

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE: MEMORY AND HISTORY

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Late Second Temple period scholarship is premised on the belief that Jews of the time thought about the past differently from the way we do. Their knowledge was rooted in traditional legends and communal bonds; ours is data-driven, self-critical, and context-free. Both statements—history is subjective and situation-dependent, and history is objective and situation-transcendent—provoke ambivalence because both are partly but not absolutely true. The problem begins when this ambivalence inhibits us from applying the findings of modern research to instances of ancient memory, for these findings often tell us what it means to “remember,” help us dissect the complex relation between individual memory and history, and, above all, define the meaning and significance of memory as a *social* phenomenon.

Individuals forget much of their experience—sometimes permanently, sometimes until a cue from the environment awakens it. On the other hand, sometimes individuals experience something they cannot forget. Three examples will help to illustrate this point, which is necessary to the defining of collective memory.

First, few knew much about U.S. President Abraham Lincoln's young adulthood when he was assassinated in 1865. But William Herndon, Lincoln's former law partner, located and interviewed 250 informants, including many former New Salem, Illinois, residents who had known Lincoln while he lived there in the 1830s. Because thirty-five to forty years had passed since these people last saw Lincoln (an interval equal to that separating Mark from the crucifixion of Jesus), Herndon conscientiously weeded out distortions, rumors, and mistakes in order to estimate the truth value of their testimony (Wilson and Davis 1995). He then used this adjusted store of information to publish the most comprehensive biography to date of Lincoln's early life (Herndon and Weik 1889).

In 1895, six years after the release of Herndon's three-volume work and thirty years after Lincoln's death, publisher Samuel S. McClure sent historian Ida Tarbell on a fact-finding tour, during which she conducted scores

of face-to-face interviews with Lincoln's former friends and acquaintances (Rice 1998, 57–72). Her requests for information about Lincoln, posted in newspapers throughout the Midwest, yielded many replies—some authentic, some not. Her work resulted in a new interpretation of Lincoln's youth and young adulthood, one that identified his frontier background as an asset rather than a handicap, and she persuasively challenged many of Herndon's negative characterizations of Lincoln. Tarbell is to Herndon, one might say, as John is to Mark, for Tarbell and John both elevated the original portrayal of their subject through a reconfiguration of personal and popular recollections.

As a second case, seventy years after the American Civil War (1861–1865), the Works Progress Administration funded interviews of African Americans who had been born into slave families. This oral-history project covered all slave-holding states and resulted in a vast collection entitled *The American Slave* (Rawick 1977). Based on elderly people's memories of their plantation childhoods, the individual narratives are, in themselves, imperfect sources, but the thick methodological literature (Escott 1979) that has formed around them enhances our overall understanding of the *collective* experience of slave life. *The American Slave* embodies a composite picture that transcends the limitations of any single individual's recollection of his or her personal experience.

For our third example, Katsuichi Honda (1999) interviewed survivors of the December 1937–February 1938 Nanking Massacre. These illiterate victims could not have written their own stories, but their oral retellings, after more than thirty years, substantially enlarged the records of the war-crime tribunals. Here again, the force of individual testimonies emerges from their totality, as the memories of individual survivors converge in a relatively unified portrait.

There can be no objection to defining such works—from Herndon's and Tarbell's books on Lincoln to the final report of the slave narratives to Honda's interviews—as “oral histories,” but to do so is to take the viewpoint of the authors alone. In fact, memories of Lincoln, plantation slavery, and the Nanking Massacre were *social* memories, transmitted over time and existing independently of the people whom these authors consulted. The four canonical Gospels embody the same kind of autonomous, *social* memories.

The Gospels are comparable not only to oral and written tradition, which superimposes legend upon reality, but also to historical fiction (with emphasis on the *historical*), as exemplified in the twentieth-century

accounts of the historical Abraham Lincoln by Honoré Morrow (1935), Carl Sandburg (1926, 1939), Gore Vidal (1984), and William Safire (1987; see also Fehrenbacher 1987, 228–45). Such works seek to enlarge and vivify the historical plotline by *creating conversations* between Lincoln and others and with himself, conversations that dramatize Lincoln's personality, motives, character, aims, and priorities. The Gospels bring the history of Jesus to life in the same way. No successful historical writer, however, is free to create any conversation he or she likes; the writer must construct talk that readers find plausibly motivated, consistent with the subject's actions, and hence objectively possible.

Memories of Abraham Lincoln, the nineteenth-century “man of sorrows,” were passed on orally from one generation to the next, retained long after the people who originally carried them had scattered or died. As these memories were passed on, they were modified, but the essence of the events to which they refer remained unchanged. This essence, and the ways and reasons it is maintained, are the principal subjects of my research into social memory.

WHAT IS SOCIAL MEMORY?

In the social sciences and the humanities, social memory is reputed to be an ambiguous and complex concept (e.g., Olick and Robbins 1998; Olick 2008; Roediger and Wertsch 2008). In fact, no concept is clearer or simpler. Memory is a fundamental property of the mind, an indispensable component of culture, and an essential aspect of tradition. Although individuals alone possess the capacity to remember the past, they never do so singly; they do so with and against others situated in different groups and through the knowledge and symbols that predecessors and contemporaries transmit to them.

A good analogy to social memory is public opinion. Opinions, like memories, can only be held by individuals and can only be assessed by questioning individuals, but when these opinions are aggregated they assume new significance. Collective or *public* opinion affects the way the average person thinks about matters of the day. It renders individuals more or less confident in their own *personal* opinions.¹ Public opinion determines elections, the price of goods, and the morality of given lines of conduct.

1. George Herbert Mead formulated the concept of the “generalized other” to

Social memory resembles public opinion but comprises special subject matter. It refers to the *distribution* throughout society of what individuals believe, know, and feel about the *past*, how they judge the *past* morally, how closely they identify with it, and how they commemorate it. The word "distribution" is emphasized above because the key property of a distribution is its variation, which denies the possibility of complete consensus. That every distribution also has a central tendency makes total dissensus equally impossible. Because similar distributions appear in groups of individuals totally unknown to one another, they must be treated as "social facts" (Durkheim 1982, 50–84), *exterior* to the persons who comprise them. Such facts stabilize and link the consciousness of present and past.

Media are memory's vehicles. Premodern memory media included oral presentations, written documents, and commemorative objects, including hagiographic texts, paintings, statues, monuments, shrines, naming practices, oratory, and ritual observances. The latter, ritual observances, are social memory's most general medium. In Judaism, memory flowed through the recital of lectors, often based on written texts and usually occurring within ritual settings (Yerushalmi 1996, 11). As a standardized, repetitive, and symbolic activity that allows participants to define their relation to the past, commemorative ritual fixes in mind the events of the past, a process facilitated by the emotional assembling of the community itself (Durkheim 1965, 414, 433; Kirk 2005b, 7–10). Modern memory media include museums, photographs, cartoons, films, television, and websites. Modern media, prone as they are to suspicion and approbation alike, carry both negative and positive reminiscences: a museum might document atrocities; a text might be damning; a portrait, unflattering; a cartoon, ridiculing; a statue, degrading; a monument, covered with graffiti and uncared for; a shrine, unvisited; ritual observances, with or without oratory, unattended or ridiculed. But most vehicles of social memory convey positive information, positive feelings, and positive judgments. Although frequently violated, a collective pleasure principle seems to be at work. Societies tend to invest more resources in the preservation of positive phases of the past than of negative ones.

To this point, four dimensions of memory have been distinguished: (1) the past as it actually was; (2) "history," which refers to linear repre-

explain how aggregated beliefs, sentiments, and moral values enter into the personality of individuals (1967, 152–64).

sentations of the past that take the form of oral and written narratives; (3) "commemoration," whose symbols lift from the historical narrative those parts that best express society's ideals; and (4) social memory—how individuals, in the aggregate, think and feel about the past. From these distinctions arise the problems of how social memories get started and transmitted, how individual memories form the *emergent narratives* that constitute social memory, how social memory is preserved against forces conducive to forgetting and change, how closely the actual past typically corresponds to its historical, social, and commemorative representations, and what makes some historical events more memorable than others.

This chapter orients these theoretical questions to a specific case: the vexing problem of the historical validity of the Gospels, which will be treated here as products of early Christian memory. The remaining chapters in this book will assess my approach by applying it to the broader range of Jewish and Christian texts and historical problems in which the individual contributors specialize.

HOW MEMORIES GET STARTED

Those listening to stories about the powers of holy men in the First and Second Temple periods were motivated to remember every word, and we know that the rabbinic tradition, with its admonition to remember (*zakhor*) dominated first-century Jewish culture (Gerhardsson 1961; Yerushalmi 1996, 5–26). On the cognitive underpinning of mnemonic tactics we can always turn to David Rubin (1995), among others, but the more pressing sociological question is why these tactics were employed in the first place. Put another way, where did first-century Jewish memory come from, and why did it assume the form it did?

People who have a stake in a person's or event's memory being maintained (see Lang and Lang 1990; Fine 1996) form the "carrier groups" (Weber 1968, 468–517) that interpret, preserve, and propagate stories about the past. Unrepresented by such groups, the stories important to one generation are forgotten by the next. Sacred history tells us, however, that some stories were unique: remembering them was more than an option, even more than a *personal* duty; it was an obligatory *social* role enacted by religious elites in order to perpetuate consciousness of humanity's debt to God. In fact, these memory virtuosi may have transmitted information almost as accurately as modern news agencies. Sacred events, moreover, were not perpetuated solely by memory elites. Dedicated and

potential listeners drew information from eyewitness accounts of men and women *outside* the inner circle of religious followers (see Bauckham 2003). First-century elite testimony remained the gold standard on which other testimonies could be judged, but there was no central control; oral tradition arose unwittingly, from the bottom up, to be later preserved in writing.

Readers of the Torah and its stories were not “cognitive misers” (Fiske and Taylor 1991, 13) trying to simplify the past; they were motivated to remember the past in detail. But how can even inspired and motivated remembering be preserved in societies largely dependent on oral communication? This is a major question in the study of ancient memory. Two communication models may be deployed to explain how social memories were developed and disseminated in an ancient context.

The first model—probably still the dominant model in biblical studies and rabbinics, despite severe limitations that I will soon indicate—is conveniently described by Bart Ehrman (1999). Because a story changes as one person passes it to the next, Ehrman likens its transmission to the game “Telephone.” Children play by sitting in a circle. The first child whispers something to the second, who relays it to the third, who tells the next, until the last child hears the final version of what the first one said. This last version invariably turns out to be very different from the original and subject to great hilarity, which is why the game is so popular. The problem with Ehrman’s analogy is that ancient stories did not go in circles. They multiplied exponentially: one person told the story to his relatives, friends, and acquaintances, each of whom knew several people and some of whom passed on the story to their own several relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Network theory (Stark 1996) shows that five or six iterations yield thousands of story recipients. Furthermore, this process is not random: it plays out within existing social networks, namely, clusters of people who are likely to share the beliefs and values of the storytellers. Take the early Jesus tradition as an example: if Richard Horsley (1989) is right about ancient Palestine, these social clusters initially consisted of peasants eager to free themselves of the tributes demanded by Roman and Jewish elites. Clustering enhances receptivity to the stories while it limits their variation to a range compatible with recipients’ culture and interests.

Networks and clustering point to a second communication model that differs from Ehrman’s logic in its conception of memory’s origin: a single story may have more than one “original” version. Edmund Leach explains why this is the case in his account of myth transmission.

Let us imagine the situation of an individual A who is trying to get a message to a friend B who is almost out of earshot, and let us suppose that communication is further hampered by various kinds of interference—noise from wind, passing cars, and so on. What will A do? If he is sensible he will not be satisfied with shouting his message just once; he will shout it *several* times, and give a *different* wording to the message each time, supplementing his words with visual signals. At the receiving end B may likely get the meaning of each of the individual messages slightly wrong, but when he puts them together the redundancies and the mutual consistencies and inconsistencies will make it quite clear what is “really” being said. (Leach 1976, 63–64)

Following the logic of this model, the “meaning” of the message is not in any single one of its versions but in all of them taken together. To return to the example noted earlier: Abraham Lincoln’s friends did not fall silent when he died; they continued to broadcast his virtues, and they did so convincingly. Eyewitnesses to Lincoln’s later life also lived long after his death, and through teaching as well as ordinary social contacts they communicated information about him. Let Lincoln’s close friends represent A to K; other eyewitnesses, L to Z. Each witness need not tell the same story in order for a fair estimate of the “real Lincoln” to appear on the “receiving end” of the line (to return to the Telephone analogy). Indeed, the more varied a narrative, the more effectively it is conveyed and remembered. Not every valid story about the past has a single point of origin.

HOW INDIVIDUAL MEMORIES BECOME SOCIAL MEMORY

Historical information remains stable when the narrative arising from multiple versions of a famous life story becomes independent of its tellers. Folklore study attests to this aspect of tradition. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French folklorists recorded almost ten thousand popular tales representing stable oral traditions spanning many generations. These anonymous storytellers, according to Robert Darnton, “kept the main elements [of the traditional narratives] intact, using repetitions, rhymes, and other mnemonic devices” (1984, 16; see also Rubin 1995). But why did they go to the trouble? These stories provide a point of entry into the mental world of the French peasant, who passed them on because she found in them a picture of herself and her distress. Folklorists could never reach this entry point had they confined themselves to one version of a story or to fine points of detail, and they felt no need to do so. With thirty-

five variations on "Little Red Riding Hood," ninety on "Tom Thumb," and 105 on "Cinderella," there is sufficient redundancy to discern the stem story's theme, style, and tone. This redundancy discloses a social memory that precedes and transcends any specific act of storytelling.

The redundancies in scores of French folk tales are generalizable to other texts, including the Scriptures. Although there are only four partially independent Gospels in the New Testament, they make up in time and topic what they lack in number. They refer to a real historical figure, were written shortly (a few decades) after his death, and remained after their tellers vanished. Such stories, in Emile Durkheim's (1974) words, are "collective representations" that emerge from individual sources.² Shortly after Durkheim, Alfred Kroeber expressed a similar understanding. In his words, "there are certain properties of culture—such as transmissibility, high variability, cumulativeness, value standards, influence on individuals—which are difficult to explain strictly in terms of the organic composition of personalities or individuals" (1963, 62). These properties are "superpersonal," which is to say "emergent"—the product of a multiplicity of single interactions.

More recent data demonstrate further the stickiness of emergent narratives. Over a thirteen-year period (1975–1988), historian Michael Frisch instructed his college students to "write down the first ten names that you think of in [relation] to ... American history from its beginning through the end of the Civil War." Frisch varied his questionnaire by including and excluding questions about generals, presidents, statesmen, and others. He posed the questions to students with one or no previous college courses in American history and at two different universities in two different states. The student cohorts had no previous communication with one another, used different textbooks, went to different high schools, and had different teachers. Nevertheless, their rank orderings of significant figures in American history were almost identical over the entire thirteen-year time span. Because the same names—Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson, in that order—occupied the top three presidential ranks for every test group, because these and other rankings were independent of knowledge of American history or differences in regional background, and because the test subjects regularly listed historical figures who are not mentioned in

2. "Collective representations," commonly manifested in symbolic and iconic signs, reflect cognitive, affective, and moral states of the "collective consciousness." See here Lukes 1973, 6–8, and also n. 3 below.

standard textbooks (notably Betsy Ross, who, according to popular legend, produced the first American flag), Frisch infers the existence of a collective fixation on origins that the content of history texts alone cannot explain. "[T]he list is not only composed of quasi-mythic figures: as a collective portrait, it has a kind of mythic structure and completeness itself, a character confirmed by its re-creation year after year in nearly identical terms" (Frisch 1989, 1146). Tradition's consistency thus presupposes its autonomy, while autonomy presumes an emergent social memory.

Some (e.g., Megill 2007) have argued that traditions rely on memory only when they are fading, while sound traditions affirm themselves by a canon of authoritative writings, respected institutions, and credible and legitimate leaders. But this is a theoretical, not an empirical, claim, for the opposing logic is equally compelling: far from being a symptom of weakened tradition, memory is strong tradition's main component—the source of authoritative writings, respected institutions, and leaders. Edward Shils believed as much, and he went even further. In the study of the Torah, before the Mishnah redaction, written texts were regarded as *auxiliary instruments to aid memory*. Even when technologically unnecessary, therefore, memorization of narratives reinforced tradition—which can only mean that memory's role was ritualistic as well as instrumental, an end in itself. To memorize a narrative, even its broad outlines, was to *internalize* it, to define oneself in its terms (Shils 1981, 92–93).

PRESERVING SOCIAL MEMORY

The coherence of most historical accounts results not only from the obduracy of the reality they represent but also because their preservation and transmission processes—keying and framing, oral and written communication, path dependency, sites of memory, and critical life-course periods—are so consequential.

Keying (perhaps most familiar to biblical and rabbinics scholars as an aspect of typology) transforms the meaning of activities understood in terms of one reference frame by comparing them with activities understood in terms of another (Goffman 1974, 40–44, 82). Keying is the action that activates framing. For example, Abraham Lincoln invoked the American Revolution as a frame for the Civil War by keying his Gettysburg Address into it; Carl Sandburg described the liberating power of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal by keying it to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Similarly, the Gospels key the activities and fate of Jesus to statements in

the Hebrew Scriptures an estimated three hundred times, which affirms both the Gospel writers' mastery of Scripture and their listeners' identification with the history the sacred texts describe.

Keying defines social memory's function, matching the past to the present as (1) a model of society, reflecting its needs, interests, fears, and aspirations; (2) a model for society, a template for thought, sentiment, morality, and conduct; and, (3) a frame within which people find meaning for their experience (Schwartz 2000, 2008; Poole 2008). In these senses, social memory is preserved by and for the functions it performs.

By keying events of the present to a sacred past, communities and their members alike refer to and frame the collective experience. As such, the meaning of a social memory involves "not just the history being commemorated, but the accumulated succession of commemorations" (Olick 2007, 58). Sacred texts are, thus, "path-dependent"—affected not only by their social contexts but also by previous representations of their content. In Georg Simmel's words, "We are free to make the first move, but we are servants of the second" (1977, 92). To the extent that earlier interpretations contributed to the content of later ones, the Gospels possessed an inertia that only significant social change could modify. That 90 percent of the Gospel of Mark appears in Matthew and Luke exemplifies the relevance of path-dependency for memory and tradition.

Scripture obviously plays a major role in maintaining sacred narratives, but its timing, in some cases, has been misunderstood. The failure of Jesus' prophecy that the parousia would occur within the lifetimes of his followers highlights the reasons why the Gospels were not written sooner. The timing of *written* Gospel narratives during the second half of the first century CE reflected not only the dying of a generation of witnesses and a concern to secure their memories, as Jan Assmann (see 2006a; 2006b) famously declared, but also a growing conviction that the end of days was far enough in the future to make time-consuming written accounts worth the effort.

In the Jerusalem temple, also, many Christians and Jews must have seen a concrete link relating their mundane existences to God's larger plan. By destroying the temple, the Roman army destroyed a physical manifestation of God's majesty. What a difference it must have made for this generation! To commemorate God by visiting the place of his presence was one thing; to remember him by listening to lectors' stories in mundane, local contexts, another. Written accounts became sanctified as they replaced the temple as "localizations" (Halbwachs 1992a, 1992b) or "sites" (Nora 1989) of sacred history.

"Critical periods" also play a significant although largely unrecognized role in the preservation of memory. One of the best-established findings of social memory research is that individuals are most likely to remember important events that occur in their late adolescence and early adulthood. The relevance of this critical period to memory was asserted in the writings of Karl Mannheim (1952) but has been verified only recently by Howard Schuman and his associates (Schuman and Scott 1989; Schuman and Corning 2012). Individuals in late adolescence and early adulthood are going through formative years during which a distinctive openness to new points of view, including ideology, religion, politics, and history arises. As late adolescence/early adulthood is the stage in the life cycle when a permanent identity forms (Erikson 1959), the memory of any great person, for his or her admirers or worshipers, fuses with selfhood. As a case in point, those who came to know Jesus during their critical life period would have been more impressed by him, more passionately attached to him, than those born earlier or later. Also, they would have been most receptive to the developing oral tradition in the decades following his death. As a new Christian generation appeared, people exposed to Jesus' teaching and actions during their critical period would have been elderly, roughly fifty to sixty years old. In a society where authority was an entitlement of age and the credibility of a narrative depended on the social status of its transmitter, these individuals would have been effective "opinion leaders" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955) as one Gospel succeeded another.

MEMORY AND HISTORY

Memory's carriers are its primary preservers. James Dunn, prominent among historical Jesus scholars, declares that "the quest for the *historical* Jesus" can only be the quest for "Jesus remembered" (2003, 335). In other words, Jesus himself is "unobservable," and the only way we can know him is through his influence on his contemporaries. But how much stock can be placed in their memories? Is it not the destiny of all memory, in fact, to be annihilated by history? Pierre Nora (1989) tells us so, but if we take him uncritically we must not only renounce much of what individual participants have taught us about historical events but also give up all attempts to learn more. That Nora and his likeminded colleagues exaggerate the difference between social memory and history, underestimate their interdependence, misunderstand memory's nature, and vastly understate its validity is the argument to be considered here. At issue is how knowledge of histori-

cal figures, including those for whom little documentation exists, is theoretically possible. Readers will have no trouble identifying implications for the meaning and authenticity of the Gospels.

Even on its face, belief in the fading of social memory is problematic because biographers, autobiographers, memoir writers, journalists, novelists, and historians alike are paralyzed without access to it. In recent years, it is true, a more nuanced perception of the relationship between history and memory has emerged, but that revision is ambivalent and confusing. British historian Peter Burke's (1989) oft-cited work remains as good a sample of this ambivalence as any other. Burke recognizes that "memory reflects what actually happened and that history reflects memory." But this traditional view, Burke believes, is no longer valid. "Neither memory nor history seem objective any longer." Because different historians in different times and places have produced different versions of the past, the phrase "history as social memory" is simply a "shorthand which sums up the complex process of selection and interpretation." Burke concedes that if memory is not distinguished from history, then we fail to recognize that individuals are influenced by their own experiences of the past. But if memories are faultlessly embedded in written records, why is there apparently so much discrepancy between written records and the past as it was?

Ambivalence about memory and history actually stems less from evidence of their discrepancy than from the mentality of contemporary humanities and social-science scholars, who, being more suspicious of "knowledge" than was any preceding generation, are more impressed than ever by proof of memory's imperfections. This new mood has its virtues, including the protection it affords against naïve realism, but if we do not recognize it for what it is we lose more than we gain. To say that history and memory are more "selective" and less "objective" than commonly believed is to make a useless statement, for partial knowledge is not synonymous with faulty knowledge. Never in the history of the humanities and sciences has there been a generation that failed to concentrate on some problems more than others. The question is whether selectivity exposes valid memory or memory warped for political and ideological reasons. Failure to resolve this issue is one of the factors concealing the relation between history and memory.

To trace this problem to its root in social memory research, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs proposed the first systematic explanation, and few scholars today take serious issue with it. Halbwachs was a student of both Henri Bergson, who emphasized the subjective aspects of time,

thought, and reality, and also of Emile Durkheim, the social realist who taught Halbwachs that society is not reducible to its members' *subjective* states. Society is an *objective* reality, *sui generis* and possessing a "collective consciousness."³ Halbwachs's work on memory drew more from Bergson than from Durkheim. In *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels*, he declares, "If, as we believe, social memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past, if it adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present, then a knowledge of the origin of these facts must be secondary, if not altogether useless, for the reality of the past is no longer *in the past*" (Halbwachs 1992b, 7). After seventy years of subsequent scholarship, this statement seems as if it were made yesterday—which is precisely the problem. No one can doubt that present predicaments motivate us to remember different things in different ways, but Halbwachs makes no provision for memory as a route to past realities.

Halbwachs's accounts of the Christian memory of Jesus (1992a, 1992b) are stunning because they violate common sense, making the past a hallucination pressed to the service of individual faith and social solidarity. But violations of common sense, although refreshing and stimulating, are often wrong. "The facts are that perception is selective; motivations and needs sensitize us to specific stimuli or sometimes lead to distorted perception.... But these facts should not cause us to ignore the further fact that *reality sets limits to perception*.... No one can live in a real world if we see only what suits us" (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1988, 124, emphasis added). Philosopher-social psychologist George Herbert Mead defined "the past as that which *must* have been before it is present in experience as a past" (1929, 238, emphasis added). His point is a special case of Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin's premise. Before we can take "the car to be where we are," he adds, "*we must* have first arisen" from sleep (Mead 1929, 238, emphasis added). That previous events *must* have happened in order for their consequences to occur does not mean that all memories are true;

3. Durkheim defines the "collective consciousness" as "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average citizens of the same society [that] forms a determinate system which has its own life.... It is, in effect, independent of the particular conditions in which individuals are placed; they pass on and it remains.... Moreover, it does not change with each generation, but, on the contrary, it connects successive generations with one another. It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular [consciousnesses], although it be realized only through them" (1965, 79–80). More than one scholar has commented on the convergence between Mead's "generalized other" and Durkheim's "collective consciousness." Collective or social memory is an aspect of both.

it does mean that present conditions can only be the result of past events. Such events have “an implied *objective existence*” and “exist in the present through memory” (Maines, Sugrue, and Katovitch 1983, 164).

While the approach of Mead and his followers is significantly more helpful than Halbwachs’s proposal, they fail to go far enough: they mention the reality of the past incidentally, as a *qualification* of their claims about its rootedness in the present. Whether the reality of events is a primary determinant of what we remember or mere building material for what present situations require makes a difference. In the first case, memory embodied in the Gospels and elsewhere is a repository of both authentic and inauthentic information; in the latter, a repository of distortions, which, although narrowed by reality, do little more than make the present meaningful.

My reference to “reality” reflects both an epistemological aspect, that some objects of perception exist independently of the mind, and a related metaphysical aspect, that some perceptions exist collectively rather than individually. These observations are hardly new. If a phenomenon reflected no imperceptible but real “thing in itself,” declared German philosopher Immanuel Kant (2007), it would have no meaning; reciprocally, the “thing in itself,” the *noumenon*, would never transcend what we think of it. On the other hand, references to the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* are not references to error-free history. Indeed, Leopold von Ranke (1973), author of that famous phrase, knew we can never have at our disposal anything more than residues of events embodied in witness accounts, documents, images, and artifacts. He endeavored to capture the past “as it *essentially* was.”⁴

Although history, sacred and secular alike, is malleable and constantly reinterpreted, these variations would not be noticeable if not superimposed upon a stable essence that makes events and individuals recognizable across generations. In many cases, this essence is itself exaggerated, underemphasized, falsified, misrepresented, and misunderstood, but it would be a mistake to take these distortions as social memory’s paradigm. Nor may we assume that memories are usually, let alone always, valid. Realism’s assumption is more modest: interpretation is more often forced upon the

4. Leopold von Ranke was a romantic idealist who never believed the historian’s task to be the mere collection of facts. His use of the German adverb *eigentlich*, generally understood by English-language historians to mean “actually,” is more accurately translated “essentially”—a term that takes us beneath surface facts. If von Ranke were in fact a narrow empiricist, he would have used the common phrase *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*. See Novick 1988, 21–23; Iggers and Powell 1990, xix–xx.

observer of an event by its inherent quality than imposed by the observer’s worldview and interests. Put another way, reality counts more than bias in the remembering of most events most of the time.

Of course, many scholars would reject even this qualified proposition. “To remember,” they repeatedly tell us, “is not like pulling files out of a cabinet.” But if memories do reflect, to some useful extent, a sequence of happenings, then remembering is indeed comparable to pulling files out of a cabinet. Common sense concedes that people often remember incorrectly, but this same sense tells us that significant distortions of reality are exceptions to normal remembering, which is why we give special names to them: constructions, fabrications, inventions. If human memory were typically a creation, it would have no survival value, and we would possess no contact with the past.

Nothing, however, causes more misunderstanding of the history/memory dynamic than recent concerns about memory’s failure among oral cultures. Jack Goody and Ian Watt observe in *Literacy in Traditional Societies* that “societies and groups performing oral tradition censor the past and celebrate only those items of the tradition that are *relevant* to the present situation.... The present takes over; the present is the past; fact and fiction merge in an oral symbiosis” (Byrskog 2004, 468–69). But Goody and Watt could not advance such a theory in the first place if they had not already established the content of the essential past: If the past is truly inaccessible, how can we know whether or how it has been taken over by the present? Further, why is it necessary to conclude that present *relevance*, the unexplained something that explains everything else, renders the actual past unknowable? That a historical statement is relevant to the present, or formulated on the basis of present relevance, seems essential if that statement is to be at all comprehensible. But the fact that a historical statement is relevant and comprehensible does not necessarily invalidate it.

The concept of mediation—one of the worst sticking points in social memory scholarship—can be equally misleading. Because events cannot be known to a later generation unless they are remembered and transmitted by predecessors, all knowledge of the past is necessarily vulnerable to the memory lapses of witnesses and the biases of speakers and writers. While this claim is true as far as it goes, it is also exasperating because nothing can be known without mediation. We know about the existence of distant galaxies because powerful but imperfect telescopes mediate the light they emit and thus determine what we see and analyze. Similarly, our expectations affect our perceptions and the conclusions we draw from them, but

the correlation between the two is typically far weaker than psychologists lead us to believe (Best 1993; Gross and Leavitt 1994; Ben-Yehuda 1995). History texts and commemorative objects, no less than accounts of the movement of light particles, are at least partly dependent on the reality they represent.

DISTORTION'S LIMITS

According to the prominent psychologist Daniel L. Schacter (1995), memory by and large reflects reality, "but distortions can arise due to its constructive nature." Schacter's statement, so representative of the present state of social memory scholarship, is symptomatic of century-old disciplinary cultures plagued by excessive, sometimes pathological and often paralyzing cynicism—research cultures so determined to disclose memory's deficiencies that scholars choose for study topics in which only deficiencies are evident. Books and journals typically show memory at its worst because few editors and readers are interested in cases of accurate remembering. Accordingly, investigators tend to design their research with a view to identifying memory's fickleness.

Because constructionism is so evident in the way memory problems are selected and defined, its merits as well as limitations must be acknowledged. "Constructionism" refers to the conviction that social memory depends more on the contingencies of social experience than the qualities inherent in events remembered. Positively, constructionism compels recognition that the past is not always as it now seems on the surface—groups commonly fabricate a past, either wholesale or through selective remembering and forgetting, that is most relevant to their present interests and concerns. The number of examples is limitless. Given the current four-year sesquicentennial of the American Civil War (1861–1865), it is timely to consider how the Civil Rights Movement lessened historians' and the public's interest in Abraham Lincoln as savior of the Union and instead emphasized his role as the Great Emancipator who freed African Americans from slavery, notwithstanding significant historical evidence that would challenge this portrait (Schwartz 2008; Gallagher 2011). Constructionism is provocation, an invitation to interrogate memory by scrutinizing its contexts. Such is its most useful function, for there are no memories that remain the same forever or do not vary among society's regions and groupings. In the world of biblical studies, Rudolph Bultmann and his successors have, in some measure, shown us as much. This is all to the good.

The problem begins, however, when investigators cease to inquire whether a proposition is true or false in itself but instead attempt to understand it solely in terms of the situation within which it has been formed, when they assume that constructions of the past are nothing but constructions, with no real historical core within them, or when they conclude that the actual past is incidental to its subsequent representations and therefore irrelevant as an object of inquiry. If memory cannot be at least partially autonomous, if it must be fully contextualized to be understood, then it ceases to be memory in any real sense of the word and becomes quickly entangled in a web of infinite regress. The situation of the historical observer induces her to interpret a historical event in a particular way, but that observer is rarely an eyewitness of the event she interprets; she is dependent on the representation/testimony of an earlier observer, who in turn saw the event from the standpoint of his own situation, and so forth. History and memory alike become a succession of situations, while the events themselves become secondary.

Equally fruitless is the reduction of social memory and history to their narrative forms. If everything that matters about "history" results from the narrative that conveys it, then the French Revolution consists of no more than the story that gives it meaning. Historian Hayden White (1987) made a career of elevating story structures to this methodological principle, to the consternation of even his admirers. Paul Ricoeur (2004, 21) was right when he warned against colleagues such as White, who approach historical reality solely on the basis of the deficiencies in our store of concrete historical evidence. No one can doubt that every story of every historical event or figure is modified by the way it is told from one generation to the next, but it is equally certain that such a story loses plausibility if it fails to acknowledge the minimal claims of accepted knowledge.

Two cognitive models specify the limits of memory distortion. The first model is exemplified by Frederick Bartlett's (1995) memory experiments in the 1920s. After reading to his subjects a Native American folktale titled "The War of the Ghosts," a story of a mythical battle to the death involving supernatural forces, Bartlett asked them to reproduce the story twenty minutes later. Applying the "repeated reproduction" method, he then asked these subjects to reproduce the story at later times; as they did, the story gradually became shorter and more coherent, with fewer mentions of supernatural powers. The order of events changed. The sacred narrative became mundane—a transformation involving omissions, simplification, and translation of esoteric into familiar detail. Gradually, a Native

American folktale became a story that any Englishman could understand. Bartlett formulated the concept of the "schema" to describe the cognitive dynamic of this transformation. A schema is a framework for the organization of experience without which the capacity to remember is weakened. If two people are asked to watch a soccer game, for example, the person who knows what the game is about—its rules, strategies, player roles—will remember more of its content than the naïve spectator who knows nothing about soccer. The experienced viewer remembers better because his schema provides him a grid on which to locate, then easily recall, the events of the game. Similarly, the gradual transformation of a *Native American* tale may be explained as a translation of the story's elements into mnemonic schemas that were available to Bartlett's *British* subjects.

The problem with Bartlett's experiment, however, which substantially reduces its relevance for understanding the relationship between memory and the actual past, is that its design deprived his subjects of the resources necessary for remembering. Aside from the obvious fact that Bartlett's test narrative could not be relevant to his subject's concerns, he did not warn his respondents that they would be tested, nor did they believe that something of importance might depend on their test performance. Because Bartlett's subjects knew their responses were inconsequential, they relied on the default option, performing as "cognitive misers"—treating the information indifferently and impassively, condensing and simplifying, reducing it to its simplest schematic structure.

Of course, most people must be cognitive misers in order to organize in their minds the vast amount of information to which they are exposed. We simply cannot, and have no need to, remember the myriad of sensory data and bits of information that our brains absorb on a daily basis. But in many situations, including challenges that transcend day-to-day experience, people have a powerful interest in remembering accurately. Detectives, scientists, historians, military air controllers taking messages from besieged soldiers, and many other people of all kinds in specific situations are highly *motivated* to remember, since their success depends on it. Cognitive misers in one situation thus become "motivated tacticians" (Fiske and Taylor 1991, 13) in others. The ignoring or simplifying of information in one realm enables motivated tacticians to remember lengthy and complex details in another. Such has always been the tactician's "motive for history" (Schudson 1992, 213–14).

The main question, then, is not whether one remembers a given text inaccurately but whether one is capable of remembering it *at all* and what

kind of incentive induces one to do so. Incentives are not limited to material rewards. On the contrary, "because of his psychological constitution, man cannot live without attachment to some object which transcends and survives him" (Durkheim 1951, 201). If memory promotes such attachment, then Jesus' most enthusiastic admirers, unlike Bartlett's test subjects, must have been intensely inspired motivational tacticians, men and women whose memories were crucial to their lives and self-conceptions. Bartlett's findings, therefore, would be nearly irrelevant to the case of Jewish Christians forming and communicating memories of Jesus during the first century. In the context of widespread belief in the imminence of a day of judgment and the establishment of God's kingdom, those faithful who listened to stories about Jesus must have been desperately motivated to remember every word. Listeners no doubt failed to assimilate everything, but they remembered more than they would have if they had had less of a stake in the message—certainly more than Britons would remember of a random and unfamiliar Native American folktale.

These observations lead to a second model that reveals the limit of memory's weakness, namely, the tendency in experimental accounts to emphasize dissensus rather than consensus, variations rather than similarities. To take one classic example, Elizabeth Loftus (1974) showed test subjects a video of an automobile accident and asked them to estimate the speed of the vehicles on impact. Estimates varied from 30 to 40 miles per hour (50 to 65 km/h), in direct correlation, significantly, to the words the researcher used to describe the impact (e.g., "How fast were the cars moving when they *collided*?" versus "How fast were the cars moving when they *smashed into one another*?"). At first glance, it may give one pause to note that viewers offered such a wide range of estimates, simply on the basis of suggestion, when viewing exactly the same video; on the other hand, no subject estimated the cars to be traveling 10 or 60 miles per hour. Absence of perceptual extremes is also evident in the conformity studies of Asch (1951), where confederates influenced test subjects' estimates of the length of lines, and Sherif's (1935) experiment on perceived movement of a stationary light. In these experimental trials, memory regularly distorts reality to some degree, but does so within a limited range—and this limit confirms reality's constraint on the vulnerability of perception.

To what extent, however, can this principle be applied to historical questions? For example, since the Gospels are the only source of information about Jesus, where are the *external criteria*—comparable to a video of colliding automobiles, a set of premeasured lines, a fixed position of

light—against which to test conclusions about their accuracy? How can we be certain we are seeing the world from Jesus' viewpoint when we can only know it from anonymous remembrances captured in the Gospels? The first step toward answering this question is to identify the kinds of events that are most likely to be remembered.

WHAT MAKES EVENTS MEMORABLE?

The concept of "historical significance" generates as much controversy today as ever. Social scientists with even a slightly constructionist bent of mind believe, as did Georg Simmel more than a century ago, that "if something is important, then importance must be 'ascribed' or 'attached' to it; in other words, it is important [and memorable] because the historian is interested in it" (1905/1977, 163). Historians who ascribe significance to an event because of its intrinsic importance personify the realist challenge to Simmel's argument. Destructive and order-changing events, such as the bombing of Hiroshima or the attacks of September 11, allow for concrete discussion of this issue. So do creative events, such as the colonization of the New World or the advent of Christianity.

Consider the latter category: creative events. The first step toward determining whether Jesus' significance was ascribed or inherent in his mission is to align it to the worldview of his generation. Most of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries rejected him, but they could not ignore him. To recognize that Jesus challenged many foundational premises of first-century Judaism is to establish context, not causation, let alone Jesus' viewpoint or motives. Yet context is indispensable for estimating viewpoint and motive. Culture, after all, is public, and from the public fact personal attitude is inferred. No one can get into Jesus' mind by imagining herself to be him and envisioning what he thought, but one can analyze the symbolic world—texts, institutional values and practices, religious rituals—for and against which Jesus acted and in terms of which he represented himself. Clifford Geertz (1973) defines this method as "thick description," key to the understanding of any alien thoughtworld.

Researchers who consider Jesus' apocalyptic vision as the basis of his significance draw on multiple sources, and these coexisted with multiple conceptions of the messiah. During the Late Second Temple period different messianic ideas reflected the range of Judaism's variants (see Neusner, Green, and Frerichs 1987). In the first century alone there appeared, besides Jesus, Judas of Galilee, Menachem ben Judah, Theudas, and John

of Gischala, all of whom were preceded and followed by other messianic claimants. Why Jesus succeeded while other claimants failed takes us to Jesus' personal appeal and exploits and to the many people with an interest in spreading his story. Jesus' appeal and his disciples' energy would have borne no result if the cultural environment were not conducive to a messiah in the first place. However, there is no strong evidence that Jesus conformed to any one of the messiah ideas that were part of Jewish tradition. When Peter declared Jesus to be the Christ in Mark 8:2, for example, he was uncertain precisely what the title meant. Paul set forth the new messianic idea (MacRae 2007), but Paul's vision cannot be assumed to be *totally* different from that of Jesus himself. To extend Max Weber's famous metaphor, in a society where multiple messianic tracks existed, Jesus was the switchman who determined which one would be followed. Jesus probably recognized his culture's messianic strains, from warrior to prophet, but he seemed to feel an apocalypse coming on; he acted on his feeling, and others followed. Paul's letters invoked comparable images, including the dead literally rising to join Jesus in the clouds (1 Thess 4:13–18). Jesus himself died to rescue humanity (Gal 1:4), but when he returns "every person's work will become manifest, for the day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire" (1 Cor 3:15). As Jesus will save us from the "coming wrath..., it is well for a person to remain as he is.... I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short.... The form of the world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:26–31). The Q source, if its proponents are correct, was probably written before Mark and independently of him, but it reveals this same apocalyptic thought world (Gregg 2006). In the words of Ernst Käsemann, "apocalyptic is the mother of all Christian theology" (1969).

Where, then, do we stand on the memorability of Jesus? All ideas and events occur in a context that reduces or amplifies their memorability, but the ideas and events this context must surround, including Jesus' life and death, are fundamentally real. They cannot be defined or interpreted into or out of existence.

CHARISMA AND MIRACLE

Context can provide a framework for interpreting memory's content, but it cannot alone account for that content. If the average person is to be known, we must reach out to him; however, the great person is known because she reaches out to *us* and is therefore more accessible to our understanding (Simmel 1977, 98). But of what does this "reaching out" consist? Contem-

porary scholars are typically more certain of who Jesus *was* than of any particular thing he *said*. In Max Weber's (1967) view, the prophets' success in promoting the regular study of Torah, which infused everyday conduct with a religious ethos, laid the basis for the moral rationalism of Western civilization. Weber discerned the content of ethics in tradition and law, but he was less concerned with whether or not a particular statement could be ascribed to a given prophet than with the ethos to which that prophet's community conformed. So, too, with Jesus: his place in social memory is defined not by the literal authenticity of his sayings but by the revolutionary ethic he and his followers embraced.⁵

The Late Second Temple period was a "hot" period, a traumatic span of time during which old ways were destroyed and re-created (Levi-Strauss 1966; Shils 1975). It is no simple matter to validate the proposition that no event is intrinsically significant or intrinsically traumatic, that significance and trauma are matters of subjective definition and merely reflections of how the past is perceived and processed (Alexander 2004; Surprenant and Neath 2009). Whether or not individuals choose to *define* events as traumatic, only their objective *consequences* actually make them so. In terms of actual consequences, the early decades of the first century were among history's most pivotal—their events, centered in the Middle East and Mediterranean, challenged and transformed identities as they shifted the course of Western civilization.

During the last century of the Second Temple period, unprecedented conflict over Scripture and its interpretation, surging fear of demons, and anticipation of an apocalypse produced memorable men. Some of these men were "charismatic leaders": they possessed a "gift of grace" and performed extraordinary deeds, including exorcisms and miracles; they aimed to revolutionize their world, to prepare it for a future of holiness and virtue; and they deemed its inhabitants duty-bound to obey their teachings and commands (Weber 1947, 358–63). Jesus was one of these men, and his miraculous accomplishments (no less than twenty-four are described in Mark alone) contributed to his legacy. Indeed, John explains that Jesus made so many miracles that no single story could ever convey them all (20:30; 21:25).

Jesus' miracles can be understood with or without Christian faith. In 1828, Heinrich Paulus, a child of the Enlightenment, avowed Jesus' divin-

5. For detail on quotations spuriously attributed to *modern* leaders, see Boller and George 1989, 77–74.

ity while invoking natural causes to explain his miracles. He recognized the power of suggestion and believed Jesus possessed medicines and sedatives to cure physical ailments and exorcise demons. Such claims could not be substantiated, however, until the rise of modern medicine. Under hypnosis, as we now know, "paralyzed" people walk; placebo effects often approach the direct effects of medications measured against them. So certain are we of the mind/body connection that it is difficult *not* to believe that the sick and possessed were healed when Jesus laid his hands upon them. Other miracle stories, particularly those relating to the resurrection, require different kinds of explanation. Given the Jewish practice of burial within three hours of death, Paulus cited frequent failure at the time to establish certain death. He believed Jesus was alive when taken from the cross. Although fear of premature entombment and burial goes back to antiquity, the accumulation of evidence on its *frequency* grew in Europe and America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Tebb and Vollum 2011; Wikins 1990). This evidence includes cases of execution, where a person hanged and presumed dead turns out not to be dead at all. Moreover, in the preindustrial world, naïve family members determined whether or not their kin had died, which can only mean the problem might have been even more common than is currently believed. Paulus's statements about miracles, then, are far more plausible today than in the early nineteenth century. In a different but related connection, the frequent sightings of Adolf Hitler and Elvis Presley long after their demise and the denial of Osama bin Laden's death in much of the Middle East illustrate the refusal of the collective consciousness to accept the loss of those who have powerfully influenced it.

Less than a decade after Paulus published his *Life of Jesus*, David Friedrich Strauss (1835) denied Jesus' divinity and declared Paulus's rationalistic accounts of Jesus' miracles less credible than the miracles themselves. Miracle stories were based not on facts but on myths, most of which were conceived before the first written Gospel appeared. The referents of these myths included the yearning for spiritual sustenance (Jesus feeding the multitude) and the need to stand firm against the stormy sea of life (Jesus walking on water). Interpreting miracle stories as statements about the human condition, Strauss negated Paulus's influence as he won enthusiastic acceptance in skeptical circles. As the years passed, his renown grew: George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans) translated his *Life of Jesus* into English; Albert Schweitzer (1926) declared it a turning point in modern biblical scholarship; The Jesus Seminar dedicated its *Five Gospels*

to Strauss and continues to recognize scholarly excellence by inducting likeminded researchers into the "Order of D. F. Strauss." Contemporary skeptics embrace Strauss because he denies the miracles that Jesus' followers believed they witnessed. But given the present state of knowledge, one is entitled to ask whether Strauss's accounts were actually more far-fetched than Paulus's and whether Paulus's still untranslated explanations of the Gospels' miracle stories, many of which are admittedly strained, should be at least revisited rather than dismissed out of hand. Paulus's accounts, which recognize the events that Jesus' contemporaries deemed miraculous, are more consistent with the Gospels' accounts than Strauss's, which deny that these events ever happened.

Whatever the merits of the above argument, many scholars who might otherwise accept the Gospels as repositories of memory reject them as soon as the supernatural is invoked. Without miracles, however, what made Jesus distinctive to his generation? If such stories—whether products of supernatural powers, suggestibility, or fictional elaborations of reality—are dismissed entirely from our understanding of Jesus, where are we to find his charisma? And if we cannot find that charisma, how are we to explain Jesus' extraordinary place in his generation's memory? If Jesus did nothing out of the ordinary, why did his contemporaries remember him at all?

Miracle stories are remembered and commemorated not only because they violate the laws of physical nature but also because they have a foundation in human nature. Emile Durkheim (1960), in this regard, believed that human character is double, moved by both personal idiosyncrasies and social imperatives. Miracle stories are parts of the latter; they express the cultural currents personified in those who, against all odds, shape their community's fate. Miracles are in this sense "cultural realities" (Craffert 2009). Above all, the concept of miracle is aligned with beliefs about the holy, which dramatize the universally unbridgeable opposition between the sacred and the profane—a polarity as real today as it was two thousand years ago.

CONCLUSION

Stated independently of specific cases, theoretical statements are abstract and vacuous. My own statement in this essay has tended toward the abstract, and what it does say about Jesus and his contemporaries adds nothing to what is already known. At issue, however, is whether the weakness in my perspective adds strength to others. This volume's success will

therefore hinge not only on the vigor with which its contributors refute, affirm, or qualify my observations on the nature and power of social memory but also whether, in so doing, they advance their own research.

If social memory is to remain stable, it must emerge from its individual sources and be incorporated into a tradition, and that tradition must, in turn, become institutionalized. The memory of all historical figures is institutionalized by rituals, framing, keying, path-dependency, emergent oral tradition, sites of memory, life-course turning points, and, where relevant, Scripture. If these assertions, all constituents of social memory theory, bear any truth, then it is fair to conclude that such theory, in some slight but significant measure, illuminates the biblical texts as pathways to understanding the events and figures described in them. Far from being annihilated by analytic history, as many scholars presently affirm, social memory, properly validated, is history's ultimate foundation.

Most readers will recognize that my application of social memory theory is open to the charge of naïve optimism, an exaggeration of the soundness of what we know about the past and an underestimation of what we do not know. I can only respond to this criticism by pointing out that my approach and this charge represent two competing forms of metaphysical pathos. As defined by Arthur Lovejoy (1948, 11), "metaphysical pathos" refers to the affective climate in which objective propositions reside. The pathos of this chapter is clearly optimistic, while the pathos of much social memory theory is fatalistic—a flaw most evident in the conviction, which survives through conclusions that have nothing to do with evidence, that human memory, individual and social, is *essentially* warped. No worldview, in my judgment, has done more to confound the relation between memory and history, and I have tried to demonstrate its shortcomings. The eminent contributors to this volume must enlarge, modify, and/or refute my assertions.

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