
With the publication of this important handbook, Huebenthal demonstrates that memory theory (*Gedächtnistheorie*) is indispensable for clarifying the emergence of the New Testament literature. Perhaps counterintuitively for readers who might be new to memory approaches, she argues that the principal application of *Gedächtnistheorie* is not historiographical but *kulturwissenschaftlich*: how the past is interpreted and constructed to forge early Christianity’s emergent cultural identity. Memory theory, Huebenthal holds, is not a historiographical but a hermeneutical category: it tells us about cultural identity formation, not about the facts of history. In this same connection, its advantage is to take classic problems of New Testament scholarship beyond standard theological and *sui generis* explanations and bring them into the light of the broader sciences of culture. I will first give a distillation of the groundbreaking contents of the volume, and then open a critical dialogue on a few points.

Memory theory’s pertinence, Huebenthal shows, begins right with the formation of the episodic tradition: human experiences universally take cognitive form in memory as narrative, in a range of narrative templates (*Erzählmuster*). Moreover, cognitive memory formation is semantic; it imprints experiences narratively with *meaning*, or, put in terms of Markan materials such as call stories, healing stories, and pronouncement stories, it distills out and foregrounds elements of existential and Christological significance. Narrative memory formation, that is to say, is indissolubly bound up with cultural identity formation. This is because individual memory takes shape within *social frameworks*, that is, within affinity groups, the diagnostic case being the family with its fund of narratives that constitute the family identity.

The social frameworks for memory are not static, however, but dynamic, which means that the way that the past is remembered is dynamic. Put differently, a group’s perception, interpretation, and retrieval of its salient past is contingent, which is to say: determined by and relative to its present social frameworks. It is a matter of “Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit” (p. 48). This point is of central importance to Huebenthal, and she holds to it quite categorically: a group’s representation of its past, she says, will be a social construction of its present. That is, the gospel narratives do not inform us about who Jesus was, but rather who Jesus is for the particular communities of memory from which they emerge (pp. 48–49).
Drawing on a model developed by the oral historian Jan Vansina and adopted by Jan Assmann, Huebenthal identifies the two principal points of crisis for a community of memory. The first—and particularly precarious for an emergent, marginal movement like primitive Christianity—is the generational shift at the forty-year marker, when the cohort of living bearers of memory is passing from the scene. This prompts a programmatic shift of the socially dispersed memory traditions to the more durable medium of writing. It accounts for the appearance of the Gospel of Mark around AD 70 (not the sole factor but certainly the leading factor) and its comprehensive narrative project.

The second is the floating gap, which opens up with the passing of the final generation to have had a living connection to the first generation (i.e. still able to claim acquaintance with people who could remember original members of the movement), that is, eighty to one hundred and twenty years on. This floating gap therefore effectively severs subsequent generations from living memory connections with definitive formative events. The consequence is acceleration of the process of canonization of normative writings.

Huebenthal correlates these cultural inflection points to a tripartite schema worked out by Aleida Assmann. The first category in the schema is social memory, which designates the diffused episodic memories of the first generation, circulating face-to-face. The second is collective memory: at the forty-year gap, the concentration of these diffuse materials into a unified narrative sequence that becomes the principal narrative basis for a unified cultural identity (i.e. the Gospel of Mark). The third stage is cultural memory: at the “floating gap,” the canonization of works of the collective memory period in order to secure cultural identity for the long term.

In Huebenthal’s hands this becomes a schema of remarkable power for explaining the emergence not just of the gospels but also the epistles and thereby for mapping the New Testament writings comprehensively onto a cultural-formation trajectory. Memory approaches, that is, are the basis for a kulturwissenschaftliche analysis of the classic problems in Christian origins and early Christian literature, and as we noted, the basis for a productive widening of perspective beyond the theological and ecclesiological factors typically adduced to account for the appearance of gospels, pseudepigraphic epistles, and the impulse to canonization in the second century.

Huebenthal carries out full demonstrations of this explanatory capability in several case studies from across the genres of the New Testament writings, using the analogy of a “family album” that contains pictures of family members over three or four successive generations.
Paul in his undisputed epistles is exemplary of the “social memory” phase of primitive Christian identity-formation, of face-to-face circulation of foundational memories in the generational context of living witnesses. It is in this phase that diverse understandings of the cultural identity of this new “family” are contesting with one another, and a unitary cultural identity (in Huebenthal’s schema, the shift to a collective memory) is still in development. Galatians captures this situation most clearly: Paul is personally in touch with Peter, James, and the Jerusalem community, from whom he has direct knowledge of foundational events of Jesus’ death and resurrection. He recollects with the Galatian believers shared memories of his recent personal presence with them. In the epistle itself he works strenuously on construction of the cultural identity of this “family,” with reference to the normative framework of the Jewish scriptures. The urgent issue of cultural identity has been precipitated by the influx of Gentile believers into this emerging family, which at the same time understands itself as belonging to an older, Jewish family, with an established cultural identity. Galatians, Huebenthal aptly says, gives us a “snapshot of early Christian identity in formation” (p. 150).

For its part the Gospel of Mark is the signal work of the collective memory phase, i.e., consolidation around a widely shared narrative identity. In response to the first crisis of memory—the passing of the immediate generational connection to Jesus—the Gospel consolidates the diffuse episodic materials of the “social memory” phase in the durability of written medium within a master narrative that now stabilizes and securely anchors a normative cultural identity (Grunderzählung). This narrative of foundational events, however, models the present social and ritual identity of a movement now constituted of Jew and Gentile, a social reality that receives representation in the master narrative’s two eucharistic Feeding stories, replete with Jewish and Gentile symbolism respectively, and in the common encounters of Jesus with both Jewish and Gentile characters (Erzählfiguren). That this collective memory phase is in flux is evident in Luke’s adaptation of Mark’s narrative to his social and cultural frameworks, narratively depicting Jesus as a Hellenistic city dweller and frequent guest at symposia. The Acts of the Apostles sequel depicts the now self-subsistent Christian movement secure in its stabilized identity within the Roman world, an identity that though a social novum remains inseverable from its connections to Jewish scriptural and cultural tradition (secured by Paul in Galatians), against emerging impulses to the contrary.

In extraordinarily insightful studies of Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, and 2 Peter, Huebenthal analyzes these epistles widely identified as pseudepigraphic as strategic responses to the same crisis that the Gospel of Mark
responds to: the absence of the eyewitness, or, more specifically for these epistles, the passing of the living, immanent apostolic authority that is evident in Galatians. The response is to secure a continuity of authoritative tradition by means of the pseudepigraphic strategy. This is achieved by the back-projection of pressing contemporary issues and the presentation of them as being resolved by the apostolic authorities Paul and Peter, narratively depicted as absent and distanced. In Colossians the Pauline voice in fact speaks not to situational issues but expounds more widely salient Christological and soteriological principles and issues of praxis. Similarly, it includes explicit instructions for wider circulation.

In 2 Peter, Huebenthal points out, the distance from the normative period of origins appears even wider. In fact, the epistle is to be positioned on the other side of the 80–120 year floating gap, when the three-generation span of living memory connection to members of the founding generation has reached its terminal point. Paul is now known to the recipients through “all his letters” (3:15–16)—a perspective difficult to attribute to the historical Peter. The Petrine voice describes the eyewitness generation as having passed (3:4), but on the other hand identifies himself as a member of it (1:16–18), repressing the role of Peter in the gospel transfiguration narrative. The epistolary narrative is therefore completely upfront about its factitiousness, its strategic cultural function to tether the movement as it presently exists historically to the now far-receding foundational generation, and more precisely, to Peter, and through Peter, to Jesus himself. Huebenthal puts the point elegantly: “Dabei geht es weder um Nostalgie noch darum, die Vergangenheit zu falschen, ... sondern darum, eine Verbindung zur eigenen Tradition herzustellen und sich der Herkunft und Wurzeln bewusst zu werden, die die eigene Identität prägen” (p. 247). The same concern to be able to articulate a multigenerational “Tradentenketten” across the floating gap appears in Papias—whose activities coincide with the imminence of the floating gap—and then also in Irenaeus. It accounts for Papias's efforts to collect and write down still circulating essential cultural traditions from surviving members of the third generation removed from the founding generation of Christ and the disciples (e.g. Presbyter John).

This volume marks a consequential intervention into New Testament criticism. We see how it gives the latter a long overdue nudge out of its traditional methodological insularity into the wider sciences of culture. Huebenthal can speak with particular authority about this because she emerges in the volume as herself thoroughly grounded in the standard New Testament critical approaches. The book is also a superb introduction to Kulturwissenschaft as it is currently being practiced in German language scholarship. As such it
should be translated into English, though it would benefit from a chapter on second and third century canonization processes. This is much needed given the chronic confusion around the canonization question in the discipline, where ad hoc and emic explanations are the rule. Its omission is odd, given the prominence of the “cultural memory” category—defined as canonization processes—as the culminating stage of Huebenthal’s tripartite cultural formation schema. Huebenthal’s chapter on the Council of Trent’s canonical boundary-drawing is informative, but it hardly compensates for this explanatory omission.

Finally, this review would be doing a disservice to the book and to its author if it did not open a dialogue with Huebenthal on some points of substance. The first is in regard to Huebenthal’s tripartite schema social memory/collective memory/cultural memory. It can be readily granted that the three categories illuminate essential features of the different stages of primitive Christianity’s cultural identity development. Yet questions arise with regard to, first, its tripartite structure, and second, Huebenthal’s emphasis upon its schematic discontinuities.

Huebenthal owes her tripartite schema to Aleida Assmann’s restructuring of Jan Assmann’s simpler bipartite schema: communicative memory/cultural memory. However, Aleida Assmann appears to have modified Jan Assmann’s bipartite schema—appropriately formulated in connection with the cultural dynamics of ancient Hochkulturen—to capture the distinctions that exist in the modern nation state among (1) local exchange of memory within family and other small-scale solidarities in a society (“social memory”), (2) the more encompassing “collective memory” constitutive of a shared national identity, and (3) official, institutionalized memory, flowing in the channels of museums, libraries, academic departments of history, educational curricula, and so forth (“cultural memory”). Its application to emergent Christianity at the very least would seem to need considerable qualification.

To be sure, the collective memory/cultural memory distinction (second and third categories) very usefully distinguishes the institutionalized canonization of early Christianity’s cultural texts from the dynamic phase of their formation which is concurrent with the consolidation of a collective cultural identity around a unified narrative, first manifest in the appearance of the Gospel

of Mark. But its schematic distinction of dispersed episodic “social memory” from the formation of a narrative-based “collective identity” artificially separates what in primitive Christianity would have been a more continuous phenomenon. Formation of a collective narrative identity—the emergence of a *Gründerszählung*—seems already well under development in Huebenthal’s “social memory” stage, in narrative practices surrounding eucharistic ritual. It is similarly underway in the formation of the episodic tradition, each element of which is manifestly shaped to carry a potent moral and Christological charge, i.e., calibrated to contribute to the formation of a specific cultural identity and (as Huebenthal ably demonstrated in her 2014 monograph on Mark) already intricately interwoven with narrative patterns from ancient Judaism’s cultural register. Huebenthal gives comparatively little attention to the formation of the tradition, and indeed appears explicitly to rule out attention to “Traditionsprozessen” (p. 25). This appears to be the effect of the tripartite schema, which induces her to defer initial collective identity formation to the emergence of the Gospel of Mark, and cultural memory formation to second century canonization processes. The macro-analysis therefore suffers from over-schematization. In fact, not infrequently the schematic divisions break down perforce in her discussions of specific matters, as for example when she acknowledges that in the consolidation of a collective identity in the Markan narrative project, “geht es bereits um einen Kanonisierungsprozess” (pp. 323–324).

A second matter to be queried is Huebenthal’s insistence that *Gedächtnistheorie* approaches have as good as no cross-over contribution to make to historiographical questions and methods, i.e., to *Jesusforschung*. Rather, their analytical relevance is limited to cultural identity projects. Its principal alliance therefore will be with narrative criticism (of which Huebenthal is a uniquely gifted practitioner). At times she speaks as though this is just a matter of the different foci of different questions—“andere Erkenntnisse” (p. 119), but more often she sharpens this into an oppositional binary: *because* they are cultural identity enterprises, the narrative formations present in the Gospels have nothing to tell us about “was wirklich geschehen ist” (p. 102). This hardline position clearly owes something to the over-schematization discussed above, which entails that Huebenthal while not ignoring nevertheless neglects tradition formation in primitive Christian memory practices. For Huebenthal things do not really get underway until the “collective memory” phase, which commences with the Gospel of Mark’s narrative project.

The principal difficulty with her oppositional binary, however, is that the cultural identity enterprises on view in the Gospels are oriented to a salient past, which is a real past. The cultural identity project which they attest has...
its origins in formative historical events. Cultural identity dynamics cannot be so cleanly decoupled from historical realities. To be sure, the historiographical challenges presented by narrative formations in the Gospels are daunting, but Huebenthal’s categorical denial of the relevance of Gedächtnistheorie to historical work seems both extreme, and—in this volume at least—not really supplied with much argumentation.

This may owe something to her maximal social constructionist position, which holds narrative representations of the past to be in all important respects constructions of the present in service to a community’s contemporary cultural identity exigencies and social frameworks—the inference being that they have little to tell us historically about the past. This may be a commonplace of Gedächtnistheorie approaches in European scholarship associated with the Assmanns (and stemming ultimately from Halbwachs), but the claim at least in this its strong form need not be conceded. It is here that the striking absence in this volume of any engagement with American and Israeli “social memory” scholarship (associated with Barry Schwartz, Jeffrey Olicks, Yael Zerubavel, and others) makes itself felt. This body of scholarship provides an indispensable counterweight to one-sided social constructionist approaches to collective memory. Its focus is upon how contemporary societies negotiate, reconstruct, and culturally redeploy salient and—for better or for worse—inescapable, inescapable pasts through social practices of commemoration; in a word, how cultural symbols, and thereby cultural identity, are dialectically produced and reproduced in commemorative orientation to the past. In alignment with Clifford Geertz’s recognition that cultural tradition and social structure are interacting but independent variables, it identifies the salient past as itself a potent factor in shaping cultural identity/ies in the present. Huebenthal rightly declares that “[d]ie Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit ist relativ zu den Bedürfnissen der Gegenwart gestaltet und stellt damit kein Abbild vergangener Zeiten, sondern ein perspektivisch-selektives Konstrukt dar” (p. 48). But conversely, the salient past, laid down in symbolically dense narrative patterns shaped in commemoration, provides the frameworks for the cognition and representation of the experiences of the present. It would seem, therefore, that narrative representations of the past that shape cultural identity do have pertinence to historiographical inquiry, though to be sure, exploiting this potential is very fraught methodologically.

The kulturwissenschaftlich approach adumbrated by Huebenthal is essential to the questions addressed by New Testament criticism. Gedächtnistheorie und Neues Testament has made this point resoundingly. And given its debts to Jan Assmann, it is particularly apposite to ancient cultural dynamics and therefore to formative Christianity. But the kulturwissenschaftlich approach
is incomplete without integration with the research of American and Israeli sociologists, research which serves to widen memory theory out into social processes of commemoration more generally. It is appropriate therefore to conclude this review with a plea for a \textit{Gedächtnistheorie} for Christian origins research that brings both strands of theory together.

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