Barry Schwartz is a leading proponent of social memory studies, which focuses on the ways in which collective memory shapes how events are recalled and written down. Schwartz argues that individuals, and hence the communities they make up, remember what actually happened much better than contemporary historians tend to give them credit for. This means that historical texts that scholars today interpret primarily as reflections of the ideologies and perspectives of later generations should be seen rather as preserving, within certain limitations, at least the core of what actually happened. The historian thus has the capability both of assessing what actually happened and of better understanding later manifestation of the community by evaluating the rethinking of shared memories from age to age.

Schwartz’s work is grounded in his studies of Abraham Lincoln, but for the past decade he has applied this mythology as well to the life of Jesus and to the question of Christian origins. Memory and Identity emerges from that interest. It is introduced by Schwartz’s methodological statement that explains the social memory model as it applies to study of the historical Jesus. The remainder of the volume presents eleven essays that cover the role of memory as a factor in the histories presented by the Hebrew Bible (Carol A. Newsom), the literatures of postbiblical and rabbinic Judaism (Tim Langille, Gabriella Gelardini, Steven D. Fraade), and the writings of emergent Christianity (Alan Kirk, Chris
Keith, Jeffrey E. Brickle, Rafad Rodriquez, Frederick S. Tappenden, and Dennis C. Duling). Rather than critique Schwartz’s own research or conclusions, these authors investigate the application of his model and analytical principles to their own areas of biblical and postbiblical studies. The result is a cogent and encompassing introduction to a methodology with which every scholar in biblical studies, and historical studies in general, should be familiar.

Central to Schwartz’s analysis is the idea that at the foundation of “social” memory stands an accurate depiction of what truly happened. This depiction emerges from the personal duty taken on by religious elites accurately to recall and transmit sacred history: “In fact, these memory virtuosi may have transmitted information almost as accurately as modern news agencies” (11). Still, absent “central controls” (12), oral traditions arose and were later preserved. Such traditions superimposed legend upon reality, modifying the original historical memories. Still, Schwartz argues, “the essence of the events to which they refer remained unchanged.” This essence “and the ways and reasons it is maintained” are the historian’s appropriate research focus.

In depicting the process through which historical memories are transmitted, Schwartz rejects the “telephone” model that assumes that stories were transmitted lineally from individual to individual, with the result that a single original depiction was slowly lost and replaced, as each transmitter introduced slight variations. Instead, Schwartz imagines the original story’s being repeated by the same teller and to the same audience many times, perhaps in slightly different words or with varying amounts of detail. Even if those who heard this repeated story subsequently got certain details wrong, the redundancies as against the inconsistencies still make clear what actually was reported and, hence, what really happened. While we cannot pick out a single correct or “original” account, what actually happened and its meaning is preserved in all of the versions taken together (13).

While recognizing that memories are modified from one generation to the next, social memory study sees it as equally certain that such modifications occurred within a circumscribed framework: if a story did not coincide with accepted knowledge, it would have lost all plausibility and not been transmitted. So while distortion of memory is a given, so are the limits of possible distortion, and this must be recognized by anyone who wishes to determine what actually happened. In the case of the historical Jesus, for instance, those who were most committed to his teachings and message would have found it crucial to remember as accurately as possible every one his words and deeds, which would have been the only way his disciples could have remained close to him. In this view, gospel accounts, correctly analyzed, give us access to what Jesus actually said and to what actually happened.
The limits of this approach are perhaps most obvious when Schwartz addresses Jesus’s miracles, which he sees as the unique occurrences that would have been necessary to trigger Jesus’s followers’ immediate and powerful memory of him (30). But since actual miracles, let alone resurrection, are not scientifically plausible, to explain what actually happened Schwartz turns to the earliest Enlightenment approach, substantiated, he says, by contemporary science. Jesus’s “miracles” were produced by medicines, hypnosis, the placebo effect, and, in the case of the resurrection, the possibility that Jesus was either entombed alive or, as happens in contemporary sightings of the famous or infamous, was subject to a collective refusal to accept the loss of such a powerful figure. In this we see a central rubric of social memory theory, that dramatic accounts such as these must have a historical foundation, even if their true explanation is other than that given in the texts before us.

Since this volume is dedicated to the application of a social memory model in the study of biblical and postbiblical history, the chapters’ authors approach to this particular aspect of Schwartz’s methodology is perhaps the most striking aspect of their work, for the authors whose studies are collected here largely either shy away from or downright reject claims regarding our ability to recover what really happened. Carol Newsom, for instance, carefully details the significance of collective memory in setting out and transmitting a master narrative that could be activated and engaged in various ways so that diverse details might be included or omitted without threatening the credibility of any single telling. This explanation of the Hebrew Bible’s diverse, even contradictory, uses of patriarchal narratives explains a great deal about the text before us but falls short of making any claims for what actually happened. Looking at rabbinic texts that “thematize and practice collective memory in the face of profound collective loss” (113), Steven Fraade expertly evaluates what we learn from the contrary ways they reported the event about those who told and retold the story of Yohanan b. Zakkai and the destruction of the Second Temple. But he is clear: “There is no way to know which, if either, of these scenes represent the ‘actual’ reaction of the great sage to the destruction of the temple—it would be futile to ask which picture better portrays the ‘historical’ Yohanan ben Zakkai” (121), then goes on to argue that neither can what actually happened be found in some harmonization of the different accounts. What he learns from Schwartz thus concerns not the retrieval of actual historical accounts. It is rather in how we might address the meaning of these accounts, which Fraade agrees with Schwartz is found “not in any single one of its versions, but in all of them taken together” (122, citing Schwartz, 13).

The insights that Schwartz’s comprehension of social memory provides are perhaps most broadly represented in Jeffrey Brickle’s chapter on the Fourth Gospel. Brickle interprets John, at the end of first century, as one of the few remaining eyewitnesses to Jesus, who uses his memory to face “factors threatening the late first-century church by means of a
collective and elevated vision of the past” (188). In a period of crisis and change, John’s use of memory allowed him “to offer a solution that was ‘familiar,’ yet innovative and arresting” (190).

Even as they consider the usefulness of the social memory approach, these authors thus are wary of any overreliance on memory theory. They recognize the limitations of the transmission of historical fact by those who, not present at the original event, could only repeat as best they could remember what they had been told. This limitation, of course, would have been especially pronounced in a cultural setting in which the vast majority of people were not literate and so depended on the spoken word as the primary means of memory. At the same time, the importance of this book, and the methodological implications of the volume as a whole, can be clearly stated. Even as these authors downplay Schwartz’s contention that we can recover what actually happened, the studies emerging from social memory theory valuably highlight the processes through which memories coalesce into the kind of socially shared knowledge that has the power to shape and ground a community. To have this power, memories need not accurately depict what actually happened. Memory’s “truth,” to the contrary, emerges from the social construction within which it is cherished and produces the community’s foundation. Memory in this way creates for those who transmit it a new historical reality, one that, for the community, is more real, and certainly more important, than what actually might have happened.