In this truly “memorable” gem of a volume, a group of biblical scholars, both those dealing with Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament studies, conduct a series of fascinating “conversations” with Barry Schwartz and his theoretical and methodological understanding of collective, cultural, and social memory.

Schwartz, professor emeritus in sociology at the University of Georgia, is one of the leading figures in this generation in the study of social memory in the historical sciences (along with J. Assmann perhaps, e.g. Assmann 1992, 2006). Perhaps best known for his studies of social memory in modern American society, such as his studies of Washington, Lincoln, Rosa Parks, and war memorials (Schwartz 1990, 2000, 2009; Schwartz and Bayma 1999; Schwartz and Schuman 2005; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), his insights on the inter-relationships between memory and society have had a deep effect on the very broad field of memory studies. While already dealing with topics close to biblical and ancient Near Eastern scholars in the 1980s (Schwartz et al. 1986), it is only relatively recently that he has also contributed important insights on collective memory in biblical studies (Schwartz 2005).

The study of memory and its effect in numerous fields of the humanities and social sciences is hardly a new topic (e.g., Klein 2000), so much so that it has even been derided
as the “memory boom” (e.g., Berliner 2005). This said, the interface between biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies and collective/cultural memory has been late in coming. Nevertheless, in recent years, the important insights that the “memory perspective” can offer has been realized, and a surge of memory-oriented studies, collections, conferences, and workshops have appeared for Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, New Testament, and other related issues (e.g., Aguilar 2000; Ben Zvi and Levin 2012; Brenner and Polak 2009; Carstens et al. 2012; Edelman and Ben Zvi 2013; Ellman 2013; Gilmour 2014; Hendel 2001, 2005; Kirk and Thatcher 2005; Mendels 2004). One can add that the memory perspective in archaeological studies (e.g., Borić 2010; Lillios and Tsamis 2010) has also had its effect on Near Eastern and biblical archaeology, including studies by this reviewer (Maeir 2015; Maeir and Shai 2015).

The volume under review is divided into four parts. The first part, initiated with “Preface: Keys, Frames, and the Problem of the Past” (1–5) by the editor, Tom Thatcher, introduces Schwartz’s contribution to memory studies, focusing on three major issues: (1) his commitment to the principle that the past and its commemorations are “interfluential,” in that both affect each other; (2) based on this, the “normative force of the commemorated past,” on how groups and peoples look at the past to model their lives; and (3) Schwartz’s important terms “keying” and “framing,” where keying is how something/one in the present is associated to the past, and once something/one has been keyed, the keyed value becomes a frame that provides a interpretative context for the present.

In the second chapter (“Where There’s Smoke, There’s Fire: Memory and History,” 7–37 the honoree, Schwartz, offers some introductory remarks, defines social memory and some of its manifestations, and shows how it can be relevant, specifically, for the study or early Christianity).

The second part of the volume is entitled “Remembering in Jewish Antiquity,” which has four papers dealing with early Jewish social memory. Carol Newson’s “Selective Recall and Ghost Memories: Two Aspects of Cultural Memory in the Hebrew Bible” (41–55) discusses two examples of cultural memory in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. First she compares the description of Israel’s past in Pss 105–106 to that of Ezek 20 and suggests that the differences in these narratives can be explained in light of the cultural contexts in which they were formed. Similarly, she discusses how cultural memories of Nabonidus, who as a figure itself was forgotten, were enmeshed in the biblical image of Nebuchadnezzar.

“Old Memories, New Identities: Traumatic Memory, Exile, and Identity Formation in the Damascus Document and Pesher Habakkuk” (57–88), by Tim Langille, discusses the
memories and contemporary use of the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE as reflected in these two sectarian documents and how they were used by these communities to build their images of communities that connect between the past, present, and future.

Gabriella Gelardini “Cult’s Death in Scripture: The Destruction of Jerusalem’s Temple Remembered by Josephus and Mark” (89–112) compares and contrasts the memory of the Roman destruction of Second Temple Jerusalem and in particular emphasizes the role it played in Mark’s text, in the context of replacing the temple cult with a new religion.

“Memory and Loss in Early Rabbinic Text and Ritual” (113–27), by Steven D. Fraade, discusses the important role that the memory of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem played in early, post–Second Temple rabbinic Judaism.

The third part of the volume (“Remembering in Emerging Christianity”), which is also the largest, consists of several studies dealing with social memory in early Christianity.

The first paper, “The Memory-Tradition Nexus in the Synoptic Tradition: Memory, Media, and Symbolic Representation” (131–59), by Alan Kirk, is a fascinating study in which the author combines Schwartz’s and Jan Assmann’s insights on cultural and social memory and the understanding of memory in current cognitive science, to add insights in the study of the Synoptic and Johannine Gospels. While not making any claim to discard earlier studies of these texts, he believes that incorporating a “memory perspective” in the form-critical study of the Synoptic traditions will add important insights into the complex processes of their formation.

Chris Keith’s “Prolegomena on the Textualization of Mark’s Gospel: Manuscript Culture, the Extended Situation, and the Emergence of the Written Gospel” (161–86) discusses the important role that social memory had in the Markian textualization of early gospel traditions and how a combination of both the oral memories and those that were written down from Mark onward jointly played roles in the ongoing formation of these traditions.

“The Memory of the Beloved Disciple: A Poetics of Johannine Memory,” by Jeffrey E. Brickle (187–208), is an attempt to view the Gospel of John using Schwartz’s insights on social memory, not as a supplement to the Synoptic traditions, but rather as a much more complex and sophisticated interaction between the memory of the past and the communal needs of a troubled early Christian community.

Tom Thatcher’s contribution, “The Shape of John’s Story: Memory-Mapping the Fourth Gospel” (209–39), also looks at John through Schwartz’s perspectives on memory,
stressing, likewise, the major role that social memory played in the formation of the Fourth Gospel.

Rafael Rodríguez’s “‘According to the Scriptures’: Suffering and the Psalms in the Speeches in Acts” (241–62), one of the most enjoyable pieces in this volume, discusses how Psalms are used and appropriated in Acts as vehicles through which the suffering of Jesus is placed within the context of the memory of the suffering of God’s people in earlier times.

Frederick S. Tappenden’s “On the Difficulty of Molding a Rock: The Negotiation of Peter’s Reputation in Early Christian Memory” (262–88) attempts to show that the image that Luke portrayed of Paul is connected not only to the needs of the early second-century Christian community but also to actual memories, reflecting in different ways, earlier memories of Paul and his actions.

The final paper in this section, “Social Memory and Commemoration of the Death of ‘the Lord’: Paul’s Response to the Lord’s Supper Factions at Corinth” (289–310), by Dennis C. Duling, again using many of Schwartz’s insights, discusses Paul’s use of the Last Supper as a method to overcome factional tensions in Corinth, as depicted in 1 Corinthians.

The final part of the volume is in fact a second contribution by Schwartz (“Reflections on a Coming Conversation Harvest,” 313–37), in which he goes over the various papers in the volume and discusses, assesses, and in some cases debates the authors’ views. Needless to say, his sagacious input is extremely helpful and serves as an excellent cap to this very interesting volume.

All told, this volume is chock-full of excellent ideas and directions to develop in the utilization of “memory perspectives” in biblical studies. I cannot but recommend this volume for anyone interested in developing ideas on cultural and social memory in the ancient world in general and the biblical one in particular.

References


