

Chapter 4—Memory-Hope

Introduction--

The phrase/term Memory-Hope for Western enculturated people sounds like opposites forced together. Those of Eastern and Middle-Eastern cultures, like the Old Testament Hebrews, recognize a paradox, a way of reading the present in light of the past and the future.

The impact of lives before us, for example, as in heroes/heroines, comes out of an expanse of time and space that exceeds our own. They, likely, give us reasons and tools to look into the future.

Thus, the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews—whoever he or she was—caught onto this paradigm and used it to motivate, encourage, and support those Christians in the First Century who had found themselves out and away from the majority base of Christians. They were quite possibly first-generation Christians, some (if not most) converts out of practicing Judaism. So, the author communicated the points of practicing Christianity in an otherwise non-Christian context. (RSV)

Memory-Hope is another paradigm, archetype, and informative and formative influence that has a reciprocal relationship with worship. For visualization, consider Memory-Hope as being the spoke on the Integrity Wheel that lies at 12 o'clock.

Those who have been reared in a Christian congregational setting are familiar with the question, “What is the definition of faith?” The expected response is to recite Hebrews 11:1. After that brief exercise, hearers or readers are directed to 11:4 and asked to consider the “Hall of Faith” names that begin there and flow on through verse 32. Usually the last part of verse 4 is

overlooked, however. I contend that phrase: “. . .he (Abel) died, but through his faith he is still speaking,” is the main hermeneutical tool for the whole chapter, yet little reference is ever made of the phrase. Maybe the paradoxical nature puts off those homileticians who work only with “low hanging” scripture fruit.

Importance of the Passage to First Century Hebrew Christians

First, the phrase “. . .though he is dead, he still speaks” holds the tension of memory-hope. Those people back there were asked to remember Abel. Whether they had realized before their current context, his actions formed the prototype for what a life of faith is and does. His was an actional definition of faith. A faith built on previous experiences, but which caused him to think into the future. There is such substance to his model that anyone ever afterward could and can learn and grow from practicing the same approaches.

Lest they forget, they needed to remember and rehearse among themselves the names and places of these around whom the main narratives of the Old Testament swirled.

For them, and for us, there is an element of encouragement to note the way the Old Testament was presented: Genesis—the book of beginnings, interspersed with genealogies which indicated family, cultural, faith lines spread over centuries; Exodus through Joshua—full of names and places reflecting the reality of life having points of triumph as well as tragedy; Books of History—the narratives relating those who attempted to keep the people of God on a high plain of morality, but also indicating how faith practice can get off track with poor leadership; the Prophets—a collection of individuals, some who knew one another, unlike any other faith tradition over the time frame indicated who communicated essentially the same message; the

Wisdom Literature—collections of not just clichés and platitudes, but reflection of extraordinary understanding of the interface of faith practice with every facet of the human race.

Why Were These Records (The Hebrew Scriptures) Kept?

Record keeping goes as far back as we can recognize some kind of organization developed among people. Twenty-first-century persons have to marvel at the trouble some of the ancient people went to in order to make sure data, especially for the governing personalities, was kept.

With the Hebrews, they recognized some events happened with and to them that put into perspective their history, but also gave clarity to what lay in the future for them. The sense of making sure the recognition of God among them pressed them to make sure future generations knew of the acts of God.

More specifically, the record keepers wanted current and future generations that those acts of God occurred among people like those who read/heard these Scriptures. God had established personal relationships with individuals and a group of people like themselves and would do so with them, and generations following. Judaism, and then Christianity, are extraordinarily “this world” religions.

The Scriptures carry a human-divine element and pull no punches regarding the reality of human affairs. The record keepers illustrated that people served in harmony with God and also moved in opposition to God, with consequences both ways.

Examples were kept to show that God has moved among people in the past, with promises to move among people in their future. Therefore, there was every reason to believe God would be with them in their present. Paradoxically, there is hope in remembering.

Contemporary Christians too often ignore the genealogies, lists of names. Not unusually, if one is given the assignment to read a passage of Scripture which includes the genealogies, the reader will pass over with “hard name begat hard name.” The dismissiveness underlies not only those names but also much of the rest of Scripture, unfortunately. There was rationale to the genealogies. At the least, a generation looking back could gain a sense of “where did I come from” so as to understand more clearly the current context and what can be done in it.

Hebrews Attests to a Continuity with Elements in the Hebrew Scriptures

Likely the creator of Hebrews did not consider the letter would become canonized. But, the composition did reflect that which was beginning to be circulated, the themes in the Pauline epistles and some of the Gospels, for example.

Matthew was written toward comprehension by a Jewish audience. Matthew began with a genealogy, that of Jesus. Luke wrote two volumes. One was an attempt to demonstrate Jesus’ commonality with the prophets, especially with regard to material goods. Luke’s history, The Acts, was a collection of examples of the movement of the Holy Spirit among, ahead of, and along beside people who began to constitute expressions of the Church across the Roman Empire.

As well, Hebrews provides a template for one to consider how the New Testament materials eventually reflected some of the same kinds of elements found in the Old Testament. A sense of

continuity resided in these materials. Not the least of the dynamics is that of memory-hope—just as Abel died, so will you. These names represent people, individuals and a people, who are more than mere names. Though they are dead, because they walked with God, they yet speak, have influence, provide reasons for hope.

The writer of Hebrews asked the readers/hearers of the material to think back over the faith genealogy that brought them to their present time. That memory review would begin with those who first practiced their faith tradition and carried them to their own time with family, friends, acquaintances who had formative influence on their contemporary faith practice.

What Are Lessons for Us to Learn?

In our age of data collection, there is the tendency toward lacking skills requiring remembering dates, addresses, names, and on and on. One has search engines which can explore information globally in the time it takes to tap in the terms, theme, topic to be explored.

Every generation has pockets of representatives who have little regard for the previous generations. Most of us have heard, or used, the phrase, “These younger people act as if nothing happened before they were born.”

Still, an important dimension for how we live life, which includes how we reflect and act theologically is the significance we give to memories. For, memory is a wonderful, beautiful, happy gift when used properly. We can go back, relive moments again, sense the same emotions. Our sense perceptions, smell, taste, touch, hearing, can connect to experiences in the past. For instance the smell of bread baking moves us in our imaginations to a kitchen years ago

and the experiences there with a family member now deceased. In a relative sense we are in two places at once.

We should exercise our memories. A starting point is to be more conscious of those around us. What do they look like? What does their voice sound like? What are some particular, even unique, gestures they have? How do we want to remember these people if these moments are the last we are with them?

How do we remember those who have died? The intent is not to suggest that we remember in a morbid way. Sometimes we can visit a home where a member has been deceased for some time, but a room, or area, in the home that the deceased used has been left just as it was the last time the deceased person was there. Not unusually, the remaining family member, for example, will say, “This is the way he/she left it and wouldn’t want anything moved or changed.”

Rather, let us remember people who have died in as celebratory way as possible. The situation of never moving anything is a form of idolatry and implies the deceased could do no wrong.

Instead, let us honestly remember others—their excellent character traits and actions, along with their shortcomings. And, if we can, remember their living out justice, righteousness, love of neighbor, love of God and being thankful for how God touched their life, and our own through them. Truly, we can begin to experience the sense that “though they are dead, they speak.”

The lesson that God has moved in our own history begins to dawn upon us. God’s movement among humanity is not just Bible stories, but in our own narrative. So, God continues to work with and through people we know and have known.

Certainly, we should be inspired to take up the journey, the work, the task, the ministry where these who have gone before have left off. Where they were able to point to horizons, we are able

to not only move to those horizons but cross over them. In so many ways, these who have died are revealers of our destinies.

Conclusion:

We are made up of all that have come before us. We are a part of their speaking on. The memory of them remind us of that.

What are the memories, the main memory of who you are, you will leave? Your influence will live on. What will be the tone, the style, the formative power of that influence? When you are dead what and who and how will they speak of you? Is there substance to the style and form, and content of faith you practice that you, in effect, will still speak after your death?