

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 25, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho. And the LORD showed him all the land, Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the western sea, the Negeb, and the Plain, that is, the Valley of Jericho the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And the LORD said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, ‘I will give it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.” So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day. Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed, and his vigor unabated. And the people of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days. Then the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands on him. So the people of Israel obeyed him and did as the LORD had commanded Moses. And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders that the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great deeds of terror that Moses did in the sight of all Israel. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 2:1–8

For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain. But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict. For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with

you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 22:34–46

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying,

“The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet”?”

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I’m going to go off into the deep end on our reading from Deuteronomy this week. It turns out there’s a lot more going on in this short reading than I’d ever imagined. First, what God shows Moses as the land that is promised to the people of Israel is a lot more than just the land on the other side of the Jordan (Canaan) that was originally promised. Our reading from Deut. 34 sort of puts a cap on a gentle but firm shift from the smaller promise to the larger than has resulted from the insertion of certain phrases in Numbers and Deuteronomy by a later editor/redactor.

Second, there is evidence in this recounting of the death of Moses the existence of four different accounts of his death from all of the four main sources of the text of the Pentateuch, J, E, D, and P. I don’t think it’d be helpful to try to untangle them verse by

verse, but here's a quote from the article I found on this, characterizing each of the four accounts.

“In J, the death notice is laconic, (*Moses died*). In D, the death notice includes the location (*in the land of Moab*). The death notices in E and P are more elaborate. The notice of Moses as (*the servant of the Lord*) continues E's evaluation of Moses as a highly esteemed servant of YHWH.... In P the deaths of Moses and Aaron are the result of YHWH's prohibiting the brothers from crossing the Jordan. (I have substituted the words in italics for the author's Hebrew text. [Here's a link to the whole article.](#))

Both of these approaches to the text seem to hold some promise for study, but I was taken by something else entirely. In the translation from the NRSV that many of you will read in church on Sunday, it says that Moses died in Moab “at the Lord's command.” In the ESV translation above it reads “according to the word of the Lord.” Those are pretty different, so I went to look at the Hebrew text to see why they're so dissimilar. It turns out that the word that's translated so differently is actually the Hebrew for “mouth.” So while it isn't very appealing to say it this way in English, it seems to read, “according to what came from the Lord's mouth.” Word, command, “what the Lord had said,” all these are translations that I found for it.

But here's what happened as I pondered these differences. I heard the phrase “So Moses' died” in a more active rather than passive way. That is, Moses surrendered his life in obedience to the Lord's command. This had become an event that had to precede the people's crossing of the Jordan into the land of promise, due to the people's grumbling and Moses' error (In Numbers 20). So Moses ascends the mountain and there he “dies.” That is, he gives up his life. He chooses to die. The text tells us that he was still full of vigor. His death didn't result from his age or some affliction.

If you haven't yet seen the parallel that I'm building up to, then I'm a worse writer than I thought. Moses goes up a mountain to die so that the people might enter the land that he is shown. Jesus went up the hill to Calvary to die “according to the Lord's word” so that we might enter into the Kingdom. Yes, Jesus' sinlessness sets His sacrifice miles apart from that of Moses, but I still think there's a link here. Moses had laid his hands on Joshua, who took up the work of leading God's people into the promise. Jesus has anointed us to do the same.

I may be pushing this text to far to read it this way, but that's where I am this week!

Second Reading

Last week I wrote a brief introduction to the Letter to the Thessalonians before diving into the appointed verses. If you missed that, I'd commend it as preface to this week's Divergence. (Link to the Introduction to Thessalonians)

Initially Paul describes his own coming to the congregation of Thessalonica in the midst of much suffering (*thlipsis*). This is important because his preaching of the Gospel in spite of affliction is something he intends to ask the congregation to imitate. This was a common manner of teaching amongst the philosophers, offering an example, a model to be imitated. The way that Paul varies it, though, is significant. While the philosophers often pointed toward some exemplary person as that ideal to be imitated, they rarely suggested that their followers imitate *them*. Paul will go on later in the letter to suggest that his readers do just that, imitate *him*.

Paul then goes on to describe the manner in which he was among the Thessalonians. Once again we can identify a theme common to many philosophers, that of a nurse. Plutarch, explaining the occasion on which to speak frankly wrote, "When children fall down, the nurses do not run up to berate them, but they take them up, wash them, and straighten their clothes, and then after all this is done, they rebuke and punish them." (quoted from [Exhortation in Thessalonians, Albert J. Malherbe](#))

In this way, Paul has begun to lay the groundwork for his entreaties in chapters four and five of the letter.

I find it significant that Paul changes the language and methods of his teaching so thoroughly from one letter to another, according to the people and situation to which he's writing. How does that speak to us of the way we might adapt our presentation of the Gospel to cultures other than our own? What kind of cultural competence might we require to accomplish that?

Gospel Text

Last week I pointed out that the question posed to Jesus was part of a series of four questions grouped in such a way that they resemble a group of questions put to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah by the Alexandrians in the Talmud. It suggests to me that Matthew was aware of this story about the Rabbi, and grouped the questions in chapter 22 intentionally. But what I find interesting is that in Matthew's grouping of questions, Jesus has "flipped the script" on His opponents.

In the questioning of the Rabbi from the Talmud, all the questions come from his adversaries. Matthew has grouped three questions from the different groups, Pharisees, Sadducees, a Lawyer, but left the fourth question for Jesus. It's a bit unfortunate that

our lectionary skips over the question designed to be “mocking,” but we have from last week the *halakhic* question, and this week the question concerning the more general principles for living. Then the question of the interpretation of the Scriptures comes from Jesus, and Jesus asks a question that “no one” can answer, not the Pharisees, not the Sadducees, not the lawyers. We have a little of that impact saved for us by the grouping of both these questions in this week’s reading, but as the conclusion to a larger series, I think Matthew’s result is much stronger.

Moving on to the questions themselves, we first find Jesus answering a question about the “greatest commandment.” This would have been the “general question” concerning a successful life. Jesus’s reply, combining citations from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, has become what we know today as the “Summary of the Law.” Back in the Divergence on Proper 18, I wrote some on whether or not this combination was already known in first century Judaism. (Paul had cited a summary there that omitted the first half.) What my studies then left me saying was that while there’s some indication that this combination may have been known among Hellenistic Jews of the first century, there is no firm evidence that Jesus was quoting a summary that would have been recognized.

Given the challenge concerning rabbinic authority hidden in the first of the four questions (on taxes to Caesar, last week), it’s possible that Matthew intended to have Jesus respond with an answer already known to the authorities of His time, also demonstrating His own authority, but I think it more likely that Matthew saw this as Jesus silencing His opponents with a wisdom surpassing their own. The evangelist would have understood this teaching to be something new and wonderful.

I think this way of reading that text fits better into the atmosphere of growing tension in the last chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, and it sets up the fourth question in which Jesus becomes the questioner, asking a question that “none” of his opponents can answer. Once again, Jesus shows Himself to be the real master of the Scriptures.