As I discussed in my previous post, the sixth chapter of my proposed book Jesus Before the Gospels will cover the area of “collective memory.” This is a kind of memory that a lot of people don’t seem to be aware of, but it has long been discussed by sociologists. Here is how I summarize the views of the famous scholar who first articulated an understanding of collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs.

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The term “collective memory” was coined by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). His most important and influential book appeared (in French) in 1925 and was called, simply, On Collective Memory. Halbwachs acknowledges the rather obvious point that it is individuals, not social groups, who remember the past (society does not have some kind of enormous hippocampus!). But in his view, individual memories have all be reconstructed based on our relation to society around us, especially our various social groups – for example, our families, friends, towns or cities, nations. It is impossible, in fact, for us to remember without having a social framework within which to place a memory. That is to say, in his rather radical claim, there is no such thing as a memory outside of a social context. If you remember something that happened to you, it is always in relation to the people you know, or the things you have learned and experienced from other people. It can never be in complete isolation to your social surroundings.

Halbwachs was notoriously suspicious of psychological research that tried to investigate memory as an individual phenomenon. In his view:

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The Community Behind the Gospel of John
My Memory Book, Chapter 6 on “Collective Memory”