

Article

Restoring the Spirit through the Redemption of Memory

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Abstract: Restoration and redemption of the soul are, in biblical terms, essentially life-bringing acts. Yet even the present reality is so frequently a spirit deeply in need of renewal and new life. Memories contribute greatly to this felt need: as the psychological building blocks of an individual's sense of self, their joy and their pain reverberate through the self, reaching deeply to shape identity and worldview. What is needed is not only the redemption of our souls but the redemption of our memories as well. Such an inner transformation would indeed prove both a restoration and a transformation, an experience now of the future kingdom in which God will reconcile all things to himself (Colossians 1:20). This article explores how the New Testament text provides a psychologically and neurologically coherent model to leverage memory formation and reconsolidation toward restoration and renewal.

Keywords: renewal; Christianity; New Testament; spirituality; spiritual formation

1. Introduction

Within the Christian tradition, restoration of the spirit is consistently linked with transformational experiences of the presence of God. In fact, the term “restore” carries the semantic weight of returning something to its original form or state of being (see, for example, its definition in *The Dictionary of Bible Themes* [Manser 2009]). The New Testament use of the corresponding Greek term ἀποκατάστασις is found only in Acts 3:21, when Peter describes God's salvific goal as the “restoration of all things,” a phrase that echoes Jesus' words in Mark 9:12 regarding Elijah and draws the mind to such passages as Ezekiel 40–48 and Revelation 21–22 (Morris 1009). Together, the Gospels and Acts describe restoration in the context of healing and other miracles performed by Jesus as signs of God's coming kingdom and harbingers of a time when all creation would be renewed and evil destroyed (e.g., Matthew 9:30; 12:13; 17:11; Mark 8:25; Acts 1:6; 3:21; 15:16). Passages like these demonstrate a clear link between restoration and a divine “undoing” of the influence and consequences of sin within creation.

Restoration of the spirit, then, involves experiences that echo the salvific work of God redeeming his creation from the devastating impact of sin. It is marked by healing and transformation of not only the self, the inner person, but also of the thoughts, actions, and emotions emerging therefrom.

The inner person, in turn, is an ever-growing compilation of an individual's own experiences, their memories (Vanderkerckhove 2009). As Eric Kandel notes:

Without the binding force of memory, experiences would be splintered into as many fragments as there are moments in life. Without the mental time travel provided by memory, we would have no awareness of our personal history, no way of remembering the joys that serve as the luminous milestones of our life. We are who we are because of what we learn and what we remember. (Kandel 2017, p. 10)

It is not joys we remember though: we also carry our hopes, disappointments, and pain within our memories. If ever there was a part of the inner being crying out for renaissance, it would be our memories. And since our memories of ourselves create our very



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sense of who we are (Kihlstrom et al. 2013, pp. 71–72), what we seek is not only the redemption of our souls but the redemption of our memories as well. There, we may find true restoration and transformation, the experience now of the future kingdom in which God will reconcile all things to himself (Colossians 1:20).

But is that possible? Can we find a path toward restoration in the New Testament that not only addresses the very real shadow our memories throw over our lives but actually offers hope toward a complete resolution—a redemption, in fact—of those memories? This study will explore the possibility that such a path may indeed be found in the New Testament Scriptures. And, while God’s presence is, according to Christian Scripture, freely available to his followers through his Spirit at all times (John 14:16, 26), this exploration will focus on the presence of God as the Word of God within Scripture and thus on the intersection of God, man, and memory in the New Testament.

2. Limitations, Methodology, and Hermeneutic

As a whole, biblical scholarship has only begun to map out possible intersections between memory and the New Testament. Reasons for this scarcity are varied. Those scholars who have researched these intersections have predominantly focused on the problems of misremembering and the faithfulness—or lack thereof—of memories, and their impact on the testimony of Scripture (e.g., Allison 2010, pp. 27–28; Keener 2012, pp. 270–72). A few scholars have investigated the tantalizing question of the soul, bringing both neuroscience and biblical studies to bear in their research (e.g., Green 2008; Czachesz 2017). But psychology and neuroscience, the two fields in which memory plays the largest part in research, are vast fields of research and scholarship which few biblical scholars have mastered, making interdisciplinary research a larger and significantly more intimidating task. Social memory, however, with its implications for social identity, is a field that has been well mapped by biblical scholars and offers some insights applicable to the present exploration. Yet the question of this study is at heart personal, not collective or communal. Our focus here must be on how the memories of an individual change, how that change impacts the individual, and how the New Testament may speak into this process toward personal restoration.

Facing, then, something of a dearth of established models appropriate to this study, the most appropriate way forward is to follow the basic steps of interpretation: defining the goal and rules, identifying the players, and mapping out the field. Yet, according to Max Turner and Joel Green, the prevailing model of biblical interpretation “leave[s] the reader firmly within the horizon of the ancient author’s world, and offer little or no academically disciplined guidance concerning the contemporary theological significance of the work in question” (Turner and Green 2000, p. 2). In fact, “contemporary theological significance” is not the only aspect left unexplored. Modern readers are frequently also left with little guidance on how to discern and implement the relevance and impact of the text in their lives. E. D. Hirsch notes many commentators offer insight into the meaning of the text without touching on its significance for the reader (Hirsch 1978, pp. 103–26).

In short, these scholars provide no personal goal and no guidance on reaching it. The text has no significance, then, for the reader’s behavior and experience. Here, Grant Osborne’s hermeneutical spiral provides a more productive model:

A spiral is a better metaphor because it is not a closed circle but rather an open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader The task of hermeneutics must begin with exegesis but is not complete until one notes the contextualization of that meaning for today. (Osborne 2006, pp. 22–23)

In this case, the “context” Osborne mentions and the “horizon” of Turner and Green are not dissimilar. The significance of meaning emerges in the interplay of the two horizons, and the greater the understanding of both modern and ancient contexts, the better equipped the reader is to discern the text’s significance for modern life.

The model of modern biblical interpretation referred to by Turner and Green overwhelmingly chooses Scripture as the starting point of interpretation, and with good reason:

for most modern readers, the biblical context is a relatively poorly understood context, and meaning emerges as the reader understands both the horizon of the text and how their own horizon or context intersects with and is impacted by the text. Grasping the significance of Scripture for our own context, then, seems dependent both on our understanding of the context of Scripture and on our understanding of our own context. We must map out both in order to fully appreciate how the New Testament may speak into our experiences, behavior, and memories.

Yet here it seems that the task of understanding how Scripture may speak into us is in fact predicated on how well we comprehend ourselves. We must take up the daunting task of understanding ourselves, acknowledging that only in the past few decades have we begun to understand the workings—both the physical and the intangible—of our own minds and memories. Our understanding of Scripture, then, stands to be deeply enriched by a deeper understanding of our own neurobiology and the psychology of memory. Following the hermeneutical spiral, we will then be equipped to grasp the significance of the text for our lives as we not only allow Scripture to interpret Scripture but invite it to interpret our new understanding of ourselves (Starling and O'Brien 2016, p. 13) as vessels and shapers of memory.

3. The Neurobiology of Memory

Vessels we are indeed, as our brains and nervous systems house the physical stuff of memory. Our experience of memory, as intangible as it is, owes its nature and function to its very tangible roots. The process of memory formation within the brain creates the potential for both hurt and healing within the self, and, in so doing, reaches even to our spiritual self.

Memory formation takes place in three distinct steps: memory acquisition, memory consolidation, and the storage of memory (Tranel and Damasio 2002, p. 20). In memory acquisition, experiences introduce information into the brain through the five senses. Receiving these signals through the nervous system, the brain consolidates the disparate signals into a whole picture, concept, or narrative (depending on the experience). Neurobiologists speak of memory storage in terms of a “memory trace” that is connected dynamically to other, stored information in the brain in order to preserve the memory as a whole (De Brigard 2014, p. 411).

Studies of human brain disorders and diseases demonstrate that different types of memory (visual memories, physical skills, language, spatial memory, short-term memory, etc.) seem directly linked to different parts of the brain (McGaugh 2007). For example, sensory memory is housed within the sensory cortex, while language is stored within the ventral temporal area, and knowledge of physical skills is located in yet another area of the brain. As De Brigard notes, as the brain consolidates memories, it rejects details deemed insignificant or details too extensive to fit within short-term memory. Thus, the brain retains the essential aspects of a memory, augmented with knowledge drawn from different areas of the brain (the color blue, the sound of a relative’s voice, the sensation of riding in a car, etc.) (De Brigard 2013, p. 172). The mind is marvelously efficient in this process of memory formation: there is no need to record every detail of an experience. Instead, any experience, once encoded, depends upon previous memory-experiences of similar events, emotions, actions, or facts to fill out the full dimensions of the memory (De Brigard 2013, p. 176).

In the same way, different cortices of the brain are active during memory retrieval (De Brigard 2013, p. 173). The consolidated memory, certain details of which are linked to data stored elsewhere in the brain, is recalled to the pre-frontal cortex. In this retrieval process, those details of the retrieved memory that the brain linked to already-existing memory (e.g., smells, sounds, similar events, and experiences) reconsolidate with the essential memory (Tranel and Damasio 2002, p. 44). The reconsolidated memory thus carries the essential details of the original event, with nonessential details linked in through data stored in other parts of the brain, possibly at other times. For this reason, De Brigard describes

memory as “the sort of mechanism that cannot only bind together information that is distributed across neural networks, but must also be able to fill the gaps left by the missing pieces.” (De Brigard 2013, p. 174)

Unlike a computer, the human brain does not seem to create static “snapshots” or video files of memories in a single location within the brain. The process of memory formation seems to be consistent across mammals, allowing researchers to identify the stages of memory formation precisely without human trials. A study of mammalian memory formation observed that the formation of memories begins in the hippocampus and within minutes activates the entorhinal and posterior parietal cortices in the first stages of memory consolidation. After consolidation, initial memory retrieval activated all of these areas again, but, as the memory was retrieved repeatedly over time, fewer areas of the brain were activated: after several weeks, only the parietal cortex activated upon memory retrieval (Izquierdo and Medina 1997).

This ability to “fill the gaps” is partly due to the process of memory retrieval itself and how the brain links essential details of a memory narrative with knowledge stored in another part of the brain, possibly at another time. But memory’s ability to fill the gaps is also made possible by neuroplasticity. In their introductory text on the subject, Kania, Wrońska, and Zieba describe neuroplasticity as “the brain’s ability to form new neural connections throughout life, which is influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli, or the capacity of neurons and neural networks in the brain to change their connections and behavior in response to new information, sensory stimulation, development, damage or dysfunction” (Kania et al. 2017, p. 41). Thus, not only do memories potentially experience some change through the retrieval and reconsolidation process, but nerve tissue itself self-repairs and changes in response to new experiences—and in response to new thought patterns. As mental patterns are practiced, neurons respond by creating more direct pathways to support them. Patterns that fall out of practice do not receive this support and eventually become more difficult to recall.

Memory, then, is fundamentally open to change: even the neurobiological processes of memory formation and retrieval create some gaps between data that is stored disaggregated in the brain, allowing for some measure of alteration within the memory. While this can lead to misremembering, the same process also creates the potential to transform memories in positive ways: “who we are is very much defined by the way in which we remember and reconstruct our past experiences.” (Fivush et al. 2011, p. 324) In the search for restoration of spirit and self, the reconstruction of memory may be as significant as the act of remembering itself.

4. The Psychology of Memory

While neuroscience concerns itself with the physical, chemical, and electrical processes involved in memory formation and reconsolidation, psychology offers behavioral insights into how memory and the act of remembering impact identity and mental health. Where neuroscience is by nature detailed, even microscopic in its focus, psychology touches mind, body, behavior, and emotions toward both research and therapy. Due to this much broader application, the following exploration of psychology as it relates to memory is limited first to psychological research and observation (as opposed to therapeutic practices), and second to the specific question of how memory formation, retrieval, and reconsolidation impact the self psychologically, and—to the extent possible—why and how that impact occurs.

In 1983, Endel Tulving introduced a distinction between categories of memories encoded and consolidated in the brain. Pure data without context he termed semantic memory, but information that is intrinsically linked to events, that exists only as part of the event narrative, Tulving described as episodic memory (Tulving 1985). Charlotte Linde expands this binary taxonomy to include procedural memory, which refers to muscle memory and to physical skills and processes (Linde 2015, p. 323). Within these three categories of memory, episodic memory includes autobiographical memory, in which the individual is either

the subject or object of an action or event. It is autobiographical memories that create one's sense of self and provide a context and consistency that help maintain that sense of self and normalize mental and behavioral patterns (Prebble et al. 2013).

Since episodic, autobiographical memories concern events that take place over a specific span of time, they are remembered in narrative form as stories (Sarbin 1986). This is even more the case in an interpersonal context: memories become stories through narration in a social context (Smorti and Fioretti 2016). Thus, memories are, at heart, stories—and so the narration of memory is also inherently social (Volf 2021, p. 99; Linde 2015, p. 321). Unfortunately, the lack of interdisciplinary engagement between memory and narrative studies within psychology has hampered a more robust understanding of memory in terms of narrative within the field (Miształ 2010).

However, even without a more robust understanding of memory as socially formed narrative it becomes clear that memories exist within the self and also between individuals within relationships. Existing as they do in this shared yet private space, memories are subject to the influence of both self and other: the self influences memory through aging, experience, and maturity, and other individuals wield influence through feedback. As memories encoded years before are retrieved verbally and interpersonally, both the rememberer and the interlocutor verbally link their own and more recent experiences to the original memory narrative. As these original memories are rehearsed with other, more recent, linked events and remembered together with other individuals, the memories reconsolidate incorporating the new event and information—and the memory is changed (Linde 2015, p. 326).

One of the most significant changes that can occur in memory reconsolidation is meaning-making. Information such as more recent events, a more mature perspective, the feedback of friends and family provides new context for the memory and new interpretations of events (Fivush et al. 2011, pp. 329, 334). As new interpretations of memory are developed based on new experiences, those new meanings are encoded and linked to the original memory. In the future, retrieval of the original memory will retrieve both old and new with the new meaning.

In fact, remembering events with specificity yet also welcoming new interpretations of those events are critical factors in developing a healthy definition of self. If the individual remains open to reinterpretation based on new data, and the new interpretation holds internal integrity and is realistic, that personal narrative will contribute positively toward a healthy self-concept (Singer et al. 2013, p. 569). This is especially true of turning point narratives, for which higher levels of meaning-making are associated with greater maturity and a stronger sense of personal identity (Fivush et al. 2011, pp. 329–30).

Relationships exert a particularly powerful influence on meaning-making, and the more personally significant the relationship, the greater influence of that person on the individual's memories. In fact, our most significant relationships influence not only how we remember past events but what we remember at all: we are socialized to consider certain types of events and experiences worth remembering and others forgettable (Linde 2015, p. 322; Fivush et al. 2011, p. 321).

Children pattern their personal narratives after the autobiographical stories they grow up hearing, and familial feedback to stories reinforces their developing sense of what is significant in their lives—and what is significant about themselves, their sense of identity (Wang et al. 2018, pp. 213–17). Considering also the evidence discussed above regarding the causal link between specific, coherent personal narratives and a strong, healthy sense of personal identity, this evidence suggests that positive familial influence in assisting children to develop their autobiographical narrative also helps shape their sense of who they are, which in turn has significant impact on their mental health (Fivush et al. 2011, p. 327).

Memory shaping is not limited to childhood, however. As individuals mature and their self-concept changes, some autobiographical memories become less relevant to they are now, while other stories become, in hindsight, more significant or simply significant in a different way than originally assumed. Less relevant stories are rehearsed less and less

frequently, while significant stories are not only retold but are also given predictive power over the individual's sense of personal identity and behavior (Linde 2015, pp. 324–25).

In addition, new social contexts can catalyze significant changes in autobiographical memory and personal narrative. As adults assimilate into a new social group or community, they learn its values and reinterpret their own memories in light of their new shared values (Linde 2015, p. 324). As they become more deeply integrated within the new community and its symbolic world, they also learn new models of autobiographical memory, storytelling, and worldview that they then use to further restructure and reinterpret their memories (Littlejohn 2002, p. 33; Fivush et al. 2011, p. 334).

Social memory theory, while focused on collective memory instead of (and somewhat dismissive of) memories of individuals, is nonetheless correct in stating that “individuals remember within the social frameworks (*les cadres sociaux*) of the groups to which they belonged” (Rodríguez 2016, p. 347). The significance of this statement is found in the concept of memory frameworks as the socially developed narrative skeleton which tells the individual what to remember and how to structure the memory. As the social context changes, so does (to some extent) the framework. In fact, symbolic convergence theory notes that story arcs called “master narratives” are shared and valued by a community and provide key symbolic and narrative structures for its members (Cragan and Shields 1998, p. 94). Two master narratives in particular exert significant influence over memory interpretation and the continued development of personal identity: redemption scripts and contamination scripts. Redemption scripts prompt the individual to consider negative past events as experiences to learn from and obstacles that may be overcome. Contamination scripts claim that past negative events are wholly definitive for the self and are predictive for future experiences. As one might expect, redemptions scripts consistently successfully predict high mental health and personal growth, while contamination scripts accurately predict depression scores (Fivush et al. 2011, p. 343).

The overlap of family and cultural influences with religious influences is clear. Family, friends, and a community of faith are all social forces that help make meaning in memory. Each contributes to memory-shaping through the process of feedback and values education, thus introducing incremental changes in memory and meaning that are made possible through the memory retrieval and reconsolidation processes. It is clear, however, that the nature of the forces exerting influence over memory is critical to how the individual's sense of self—one could say their spirit—is shaped.

While the whole of Christian Scriptures, both Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, speak into memory formation and transformation in many, varied, and significant ways, the current study will limit its focus to the New Testament. The following pages will address two questions: What influence does the New Testament exert over the memories and self of its readers? Can that influence truly restore the spirits of those of us who read its text through the lens of faith?

5. Memory in the New Testament

The New Testament is by no means short on references to memory, remembering, and forgetting. The vast majority of these references are directed toward the readers of the text, charging them to remember the gospel of Jesus and the teaching of the apostles. There are relatively few references, though, to God's memory, making these all the more intriguing and significant.

In keeping with the analysis of cultural influence as a memory-shaping force, many of the memory-specific exhortations that are directed toward the reader demonstrate the community values of Jesus-followers (e.g., Matthew 26:13//Mark 14:9). These function as models of personal narrative that explicitly encourage readers to reinterpret their memories in light of Jesus and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection. In fact, Jesus' mother Mary serves as the prototype of one who engages in meaning-making upon meeting Jesus (Luke 2:19). After Jesus' death and resurrection, the disciples become the primary example of this process of reconsolidating and reshaping memories based on new under-

standing about Jesus (Luke 24:6; John 2:22; 12:16; Acts 11:16). Following the birth of the church, Paul and Peter frequently use the language of memory, enjoining readers to “remember” their teaching (Romans 15:15; 1 Corinthians 15:1; 2 Thessalonians 2:5; Hebrews 13:7; 2 Peter 1:12–15; 3:1; Jude 17).

Each of these texts serves the same purpose: to develop, demonstrate, and influence the readers of the text to “remember” their past experiences differently because of Jesus and, in reshaping their memories, reshape their identity based on who Jesus is and how Jesus’ identity and actions change their own actions and experiences (2 Corinthians 5:17–21). Two significant narratives—both of which are found in Luke’s Gospel—demonstrate this model at work and have, in different ways, become paradigmatic for the Church. Both the Eucharist and the disciples’ post-resurrection walk to Emmaus are, at heart, stories about reshaping and reinterpreting memory because of Jesus.

The Last Supper, or Eucharist, is the preeminent remembrance narrative in the New Testament (Luke 22:14–22). Jesus created a paradigm-shifting symbolic world by superimposing the Passover imagery on his own death and resurrection, and this new way of viewing reality was wholly dependent on himself and his life, death, and resurrection. The term used by Jesus in Luke 22:19 is ἀνάμνησις, or remembrance. The term is critical to the discussion of memory in the New Testament because it does not only indicate remembering as a mental exercise but to bring the event vividly forward in the mind, so it becomes a recalling to presence (Plato, Phaedrus 72E, 92D). In this case, the ritual of communion recalls the presence of Jesus to the congregation (Johnson 2006, p. 338). As the single mandated ritual for the church, Eucharist is the enacted memory that makes Jesus, his death, and his resurrection the foundation of Christian identity (Volf 2007, p. 27). In fact, in much the same way that key memories form and continue to shape an individual’s identity, the memory of Jesus forms and shapes the church (Dallas 2016).

Further, linking the Passover supper to the death of Jesus evokes the traditions of the Passover, namely, the tradition of proclaiming once again the identity-defining story of freedom from slavery (Exodus 13:14–16) (Witherington 1995, p. 250). Paul’s reminder to the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 11:24–25) connects the Eucharist not only to the past but also to the future (Soards 2011, pp. 241–42), confirming that the event had become—and was intended to be—a core memory shared within the church that functioned as both an expression of Christian values and a means by which believers were to reinterpret their own pasts and set new expectations for their futures (Volf 2021, p. 97).

Only three days later on the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:13), Jesus joined some of his disciples on their journey to Emmaus. While walking together, Jesus used his own life and death to reinterpret his disciples’ understanding not just of Torah but also of their own symbolic world and their memories (Luke 24:25–27). Jesus gave them the original model of a messianic, Christocentric interpretation of Scripture (McGaugh 2007, p. 897), most likely focusing on the model of rejection foretold and experienced by the prophets (Luke 24:19–20) (Johnson 2006, p. 396). This one lengthy conversation provided Jesus’ disciples with the single crucial piece of information they needed to completely reinterpret their experiences: Jesus was the Messiah foreseen by God’s prophets. Again, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection form the narrative that reshapes his disciples’ memories, forcing them to reevaluate and reinterpret all they have experienced, even since childhood.

The story of this walk to Emmaus holds one other piece of the story that is significant for followers of Jesus today: Jesus himself reminded his disciples of what they already knew (Scripture), but when placed in context with himself, all that they knew had to be reinterpreted. In the same way, John’s Gospel relates the promise that the Holy Spirit “will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26, NIV). One of the few texts in the New Testament in which God is the subject of the act of remembering, for those who believe, this promise signifies that, like that day on the way to Emmaus, God’s active presence guides the reshaping of memory. In psychological terms, the relationship exerting the most influence over meaning-making and memory reshaping

in a Christian's experience is the Spirit, and, based on Luke's narrative, Scripture is the primary means used by the Spirit.

Meaning-making and memory reshaping is not limited to the act of remembering: the choice to forget is equally powerful. While many scholars view forgetting as a failure of memory or a static problem to overcome in their study of the transmission of Scripture (e.g., Malina and Pilch 2006, p. 313; Allison 2010, p. 27; Keener 2012, pp. 270–72), there is a mercy to forgetting, especially for those suffering from traumatic or simply shameful memories. Yet these are frequently the memories that most deeply impact and even shape identity due to their emotional intensity (Singer et al. 2013, p. 78) and are thus all the more difficult to abandon.

Paul's personal narrative bears these marks clearly. His life before Christ was a strong affirmation of the Pharisee community to which he belonged: in Paul's own words, "as for righteousness based on the law, faultless" (Philippians 3:6). This righteousness was so significant, so central to Paul's identity that he persecuted Christians out of his conviction. Yet his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1–18) forced Paul to reinterpret his closely held memories, to find new meaning in his memories because of the reality of Jesus the Messiah (Witherington 1998, p. 342). And this new meaning is so radical that Paul's transformative understanding undermines the value of nearly every identity marker that he once thought of with such pride (Witherington 2011, p. 190). Instead, Paul affirms a new, intensely Christocentric lens through which he now interprets everything: his identity, his past and memories, his present actions, his future hopes (Philippians 3:7–14). Behind Paul's language of "knowing Christ" and being "in Christ" is an intentional posture of prioritizing the influence of Christ over every aspect of life (Bockmuehl 1997, pp. 213–14), which also includes memories and meaning-making. The impact of this Christocentric attitude on Paul's personal narrative and his memories is equivalent to the impact of parents on children, helping them identify significance and interpret meaning in their experiences. In the same way, the reality of Christ also now defines Paul's sense and story of who he is (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul's end goal is critical to our purposes here: Paul seeks conformity to Christ in order to "attain the resurrection of the dead" (Philippians 3:11). Alternately phrased, Paul "desires to understand and experience the life-giving power of God" (O'Brien 1991, p. 400). Paul seeks restoration of the spirit.

Yet in order to maintain a mentally healthy sense of personal identity, interpretations of memories must be internally coherent, adaptable, and maintain integrity with reality (Singer et al. 2013). In what way is Paul's example of simply forgetting both previously significant memories and the behaviors they condoned coherent or truthful? As a blunt example, Paul murdered others in the name of his faith but, by the time he wrote to the Philippian church, followed a new faith that condemned such actions. As Markus Bockmuehl notes, "the present tense of forgetting suggests an ongoing concern to be unencumbered both by what may have been abandoned in the past and what has already been achieved, the part of the course he has already covered" (Bockmuehl 1997, p. 222). It would seem that such forgetting, though, would be a convenient avoidance of past wrongdoing, not an expression of integrity with a new reality.

The anonymous letter to the Hebrews provides the answer in one of the rare references to God's memory. A quotation of Jeremiah 31:31–34, it occurs twice in Hebrews (8:12; 10:17), underscoring its significance: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more." There is no Scripture in either the New Testament or Hebrew Scriptures that suggests God has voluntary amnesia, nor is there any accepted interpretation throughout the history of interpretation in the church that suggests God has actually forgotten anything. As noted above, the first-century concept of remembering involved intentionally bringing the event or information to mind so that it was experientially present to the individual (Plato, Phaedrus 72E, 92D). Thus, the choice to "not remember" is in fact a conscious refusal to relive the memory. In fact, David reflects this understanding in writing that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). According to Scripture, this is God's version of forgiveness: as east never touches

west, so sins forgiven never return to the mind. In the letter to the Hebrews, as in every other book of the New Testament, Christ's death made this forgiveness possible (Hagner 2011, p. 160).

This is the single element that gives Paul's personal narrative coherence and proves that his forgetting has meaning and is an accurate reflection of reality after all. And because God chooses not to remember, we may ourselves forget as well. In *The End of Memory*, a profound exploration of forgiveness, Miroslav Volf concludes,

No doubt, what we or others have inscribed onto our souls and bodies marks us and helps shape who we are. Yet it has no power to define us. God's love for us, indeed God's presence in us ... most fundamentally defines us as human beings and as individuals. (Volf 2021, p. 199)

Like Paul, we who follow Christ are identified with Christ, defined by him, and continually being reshaped in our memories and our selves to become more like him.

However, human memory is notoriously fickle. Without consistent reminders, without consistent influence reshaping our memories, we fall back to the status quo. Perhaps it should not come as a surprise that the New Testament is remarkably realistic when it comes to human failings. In his letter to the Jewish churches, James contends that those who fail to follow the teaching of the gospel have forgotten what they look like (James 1:23–24). But those who obey it are free (James 1: 25). What he describes is identity instability. James' readers are believers who do not act like people who are new (2 Corinthians 5:17) or free (Galatians 5:1), though that is who they are in Christ, given new birth "through the word of truth" (James 1:18).

Although James' description of the forgetful man is somewhat humorous, he nonetheless correctly diagnoses both the true problem—we have forgotten who we are—and given us the real solution: looking "intently into the perfect law that gives freedom" (James 1:25). James nowhere requires Christians to adhere to the Old Testament laws, and "the word ... which can save you" in 1:21 must be the gospel, leading one to conclude that "James' 'law' does not refer to the law of Moses as such, but to the law of Moses as interpreted and supplemented by Christ" (Davids 1982, p. 100; Moo 2000, p. 94). The solution to the problem of forgetting who we are is consistent immersion in Scripture, consistent exposure to the presence of God within Scripture. From this perspective, Scripture serves as the influence that shapes our memories and affirms new meaning-making toward conforming the self to properly reflect Christ instead of our old identity (viz., Paul's old creation, 2 Corinthians 5:17).

In the same way, Paul charges the Christians in Rome to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" in order to avoid conforming "to the pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2). According to Paul, the self is continually influenced by its surroundings, and one's surroundings without God render the mind and thus the self "unfit" for worship or service to God (12:1) (Barrett 1991, p. 214). Paul's use of the present tense for both *συσχηματίζεσθε* and *μεταμορφοῦσθε* underscores the ever-present and continual aspect of a complete metamorphosis of the self (Witherington and Hyatt 2004, p. 286). As Fitzmyer notes in his commentary on Romans, the following verses of Romans 12 indicate that this must be a thoroughgoing transformation (Fitzmyer 2008, p. 641), extending from the mind and self through to moral discernment (12:2b), attitude (9–11), and action as well (12–18). This is far more than Fitzmyer's "ethical instruction," though (Fitzmyer 2008, p. 637). Instead, Romans 12 (and particularly Romans 12:1–2) provides a practical path forward, in fact a path of practice toward the renewal of the mind: it is intentional, consistent focus on the pattern of Christ that leads to renewal and restoration (Willard 2002, pp. 189–96). James D. G. Dunn refers to this as "the recovery of the mind's proper function," its restoration from the impact and influence of sin (Dunn 2003, p. 74).

And the pattern of Christ, the true Word of God (John 1:1), is most clearly seen within Scripture. To this end, the study of Scripture is essential to reshaping memories and, thus, reforming one's sense of self (Vanderstelt 2017, pp. 109–29). Yet study alone proves insufficient: understanding the meaning of the text fulfills only half of the promise of inter-

pretation. Readers must also understand and embrace its significance for their lives. It is no accident that Paul's message in Romans 12 echoes his earlier discussion of "those who live according to the flesh" versus "those who live according to the Spirit" (Romans 8:5–7). The renewed mind thus parallels those who live by the Spirit, and Paul's emphasis in both texts is on what followers of Jesus do and how they act: he reinforces that "God's will here involves how we devote our bodies to God's service." (Keener 2009, p. 144) Renewing the mind involves reshaping memory and identity. It is a true restoration of the mind that requires intentional and consistent immersion—a discipleship of the Word of God and the presence of God toward the reinterpretation of our reality—and results in transformation of the personal narrative, a rebirth of identity, and even healing (Tygrett 2019, pp. 192–94).

6. Conclusions: Spiritual Renewal through the Redemption of Memory

Yet, as noted above, understanding the meaning of a text (or concept) without grasping its significance for our lives leaves us only half done with the task of interpretation (Hirsch 1978). This study of memory and the New Testament has introduced a variety of threads, the connections of which have been briefly highlighted. Now is the task of finally weaving them together into an actionable whole that integrates the threads into a single, coherent narrative that maintains integrity with both lived experience and Scripture. Through such a process we may test and prove true the promise that "times of refreshing will come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

Mary and the disciples of Jesus provide the first model of restoration through the reshaping of memory. Theirs is a turning point narrative in which their experience of Jesus culminated in a point of insight that dramatically reconfigures their interpretation of all of their past experiences. For Mary, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus developed in her a habit of comparing the experiences and beliefs lodged in her memories with Jesus' unfolding life, continually seeking understanding about the person and mission of her son. In pondering these things, she engaged in ongoing meaning-making as she welcomed the influence of new experiences and information that might illuminate or reframe her memories. For Jesus' disciples, the turning point narrative centered on the resurrection, which overturned their interpretations of past experiences. Everything they thought they knew had to be re-examined in light of Jesus as they now knew him.

Those of us who follow Jesus have the same moment in our lives. We each have a turning point narrative that hinges on who Jesus is and how his life, death, and resurrection change everything we thought to be true. The paradigm Mary models calls us to a continual re-examination that welcomes new insight and reshaping based on the person of Jesus. It requires courage and a willingness to reinterpret past experiences based on new insights. The disciples demonstrate for us the impact of such courage and willingness to be reshaped at such a fundamental level: their identities were forever changed, and the actions catalyzed by this internal transformation changed the world. Theirs was no tidy internal transformation that conveniently allowed their personal worlds to continue in the same direction: for modern followers of Jesus, their narrative is both a promise and a warning.

From the disciples' walk to Emmaus we remember that Scripture is the primary means of transformation—Scripture guided by the presence of God, that is. For these first-century disciples, the journey to Emmaus was a protracted experience of memory retrieval, reshaping, and reconsolidation: their experience and memory of Scripture would never be the same. In the same way, the Holy Spirit comes alongside those who study Scripture, engaging their memories, informing their experience, and creating new opportunities for turning points and meaning-making that can reach deeply within to reshape personal narratives and transform identities. For most of today's disciples, this process is years in the making, not hours, as Scripture influences small changes in memories that slowly bring about the same internal renewal and transformation.

Paul's personal narrative speaks to how deeply that turning point conversion experience reshapes memories. For Paul, meaning-making was a process not only of reinterpret-

tation but also discovering which memories actually still held meaning for him after his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Memories that no longer held meaning could be intentionally “forgotten”: they would no longer be brought to mind. Because of the neuroplasticity of the brain, while those memories may not be truly forgotten, they will become more difficult to recall over time. Paul’s practice of “taking captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5) no doubt reflects this work of intentionally pursuing Christocentrically reshaped memories and mental patterns.

We learn from Paul to accept Christ’s authority over our memories, affirming Christ’s forgiveness and acknowledging freedom from a past that no longer defines us. In so doing, we begin to hold to the reshaped meaning of some of our memories and to abandon other memories, refusing intentionally to bring them to mind until such a time as those memories no longer resurface easily.

Paul gives us a story of how and why to forget; the Eucharist is a story about how and what to remember. As James pointed out (James 1:24–25), Christocentric memory-shaping can directly conflict with the influences around us. It is all too easy to forget the instances of meaning-making that have created in us a new personal narrative and a new identity in Christ. We need reminders of our Christ-shaped symbolic world, and we need a community around us to reinforce the influence of Scripture and Spirit on our memories and our personal narratives. Eucharist is a constant recalling to our minds the truth that who we are is built on who Christ is in his life, death, and resurrection. It acts as a consistent reaffirmation of the slow reshaping of memory and self that we welcome through the study of Scripture, through prayer, and through other spiritual disciplines.

Restoration of the spirit and the renewal of self are both promised and commanded in the New Testament (e.g., Titus 3:5; Ephesians 4:22–24). The New Testament promises restoration through engagement with God, who brings life to the soul. We are commanded to pursue it because we easily forget who and what we are. Neuroscience and psychology provide us with very specific tools we may wield in this pursuit as we study the New Testament. Neuroscience gives us the keys to memory formation and retrieval that we may intentionally leverage into memory reshaping and reconsolidation by welcoming the spiritual and psychological influence Scripture brings to bear on our memories and personal narratives. In short, Scripture invites us to a life-long walk to Emmaus. Both the text and the Spirit walk with us on this journey to remind us of what we should not have forgotten, to make meaning of and redeem our memories, to reshape our narratives, and, in so doing, restore our spirits.

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