



Changes in Remembrance? The Digitalization of Biblical Texts under Theological and Ethical Considerations

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How does the digitization of biblical text influence ways of remembering and interpretation? Gotlind Ulshöfer discusses this question using the example of the Codex Sinaiticus. Inquiring whether the digital text can best be understood as monument or memorial, she describes the fluidity of remembrance in digital “in-between-spaces” and the transitions associated with them.

1. The Importance of Remembrance and the Presentation of Digitalized Texts as In-Between-Spaces

A Theology of Digitalization brings into focus how to consider technical developments – like, e.g., artificial intelligence – from a theological point of view, and has also the task to reflect the possibilities how new technologies can be used for theological study and to re-consider how this effects theological thinking and the practice of faith as well as vice versa. The digitalization of Biblical and religious texts is one of the topics of a Theology of Digitalization and should be considered under multiple perspectives. In this article the idea is to focus on the question of remembrance and how the digitalized Biblical texts may influence the ways of remembering and interpretation. The digitalization of Biblical texts means in this article two things: on the one

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hand it refers to the availability of Biblical texts online. These texts appear online in a variety of translations or as images of original manuscripts like the Codex Sinaiticus and their transcriptions. On the other hand, due to the virtual access to these texts it is possible to apply methods of digital humanities to them. The main focus of this article lies on the first part without completely neglecting the second perspective.

Remembrance will be understood here as the noun which describes how present-day persons in general refer to a text or an event in the past and interpret it, use it or adapt it, while the process character of this phenomenon is described by the word remembering. Remembrance and remembering are core concepts (“theologische Basiskategorie”)¹ for religions in general and also for Christianity and Christian theology. Remembrance is closely related to texts and their stories as well as to places of relevance for these stories. “Memory” is used to describe what to remember in a more personalized sense and can be individual and collective. In Christianity Biblical texts and the stories of the New Testament and of the Hebrew Bible are texts which help to remember what happened and tell about the relevance of the story of God with God’s people of Israel and of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Remembrance as well as remembering these deep connections between God and God’s creatures actively is seen as one of the main tasks of a believer – already in the Bible. Especially the Hebrew Bible with its theology of “zachor” relates religious identity to this “imperative to remember.”² To develop a religious identity has to do with the gift of faith as well as with relevant texts as (scriptural) witnesses and the active remembering of stories of faith and is related to expressions of one’s personal practices of faith and e.g. of liturgical practices.

Due to the relevance of faith-related remembering the Biblical texts as manuscripts have become important in a double sense: First, due to the written name of God on them, already manuscripts or parchments can turn into something connected to holiness which cannot be thrown away but must be stored or buried as in Judaism.³ Second, also the content of the remembrance becomes important, i.e. the Biblical stories which stand in the center of remembrance, and where two main groups are of special importance for the act of remembering: the remembrance of the liberation and salvation out of the Egyptian slavery by the Jewish people and the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and the stories around his life and the life of his disciples.⁴

¹ Boschki (2016).

² Greve (1999).

³ Eißler (2003), 419.

⁴ Konz (2019), 152.

This religious interpretation of events which might have taken place in the past or are remembered as having taken place, lead to an important concept which can be connected to a then theologically qualified remembrance by the topic of hope. The Catholic theologian Jean Baptist Metz reminds us that remembrance in this context puts the events which relate to suffering in the broader context of liberation and resurrection. In other words: It draws remembrance into eschatological contexts which are filled with hope.⁵ Remembrance becomes therefore something which is not only related to the past but is important because it relates to hope and opens up the future. In this sense, remembrance understood from a theological point of view is not neutral, but relates to stories of all life, so it relates also to suffering, to the marginalized and to the oppressed in relation to Jesus Christ's life. It makes past events related to future hopes. Therefore, remembering – which is ascribed to God and to human beings – is something which establishes traditions but also which opens up space for remembering the counter-events to power structures as does the crucifixion of Jesus in relation to Roman power. Alas, from a theological perspective: remembrance is more than just collecting information and data about the past, because it refers to bringing past events into the present and reminds of the relationship of God and human beings.⁶ The act of remembering is always part of services and liturgy and can also take place in the works of diaconia and in martyrria, remembrances can be seen as expressions of faith. But there are also other ways to remember the texts of the Bible as well as the stories about God's story with his/her people. These different forms can be in music, art or play. All of those can find their way into digital media. Relating to ideas from the historian Alina Bothe and her research on "The history of the Shoah in the virtual realm."⁷, I would like to understand media as technologies which become a medium via the activities of the persons related to the medium.⁸ In this sense, remembering and remembrance in the virtual space is an activity which stands in relation with the active persons although they are not physically present in this space. Bothe develops the idea of the "virtual in between-space of remembrance" as an epistemological concept. Referring to concepts of Edward Soja⁹ and Homi K. Bhaba of the Thirdspace¹⁰, this idea of the "In-Between-Space of Remembrance" helps to bring together the perspectives of space, time and subjects and their interrelation. This virtual "In-Between-Space"

⁵ Metz (1977).

⁶ Konz (2019), 156.

⁷ Bothe (2019)

⁸ Bothe (2019), 441.

⁹ Soja (1996).

¹⁰ Bhaba (2000).

is formed by digital data as well as communication, interpretation and also imagination. In this sense it also helps to “think beyond the present thoughts,”¹¹ and so to transcend the past and the present into future options and interpretation. Relating this idea to Biblical texts in its various material stages and interpretations we can try to interpret also the digitalization of the Codex Sinaiticus as something more than just making digital images out of the papyrus papers of the Codex. The focus lies here on the Codex Sinaiticus due to its importance as a manuscript and as the first significant biblical manuscript corpus to be digitalized.

2. The Digitalization of the Codex Sinaiticus as the Beginning of the Digitalization of Biblical Texts¹²

It was in the 19th century when new technologies of travel enabled scholars to get to far away places and find “authentic” ancient manuscripts or hidden monuments from the past.¹³ One of the outstanding findings which was also impressively, publicly merchandised was the “discovery” of the manuscript of the Codex Sinaiticus by Constantin (von) Tischendorf (1815-1874). In 1844 the monks in St. Catherine’s monastery on the Sinai showed Tischendorf 129 pages of texts of the Hebrew Bible and they allowed him to take 43 of them back to Leipzig, Germany. In 1846 he published them as the “Codex Friderico-Augustanus.”¹⁴ For him it was clear that this finding and its publication was a sensation. During the history of its further discovery, parts of the manuscript stayed in Leipzig, others were brought to St. Petersburg and London. This publication of the Codex Sinaiticus has been of fundamental importance for academia and society. The Codex Sinaiticus contains the oldest complete version of the New Testament and other writings of early Christian authors such as the Letter of Barnabas and the Didache. So it is relatively comprehensive, and its material condition is still good. The Codex is an important witness for the textual tradition, its origin and history are highly remarkable: for it is a new form of binding – the codex and not scrolls anymore.¹⁵ The story of the discovery of the codex as well as its finding in the 19th century is remarkable in that the codex has been linked through the centuries to questions of accessibility and preservation of both the text and the codex as a whole.

¹¹ Bothe (2019), 246.

¹² This chapter and following passages refer to my article: Ulshöfer (2021).

¹³ Böttrich (2011).

¹⁴ Tischendorf (1846).

¹⁵ Böttrich (2011).

The Codex Sinaiticus was digitalized between 2005–2009. With the digitization¹⁶ of this manuscript a direct virtual access to it was made possible and thereby a contribution was made to the preservation of the manuscript and also to the culture of remembrance. How is the Codex Sinaiticus presented and preserved online? If you look at the website of the digitized Codex Sinaiticus¹⁷, you can see that remembering and preserving is multidimensional: the image of the Codex can be found there as well as translations, comments and other information. The open accessible website makes it possible for everybody to be reminded of the Codex Sinaiticus, of the text and its history, and of the Codex form. Ulrich Johannes Schneider and Zeki Mustafa Dogan write: “The Codex Sinaiticus, in its Internet edition, has emerged from the contentious contexts of its discovery, postponement and sale and rests, so to speak, in itself, in a place that belongs to no one except those who paid for its construction and those who continue to maintain its presence – text lovers with public support.” They speak of a “step towards a peaceful digital future.”¹⁸ With the digitization of the codex something happens that brings it back to its original version: Due to digitization the various pages of the codex – beyond the libraries in which they are located – can be virtually reassembled and form the corpus that they once embraced. The codex has also served as a model for further digitization and thus for dealing with the ancient texts and presents a version how ancient material can be opened up to public access virtually.

3. The Digital Text as a Monument or Memorial in the In-Between-Space?

The Codex Sinaiticus as manuscript is a variant of a “sacred text” of the Bible. As characteristic features of “sacred texts” shall be seen their formative powers which are preserved through decades and centuries. The formative powers of the texts relate to their cultural impact as well as to their spiritual and intellectual dimensions.¹⁹ This also implies that the texts are passed on. Remembrance in relation to the “sacred texts” includes their use as witnesses of faith and their academic processing, which takes place in the form of exegesis, or with regard to the materiality of the codex and its preservation as an artifact in corresponding editions. Tischendorf already made it clear that the latter aspect was important when, in 1859, in view of the edition of 132,000 lines

¹⁶ In “digitization” the focus lies on the technical options, the word “digitalization” considers more the the general context of bringing something into data of 0/1 and its social implications.

¹⁷ <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org/de/> (accessed September 12, 2019).

¹⁸ Schneider and Dogan (2011), 41, translation GU.

¹⁹ Lauster (2004) and beyond.

of the manuscript he had copied, he noted: “this edition [will] erect an indestructible monument/ memorial (‘ein unzerstörbares Denkmal’) to church and academia. I know that the whole Christian world, as far as it knows, will receive this precious gift with grateful joy.”²⁰

When the text edition and thus also the text is understood as a “Denkmal”, its singular character, its outstanding importance and exemplarity are emphasized and in German this word connotes monument, memorial as well as “think about it.” At least it gives a hint that by editing the Codex Sinaiticus the text is put into the public and is therefore an artifact scholars and people can relate to either in form of the edition of the 19th century or the present-day digitization.

But how can this “Denkmal” be understood in a deeper sense? It is not intended here to tie in with Robert Musil’s dictum on monuments in urban areas, which he proves to have a paradox: he assumes that after the solemn inauguration monuments are no longer perceived and thus lose their function. Although this point might be valid also to the digital Codex Sinaiticus if it were forgotten in the layers of the internet. But remembrance and traditions bring this monument back into the present: since the Codex Sinaiticus is part of a community of remembrance, i.e., theology and church, the danger of being forgotten, can be neglected. Therefore one might say that the Codex Sinaiticus should be more interpreted in the sense of Aleida Assmann when she objects Musil: “In his reflection on monuments, Musil completely ignores the dimension of cultural, political and social ‘acting on monuments.’”²¹ If one takes up this thought and refers it to the digital copies, such as the Codex Sinaiticus, it can be said that the “monument” can be understood as a memorial, also in its digital form, and thus it also fulfils its function of remembrance, because it can be worked with again and again, especially through the digital possibilities and it can be understood that it belongs to the “In-Between-Spaces of Remembrance.”

In addition, remembrance and remembering manifests itself in various forms of expression, i.e. in reciting the texts – or more precise: prepared and translated versions of the text – in a service, but also in direct touch with the document of the Codex Sinaiticus in such forms as commentaries, text criticism and the development of new texts. So at the same time, a remembrance of the texts with religious content is up-

²⁰ Böttrich (2011), 102, translation GU.

²¹ Assmann (2018), 73, translation GU.

dated in the events of faith and also the interpretation of the text can be identified as “an essential element of a written culture of remembrance.”²²

Now the question arises as to the extent to which remembrance and the associated forms of interpretation change as a result of digitalization. If one looks at the digitalization of Codex Sinaiticus, one can first of all point out that technical devices are used to make the texts accessible to all those who have access to the Internet, both as images and in forms of linking. Thus accessibility can be presented as an essential feature of change. Second, the Digital Humanities enable a new access to the digitized text, because they can present new references within the text and with other texts using methods such as computer philology, and thus achieve results that are not yet known or can also be established in chronological order. Third, the visualization of digital manuscripts represents a new way of relating to the texts, because beyond the original artifact they can open up the object to the viewer from different perspectives and under different analytical levels. All these differences and new approaches to the manuscript texts can be seen as being part of the “In-Between-Space of Remembrance.”

4. The Fluidity of Remembrance in Digital “In-Between-Spaces”: Theological Input

The digitalization of the Codex Sinaiticus can serve as an example of how theological work can find new possibilities of reference and perspectives through the availability on the internet as well as the use of digital humanities. When manuscripts like the Codex Sinaiticus become part of the “In-Between-Spaces of Remembrance” which is characterized by virtual issues as well as persons who use and demonstrate how fluid also artifacts become when they are digitalized, we have to ask how this influences our perception of Biblical texts and how they influence the In-Between-Spaces of Remembrance. With the media researcher Felix Stalder,²³ we can see that the digitalization constitutes this In-Between-Space through three aspects: The aspect of referentiality shows that there are new possibilities for linking and evaluating texts due to digitization via referencing across different spheres. The aspect of communality brings it into the center that it is the interaction of people which make up the medium and this In-Between-Space and are also a characteristic of a culture of digitality, and which is also evident in the Codex Sinaiticus, for example when it is understood as a document

²² Lauster (2004), 461, translation GU.

²³ Stalder (2016).

of the Christian community. The algorithms which order and structure the digital sphere as well as our perceptions of decisions and of reality play a role as well.²⁴ Technology of the Digital in this sense enables transgressions of borders and realms and at the same time serves the self-constitution of the human being, who with the help of digitized manuscripts, for example, can become aware of his and her part in a cultural and religious history of humankind. At the same time, however, this example also shows the limits of technical possibilities, because it is not only the technique of the digitalization alone which attributes value and importance to digitalized texts like the Codex Sinaiticus, but it is the interaction of people as well as their attributions through which the sacredness associated with the texts is revealed and which is difficult to reproduce without this context. Therefore, it makes sense not only to talk about “the internet”, but develop further the In-Between-Spaces-concept. This In-Between-Space is due to technology which also constitutes the spheres where the remembrance can take place.²⁵ In view of the digitalization of manuscripts such as the Codex Sinaiticus, this also means that more than the text alone is passed on in the sense of remembering and preserving since the texts are profound and have in themselves a history and can be shared in new digital ways. Therefore it is not only storing, but remembrance which takes place in In-Between-Spaces: “Storing can be delivered to machines, while remembering can only be done by people who have unmistakable points of view, limited perspectives, experiences, feelings and goals. Remembrance thus includes a reference to the present and has a constructive character.”²⁶

In a digitalized world, these In-Between-Spaces also help to form collective expressions and remembrance. But then the question arises as to which collective they refer to. Here the concepts of Avishai Margalit remembrance which leads to a “shared memory” or a “common memory” might be of help. The philosopher distinguishes between a “common memory” as a “an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually. If the rate of those who remember the episode of a given society is above a certain threshold [...], then we call the memory of the episode a common memory.”²⁷ On the other hand Margalit talks about the “shared memory” which is for him a living phenomenon which relates to this what can be seen as action when we talk about the “In-Between-Space of Remembrance” of the digital: For him a shared memory

²⁴ Stalder (2016).

²⁵ Stiegler (2009), 60.

²⁶ Assmann (2018), 215, translation GU.

²⁷ Margalit (2002), 51.

“requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode – [...] into one version. [...] Shared memory is built on a division of mnemonic labor.”²⁸ and it needs institutions or monuments to be remembered. This shared memory therefore has the dimension that it does not only refer to the individual, but is a collective event. Margalit thinks that there is at least a responsibility for the collective to nurture memory and keep it alive even if as an individual one perhaps has nothing to do with it at all – referring to the Holocaust, e.g.. The shared memory can also be a memory of memories, as it exists here in the digitized codex. On the other hand, this means that the past has been updated in the artifact that has been digitized. It can be assumed that there is a double level of remembrance of the past with regard to Codex Sinaiticus, namely the remembrance of the artifact in the sense of its origin and find history as well as the remembrance of the text corpus of the Bible, which it comprises. For Margalit, it is compassion that becomes a criterion for why remembrance should take place at all. I am aware that the idea of “shared memory” can only partially capture the cultural, theological and ethical significance of the digitalization of Codex Sinaiticus, especially as a part of In-Between-Space because it does not completely capture the plurality and the fluidity of remembrance in a digital age.

We will now intensify the question of why remembrance in the In-Between-Space is important and how a theological understanding of remembrance may bring another perspective into the analysis also of digitalized biblical texts like the Codex Sinaiticus. Foremost the digitalization of the Codex is a work of preservation because the material aspects are of special importance for it, and digitalized it can be preserved. Preservation also carries the aspect of storage and thus of the archive in itself and digitized material can be stored, even if it is not actively used. Here, however, it is also important to consider how and whether this is actually the case and how digitized material should then be set up in such a way that it remains accessible even if it is not used regularly. The preservation side of the digitalization is of importance because it is part of the way what and how things are remembered and defines which information about them are available and how they become part of the In-Between-Space. But for the Codex Sinaiticus remembrance is also essential, not only in its use as reference text for Biblical exegesis. In addition, remembrance and preservation can be understood simultaneously in a prospective sense, so that in addition to these two aspects, the use and/or evaluation or reception of the preserved should also come into view.

²⁸ Margalit (2002), 51–2.

From a theological point of view, it is interesting to see that remembrance is often connected to artifacts, which can be understood as symbols like the cross or water for baptism. This also reveals typical elements of the function of media, which can function as storage and circulation instruments and form “retrieval notes,” i.e., which themselves become an occasion to retrieve memories, as is the case, for example, with family photos. Taking up on Johann Baptist Metz idea of the non-neutrality of remembrance, we can add another perspective to a theological point of view on how remembrance also from digitalized biblical texts can be understood. For Metz it is not only important that remembrance of the revelation is passed on by faith witnesses and in communities of faith,²⁹ but that a Christian remembrance has to be understood in relation of the “*memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*,” which makes this remembrance not a neutral way of thinking of things or events in the past but has actual effects. Due to these actual effects he can say the remembrance can be dangerous as well as liberating. He combines the remembrance with the hope which is brought into Christian thinking especially by the resurrection of Christ. So Metz can say that one should not forget the suffering but that this suffering is not the end but must be seen under the perspective of hope which can change things in the future due to God’s power. So, remembrance is much more than storing, it has a societal and political dimension since “*Erinnerung [ist] nicht nur Gegenstand, sondern inneres ermöglichendes Moment jeden kritischen Bewußtseins.*”³⁰ So remembrance is related to a critical reception of reality and to remembered hope.³¹ If we take this perspective, the idea of the “In-Between-Space” becomes not only a way how to describe the relation of technique, algorithms, texts, artifacts and action of persons in an epistemological sense, but its function needs to be extended to a normative concept since remembrance in this perspective means also to hear those who suffer and listen to their voices and look at this which is a fragment and the lives unfinished.

5. Whose Tradition, Whose Power? Remembrance as a Task

The digitalization of the Codex Sinaiticus has been chosen in this article because it is an example how digitalization can change the perception also of Biblical texts but it also shows that the “In-Between-Spaces of Remembrance” which have become one of the phenomenon of the digital age are still deeply connected with the non-digital world. Therefore a theological perspective of remembrance which can be developed

²⁹ Taxacher (2003), 146.

³⁰ Metz (1977), 186.

³¹ Schroffner (2018), 453.

with the help of an approach like the one from Johann Baptist Metz is still useful because it does not romanticize remembrance but brings into view that also shared memories can be and even should be memories which do not leave out the suffering and the oppression and the fragmented sides of life. Therefore, concerning an analysis of the output of digitalization of ancient texts it should be also kept in mind: The possibilities of digital techniques are embedded in cultural-normative imprints. For example, Carolyn S. Schroeder reports on her research in the field of Coptic. She draws attention to the fact that even in large collections of Coptic manuscripts such as the British Library – at least at the time of publication of her text, 2016 – Coptic documents had rarely been published digitally, whereby it is clear to her that Coptic has a relatively marginal status within Biblical studies. For her, this is proof that with digitization, decisions that are characteristic of an off-line world find their way into the online world. Using the example of the missing markings at TEI, the Text Encoding Initiative, for manuscript parts that are distributed across different libraries, she then draws attention to the fact that this normative decision to marginalize the Coptic language is also reflected in TEI and thus in its programming. However, she also makes clear that the TEI is so flexible that changes and adaptations are no problem.³²

As can be seen from the examples of Carolyn S. Schroeder, technology and in particular the possibilities of digitalization are interwoven with power structures and contexts as well as with values and norms. This can be seen, for example, in decisions about who gets access and what is to be shown and processed at all. With Carolyn Schroeder we can speak here of “cultural capital” in the sense of Bourdieu, which is mediated and acquired with Digital Humanities. In this context, ethical questions also become relevant, when a theological stance is taken which relates to Metz’ notion that remembrance is not neutral but has societal implications.

If one extends one’s view beyond the digitalization of the Codex Sinaiticus, two fundamental aspects come to the fore: First, the question of the framework or perspective that characterizes digitalization, digitized material and digital humanities, and second, tentativeness in the sense of the provisional nature of memory and preservation. Relating to the first point: It can be pointedly formulated that digitalization in the humanities is about the fundamental question of the framework or perspective under which digitized material is created and operated. Algorithmicity in particular, which is playing an increasingly important role in digital humanities, and algorithms’ abilities to sort out and in are one part of it, because they might have a hidden agenda of

³² Schroeder (2016), 26–7, 36.

norms and values.³³ But in order to enable an In-Between-Space for Remembrance it is important to detect the perspectives taken and not to neglect the downside for those who are not present as Metz makes it clear.

Looking at the second point, if one looks at digitalization from a longer-term perspective, in view of the changes that are also taking place in remembrance and preservation with the help of digital copies, it becomes apparent that the interpretations of reality thus made can only be understood in a provisional sense because they are also subject to the changes of time. At the same time, however, due to their open accessibility, digitized texts and artifacts can also lead to remembrance in which individual and collective remembrance flow together to form a shared or also common memory and common identity. Digitalization, the digital copies it makes possible and digital humanities as an academic field of research create access to historical sources such as the Codex Sinaiticus. These artifacts are accessible to all, even as sacred texts used in the religious field, and thus refer also to the task of remembrance those things, events and artifacts which are relevant and which tend to be forgotten. This includes the preservation of cultural heritage and artifacts, as well as digitized material of all levels that allow interpretations of the past. Thus the present can be perceived in the continuum of past and future. So the “task of remembrance” from a Christian perspective remains and develops: it remains on a general level the same since it is the telling of the story of God with his/her people and it develops concerning the creation of In-Between-Spaces for Remembrance as the tasks have become manifold since these spaces might become battlefields over what, how and whom to remember. In these In-Between-Spaces everybody can get in touch online with Christian traditions and its artifacts and share these memories. In this context a normative concept of In-Between-Spaces which relates to Metz’ approach of remembering also the neglected and marginalized might be of help in order to realize biases of the technical sides of digitalization as well as biases of the content.³⁴

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³³ O’Neil (2017).

³⁴ This article is part of the DFG-Heisenberg-research project “Ethics of Power in a Digital Age” (UL 191/5-1) at the University of Tübingen.

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Tischendorf, Constantin. 1846. *Codex Friderico-Augustanus sive fragmenta Veteris Testamenti e codice graeco omnium qui in Europa supersunt facile antiquissimo in oriente detexit in patriam attulit ad modum codicis edidit. Serenissimo ac potentissimo principi Friderico Augusto II. clementissimo Saxoniae regi etc. etc. etc. Quum summo Tuo nutu factum esset*. Leipzig: Franz Koehler.

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