Pieter B. Hartog

Acts of Memory

Ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῖται, ἀκούσατε τοὺς λόγους τούτους· Ἰησοῦν τὸν Ναζωραῖον [...] θεὸς ἀνέστησεν λύσας τὰς ὠδῖνας τοῦ θανάτου, καθότι οὐκ ἦν δυνατὸν κρατεῖσθαι αὐτὸν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ. Δαυὶδ γὰρ λέγει εἰς αὐτόν· προορώμην τὸν κύριον ἐνώπιόν μου διὰ παντός, ὅτι ἐκ δεξιῶν μού ἐστιν ἵνα μὴ σαλευθῶ. Διὰ τοῦτο ηὐφράνθη ἡ καρδία μου καὶ ἠγαλλιάσατο ἡ γλῶσσά μου, ἔτι δὲ καὶ ἡ σάρξ μου κατασκηνώσει ἐπ' ἐλπίδι, ὅτι οὐκ ἐγκαταλείψεις τὴν ψυχήν μου εἰς ᾅδην οὐδὲ δώσεις τὸν ὅσιόν σου ἰδεῖν διαφθοράν. Ἐγνώρισάς μοι ὁδοὺς ζωῆς, πληρώσεις με εὐφροσύνης μετὰ τοῦ προσώπου σου.

Ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἐξὸν εἰπεῖν μετὰ παρρησίας πρὸς ὑμᾶς περὶ τοῦ πατριάρχου Δαυὶδ ὅτι καὶ ἐτελεύτησεν καὶ ἐτάφη, καὶ τὸ μνῆμα αὐτοῦ ἔστιν ἐν ἡμῖν ἄχρι τῆς ἡμέρας ταύτης. Προφήτης οὖν ὑπάρχων καὶ εἰδὼς ὅτι ὅρκῳ ὤμοσεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς ἐκ καρποῦ τῆς ὀσφύος αὐτοῦ καθίσαι ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ, προϊδὼν ἐλάλησεν περὶ τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ Χριστοῦ ὅτι οὔτε ἐγκατελείφθη εἰς ᾅδην οὔτε ἡ σὰρξ αὐτοῦ εἶδεν διαφθοράν. Τοῦτον τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀνέστησεν ὁ θεός, οὗ πάντες ἡμεῖς ἐσμεν μάρτυρες.

Acts 2:22, 24–32

Acknowledging that the book of Acts is an exercise in memory making amounts to stating the obvious. Like so many ancient sources once read as history, Acts is now more commonly perceived as a repository of memory/ies from and for the early Jesus movement (»the Way« in Acts' terms), which sought to find its place within the large and complex Roman world.

In his speech in Acts 2 (quoted above), Peter explains Jesus' resurrection by evoking Ps 16:8–11, paying particular attention to verse 10 (»For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit«[1]). He then points to David's tomb to support his point that David cannot have spoken these verses of himself: »I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day« (29). Hence, Peter concludes, David must have been talking prophetically about the Messiah – i.e., »Jesus« whom »God raised up« (32).

[1] Bible translations follow the New Revised Standard Version.

This combination of a literary tradition with a monumental landmark is an act of memory making, whereby Ps 16 and David's tomb come to serve as ›lieux de mémoire‹:[2] the literary tradition affects how the monument is remembered, and vice versa. In light of the Psalm's reference to the immortality of its speaker, David's tomb no longer reminds its viewers solely of David's great deeds, but also of his mortality – and, by way of contrast, of Jesus' immortality. Similarly, the presence of the tomb reminds readers of Acts that the reference in the Psalm to immortality does not (or not only) refer to David, but to Jesus. Thus, Acts transforms existing *lieux de mémoire* and imbues them with fuller meaning in order to construct a historical memory for the Way.

The dynamics in this passage resemble those in Acts 17:16–32, where Paul's encounter with an altar dedicated to »to an unknown god« triggers his Areopagus speech. Although the move in Acts 17 is less direct than in Acts 2, Paul's Areopagus speech also connects a landmark with a literary tradition. Yet in Acts 17 no literary tradition from the Hebrew Scriptures is in play. It is rather a quotation from the Greek poet Aratus which allows Paul to equate his God both with Aratus' Zeus and with the unknown god of the altar. In this way, the Aratus quotation turns the altar into a ›lieu de mémoire‹ for a god the Athenians now do know – i.e., the God Paul pronounces, who is the same as Aratus' Zeus – whereas the Aratus quotation, through Paul's reading (or rather, the reading of the author of Acts), becomes a ›lieu de mémoire‹ for that formerly unknown God.[3]

Through these acts of memory the author of Acts writes the Way into the literary traditions and architectural landmarks of the Roman world and its various inhabitants. As Acts develops historical memories for the Way, these memories are closely linked with those ›lieux de mémoire‹ the protagonists of Acts encounter on their journeys. In Acts 2, Peter's message appears continuous with David's tomb as a ›lieu de mémoire‹ commemorating Israel's glorious past under David. In Acts 17, Paul presents the Way as a logical perpetuation of Greek philosophical and religious views. In neither passage is the tone explicitly polemical: previous meanings attached to these ›lieux de mémoire‹ are largely allowed to stand. The message of the apostles is not being presented as a wholly new, but rather as a more complete message, which for that reason deserves to be embraced. Hence, Acts finds a place for the Way among existing structures in the Roman Empire, whilst transforming these structures by incorporating them in the overarching movement of the Way.

[2] On the term ›lieu(x) de mémoire‹ see Pierre Nora: Les lieux de mémoire, 3 vols., Paris 1984, 1986, 1992.

[3] More elaborately on my reading of the Areopagus passage see Pieter B. Hartog: Where Shall Wisdom be Found? Identity, Sacred Space, and Universal Knowledge in Philostratus and the Acts of the Apostles, in: Jerusalem and Other Holy Places as Foci of Multireligious and Ideological Confrontation, ed. Pieter B. Hartog et al., Leiden (Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series), forthcoming; idem: Joodse reizigers in het Romeinse rijk. Tussen globalisering en zelfbehoud, in: Journal for Theology and the Study of Religion (formely: Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift), forthcoming.

In his lecture at the 2008 *Dies Natalis* of the *Protestant Theological University*, Hans-Martin Kirn pleaded for an encyclopaedic approach to theology, in which literary and historical disciplines self-consciously make their own contributions alongside other subfields.[4] Inspired by Kirn's lecture, I will briefly consider two theological ramifications of the historical observations presented above.

To begin with, historical, comparative, and exegetical work on ancient Judaism and Christianity serves as a powerful reminder of the internal variety of these groups and their complex interactions with surrounding communities. In the cases treated here, the fact that Acts grounds the memories it constructs for the Way in a variety of existing ›lieux de mémoire‹ creates a multi-faceted image of the early Jesus movement. In Acts, God can be remembered as the one who inspired the ancient prophets and now, with Jesus' resurrection, brings his plans to fruition (Acts 2); but also as the omnipresent creator in whom all persons »live and move and have [their] being« (Acts 17:28). Depending on the context in the narrative, Acts provides different memories of God and his deeds. This variety is not, in my view, merely a case of audience-oriented communication. Through the different ways in which Acts' protagonists communicate their viewpoints, these viewpoints themselves change, and different ways of remembering God come to the fore.

I write this two days after David Nirenberg, in his 2019 Franz-Delitzsch-Vorlesung, spoke about the theological relevance of historical enquiry as offering a range of »possibilities« for faith and challenging one-sided accounts.[5] Nirenberg focused on the pluriform relationships between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but his proposal is equally valid for my observations here. Historical research on Acts shows the variety of possibilities the book has on offer, and this variety only increases if other biblical (let alone non-biblical) writings enter the picture. Thus, historical awareness – not as »knowledge of facts,« but as »a way of thinking«[6] – is an essential part of the theological enterprise, as it foregoes easy evocations of »the Bible« or »the early church« – or, in fact, any historical document or period – in theological thinking.

Moreover, reading ancient Jewish or Christian sources in terms of memory and forgetting shows that historiography is always present-oriented. If the author of Acts, writing at least twenty (and perhaps more) years after the events he describes, presents his readers with historical memories, his aim is not to record facts, but to shape the self-understanding of this audience. In a similar vein, modern historians and exegetes will, consciously or unconsciously,

[4] Hans-Martin Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies? Voorbij het dilemma tussen zelfopheffing en isolement (Lecture at the dies natalis of the Protestant Theological University, Leiden, 8 December 2008), http://theoluniv.ub.rug.nl/220/1/KirnHM_diesrede_8dec2008.pdf.

[5] David Nirenberg: Judentum, Christentum, Islam. Nachbarschaften in der Longue Durée (Franz-Delitzsch-Vorlesung, Münster, 2 December 2019).

[6] Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies?, 10.

provide their readers with interpretations and histories that they consider their audience needs. A telling example is the attention in archaeology and ancient history – and increasingly also in the study of ancient Judaism and Christianity – to processes of globalization in the ancient world. This line of research, which gained momentum in the 2000s, resonates with the world in which we live today. In similar vein, the attention in much of modern historical scholarship to discontinuity, variety, and complexity in antiquity is likely to mirror our postmodern condition.

Yet Kirn reminds us that this orientation toward the present must not lead to »economical exchanges« in historiography (»I will give you attention, you will give me meaning«[7]). Even if all historians bring their own assumptions to their material, yet ethical historical enquiry is aware of its responsibility to give voice to the »other« from the past:

> History is here seen as an elementary gift and task – similar to how the other is a gift that makes us responsible. [...] History challenges appropriations of the »other« along the lines of one's own sake and self-chosen actuality.[8]

When done responsibly, Kirn argues, historiography can have a transformative – even »sacramental«[9] – effect on historians, as they understand themselves to be participants in history, history being »as it were the air we breathe«.[10] Unless we take the position of the uninvolved onlooker, the historical or exegetical study of ancient sources allows us to enter into a dialogue with the »other« from the past, not only to understand the »other«, but also to understand ourselves and to create our own historical memories. Lose the past, and we lose ourselves.

---

7 Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies?, 14: »Jubilea zijn een goed voorbeeld voor wat niet de bedoeling is, de markteconomische ruil: ik geef jou aandacht, en jij geeft mij betekenis, in de manier van: kom op Calvijn 2009, kom op Luther 2017.«

8 Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies?, 14: »Geschiedenis wordt hier gezien als elementaire gave en opdracht – zoals de ander een gave is, die ons verantwoordelijk stelt. [...] Geschiedenis bestaat juist als inspraak tegen het verwerken van de ›ander‹ naar de maatstaven van eigenbelang en zelfgekozen actualiteit.«

9 Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies?, 15.

10 Kirn: Van Theologie naar Religious Studies?, 14.