

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 17, Year A (tracks one and two)

First Reading

Exodus 3:1–15 (track one)

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)

Jeremiah 15:15–21 (track two)

O LORD, you know;

remember me and visit me,
and take vengeance for me on my persecutors.
In your forbearance take me not away;
know that for your sake I bear reproach.
Your words were found, and I ate them,
and your words became to me a joy
and the delight of my heart,
for I am called by your name,
O LORD, God of hosts.
I did not sit in the company of revelers,
nor did I rejoice;
I sat alone, because your hand was upon me,
for you had filled me with indignation.
Why is my pain unceasing,
my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed?
Will you be to me like a deceitful brook,
like waters that fail?

Therefore thus says the LORD:
“If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless,
you shall be as my mouth.
They shall turn to you,
but you shall not turn to them.
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they shall not prevail over you,
for I am with you
to save you and deliver you,
declares the LORD.
I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked,
and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 12:9–21

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 16:21–28

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)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Exodus text (track one)

In preparation for writing this week's Divergence I came across two very helpful articles concerning Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, and more particularly, about God's self-naming. "I am that I am." In one I found a more theological approach to the Name God gives for Himself and the sometimes questionable history of the interpretation of that Name, and in the other I found an examination of the syntax of that verse which casts into doubt the dominant translations of 3:14. (I'll provide links to both at the end of this section of the Divergence.)

In the first article the author writes about the collapse of the "God of the attributes." By this she means that the absolute notions about God's "attributes," i.e. immutability, impassibility, omniscience, omnipotence, etc., have suffered greatly in theological circles in the last century or more. Influential thinkers like Hume, Feuerbach, Freud and Lacan have thoroughly undermined any transcendent notions concerning God in much of Western culture.

In spite of this, the article's author (Janet Martin Soskice) maintains that the God who has been deconstructed here is not the God of the Bible. Much of the emphasis on God's eternal and immutable existence, so far removed from human experience, is rooted in the neo-Platonist culture in which it took early root. And those philosopher-theologians who forced Christian and Jewish belief into their Platonic categories did so often by using God's self-revelation in Exodus 3:14. "I am that I am." So God is reduced (and I use that word intentionally) to some quintessential "Being" that is too perfect to experience feeling or change or limits to His power.

These qualities attributed to God were perhaps justly critiqued in large part because when combined with our tendency to anthropomorphize God, became the foundation for an image of God as a wise, omnipotent but entirely removed monarch, ruling from a great distance but unmoved by human experience. That these notions of God undergirded all manner of injustice and oppression in human dealings with another is undeniable, and so these depictions of God did need to be dismantled.

But what Soskice points out in her article is that the ideas about God that Hume *et al* attacked are not the thoughts the Bible has about God at all, that the God who is "I am that I am" is not a God of impassible Being, but a God of Presence. Without reference to specific Hebrew syntax, Soskice points to the inadequacy of our dominant translations of 3:14 that come out as some version of "I am that I am" or "I am what I am." She points to numerous more recent translations that lean more in the direction of "I was, I am, and I will be" as a description of God's presence throughout history with His people. In (most) Jewish thought, God is not known by proposition, but as experienced in history, as present in history.

She concludes her article (as I read it) by suggesting that God is not summed up only by one or the other of these realities. Her idea is that the “attributes” of God can be absolute and still held in tension with the God who is with us. My take from this thought is that the space between the two ways of knowing God is perhaps the most fertile space available to us in our desire to grow into the knowledge of Him.

The second article I found is one that argues that our translations of 3:14 are syntactically inaccurate. It took me at least three tries to make sense of “the governing substantive that is the subject of the relative clause,” and its implications for reading Exodus 3:14, but I think I got the gist of it. Basically, the “I am” of the second half of the sentence shouldn’t be read as equivalent to the first expression of those words, but as subordinate to it, so that the translation should read “I am the One who is.” That is, “I am He who is.” This is far removed from any mystical notion of absolute being, but is more an “existential” statement.

I have written elsewhere about the relationship of God’s being to our own mimetic crises. That is, God’s being is not contingent on anyone or anything else, but ours is. That we long for “being” more like God’s is, at the root of all things, the source for sin. It is the desire for this non-contingent being “You will be like God” that is offered to Adam and Eve that leads them to eat of the forbidden fruit. It is likewise the desire for greater “being” that drives the human heart to desire that which we see others having because we sense that their possession of that thing grants them a greater sense of being (per Rene Girard). If you’d like to go down that rabbit hole with me at some point, I would suggest these articles on The Vicar’s Keep.

[Divergence - Lent 1, Year A](#)

[Worship, the Redemption of Desire](#)

Also, here are links to the two articles mentioned above.

[The Gift of the Name - Moses and the Burning Bush](#)

[On Exodus III 14 “I am That I am”](#)

Jeremiah text (track two)

I don’t know about you, but Jeremiah’s calls for vengeance trouble me.

Our reading for track two begins:

“O LORD, you know;
remember me and visit me,

and take vengeance for me on my persecutors.”

How are we to take these passages? This isn't the only time the prophet calls for God to take revenge on his behalf. It turns out that, if you have the same struggles, we are not alone. Scholars have pretty nearly exhausted the possible interpretations of these vengeance passages over the years. So much so that very little has been written about them in the last thirty or forty years.

Scholarly explanations of them tend to fall into three categories.

Some interpreters see in these passages later editorial insertions. They see these verses as reflections of the minds and hearts of the people after they have returned from the Babylonian captivity. This is convenient, but it tends to give us an excuse to gloss over them, to treat them as unimportant, uninspired. I think that's a slope I'd rather not try. For me, even if they're late, they were included in the canon of Scripture. I believe that process to be inspired, too, so whether these words are interpolations or not, they're important. And if they're still important, then it doesn't matter too much if they're editorial additions.

Other students of Jeremiah see in these passages a glimpse not into the prophetic life of the man, but into his inner life. These are things he might have felt as one who was horribly persecuted for his faithfulness to his ministry, but they aren't things he'd have spoken aloud for public consumption. This makes better sense to me, as almost all scholars agree that the four “complaints” of Jeremiah *are not oracles*. And yet, someone wrote them down, whether it was his amanuensis Baruch or not. For me, then, whether they reflect Jeremiah's inner state or not, that is not *all* they represent.

Another approach treats these complaints as “literary convention.” That is, they bear a superficial resemblance to similar calls for retribution in the psalms. While this appears at first to have some validity, scholars have shown that the resemblances just aren't strong enough to hold water.

This leaves me with the inescapable conclusion that he did desire vengeance upon his enemies. But it doesn't answer the question, “What did Jeremiah really expect to happen?”

In an article that summed up the above positions for me really well, the author, Michael Avioz, goes on to suggest three interrelated possibilities. (Link at the end.)

The first he calls “punishment for those who offend against God's messengers.” This would rely on the pattern among earlier prophets, where those who spoke against or

harmed the prophets were swiftly punished, usually by death. So this is a less personal kind of “vengeance.” It isn’t related specifically to Jeremiah, but to his role as God’s prophet.

The next approach involves the principle found elsewhere in Scripture of “measure for measure.” This is more personal, but again, isn’t really a personal appeal as much as appeal to God for consistency. “Do as you have done elsewhere. They hurt me. They tried to kill me. Let the same happen to them.” So this is more a reliance on God’s habit of giving “measure for measure” rather than expecting God to be offended on the prophet’s behalf.

The last of the three approaches is an appeal from one who declines to pursue justice on their own to a Divine Judge who *can* bring justice. His example is from 1 Samuel, where David says, “he LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me upon you; but my hand shall not be against you.” In a way, this is more personal. God stands up for one who will not commit violence on his own behalf.

In the end, Avios suggests that Jeremiah (or whoever wrote these complaints) may have had all three images of vengeance in mind when these verses were uttered. Personally, I’m not sure I understand how that works, but at the same time, I have trouble choosing one over the others.

Which makes most sense to you?

([This is the link to his article at Jstor](#). Remember that you can register to use it for free.)

Second Reading

In last week’s Divergence I shared my frustration in trying to interpret these portions of Romans 12 without the context of Paul’s guidance in chapters 13 and 14. Here in 12 we have entered into the section of the letter where Paul shares the real kinds of changed behavior that will result from the letter he has sent. Here, in the paraenetic portion of the letter Paul exhorts his readers/hearers to behave in a way that is in keeping with the foundations he has laid out in the preceding chapters.

This week’s portion of chapter 12 reads a lot like his guidance in other letters. Indeed, I think I could, if I tried, find an antecedent to every verse in another epistle. There are hints about the deeper concern that prompts Paul’s letter, but these words could be applicable in almost any situation.

And perhaps for that reason, they speak all the more clearly into our day and time. Paul was disturbed by the treatment by the Christians of the Jewish synagogue members in whose congregation they gathered. His counsel for change had grounds in his reading of Scripture and his theology, much of which he's worked out in previous chapters, but there are also some basic rules for interacting with each other and the world that also support the desired change. "Live in harmony with one another," "Be not haughty," "Return not evil for evil," "Take no vengeance." Indeed, were they, or we, simply to follow those tenets most any conflict might be resolved. Paul has a specific one in mind, but in this week's second reading, he gives instruction that is applicable in almost any situation.

Gospel Text

Our reading from Matthew this week is really on the second half of last week's. To read this in any context other than that of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of God denies it a great deal of its impact. That is to say, Peter's rebuke of Jesus and Jesus' rebuke of Peter in return all occur as a direct result of this revelation. (And immediately before the Transfiguration, which we read only a few weeks ago.)

I do not think that Matthew's choice to locate this pericope in chapter 16, where the conflict between Jesus and the Jewish leadership (see the last couple of Divergences) has finally reached its peak. The leadership which once quietly questioned Jesus in their own hearts or among themselves has now come forward to "test" Jesus as Satan did in the wilderness. It is in this growing maelstrom that Peter comes forward and declares, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you." He holds out an alternate path for Jesus, one quite in opposition to God's plan for Him, and Jesus recognizes in Peter's words the work of His bitter enemy. "Get thee behind me, Satan!" Peter is "testing" Jesus (without realizing it) in precisely the way that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness.

There are also a couple of differences between Matthew's rendition of this story and that of Mark and/or Luke. They're worth noting, as they may offer some additional insight into the meaning of this moment that he wanted to convey to his readers/congregation.

The first is that when Jesus goes on to teach about following Him and taking up one's cross, he rounds out that teaching with, "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." (16:27) This is quite different from what we find in Mark or Luke, who both have, "For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (Mark, 8:38, Luke 9:26)

Now, I'm one who reads Matthew as (probably) the first of the four Gospels to be written. That isn't what most biblical scholars believe any more. I say that to acknowledge that you may want to take some of what I offer here and in other places with a grain (or a handful) of salt when I compare the synoptic Gospels to one another. In this case, for instance, I think that Matthew's rendition here is the earliest, and most likely the more original. I don't think that Mark and Luke were working from a different source. I think that I can build a reasonable argument (at least to me it is) that Mark first changed the text to suit his needs and that Luke, for reasons that are less clear, chose to follow Mark in this instance rather than Matthew (both of whom he used as sources). But that argument will have to wait until Proper 19 of Year B (which I'll be writing next year).

So here's how I'd like to encourage you to read and understand what Jesus is saying here. Read all of this as concurrent, not sequential.

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."

Jesus here speaks of a reality that will occur well within the lifetimes of many of those gathered around Him. He is not speaking of some heavenly reward that will occur after the hearer's death or at the end of the age. The coming of the Son of Man in His kingdom, with the holy angels, is a moment within which all these repayments (which can also be translated "rewards") will take place, and His hearers will live to see it. This can be no other than the Pentecost, wherein the Holy Spirit will descend and lay bare the hearts of those whom She touches, and they will then know the joy (reward) that comes with having chosen to follow Jesus, to the point of taking up their own crosses.

We do love to string out God's plans for us as though He dangles a monstrous carrot for us somewhere out in eternity after which we might chase. I think that the only future Jesus held before His listeners here was one that would follow in a matter of weeks or months, and it is a future in which we already live. The choice He offers us has the immediate benefits He holds out to us. To gain one's life, one's soul, the reward of the knowledge of God's pleasure in us. And I'm really getting preachy here. My apologies.

(Unfortunately, what I've worked out here also means that I'm going to have to rethink what I've written on some of the parables in earlier Divergences!)

The other difference worth noting, but one that will wait until Year C to get much attention, is that Luke leaves out completely Peter's rebuke of Jesus, and the rebuke from Jesus that he receives in return. Now why do you suppose he did that?