Navigating “Deuteronomistic History” as Cultural Memory

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Abstract
Scribal tradents have been the custodians of identity. Through memory and meaning an identity was born and within their work the reader finds the pillars of mnemonic socialization. The so-called Deuteronomistic History, as a cultural memory, is a form of crafting and protecting an identity.

Keywords
memory; meaning; identity; history; Deuteronomistic History

1. The Retrieval of Memory

This essay uses socio-rhetorical analysis (“SRA”) in order to address, in a very condensed manner, the weaving of memory as a means of negotiating identity. Jan Assman’s mnemohistory understood within the framework of SRA can be understood as the clustering of topological cues read retrospectively through history.

Philip Davies wrote: “What is more important about the past than facts? The answer is memory, because memory, whether personal or collective, belongs to us. It is our history […] Nor is it a disinterested recollection, but something basic to our identity and our future. Our memory of what we have experienced enables us at each moment to sustain identity. Total amnesia is a total loss of self. We are, except in a purely biological sense, what we remember.”¹ Interaction with other cultures can blur one’s memory. Influence

from other modes of thinking can cause a detachment from one's own anchoring frame, that is, the cultural milieu we are brought up in when we are confronted or immersed in another or from another mode of thinking. When memory fades, artefactual remains reinforce and complete what a living community has sewn within us (in the sense of memory weaving).

Cultural memory is a bridging tie between historiography and cultural studies. History writing evidences the processes of cultural memory, while cultural studies evidences the implications and causes of cultural memory.

Discoveries in archaeology, epigraphy, linguistics and cuneiform studies continue to shed light on the world portrayed in Biblical texts. This paper seeks to give special attention to one particular aspect of the so-called Deuteronomistic History ("DH"), that is, the weaving of identity through cultural memory. While texts are the subject of study – the actual artefact, culture, is the tool by which memory is orchestrated in order to achieve a given aim. Professor Peter Machinist, while writing about the question of monotheism and its varying viewpoints within the Hebrew Bible, concluded by saying: "Yahweh may be the supreme God, but he has constantly to reclaim his supremacy by warring against other forces. One cannot be over-confident that the battle once won will never be fought again. And in this battle, Yahweh needs us as much as we need him."

Cultural memory is that discourse that later becomes the fabric of a people. Monotheism versus monolatry is but one example of the weaving of cultural memory. The so-called DH promotes a fierce monotheism, or better still, an intolerant Yahwism, yet throughout this nebulous corpus the reader will notice traces of monolatry: at times tolerant, at others clearly intolerant. When one thinks of a differentiating characteristic for biblical Israel, one usually thinks of monotheism, but this monotheism is really a weaving, an orchestration of competing voices from a people of a set of beliefs to engender a unifying thread in order to create a common bond between past traditions and their present situation; a compression according to Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner; a series of analogy-disanalogy to promote change and negotiate identity for a people through the Uniqueness of Deity and consequently, uniqueness – or otherness of its people.

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2. Patterns of Memory

Mnemonic formulae are the threads that address the important markers that define the processes of collective memory in negotiating this cultural identity. Jeffrey C. Geoghegan’s work on the formula “until this day” makes it possible for us to identify the “religio-political perspective of those producing Israel’s history”.\(^5\) The formula “until this day” permits Deuteronomist to anchor commandments (laws and precepts) and institutions of Deuteronomic law with prophecy fulfillment patterns\(^6\) and to emphasize “on remembering the words and deeds of YHWH and passing these on to future generations (Deut 6:4–7; 11:2–7)”.\(^7\) As Geoghegan points out, “the number of monuments said to persist “until this day” throughout the land would certainly give testimony to God’s past actions on Israel’s behalf”\(^8\) and the Deuteronomist’s concern “for centralized worship”.\(^9\) Gilles Fauconnier called this the compression of space-time-and-events “as a prompt to blend events, intentionality, and times”\(^10\) as a basic cultural instrument. The custodians of the DH designated certain places and certain times (or events) for the purpose of remembrance. These custodians used places, events and mnemonic devices (like \textit{until this day} and \textit{they forsook YHWH and served the Baalim}) as anchors for memorial purposes, didactic purposes and as “prompts for memory and time compression”.\(^11\)

Scribal custodians have had the monopoly in generating this bonding belief and have succeeded so well that Yahwism has won as the only belief or expression of the proper belief system of the Hebrew Bible. Eviatar Zerubavel\(^12\) and Steven Pinker\(^13\) are two scholars who artfully articulate how words are carriers of culture and how culture is determinative of words – and this is clearly demonstrated in the inner and social-cultural textures of an SRA

\(^{5}\) Jeffrey C. Geoghegan, \textit{The Time, Place, and Purpose of the Deuteronomistic History: The Evidence of “Until This Day”} (Brown Judaic Studies; Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 2006), 6. DH employed the formula until this day “as his own personal witness to objects and institutions mentioned in his sources that still existed during his day” during or shortly after the reign of Josiah (late 7th to early 6th century BCE).

\(^{6}\) Geoghegan, \textit{The Time, Place}, 144.

\(^{7}\) Geoghegan, \textit{The Time, Place}, 145.

\(^{8}\) Geoghegan, \textit{The Time, Place}, 145.

\(^{9}\) Geoghegan, \textit{The Time, Place}, 145.

\(^{10}\) Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 316.

\(^{11}\) Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 316.


\(^{13}\) Steven Pinker, \textit{The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window Into Human Nature} (New York: Penguin Group, 2007).
reading of the DH. If one keeps in mind the questions of who speaks, to what audience, and for what purpose, when reading a text, then “remembering involves more than just the recall of facts,” the past is conveyed through “mental filters.” The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), in *Les cadrats sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), showed that the past is never able to survive unto itself. It can only survive if it is reconstructed within the framework of a cultural present. This reconstruction starts with the present and reaches back into the past. The past is, in fact, a cultural projection. History becomes the recollection of events that occupy man’s thoughts. What triggers the remembering of a particular set of events rather than another is the framework of man’s present. Biblical Israel’s identity was redefined and tweaked with each new crisis. Indeed, the exile was a most intriguing trigger as biblical Israel found itself without its markers of identity (no temple, no land), yet it found a way to renegotiate its identity and strengthen it.

For the German writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955), the driving question concerning history and the past is: *why and for what purpose does man need the past?* For Mann, the past endures only as a symbolic form that he calls myth; what we call historiographical narrative. The past is a dimension of time. Indeed, time is the framework of events, as long as these events carry some type of memories. Modern man, for example, uses time to delimit frames of history; “before Christ” is known to all. Still, our mind rewinds itself to moments (real or created) in time in order to situate an event. Jerusalem in the time of the Crusades will generate created memories to the modern man: scenes of violence and injustice. Most striking in our modern mind is: September 11. All one needs to state is the date and Twin Towers comes to mind. Time, indeed, is a situational framework.

Two groups of the same geographical region may live the same past but remember it differently. Zerubavel gives the example of the difference between what Americans and Indians tend to recall from wedding ceremonies “as a product of their having been socialized into different mnemonic traditions involving altogether different mental filters commonly shared by their respective mnemonic communities.” Another aspect of the act of remembering is that “remembering is also governed by unmistakably social norms of remembrance” that tell us what we should remember and what we

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should essentially forget”¹⁸ – such as Memorial Day. This is called “mnemonic socialization” and this process can take place in formal settings – like museums and old battle grounds. It can take place in less formal settings such as the Christmas family table where older family members group-reminisce. Language allows memories to be transmitted in oral settings: again, the Christmas family table setting. Yet, writing permits yet another form of remembering through documents such as king lists, law codes, treaties and the like. Add to this memories transmitted without the verbal or written medium like a statue, a photograph, or a memorial. And when we take the example of a history book, the matter of how a subject is remembered shows, again, a filtered state. Which event is selected, recounted, from which point of view, and in which arena, is in and of itself an attempt to recraft memory. The history of the African-American people is a strong example. Who writes the past is as important as the recounting itself. When recounting the history of the United States of America, the history of the African-American was not always told. Today, one can access memories and cultural knowledge from this unique people as they themselves remember it.

If the past is seen through mnemonic social patterns – or a retrospective memory – this is conveyed by plotlines and narratives.¹⁹ We feel connectedness through emplotment because it is through emplotment that “we manage to provide both past and present events with historical meaning”.²⁰ Indeed, narratives, or in our present case historiographical narratives, are the means by which we “string past events in our minds, thereby providing them with historical meaning”²¹ – not an objective meaning, rather a filtered meaning through the social structures: “sociomnemonic structures”.²² In the case of the DH, we lean towards Thomas Römer’s examining of the possible ongoing redactional activity of the DH within the Persian-Hellenistic²³ periods. Some of these issues are: segregation, especially true of texts where “a strict separation of Israelites from other nations is requested”²⁴ – a period, according

¹⁸ Zerubavel, Time Maps, 5.
¹⁹ Zerubavel, Time Maps, 11.
²⁰ Zerubavel, Time Maps, 13.
²¹ Zerubavel, Time Maps, 14.
²² Zerubavel, Time Maps, 14.
²³ Thomas Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 180–81. Römer says that in the Persian period the priestly influence – which advocated that the “land appears as the central topic of Jewish identity” – dies down as “[t]his was certainly considered as somewhat dangerous by the Priestly and Deuteronomistic majority, especially because of the violent conquest account, which in a Persian context was certainly not the best way to express goodness towards the Achaemenid authorities”.
²⁴ Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History, 166.
to Römer, “when the transformation of the Yahwistic Judean religion into Judaism took place”.25 But Jon Berquist reminds us that “[i]dentity refers to the pattern that multiple forces produce. Each point is fluid and changing, as a complex product of imperialization and decolonization. Religion, nationality, and ethnicity are all components of identity – and all of them are simultaneously both imperializing and decolonizing,”26 so that in the Persian period “[n]ational identity is both Persian and Yehudite”.27

If only a select few could write, then only a select few could choose which belief to select as the bonding belief of a people or a nation. One cannot think that the dominant faction – the select few – is representative of the whole, of culture itself. Popular versus official representations of the beliefs of biblical Israel is a vast and complicated discussion that cannot be addressed with justice here. Suffice it to say that the DH is most assuredly the preferred ideal or official version.

The weaving of identity as “history” is, of course, a subject studied by many facets of scholarship. Some will say that the so-called DH is the product of one “true historian”, while others have argued that the DH is no history at all, but an idealized and theologized version of biblical Israel’s past, or even the past of many biblical Israelis (as the work of Davies and Machinist demonstrate).28 Today we approach DH as a careful weaving of a nation’s identity through the cultural memory built and protected by its tradents and custodians, the scribes. I would argue that these custodians by using language wove together, as a rich tapestry, a culturally-unifying memory that came to known as biblical Israel.

DH also promotes a centralization of sacrifice – as Geoghegan pointed out,29 the convergence and differentiation of Ancient Near eastern concepts in our understanding and our articulating of the divine – as Mark S. Smith pointed out.30 DH also advances regulations pertaining to sacrifice and legitimization of leadership and administration. As such, biblical Israel asks for a king, but the concept of kingship differs from that of its neighbours as DH promotes a high

25 Römer, The So-Called Deuteronomistic History, 166.
28 See Davies, Memories of Ancient Israel; Machinist, “Once More: Monotheism in Biblical Israel.”
level of responsibility of the king towards its people.  The biblical Israel of the
DH promotes, as we have said, a fierce monotheism, but it does so by converging and differentiating “from the antecedent polytheism of the region (now best attested by the Ugaritic texts), through Israel’s early polytheism down to Israel’s monotheistic expressions best seen in the seventh and sixth centuries”. Even though the exile was not a single point in time, it was a determining moment in a process of biblical Israel responding to the ever growing changes it was going through. Those who remained in the land versus those who were deported and those who later chose to return had different views as to who were the authentic people, each interpreting the same events, but from differing points of view – each group having been influenced by their surroundings, each accepting and rejecting the influence of the cultures that mixed with their own. All this contributed to the self-expression of a people and their perception and conception of a unique deity.

3. The Custodial Aims of Memory

DH shows the emergence and protection of an elaborate socio-religious authoritative organization. What the modern reader is witness to is the end product, woven by these custodians. It is not necessarily the representation of the whole of the population as some texts clearly demonstrate: the portrayed audience in the confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18) and the Samaritans of the Second Temple period are but two small examples that show how one view became the predominant one as the rest became peripheral or selectively forgotten.

Scholars have long debated and elaborated on the association between history and identity, and understanding the surrounding people of biblical Israel as fundamental to achieving the balance between the history of these people and what biblical Israel took, amalgamated, and rejected from them. To that end, Mark S. Smith gives the reader an appreciation of how to better understand the Divine. A considerable part of this identity takes place via a mnemonic socialization and is handed down to us in writing by an elite – or a

literate body that generates a common collective and collected memory: a mnemonic community. DH, in its final form, predominantly depicts a state or official religion; it does not reflect what some have labelled the popular religion. Karel van der Toorn and others have clearly demonstrated that what one may understand as official religion stems from the rise of monarchy.\(^{35}\) This aspect of Israelite society generated the need to create a unifying base: one national identity, one system of belief, one Deity.\(^{36}\)

Yet the collective memory that is presented in the artificial corpus is more than a version of an elite’s set of memories. In the case of the DH, according to Zerubavel’s theory, one should consider “the way major figures and events from the past are ritually commemorated. After all, by carving marked periods out of essentially unmarked stretches of history, ritual commemoration helps mnemonic communities explicitly articulate what they consider historically eventful.”\(^{37}\) This weaving thus becomes a sacred history presented through commemorative rituals. The essentialistic narrative body recruits, restores, reminds and regenerates a continuum of belonging through language and texts. This bonding bridge creates and preserves a cultural continuity between Israel’s past and present, based and presented on an alleged “cultural continuity,”\(^{38}\) traditional commonality\(^{39}\) – a highly social and cultural remembering; a selective remembering, done by few, preserved and transmitted by few to represent the many, and accepted by the many. Biblical Israel’s cultural selective memory is what generates or regenerates it as a mnemonic community; it is the fabric that creates the tapestry of identity. DH is a perfect example of the manipulation of memory; the genius in the ability to make use of moments of the past and generate a coherent “historical narrative”.

Words carry and sometimes create a reality. In the DH, words are used for their sound, for their stereotype. Words are used to generate emotions such as loyalty and to build the ultimate community: the blueprint of the nation of Israel. DH has, at its heart, the uniqueness and supremacy of YHWH. It inculturates a sense of unwavering loyalty through its alliance by its blessings and

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\(^{38}\) Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, 56.

\(^{39}\) Zerubavel, *Time Maps*, 63.
curses. DH emphasizes a rhetoric of differentiation of YHWH among other gods. It reflects an intolerant monolatry towards a Yahwistic monotheism.

The specifics of language encompasses the direction of causation of thought in the narrative. The landscapes (such as the valley, the city gates, and the hill side), the mnemonic formulae (such as until this day, they forsook YHWH and served the Baalim), and the stereotypical figures of Moses, Elijah and the like, are employed to maximize the restructurizing of memory so that the reader or the listener associates Israel as being monotheistic at its inception. It plays in the reader’s mind to overlook the cultic, social, and cultural cradle from which biblical Israel stemmed. The language used affects thought: a modern reader will clue in the fact that Israel backslides into idolatry in a cyclical manner. Language is tightly linked to causality or direction in our belief systems. DH may very well tell the tale of how it is that Israel came to be exiled. It may very well demonstrate the fallacy of certain kings in thinking that going into alliance with a pagan king was to the advantage of Israel’s strength and defences. But DH is truly a window in the laboratory of Israelite cultural memory weaving. The sheer genius of the tradents in their capacity to generate a common bond among its people by using stories about cult, politics and the concept of otherness established a connectedness through a “narratological perspective” that strung together bits of memories that were adopted or assimilated into the psyche of the many.

It becomes the many’s religion, and “religion is an inextricably human phenomenon,” not a sui generis phenomenon. Our object of study then becomes how Israelite religion “is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning”. History becomes the framework wherewith the essentialistic narrative body that is DH finds its human expression. History becomes the seal of authenticity for the goal-oriented texts of DH which promotes this negotiated identity. The weaving of the DH corpus was a necessary part of meaning construction.

The saying “they forsook YHWH and served the Baalim…” appears to evidence a framework by which identity is articulated within the Hebrew Bible. The repetitive formula is presented in a progressional manner through DH and well beyond within the Hebrew Bible. It is repeated approximately

40 Jan Assmann, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
41 Zerubavel, Time Maps, 133.
42 Zerubavel, Time Maps, 13.
44 Smith, Map is not Territory, 290.
46 יִשְׁרָאֵלָה יַעֲבֹדּוּ לִבְלוֹל הַשָּׁמַאֲוֹת.
39 times from Joshua to 2 Chronicles 34. This progression appears to highlight the blame, or reason, for the misfortune of Judah upon its turning away from YHWH.

4. Achieved Mnemonic Socialization

A socio-rhetorical analysis of the DH picks up on the repetition of the saying they forsook YHWH and turned to the Baalim. Moreover, SRA picks up on the progressive clusters in which they are repeated. With the social-cultural textures of SRA, we may say that within DH memory is a culture, a way society ensures cultural continuity by preserving – with the help of cultural mnemonics such as: 1) formulae 2) memorials and 3) major characters and the like – and rendering it possible to construct or negotiate its cultural identity.

The references to the past consolidate the bridge between their retrospective memory and the situation of the late Persian-Hellenistic period to generate or reinforce their otherness in time and space (Assman’s historical consciousness).47

Mnemohistory: the past as it is remembered is that rhetorical discourse that looks at what is perceived as history within a culture.

5. Conclusion

The “Deuteronomistic History” is an interesting quilt of the weaving of cultural memory. This historiographical corpus gives evidence of the processes of cultural memory and demonstrates the causes and implications of the choices of such a selective remembering. The monotheistic discourse interwoven in this corpus gives witness to the political and religious workings of building and protecting a distinct people among the ANE.

Biblical Israel was self-defined by its tradents; the scribes. The workings of a select few has become the utopian and official version of Israel’s past. Mnemonic formulae such as “until this day” are but one example of anchoring threads used as memorial purposes, as teaching opportunities and as important prompts of connective memory.

DH brings biblical Israel from a tolerant monolatrous people to an exclusive Yahwism and it achieves this within a crafted and set framework of events. Each new crisis served to redefine the implications of the markers of

47 Jan Assmann, Religion and Cultural Memory (Standford: Standford University Press, 2006), 93–100.
identity; each monument, high place, divine name and conflict has become the working threads in creating this quilt. Cultural memory was shown to be selective and often retrospective and gives the modern reader a glimpse of the historical consciousness of the scribal custodians who wove this quilt of mnemohistory.

One could agree that the custodial aims of memory were achieved in DH. This corpus has influenced modern man’s perception of Israel’s past, of man’s perception of G-d as well as Jews and Christians systems of beliefs.

Bibliography


