

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 11, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 28:10–19a

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it (or preferably, “stood beside him) and said, “I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel. (ESV)

Or,

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19

There is no god besides you, whose care is for all people,
to whom you should prove that you have not judged unjustly;
for your strength is the source of righteousness,
and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.
For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power,
and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.
Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with mildness,
and with great forbearance you govern us;
for you have power to act whenever you choose.

Through such works you have taught your people

that the righteous must be kind,
and you have filled your children with good hope,
because you give repentance for sins.(NRSV)

Second Reading

Romans 8:12–25

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 13:24–30, 36-43 (omitted verses in italics)

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest,

and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.””

He put another parable before them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

He told them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.”

All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet:

*“I will open my mouth in parables;
I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”*

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

In my preparations for writing for this week I came across a fascinating discussion of the elements of Jacob’s dream from Genesis 28, and their intended meanings. I’ll do my best to give you a thumbnail sketch of the conclusions I think the author intended me to take away, and then I’ll give you a link to the article itself, in case you’d rather read the whole thing. (Which you might well do, as I’ll give this piece rather short shrift, I’m afraid.)

The first thing I learned is that most of the scholars who have written on this subject disagree with the translation of the Hebrew word *sullam* as “ladder.” It’s a difficult word to translate because this word only occurs the one time in the entire Bible. They have a fancy name for words that we only find once in Scripture, a *hapax legomenon*. This is one of those.

The various commentators on Genesis 28 seem widely to agree that this word *sullam* doesn’t mean ladder, but they differ considerably on what it *does* mean. Some see it as a staircase. Some see it as stairs winding around a great tower that lifts to heaven (the tower would have grown up from the stone that Jacob set under his head to sleep). Some see it as a ziggurat, like those of Babylon.

The author of the article I read chose instead to see the *sullam* as a long slope approaching heaven, along which the messengers of God (angels) may reasonably ascend and descend at the same time (something that makes little sense on a ladder). Further, this slope is not leading up to an entrance, beyond which heaven and God lie, but is a place of transition where heaven and earth meet, both are present.

This can be inferred from the way that Jacob takes the stone on which he had slept and sets it upright, as a pillar, to mark the place. Dr. Houtman, the author of this article likens this pillar to a representative of the God who “stood beside him,” and gave to Jacob promises akin to those that had been given to his grandfather, Abraham.

The last insight I took away from the article is this: There is a real (if negative) correlation between this slope that brings heaven and earth into relationship and the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. In this, the notion of the incline as “ziggurat” gains some strength, but the author’s arguments against it still seem to me to hold.

But Dr. Houtman points out a really important, if secondary insight from this passage in Genesis. Humankind in its sinfulness builds toward God in Babel, but here, God builds a place of communication toward humankind. The connection is to be valued, but it must be initiated by God. This parallel imagery is lost to us when we read ladder, but if we read it aright, it adds a lot of depth to Jacob’s vision and the promises he receives.

Oh, and here’s the link to the whole article. I do commend it.

[What Did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel?: Some Remarks on Genesis XXVIII 10-22](#)

OR,

The book entitled “The Wisdom of Solomon” is also called “The Book of Wisdom.” It’s one of those books known as the “Apocrypha.” These are books of Jewish origin whose canonicity is accepted in some parts of the church and rejected in others. They aren’t ever treated as authoritative by New Testament authors (though Paul seems to have known the book), but they are by some Church Fathers. Augustine believed they should be included among authoritative texts, Jerome (author of the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible) did not. The Council of Trent in 1546 decided that they would be part of the Canon for the Roman Catholic Church, but the later reformers (Luther, Calvin) rejected this. Most reformed and protestant churches treat these texts as edifying and suitable for use in worship, but not to be used to determine doctrine.

The Wisdom of Solomon itself is a book that comes to us from the Jewish community in Alexandria, probably from the latter half of the first century BC or the first few decades of the first century AD. It’s overall purpose seems to be to encourage a flagging exiled Jewish population that has been driven from its homeland (largely in response to the failure of the Maccabean revolt) into Egypt where it faces a vibrant and intellectually challenging culture. It purposes to help Jews remain faithful and proud of the faith that they hold.

The portion of Wisdom that we have in our reading for this week benefits from some context. The larger argument into which these verses on the kindness and graciousness of God were placed is a discussion of the reasons for God’s decision to bring ten plagues on the Egyptians during the Exodus, each of increasing severity. Why not just deliver one overwhelming blow? The answer seems to be that God is merciful and that this mercy required that the Egyptians be given an opportunity to repent of their cruelty before the most severe of penalties was inflicted.

While the evil of the Egyptians meant that this mercy on God’s part was doomed to failure, the author of wisdom goes on in later verses to use God’s behavior as an example to his Jewish readers of the mercy they ought to show.

Second Reading

Last wrote about how commentators have described chapter 8 of Romans as the pinnacle of Paul’s theology. Then I went on to remember that as glorious as it is, chapter 8 was written for a purpose, and to excise it from that context risks missing what Paul was saying. This latter half of the problem of commenting on Romans and chapter 8 in particular is far the hardest for me, but I feel compelled to keep coming back to the question, “Why did Paul feel he needed to write this to the Romans?”

So I'll begin by doing some micro-commentary on the text as we have it and then try to draw all that back into context.

“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

This follows immediately on the end of last Sunday's reading from Romans, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Paul has just proclaimed the astounding truth that through the Spirit we are recipients of the same life that “raised Christ Jesus from the dead.” I find that I regret the way that this twelfth verse is translated, though. It reads as though we *are* debtors, but no longer to the flesh.

There isn't any reason to translate it “... we are debtors, not to the flesh” which rather demands that we ask, “Then to whom?” It makes more sense to translate it “So then, brothers, we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.” This is an easier translation, and follows more closely on Paul's thought from the earlier verses. “Since we now have life through the Spirit, we are no longer debtors to the flesh, through which comes death.”

And if we read verse 12 in this fashion, then verse 13 begins to mean something else. Paul is not worried about life in the flesh and the death that it brings, so in verse 13 he isn't warning his readers about the consequences, but reminding them of that from which they've been freed. He goes on in the next verses again to contrast where they were, in a “spirit of fear” with their newfound ability to call on God as “Abba,” to live as children of God.

This pattern of reminding his readers of that from which they've been freed and contrasting it with that which they now enjoy then repeats itself yet again in verses 18-25, but Paul grounds this contrast in the Romans' earthly experience. That is, Paul parallels the hope of his readers (for the redemption of their bodies) in the midst of their with that of creation that groans in the pains of childbirth in eager hope of the revealing of the children of God.

I find in this pattern some of Paul's genius. He doesn't proclaim the power of the Gospel as though it blotted out the sufferings of this present time, but holds both in tension so that each more deeply reveals the other.

As for context, I would draw us back to the tensions within which Paul's readers worshiped. I've said before that I reject the idea that the primary tension was between Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian, but rather, with Mark Nanos, (*The Mystery of Romans*) that the tensions were between Jews and Christians who worshiped together in the same synagogues. Because Christians were still dependent on the synagogue for a place to worship that exempted them from emperor worship, they would also suffer with the Jews at the hands of the empire when it chose to persecute them.

I think that I see Paul here first developing that contrast between "flesh" and "Spirit" so in order that he might use that same pendulum to contrast "the sufferings of this present time" with the "glory that is to be revealed to us."

This way of building up the Christians who still worship alongside their Jewish siblings while still grounding them in that which they escaped (death, meant metaphorically here) and that which they still endure seeks to create strength tempered by humility, so that this pinnacle of Paul's theology will find its real purpose when he turns to his discussion of his brothers, the Jews, in chapter 9.

That, at least, is how I set this into a pastoral, contingent context.

Gospel Text

The parable of the weeds that is central to this week's reading from Matthew presents us with this question. "Is this a parable about believers and non-believers, or a parable about good and evil people within the community of faith?"

The majority of interpreters seem to prefer the first option. It certainly fits best with what Jesus says in verse 38, "The field is the world." And yet it doesn't fit at all well with verse 41, where we find, "They will gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all lawbreakers." This verse seems to have a much narrower (ecclesial) understanding of the parable. A second difficulty with the broader understanding of the parable is the difficulty of distinguishing wheat from weeds. The distinction between believers and non-believers seems as though it would be easy to see. But if we interpret the parable more narrowly as referring to the church, then it makes more sense. They will look more alike, at least superficially.

One possible solution to these problems is to concede that the "field" is the world, but that the wheat and weeds together represent the church. As the crop exists within the field, so the church exists within the world. I tend to lean toward this solution if we must choose between these two dominant interpretations.

But there is a third, however unheralded, that I'd like to offer. This is where I tend to go.

What is gathered up and thrown into the fire is the *fruit* of the sons of the evil one. It is what has grown up out of the seeds sown by the devil. I do not believe that Jesus intended to differentiate here between one group of people and another, but different results produced by them. This fits comfortably with the statement that "the field is the world" and fits equally well with the problem of differentiating between two different grains, two different fruits that look alike.

This way of interpreting the parable lifts us out of the questionable practice of deciding who is in and who is out. Instead it recognizes that some bad people will do things that appear good on the surface, but are not. And it expresses confidence in a God who will see to the separation when the time comes.