

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 13, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Genesis 32:22–31 (track one, vs. 32 added in italics just because it completes the paragraph.)

The same night he (Jacob) arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered." The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. *Therefore to this day the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob's hip on the sinew of the thigh.* (ESV)

Isaiah 55:1–5 (track two)

"Come, everyone who thirsts,
 come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
 come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
 and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
 and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
 hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
 my steadfast, sure love for David.
Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,
 a leader and commander for the peoples.

Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,
and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 9:1–5

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 14:13–21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a desolate place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them and healed their sick. Now when it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a desolate place, and the day is now over; send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” But Jesus said, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” They said to him, “We have only five loaves here and two fish.” And he said, “Bring them here to me.” Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass, and taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of the broken pieces left over. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Genesis text, track one

Reading what scholars have had to say about our text from Genesis this week opened my eyes to some things that some of you may have known for a long time, but they're new to me.

First is that the story of Jacob's wrestling match was likely inserted into the larger Jacob narrative at some point. There was a story about Jacob's sojourns and return that lacked this story at some point in its history.

The second is that the story itself probably has an interesting history. At some point in its earliest forms it was likely a story of Jacob wrestling with an opponent and overcoming him, but the opponent was not God. It seems quite possible, even likely, that it was originally a story of Jacob overcoming some sort of Canaanite god or demon that sought to defend the land against Jacob/Israel's return. (There were "nocturnal" gods whose power vanished with the rising of the sun, so this makes some sense of the "man's" departure in the morning.) In this way, Jacob's victory serves as a precursor of the victory of the people named after him. It is also suggested that while the story may not have originally included this detail, Jacob's lameness was a well-attested part of the community's memory of Jacob, and that this story was used to give some origin to it.

At some point, though, J, the "Yahwist" editor of the Hebrew Scriptures, got hold of this story and edited it to fit his "promise/blessing" theme. So the "man" is no longer an enemy, but God, and from God, Jacob struggles to obtain a blessing. So now, rather than Jacob struggling with some Canaanite entity that seeks to keep him out, he wrestles with God as he returns to take up the promise that was given to him at Bethel. Some commentators see this as punishment, others simply as God resisting him because of his dishonest past.

But it is important that this encounter with God, in its present form, serves as a counterpoint to the Bethel experience. In Bethel he receives the promise, in Peniel, he struggles to extract the blessing. In the first case he is leaving the land of promise, fleeing his enraged brother, in the second he returns to the land promised to his heirs, and suffers to obtain it.

There are a couple of themes I can draw from this for myself, at least. The first is that, while it may be costly (the limp), the story suggests that it is worthwhile to pursue that which has been promised to us, even if we may have done things that make us vulnerable to accusation. The second is closely related. God is faithful to God's promises.

What do you take away from it?

Isaiah text, track two

Our reading this week comes from the concluding chapter of what is known as Second- or Deutero-Isaiah, that portion of the book whose audience was the Judahites who found themselves in exile in Babylon. Our reading encapsulates well the dominant theme of Second Isaiah, comfort to the people and a promise of restoration.

But how to interpret this passage? Is it meant fairly literally? Or is it allegorical? And if it is allegorical, what do the metaphors represent?

While allegorical interpretations of Scripture have fallen out of favor with modern scholars, Dr. Marjo Korpel has shown in her [article for Vetus Testamentum](#) that such a method of interpretation is appropriate in this instance. This is also in keeping with the ancient interpreters of this text in the Targum.

In our reading for this week, it is not difficult to understand the spiritual referent of the wine and milk and bread God offers that will satisfy in contrast to what God's people are currently consuming. And while the passage makes reference to David, the one whom God will make a witness to the peoples is more akin to the gathered Servant of God rather than a monarchical figure. "Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know," says God to the people in exile.

But the allegorical value of our reading this week loses something when it is sundered from the verses that follow. As the bread and wine and milk take on metaphorical meaning, so does that which sprouts at the coming of the rain, the word of God. As the people have taken their place as the Davidic witness to the world, so also are they those who sprout and grow when they enjoy the rainfall of God's word. A fitting conclusion to the prophecies given to the people in exile.

Second Reading

In this week's reading from Romans 9, Paul takes what might be perceived to be a hard right turn from the upbuilding and encouraging words of chapter 8. Suddenly he is sharing his heart and his hopes for this siblings, the people of Israel. But this isn't a shift. Rather, it is the very point toward which everything in chapter 8 has been leading. The encouragement of chapter 8, woven through with reminders of the Christians' weakness and inability to pray, set in the context of tribulations that make them continually dependent on God's aid, all of that is the foundation for Paul's outcry on behalf of his "kinsmen according to the flesh," the Israelites.

But why? Again I return to the oft overlooked setting of the letter. Paul isn't writing something to sum up his entire theology for the larger church, he's writing to the church

in Rome which is experiencing great division between the Christians and the Jews in whose synagogues they continue to worship. In chapters that follow, he will lay out specific behaviors that he thinks are fitting for Christians living among their Jewish kindred, but at this point in the letter he is still reminding them of why it is that they, too, ought to care as deeply about the Israelite who worships next to them as Paul does. Paul continues to do his rather amazing balancing act between lifting up the Roman congregation(s) and reminding them of their need for humility, all to bring them to the place where they too will “wish themselves accursed and cut off from God for the sake of their kinsmen, according to the promise.”

I would add here that I have no sense at all that Paul is speaking here about eternal salvation or any such nonsense. He is wishing that his Christian readers might so long to see their Jewish siblings know the joy of being in Christ that they would themselves be willing to lose that joy in order to see them reap those blessings.

Gospel Text

You probably know this already, but for those few who don't, I'll tell you anyways. This is the only miracle of Jesus (apart from His resurrection, I suppose) that finds its way into every single Gospel account. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, all of them. The only one.

It's understandable, I suppose. In one moment thousands upon thousands were touched by the desire of God to bless them. (5000 men, plus at least as many women and children.) This must have been the most widely known of Jesus' miracles in His day, so of course it would find its way into the accounts of all four evangelists.

This is also why I resist any attempts on the part of some interpreters of this story to humanize it, to make it less astounding, less miraculous. I've heard teachers and preachers suggest that what really happened was that after Jesus sent the disciples out to share what He'd blessed, the people themselves began to share what they'd brought, but hidden away out of fear of hunger. While this may be heart warming, it fails utterly to account for the impact this event had on those who followed Jesus. “Oh, yes, well George, we were all hungry, but when Jesus gave away the little that He'd found, we all did the same, it was really cool!” Pardon me, but that's hogwash. Who would have remembered that in a way that caused it to be included in every version of the Gospel? No, something astounding happened. Something so amazing that the people rushed Jesus to make Him king.

I'd like to close this section of the Divergence by telling you a story about my hero of the Faith, Heidi Baker. I've mentioned her in other Divergences.

Heidi and her husband have ministered for decades now in Mozambique. She has sheltered and schooled thousands and thousands of orphans, and planted well over ten thousand churches in a largely pagan section of the country. All this in the face of (initially at least) great opposition. But Heidi chose to believe that if she were faithful, God would provide what she needed to do what she'd been called to do, and she's shown Him to be that faithful, time and again.

In this particular instance she was holding a training session for new pastors for the villages in which she'd planted churches. Hundreds of men had walked for days, maybe weeks, to reach her compound to be taught so that each village could have a pastor. As Heidi likes to say about them at this early stage, "They weren't very.... sanctified."

The meeting had begun, but for some reason, no one had planned for lunch for these new pastors. (I don't know why, but my memory tells me there were about 400 of them.) When these men, who'd walked so far, and were so hungry, learned that there was no food, they were about to riot. Things were looking pretty grim.

What did Heidi do? Put on her administrator hat and get things sorted? No. She fell on her face before God, declared her utter dependence on Him, and asked Him what to do.

As she prayed, a Jeep drove up. In the Jeep was a pot of "spaghetti." Heidi says they called it that, but it wasn't like ours. But it was noodles of a sort. One big pot. Describing it, she held her arms out in a large circle so that her hands didn't meet. She indicated that the pot was maybe 18-24 inches deep.

A big pot, but not enough for 400. Heidi had it taken to the kitchen and instructed the servers to "Give them as much as they want." This instruction got lots of protest. "But Mama Heidi! We'll run out! Better to give them all a little!" Heidi insisted that the new pastors be given as much as they wanted.

Everyone got as much as they wanted and to spare. I can't even write this without tearing up. God is still doing what He's always done, show His love for His children. Our reading this week is what it appears to be, a real miracle of abundance.