

Cultural Memory, Biblical Studies, and Jan Assmann (1938-2024)

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Cultural memory has not been adequately appreciated in Anglo-American biblical scholarship, including Biblical Performance Criticism. The death of Jan Assmann on February 19, 2024 offers an opportunity to focus renewed attention to his work on *cultural memory* and to the usefulness of *the concept* for the interpretation of biblical texts.

By academic training an Egyptologist, Assmann published extensively on the history, religion, architecture, and the hieroglyphic writing system of ancient Egypt, and he interpreted Egyptian civilization in the broad context of cultural theory. As director of the *Institute of Egyptology*, University of Heidelberg, he conducted archaeological field work in and around Thebes, the ancient administrative center of Upper Egypt.

Assmann's research and range of interests included three closely interrelated areas. First, there were issues that strictly pertained to ancient Egypt: beliefs and rituals, funerary practices and tomb inscriptions, solar cult and cosmotheism, political theology and sacral kingship, views of death and immortality, concepts of justice or Ma'at, wisdom and mystery, time and eternity, and the religious-political revolution of Akhenaten in the fourteenth century B.C.E. which carried out the transformation of polytheism into monotheism.

A second area of Assmann's interests concerned the disciplinary expansion of Egyptology through assimilation of the Western reception history of Egypt. Three among his numerous books were specifically devoted to the West's imaginative reconstruction of Egypt. In *Moses the Egyptian* (1997; German. transl., 1998) Assmann carried forward a discussion which in the twentieth century had been initiated by Sigmund Freud (1939) and continued by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1991). Moving into the domain of classical music, he wrote a book on Mozart's operatic masterpiece, *Die Zauberflöte* (2005) which, he argued, was infused with themes drawn from eighteenth century European Egyptomania, and thought to have originated in Egyptian initiation rituals. In *Thomas Mann und Ägypten* (2006), Assmann turned to modern literature and examined the image of Egypt, shaped after ancient mythological patterns, which Mann had portrayed in his monumental tetralogy *Joseph und seine Brüder* (1964).

Third, over the last thirty years Assmann's name has been increasingly associated with the concept of *cultural memory*. This reputation was initially based on *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung, und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (1992), a book which in Germany and far beyond has acquired something equaling canonical status. In English it appeared under the title *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (2011). The book's achievement was threefold: a theoretical exposition of *cultural memory*, its detailed application to the civilizations of ancient Egypt, Israel, and Greece, and the concept's development into a general theory of culture. Translated into many languages, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* was

instrumental in promoting what came to be called the “cultural turn” in the human and social sciences.

Assmann’s memory model was inextricably tied to group and group identity; it was socially conditioned, not biologically determined. Deeply inspired by the pioneering work of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, and additionally drawing on numerous theorists of memory, Assmann traced the labyrinthian paths of how individuals, nations, and civilizations construct memories and fashion counter-memories, select and repress remembrances, and seek to stem the tide of forgetfulness. Since, in Assmann’s view, the basic human disposition “would seem to favor forgetting rather than remembering” (*Cultural Memory*, 51), memory represents the cultural feat that requires work, and calls for explanation.

Briefly, Assmann’s paradigm of *cultural memory* proceeded from the premise that memory’s concern was with the past, or more accurately, with the enigma of the actualization of the past in the present. A basic tenet of *cultural memory* stated that we take hold of the past through memorially mediated forms, mindful that “memory cannot preserve the past as such” (26). No matter how strenuous our efforts to retrieve the past, we always possess it as a remembered past. A second tenet affirmed that remembering was decisively influenced by social frames and intellectual contexts lodged in the present. People “are only able to remember what can be reconstructed as a past within the referential framework of their own present” (26). A third tenet declared that the inclination of *cultural memory* to secure the past through presently available channels is prompted by the desire to consolidate the identity formation of those who engage in remembrances. Fourthly, since memory is both a selective and a dynamic force, it is subject to historical and generational changes. Critical moments in history necessitate a reconstruction of the past and a realignment of a people’s identity in response to changing circumstances. In sum, *cultural memory* does not function conservatively, but constructively: “In remembrance the past is being reconstructed” (17; own trans.).

As far as our dealings with the past were concerned, Assmann distanced himself from the concepts both of tradition and history. Tradition, he argued, foregrounded continuities at the expense of change and disruption, and historiography did not take sufficiently seriously its inescapable implication in the intellectual climate of the present. Hence, the term *cultural memory* “seems more cautiously suitable” (51).

It is imperative to note that Assmann did not in any way dispute the realities of factual history. To be sure, he considered the issue of factuality versus fictionality as irrelevant – but not because he denied the historicity of the past, but because, in his view, the past was accessible only via our present memorial apperception.

Unlike Nietzsche and Derrida, Assmann was not a culture critic. His life’s work is an impressive example of a scholarship firmly grounded in one discipline, while continuously extending intellectual boundaries, without ever losing touch with his home discipline. He was preeminently, although by no means exclusively, a *mnemohistorian* who concerned himself with the history of the memorial afterlife of events.

Inevitably, his substantial body of work not only garnered celebratory acclaim, but also triggered critical responses. The notion that the past is “a cultural creation” (33) was met with objections among humanists and social scientists alike. Whatever the validity of this premise, it remains one of Assmann’s noble achievements to have constructed *cultural memory* not through the lens of historicity, but as a fully recognized subject *sui generis*. His paradigm applied to memory proper, not to memory held up against the standards of history. Laments about the deficits of memory were therefore missing the point. It was, above all, his thesis concerning an affinity between monotheism and religious violence that provoked a spirited discussion. And yet, the thesis seemed understandable coming from an Egyptologist who was haunted by Freud’s *Der Mann Moses*, preoccupied with Akhenaten’s violent usurpation of polytheism, and startled by the remarkably negative characterization of Egypt in the Hebrew Bible. The discussion prompted Assmann to develop a lengthy response by way of two major publications: *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel, and the Rise of Monotheism* (2008) and *The Price of Monotheism* (2009).

It is common academic practice to discuss the work of Jan Assmann alongside that of Aleida Assmann (née Bornkamm), professor of English Literature and Egyptology, and expert in cultural studies, memory, media, and identity construction, among others. Initially, the Assmanns collaborated in the writing of *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* with the goal of a joint authorship, until they realized that their fascination with memory was taking them in different directions - Jan pursuing his interest in ancient civilizations, and Aleida covering Western history from antiquity to (post)modernity. In the end, Jan authored *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, and Aleida published a companion volume under the title *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (1999), which appeared in translation as *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (2011). Over the last fifty years, the Assmanns have been engaged in separate, but closely related research careers, each accomplishing a body of work of uncommon scholarly breadth and depth, while at the same time continuing to collaborate and to benefit from each other’s activities. In recognition of their individual and collaborative contributions, a number of prizes were jointly awarded to Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann: the Balzan Prize (2017), the Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers (2018), and the Pour le Mérite for Sciences and Arts (2020).

In October 2000, shortly before Jan and Aleida Assmann acquired an international reputation, I invited them for three weeks of seminars and lectures to Rice University’s *Humanities Research Center*. Subsequently, I initiated the translation of Jan’s *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* and Aleida’s *Erinnerungsräume*. I take this opportunity to express my thankful appreciation to Beatrice Rehl, publishing director, Cambridge University Press, for securing the translation of the two volumes.

It is fair to observe that *cultural memory* has not gained a firm foothold in Anglo-American biblical scholarship. Both in exegetical studies and in hermeneutical deliberations it has remained an infrequently acknowledged subject. I recognize four reasons to account for this situation. In the first place, differences between the English and German terminology have muddled the international discourse. While cultural studies in English rely on the single term of *memory*, the German language differentiates between *Gedächtnis* and *Erinnerung*. *Gedächtnis* is more product-oriented, and *Erinnerung* more process-oriented. For example, the *kulturelle Gedächtnis* refers to the theoretical concept of a particular type of memory theory, while *Erinnerung* relates to the transmission of Jesus

remembrances in the gospel tradition. These are among the issues that have contributed to confusion and misunderstandings.

Second, biblical studies in the United States are being conducted in a pluralistic academic environment. The availability of intellectual space for a diversity of interpretive models has made it difficult for any single approach to gain a position of dominance.

A third reason that cultural memory has not been well appropriated is that, despite the fact that the period of form criticism's supremacy is past, "the long shadows of form-historical research" (Hübenthal) are still clouding exegetical habits of mind. The discipline is far from having emancipated itself from the notion that the biblical tradition is intelligible without reference to memory.

Fourth, to the extent that memory theory has been gaining currency, it is used predominantly as a historical-theological category, whereby the historical dimension is narrowed down to the facticity of past events, and memory's theological profile highlights aspects of continuity with the past.

Readers who wish to familiarize themselves with the significance of *cultural memory* for the interpretation of New Testament texts, might find it helpful to consult the following materials. In 2005 Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher edited a volume of essays under the title *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity (Semeia Studies 52)*. While there is a notable spread of nuances between the fourteen essays, and not all of them strictly follow the Assmann paradigm, the publication still serves as a valuable introduction into memory theory from cultural, social perspectives. In German biblical scholarship, Sandra Hübenthal stands out as the most prominent representative of memory theory in the Halbwachs-Assmann tradition. She is the author of the first major commentary on a New Testament text that applied and carried further the new memory paradigm: *Das Markusevangelium als kollektive Gedächtnis* (2014). Six years later, the English translation appeared, accomplished by the author herself, and entitled *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Eerdmans, 2020). The translation is provided with an additional epilogue which traverses a vast landscape of methodological and hermeneutical issues.

Hübenthal's model of *mnemohistory* is characterized by a tripartite structure: *social memory* (oral, multi-perspectival), *collective memory* (scriptural, single point perspective), and *cultural memory* (formalization, such as in canonical construction). Mark's gospel, so Hübenthal's argument, was situated at a critical generational threshold some forty years after the founding events. It negotiated a re-memorization, e.g., a memorial transit from *social* to *collective memory* via a new medium (chirography) and a new genre (narrative). Hübenthal's 2022 book, *Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament: Eine methodisch-hermeneutische Einführung*, is an exemplary primer on *social memory* theory and its application to New Testament texts. Eminently reader-friendly, enriched with numerous explanatory graphics, provided with a useful glossary, the book ideally serves as a textbook for graduate students and faculty alike. Earlier this year Hübenthal published a volume of ten essays entitled *Memory Theory in New Testament Studies: Exploring New Perspectives*, which seeks to understand a wide span of early Christian texts as products of *social, cultural memory* - ranging from the gospels to 2 Thessalonians all the way to Polycarp's Letter to the Philippians.

“Memories of the dead,” Jan Assmann once wrote, “are the primal form of cultural memory” (“die Urform kultureller Erinnerung”). Now that he has left us, the process of remembering is being set into motion. True to his own memory concept, his work will be best remembered, most deeply respected, and ideally carried forward not by reiteration, but by inventive application and creative reconstruction.