

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 16, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Exodus 1:8–2:10 (track one)

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Then the king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

Now a man from the house of Levi went and took as his wife a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son, and when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it. When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, “This is one of the Hebrews’ children.” Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” And Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Go.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. And Pharaoh’s daughter said to

her, “Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, “Because,” she said, “I drew him out of the water.” (ESV)

Isaiah 51:1–6 (track two)

“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness,
you who seek the LORD:
look to the rock from which you were hewn,
and to the quarry from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
that I might bless him and multiply him.
For the LORD comforts Zion;
he comforts all her waste places
and makes her wilderness like Eden,
her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness will be found in her,
thanksgiving and the voice of song.

“Give attention to me, my people,
and give ear to me, my nation;
for a law will go out from me,
and I will set my justice for a light to the peoples.
My righteousness draws near,
my salvation has gone out,
and my arms will judge the peoples;
the coastlands hope for me,
and for my arm they wait.
Lift up your eyes to the heavens,
and look at the earth beneath;
for the heavens vanish like smoke,
the earth will wear out like a garment,
and they who dwell in it will die in like manner;
but my salvation will be forever,
and my righteousness will never be dismayed. (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 12:1–8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 16:13–20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Exodus text (track one)

When I went to see what the biblical scholars had to say about the first chapters of Exodus, I found that a great deal of the articles dealt with one or the other of two general topics. The first is the sources from which these opening chapters were derived and the

second is the historical importance of the references in verse 16, “They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses.”

I won’t burden you with extensive reviews of either of those discussions because I can’t for the life of me figure out how they impact our study of the texts as modern readers. But I will give you a brief outline of the discussions, and ask that if you figure out how they might speak to us now, you’d leave a note in the comments.

First, it is apparent to those who study the materials used as sources of the Hebrew Scriptures that the opening chapters of Exodus come from three different documents that have been assembled into our current narrative. This may be new to you, but it is a long-established truth in biblical studies that there are four major sources for the Old Testament, J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly). Each of these older documents is marked by certain stylistic elements and theological emphases. Of course, not all of the OT can be traced clearly to one or the other of the four, but a great deal can. Source critics can with confidence identify three of those four sources just in our reading from Exodus for this week.

This helps to account for the choppy way that our reading flows. If we included the first 7 verses of Exodus, we have three different accounts of the astounding growth of the descendants of Jacob in the land. And yet, in verse 15 we are told that there are only two midwives for the whole lot of the Israelites, so their expansion cannot have been very great at that point. This is apparently due to the mashing together of different stories to create one narrative. If you’d like to read more about this process, and which verses came from which source, I’ll leave a link to a good summary article below, but the thematic repetitions like oppression/continued growth have a good source-critical explanation. But I’m not sure how important any of that is to me.

The other set of conversations I found circle around how much historical weight to give to the reference to Pithom and Raamses in verse 16. Many scholars find this convincing, and therefore date the Exodus to the 19th Dynasty of Egypt. Others find the reference to be anachronistic and less reliable as a source for dating the Israelites flight from Egypt. I’ve thought about it all for a while and I don’t think that knowing which Pharaoh is referred to in Exodus matters that much to my faith.

When I read Exodus in general, and these verses in particular, what matters to me is God’s care for the oppressed. This is a theme that rings throughout the whole of the Bible, in one form or another, and it is one that speaks loudly into our modern day. (I’ve been trying to figure out where to put a quote I read this week, and this is the best place I can find for it. Someone on Twitter recently said, “If you think that the God of the Old Testament is brutal, it’s because you’re reading it as an oppressor, not as the

oppressed.”) As we’ll be dealing with Exodus for several more weeks in the Lectionary, I won’t go too broadly into that this week. Instead I’ll focus on one theme that is very intentionally echoed in Matthew. It may be one with which many of you are already familiar.

The slaughter of the male infants ordered by Pharaoh is a direct antecedent to the murder of the male children commanded by Herod in Matthew 2. As Matthew crafted his infancy narrative, he clearly had these stories from Exodus in mind. Israel was led into Egypt by a dreamer named Joseph. Jesus and His mother are taken into Egypt by a dreamer named Joseph. Both Moses and Jesus escape a male infanticide ordered by an evil ruler. Matthew even refers to Hosea 11:1 when he explains the Exodus laden meaning of the flight to Egypt, “Out of Egypt have I called my son.”

I believe this composition on Matthew’s part was an inspired one. I don’t know what sources the evangelist may have been relying on, but whatever they were, he shaped them so as to let his readers know that Jesus is indeed the “prophet like Moses” that Moses himself prophesied. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

I don’t mean to draw your attention away from our Exodus text by pointing to Matthew’s, but rather to indicate how much poorer our own New Testament would be without its roots in the Old Testament narratives.

Isaiah text (track two)

Our reading from Isaiah 51 for this week includes two of three related oracles that include 51:1-12. As puzzling as it is that we have only two of three oracles, we can clearly identify the sections by noting the command “Listen!” “Listen to me, give attention to me” says God through the prophet.

And what does God speak to the people? Reassurance. Comfort. We know from past studies that this section of Isaiah was given for the people in exile in Babylon. In our reading for this week God reminds them of their heritage, of Abraham and Sarah. God speaks to them as “my people,” reassuring them that they are not abandoned.

But more than that, God speaks to those who “pursue righteousness” and “seek the Lord.” I think this is an early indicator of the identity of the one later spoken of as the “servant of the Lord.” I’ve mentioned before also that this “servant” may have some individual referents, but that it is mostly likely a metaphor for the whole people of God who have sacrificed and suffered for the sake of righteousness.

In the second oracle God's reassurance shifts from comfort for the afflicted to the promise that God's salvation will indeed proceed from a ruined Jerusalem to the whole world.

In a world as pluralistic and divided as the one in which we find ourselves, how does this promise that God's salvation will "shine for all peoples" sit with you? Do we still have a message that the whole world needs? (Spoiler, I think we do.)

Second Reading

Our reading from Romans 12 this week begins the portion of the letter where Paul moves from laying foundations to building upon them his guidance for the congregation(s) in Rome. Here he begins to call them to specific behaviors that he hopes will spring from the understandings he has shared. The opening verses call the Romans to the presentation of their bodies as a "spiritual sacrifice" pleasing to God, the following verses begin to describe what that would look like. To read the one without the other, to try to give meaning to what this presentation of oneself as spiritual sacrifice somehow apart from the words that follow detaches the exhortation from its mooring.

And the first mark of this self-sacrifice? "Not to think more highly of oneself than one ought." I hope that in the preceding Divergences I have made clear Paul's pattern in Romans of building up in order to call his readers then to a place of humility. This shape manifests itself here in but a few verses. To "know what is good and acceptable and perfect" is (in part) to think not too highly of oneself.

The remainder of our lesson appointed for this week is something of a reiteration of Paul's teachings regarding the need not to value one spiritual gift more highly than another. I am frustrated stopping here because Paul's larger purpose here is masked by the absence of the opening of chapters 13 (verses our lectionary skips altogether) and 14 (which we won't read until Proper 19, three weeks hence).

What is important to note here is that, apart from Paul's recurring insistence on humility, there is no great difference between his guidance in the latter portion of our reading this week from what we might find elsewhere in his letters. In this paraenetic section of the letter, his real purpose is revealed when he gets to chapters 13 and 14, where new material is introduced. And we'll get to that, in due time. (We really must deal with the skipped verses opening chapter 13, but we'll do that in two weeks, too.)

Before leaving this section of the Divergence, though, I would like to draw your attention all the way back to Romans 1:8-12. Many of you know that in these opening "thanksgiving" sections of Paul's letter we find a sort of summation of what Paul hopes

to accomplish through the rest of the letter. That links this opening section more directly to the portion of the letter we begin with chapter 12. And what stands out to me is Paul's desire to be with them to impart a spiritual gift. It seems to me that the best solution Paul sees to the divisions in Rome that he hopes to address lies less in the arguments of the letter than in the gift of the Spirit. Perhaps this is why Paul's theological arguments are worked out in so much more detail in Romans than anywhere else. He is trying to accomplish with words what he believes can best be achieved through the Spirit.

Just a thought.

Gospel Text

It's strange that just three weeks ago we had the story of the Transfiguration (even if it was Luke's version) which happened only six days (according to Matthew and Mark, Luke has eight) after this week's reading. In the Divergence for Transfiguration I made a point of linking the two, stating my belief that we simply cannot grasp the fullness of the Transfiguration without the story of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah and the verses that follow (and which our lectionary sadly omits).

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (ESV)

From the first moment that it is spoken aloud by Peter (we'd have to think that the disciples had wondered this in private) that Jesus is the Messiah, he insists on teaching them that the nature of the Messiah is far different from that which they'd envisaged. Peter openly rebels at the idea that Jesus will suffer and die rather than conquer. Or

rather, that Jesus will conquer through His suffering and death rather than through military victory. Once again we are confronted with the reality that Jesus' glory is in the Cross.

But leaving that aside, we do well to place this story in the context that Matthew gives it. You may remember from the Divergence two weeks ago that with chapter 16 Matthew's Gospel shifts from portraying Jesus' opposition as those who quietly oppose Him to those who take on the role previously held by Satan. They "test" Jesus. The level of tension has been ratcheted up several notches, and the end of it all will be in Jesus' death. It is into this heightened state of antagonism that Matthew places Jesus' question, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?" (Mark and Luke place this exchange much earlier in their narratives.)

This suggests to me that for Matthew the question of Jesus' identity as the Christ, the Son of God, was much more central to the conflict with the Jewish leadership than it was for Mark or Luke. It makes a certain sense to me given Matthew's situation, a largely Jewish-Christian congregation led by himself, though not likely a Pharisee, certainly of the scribal class, and therefore a part of that "leadership" group that stands in opposition to Jesus. As offensive as Jesus' teachings were to them, His identity as the Son of God would have had mortal implications.

This also makes a different sense of Jesus' command to silence. While in Mark or Luke we can reasonably think that Jesus instructs His disciples not to tell anyone that He is the Christ because they are likely to misunderstand the nature of His messiahship, in Matthew there is the overlay of the conflict with the leadership, and the climax that it will come to in 26:63-64.

But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, "I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus said to him, "You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

It is no coincidence that Jesus uses the indirect reference to Himself, "Son of Man," in both our reading for this week and this climax. (In Mark and Luke Jesus asks more simply, "Who do the people say that I am?") And it is this declaration on His part in chapter 26 that finally results in His death. "Then the high priest tore his robes and said, 'He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy. What is your judgment?' They answered, 'He deserves death.'" (26:65-66)

I think that, read in context, Matthew sees this confession the part of Peter as much more an issue of life and death than it is for Mark or Luke. Mark certainly emphasizes the mortal cost of following Jesus, but that's the question he really puts before his readers. Will you follow, even unto death? I think that for Matthew, the life-or-death question is, "Do you declare Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of God?"