

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 14, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 37:1–4, 12-28 (omitted verses included in italics)

Jacob lived in the land of his father's sojournings, in the land of Canaan.

These are the generations of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was pasturing the flock with his brothers. He was a boy with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives. And Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was the son of his old age. And he made him a robe of many colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peacefully to him.

Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. He said to them, "Hear this dream that I have dreamed: Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

Then he dreamed another dream and told it to his brothers and said, "Behold, I have dreamed another dream. Behold, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What is this dream that you have dreamed? Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you?" And his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the saying in mind.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." And he said to him, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word." So he sent him from the Valley of Hebron, and he came to Shechem. And a man found him wandering in the fields. And the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said. "Tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." And the man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan.

They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them they conspired against him to kill him. They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.” But when Reuben heard it, he rescued him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” And Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but do not lay a hand on him”—that he might rescue him out of their hand to restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the robe of many colors that he wore. And they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat. And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers listened to him. Then Midianite traders passed by. And they drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. They took Joseph to Egypt. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 10:5–15

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (ESV)

Matthew 14:22–33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat by this time was a long way from the land, beaten by the waves, for the wind was against them. And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea. But when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were terrified, and said, “It is a ghost!” and they cried out in fear. But immediately Jesus spoke to them, saying, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid.”

And Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” He said, “Come.” So Peter got out of the boat and walked on the water and came to Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried out, “Lord, save me.” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and took hold of him, saying to him, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” And when they got into the boat, the wind ceased. And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from Genesis for this week omits some rather important verses. They speak to the transition through which Joseph passes, and next week’s reading from Genesis 45 suffers greatly without them. While we aren’t given Joseph’s understanding of his dreams, it is clear that his brothers understand them to refer to Joseph’s autocratic rule over his siblings. In the wake of their rejection in verse 4, we can safely claim that Joseph shared that understanding. But when he confronts his brothers in chapter 45, we learn that he has a new understanding of these dreams, that they speak to his obligation to care for them.

The Joseph “novella” in Genesis also shows us another transformation, that of Judah. In our reading for this week Judah’s vitriolic hatred for Joseph moves the story forward, but it is Judah who also leads his brothers in declaring their loyalty to Joseph, bringing reconciliation.

These passages from one way of being in relationship to each other to something quite different that Judah and Joseph experience have special meaning when we read them within the community(ies) that conflated and edited the two Joseph narratives we find

in Genesis. That is, the exilic/post-exilic community. Scholars can confidently identify two sources within the story of Joseph, sources commonly known as J (the Yahwist) and E (the Elohist). In the method of combining them scholars can also detect some of the tensions within the Jewish community in the wake of the exile.

Joseph is seen as symbolic of the Northern Kingdom, and Judah of the Southern. Judah, the son whom Isaac blesses as the predominant among his brothers, is humbled by the famine, and Joseph is raised up. Joseph, the father's favorite is hated by his brothers, but especially Judah, for his standing with his father, but his feelings toward Joseph are changed by the crisis in which he finds himself.

The Joseph narrative speaks to the Israelites of the difficulty of maintaining one's identity in the midst of a foreign culture and people. It also points to the razor's edge on which Joseph, the most assimilated descendent of Isaac walks, saving his people from starvation but also instituting the program of lending during the famine that brought his people to a state of slavery.

As the people of Israel wrestled with questions of identity after the return from exile in Babylon, the story of Joseph spoke loudly of what it meant to have a place of favor, only to lose it, and then regain it in an unlikely manner, and it spoke of the need for reconciliation among brothers who had been driven apart by pride and jealousy.

For a much better discussion of all this, I'd recommend "Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Diaspora Narrative" by Hyun Chul Paul Kim ([LINK](#))

Second Reading

I can see the reasoning behind the lectionary choosers' decision to begin our reading where they did, given the exegetical difficulties presented by verses 1-4 of chapter 10 of Romans, but for us who want to study the verses that we *do* have, it's nearly impossible to make sense of them without that context, so I'm going to put them here for you.

Romans 10:1-4

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (ESV)

Only after these verses can we understand Paul's meaning and purpose when he says, "For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them...." and the rest that follows.

A great deal of ink has been spilled over the meaning of Romans 10:1-4, especially verse 4, and it won't do to go into those arguments at length here, but as an introduction to our actual reading for this week, I'll do my best to summarize them. It revolves largely around the ambiguity of the word "end" in verse 4. On the one hand, the word *telos* in Greek can mean "purpose", but on the other, it can mean conclusion. We have the same set of meanings for "end" in English. As a result, some interpreters argue that Paul sees Christ as the purpose of the Law, others as its temporal conclusion. Both sides have their proponents, but both arguments have their flaws. There is, however a third way that I discovered while doing my reading for this week, and I find it compelling. (I'll link to the article at the end of this section.)

In it, Georges Massinelli suggests that Paul speaks more personally/individually of the "end" of the Law, casting Romans 10:1-4 as a description of the Jew's encounter with Christ, which brings to an end the place of Law, *nomos*, as the source of righteousness. In the article Massinelli builds a remarkable rhetorical analysis of 10:1-4 that shows it as a transitional element between portions of chapter 9 and what follows in 10. He uses emotional and rational elements to bring his readers to the climax of verse 4, a *subpropositio*, which introduces a new section.

In this transition, Paul moves from praise to criticism of the Jews, his "brothers in the flesh," but does not intend to condemn them or declare any ontological conclusion to the Law, but rather to describe the way that encounter with Christ radically changes the Jew's perception of the function of the Law *for themselves*, as his encounter with the Risen Christ had changed his.

Having then explained the course that such conversion would travel, Paul goes on to write the portion of chapter 10 we have for this week, which I really should get to!

Before diving into the appointed verses, I will remind you that it is my goal to interpret all of our readings from Romans within its occasional framework. That is, Paul wrote it not as a theological treatise, but wrote a letter to a congregation that needed guidance, that was experiencing difficulties/disputes he sought to resolve. Unlike many (most?) interpreters of Romans, I find the arguments of Mark Nanos concerning the identities of the two major parties in Rome to be the most convincing. That is, the divisions were not between Gentile Christians and Jewish, law-observant Christians, but between (largely) Gentile Christians and their Jewish siblings in whose synagogues they continued to

worship. This has exceptionally important implications for the way we read these verses and all of Romans.

So how do we read these verses while keeping in mind Paul's concern for a congregation of Gentile Christians worshiping within Roman synagogues?

If you've read some of the Divergences from past weeks dealing with Romans, you'll recall that a part of Paul's concern is the disregard with which the Christians have been treating their Jewish co-members. Paul has continually built up the Roman Christians' confidence in their place in God's heart while holding that in tension with the hardships they have endured and continue to endure. Confidence in God, not pride of place.

This confidence with humility has already enabled Paul to encourage compassion for the Jews within his Christian readers in some places humility towards them in others.

I see this week's reading holding to the same pattern. The transition that introduces these verses (1-4) brings his readers into that place of confidence. They are righteous before God apart from the Law. The following verses then carry the readers to Paul's real climax for this chapter, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.""

Once again Paul has used encouragement to build up the Christian members of the Roman congregation, but specifically because he knows that it is only from this place of confidence that they will find the generosity of spirit to minister to their Jewish siblings out of a place of love and respect.

In this context the last verses of this week's reading make considerably more sense than they can read alone. Who are "they"? The Christians' Jewish sisters and brothers. Paul's heart aches to see them come to belief (the process he describes in vss. 1-4) but he knows that no message shared from a place of arrogance can carry the goodness of the Gospel.

A concluding thought. As I studied this passage, I kept wondering, "Did Paul imagine that his Jewish co-religionists would be reading over the shoulders of the people to whom he'd written? Sometimes, when I read these verses, I think that he did, that he hoped they'd read or hear his words too. Just a thought.

Oh, and the article to which I referred in the beginning (about 10:1-4) can be found (It's free, just set up a personal account.) at [JSTOR.org](https://www.jstor.org/). Here's the article.

Christ and the Law in Romans 10:4 ([Click Here](#))

Gospel Text

In this week's text from Matthew we have the story of Jesus walking on the water. It occurs in Matthew and Mark, but interestingly, not in Luke. At some point, it might be worth pondering why Luke didn't use this story, when he obviously knew of it. My guess is that for him it was too nearly a repeat of Jesus' stilling of the storm (which is in all three synoptic Gospels), but that seems weak, and it's not really a question for this week's Divergence.

If I were to speculate, I'd think that of all the narratives concerning the miracles of Jesus, this would be the one most likely to be disbelieved by modern people. In many ways it does seem the most astounding. Personally, though, I don't find it any more difficult to accept than any of the others. Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, has authority over creation, especially over chaos. If we go back to the first chapters of Genesis, humankind was similarly endowed with authority to go out and subdue creation and chaos. As I understand Jesus' purpose in coming, a part of it was to demonstrate what a human being, in full communion with God, fully empowered by Holy Spirit, could be and do.

I think that's the real point of this story, because Peter nearly manages to believe that he too, empowered by God, can do what Jesus has done.

Isn't that the challenge, especially for modern Christians? To believe that we are both called and empowered to quell the chaos around us by the power of the Spirit? To heal disease and heartbreak, to demonstrate the goodness of God in the face of despair? It is this demonstration of the real presence of the Kingdom that is meant to underscore any preaching of the Gospel.

Peter takes his eyes off the One who empowers him and is overcome by his fear of the chaos. I can certainly attest to the ease with which this can happen. But our story doesn't end with Peter sinking to his death beneath the waves. Jesus lifts him up and allows him another chance. Of course, he fails again, more than once, but isn't that the way with our God? If we're willing to set out again, we will always be restored in order to take the next step.

What might we do if we stepped out of the boat?