

“Frozen Moments” – Early Christianity through the Lens of *Social Memory Theory*

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Abstract

The concept generational gap (30–50 years) and floating gap (80–120 years), developed in social memory theory to get a better grasp not only of the distinction between collective memory and cultural memory, but also for processes of media change, textualization and canonization in collective memory, can also be used to get a fresh view on questions of the textualization of the New Testament and periods in Early Christianity. This contribution teams findings of social memory theory with observations from biblical scholars regarding these questions and explores the potential of a social memory theory-sensitive epoch model both for the understanding of Early Christianity and readings of early Christian texts as snapshots – frozen moments – of early Christian identity construction.

Informed by the cultural turn, I tend to read Biblical texts as artefacts of group memory.¹ This decision involves the question: What kind of group memory? Jan Assmann, building on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, has in his intriguing work introduced the idea of cultural memory which – simply speaking – understands texts as canonized normative and formative founding stories of a certain group.² Cultural Memory treasures the origins, the remote past a group refers to. Cultural Memory is formal, ceremonial, consists of codified or even canonized signs and is mediated through education. Identity is established through one’s relation to the received tradition. To adapt a famous phrase from Paul Watzlawick: *It is impossible not to relate to your tradition*. Cultural memory is what seems to have always been there and shapes our identities – whether we are aware of it or not and whether we like it or not. One of the most important characteristics is its temporal structure: Cultural memory deals with the remote past and how it shapes our identity, our present and our future.

¹ First drafts of this paper were presented at the New Testament Research Seminar, University of St Andrews, and at Neutestamentliches Oberseminar, Universität Mainz. The discussions were of great help for developing the concept that will hopefully be seeing a much more thorough investigation and detailed reflection in the near future. I would like to thank all students and colleagues who have shared their ideas and critical questions. N. T. Wright merits a special note of gratitude for encouraging me to use the title “frozen moments.”

² Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (5th ed.; München: Beck, 2005) and Jan Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis: Zehn Studien* (2nd ed.; München: Beck, 2004).

One of Assmann's examples to illustrate the mechanisms of cultural memory was the Book of Deuteronomy.³ Thus, the whole idea became quickly known to Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars and saw a controversial discussion. This is especially true of the idea of the *generational gap* in Deuteronomy that was expressed through the 40 years in the desert. The idea was criticized and Assmann was often accused of having taken it a little too literally. The underlying idea thus had little chance to gain currency in the exegetical guild. This is unfortunate as it might yet prove fruitful for some issues that New Testament exegesis struggles with, but which never made it onto our agenda.

As the generational gap is not part of cultural memory, it was of minor importance to the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars who discussed Assmann's ideas. Besides the suspicion that Assmann might have taken the 40 years literally, this would be another reason why the idea has not been introduced to New Testament studies. It's about time to correct this mistake. The *generational gap* is meaningful for us and our work insofar as the New Testament texts and their distance from the events they reflect does not belong to the realm of *cultural memory*, but to the realm of *collective memory*. Or, if the times of crisis are your landmark: it is not (only) the *floating gap* of roughly 80–120 years after an event that stimulates the relevant processes of text production and media change New Testament scholars are dealing with, but even more the *generational gap* after roughly 40 years (or in case you prefer less fixed time corridors: 30–50 years).

For scholarly work, it is not sufficient to acknowledge that *cultural memory* has found its way into Biblical Scholarship. The change of paradigm that social memory theory brought about is much more sophisticated and merits being received and applied to our questions accordingly.

The accusation Assmann found himself being charged with is indeed unfair as the 40 years he assumed for the *generational gap* are also a genuine biblical category. Unfortunately, the Egyptologist Assmann has concentrated his research on the book of Deuteronomy. This might be one explanation for the fact that he overlooked that 40 years play a much more prominent role in the Bible and that especially the author of Acts is a supporter of his idea that 40 years mark the end of a generation of contemporary witnesses.⁴ Assmann's oversight is comprehensible. It indicates, however, the research limitations of individual disciplines and makes a powerful case for inter- and transdisciplinary research. As the patron saint of the *generational gap* has his dealings in the New Testament, Jan Assmann, who focussed on an Old Testament text, might have simply missed this support to his theory.

³ Cf. Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 196–228.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 217: “40 Jahre bedeutet das Ende einer Generation von Zeitzeugen.”

1. Generations in Acts

A brief glance at what happens in Acts is in order, before we turn to a closer look at how social memory theory can contribute to our understanding of Early Christian literature. Our “hero” in Acts, is Stephen. In 6:13–14 he is accused by false witnesses who say “This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed down to us.” Read through the lens of social memory theory, Stephen is accused of violating the common cultural frame of reference and thus falling out of the interpretative community. Tora and temple are “canonical” in the sense that they are constitutive for the identity of Second Temple Judaism.

Acts 6:13–14 makes explicit that the whole argument is about the localization in cultural frames or the question which stance to take on tradition. If we are applying Maurice Halbwachs’s categories, “taking a stance” is specific to *social memory*, but not to *collective memory*. Halbwachs’s theory in a nutshell would run like this: In the case of *social memory*, identity formation takes place within a given social frame while *collective memory* fabricates and provides frames for future processes of identity formation.⁵

The Stephen episode thus deals with the trouble the characters experience within the process of claiming and defending their identity constructions within a given socio-cultural frame. This identity construction is challenged as being out of compliance with the majority. For all those who belong to *the way* as Luke terms the early followers (Acts 9:2; 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22), being part of Second Temple Judaism constitutes their identity and they are unwilling to reject it. Stephen’s sermon is a good example of the tendency to inscribe oneself into the normative and formative tradition of Second Temple Judaism. Stephen delivers a “canonical” sermon insofar as he refers back to Moses as part of common tradition in an emic perspective. For him the Scriptures of Israel are canonical insofar as they are identity markers. Peter has already done something similar in Acts 2–4 when he interpreted Jesus with reference to Israel’s history.

What makes Acts 7 intriguing from a social memory perspective is the fact that Stephen plays with the *generational gap* when he uses the reference to 40 years to make his case. Acts is not the only biblical text using this time span, but Stephen does so in an unexpected way. He divides Moses’ life into three peri-

⁵ Cf. Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Bibliothèque de l’Évolution de l’Humanité 28; Paris: Albin Michel, 1997 [original edition 1949/1950; German: *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*; Stuttgart, 1967]) and Id., *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Bibliothèque de l’Évolution de l’Humanité 8; Paris: Albin Michel, 2001; original edition 1925, German: *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen*; 3rd ed.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006). For a more nuanced discussion of Halbwachs cf. Sandra Huebenthal, *Das Markusevangelium als kollektives Gedächtnis* (FRLANT 253; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 126–31.

ods of 40 years. As the audience (both in Acts and today) know from the book of Deuteronomy (31:2; 34:7) that Moses died at the age of 120,⁶ no one stops short when Stephen says that Moses at the age of 40 killed an Egyptian (Acts 7:23–24). No one is surprised that at the age of 80, after he had spent 40 years in Midian where he fathered two sons, an angel appeared to him in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush (Acts 7:30). Nevertheless, both numbers appear nowhere in the Old Testament. Only the 40 years in the desert are referred to.

In his sermon, Stephen mentions three periods of forty years, each corresponding to roughly one generation. The logic of this classification works, for we can vividly imagine that Moses could only appear as an Israelite when he was grown up and that he had to hide after killing the Egyptian at least as long as the witnesses were alive – or to be on the safe side: for one generation. The same explanation is given in Numbers 14:33–34; 32:13; Joshua 5:6 and Psalm 95:10 for the forty years in the desert: “until all the nation, all the warriors who came out of Egypt, perished, not having listened to the voice of the Lord.” The forty years – or one generation – are deeply rooted in biblical tradition and Stephen uses that tradition in his sermon.

The book of Acts would make for an interesting case for a social memory reading even apart from the Stephen episode, as it allows for observations on two different levels.⁷ On the level of characters it is – as we have just seen – about *social memory* or identity formation within a given frame. On the level of the whole text Acts is, however, about *collective memory* and the fabrication of new frames for future – Christian – identity constructions. The same holds true for the other narrative texts of the New Testament. As the Gospels and Acts narrate *social memory*, they create *collective memory* and thus fabricate new frames of reference for Early Christian identity constructions.

2. Generations and Caesurae in the Exegetical Discourse

Stephen is not the only one who works with “generations.” Epochs or eras are still en vogue when it comes to understanding one’s own history, as well as the concepts of “caesura” and “change of time.” Times of crisis and scenarios of change have been well established as stimulants for text production and change

⁶ The Jewish wish “Ad Meah ve’esrim” (to one hundred and twenty) is derived from Moses’ age as stated in the Torah. The fact that Moses’ burial place is unknown turns him into an even more interesting *Erinnerungsfigur* (memory figure).

⁷ Acts does not treasure direct Jesus memories (the ascension had already been covered in Luke 24:51), but narrates the struggles of the early followers on their way to identity. According to Acts 11:26, it was in Antioch where they were first called “Christians.” This also means that calling the original community, the “Jerusalem Urgemeinde,” “Christian” or “the earliest Christians” would at least for Acts 1:1–11:25 be an anachronism.

of media in our discipline. Even though the *generational gap* has not yet found its proper place in our discourses, the 40 years appear frequently in the pertinent publications.

"Generation" and "epoch" are commonly used in research on pseudepigraphy. I've chosen a passage from Udo Schnelle's *Introduction to the New Testament* – which is widely used in Germany – as a representative position. Similar arguments can be found in most of the introductory literature.

Schnelle claims that New Testament pseudepigraphy can be narrowed down to the time between 60 and 100 C. E., with the Protospaulines and the Letters of Ignatius serving as respective borders. He understands the time between 60 and 100 C. E. as an epoch of change and reorientation in the history of Early Christianity. The generation of the first witnesses was already dead, organizational structures for the whole of the church ("Gesamtkirche," thus: the whole of the church, not the whole of the churches) had not yet seen the light of day; offices and functions within the communities only started to emerge and the problem of the delayed parousia became prominent. Furthermore, there were first persecutions and the painful process of the "parting of the ways." Intensive arguments with heretics among the communities also shaped that period. As there were no longer people who had authority for the whole of the church, Schnelle argues further, the authors of pseudepigraphic letters appealed to the authorities of the past in order to accomplish their objectives in a changing situation of ecclesiastical history. Pseudepigraphy as well as anonymity were literary devices to gain influence and find adequate practical solutions dealing with the problems and conflicts in the last third of the first century. New Testament pseudepigraphy, Schnelle concludes, was thus integrated in a particular situation in the history of the church and ought to be understood as a successful attempt to come to terms with the core issues of the third generation of early Christianity. The goal of New Testament pseudepigraphy was not simply to secure the continuity of the apostolic tradition after the deaths of the apostles. In fact, the guiding idea was to re-voice the authority of the apostles in the context of the new situation. By referring back to the origins of tradition, they justified the authoritative character of their re-interpretation in the face of changed situations and new problems.⁸

⁸ Udo Schnelle, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (4th ed.; Göttingen: UTB, 2002), 327–8 (translation SH). The German original reads: "Die ntl. Pseudepigraphie ist zeitlich deutlich eingrenzbar, die meisten pseudepigraphischen Schriften entstanden zwischen 60 und 100 n. Chr., wobei die Protospaulinen und die Ignatiusbriefe die jeweilige Grenze bilden. Der genannte Zeitraum stellt innerhalb der Geschichte des Urchristentums eine Epoche des Umbruchs und der Neuorientierung dar. Die Generation der ersten Zeugen war gestorben, eine gesamtkirchliche Organisation existierte noch nicht, innergemeindliche Ämter bildeten sich erst heraus, die Problematik der Parusieverzögerung trat voll in das Bewußtsein, es gab erste umfassende Verfolgungen und schließlich bestimmten sowohl die schmerzliche Loslösung vom Judentum als auch die intensive Auseinandersetzung mit Irrlehrern in den eigenen Reihen jene Zeit.... Weil es keine Persönlichkeiten mehr gab, die eine gesamtkirchliche Autorität besaßen, griffen die Ver-

Udo Schnelle is not an isolated voice. The tendency to distinguish different generations or epochs can be found across the board. Depending on the underlying idea of Early Christian generations, pseudepigraphy is either dated into the second or – more commonly – third generation and usually understood to be a comprehensible and necessary historical and theological phenomenon. Schnelle regards New Testament pseudepigraphy as a “theologically legitimate and ecclesiological necessary attempt to maintain the apostolic tradition in a situation of change and at the same time provide the necessary answers to new questions and situations.”⁹

The generic model supported by many scholars identifies three different stages. The first generation of original Christians is followed by a phase with orthonymous text production in the second generation (Paul) and a phase of pseudepigraphy and anonymous text production (both letters and narrative texts) in the third generation. As regards the texts of the third generation, pseudepigraphy refers back to the second generation and the anonymous Gospels refer back to the first or original generation of Christianity. It is only in the fourth generation, after a tradition has been established which could be referred to, that the authors – the great grandchildren as it were – dare again to write in their own name. The different suggestions to describe the time of pseudepigraphy as an epoch further share the tendency to establish a clear line between the pseudepigraphic phase and the following orthonymous fourth generation (see Table 1, p. 23).

It is striking that Schnelle and Roloff – although working with different numbers – both offer a time span of 40 years and make use of the term “generation.”¹⁰ Like Pokorný/Heckel,¹¹ they date the Apostolic Fathers or “church authors” (“Kirchenschriftsteller”) later, distinguishing them clearly from the pseudepigraphic phase. Taking both observations together, we are witnessing on the one hand

fasser pseudepigraphischer Schreiben auf die Autoritäten der Vergangenheit zurück, um ihren jeweiligen Zielen in der sich wandelnden kirchengeschichtlichen Situation einen adäquaten Ausdruck zu verleihen. Pseudepigraphie war ebenso wie Anonymität ein literarisches Mittel, um in den Problemen und Konflikten des letzten Drittels des 1. Jhs. n. Chr. Einfluß zu gewinnen und sachgemäße Lösungen zu finden.... Die neutestamentliche Pseudepigraphie war somit in eine ganz bestimmte zeitgeschichtliche Situation eingebunden und muß als gelungener Versuch der Bewältigung der zentralen Probleme der dritten urchristlichen Generation gesehen werden. Das Ziel der ntl. Pseudepigraphie bestand nicht nur darin, die Kontinuität der apostolischen Tradition in der Zeit nach dem Tod der Apostel sicherzustellen. Vielmehr sollte vor allem die Autorität der Apostel in der Gegenwart neu zur Sprache gebracht werden. Indem die Verfasser sich auf die Ursprünge der Tradition beriefen, begründeten sie den Verbindlichkeitsanspruch ihrer Neuinterpretation angesichts der in der Gegenwart neu aufgebrochenen Probleme.”

⁹ Schnelle, *Einleitung*, 329 (translation SH).

¹⁰ Cf. Jürgen Roloff, *Einführung in das Neue Testament* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995), 194: “Es handelt sich bei dieser Pseudepigraphie um ein spezifisches Phänomen der dritten christlichen Generation, das im Zusammenhang mit der Autoritätskrise der Zeit zwischen 80 und 120 zu sehen ist.”

¹¹ Petr Pokorný and Ulrich Heckel, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

Orthonymous texts	Pseudepigraphy (letters) Anonymous texts (gospels)	Apostolic Fathers (orthonymous)
Schnelle	60–100	Ignatius’ letters serve as border
Roloff	80–120	Mid-second-century
Pokorný/ Heckel	Last third of the first century (But: 2 Peter: 110–130!)	The authors of 1 Clement (96–100), Ignatius of Antioch (110–114), Polycarp (110–115) or Hermas (2nd century) write again in their own name

Table 1: Exemplary temporal frame for pseudepigraphy in current exegetical literature

the tendency to describe pseudepigraphy as a phenomenon of the last third of the first century and on the other hand the tendency to defend the turn of the century as the end of the era. Francis Watson has recently described a similar phenomenon for the production of the canonical Gospels in his book *Gospel Writing*.¹²

In both cases, we can observe a tendency or an unintentional attempt to separate what is by definition inseparable, namely the asynchronicity of social processes. In the case of pseudepigraphy, this implies that it is highly likely that in one place the production of pseudepigraphy continued while somewhere else this phase had already come to an end. Like the quest for the *Parting of the Ways* there is no fixed date, because we are not dealing with an event, but with a process. When one takes a closer look at the above-mentioned Introductions to the New Testament, this becomes obvious from their attempts to date

¹² Cf. Francis Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 5: “A picture begins to emerge of a research paradigm in which the construction of the object of investigation – the gospel testimony to Jesus – is determined by three fundamental decisions. The first is the decision to establish a *terminus ad quem* at the end of the first century, the date assigned to ‘the fourth gospel’ which completes the canonical collection. In contrast, the second century is designated as the period of the earliest ‘apocryphal’ gospels, the most important of which – the *Gospel of Thomas* – is conventionally dated to c. 110–140 to prevent any confusion with the canonical four. On this account, the ecclesial distinction between canonical and noncanonical gospels is a straightforward extrapolation from their period of origin; the year 100 C.E. is projected back onto early Christian history so as to establish a boundary between two epochs of gospel writing. Against this, we should recognize that the canonical/noncanonical distinction is not given with the texts themselves but arises out of their reception. Gospel writing proceeds unabated before and after the moment we refer to as the ‘end of the first century,’ and it is this ongoing process that is presupposed in the retrospective differentiation of the canonical few from the noncanonical many.”

the particular texts. Pokorný/Heckel, for instance, date 2 Peter around 110–130 C. E. – which would be after the “official end” of the pseudepigraphic phase at the end of the first century *and* contemporary with the letters of Ignatius and Polycarp (or even later).

Another peculiarity of the above argument for the formation of an “era of pseudepigraphy” is the fact that the authors usually argue exclusively from an emic point of view. The notion that pseudepigraphy as a strategy and the problems of the third generation it addresses could be relevant beyond the developments in Early Christianity is not addressed and the idea that this might not be a Christian singularity but rather an anthropological constant is rarely considered. To put it differently: An etic perspective on the phenomenon as just another example for the development of a *New Religious Movement* is never discussed, nor even mentioned. Approaching the issue from a cultural science or social memory perspective, it is, however, hard to avoid that comparison. This does not entail a denial of the specific Christian aspects. In my opinion, nothing is subtracted from the emic perspective of a unique phenomenon when an etic social memory perspective extends it. On the contrary, broadening the scope can be quite helpful to obtain a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms.

Martin Ebner’s contribution, „Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts“, in *Ökumenisches Handbuch Kirchengeschichte* is another good example of the tendency to argue with generations and phases. Ebner’s attempt to link Early Christian generations/phases to the findings of cultural memory theory makes his contribution particularly interesting for our considerations.

In spite of gaps and grey zones, Ebner argues, the data allows for a categorization that leads to a *periodization* of the history of Early Christianity (“Urchristentum”). According to his model, the texts of the first phase could be characterized as *functional literature* (“Gebrauchsliteratur”) with the authentic Pauline letters serving as examples. This type of literature deals with actual problems in the communities and replaces oral communication. The second phase then is understood to be *memoria literature*. The caesura of memory literature coincides with the death of the great apostles: James in 62 C. E., Peter and Paul presumably during the great Neronian persecution in 64 C. E. From a cultural anthropological perspective, Ebner argues, the textualisation of their heritage coincides rather accurately with the time span of 40 years, when eye-witnesses cease and memory has to be transferred from *communicative* to *cultural memory*. Regarded historically, the year 70 C. E. was crucial for original Christianity: With the destruction of the Second Temple, the core identity marker of Second Temple Judaism was destroyed on the one hand while on the other hand Jesus’s doom prophecy against the temple, which led to his death, was fulfilled in a most humiliating way for the Jewish people. For all those who referred to the Jew Jesus, Ebner continues, this means that they have to address the question which stance they take on their Jewish roots and how they process this catastrophe theologically.

While the first caesura comes forward quite clearly, Ebner concludes, the second caesura which indicates the end of original Christianity is much more difficult to grasp. As regards content, it is best attached to the fact that Christian authors – once more clearly distinguishable – deliberately come forward, advertise or defend their religious beliefs, but in any case seek dialogue with their Pagan contemporaries. One example of this new phase are the writings of the Christian apologetics, which start with Justin, around 150 C. E.¹³ In his latest book *Die ersten 100 Jahre des Christentums*, Udo Schnelle underlines this divide with the observation that the Christian apologies are a particular *Gattung* of the new epoch.¹⁴

Adding Ebner’s observations to the approaches already mentioned, we gain a picture of the earliest Christian time that looks roughly like this (see Table 2, p. 26).

What I find most intriguing about the model are the two caesuras. Ebner locates the first caesura after 40 years – together with Stephen and Jan Assmann you could say: after one generation. The second caesura is rather blurred, but nevertheless clearly after around 150, which would mathematically be roughly 120 years after the founding event.¹⁵ Ebner regards the first caesura as congruent with the transition from *communicative to cultural memory*.

¹³ Martin Ebner, “Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts,” in *Von den Anfängen bis zum Mittelalter* (vol. 1 of *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte*; ed. T. Kaufmann et. al.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), 16 (translation SH). The original German reads: “Trotz dieser Leerstellen und Grauzonen ist folgende Kategorisierung möglich, die zugleich zu einer Periodisierung der Geschichte des Urchristentums führt: Die Schriften der ersten Phase lassen sich als Gebrauchsliteratur charakterisieren, exemplarisch repräsentiert durch die (authentischen) Paulusbriefe. Sie behandeln konkrete Gemeindeprobleme und ersetzen die mündliche Kommunikation. Die Schriften der zweiten Phase lassen sich als Memoria-Literatur begreifen.... Die Zäsur der Memoria-Literatur fällt ungefähr mit dem Tod der großen Apostel zusammen (Jakobus: 62 n. Chr.; Paulus und Petrus vermutlich während der großen neronischen Verfolgung: 64 n. Chr.). Kulturanthropologisch gesehen trifft die Verschriftlichung des Erbes ziemlich genau mit dem Zeitraum von 40 Jahren zusammen, in dem die Zeitzeugen aussterben und die Erinnerung deshalb vom kommunikativen ins kulturelle Gedächtnis überführt werden muss. Historisch gesehen war das Jahr 70 n. Chr. für das Urchristentum entscheidend: Mit der Zerstörung des Tempels von Jerusalem fiel einerseits das Identitätssymbol des Judentums in Schutt und Asche, andererseits wurde die Unheilsprophezie Jesu gegen den Tempel, die ihm den Tod eingebracht hat, in für das jüdische Volk erniedrigender Form eingelöst. Für alle, die sich auf den Juden Jesus beriefen, stellte sich damit die Frage nach ihrer Einstellung zu ihren jüdischen Wurzeln und der theologischen Verarbeitung dieser Katastrophe. Während diese erste Zäsur deutlich hervortritt, ist die zweite Zäsur die dann das Ende der urchristlichen Zeit anzeigt, schwierig zu fassen. Inhaltlich lässt sie sich am besten daran festmachen, dass christliche Schriftsteller – jetzt wieder eindeutig identifizierbar – bewusst nach außen treten, für ihre religiöse Einstellung um Verständnis werben bzw. sie verteidigen, auf jeden Fall aber den Dialog mit der Paganen Bevölkerung suchen, wie es in den Schriften der Apologeten, beginnend mit Justin, ab etwa 150 n. Chr. der Fall ist.”

¹⁴ Udo Schnelle, *Die ersten 100 Jahre des Christentums: 30–130 n. Chr.* (Stuttgart: UTB, 2015), 27–8. In this book, Schnelle also works with four early Christian generations.

¹⁵ With those numbers, the accustomed dating of *1 Clem* (96–100), Ignatius (110–114)

<i>Time</i>	<i>Texts/Genre</i>	<i>Pragmatics</i>
<i>Foundational Event: Life, Ministry, Death and Resurrection of Jesus</i>		
30–70	Authentic Letters (Paul)	<i>Functional Literature:</i> Deals with concrete issues (of a particular group/community), replaces oral communication
<i>Destruction of the Temple, Death of Eyewitnesses</i>		
70–150	Gospels, Deuteropauline Letters, Pastoral and Catholic Letters (Pseudepigraphy)	<i>Memory Literature:</i> Remembers Jesus and his heritage, extrapolates traditions
<i>Blurred Caesura</i>		
150–300	Authentic Letters (Apostolic Fathers):	<i>Functional Literature:</i> Deals with concrete issues (of a particular group/community), replaces oral communication
	Community orders/Church Orders (Didache)	Identity is constructed and safeguard- ed ad intra, drawing from (alleged) authorities. Later texts again refer back to the times of founding or its authorities (the later, the more florid)
	Apologies Acts of Martyrs (starting with Polycarp)	Dialogue <i>ad extra</i> Fostering identity <i>ad intra</i>

Table 2: Epoch model of Earliest Christianity I

3. Generations and Gaps in Social Memory Theory

At this point, it is helpful to pause for a moment and take another look at the categories and models of cultural and social memory theory which have been developed and inspired by building on the indispensable pioneering work of Maurice Halbwachs and Aleida and Jan Assmann.

The trinity consisting of *social*, *collective* and *cultural memory* suggested by Aleida Assmann that also parts with the concept *kommunikatives Gedächtnis* seems to be the best basis for the development of a matrix introducing different

and Polycarp, *Phil* (110–140), of course, causes problems. This might be one reason why the caesura is characterized as “blurred” or as Ebner puts it “schwierig zu fassen” (Ebner, “Von den Anfängen,” 16). Cf. also Schnelle, *Die ersten 100 Jahre*, 27: “Das Jahr 70 leitet die letzte Epoche des frühen Christentums ein, deren Ende schwer zu bestimmen ist. Allerdings kann für die Zeit um 130 n. Chr. eine deutliche Verschiebung auf mehreren Ebenen festgestellt werden.”

kinds of social memory.¹⁶ Thereby the differentiation between *social memory* and *collective memory* is oriented at Halbwachs' categories and the differentiation between *collective memory* and *cultural memory* is shaped according to Jan Assmann's categories. The connection of this classification with the assumption of a *generational gap* within *collective memory* and the *floating gap* between *collective* and *cultural memory* leads to an ideal type model. In this model, *collective memory* is understood as the time span in the process of a community of commemoration when the founding story obtains its provisional final form and the stream of tradition is gradually pointed into one perspective. Things might still be fluent, but intensify or thicken into the direction of generally shared perception of the past that begins to find its distinct expression in externalizations such as texts.¹⁷

The further differentiation of the models builds on the insights of Aleida Assmann.¹⁸ As regards *social memory* she has observed it to be limited in time and forming in the medium of conversation. It dissolves with the death of its carriers and thus has a migrant temporal horizon. The character of *social memory* is rather nonofficial; it is shared by those who happen to have grown into a group. It can thus be said that *social memory* consists on the one hand of a group's treasure of experiences which is realized time and again. On the other hand, *social memory* is inserted in the material world of things (items for everyday use, the urban environment etc.). *Collective memory* on the other hand is no longer limited in time; mental images become icons and narratives turn in to myths. In *collective memory* one of the different perspectives prevails while *social memory* was still contained of multiple perspectives. In *collective memory*, (historical) experiences are disentangled from the particular circumstances of their formation and turned into stories removed from the current of time. Accordingly duration and diffusion of *collective memory* are distinctly different from those of *social memory*. While *social memory* depends on its carriers and usually dissolves with their disappearance, *collective memory* is rather dependent on content. Stories will hence remain in *collective memory* as long as there are functional for the group and will only be replaced by other stories once they become dysfunctional. As regards its character, *collective memory* is more official. Aleida Assmann considers extending it even to religion and nation. Participation in this type of memory takes place through participation in

¹⁶ Cf. Aleida Assmann, *Soziales und kollektives Gedächtnis*. Vortrag im Panel 2 “Kollektives und soziales Gedächtnis” bei der Tagung “Kulturelles Gedächtnis. China zwischen Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Internationale Konferenz zum künstlerischen und politischen Umgang mit der eigenen Geschichte in China” der Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2006 (<http://www.bpb.de/files/0FW1JZ.pdf>).

¹⁷ The fact that such a model can be electrifying for the investigation of New Testament texts is hardly surprising as the model thrust accurately fitting into the time when the narrative texts of the New Testament are habitually assumed to have been textualized.

¹⁸ Cf. Assmann, *Soziales und kollektives Gedächtnis*.

rituals, festivities and commemoration days – each of them usually structured in a particular way. Executions such as (festive) processions or shared meals form part of this type of collective memory.

A good way to illustrate the difference between *social* and *collective memory* are family memories. As regards their structure and diffusion they would be count as *social memory*. Family memories further usually possess a large repertoire of individual episodes, but rarely *the* family history in one piece.¹⁹ Other than it is the case in *collective memory* there is usually no initiation of textualization and family memories rarely refer to a *founding story* that gained its stable guise over a longer period of time. Quite the contrary, it is crucial for family memories that the narrative truth of a story – even though the story might always be told in a particular way – remains socially negotiable.

A clear cut distinction between *social* and *collective memory*, however, remains hypothetical. Both concepts are confused in the scientific literature in that way authors sometimes work with Halbwachs' terminology and Assmann's differentiation at the same time. In both cases, however, a group's memory can still be formed. It has not yet received the final seclusion of *cultural memory*, although I deem the transition to be fluent. Whether a particular ritualized meal would best be seen as part of *social*, *collective* or *cultural memory* can often only be decided after a thorough analysis. At times, the demarcations can even blur. The characteristics *emotional charge* (social memory), *concise arrangement* (collective memory) and *institutional determination* (cultural memory) Aleida Assmann has introduced offer better orientation. They do, however, not include the question of orality and writing. It nevertheless suggests itself that externalization process aimed at duration, fixation and diffusion do already take place in *collective memory*. I therefore consider it likely that text production reaches a new stage at this level which assigns the different versions of the remembered events a provisional final form. This form can, of course, still be subject to alterations which is – at least for individual texts – no longer the case in *cultural memory*. Aleida Assmann's insights clarify that the different formations of *collective* and *cultural memory* largely consist of structurally analogous processes. In both cases, the vivid and manifold stream of tradition(s) is narrowed to a single perspective. But even *cultural memory* is not a final form, as the versatile canon discussions in the religious and profane sphere indicate.

Neither *collective* nor *cultural memory* are static complexes, but dynamic formations and basically in a state of flux. It is also noteworthy that experiences of crisis lead to the transformation of memories and their transportation into different media both in *collective* and *cultural memory*. The *floating gap*, apparently a

¹⁹ Cf. Angelika Keppler, *Tischgespräche: Über Formen kommunikativer Vergesellschaftung am Beispiel der Konversation in Familien* (2nd ed.; Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995), 207 and ead., "Soziale Formen individuellen Erinnerns," in *Das soziale Gedächtnis: Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung* (ed. H. Welzer; Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 137–59, 156.

catalyst for the formation of *cultural memory*, as regards structure, is similar to the *generational gap*, which also entails a chance of recollection processes, their representation and communication. *Collective memory*, too, sees canonization processes, even though on a different level than in *cultural memory* and with a different liability. What Jan Assmann has pointed out for *cultural memory*'s externalization processes into the media of scripture applies mutatis mutandis also to *collective memory*.²⁰

Jan Assmann further states that *Traditionsbrüche* (fractures in tradition) usually are stimuli for textualization.²¹ Here, too, the knowledge gained from investigating *cultural memory* can be applied to *collective memory*. In *collective memory*, too, fractures and upheavals cause change and relocation of memories with in communities of commemoration – at times the subsequent generation can even in the face of contemporary witnesses decide for an alternative interpretation if it better serves their identity construction.²² These new possible frames will, of course, also have to be socially negotiated before they can be accepted on a larger scale. In *collective memory* this process can take place both in oral and medial communication, in which the media might change in the course of time, but not the structure of the process itself (see Table 3, p. 30).²³

For our questions, *social memory* as depicted in the left column is less relevant. As regards time, it has to be located simultaneously with *collective memory*, but is due to its different dynamics it is not considered in the following visualisations.

In order to get an idea what this model might or might not be able to explain and how it can contribute to our understanding of early Christian writings, the following sections will apply the model to different locations in time, starting today.

²⁰ Cf. Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 82: “Traditionen werden normalerweise nicht verschriftlicht. Geschieht das doch, verweist es auf eine Krise. Die Tendenz zur Verschriftlichung ist in Traditionen nicht unbedingt im Sinne einer inneren Entwicklungslogik angelegt. Der natürliche Weg der Tradition führt nicht zur Schrift, sondern zur Gewohnheit, nicht zur Explikation, sondern zum Implizit-Werden, zur Habitualisierung und Unbewußtmachung. Der Anstoß zur Verschriftlichung muß von außen kommen, und wo er kommt, verändert er Traditionen. Daher ist es sinnvoll, nach solchen äußeren Anstößen der Verschriftlichung zu fragen.”

²¹ Cf. Assmann, *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis*, 88: “Traditionsbrüche bedeuten Verschriftlichungsschübe.”

²² Jörn Rüsen, “Holocaust, Erinnerung, Identität,” in *Das soziale Gedächtnis: Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung* (ed. H. Welzer; Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 243–59, has demonstrated this phenomenon using examples of how Germans deal with the Holocaust.

²³ See also Aleida Assmann, “Wie wahr sind Erinnerungen?,” in *Das soziale Gedächtnis: Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung* (ed. H. Welzer; Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001), 103–22, 114.

<i>Social Memory</i>	<i>Collective Memory</i>		<i>Cultural Memory</i>
Recent Past (3–4 generations)	Recent Past (3–4 generations)		Remote past (mythic time of origins)
		<i>Generational Gap</i> (≈ after 30–50 years)	
Non-intentional dealing with the past Localization within given frames	Past is consciously recalled and reshaped Fabrication of new frames		Past is referred to as given tradition New frames are canonized
		<i>Floating Gap</i> (≈ after 80–120 years)	
	→		
	Change of Medium Leading Perspective prevails		(A new Change of Medium) Leading perspective is canonized

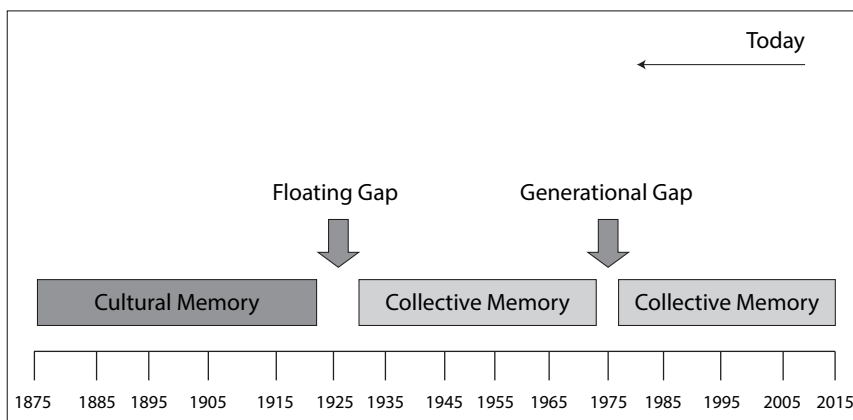
Table 3: Forms of social memory (based on social/cultural memory theory)²⁴

3.1. Generations and Gaps in our Own Times

When we use the categories provided by social memory theory, our own location in time seen through the lens of social memory theory would look like this (see p. 31).

In keeping with the theory, for our generation the realm of *social* and *collective memory* would cover everything that happened between today and 80 to 120 years ago. *Collective memory* of our times would theoretically reach out to the late nineteenth century, to the invention of the diesel engine (1897) or the last days of the German Reich – to the Wilhelmian, of course, not the Third, but the fact that difference needs to be clarified nurtures the suspicion that already the Great War (World War I) is no longer part of European collective Memory. Taking a careful look at the exhibitions that currently memorize the Great War in dif-

²⁴ For a more detailed version of the model and a discussion of its theoretical background cf. Huebenthal, *Markusevangelium*, 142–50.



ferent countries (I have visited ones in Germany, Scotland and Austria), you gain the impression that the Great War has already become a part of *cultural memory*.

Cultural memory for us would be everything and anything that is no longer covered by *collective memory*. Here, we are talking about the German Reich, the Franco-Prussian or Franco-German War (1870–71), literary events like *Bloomsday*, but also conferences like the First Vatican Council. As already indicated, the end of the Great War, the October Revolution in Russia and the Armistice with Germany (or First Compiègne, 11.11.18) are *de facto* already parts of *cultural memory*.

As regards the times of crisis, for us the *generational gap* (one generation or forty years after the event) would be located roughly in the middle of the 1970s. Extending the time a little, we would talk about the time between 1970 and 1980. The Second Vatican Council for instance already lies beyond that gap and indeed, Catholics have more or less agreed on the understanding and reception of this council. Those who do not follow the consensus of the majority are taking the best route to leave the church.

Other examples would be the 1973 oil crisis or the NATO double-track-decision in 1979, which are still somehow vaguely remembered, but quite vividly present due to their impact on recent political and ecological perspectives. Americans might think of events like the Watergate scandal.²⁵ From a social memory perspective it is not surprising that roughly 40 years after the start of the ecological movement (and 35 years after the Green Party in Germany was founded) environmental protection is not only supported by a broad social consensus, but has also been met with by the churches. The topic of the encyclical

²⁵ I would like to thank Robert Cousland for pointing me to Watergate and for proof-reading the first version of this article.

Laudato Si is thus not very surprising, even beyond the zeitgeist and politics of the day.

The *floating gap*, on the other hand (the caesura after three generations or 80–120 years have gone by) looks back roughly speaking to the early 1930s. What happened around the time of the Nazis, the Shoah and the Second World War *and* is not yet being collectively remembered according to the results of broader social negotiations faces the danger of being forgotten in the next one or two decades. Both World Wars and their commemoration have already found their place in *cultural memory*, which can be easily guessed from the way they are remembered and commemorated across Europe.

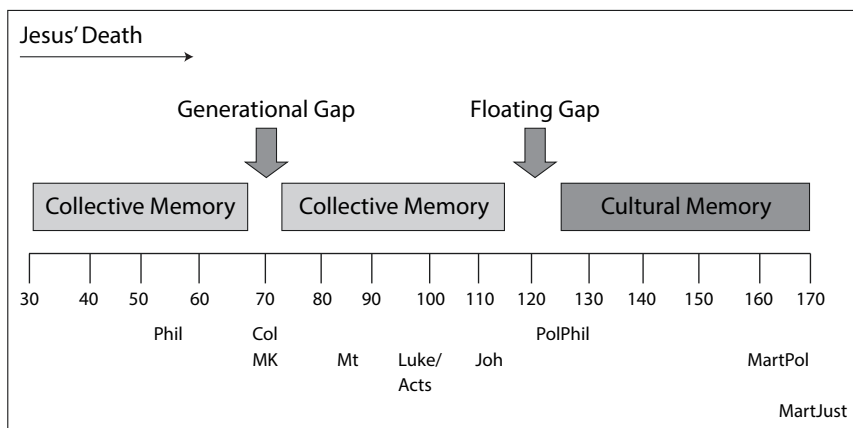
A good example for something that did not make it into *cultural memory* is the railroad carriage of Compiègne. This railroad carriage is still part of the *collective memory* for both parties during the Second World War – which explains its significance for the Armistice with France (or Second Compiègne 22.06.40). In this moment, the railroad carriage became a collective symbol and much more than a simple carriage. Had Nazi Germany won the war, the carriage would have presumably continued its journey into cultural memory and turned into a *lieu de memoire*, instead of being scrapped in 1986. But as history has continued, it obtained only a brief *collective memory*. What made it into *cultural memory* instead were Stalingrad and the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. By the way, a French museum still displays an identically constructed railroad car to recall the armistices. The 1940 armistice – our Second Compiègne – is recalled as the armistice of Rethondes. Another vehicle that is going to see a completely different fate is the bus that Rosa Parks was riding on in 1955 when she did not get up for a white passenger. This bus is on its way to become a *lieu de memoire* in the cultural memory of the United States of America.

3.2. Generations and Gaps in the First Century – Looking Forward

A next step brings us to the times of the New Testament and the question what the newly introduced categories might contribute to the understanding of the New Testament, its environment and contexts.

The founding events of Christianity – if we want to call them that – Jesus, his death and resurrection are believed to have taken place between 30 and 33 C. E. To make the calculation easier, I will work with the number 30 (without turning this into a historical suggestion). When we consider 30 C. E. to be our starting point, the *generational gap* would mathematically be between 60 and 80 C. E., and the *floating gap* between 110 and 150 C. E. (see p. 33).

One restriction has, of course, to be mentioned right away. There is neither a unique *generational gap* nor a unique *floating gap* which opens once and for all. We are not dealing with a *one-size-fits-all* model. The strength of the model



is rather that it allows for the gaps to open in different places at different times. That explains why similar developments have a different speed and a particular character depending on the individual location and context – one of the problems of the more stable models presented earlier. The flexibility causes trouble only when someone insists on a particular dating as it has sometimes been the case in older research. Whoever insists on a fixed point in time for the *Parting of the Ways* (possibly already around 70 C. E.) or the so-called *Synod of Javne* as the moment for the closing of the Old Testament canon (I was taught both dates during my studies), will face problems when it comes to dating or contextualizing other texts. A model that allows for processes with differences in character and speed is a lot stronger.

When we take a model like the one Martin Ebner has suggested and team it with these observations, it is striking how well the descriptions of the different stages fit together. It almost seems as if biblical scholarship has unknowingly already been using the concept, but not been able to provide the theoretical background.

Model Ebner	Caesura I after 40 years (around 70 C. E.) communicative => cultural Memory	Caesura II (after 120 years) around 150 C. E. <i>Explanation unclear</i>
Social Memory Theory	Generational Gap After one generation/40 years	Floating Gap After 80–120 years
	Change within collective memory (e. g., change of media)	collective => cultural memory (canonization tendencies)

Table 4: Comparison of the two epoch models

After dissolving Ebner's confusion of *generational gap* and *floating gap*, the first caesura that both models suggest is located after one generation or roughly, forty years, and we would call it *generational gap*. The second caesura or the *floating gap* would be located after 80–120 years and only then, it is possible to speak of the transition from *collective to cultural memory*.²⁶

It is also quite surprising to see how well the New Testament texts fit into the time span described as the time of *collective memory*. This accuracy is even more surprising when the two gaps are added to the picture. Using the *generational gap* as a divider, it becomes apparent that texts that are commonly dated after the genuine Pauline letters fit nicely between the *generational gap* and the *floating gap*. Considering the fact that these texts – with Revelation being the exception to the rule – have been written either anonymously or as works of pseudepigraphy, this is quite remarkable.

The surprise, however, fades a little considering the significance the two gaps have. Both usually denote changes in the structure of a group's memory. Quite frequently, they are catalysts for a change of form or media, including the transition from orality to writing or the increased production of new genres.

Let me illustrate this with two brief examples. In his book *Gospel Writing*, Francis Watson has introduced a genre called *Sayings Collections*. These sayings collections, he argues, were gradually replaced by narrative gospels, not by a single act. Both genres consist of written texts and might simply represent different stages in the development of early Christian text production. The temporal dissonance – both genres co-exist – is preserved in Watson's approach and it could be explained with the *generational gap* and the change of media it tends to bring about.²⁷ Another case might be the origin of the genre "gospel" itself. As trivial as it sounds, the situation of change in media might have played a much bigger

²⁶ Confusion about the terminology is comprehensible. In *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, Assmann argues: "40 Jahre sind ein Einschnitt, eine Krise in der kollektiven Erinnerung. Wenn eine Erinnerung nicht verlorengehen soll, dann muß sie aus der biographischen in die kulturelle Erinnerung transformiert werden." The term "kulturelle Erinnerung" is, however, not the same as "kulturelles Gedächtnis," but the dichotomy rather refers to Halbwachs' distinction between *social* and *collective memory*, without necessarily being concerned with time only. The term *Traditionsbruch*, which Assmann briefly introduced in *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* and unfolded in more detail in *Religion und kulturelles Gedächtnis* is suited better to describe the phenomenon. In addition, at a later stage in the development of the theory, Jan and Aleida Assmann abandoned the concept *communicative memory* in favor of *collective memory*. Cf. Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning; Media and Cultural Memory 8; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 109–18 and Assmann, *Soziales und kollektives Gedächtnis*, for a discussion Huebenthal, *Markusevangelium*, 142–50.

²⁷ A related idea was already suggested by Werner Kelber in his seminal book *The Oral and the Written Gospel*, in which he proposed that the canonical gospel form had arisen out of a conflict with the genre of the so-called "sayings gospel." Cf. Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 90–139, 184–220.

role than commonly thought. In Mark’s Gospel, a formerly loose network of (mainly orally transmitted) episodes was written down as a structured and self-contained narrative and in the course of this process the formerly *oral message* of the gospel was *textualized*. I do not deem it unlikely that the genre “gospel” as a coherent story was more or less invented by accident. It was, however, received with some enthusiasm and over time became formative for the genre as the later representative of the genre “gospel” show.²⁸

Social memory theory allows on the one hand for pseudepigraphy and gospels as anonymous narrations to be explained as results of the *generational gap*. On the other hand it allows us to see the return to orthonymous texts as a consequence of the *floating gap* even independently of other historical events, which might have fostered them. One could even go so far as to say that particular developments within *collective memory* are prone to happen and that it is the type of event, which sets the course for the future developments. Without the Civil Rights Movements, Rosa Park’s bus would not have become an icon in the US-American *cultural memory*, but would be corroding peacefully on a scrap heap.

What I find very convincing about applying social memory theory is the fact that this lens can not only help one to understand the phenomena themselves, but is also able to provide a better understanding of the explanations given in other models. What makes the theory especially appealing to me is the fact that it does not work with its own dating of texts, but helps to a better understanding of the dating hypotheses suggested in the exegetical discourse. In some cases, it might even provide rationales for particular developments. Its ability to embrace and explain the findings of different strands of New Testament and Patristic scholarship makes it a powerful tool and a valuable help for interdisciplinary work, too.

The Jewish-Roman War and the destruction of the temple, as well as the disappearance and death of the eye-witnesses – two common explanations for the emergence of the Gospels –, fall into the *generational gap*. Social memory theory allows connecting and regarding them together with other events in a larger framework of changes, crises and traumata which might have been catalysts for the scribal process. The important point is that we are no longer dealing with monocausal explanations (which are never really satisfying), but with a whole bundle of reasons which can still be seen within the same framework.

A combination of the “classical” considerations of exegesis and introduction, as we have seen them with Schnelle, Roloff, Pokorný/Heckel and Ebner, teamed with the observations of social memory theory allows for the following epoch model for Early Christianity:

²⁸ Or, as Werner Kelber already phrased it in 1985: “Could Mark, one must ask, become the creator of a new literary form in the Christian tradition by merely bringing oral trends to their destined culmination?” (Werner Kelber, “Apostolic Tradition and the Form of the Gospel,” in *Imprints, Voiceprints, & Footprints of Memory. Collected Essays of Werner H. Kelber* [ed. Id.; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2013], 11–32, 13).

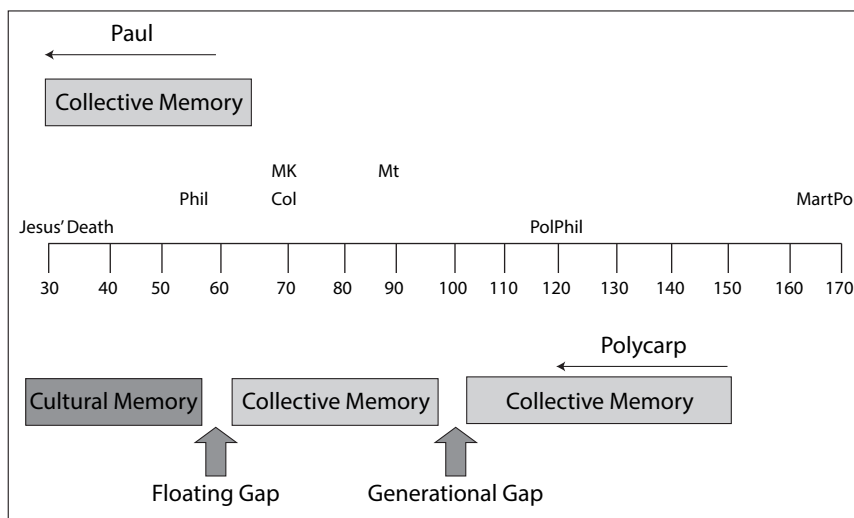
<i>Time</i>	<i>Text/Genre</i>	<i>Pragmatics</i>	<i>Social Memory Terminology</i>
<i>Foundational Event: Life, Ministry, Death and Resurrection of Jesus</i>			
30–70	Authentic Letters (Paul)	<i>Functional Literature:</i> Deals with concrete issues (of a particular group/community), replaces oral communication	Localization within given frames, the past is usually consciously recalled and reshaped, thus is collective rather than social memory
<i>Generational Gap (30–50 years)</i> <i>(Common explanations: Destruction of the Temple, Death of Eyewitnesses)</i>			
70–150	Gospels (Anonymous)	<i>Memory Literature:</i> Remembers Jesus and his heritage, extrapolates traditions	Drafting/“Finding” of traditions, fabrication of new frames for identity construction(s)
	Deuteropauline, Pastoral and Catholic Letters (Pseudepigraphy)	<i>Memory Literature:</i> Remembers Jesus and his heritage, extrapolates traditions	Individual texts can be read as snap-shots or frozen moments in a longer process of emerging early Christian identities
	Authentic Letters (Apostolic Fathers)	<i>Functional Literature:</i> Deals with concrete issues (of a particular group/community), replaces oral communication	
<i>Floating Gap (80–120 years)</i> <i>(Commonly held to be a caesura, it is often not clear why)</i>			
150–300	Authentic Letters (Apostolic Fathers)	<i>Functional Literature:</i> Deals with concrete issues (of a particular group/community), replaces oral communication	Tradition(s) are established and largely accepted. They can be referred to as the common (founding) story and drawing from them common identity can be constituted
	Ecclesiastical Constitutions	Drawing from (alleged) authorities, identity is constructed and safeguarded (ad intra)	These traditions do not necessarily have to be historical or taken literally. On the contrary they are rarely questioned.
	Acts of Martyrs	Identity is constructed and safeguarded (ad intra), installation of reliable and authoritative witnesses	
	Apologies/Apologetic Literature	Dialogue ad extra: Christianity enters the philosophical market	

Table 5: Epoch Model of earliest Christianity II

3.3. Generations and Gaps in Early Christianity – Looking Backwards

Moving a step further in time, the framework for *collective* and *cultural memory* we have just pictured for the New Testament texts moves with us. This is a good moment to change perspective and look backwards once again. The temporal distance between Jesus' death and resurrection (the *datum*, if you wish) does, of course, not change, but the early Christian author's relationship to these events does. What is only 25 years ago for Paul might already be 50 years ago for Matthew and 100 years for Polycarp. The difference in temporal distances alone might explain why the texts deal so differently with the events and their impact – and why they are written in different genres.

Let us look at a few examples to get an idea. The examples introduced below are all still in a preliminary state, waiting to be investigated in greater detail, thus this is not more than a first sketch. However, I deem the heuristic value of this first draft to be sufficient to estimate the potential of the approach.



3.3.1. Paul and Acts

For Paul, Jesus' death and resurrection, the formation of the Jerusalem community, his mission and the founding of the community in Philippi are events of the most recent past. They have taken place in his lifetime and he was even involved in some of them. Paul knew Kephas/Peter and James personally; he was the one who quarrelled with them about the question of the mission to the Gentiles (Gal 2). All of this all happened in the span of *social* or *collective memory*.

For Acts, on the other hand, things look different. Whether Luke knew Peter, Paul or James face-to-face or had personal memories of the scuffle about the mission to the Gentiles and the agreements tied to it, remains unclear. His temporal and emotional distance could, next to pragmatic considerations and the knowledge how Early Christian history continued, explain why the meeting in Jerusalem²⁹ is depicted so differently in Acts than it is in Galatians. It might further explain why the (presumably failed) Pauline collection and the incident at Antioch are equally omitted. Paul does not oppose Peter to his face in Acts as he does in Galatians (Gal 2:11, 4), but Peter overcomes his doubts through a vision (Acts 1:9–16; 11:5–10). The issues which were still burning for Peter, Paul and James have already cooled down for the author of Acts. His text deals with other issues, which are addressed before the background of the founding generation, but nevertheless include the developments since then. The same holds true for the Deutero-Pauline letters. In these texts, too, later issues are addressed in the context of a narration about Paul. In both cases, Paul is established as an authority even though Acts is anxious to present a balanced view that does not lose out the Jerusalem “pillars” (Gal 2:9).

3.3.2. *Synoptic Gospels*

Let us change the scene. For Matthew, if we date the Gospel with the mainstream of the exegetical guild between 80 and 90 C. E., things look quite different compared to Paul’s times. The first generation of Christianity is dead, the temple is destroyed and the Gospel has – thanks to the Pauline mission – spread around the Mediterranean, but its followers remain a negligible minority. Early Christianity must have resembled a tiny network of emerging communities, about the size of today’s *New Religious Movements*, which separate from their mother communities and start to develop their own identifiable profile.

The Synoptics, especially Mark, are in – or beyond – the *generational gap* and look back to the founding events of Christianity as an already less recent past. They live in a time, when recollection and memory have to be negotiated differently; a time when new forms and media come up and when first traditions are built and defended. It is thus not surprising that the first narrative account of the founding events of Christianity appears at this point in time. Mark’s Gospel does not only react to different crises, but also offers a first self-contained and consistent narrative of Jesus memories in the form of a biography. It negotiates both different possible perceptions of Jesus and a suggestion for a stable Christian identity.³⁰

²⁹ To avoid the anachronistic term “Council of the Apostles.”

³⁰ I have elsewhere explained this idea in more depth; cf. Huebenthal, *Markusevangelium*; Ead. “Von der Vita zur Geschichte des erinnerten Jesus. Überlegungen zum Markusevangelium,” in *Geschichte mit Gott. XV. Europäischer Kongress für Theologie. Veröffentlichun-*

A contemporary of Mark and his Gospel would be the figure biblical scholarship refers to as “Deutero-Paul.” This person is, of course, a scholarly fiction, as the Deutero-Pauline letters were hardly written by the same hand. Nevertheless, the author of Colossians, who is usually dated as being roughly contemporaneous with Mark, had to deal with similar issues and yet chose a completely different approach. Both texts address the crucial question of how to deal with the absence of the founder and authoritative figure commemorated in the text. Simply speaking, the Gospel of Mark works on the problem of an absent Christ while Colossians deals with the gap the absent Paul has created. In both cases, the text in the end replaces the absent person. David du Toit³¹ has convincingly worked out that mechanism for the Gospel of Mark and, with respect to Colossians, it is fairly common to argue that Paul’s temporal distance is compensated for by a local one.³² It is thus not too surprising that the fictive author locates Paul in prison. The concept of the text replacing the person can in a moderate form already be found in Eusebius’ writings. He explains that the Gospel of Matthew was written to substitute for the loss the addressees had to experience when Matthew parted from them: “For Matthew, who had at first preached to the Hebrews, when he was about to go to other peoples, committed his gospel to writing in his native tongue, and thus compensated those whom he was obliged to leave for the loss of his presence” (*HE* 3.24.6).

One difference between the Gospels and the Deutero-Pauline letters is the fact that the Gospels are anonymous narrations, which remember the story of the founding events of Christianity. A pseudepigraphic letter like Colossians, on the other hand, written in the name of a well-known person and addressing current problems, nevertheless refers back to the past generation indirectly and commemorates one of the founding figures and his impact. When we read Colossians not only as a letter, but also as a story, it is quite revealing about Paul’s impact and informs the reader how he and his work should be remembered and continued and how Christian identity can be drawn from that.³³

gen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie (ed. M. Meyer-Blanck; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 394–411 and Ead., “Reading Mark as Collective Memory,” in *Social Memory and Social Identity in the Study of Early Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. S. Byrskog, R. Hakola and J. Jokiranta; NTOA/StUNT; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 69–87.

³¹ David S. du Toit, *Der abwesende Herr: Strategien im Markusevangelium zur Bewältigung der Abwesenheit des Auferstandenen* (WMANT 111; Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 2006).

³² See e. g., Ingrid Maisch, *Der Brief an die Gemeinde in Kolossä* (ThKNT 12; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003), 21 or Angela Standhartinger, “Der Brief an die Gemeinde in Kolossä und die Erfindung der ‘Haustafel,’” in *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung* (ed. L. Schottruff and M.-T. Wacker; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998), 635–45, 635.

³³ Cf. Sandra Huebenthal, “Pseudepigraphie als Strategie in frühchristlichen Identitätsdiskursen? Überlegungen am Beispiel des Kolosserbriefs,” *SNTUA* 36 (2011): 63–94 and Ead., “Erfahrung, die sich lesbar macht: Kol und 2 Thess als fiktionale Texte,” in *Wie Geschichten Geschichte schreiben. Frühchristliche Literatur zwischen Faktualität und Fiktionalität*

3.3.3. Polycarp

Let us change the scene one last time. Without getting bogged down in dating questions, one could say that for Polycarp the time of Jesus and the apostles was already part of the remote past. For him the founding events of Christianity are already beyond the *floating gap* or on their way into it.

When we use our own situation as a landmark, Jesus' crucifixion is for Polycarp – depending on the dating – about as far away as the end of the Great War is for us. The founding of the community in Philippi, which he addresses in his letter, is about as far away for Polycarp as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat for a white passenger. Considering the temporal distance, the comparison with our own situation and distance to the events mentioned, it is immediately comprehensible that the recollection of these events and the discourse about them (must) have changed in the meantime.

It can be gathered from Polycarp's letter to the Philippians that the background of the community and especially its foundation through Paul and Paul's importance for the community are part of the shared history which also informs Polycarp's relation to the Philippians. Other than the Deutero-Pauline authors, Polycarp *can* refer to Pauline traditions as shared past or history and that is exactly what he does in the letter:

For neither I, nor any other such one, can come up to the wisdom of the blessed and glorified Paul. He, when among you, accurately and steadfastly taught the word of truth in the presence of those who were then alive. And when absent from you, he wrote you a letter, which, if you carefully study, you will find to be the means of building you up in that faith which has been given you, and which, being followed by hope, and preceded by love towards God, and Christ, and our neighbour, is the mother of us all (Polycarp, *Phil.* 3.2–3; 11.3).

For reasons of space, I cannot go into details, here, but there is one last thing that I find intriguing: In Polycarp's time the communities in Asia Minor had already taken the lead, but Christianity was still small in numbers. Helen Rhee postulates 40.000 faithful in the year 150, which would make them 0.07% of the Empire's population.³⁴ The social situation of this *New Religious Movement* might thus have changed a lot less than we imagine. Looking back from a temporal distance of almost 2000 years and living in a Christian context makes it hard to believe that even after four generations Christianity had not developed that much. What makes it especially difficult is the fact that we share Polycarp's perspective: for

lität (ed. S. Luther, J. Röder and E. Schmidt; WUNT 2.395; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 295–336.

³⁴ Cf. Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 43. Rhee estimates the total number of Christians in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century to have been roughly 40.000, which would be 0,07% of the total population, 760.000 for the year 225, which would be 1.27% and 6.300.000 in the year 300 which would be 10.5%.

us, too, Jesus' death and resurrection are events of the remote past – and thus part of *cultural memory*.

4. Conclusions

These last thoughts take us home to our own times and the question how we read New Testament and Early Christian literature. When I work as a New Testament scholar, my own approach is to receive New Testament literature predominantly as artefacts or externalizations of *collective memories*. My rationale for this approach is the temporal distance of the authors from the events they recollect and process theologically.

As demonstrated, reading through the lens of social memory theory implies working with a particular model of the underlying processes of text production without trying to date the texts accurately. This approach is not a merely synchronic enterprise and still distinctly different from historical-critical readings. The diachronic perspective is always in the background as this approach anticipates earlier stages of an existing text. Without further data, however, it is next to impossible to reconstruct earlier stages of this text. Reading New Testament texts through the lens of social memory theory is the attempt to understand how identity is shaped and how texts provide frames for future processes of identity construction.

As regards method, this reading attitude implies the need to accept that it is impossible to say how the events recalled and interpreted in these texts actually took place. Such a reading rather provides insights into the current situation of a commemoration community ("Erinnerungsgemeinschaft") and its processes of identity construction. New Testament texts allow us to witness how particular commemoration communities made sense of the founding events and their impact. The founding story of a particular commemoration community becomes also tangible upon closer reading. This can of course be a quite different sight for different groups represented in the New Testament and other Early Christian literature. It fosters the impression that the New Testament is a collection of frozen moments – snapshots of Early Christian identity construction processes at different places in different points of time.

Reading the New Testament as an artefact of *cultural memory* on the other hand, is a completely different approach. With an emic perspective, it implies taking a stance on the tradition of one's own interpretation community and regarding the text as part of one's own identity. If it is a professional reading, it is the work of a theologian. The table below might help to clarify the differences. Having worked in different denominational and non-denominational academic contexts in Europe over the last five years, I have begun to develop a heuristic to help understanding some of the discourses and controversies in our disciplines.

I use the questions as tools for understanding, not as categories for evaluation. My impression is that some of the most fiercely debated controversies could be settled knowing what the other person is really about.

Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible	Relation Text-Event	Cultural Memory	Etic	Which texts and canon formations exist and how did they come into existence? How do they shape + reflect the communities' identities?
	Relation Reader/ Interpretation Community- Event	Cultural Memory	Etic	How are or could these texts and canon formations have been interpreted in different interpretation communities over time?
Emic			How did our canon become our canon? How is our identity informed by our canon? How do we understand the texts today?	
New Testament	Relation Text-Event	Collective Memory	Etic	How do the texts reflect the events and what frames do they provide for identity construction?
		Cultural Memory	Etic	Which canon formations exist and how did they come into existence? How do they shape + reflect the communities' identities?
	Relation Reader/ Interpretation Community- Event	Collective Memory	Etic	How are or could these texts have been interpreted in different interpretation communities over time?
		Cultural Memory	Etic	How are or could these texts and canon formations have been interpreted in different interpretation communities over time?
			Emic	How did our canon become our canon? How is our identity informed by our canon? How do we understand the texts today?

Table 6: Differences between reading from etic and emic perspectives³⁵

³⁵ Regarding the Relation Text–Event, there is no emic perspective for the modern reader.

As our own temporal distance to the New Testament texts is that of *cultural memory*, it should come as no surprise that the texts of the biblical canon are read and understood that way in the different Christian interpretation communities. Independently of their denomination, New Testament scholars tend to step out of line when we read Early Christian texts considering their time of origin using our own constructs of antique encyclopaediae to actualize them. This approach entails that we do not read the texts as parts of our own *cultural memory*, but as artefacts of the early Christians’ *collective memory*. To actualize Early Christian Texts with an antique encyclopaedia further involves reading them as artefacts of *collective memory* with an etic perspective. Nota bene, this does *not* automatically mean to read them in a reception-aesthetic perspective – social memory-informed readings tend to be rather production aesthetic. It goes without saying that such a reading can only work by approximation.

The decision whether to read a New Testament or early Christian text as an artefact of *collective* or *cultural memory* already has an enormous impact on its actualisation.³⁶ Adding the distinction between etic and emic perspective allows for a helpful heuristic approach, one that not only maps different reading strategies, but is also a major help in explaining some of the current phenomena in the exegetical discourse. It explains for example why the *canonical approach* is usually represented by Old Testament/Hebrew Bible scholars.³⁷ It also sheds light on the question why merely emic approaches like *Theological Interpretation* tend to fall short and where some of their quarrels with biblical scholars come from. Although they might be faithful theologians, biblical scholars by definition have to adopt an etic perspective to make visible the frozen moments of identity construction preserved in biblical texts.

³⁶ Cf. Stefan Alkier, “Der 1. Thessalonicherbrief als kulturelles Gedächtnis,” in *Logos und Buchstabe. Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit im Judentum und Christentum der Antike* (ed. G. Sellin and F. Vouga; TANZ 20; Tübingen: Narr, 1997), 175–94.

³⁷ The first presentation of this thought at the EABS/ISBL Meeting in Vienna 2014 in a paper called “Mind the Gap! Why New Testament Scholars rarely join the Canonical Train” in the Session “The Multivalence of Canon” led to a controversial discussion with my Old Testament/Hebrew Bible colleagues. I guess this might also be due to the fact that these questions force scholars to take a stand and become visible as people who come from a certain background and with a context and tradition that influence their work. For North-Atlantic Scholarship it is often still hard to accept, that we, too, do contextual exegesis, cf. Daniel Patte, “Contextual Reading of Mark and North Atlantic Scholarship,” in *Mark* (ed. N. W. Duran, T. Okure and D. Patte; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 197–213.