

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

First Reading

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 (omitted verses from ch. 7 in italics)

So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?" And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. (ESV)

And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated. (ESV)

.....

And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor. (ESV)

Second Reading

James 5:13–20

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working. Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit.

My brothers, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and someone brings him back, let him know that whoever brings back a sinner from his wandering will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 9:38–50

John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, ‘where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’ For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

If we stick to the Lectionary for our Bible Study, this is the only week in which we get to look at the book of Esther. That's something of a shame, because it's a great narrative, and the book itself has an interesting pedigree and history. The book is set during the reign of Ahasuerus, one of the rulers of the Persian empire. In the story, Esther, at the urging of her uncle Mordecai, foils the plans of the villain, Haman, to have all the Jews in the kingdom killed. It is also the story of the beginning of the Feast of Purim, which celebrates the Jews' deliverance.

Because it bears the name of one of the characters, Esther, she is often viewed as the heroine of the story. She finds herself in a position to be able to influence the king on behalf of her people, and despite great risk, approaches him and saves them.

What I'd always overlooked is how reluctantly she does all this. Had it not been for her uncle's persistence, the Jews might well have died. In the long history of the interpretation of this story, Jewish interpreters have often celebrated Mordecai, who urged her to do the necessary thing, as the hero. For us, at the very least, Mordecai merits at least an equal place of honor, I think.

And that brings me to what I learned this week about the story's origins. It has long been a matter of scholarly consensus that it is based to some degree on Persian myth. While figuring out precisely which myth or myths lie at its root has not achieved the same level of consensus, no one really disputes this any more. That does not mean, however, that there was no plot, that there was no escape from genocide. Only that the telling of the story was shaped by the culture within which Jews of that time lived.

While consensus may have evaded the scholars trying to identify Persian precursors to Esther, one article I found offered an intriguing idea. One of the major obstacles to finding a Persian source for Esther has been the sense that any such story must have a female protagonist that is foremost in the narrative. But when we recognize that the story as it was initially received may have been perceived to be primarily about Mordecai, a new possibility emerges.

There is, in the volume known as the Enuma Elish, a story of Marduk, wherein he appeals to the Gods to save his people from a plot not unlike the one that Haman planned. While Ishtar (note the similarities, Marduk/Ishtar - Mordecai/Esther) doesn't figure large in that story, it still bears a greater resemblance to Esther than any other narrative seems to.

This appears to reinforce the idea that Esther was initially written as a story about a male protagonist. That Esther's role was amplified well beyond that of Ishtar also says that among the people of YHWH, women's roles were viewed as more important than in the Persian mindset.

We only get this tiny bit of Esther each third year and I find that sad. The whole book is well worth the reading. That Mordecai and Esther together saved the Jewish people became a source of celebration for God's people, when in addition of gifts to the poor, one rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud recommended that all men as drunk as Mordecai, so as to forget Haman altogether!

Second Reading

Along with a lot of other interpreters of James 5, I've been confused for a long time about the insertion of Elijah and the drought into the discussion of prayer for healing. Just doesn't make a lot of sense, especially when the author is trying to wrap up the letter. But then I stumbled across an article on just this very thing while I was studying this week. In a piece for the Journal of Biblical Literature, Mariam Kamell Kovalishyn writes about reading this passage, and indeed much of the letter of James "intertextually" against the whole drought cycle of 1 Kings 17 and 18. That is, mentioning Elijah in this moment is meant to evoke the whole two chapter saga, not just the prayers for and against the drought.

She begins by taking note of the difficulty we have with this passage if we read it on its own. Calling Elijah someone with a "nature like ours" makes no sense. Especially in the time in which James was written, Elijah was held in the highest possible regard, almost semi-divine. And if James had wanted to use Elijah as an example, he might at least have chosen the moment where he raised the widow's son from the dead!

But if we understand the reference to be an oblique reference to the larger story of Elijah, especially in chapters 17 and 18, a new relationship begins to emerge. James speaks earlier of "caring for the widow and orphan" as a mark of true religion. During the drought, Elijah is sent to the widow of Zarephath, where he cares for her and her son. James advises those who are sick to seek prayer from the elders and he will "raise him up." Elijah raises the widow's son from death. James, in this context, speaks of forgiveness of sin. When the widow's son falls ill she declares that Elijah has "brought her sin to remembrance." This can be seen as the confession that leads to healing. James 1:5 speaks of the "prayer of faith." Elijah's prayer at the end of ch. 18 exemplifies this prayer. He prays seven times before the small cloud appears, but as soon as it does, he send to Ahab to tell him that he hears "rushing rain."

This all brings me back to that description of Elijah as one with a “nature like ours.” Here James relies heavily on the Elijah narrative itself, not the later elaboration on it by the rabbis. Especially in chapter 18, Elijah fears a great deal, runs away, hides, though he does finally do what he’s called to do. If someone who is as fearful as Elijah can do remarkable things, then so can we. Finally, the closing verse about “bringing back a sinner from his wandering” also evokes the story of Elijah. He did everything he did on God’s behalf in order to bring Ahab, and indeed all the twelve tribes of Israel to repentance, to “bring them back from their sin.” In a world in which the character of Elijah was in some ways more highly exalted even than that of Moses, James’ appropriation of the whole story of the prophet would have been much easier to perceive than it is for us.

(Here’s a [LINK](#) to the whole article, should you care to read it.)

Gospel Text

Our reading from Mark 9 for this week comes to us from the same “Discipleship Discourse” that I mentioned last week. I don’t think it’s overstating it to say that some of it would come a close second to some of the things Jesus said in John 6 about eating and drinking his flesh and blood for “difficult sayings.”

It begins with Jesus admonishing his followers not to set boundaries around themselves that exclude others who do good works in His name. Probably a good word for all of us.

But then He gets into all that stuff about cutting off limbs and tearing out eyes that cause us to sin. I don’t know if anyone has ever actually tried taking that literally, but given our ability as humans to go to extremes, it wouldn’t surprise me.

The thing is, I just don’t think Jesus meant our hands and feet and eyes at all. It comes immediately after His teaching about those who would “cause one of these little ones to sin.” This is a warning to those who would do this. Then Jesus goes on to warn those of us who qualify as “little ones” about doing without those who would cause us to sin, no matter how painful the separation might be.

Yes, He uses extreme images, but He’s trying to make a point. We subject ourselves to the “Gehenna of fire” if we cling to people who repeatedly cause us to sin. (I refuse to use “hell” here. It doesn’t say that, it says Gehenna, a reference to the hill of Hinnom, outside Jerusalem, where refuse was constantly burning - to cleanse it.) I am certain that the hand, and foot and eye that might cause us to sin are meant as metaphors for people with whom we have a relationship of some sort.

Then He goes on to say that we'll all be "salted" with fire. What does salt do? Protects food from spoiling. What does the fire of Gehenna do? Cleanse that which has spoiled, preventing it from spreading the rot. The salting with fire isn't a testing, it is a purification, and yes, we'll all experience it to some degree or another.

Personally, I am reluctant to view this as an "afterlife" kind of event. Yes, some of it may come after I've died, but it is also my experience that I have passed through fire in this life in order to be rid of elements of myself that I didn't want or need. So, no, this *isn't* about eternal torment in some lake of fire. It's still a hard saying, but it's all for our good, not for our harm.