

The One Hebrew Word You Don't Want to Forget

BY CHAD BIRD

To forget ourselves is to remember another, that is, to act in such a way that benefits them. That's the problem: we don't.



Tom and Charlie remembered their respective wedding anniversaries in two very different ways. Tom's way landed him in his wife's good graces; Charlie's landed him in the doghouse. Here's why.

Tom remembered his anniversary by sending his wife a dozen red roses at work, taking her out to her favorite restaurant for dinner, and buying her a little gift that said, "I love you and I'm so happy that you're my wife."

Charlie remembered his anniversary in a much more dangerous way. He remembered it in the same way that he remembered that $2+2=4$, in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue, and that he's going golfing with Jeff and Marty next Saturday.

At bedtime, when Charlie asked his wife why she seemed so upset, she cried, "You forgot our anniversary!" to which Charlie, thoroughly surprised, replied, "No, honey, I did not forget. I remembered it when I got up this morning and looked at the calendar. And I've been remembering that it's our anniversary all day long."

Poor Charlie will spend the night, if not the entire week, in the doghouse because he chose a remembrance of the mind over Tom's remembrance of action. Or, to say it differently, Tom chose to remember as the Hebrews remember while Charlie chose to behave like a Gentile.

THE HEBREW WAY OF REMEMBERING

The one Hebrew word you don't want to forget is the word for remember: *zakar*. In the Old Testament, to *zakar* is not merely to rifle through the files in your head until you find that fact you've been searching for. To *zakar* is to employ your hands and feet and lips to engage in whatever action that remembrance requires.

"Biblical remembering is a body activity, not merely a head activity."

For instance, when "God remembered Noah" and his floating zoo, he "made a wind blow over the earth and the waters subsided," (Gen 8:1). As the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna comments, "In the Bible, 'remembering,' particularly on the part of God, is not the retention or recollection of a mental image, but a focusing upon the object of memory that results in action."^[1] In other words, God remembered Noah by doing something, by sending the saving, flood-drying wind. Remembrance = a divine act of mercy.

Or think of Joseph. When he interpreted the dreams of Pharaoh's cupbearer, he begged him, "Only remember [*zakar*] me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to remember me [*zakar*] to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house," (40:15). Most English translations render "remember me to Pharaoh" as "to mention me," but the verb is *zakar*. Joseph expected more from the cupbearer than pleasant recollections of the Israelite wunderkind back in the slammer. He wanted Pharaoh's servant to do him kindness (Hebrew: *chesed*) by remembrance resulting in action. And, though he drug his feet for two years, the servant finally did just that.

But these examples are just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. When the Lord sees the rainbow and "remembers [his] covenant," he actively prevents a cosmic flood from recurring (9:15). When he remembered Abraham, he "sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:29). When he remembered Rachel, he "opened her womb," (29:22). As John Goldingay remarks, "When God is said to think about someone or something, this is preliminary to acting on their behalf."^[2] Or, as Brevard Childs puts it, "[remembrance is] an action directed toward someone, rather than as a psychological experience of the subject."^[3]

Biblical remembering is a body activity, not merely a head activity. Likewise, to forget is not to act. When the Psalmist complains, "Has God forgotten to be gracious?" (77:9), he isn't asking if Yahweh is a bit absentminded lately. He's wondering why God hasn't acted graciously to save them. When God

forgets, he doesn't engage in a certain action. When God remembers, he does.

THE INCARNATION OF DIVINE REMEMBRANCE

God is a divine husband like Tom. When he remembers us, he saves us. John says that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us," (1:14). You might also say, "God's remembrance became flesh and dwelt among us." Divine recollection was not merely the firing of neurons in the grey matter of the divine brain but the incarnation of the mercy of God in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ.

We, on the other hand, are self-remembering creatures. That's what it means to be a sinner. As Luther put it, we are *homo incurvatus in se*, that is, people curved in on themselves. When we remember ourselves, we act in a way that is self-beneficial. We fail to love, or fail to love as we should, for love always entails a focus away from me, giving to another, curved outward to the neighbor. To forget ourselves is to remember another, that is, to act in such a way that benefits them. That's the problem: we don't. And even when we do, we're always also remembering ourselves. To be self-forgetful is to love.

We are those remembered by God. We are the objects of his active, saving, incarnating, remembering mercy in Christ. For him to *zakar* is to act in a way in keeping with the love that defines his very essence.

Christ's own Hebrew mother sums it up well as she closes her pregnancy song, the Magnificat, with these words, "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy," (Luke 1:54). She should know. Growing inside her womb was the incarnation of divine remembrance in the Son who would act to save us all.

[1] *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary. Comment on Gen 8:1, p. 56.

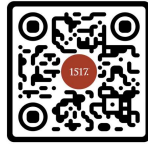
[2] *Old Testament Theology*, Volume 1, (IVP: 2003) p. 174.

[3] *Memory and Tradition in Israel*, p. 31. See also *TDOT* 4:64-82 for the entry on *zakar*, as well as the *Theological Wordbook of the OT*, where it says, in part, that "in some cases the relation between the remembering and the concomitant action is so close that they are virtually identified in the mind of the writer," p. 241.

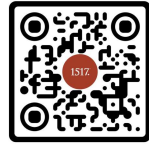
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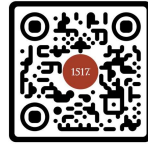
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