (1 Sam 1:11). When we make commitments, it is easy for us to put them out of mind later, and we may think we are right to do so. The classic example is that of marriage, when half the people in our culture who make a lifelong commitment to someone else realize that they cannot keep it, they have to go back on it. One of the problems about being God is that you cannot act in that way. God remembers

Admittedly, the fact that God remembers things has a bad side to it. God remembers your wrongdoing, remembers your turning to other deities, say Jeremiah and Hosea (Jer 44:21; cf. Hos 7:2). It is in that connection that God’s memory is then selective, like ours. “So he turned into an enemy to them; he himself fought against them,” Isaiah 63 notes, but then “he remembered the days of old, remembered Moses, his people (Isa 63.:10-11).

The climax of that process is that when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, God did not remember his footstool, Lamentations says (Lam 2:1). The heavens are God’s throne and the earth is his footstool, you see. God sits in the heavens in glory and puts his feet up on the earth; specifically Jerusalem is the place where he puts his feet up. But when its people turned to other deities, when they declined to keep God in mind, God returned the compliment. God put Jerusalem out of mind. If God remembers you, you are secure; if God decides to forget you, you are finished.

But God cannot finally forget Israel. In the account of God’s words at Sinai in Leviticus, God anticipates that thing happening that Hosea and Jeremiah and Lamentations talk about, and makes a similar statement about how he will remember his commitment (Lev 26:42, 45); evidently forgetting will not be final. God makes a similar statement when the exile has happened, in Ezekiel (Ezek 16:60). There the background is the prospect of the Israelites failing to keep their side of the covenant, and the prospect of God’s taking them into exile, and then the actuality of those happenings. When they face the facts about their relationship with God, God will remember the covenant with their ancestors. The encouraging aspect to these references to God’s memory is that it operates in a positive way in connection with people’s wrongdoing. God made commitments that it was impossible to get out of even if Israel thumbed its nose at God. So God is still committed to the Jewish people and still committed to the church and still committed to you and me despite the way we fail to keep our side of the commitment.

Therefore Israel can pray in Isaiah 64, “don’t remember waywardness forever” (64:9 [8]). And part of God’s response is to say in Isaiah 65,

The former troubles will have been put out of mind; they will have been hidden from my eyes.

Because here I am, creating a new heavens and a new earth.

The former things will not be remembered; they will not come to mind. (65:17)

God has forgotten the sins that led to the exile and the trouble that these sins led to. Yes, God’s memory is selective. God’s mind is now all on the future. God is going to create a heavens and a new earth. He’s not talking about a new cosmos, exactly – there’s no need of a new cosmos. There’s nothing wrong with the cosmos. The context makes clear that God is talking about a new Jerusalem, a new city, a new community there. God will forget the nasty aspects of the past and give people a new future.

Maybe the fact that God remembers is the most important aspect of the link between spirituality and memory. Yes, it is important that we remember the story on which the faith is based. It is important that we remember the way God has related to us ourselves in the past. It is important that we remember the obligations that the past places on us. But it is most important that God remembers, which is in small ways a solemn fact, but in big ways an encouraging fact.

1. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (reprinted Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993), p. 165, quoting W. H. Kelber, *The Oral and Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*,pp. 143-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. So Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1990), pp. 401-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elie Wiesel, *Kingdom of Memory* (New York: Summit, 1990), p. 9, as quoted by Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Written by Alan Bergman, Marilyn Bergman, and Marvin Hamlisch, and performed in the movie *The Way We Were* by Barbra Streisand. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, pp. 110, 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah* (New York/London: Clark, 2006), p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 609-20, following Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982; see pp. 165-66); quotation from p. 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. On the “dialectical tension” over remembering and forgetting, see John Barton, “Forgiveness and Memory in the Old Testament,” in Markus Witte (ed.), *Gott und Mensch* (Otto Kaiser Festschrift;Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2005), 1.987-95 (p. 994). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The Ethics of Memory*, pp. vii, 18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)