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Towards a biblical mind

Difficult histories:

Christian memory and historic injustice[1]

By John Coffey

Summary
Recent years have witnessed heated debate over how Western nations remember their pasts. A generation of historical research on racial slavery and imperial expansion is now informing public memory. The turn to 'difficult histories' has provoked a reaction and calls for the reassertion of 'patriotic history'. This paper surveys the controversy and asks how Christians should respond. It argues that Christian memory should be shaped by the difficult history we find in Scripture.

History wars

In the summer of 2020, with nations in lockdown during a global pandemic, crowds gathered across the Western world to declare that Black Lives Matter. Sparked by the death of George Floyd, an African American man killed by Minneapolis police, these protests linked the vulnerability of black lives to a long and bitter history of racial injustice. A year previous, *The New York Times* had launched its '1619 Project', marking the anniversary of the first ship carrying enslaved Africans to land in British North America. The project claimed that this (rather than 1776) was 'the country's true birth date, the moment that its defining contradictions first came into the world'.[2] Historic icons were exposed to a new wave of iconoclasm. In the American South, statues of Confederate leaders were removed from their pedestals. America's slaveholding Founding Fathers – Washington, Jefferson and Madison – came under renewed scrutiny. A statue of the evangelist George Whitefield was removed by the University of Pennsylvania because he had campaigned to legalise slavery in the colony of Georgia. In the English city of Bristol, crowds toppled a statue of slave-trading merchant Edward Colston, hurling it into the harbour. In London, the British Museum removed a statue of its founder, Hans Sloane, from its plinth, displaying it in a new exhibit that documented his profiteering from slavery. In Edinburgh, the University renamed David Hume Tower as a way of disavowing the philosopher's racist statements about African inferiority. In Oxford, the fellows of Oriel College agreed to remove a statue of the imperialist Cecil Rhodes.

Western nations had long told celebratory histories about European explorers, conquerors, settlers and emancipators.

This provoked a remarkable phenomenon: 'statue wars'.[3] President Trump, true to character, saw no need to apologise for the sins of the past. Speaking at Mt Rushmore, he situated himself beneath the monumental figures of former Presidents: the slaveholders Washington and Jefferson, the segregationist Theodore Roosevelt, and the complicated emancipator, Abraham Lincoln. Criticising the 1619 Project, he set up the '1776 Commission' designed to promote 'patriotic education'. In

1 For critical feedback on this paper, I am grateful to David Bebbington, David Killingray, Lily Rivers, Matthew Rowley, Sujit Sivasundaram, Brian Stanley, and Stephen Tuck.
2 https://pulitzercenter.org/sites/default/files/full_issue_of_the_1619_project.pdf. For a critique of the project see B. Stephens, 'The 1619 Chronicles', *New York Times*, 9 October 2020; in its defence, see N. Guyatt, '1619 Revisited', *New York Times*, 19 October 2020.
3 For lists of statues removed or targeted see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_monuments_and_memorials_removed_during_the_George_Floyd_protests; and https://policyexchange.org.uk/history-matters-project/.

Britain, a campaign was established to 'Save our Statues'.[4] When the National Trust released a report documenting links between its properties and Britain's slave economy, it was accused of 'instigating a witch-hunt into the lives of past property owners' and succumbing to a 'woke agenda'.[5]

Critics of the new moralism advanced a variety of arguments: empire was a fact of life across large swathes of the world for thousands of years, and one with constructive as well as destructive legacies; slavery too was once a global phenomenon, sanctioned by Arabs and Africans as much as by Europeans; slave traders were simply men of their times and should not be judged by anachronistic standards; and what was truly unique in Britain and America was the emergence of mass antislavery movements, an unprecedented historical phenomenon.[6] In the new statue wars, some detected a plot against Western civilization or a loss of faith in the West. Cosmopolitan elites were engaged in a systematic attempt 'to rewrite and discredit the past', to replace a sense of national pride with 'a climate of guilt and shame'.[7] Others compared anti-racist activists to other zealots: Calvinist iconoclasts, French revolutionaries, and Islamist militants. 'Woke' activism was said to be a new religion – perfectionist, self-righteous, and iconoclastic.

In fact, soul-searching about the Western past was not a new phenomenon, nor confined to the progressive Left. Pope John Paul II had issued a series of apologies for the sins of the Roman Catholic Church, asking forgiveness for Christian involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, and the injustices visited on the indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.[8] Such acts of contrition stand in sharp contrast to the chauvinistic history promoted by leaders like President Trump, President Putin of Russia, Prime Minister Orbán in Hungary, President Xi of China, Prime Minister Modi of India, and President Erdogan of Turkey.[9] For their part, Western nations had long told celebratory histories about European explorers, conquerors, settlers and emancipators. The great Caribbean historian, Eric Williams, president of Trinidad, once quipped that British historians had written 'as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it'.[10] Against such sanitised and self-serving pasts, many in the West now sought to deconstruct national myths.

Christians were divided over this phenomenon. Black Christians, with their experience of persistent discrimination, had few illusions about the American or British past. Yet their voices often went unheard.[11] Among many white Protestants, there was nostalgia for a lost past, and amnesia over historic

Statue of the Bristol slave-trading merchant, Edward Colston

Posters surround the empty pedestal after the toppling of Colston's statue

wrongs – hence the appeal of 'Make America Great Again'.[12] As the leading historian of the pro-life movement observed, many American Christians favoured narratives of decline (focused on the evils of post-Christian America) over histories that highlighted a more uncomfortable truth: Christian America's longstanding complicity in racial discrimination.[13] This was difficult history because it had left a bitter and enduring legacy to the present day – unlike, for example, the Barbary slave trade.[14]

The proponents of 'patriotic history' often failed to appreciate the deep roots of the current historical reckoning. Over many decades, historians had undertaken prodigious and painstaking research on European expansion and its human cost. Scholars now estimate that in 1492, the indigenous population of the Americas was more than 50 million; by 1570, the impact of European diseases had reduced it to just 13.5 million, a demographic catastrophe that many Europeans welcomed as a providential clearing of the land.[15] Historians have reconstructed the long history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, documenting the sheer scale of human misery it engendered.[16] Specialists have minutely examined slave plantations, documenting their brutal work regimes, savage punishments, sexual exploitation, high mortality,

4 https://saveourstatues.org.uk
5 N. Badshah, 'National Trust Bosses in Slavery "Witch-Hunt"', *The Times*, 9 October 2020. For the report see nationaltrust.org.uk/features/addressing-the-histories-of-slavery-and-colonialism-at-the-national-trust
6 See N. Biggar, 'Don't Feel Guilt about our Colonial History', *The Times*, 30 November 2017; J. Fynn-Paul, 'The Myth of the Stolen Country', *Spectator*, 26 September 2020. See also E. Boehmer and T. Holland, 'The Duel: Are Empires Always Bad?', *Prospect*, 8 November 2020. For a longer study, see J. Black, *Imperial Legacies: The British Empire around the World*, Encounter Books, 2019.
7 F. Furedi, 'The Humiliation of Western History', frankfuredi.com/post/the-humiliation-of-western-history
8 A fairly comprehensive list of political apologies for past wrongs can be found at: List of apologies made by Pope John Paul II – Wikipedia
9 A. Roussinos: https://unherd.com/2020/08/the-irresistible-rise-of-the-civilisation-state/
10 Cited in C. A. Palmer, *Eric Williams and the Making of the Modern Caribbean*, University of North Carolina Press, 2006, p.17.
11 For two such voices, read J. Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism*, Zondervan, 2019; and A. D. A. France-Williams, *Ghost Ship: Institutional Racism and the Church of England*, SCM, 2020.
12 See M. Rowley, *Trump and the Protestant Reaction to Make America Great Again*, Routledge, 2020.
13 D. Williams: patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2020/06/racial-injustice-abortion-christian-nationalism/
14 Contra D. Murray, 'It's Time Europeans Demanded Reparations for Slavery', *UnHerd*, 28 August 2020.
15 T. Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History*, 1490–1830, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp.51–54; M. Rowley: https://theconversation.com/how-plague-reshaped-colonial-new-england-before-the-mayflower-even-arrived-137570
16 slavevoyages.org/

and dehumanisation.[17] Other historians have followed the money, revealing the significant contribution of plantation slavery to the British imperial and American economies, and analysing the massive compensation of slaveholders after emancipation.[18] Historians of Australia, South Africa and other British dominions have exposed the violence of settler colonialism and its devastating impact on native peoples.[19]

At the same time, there has been an explosion of research and reflection on historical memory, by historians and political scientists, philosophers and theologians. This has involved a growing debate over how societies remember, forget and confront historic wrongs.[20] Beyond academia, public awareness of this history has been deepened by documentaries, films, popular books, and anniversaries. The problem of historic injustice has become hard to ignore.

How then should Christians respond to this turn towards 'difficult histories'?[21] And what should we make of calls for the reassertion of 'patriotic history'?

Scripture and Christian memory

In answering these questions, Christians have a unique resource at their disposal – the ancient Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. The Bible does not fit contemporary stereotypes of 'inspirational' literature. It tells the story of redemption, but redemption worked out in a world gone wrong. Its narrative is often brutally honest, reminding us why humanity needs redemption. Here we read of war and sexual violence, imperial conquest and exile. We read psalms of lament and imprecatory psalms calling down curses on enemies. In Job, we find perplexity at the problem of suffering; in Ecclesiastes, perplexity at the meaninglessness of life. The Spirit might have given us an easier text. Instead, we have a book full of difficult history.

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From the third chapter of Genesis, we see humanity in ruins. Created in the divine image, fallen humans assault human dignity. Cain kills his brother Abel. The Tower of Babel exemplifies human hubris and prefigures later empires. Scripture asserts the universality of human fallenness ('all have sinned'), but it also recognises that there are victims and perpetrators, the oppressed and their oppressors. It sees too that in a fallen world, the breakdown of government can be as devastating as tyrannical government (this is one lesson of the Book of Judges). In both Testaments, states and even empires are seen as divinely ordained for the purpose of enforcing law and order in a lawless world, though the biblical writers are acutely conscious that government itself can become arbitrary and oppressive.

In the midst of this injustice, God 'chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong'.[22] From Genesis onwards, there is a privileging of the younger over the older – Abel, Jacob, Joseph, David. God overlooks the great powers of the ancient world, revealing himself to and through a marginalised people. The Gospels are remarkable in naming so many humble figures, who would not merit a mention in Greco-Roman histories – and even more remarkable in hailing a crucified man as the resurrected Lord. Insofar as we value the weak, the suffering, and the downtrodden, we do so (in part) because of Christianity's central symbol: the Cross.[23] It is no coincidence that Frantz Fanon's seminal postcolonial text, *The Wretched of the Earth*, defines decolonisation by invoking the words of Christ: 'the last shall be first, and the first last'.[24]

In exalting the weak, the God of the Bible humbles the strong. The Scriptures were written under the shadow of superpowers: Egypt and Assyria, Babylon and Persia, Greece and Rome. Within their national narrative, the Hebrews viewed imperial powers as sanctioned by divine providence, and subject to divine judgment. Despite themselves, empires could serve God's purposes. Yet the Hebrew prophets declared that God will humble the idolatrous pretensions of pagan empire, as he does with Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar. Mary's Magnificat praises a God who has 'brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble'.[25] In Paul's 'counter-imperial theology', argues N. T. Wright, 'the very notion of empire, of "world domination", had itself been deconstructed by the cross and remade, in a quite different form, in the resurrection'.[26] The Book of Revelation 'advances a thoroughgoing prophetic critique of the system of Roman power', making it 'the most powerful piece of resistance literature from the period of the early Empire'.[27] It is this counter-imperial strand in the biblical witness that was developed by Augustine in *The City of God*. Augustine recognised the valour and civic virtue of the Romans, but he was in no doubt that imperial expansion is driven by the *libido dominandi* (the lust for domination). Augustine urged Christians to live by the values of the City of God, not

17 See, e.g., P. D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry*, University of North Carolina Press, 1998; T. Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and his Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

18 See E. Baptist, *The Half has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, Basic Books, 2014; M. Taylor, *The Interest: How the British Establishment Resisted the Abolition of Slavery*, Bodley Head, 2020; P. Scanlan, *Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain*, Robinson, 2020; N. Draper, *The Price of Emancipation: Slave-Ownership, Compensation and British Society at the End of Slavery*, Cambridge UP, 2010; ucl.ac.uk/lbs/project/details/

19 See Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Australians: A History from 1788*, 5th edn: Allen & Unwin, 2019. For a Christian perspective see J. W. Harris, *One Blood: Two Hundred Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity*, Australians Together, 2018.

20 From a vast literature, see D. Philpott, ed, *The Politics of Past Evil: Religion, Reconciliation and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, Notre Dame UP, 2006; M. Berg and B. Schaefer, eds, *Historical Justice in International Perspective: How Societies are Trying to Right the Wrongs of the Past*, CUP, 2008; S. Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil*, Allen Lane, 2019; P. Satia, *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire*, Allen Lane, 2020. For a different view, see David Rieff, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and its Ironies*, Yale 2016; Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights*, CUP, 2020.

21 See J. Wallis, *Report: Difficult Histories and Positive Identities*, 2019: cumberlandlodge.ac.uk/project/difficult-histories-positive-identities.

22 1 Cor. 1:27.

23 This is a central argument of T. Holland, *Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind*, Little, Brown, 2019.

24 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Penguin, 2001, pp.28, 35, citing Matt. 20:16.

25 Luke 1:52.

26 N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols, SPCK, 2013, ch. 12: 'The Lion and the Eagle: Paul in Caesar's Empire', quotations at pp.1282–3.

27 R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge UP, 1993, p.38.

to invest their spiritual hopes in earthly powers.[28]

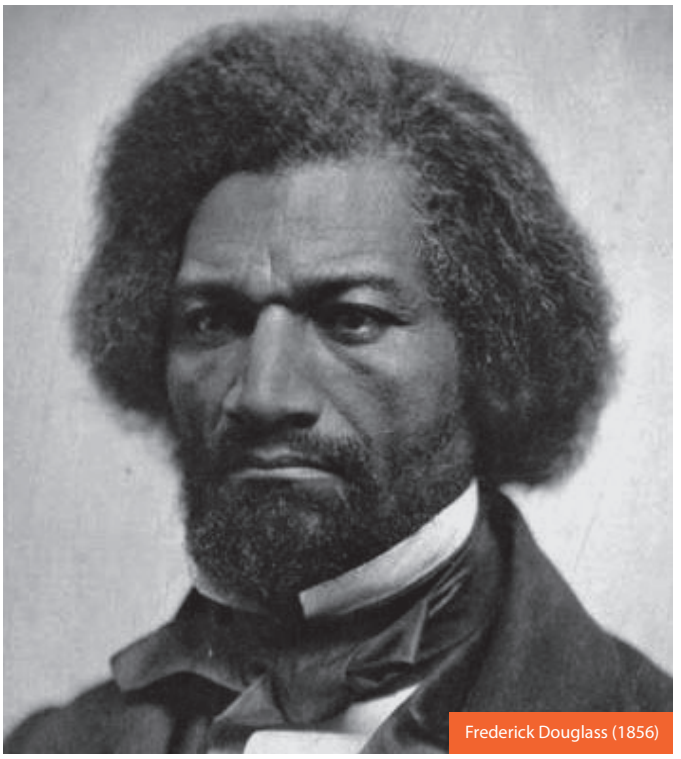
However, biblical testimony contains more than a critique of pagan empire; it incorporates self-critique. Israel's Scripture is undoubtedly patriotic, yet as the former Chief Rabbi, the late Jonathan Sacks, observed: 'The Hebrew Bible is the supreme example of that rarest of phenomena, a national literature of self-criticism. Other ancient civilisations recorded their victories. The Israelites recorded their failures'.[29] The heroes of the story – Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samson, Gideon, David – are flawed, and not idolised; they are remembered for what God did through (even despite) them, not for their inherent virtue. David mimics Near Eastern empires with his census and his desire for a standing army, only to realise that he has 'sinned greatly' and done 'a very foolish thing'.[30] Israel's prophets denounce the nation for its hollow religious rites, its neglect of justice and mercy. Exile is God's verdict on a wayward people. The New Testament continues to recognise the frailty of the people of God: Christ denounces the nation's religious leadership; his apostles, especially Peter, are flawed; the earliest Christian churches are depicted 'warts and all'.

It is amid this human folly and fallenness that God works redemption. Each testament is centred on a great redemptive event: the Old Testament on the Exodus, the New Testament on the Passion. One takes place in Pharaoh's Egypt, the other under Roman imperial rule. 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt' is an insistent refrain.[31] At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'.[32] The Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, reflecting on his own experience of interrogation and on the Balkan Wars, considers how the Exodus and the Passion should shape Christian memory. He finds two lessons in the Exodus story: deliverance and retributive justice. 'In an unjust and violent world', he writes, 'deliverance of the downtrodden requires uncompromising struggle against their oppressors'. The Passion both reinforces and reframes the thirst for justice. On the one hand, Christ's agonising and shameful death on a Roman cross is God's ultimate act of solidarity with the victims of injustice. At the same time, Christ's atoning death is a substitution for wrongdoers. Grace 'honours and transcends the claims of justice…because the Lamb of God took on himself the sin of the world', thus affirming justice and extending unconditional grace. 'In the memory of the Passion we honour victims even while extending grace to perpetrators'. Exodus and Passion together call Christians to pursue justice and love mercy.[33]

Reading Scripture from below

Biblical memory – like personal memory – can malfunction. The history of European colonisation and racial slavery bears witness to this fact. Conquistadors, slave traders, slaveholders, and white settlers needed legitimation for expropriating Native lands and enslaving black Africans, and no text had greater prestige than the Bible. Racial slavery was biblically constructed by Christians who justified it through appeal to chapter and verse: the Curse of Ham, slaveholding patriarchs, the law of Moses, the household codes. Even the Exodus story was deployed to justify the conquest of new Canaanites, while the Passion narrative was weaponised against the Jewish people. Toxic readings of Scripture turned the Good Book, or parts of it, into a text of terror.[34]

Precisely for this reason, however, Scripture proved indispensable in the struggle against racial subjugation and imperial oppression. When victims of European oppression read the Bible for themselves, they understood it as history from below – a people's history. The Bible proved to be one of the 'weapons of the weak'.[36] The seminal slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano is steeped in Scripture, as were the speeches of the greatest antislavery orator of the nineteenth century, the African American Frederick Douglass.[37] With such



Frederick Douglass (1856)

28 Augustine, *The City of God*, I. Preface; III. 14; IV. 3–4, 7; V. 12; XV. 1, 5.
29 J. Sacks, *Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2015, p.52.
30 2 Sam. 24:10. See D. Stuart, 'The Old Testament Context of David's Costly Flirtation with Empire-Building', in S. Porter and C. Westfall, eds, *Empire in the New Testament*, Pickwick Publications, 2015, ch. 1.
31 Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18; 24:22.
32 Luke 22:19.
33 M. Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Eerdmans, 2006, ch. 6: 'Memory, the Exodus, and the Passion'.
34 See Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, OUP, 2006; C. Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World*, CUP, 2006; and K. Gerbner, *Christian Slavery*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. See also Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror*, Fortress Press, 1984.
35 L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd edn: Orbis, 2015; B. Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, IVP, 1990; R. Elphick, *The Equality of Believers: Protestant Missionaries and the Racial Politics of South Africa*, University of Virginia Press, 2012; J. Coffey, *Exodus and Liberation*, Oxford UP, 2014, chs. 3-6; R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, CUP, 2001.
36 The phrase is from J. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale UP, 1985. For a notable example, see my essay on the Demerara slave rebellion in G. Atkins et al, eds, *Chosen Peoples: The Bible, Race and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Manchester UP, 2019.
37 See the Pulitzer-Prize winning biography by D. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, Simon & Schuster, 2018, pp.xvii–xviii, 228–38, *passim*.

figures, a tradition of black biblical interpretation emerged that would powerfully inform the Civil Rights Movement and South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.[38]

In the speeches of Frederick Douglass,we see how this reading of Scripture produced a prophetic reinterpretation of the American past. In his most famous address, delivered to a white audience on the Fourth of July 1852, he noted that American nationalism had been informed by a particular reading of Scripture. American Independence was seen as a new Exodus: 'This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God'. Douglass admired the egalitarian ideals of the Declaration of Independence, but he observed that black Christians remembered American history differently:'This Fourth July is yours, not mine'. African Americans were like the exiled Jews weeping 'by the rivers of Babylon'. To them, the United States was akin to Babylon, not to the Promised Land. To 'the American slave', the Fourth of July seemed like a sham, like the hollow piety denounced by the prophet Isaiah.American divines had 'shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system' and fostered a faith 'which favors the rich against the poor…the proud above the humble'. True religion, by contrast, was 'to side with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor'.[39]

Abraham Lincoln had grasped this fundamental point, so Douglass honoured the former President, though without idolising him. When African Americans erected a monument to the slain emancipator, Douglass's oration observed that Lincoln had often disappointed, leaving black Americans 'grieved, stunned, and greatly bewildered'. Lincoln 'shared the prejudices' of whites 'against the Negro'. Yet he also 'loathed and hated slavery'.[40] Douglass could even recognise Washington and Jefferson as 'great men', and 'honor their memory', despite their slaveholding. He treated such figures as the Hebrews had treated their national heroes: not as idols but as men, with feet of clay. It is for this reason that the writer Alan Jacobs invokes Douglass to guide us beyond our current impasse. 'The idealization and demonization of the past are equally easy', he notes,'and immensely tempting in our tense and frantic moment.What Douglass offers instead is a model of negotiating with the past in a way that gives charity and honesty equal weight.'[41]

Remembering historic injustice

An authentically Christian memory, shaped by the biblical narrative, suggests a distinctive approach to current 'History Wars'. On the one hand, biblical narrative contrasts with the celebratory stories we prefer to tell about our national, imperial or ecclesial pasts. Biblical history is frequently dark, confronting the worst episodes in Israel's past; chauvinistic histories typically sidestep our collective moral failings. Biblical history is written from the margins, by a people exiled or colonised; national and imperial histories are written by the winners. Biblical history contains searing self-critique; we often prefer a more soothing account of the past. Biblical history is concerned with justice and oppression; Western histories have often ignored the victims, and even celebrated the perpetrators.The current reckoning with that past is overdue.

At the same time, biblical memory challenges our tendency to count ourselves among the righteous, whether as chauvinists or censors.The biblical writers had a powerful sense of the pervasiveness of human corruption. Israel and Judah can seem just as corrupt as the mighty empires which oppress them. Justice must be pursued, including retributive and reparative justice, but throwing the first stone is a dangerous business.'For in the same way as you judge others', says Jesus, 'you will be judged'.[42] Everyone needs redemption.

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Alexander Solzhenitsyn, after years of incarceration in Soviet gulags, had every reason to divide the world cleanly between victims and perpetrators, but he came to a more disturbing realisation: 'The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart.'[43] This was no excuse for ignoring the sins of the past – Solzhenitsyn, after all, was the principal chronicler of the inhumanity of the Soviet regime. Yet he recognised the moral complexities of the human condition.

To apply this principle to historic statues is to resist the notion of a wholesale purge.Measured by twenty-first-century values, let alone by a standard of absolute purity, 'pretty much no public figure from history celebrated in our streets will bear detailed scrutiny and judgement'. Even the saintly Wilberforce supported crackdowns on civil liberties, while Gandhi and Darwin voiced racist ideas.[44] We can recognise these glaring faults while marking the achievements of such figures. The African American historian, Annette Gordon-Reed, who wrote the landmark study on Thomas Jefferson's relationship with the enslaved woman Sally Hemmings, argues that 'you take the bitter with sweet.The main duty is not to hide the bitter parts.' Contextualisation of monuments is often a better option than removal or renaming.[45]

38 See D. Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*, Yale UP, 2006; E. McCauley, *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, IVP, 2020.
39 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' (1852), in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, eds. J. Stauffer and H.L. Gates, Jr., Penguin, 2016, pp.196–222.
40 'The Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln' (1876), in *The Portable Frederick Douglass*, pp.364–76.
41 Alan Jacobs, 'Hate the Sin, Not the Book', *The Atlantic*, 6 September 2020.
42 Matt. 7:2.
43 Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, abridged edn, Penguin, 2018, p.312.
44 Nick Spencer, 'Edward Colston and Tearing down the Past', *Theos*, 9 June 2020.
45 Interview with Annette Gordon Reed, *Harvard Gazette*, 19 June 2020. See also David W. Blight, 'Europe in 1989, America in 2020, and the Death of the Lost Cause', *New Yorker*, 1 July 2020; David W. Blight, 'Opinions: The Freedman's Memorial', *Washington Post*, 25 June 2020; c-span.org/video/?473704-1/debating-removing-monuments; Interview with Manisha Sinha: npr.org/2020/06/23/881992636/should-statues-of-historic-figures-with-complicated-pasts-be-taken-down

Yet statues are not sacrosanct. Given the human tendency towards idolatry, the biblical tradition is suspicious of images – whether of golden calves or mighty rulers.[46] The iconoclastic strain within Western political culture has scriptural roots.[47] There is a Christian case for removing certain figures from their pedestals. The statues of Communist dictators have been retired to memorial parks, and we should shed no tears for the dismantling of Confederate statues erected to fortify white supremacy.[48] One does not need to endorse direct action by crowds to see why such monuments have been a source of pain and resentment. Local authorities have a duty to listen to marginalised communities and review historic monuments with due process and public consultation. When the Republican governors of South Carolina and Alabama oversaw the lowering of the Confederate flag in their state capitols, they made a powerful (if long overdue) statement. Removing the statues of slave traders does the same. Far from erasing history, it can ensure that public memory is better informed and more honest about the historical record.

We also need to think creatively about how we commemorate historic injustices. Nations and empires forget their victims. The striking exception is contemporary Germany, where in Berlin alone there are over 400 monuments to the victims of the Nazi regime.[49] Elsewhere, in recent years, museums have been founded to commemorate slavery and lynching as well as the Holocaust. In Liverpool's International Slavery Museum, the history of the Atlantic slave trade and colonial slavery is unfolded alongside the tradition of abolitionist protest and black resistance. Such museums seek to create a new shared history, one that recognises the sins of the national past while honouring the victims and opponents of injustice. Like ancient Israel, nations need to remember their prophets. Equiano is being recognised, after two centuries of neglect, but there is no statue of the Leicester Quaker, Elizabeth Heyrick, who in the 1820s called for the 'immediate emancipation' of the 700,000 people enslaved in the British Caribbean. As a Quaker, Heyrick would not have wanted a statue – the only image we possess of her is a silhouette.[50] But what matters more than the statues we erect are the stories we tell. By telling the histories of past injustices, we can begin to address their contemporary legacies.

If we care about truth and justice and the interracial promise of the gospel, we must develop a less selective, and more biblical, memory.

Such difficult history is not at odds with patriotic history. Indeed, Christian memory can play a role in forging a critical patriotism. As Christians, we are exiles called to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' we inhabit, while fixing our eyes 'on a city with foundations whose architect and builder is God'.[51] The cultivation of Christian memory begins in our churches. Many congregations suffer from historical amnesia: church history is almost forgotten. In other churches, it is remembered, but as a parade of uncomplicated heroes; mostly male, mostly white. And we are increasingly inclined to forget the difficult history of the Old Testament.[52] If we care about truth and justice and the interracial promise of the gospel, we must develop a less selective, and more biblical, memory.

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46 Exod. 32–34; Daniel 3.
47 For a classic example, see John Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, 1649.
48 See Thomas Kidd, 'American History is not Cancelled', *Christianity Today*, 14 July 2020.
49 Neiman, *Learning from the Germans*, pp.274–75.
50 On the scarcity of statues of non-royal, non-mythical women see: bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43884726
51 Jer. 29:10; 1 Pet. 2:11–12; Heb. 11:10.
52 See B. Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying*, Baker Academic, 2017.

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