

Proleptic Recapitulation: Passover, Eucharist and God's saving acts

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We may speak casually of 'salvation history' and look for patterns in the Bible which bear out a claim that the sacred writers saw a movement toward a particular goal, the fullness of revelation in Christ Jesus (cf. Heb 1:1—2). Such a view can influence how we interpret both the Old Testament itself and its relationship to the New Testament. These interpretations may range from a searching out of phrases and themes which may then be applied to the New Testament—giving the impression that the New Testament author created a patchwork of sources—to a searching for patterns of God's grand design which is manifested in the sweep of the Bible, irrespective of the time, place, or particular interest of the biblical author. What is proposed here is an examination of a mode of relating the past to the present which can be found throughout the Old Testament and to see how this relationship in a cultic context has far-reaching implications for the understanding of both the Christian Eucharist and the Jewish Passover in relation to one another and to the memory of God's saving acting.

Past and present in history writing

A frequent pattern in the Bible is the recapitulation of origins to explain new beginnings.¹ This is reflected in various ways.

One is to use the imagery of creation to describe a new creation.² For example, the author of Gen 6—9 describes the punishment of the human race in terms of a return to chaos and a re-emergence of dry land from the waters as in Gen 1. One finds other references back to the days of creation throughout the Old Testament literature, where both the imagery of Gen 1—2 as well as extra-biblical myths (some unknown) are used. Ezekiel taunts the prince of Tyre in terms of imagery proper to a tale of man's origins otherwise unknown to us³. The revitalization of the dry bones—the revival of Israel—recalls man's creation from the dry dust in Gen 2. (And could not this same imagery be operative in the formation of Israel from the dry desert during the wilderness experience?) Israel reconstituted will be seen by all as a garden of Eden. This theme is used to great effect in Exodus, where Israel, to be constituted a new people out of the nations, is brought to safety across the dry land which emerges from the Sea of Reeds. The later entrance into the Land can be seen as a move from the chaos of social

disorganization to the created order of the apportionment and settlement of the Land.⁴ The Deuteronomist perceives history as a series of disintegrations of society brought about by disobedience (= the return of primordial chaos) and the re-establishment of society brought about by repentance and renewal of obedience (= new creation).

There is, however, another way of bringing the past to bear on the present. Significant beginnings may involve a retelling of the past both to explain how the people have come to find themselves at the present moment as well as to explain that moment to them.⁵ The book of Deuteronomy is cast as a long speech by Moses in the Arabah in the Trans-Jordan, wherein he re-interprets the Law from which the people will derive its identity upon entry into the Land. This re-interpretation is preceded by a description of the events of the people's past from their departure from Horeb (Sinai) to the time just before the death of Moses and the subsequent crossing of the Jordan under Joshua's leadership. The crossing of the Jordan is described as a re-enactment of the Exodus⁶ and the taking of the Land is commemorated with a restating of history from the call of Abraham to the conquest.⁷ At the time of the rededication of the people of God after the return from Exile, Ezra retells the history of the people from the creation of the world itself, through the call of Abraham, to the Exodus, the possession of the Land and the subsequent dispossession of it. Psalms of lament and petition can recapitulate the past history of the people and plead with God to act favourably on their behalf as he did of old (Ps 44). And in the New Testament this same device is continued. Stephen's speech in Acts 7:2—53 begins with a long recounting of the history of the people as a prelude to his confession of what God has done in Christ Jesus. In all these instances the past serves to comment on the present moment. Somehow the hand of God is perceived operating today as it did in the past.

Past and present in law and liturgy

Closely related to this second way is the linking of feasts with the history of the people. Deut 26:1ff. describes a harvest festival. There appears to be a liturgy associated with the presentation of the first fruits, wherein the one presenting the gifts responds with a brief epitome of the history of the people from the departure into Egypt of Jacob and Joseph to the Exodus and the possession of the Land. The first fruits are a sign of the fulfilment of the promise by God of the Land's abundance. In this context we may note that the extent to which Israel historicized its celebrations⁸ remains an unresolved issue. Even the origins of some feasts are obscure, particularly the Passover.⁹ Perhaps it is to make too fine a distinction to try to separate out a people's historical self-awareness from the way in which this same self-awareness is expressed in cultic actions.

Yet again we may find other uses of recapitulation. What stands at

the beginning of a narrative may be normative for what follows. Exodus provides two good examples of this device.

Firstly, we note that the Decalogue (Exod 20:2—20) precedes the giving of all other laws. Whatever the origins of the Decalogue, and however the words were originally understood in Israel's tribal beginnings, they are taken as normative by the redactor of the Pentateuch. These are the words which the Lord uttered and which all Israel heard (repeated in Deut 5:6—21 as the words which all heard (Deut 5:22)). All other precepts come to Israel through the mediation of Moses. The implication seems to be that the precepts from the mouth of God serve as the basis of all law: not that the particulars of the Decalogue are the basis of Law, but rather that all human laws must refer back to God himself and his directly revealed Law as the basis and model for all lawgiving. To the extent that human laws conform in some way to the divine mind and divine plan they are good. And to the extent that human laws are bound to time, place, or whim of lawgiver they may serve at best a temporary good which will pass. And laws which do not in any way reflect the eternal plan of God, but rather look to man as their model are necessarily evil (compare the laws which well-meaning but careless rulers are tricked into promulgating in Dan 3:4—6, 6:6—8, Esth 3:8—15; note that in the examples from Daniel even pernicious law shares the quality of God's Law of being irrevocable and binding).

The other example from Exodus provides the introduction to the principal topic of discussion here. The narrative of the Exodus proper begins in chapter 12 with a description of the Passover. The rubrics for the celebration are laid out before ever the event it is to commemorate takes place. Though perhaps we tend to pass over these passages without advertent to the fact, it is curious that the liturgical celebration of liberation should be outlined before the actual liberation itself. Naturally, the author of Exodus is writing long after the event and in light of the feast itself, which has been presumably celebrated annually for quite some time. And naturally, one may always rationalize that divine foreknowledge is sufficient to tell Moses what future generations are going to do. But in fact, if we are to treat the Exodus account as (theological) narrative, we must explain this curious placement of the description of the celebration of Passover.

History is both cyclical and linear

Before proceeding let us examine the implications of the evidence presented so far. By looking to beginnings to describe a present new beginning the Bible would appear to have a cyclical view of history. But it is not a view which sees time as returning to its beginnings as part of the natural order and rhythm of creation. Rather, as von Rad has shown, the cycle is broken by certain definite acts of God for creation and redemption.¹⁰ Time seems to define the bounds within which God acts on behalf of creation and in particular on behalf of Israel.

There was already at work in Judaism in the centuries before Christianity a tendency to read the customs of Israel back into *primaeval* history. The book of Jubilees shows Adam and Eve observing Levitical laws of purity (Jub 3:8—14). Ben Sira makes the gift of Wisdom to Israel the focus of creation itself (Sir 24)¹¹. Apparently, the study of Torah brings one to see that the implicit beginning of Israel is not only before the call of Abraham itself (and Abraham was already living a life in accord with the will of the God to be revealed (Jub 12)) but ultimately before creation. We have already noted that creation and salvation tend to use similar imagery.

Creation and redemption

The perception of recurring patterns in history is a perception of recurring acts of creation and redemption.¹² If history in any sense proceeds from beginning to end, the end is seen in terms of the re-emergence of primordial chaos which will be subdued in a new act of creation. Whether this is shown graphically with the return of watery chaos in the days of Noah or implied by the disintegration of society the principle is still the same: in order for there to be a new creation, the old order of the world or of society must come to an end. The new creation, however, will be in terms of the first creation. So the People can be newly constituted after the Exile yet find itself in continuity with the pre-exilic Israel. The recapitulation of history becomes an important means of bracketing time so that the framework within which one lives and moves will always have God's salvation at its centre. Hence, creation and salvation are necessarily complementary. The passing of an old order and a new act of creation reveal the continuity of God's providence: as He acted of old for us so now He reveals himself again. This gives each age the chance to reform itself and to see its re-formation not as something totally new but as a joining with the very same God who brought the original age into being.

To use a formalized introduction to a narrative is to establish the norm for what follows. God is His own standard for the manner in which He moves to save His people. Therefore, a present act of salvation is best understood in terms of past acts. History does not repeat itself, but the divine presence in history remains the same. Rather, new depths of meaning are revealed about God's plan for creation, meaning which takes into account the reality of free human actions (in other words, history). The Exodus itself is God's saving action *par excellence*, the standard by which all saving acts are to be measured. And it has cosmic repercussions as well. As already noted, elements of the narrative reflect the creation narrative itself. Out of the chaos of the nations, Israel is formed by God; out of the chaos of the waters, Israel is rescued from her enemies; out of the chaos of the formless wilderness, Israel is constituted as a people under the divine Law, to act out the divine plan in its everyday life, showing forth both the divine freedom of election as well

as the divine order in the making of Israel as a people peculiarly conscious of the activity of the creator God in their lives.

Memory and the celebration of the Passover

When we look at the Passover, regardless of its origins, we see that it is interpreted as a normative saving act through the very celebration of the feast itself. The celebration must be seen as pointing in some fashion to the event it commemorates: the celebration must itself contain an expression of God's saving act on behalf of his people. To place the rules for cultic celebration at the beginning of the narrative of the Exodus is to say that the Passover is somehow normative for remembering God's salvation.

Moreover, it contains within itself in iconic form the salvation of God, made present by recalling what he has done. From the perspective of the priestly writer, the annual celebration of the Passover does more than bring to mind the deliverance from Egypt; it brackets in some way the significant moment in God's plan for creation. The actual annual celebration looks back to the moment *before* the Exodus and by linking the participants with what went before ('For we were slaves unto Pharaoh in Egypt...') as modern Jews still begin the re-telling) it brings the sacred time of the feast in contact with the sacred time of God's establishment of the feast. The time of institution comes before the event; the time of celebration comes after. In between is God's saving act and the constitution of Israel as a people. The new creation is given a fixed beginning from the liturgical perspective; the present moment is a temporary limit to the span of creation and time and englobes, encapsules the creative and saving moment: time is now marked out as the arena in which God acts to save.¹³

Memory and the celebration of the Eucharist

So it is too with the institution of the Eucharist. The 'Last Supper' of the Synoptic gospels establishes the rubrics for a ceremony to commemorate a saving act of God prior to the actual event. Just as one could ask 'What were the Hebrews who celebrated the first Passover celebrating?' (the coming salvation?) so one might ask what exactly was being celebrated at the Last Supper (apart from the Passover). Yet the questions are really beside the point. Both accounts have been written not only after the event but also in full knowledge of how the event is currently being memorialized. What is common to both, then, is the bracketing of the divine saving act by a fixed *terminus a quo*—the description of the establishment of the feast—and an implied flexible *terminus ad quem*—the annual celebration of the feast ('You shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time for year to year' (Exod 13:10) or 'as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26)). Time is still the locus of God's saving acts and significant time has been marked out by the establishment of the

feast commemorating salvation at one end and any present celebration at the other.

Time is both relevant and irrelevant in each instance. It is relevant because we are dealing with an event that can be fixed in time by the narrator and his community (Exodus, Passion of Christ); it is irrelevant because every memorial celebration recreates the event as present. In both the case of the Passover and of the Eucharist, sacred time is not cyclical but rather moves from a definite beginning to the present moment which in future repetitions will stretch the boundaries of significant time indefinitely. For the purposes of sacred history the fixed beginning is an announcement of the feast which will be celebrated later; the flexible end is the present moment in which the celebration takes place.¹⁴ The Jewish Passover brackets the Exodus. Sacred time will always have God's salvation at its centre. The Christian Passover brackets the Passion. Sacred time still has God's salvation at its centre. All that has happened in the establishment of the Eucharist is that, for Christians, the position of the brackets has been shifted. Yet, though God has revealed something new in Christ, the commemoration of this revelation is still the same: the elements of the Passover have been invested with new meaning.

Conclusion

The Passover and the Eucharist both mark out the limits of significant time. Their celebration gives the participants entrée into this time and hence with God's salvation itself. The Passover is end and beginning. The sign for all generations continues. God's saving act will always be remembered. The Eucharist and the Passion which it commemorates do not so much abrogate the old Passover and the Exodus (for how can God's salvation be set aside or how can memory cease to function?), but rather show in Christ an opening out of the way God saves. The continuity with the past is God's direct intervention on behalf of his people. This continuity is expressed in the appropriation of the Passover to commemorate this intervention. There is only one dispensation of salvation, since the time bracketed out by the Eucharist will always fall within the time bracketed out by the Passover. But with the Eucharist the event and its celebration are opened out by the way in which God intervenes—now through the incarnation of His Word which has the power to make all things new. Yet it is a newness which looks back to the dawn of time when all things were made new for the first time.

- 1 Hermann Gunkel had already noted this phenomenon with respect to certain apocalyptic texts in *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895.
- 2 See Clifford, R.J. 'The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation', *Theological Studies* 46 (1985) 507—523.
- 3 But which appears in various forms in 1 Enoch.

- 4 Cf. Clifford, R.J. *Hebrew Scriptures*, 510.
- 5 See Noth, M. 'The Re-presentation' of the Old Testament in Proclamation' (translation of 1952 German original by J.L. Mays), in Westermann, C. *Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* (translation of *Probleme alttestamentlicher Hermeneutik*, München: Kaiser, 1960), London: SCM, 1963, 76—88.
- 6 'And when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water ... the waters coming down from above stood up and rose up in a heap far off ... and the people passed over opposite Jericho. ... And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place and overflowed all its banks, as before' (Josh 3:15—16, 4:18). Compare 'And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left' (Exod 15:22). (All biblical quotations are from the RSV)
- 7 We are naturally not concerned here with the historical realities of the conquest but with the way in which the past is perceived and formalized. On the probable antiquity and cultic origins of such summary formulae as Deut 26:5—9, Josh 24:2—13 see Noth, M. *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948, 48—67.
- 8 For such a view see Rad, G. von. *Old Testament Theology: Vol. II, The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* (Translated by D.M.G. Stalker from *Theologie des Alten Testaments: Bd. II, Die Theologie der prophetischen Überlieferungen Israels*, München: Kaiser, 1960) Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 104.
- 9 It is made up, possibly, of the conflation of two celebrations—an agricultural feast (the Unleavened Bread) and a nomadic feast (the offering of a lamb from the flocks—the Pesah proper). See Vaux, R. de, *Les Institutions d l'Ancien Testament: II, Institutions militaires; institutions religieuses*, Paris: Cerf, 1960, 383—394.
- 10 Rad, G. von. *OT Theology II*, 104.
- 11 'Then the Creator of all things gave me a commandment, and the one who created me assigned a place for my tent. And he said, "Make your dwelling in Jacob, and in Israel receive your inheritance." From eternity, in the beginning he created me, and for eternity I shall not cease to exist. In the holy tabernacle I ministered before him, and so I was established in Zion' (Sir 24:8—10).
- 12 The 'fulfilment prophecies' of Matthew's gospel should probably be seen in this light.
- 13 Here we have an analogy to the 'merism', an important feature of Hebrew poetics, by which the naming of extremes implies the inclusion of what comes in between.
- 14 It makes no difference that the Passover is an annual celebration while the Eucharist has developed into a daily celebration (at least in the Latin Church).