

“Forget what happened in
the past...” (Isaiah 43,18)

Old Testament perspectives on
commemoration

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Do not remember ...

◎ Isa 46,9:

- Remember () what happened in the past ()

◎ Isa 43,18:

- Do not () remember () what happened in the past ()

The book of Isaiah

- Here is the message about Judah and Jerusalem that was revealed to Isaiah son of Amoz during the time when Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah reigned over Judah (Isaiah 1,1)
- This is what YHWH says to his chosen one, to Cyrus, whose right hand I hold in order to subdue nations before him, and disarm kings (Isaiah 45,1)
- This is what YHWH says: “For your sake I send to Babylon and make them all fugitives, turning the Babylonians’ joyful shouts into mourning songs” (Isaiah 43,14)

Isa 43,14-18

¹⁴ Thus says YHWH, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars, and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. ¹⁵ I am YHWH, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. ¹⁶ Thus says YHWH, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. ¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

« The former things... »

- ◉ Should Israel forget what God has done?
- ◉ A complaining commemoration of the past?
- ◉ Should Israel forget the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile?
- ◉ Isaiah 43,18 and the following verses

Isaiah 43, 19-25

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. ²⁰ The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise. Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob; but you have been weary of me, O Israel! ²³ You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings, or honored me with your sacrifices. I have not burdened you with offerings, or wearied you with frankincense. ²⁴ You have not bought me sweet cane with money, or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities. ²⁵ I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.

Isaiah 46,3-4

³ Listen to me, O family of Jacob, all you who are left from the family of Israel, you who have been carried from birth, you who have been supported from the time you left the womb. ⁴ Even when you are old, I will take care of you, even when you have gray hair, I will carry you. (...). ⁹ Remember what happened in the past. For I am God, and there is no one like me.

Preliminary conclusions

- The Old Testament does not provide a theoretical tract on commemoration
- The central Old Testament term:
(*zachar*) – cf. Zechariah (John the Baptist's father)
- Human beings / God as subject of the term
- Powerful past, powerful present, challenging future

Past and future

- “The chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (Genesis 40,23)
- “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember () that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity” (Qohelet 11,7-8)

No 'faked' remembrance

- ◉ “Whom did you dread and fear so that you lied, and did not remember () me or give me a thought (litt.: you did not put me on your heart)? (Isaiah 57,11)
- ◉ “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered () or come to mind (litt.: raise to the heart)” (Isaiah 65:17)

Remembrance and actual behaviour

- “God is mindful () of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac” (Psalm 105,8-9)
- “For he remembered () his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant” (Psalm 105,42).
- “He has remembered () his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel” (Psalm 98,3)

Remember and observe

- “Remember () the Sabbath day to set it apart as holy” (Exodus 20,8)
- “Observe () the Sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5,12)
- “Those who keep () his covenant and remember () to do his commandments” (Psalm 103,18)
- “Remember the teaching of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel” (Malachi 3,22)

Remembrance as warning

- “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way (...) he did not fear God” (Deuteronomy 25,17)
- “I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56,5)

General conclusion

- ◉ A multicolour concept
- ◉ Not free of engagement
- ◉ Implications for present and future
- ◉ Commemoration: powerful past, powerful present, challenging future...

“La mémoire ...”



Jean-Michel Folon