IDENTITY AND REMEMBERANCE

BINSAR PAKPAHAN

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that memory is important for people to live. To remember is to have a hold on your memory and to have an identity. One can barely live without memory. Memory of the past is important to get a hold of the future. As Wiesel writes,

Memory is a passion no less powerful and pervasive than love. What does it mean to remember? It is to live in more than one world, to prevent the past from fading and to call upon the future to illuminate it. To remember is to revive fragments of existence, to rescue lost beings, to cast harsh light on faces and events, to drive back the sands that cover the surface of things, to combat oblivion and to reject death.¹

To remember is actually to live and to have your identity, or a sense of self through memories. It is a revival of one’s existence by preventing the past from disappearing and to call upon the future.

There are difficulties in choosing one identity. Everything is no longer as clear-cut as it was. For instance, in my grandfather’s time, it would be easy to say that he is a Batak, coming from an area in Samosir, North Sumatra, Indonesia. But now, even I—a Batak born in Medan, the capital of the North Sumatra province, and raised in Jakarta—have difficulties saying that I am a real Batak. I have to choose a history, which is a history of my grandfather’s, to say that I am a Batak from Samosir. The question of identity has been a problem in a culture where traditions were very important. How can one say that she/he comes from a certain tradition when she/he does not even speak the language or understand the culture? The problem of personal identity must reassess the role of memory of your own root in searching for the answer of the questions: Who are you?; What is your identity?

Christianity is a religion full of traditions and is rooted in the history of the Israelites. The author chooses to explore the idea of memory and identity in the Old Testament because it played an important role in forming the identity of Israel as a nation. Edward P. Blair said that a nation is a people with common memories and common hopes. Without them, human beings remain an aggregation without cohesion and national consciousness. Therefore, “Israel was a pre-eminently a nation.”2 Israel remembers her history and her identity as God’s chosen people who are bound to God in the covenant. This is their identity and their history. As Dykstra says, “perhaps this is why the Bible commands us to remember. Our memory is our life.”3 Without memory, we do not only lose our past, but we miss our present and future as well. For Israel, the order to remember is, in fact, the identity of the nation. In the theme of ‘Christian Identity,’ this paper will try to show how remembrance and memory played an important role as the identity in Israelites lives. The author will use the book of Brevard Childs as the main source for this paper, with the help of biblical dictionaries for terminology, especially on the topic of remembrance in connection with Israel’s identity in the Old Testament.4

What is Remembrance

From the understanding of the word, remembrance is derived from the verb remember, and often connected with the word memory. Long before

---

4 Brevard S. Childs, Memory and Tradition in Israel, (London: SCM Press, 1962). Childs wrote this book following a general attack on the book of Johs Pedersen, Israel: Its Life and Culture I–II, London—reprinted 1946, 99ff, by James Barr, The Semantics of Biblical Language, (London—third impression 1991). Childs studies the use of the verb ‘remember’ in the setting of the cult, the law court, the prophecy narrative, etc. in the methods of form-criticism. However, the book of Childs only focus on the word ‘remember.’ As Barr has warned us, we must be careful of the complexity of the use of an isolated word-use in languages for they can have different meaning. Childs’ focuses his research as (1) an attempt to find the scope of meaning and understanding of memory in the Old Testament; (2) to discover through a form-critical analysis of the