Remembering and Forgetting in Isaiah 43, 44, and 46

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1 Remembering and Forgetting in the Book of Isaiah

Memory studies, which deal with how memory relates to identity, history, and tradition, might offer fruitful tools for studying the topics of remembering and forgetting the former and the new things in Isaiah 43, 44, and 46. When describing the divine intervention in the Book of Isaiah, scholars have applied terminology like drama,1 dreams and fantasies,2 exhortation,3 vision,4 and eschatology.5 In the prophetic discourse of remembering and forgetting, temporal processes and mnemonic selection are related by visions of the future connected to the past. From a cultural historical perspective, Brockmeier explicates how the process of cultural memory takes place within a narrative discourse “that continuously combines and fuses the now and then, and the here and there,” including “simultaneous scenarios of diverse time structures.”6 Brockmeier further describes remembering and forgetting as “two sides of one process, a process in which we give shape to our experience, thought and

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1 Klaus Baltzer, Deutero-Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 40–55 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), and John D.W. Watts, Isaiah 34–66 (WBC 25; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), read the texts as a performed drama, and Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, For the Comfort of Zion: The Geographical and Theological Location of Isaiah 40–55 (VTS 139; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 47–51, reads them as a "reading drama."


6 Jens Brockmeier, “Remembering and Forgetting: Narrative as Cultural Memory,” Culture and Psychology 8 (2002): 15–43 (21–34, quotation from pages 21, 34). He relates the concept of cultural memory to intertextuality; see more on this in n. 48, below.
imagination in terms of past, present and future.” 7 Every remembering is a process of selection from a store, where much else is omitted, as either obscured, repressed, or forgotten. 8

In the Book of Isaiah, the terminology of remembering and forgetting has a wide range of meanings, related to stereotypes and idioms, parallels, synonyms, and antonyms. ה זָכַר “remember” is parallel to expressions like על־לב עַל־לֵב “take to heart” (47:7, 57:11, 46:8 hiph.), על־לב עָלָה “come to mind” (65:17), and ההובָה “consider” (43:18), and contrasted with מָחָה “blot out” (43:25) and שָׁכַח “forget” (17:10, 54:4). Both YHWH, Israel, and Babylon are subjects of remembering and forgetting: God remembers ה זָכַר Zion (49:15, and shall not forget [נָשַׁת niph.] Israel in 44:21), but also Israel’s sin (43:25, cf. 64:8). Israel shall not remember “former” things (43:18, cf. 65:17 niph.), but also recall “these (things)” (44:21), “this” and “former things of old” (46:8–9, cf. 63:11), as well as recount the kind acts of YHWH (63:7 hiph.). The daughter of Babylon did not “take these things to heart” and “gave no thought to (זָכַר) the end of it” (47:7). Zion shall forget (שָׁכַח) the reproach of her youth and remember no more the shame of her widowhood (54:4, cf. 49:14, where she says, “YHWH has forsaken [בָּזַב] me and my lord has forgotten [שָׁכַח] me”). Also, Israel neither remembers nor puts YHWH upon her heart (57:11, cf. her act of forgetting [שָׁכַח] YHWH in 51:13). In this study, I will focus on “remembering” and “not recalling” with Israel as subject.

2 Remembering and Forgetting in Isaiah 43, 44, and 46

2.1 Isa 43:18–19: Do not Remember the Former Things

43:18. Do not remember the former things and the things of old do not consider!
19. See, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?
Yes, I will make a way in the wilderness, rivers in the desert.

In Isa 43:18, YHWH addresses Israel in a chiastic parallelism, admonishing the people to neither remember the former things nor consider the things of old. These expressions concerning the past become contrasted with one about the future, where YHWH himself is deeply involved: “See, I am doing a new thing!”