

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 21, Year A (track one)

### First Reading

Exodus 17:1–7

All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages, according to the commandment of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” And Moses said to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?” But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” So Moses cried to the LORD, “What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel, and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb, and you shall strike the rock, and water shall come out of it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the quarreling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the LORD by saying, “Is the LORD among us or not?” (ESV)

### Second Reading

Philippians 2:1–13

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Matthew 21:23–32

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, “By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?” Jesus answered them, “I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From man,’ we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.” And he said to them, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons. And he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not,’ but afterward he changed his mind and went. And he went to the other son and said the same. And he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?” They said, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. And even when you saw it, you did not afterward change your minds and believe him. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

In our reading from Exodus this week we find the people once again grumbling against Moses, and therefore God, and God responding graciously to them. As we’ve seen already, this is a pattern throughout the wilderness time of the Israelites. This story also gives us the origins of a place name, “Massa and Meribah.” It’s worth noting that these two names appear singly elsewhere in the Old Testament. Massa appears alone in Deuteronomy 6:16 and 9:22, Meribah in Numbers 20:13, Deuteronomy 32:51, and twice in Psalms, 81:8 and 106:32. This has led scholars to suggest that they were not always linked as place names, that perhaps the Meribah tradition had Massa added onto it at some point. Some scholars opine that Massa (testing) may have been the name of a

place where disputes were brought for judgment (testing) and only later was that name introduced into the wilderness saga.

We should also keep in mind that this story of God giving the water at Massa and Meribah is closely paralleled by the narrative from Numbers 20. However the focus of the Numbers account is less the grumbling of the people and more on the place of Moses within God's plan for the people of Israel. (It is in the second of these stories that Moses and Aaron misstep, and this becomes the reason he does not cross over into the Promised Land.)

As I pondered this story for the Divergence, I first recalled the number of times that I've heard it said that God often brings us into dry places so that He might reveal Himself and His love for me/us through the bringing of water in the desert. Or something similar. When I consider those ideas now I recall that, while the Israelites wilderness tradition is often characterized by their grumbling, there lies behind it another oral tradition which is simply focused on God's gracious provision in time of need. This is later combined with the tradition of God "testing" the people.

It seems to me that these two ways of viewing the difficulties of the wilderness experience come from different viewpoints on the same timeline. That is, (at least for me) when I am hungry and/or thirsty, God's provision seems gracious as He leads me out of a place of oppression. Only upon later reflection am I able to see the way that I was formed, brought into a relationship of greater trust, through those trials.

Sometimes we hear (I know I have) someone counseled who is in their own wilderness that they should instead view it as a gift, God forming them. At first it seemed callous to me to ask the person in the midst of great suffering to view their trials from a viewpoint on the time they haven't reached yet. Why not just be the one striking the rock and offering the water, and then later help them reflect on a grow from God's provision in that moment?

For some, that is the right thing to do. It was certainly what God did at Massa and Meribah. When the people couldn't see beyond their immediate need, God simply provided. But we have another example of God calling on His children to view their experience differently even while they're in it. We had it in Romans several weeks ago in the lectionary. If you read this one, back in the readings for Proper 6, we had a portion of Paul's letter to the Romans from chapter 5. In it Paul wrote:

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and

hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

While it is somewhat incidental to Paul's arguments concerning justification at that point, he nonetheless sets his own (and by example, the Romans') sufferings in the larger context of the good that God is working in His people. All this in the midst of that suffering.

All this is to say that I don't think there's one right answer to the question of how to help someone we encounter in the middle of their wilderness. I think it requires some discernment on our part. It is too easy to go simply with one approach or the other as the "right" one. This is where our ability to listen to God, to discern what the Father is up to in that moment, and "do only what we see the Father doing" is frightfully important. But that skill is for another time! (I've written a lot about that elsewhere on The Vicar's Keep, under "Hearing His Voice.")

## Second Reading

Last week I tried to provide an introduction to Philippians that would set our four readings from that letter in some context. I won't make you read through all that again, but if you missed it and would like to read my take on the letter as a whole, Paul's concerns and the larger methods he uses to address those concerns, *here's a link to that part of last week's Divergence*.

This week we have some of the most stirring verses that I know of in the whole Bible. Few passages in Scripture soar to the heights that this Hymn to Christ does. Indeed, when my Uber driver a couple of months ago asked me what my favorite passage of Scripture was, these were the words I quoted to him. But these verses are probably not something Paul composed. Rather, this is likely a "christological hymn" that Paul knew and used as part of his letter of exhortation to the Philippians. That, I had known as I entered into my study this week of Philippians 2. It didn't change the effect these verses had on my heart when I read or heard or spoke them. What I found in my studies did, at least at first.

That is because I discovered that a significant (and growing?) number of scholars read this hymn differently than I always have. That is, they don't see Christ's pre-existence as a facet of the beliefs of the original authors of the hymn. There. I've said it, but please hang with me for a few moments. If you haven't read that before, you may find it as shocking as I did, but I promise, it does get better.

Yes, that's right. Scholars increasingly (or so it seemed to me) to be arguing that, "... though He was in the form of God," does not refer to Christ's pre-existence as a Person of the Trinity, as I had always assumed. Instead, they see that reading of the text to be too deeply influenced by our post-Pauline Trinitarian theology. We're reading our beliefs back into the text.

And now that I've read some of the articles that support that conclusion, I have to say that after some soul searching (and not a few tears) I have to admit that these arguments have some merit. Allow me to soften that blow a bit by recalling here that one author said that this doesn't mean that the author of the hymn didn't believe in Christ's pre-existence, only that this was not the focus of the hymn. It seemed quite possible to him that one might hold onto the eternal nature of the Son and still write a hymn that was focused entirely on exalting Jesus' earthly life and ministry.

And that is what he and other authors suggest was the intent of the hymn that Paul quoted. Instead of seeing these verses as a hymn to the pre-existent Christ who descended from the heavenly realm ("emptying Himself" of His Godhead) and being highly exalted for His obedience, this anthem praises the human Christ who recognized His right to incorruptibility/immortality as the correct reward for His sinlessness, (being in the form of God, I'll come back to this in a moment) but remained obedient to the point of death (even death on a cross, a phrase many authors maintain is a Pauline insertion into the hymn).

Okay, so how do they get from "... who, though he was in the form of God, did not see equality with God as something to be grasped..." to a text that doesn't reference Jesus' pre-existence? I think that the most cogent arguments to that effect center around the idea of Jesus Christ as the second Adam, a theme favored by Paul (and apparently the author of the hymn as well). The analysis rests on the parallel between the first, pre-lapsarian Adam and Christ, both of whom were still without sin, and were "in the image of God," that is, having the "form of God." This originally entitled both to avoid death, but where Adam failed (sought to grasp this equality for himself) Jesus did not, obediently accepting a death like Adam's He did not deserve. It is for this obedience that He is highly exalted. So then Jesus' self-emptying is not His giving up of divine prerogatives but His surrendering of His right as sinless son of Adam to escape death.

I have to admit that the plausibility of this argument knocked some of the stuffing out of me when I first read it. And I was/am reluctant to share it for that reason. But once I'd reflected on it for several days I decided that it was worth offering here, and here's why.

First, it doesn't change my belief that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. As the one author suggested, even the person who wrote the hymn may have held this belief

(though in the mid-first century one wonders how well worked out that idea might have been). But second and most forcefully, I am all the more enamored of my Savior who relinquished His right *not* to die within the human sphere within which I find myself. How much easier might it have been to “condescend” to take human form and human death from the viewpoint of His throne in heaven? Instead I have a Savior who made those decisions, who chose that obedience from a perspective no more elevated than my own.

That Savior’s example of obedience in relinquishing His rights as one bearing the image of God is far more compelling to me when it calls on me for obedience as well. And that, dear readers, dovetails much too neatly into the purpose and methods of the letter as a whole that I discussed last week. Paul, exhorting the church in Philippi to obedience/duty in the face of threats from within and without, makes use of a hymn to Christ whose obedience is no more or less human than that which Paul requests.

It always comes back to the specific situation that prompts the letter and Paul’s purpose and method for addressing that situation.

In the end, what initially shook me as I discovered a new way of reading Philippians 2 has since become a reason all the more highly to exalt Him on whom I believe.

### Gospel Text

I really shouldn’t be as surprised as I am to discover that I’ve been misreading the parable of the two sons as thoroughly as I have for my entire ministry. Writing the Divergences has confronted me with this truth concerning one text or another, over and over again. At least this revelation was pleasant right from the outset, unlike the initial shock of Philippians 2.

I should start at the beginning, though. We have two questions from Jesus in this week’s reading from Matthew, and I’d like to touch on the first question before moving on to the parable and its associated question.

One word keeps rattling around in my head as I read Jesus’ counter-question to his opponents - “courage.” It seems to me that this is all that Jesus asked of them, to have the courage to give either answer, and Jesus, knowing they lacked it could rely on their fear to permit him to evade their question.

Then He moves on to his parable, which doesn’t appear to be linked to the controversy around John at first.

I was surprised to learn that this parable has an interesting textual history. That is, there are nearly as many textual witnesses that have the “I will go” son first and the “I will not” son second as there are those that read “I will not” first and “I will go” second. Apparently the reading with “I will not” first has slightly better attestation in the ancient texts, and so that is the one we have.

What’s even stranger, though, is that there is a third set of texts of this parable. In the first two sets, the reply to the question “Who then did the will of his father?” points to the one who said no first, then went and did as his father asked, whether he was first or second in order. But in the third set of texts the chief priests and elders respond that it was the other son, the one who said, “I will go” and did not who was obedient to his father! These texts can fairly easily be explained by suggesting that a copyist who’d reversed the order of the two sons had forgotten to change the response from “first” to “second” (or vice versa) in the answer to Jesus’ question, but there remains another possibility that emerges when we interpret this parable within its own semitic setting.

At the end of this Divergence I’ll include a link to the paper by Wendell Langley that opened my eyes to this parable in a whole new way. In this article I learned that in Jesus’ day saying “no” to one’s father was likely considered as great an insult to the father as not doing what one was asked, perhaps greater. When a Christian missionary once read this parable to his Palestinian hearers and asked them which son had done the will of his father, they all replied that it was the one who’d said “Yes,” but had done nothing! “A day’s work in the vineyard is a small thing, but to say no to your father’s beard is a grievous sin.”

To our Western minds this is most strange, but to a Semitic mind, an insult to one’s father was a transgression worthy of death. Exodus 21:17 reads, “Whoever curses his father or mother shall be put to death.” The verb translated “curses” means to “make light of” and so can be read as “insult” or “dishonor.”

Once we understand this, Jesus’ parable takes on much greater depth. He has given his opponents two nearly equal sons, each obedient in one thing and disobedient in another. Our reading is further complicated by the absence in Hebrew of comparative forms of adjectives. That is, Hebrew has “big” and “small” but not “bigger” or “smaller.” Given this, and Hebrew’s reliance instead on something called the “correlative comparison,” Langley suggests that the better translation of Jesus’ question to the Jewish leaders might be, “Which of the two sons was more obedient?”

In laying out His question this way, Jesus has set a trap for his opponents, but one that is far more elegant than I had ever understood. What I hadn’t considered was that there is a third possible response to the father that Jesus doesn’t mention, that of the son who

says no and then does nothing. Langley cites examples from Rabbinic Judaism of parables they used that had similar structures, but included all the possibilities.

Jesus asks the chief priests and elders which of the two sons was the more obedient, but once they've given their answer He points to the third possibility and equates his opponents with the son who says no and does nothing, in this case, in response to John's call to repentance. It was in this link to John and the previous set of questions that I'd failed to understand the parable correctly. I had not considered the possibility of this third "no/no" response, but it is precisely this for which Jesus condemns those who have questioned Him. They neither believed John when he first preached repentance, nor did they go when they saw the tax collectors and the prostitutes receiving John's baptism.

If both the sons in the parable were disobedient in some degree, "how much greater" must be that of the chief priests and the elders who did nothing at all!

I have always misread this parable as one in which Jesus opponents fell into the category of the second son, those who said yes, but did not really do what they'd said they'd do. I completely missed that Jesus casts them as a third son, a "neither/nor" son." But this third possibility was a rabbinic tool that Jesus just held back as a surprise for His questioners.

Perhaps most of you saw what I'd missed for so long. In that case, I hope I haven't bored you with all of this! Oh, and here's the link to Langley's article, which lays all this out much better than I have. [The Parable of the Two Sons \(Matthew 21:28-32\) against Its Semitic and Rabbinic Backdrop](#)

One final thought. Even as Jesus explains His parable and casts the chief priests and elders as those who neither said yes to the Father nor later did what was asked, He extends some hidden grace to them. He said that the prostitutes and the tax collectors would enter the Kingdom of God *before them*. Even the most recalcitrant of God's children enter the Kingdom. No one is left out, shut out. Yes, there is a lot of talk about "outer darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" in Matthew, but in the end even those who say no to God are brought in. And yes, I guess you'd have to say that I'm a universalist. But then, so was Jesus, apparently.