

## Divergence on the Lectionary, Third Sunday in Lent, Year C

### First Reading

Exodus 3:1–15

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush. He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned.” When the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.” Then he said, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?” He said, “But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel: ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.’ This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations. (ESV)

### Second Reading

1 Corinthians 10:1–13

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (ESV)

## Gospel Text

### Luke 13:1–9

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’” (ESV)

## Questions and Comments for Discussion

### First Reading

After doing some serious reading about this passage from Exodus 3 (and some more reading about the readings I'd read) I'm left wondering which subject to write about.

It turns out that the standard Source Hypothesis I'd learned in seminary doesn't really hold among current scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures, and especially the Pentateuch/Hexateuch. While J, E, D, and P are still recognized to some degree, their relationship to one another is now seen differently. Oh, and there's likely another source in there called "H," for "Holiness." I haven't read enough to understand all the details of these new approaches to the first books of the Bible, but one thing is clear. J, or the Yahwist source, is now thought to be dated much later than I'd learned. When I was in seminary some 35 years ago, J was given written form at some point during David's reign. Now, J is an editorial author, using older materials, but adding some of their own, and probably writing during the Exile in Babylon.

This may seem trivial, but as you'll see below, it changes a great deal about the way we read both the beginning and the ending of our text for this week. I'm going to write too much here, but both of the things I discovered this week are too fascinating to leave out. I'll try to be brief and not go on too long.

First, the burning bush. This part of our reading is from the pen of J, and now that we've dated it during the tribulations of the Exile, its meaning and symbolism begin to emerge. In an article for *Vestus Testamentum*, N. Wyatt explains how the composition of this story functioned among the Judahites living in Babylon. First, this happens on "holy ground." Holy ground in the wilderness, the place farthest removed from Holiness any faithful reader could have imagined. (That is, Babylon.) Next, the bush, or tree, evokes the image of lampstands in the Temple. (Please read the whole article for details on that.) These lampstands were ever-burning, never ran out of oil. They burned, but were not consumed.

I tried to sum up the meaning, the impact of these images for the people in exile, but Wyatt does it so much better, I'll simply quote them.

Let me now offer a hypothesis for our understanding of the burning bush. Moses, an archetypal figure whose stature grew enormously during the exilic period (in Deut. i 37, iii 26, ix 18-20, x10, for instance, he is presented in the latest recension as a redeeming, almost christological figure, and in the Pentateuch at large he is presented in transparently royal terms), here represents exilic man-his treatment

in Deuteronomy, just mentioned, reinforcing the idea of his solidarity with sinners. He is in the wilderness-at the edge of the world, at the furthest remove from the centre-conceived of course by the exiles as the sanctuary in Jerusalem. Suddenly, to his amazement, in the darkness and sterility of his condition, he discerns a tree or bush-symbol of life and divine grace-and it burns and is not consumed, just like the temple *menora*. As if to confirm his intuition, which he dare not articulate, a voice from the very heart of the vision confirms that this is indeed holy ground, just like the *temenos* of the temple, and instructs him to remove his shoes. The wilderness is a symbol of Babylon, and even here Yahweh brings the exiles hope in despair: he reveals himself, paradoxically and against all traditional expectation, in the very place which seems formally to deny his presence. Such a story was drawing out for the exiles the most important theoretical principle of the recently developed monotheism of the period: that Yahweh was no longer to be conceived in territorially limited terms; his rule and power were universal. Such a message must have been of great comfort to people whose traditional beliefs could not seriously accommodate the misery of deportation and the destruction of Jerusalem.

The whole article makes for good reading, I commend it to you [HERE](#).

Now, on to the Name of God from the latter verses of our reading.

When Moses asks for a name, to tell the people who had sent him, God responds, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" This is J's contribution to God's self-naming. This contributes to the growing monotheism during the exilic period. But God doesn't stop there. God goes on to say, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" Only after that does God say, "This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." This would be the Elohist contribution.

As J would have been the editor of E (the earlier source), it seems clear that they did not intend to supplant one way of naming God with another. Had that been the case, they would surely have just omitted verse 15. J saw them both as necessary.

So, God is I AM, YHWH, but God is also to be named the God of their forefathers and the generations yet to come. Two different and complementary names, neither of which sufficiently sums up God on their own. As Ellen J. van Wolde explains in her paper, we have given too little attention to this second half of God's self-naming since that time, and it we would do well to give more weight to the generational Name of God.

I wish I could recommend reading her article, but it's long and complex and unless you're a lot better at Hebrew than I am, it'll be *very* hard reading. Even so, [here's a link to it](#).

## Second Reading

This reading, especially set apart from its context as it is when we read it alone as part of this Sunday's lections, threatens to take on all sorts of meanings that Paul would have wept to see. It comes off as a threat that when/if his readers engage in certain behaviors, there will be certain punishments that follow.

But placed in context, this (and the rest of chapter 10:1-22) constitute the second segment of Paul's argument against one particular act, the eating of food sacrificed to idols. The participation in such cultic meals was a significant part of the social life of those Corinthians who could afford it, and Paul is trying in chapters 8-10 of 1 Corinthians to explain why he wants these members of that congregation to stop taking part in them.

His argument is in two parts. Chapters 8 and 9 are devoted to his concern for the destructive effect such behavior has on the community, especially the "weak." "Discontinue this practice because of the harm it does to your sisters and brothers in the faith whose conscience may be wounded by it." In chapter 10:1-22 Paul shifts his argument from this "horizontal" approach to a "vertical" one. "Discontinue this practice because of the harm it does to your relationship with God." All of the illustrations Paul cites in our reading for this week are not behaviors that concern Paul in the present, but examples of things done in the past by the people of Israel that broke their relationship with God. Paul sees this practice of taking part in cultic meals, eating food sacrificed to idols, as idolatry, something that similarly breaks one's relationship with God.

If we read farther, 10:23-32, Paul shifts back to his horizontal argument, but in this case to concern for the conscience of "unbelievers," (*apiston*) with whom they might eat. It is unfortunate that none of the translations I looked at put the last sentence of verse 29 and verse 30 in quotation marks, because I am convinced that Paul here is quoting the Corinthians' response to his argument. "For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks?" (Keeping in mind that Paul quotes elsewhere in 1 Corinthians from correspondence he has received from them in order to refute what they have said.)

He concludes his argument against participation in these public, cultic meals by summing up both the horizontal and vertical portions, "So, whether you eat or drink, or

whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God..." Given this context then, we are not meant to read our selected text for this Sunday with concern for the variety of behaviors that are cited, nor for the results that ensued, for this entire reading is only a list of examples of ways in which God's people have broken that relationship in the past. The only "temptation" Paul has in view is the eating of food sacrificed to idols, to idolatry.

## Gospel Text

When I began searching for papers to help me learn something new about this passage from Luke, what I found was less than useful. Those who chose to write about it from an academic perspective (not many) all approached the first portion as if it were about the "problem of evil." It isn't, unless you come to it with that preconception. I couldn't find a single paper that dealt with the fig tree imagery in the second half.

So I tried Academia.edu, my fallback source. Again, nothing about the fig tree, and the papers on the first portion were even less useful. All of them saw in Jesus' warnings cautions about being condemned to eternal damnation. Which it isn't, I don't care *what* preconceptions you bring to it.

So, once again, you're stuck with my readings of the text. So, some people come to tell Jesus about some other people who died horribly, and whose blood Pilate had defiled. Terrible. Ugly. Jesus, knowing their hearts as He did all those around Him, knew they expected Him to explain what awful thing they'd done to deserve such a horrid end. He corrects that.

And then he says, "And unless you change your thinking (the real meaning of "repent") you will likewise perish." This has *nothing* to do with salvation/damnation. It doesn't even have anything to do with horrible consequences. It is about perishing, dying thinking it must be because of something you've done (as Jesus' hearers appear to have expected, horror!) or perishing/dying knowing that you go to a God who doesn't work like that. *This* is the repentance to which H calls them.

And the fig tree? It is the twisted, fruitless version of the faith of Abraham and Moses that taught them to think the way they're thinking right in that moment. Jesus knows it for what it is, and knows that its end is near. This isn't condemnation, just recognitions that there is no longer any fruit on this tree (see Mark 11) and so it's time to cut it down. Judaism isn't being abandoned, just this fruitless distortion.

I don't often go off into preachy stuff in these Divergences, or I try not to, but I feel compelled to add that I think the tree of institutional Christianity may be in its last

season now. We have a twisted version that is trying to build the Kingdom with political power, which is utterly bereft of any Gospel, and we have progressive Christianity that, while loving, lacks the power to confront it meaningfully. I believe that God may soon raise up something very new to take the place of both of them.