

## Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 10, Year B (track one)

### First Reading

2 Samuel 6:1–5, 12b-19

David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. And David arose and went with all the people who were with him from Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called by the name of the LORD of hosts who sits enthroned on the cherubim. And they carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. And Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart, with the ark of God, and Ahio went before the ark.

And David and all the house of Israel were celebrating before the LORD, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals.

So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing. And when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six steps, he sacrificed an ox and a fattened animal. And David danced before the LORD with all his might. And David was wearing a linen ephod. So David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn.

As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart. And they brought in the ark of the LORD and set it in its place, inside the tent that David had pitched for it. And David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings before the LORD. And when David had finished offering the burnt offerings and the peace offerings, he blessed the people in the name of the LORD of hosts and distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins to each one. Then all the people departed, each to his house. (ESV)

### Second Reading

Ephesians 1:3–14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in

the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (ESV)

Or... In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance *for the redemption of (our) possession, for the praise of His glory.* (The ESV translation is truly dreadful.)

Gospel Text

Mark 6:14–29

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some said, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him." But others said, "He is Elijah." And others said, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." But when Herod heard of it, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised." For it was Herod who had sent and seized John and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because he had married her. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." And Herodias had a grudge against him and wanted to put him to death. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed, and yet he heard him gladly.

But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his nobles and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. For when Herodias's daughter (or, his daughter Herodias) came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests. And the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it to you." And he vowed to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." And she went out and said to her mother, "For what should I ask?" And she said, "The head of John the Baptist." And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." And the

king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he did not want to break his word to her. And immediately the king sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. He went and him in the prison and brought his head on a platter and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard of it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. (ESV)

## Comments and Questions for Discussion

### First Reading

I could have included the skipped verses above, but I decided to put them here, to draw more attention to them. Our reading from 2 Samuel begins with David's first attempt to bring the Ark to Jerusalem after it's time of captivity, then it jumps, jumps right to the second attempt so that it all looks like one thing, but it's not. It's broken up by the sad episode with poor Uzzah's decision to keep the Ark from falling off the ox cart. He touches it and God gets angry and kills him. David gets angry at God and decides to dump the Ark on Obed-Edom. He leaves it there till he hears that God is blessing Obed-Edom, so then he goes and gets it and tries a second time. Here are those verses.

### 2 Samuel 6:6–12a

And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, "How can the ark of the LORD come to me?" So David was not willing to take the ark of the LORD into the city of David. But David took it aside to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. And the ark of the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

And it was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God." (ESV)

These verses are important, less because they tell a really strange story about the Ark than because they make it clear that this is *not* all one procession. The second procession is far more elaborate and energetic than the first, but it's easy to overlook, especially when the two processions are treated as one. First, it's led by David, not the sons of Abinadab, second, David dances with great passion at the head of the

procession, then we have the addition of shouting and horns to the “musical” part of the procession.

It isn't as clear to me as it was to the author who pointed this out, not as clear about exactly *why* David added all of this to the procession, but It's worth noticing. Was David happier to have the Ark? Or was he afraid of another disaster and putting more energy and effort into the worship of the procession in order to try to keep God happy? To be honest, I haven't decided for myself. I thought I'd bring it to your attention, for you to make your own determination.

One final thought. In the omitted verses God becomes angry with Uzzah when he puts out his hand to stop the Ark from falling off the ox cart. One preacher I heard many years ago said something like this. God had been in the box since Sinai, and wanted out. What made God angry was that God had arranged the stumble on the part of the ox to get out of the Ark, and Uzzah frustrated that plan. I'm not sure that holds, but it sure does fit with a God who's been trying to get out of a box we put Them in for millenia.

## Second Reading

This Sunday, we begin a series of readings from Ephesians. Because of this, it's important to do something this week as an introduction to the letter. This proved to be difficult for me because, as much as I have loved parts of this letter, there are other parts that have caused me to question Paul's part in writing it. If you search back through past Divergences, you'll see that I wrote in those that I had given up on defending the idea that Paul had written the letter.

I've changed my mind. That doesn't mean that there aren't serious problems with this stance. I think there are, but I think the problems with writing Ephesians off as pseudepigraphic are greater.

When I came through seminary I was affected by the near consensus on Ephesians as Deutero-Pauline, that is, coming from the pen of a follower of Paul, but not Paul himself. To be sure, that still seems to be a majority opinion among scholars whose work I could find (keeping in mind that I still don't have access to a really good theological library) but I don't think it's as large a majority as it once was. What I find is a greater willingness to accept that pseudepigrapha, works written by one person but claiming to be written by another, were not nearly as widely or well accepted in the first century as scholars of the late 20th century assumed them to be. The author of Ephesians makes an absolute claim to be Paul. This would *not* have been easily accepted by churches who knew the Apostle to the Gentiles if it were not true.

It has been suggested by some who try to explain the pseudepigraphic nature of certain epistles that inspiration by the Holy Spirit may have caused an author to believe that what they wrote would have been written by Paul, and that this almost demanded that the letter be attributed to Him. This is almost convincing to me, but it fails to account for the fact that such a letter would appear years, perhaps decades after the death of Paul, and that later readers would know this. Not knowing anything of the proposed inspiration, they seem likely to have rejected it.

This change in stance for me doesn't erase the difficulties we have with Pauline authorship. There are sufficient changes in language, theological and pastoral material in the letter to support the argument that someone other than Paul wrote it. Some of those I hope we'll cover in weeks to come, but not this week. This week I'm placing my feet in the court of Pauline authorship while admitting that the question is far from clear, and may never be. In the end, this is in keeping with what I named these lectionary studies, Divergences. Perhaps I'll encourage you to think more deeply about this letter than you have in the past.

Very little can be discerned from the letter about Paul's intention in writing it. There is almost no specific information about the situation that prompted it to be written, but two main thrusts appear to be clear, from what I've studied. The primary concern of the letter is Christian unity, not uncommon in Paul's letters. The disunity he appears to be concerned with is Jewish and Gentile division within the church. There does appear to be a second concern, as well. The church to whom Paul writes seems to be confronted with particularly powerful worship of pagan/demonic entities. Paul appears to be trying to stiffen his readers' resolve in this confrontation.

This second concern helps me make sense of Paul's language in these opening verses of the letter. Even now, more than twenty centuries later, Paul's description of all that God has accomplished through Jesus Christ for our sakes sets out hearts soaring. For a community challenged by worship of powerful and frightening entities, these verses become a bulwark against despair.

Having a grasp of this challenge to the readers' of the letter helps make sense of the language of predestination and mystery as well. While predestination opens the door to all sorts of theological shenanigans that have occurred in the last few centuries, it needs to be read as a pastoral effort, even as I believe Calvin's was. In both cases, predestination was a remedy for uncertainty and fear, not a foundation for a theological system (though it certainly became one in Calvinism).

We will encounter the "mystery" of which Paul speaks later in the letter, so I'll only deal with it briefly here. There is in Paul a thread of thought (I think, this is me speaking not

authors I've read) that attempts to deal with the radical change in thinking that the Gospel brings. Paul seems to cloak this new way of thinking with the garment of "mystery" so as to be able to maintain that this is not new, only newly understood. For Paul, God does not change.

Added later.....

My heavens. I've been preparing to preach on this lesson all week (who's going to preach on the death of John?) but something was nagging at me. I think I spent too much time pondering and deciding what to write about Ephesians as a whole and overlooked our text for this week in detail. And when I began praying over it in preparation for preaching I was so focused on the reassurance of the notion of predestination that I let that annoying voice in the back of my head go unheard.

But since I use the ESV so extensively, the last phrase of our text for this week really struck me wrong, as well it should have, because our translators (I find myself using this word loosely at the moment) have made a right mess of Ephesians 1:14. The translation you'll hear on Sunday isn't nearly as bad, though I think it's wrong, too. I have just added my own translation above.

There is nothing temporal about the preposition *eis* (that the ESV creators translated as "until") that I can find anywhere, but they have made our taking possession of our inheritance (redemption of inheritance) some future thing, like getting into heaven some day. But Paul here has written two parallel prepositional phrases that need the same preposition in front of both, to give them the intended impact.

God has given us the "promised Holy Spirit" who "guarantees our inheritance" for two purposes:

For the redemption of possession (So that we might take possession of our inheritance now) and,

For the praise of His glory. (That is, so that by stepping into our inheritance we will become sources of God's glory.)

I was astonished to find that the ESV here only mimics the older RSV, from which it has been taken. I can usually trust the RSV translators much farther than the ESV folks who bought and edited it. But both are way off the mark this time!

Gospel Text

As if our story of the execution of John weren't difficult enough on its own, I discovered this week that there is extensive scholarly literature on it, due to the differences between our version in Mark and that in Matthew (the other Gospels don't relate it), but also between both the Gospels and the Jewish historian Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*. It would seem from my brief scan of what is available to me, that attempts to harmonize all these sources have failed. It would also appear that the story as we have it is a creation of early Christians, and not a retelling of historical events.

Of one thing we can be reasonably sure: John was executed by Herod Antipas. It seems likely to me that John was executed because he was a charismatic preacher who threatened the peace of Herod's realm. It appears to be unlikely that either Herodias or her daughter, or Herod's daughter had anything to do with John's death. This would be in large part because a dance such as the one described in the Gospels was simply not done by reputable women such as the wife, or the daughter, or the step-daughter of the king.

And yes, one of the questions that I can't find a good answer to is, "Just who is it that the author meant to say danced?" Tradition has it that it was Salome, Herodias' daughter from her earlier marriage. But issues with dating and the age of the girl, along with textual variations in Mark's text, make that very unlikely. You'll notice that in the text above, I included the NRSV translation of that passage (Herod's daughter, Herodias) to indicate just how difficult that one question is.

Then we have questions about the relationship between Mark's and Matthew's versions. The differences are not great, but I think they're meaningful. I'll touch on those later.

Finally, though, I am left with the questions, "Why were the women added to the story" and, "Why did Mark (because we're studying Mark) include this text in his Gospel in the form in which we find it?"

My answer to the first question is that the women, especially as we find them in Mark, serve to best undermine Herod's rule by undermining his masculinity. In Matthew, Herod wants John dead, but lacks the courage to do it. He is weak. But in Mark, Herod admires John, despite John's condemnations, and is driven to this horrid act by his weakness toward his wife and the dancer.

I have written elsewhere that I believe that Matthew predates Mark, at least as we have it now. This means that the women were added before Mark received the story. Personally, I think they were added before Matthew received it too. (There is an interesting tale told of a Roman senator who was cast out of the senate because he had

had a man beheaded at the request of a courtesan who asked him to do it to satisfy her curiosity in 184 BC. This might provide a source for some of this material.) Matthew demonstrates Herod's weakness, but Mark adds detail that emasculates him.

But why include this gory narrative at all? The answer, for Mark at least, seems to fit nicely into the question of Jesus' identity that hangs over the first half of his Gospel. That is, John's having been decapitated absolutely precludes the possibility that Jesus is John, raised from the dead. This seems to be a question that vexed early Christians, but by recalling the manner of John's death, that he was decapitated *and his head separated from his body by being given to Herodias*, it is impossible that Jesus might have been raised from such a desecrated corpse.

It is curious to me that only two weeks and one chapter ago, we read the two intercalated stories of women healed/cleansed by Jesus, symbolizing the effect of the Gospel on all women, rendering them all clean, and this week we have two such soulless women bringing about John's death. Personally I reconcile this by understanding that, while there is no inherited uncleanness in femininity for Mark, he recognizes that women remain just as capable of evil as men.