

EUCHARIST AND PASSOVER

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1. Introduction

Christianity is the religion of which roots are deep in the Judaism. In fact, the latter contains the context, the symbols, the religious practice, etc. in which Christianity has understood itself and went further. There is continuation and development. We cannot understand the New Testament apart from the Old Testament. We cannot also search for an understanding of the social-religious context of the New Testament by leaving out of consideration that social-religious-cultural context of the Old Testament, which is the common ground for Judaism and Christianity.

Jesus Christ through his incarnation became man, a Jew person. He lived the Judaism, he knew the religious practice of Israel and was familiar with the festivals of Israel and its sacred texts. He celebrated the Passover every year and he knew its deep meaning. Having this knowledge and religious sensibility concerning the special way in which Israel worshiped Yahweh, Jesus Christ lived his Last Supper with his disciples, in a way that we are invited by him from there on, to "do this in memory of me". What does it mean this? Why did he institute Eucharist in the context of the Passover? What are the relation between Passover and Eucharist? What are the common elements and development? How is the invitation to com-memorate to be understood?

2. The Passover

For understanding Eucharist we need certainly to look to the context of Jesus Christ's life, Last Supper, but also to the religious context in which the Last Supper is celebrated. This is an important hermeneutical key for understanding this event. The Last Supper was happened before the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, but the framework of all this is the preparation for the Passover, the biggest festival of jewish people. Through it we read also the event of Eucharist.

The Passover is the celebration of Yahweh's liberation from the slavery of Egypt. It is the beginning of the exodus toward the promise land. It is a fundamental event in which the jewish people felt Yahweh as their God, as their liberator. For this reason the Passover is central for their faith, identity and relation with Yahweh. Throughout their history, the jewish people have celebrated this religious event through the ritual of Passover. We can ask here, why did they continue to celebrate the Passover and how?

The Exodus 12:14 asserts that this feast have to be celebrated by each generation from there on. The fundamental term which indicates the way and the attitude with which to celebrate this religious

event, is the word *memorial*. Its correct understanding is fundamental for seeing the Passover as Jewish people live it and it is also of particular importance for the understanding of the Eucharist.

3. The Memorial

a) *In the Passover*

The term *zakar*, 'to remember,' which is used in Exodus 12:14; 13:9 referred not just to remember something, but to call in mind something and re-live it, to enter not only into the thought of the past, but also into the actuality of what happened.¹ In this case the Passover which they celebrate is a re-actualization² of this event at the moment of its celebration. It is a present event and it is happened to themselves. It is not just a past event, but an event to apply to their life, to consider for themselves, to find its meaning in their present situation. "By this cultic 'commemoration,' past salvation became once again an actual and present reality."³ The Mishnah affirms that "In each generation, each man ought to consider himself as having personally come out of Egypt."⁴ everybody has to consider the Passover as if it happens to themselves. "Through the power of God, each generation was involved in the Exodus."⁵ Therefore, the Passover is not a matter of nostalgia, melancholy, memory of the past, but it is intervention of the Yahweh now, in the present, with us and for us. It is an alive memory, an alive event.

This understanding of the memorial of what Yahweh has done for them is the core of the Jewish celebrating the festivals, and in this case, the Passover. Without grasping this sense of memory, we cannot understand their attitude in living the festivals, the Passover. The celebration of the festivals with an alive memory is part of their understanding the history. For them, comparing with the other ancient nations, the history was made by the events⁶, which will be then remembered and re-actualized because they were viewed at the origin of their relation with Yahweh. It is not an understanding of the event, i.e. of Passover, in a cyclical way, which came again, repeated again, but re-actualized, re-lived now⁷ and for us (and not just calling in mind the past). "*En son memorial pascal, Israel recoit son passe' en present, et ce don garantit une promesse d'avenir.*"⁸

b) *In the Eucharist*

The background of the Passover serves to understand the Last Supper, because Jesus has instituted the Eucharist in its context, in that period of celebration. There are still divergences among theologians if the Last Supper was a Passover or not. According to the Synoptics it was a Passover, but not the same for St. John's Gospel.⁹ According to R. Brown the Last Supper was not a Passover, but it had its characteristic. A positive or negative response does not alter the meaning of what Jesus Christ has done, but anyway, whatever it is the answer at this question, we cannot leave out of consideration the context in which was lived the Last Supper, the gestures, the words, because they

are essential for interpreting the Eucharist, for viewing the Eucharist as a living memorial. The fundamental thing in connection with Eucharist is the context in which Last Supper was done. The context was determined by the coming of the Passover, the meal that Jesus and his disciples have had together and by the command to com-memorate it from there on. During the Last Supper, after blessing and giving the bread – his body and the cup of wine – his blood, Jesus has told to his disciples "do this in memory of me." The phrase is proper to the Luke-Paul version of the Institution Narrative.¹⁰ The disciples knew all this vocabulary, its meaning.¹¹ The word is *anamnesis* which refers not just to a call in mind of a past event, but an alive call in mind, namely it is a re-actualization of the event through its memorial and re-living as if it would happened now!

The com-memoration from now on will be this Eucharist which marked the new-Passover, understood with the same attitude of com-memoration as for the jewish Passover: a re-actualization of Eucharist. Present and past linked together reciprocally. "*Le souvenir reconnaissant du passe' est une assurance du salut present.*"¹² "As the present was involved in the past, so does the past become in the present"¹³ (but not according to C.Giraud!¹⁴). A living event, a living memorial.

4.Conclusions

"The appreciation of the force of the word 'memorial' is one of the great discoveries of the modern eucharistic theology."¹⁵

The sense of memory grasped from the context and religious mentality of the Old Testament, helps to understand better the meaning of Jesus Christ's words. The Passover context is also not at all indifferent for penetrating and interpreting the gestures and the words through which the Eucharist was instituted. The Eucharist became the new Passover, because new liberation was brought about and the exodus¹⁶ was fulfilled through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, symbolized in the Eucharist. The essence of the Last Supper is the fulfilment of the Old Pasch.¹⁷ As The Passover was for jewish people the memorial par excellence¹⁸, for the Christians , the Eucharist became the living memorial par excellence. "As heirs of the Jewish tradition, the first Christians did not invent another feast in order to celebrate the salvation which God had wrought in the exodus and exaltation of Christ. They simply understood the traditional feast of their people in a new way and celebrated the Jewish Passover as something Christian or 'Christic.'"¹⁹

The word anamnesis understood as re-actualization, links every generation of Christians with what have been done by Christ in the Last Supper and they re-live at present this event. A living Eucharist, a living memorial.²⁰ A memorial beyond memory. The memorial of Eucharist "renders me present, not strictly speaking, to the final meal of Jesus but to what that meal signified: the life which Jesus gives to his disciples by dying on the cross."²¹ The encounter of the people with God in the liturgy, in the Eucharist entails a "presence" here and now to the God's great acts.²² "*Par sa celebration, les chretiennes recoivent de l'unique sacrifice, rendu present et actuel.*"²³

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Notes

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- ¹ Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 44
- ² Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the Primitive Church* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 72
- ³ Nils A. Dahl, *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1976) 14
- ⁴ L. Deiss, *It's the Lord's Supper* (London: Collins, 1980) 59
- ⁵ Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 43
- ⁶ Gerard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology vol.2* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966) 100 - 104
- ⁷ Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the Primitive Church* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 71
- ⁸ Louis-M. Chauvet, *Symbole et Sacrement* (Paris: Les editions du CERF, 1990) 239
- ⁹ M. Schumas, *Dogma 5: The Church as Sacrament* (Kansas City and London: Sheed and Word, 1975) 55
- ¹⁰ Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 42
- ¹¹ Max Thurian, *L'Eucharistie Memorial du Seigneur* (Neuchatel: Editions Delachaux et Niestle, 1963) 31
- ¹² Bernard Sesboue, *Jesus-Christ l'unique Mediateur* (Paris: Deselee, 1988) 262
- ¹³ Raymond Moloney, *The Eucharist* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995) 48
- ¹⁴ D. Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1992) 45
- ¹⁵ Raymond Moloney, art. "*Eucharist*", in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 344
- ¹⁶ L. Deiss, *It's the Lord's Supper* (London: Collins, 1980) 59
- ¹⁷ Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the Primitive Church* (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965) 67
- ¹⁸ *ibidem.*, 71
- ¹⁹ Xavier L. Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986) 194
- ²⁰ Raymond Moloney, art. "*Eucharist*", in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 344
- ²¹ Xavier L. Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1986) 112
- ²² *ibidem.*, 107
- ²³ Bernard Sesboue, *Jesus-Christ l'unique Mediateur* (Paris: Deselee, 1988) 270