

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 18, Year A (both tracks)

First Reading

Exodus 12:1–14 (track one)

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, “This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers’ houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast. (ESV)

Ezekiel 33:7–11 (track two)

“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul.

Why Will You Die, Israel?

“And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?’ Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (ESV)

Second Reading

Romans 13:8–14

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 18:15–20

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Exodus reading, track one

How do I say something worthwhile about an event that is so wrapped up in centuries of meaning that everything worthwhile that can be said has been said? That was the question that stopped me cold for a few days when I sat down to write about the Passover. And to be quite honest, I'm still not sure anything I say here will be worthwhile, but when I talked with Sara (my wife) about it, and told her what I'd read and thought she encouraged me just to write that. That many of the things I thought of as common knowledge weren't common, and many of the things I thought of as interesting but unuseful might be useful to someone else.

These ramblings may be disorganized and disconnected, but here goes.

First, scholars are a lot less confident that they can assign the Exodus to one Egyptian dynasty or another than they were back when I was studying this in seminary. At that time, while there were differences of opinion as to *which* dynasty might have been the one during which the Hebrews (called the *Habiru* in 2nd millennium BC Egyptian texts) escaped from Egypt, it seemed (to me at the time) that many scholars then believed that they could name one or another Pharaoh, from whom they'd fled.

Nowadays when I read about the events of the Exodus opinion leans away from trying to assign a specific date or dynasty. There are even those who maintain that the historical haze that clouds the Exodus is so dense that it makes it nearly impossible to be certain there even *was* an Exodus event. After having read a few articles more recent than my seminary texts, here is where I find myself.

While the specific dating of the Exodus is increasingly difficult given current scholarly findings, the story of the Exodus is too firmly fixed in the cultural memory of the Israelites to have been entirely a myth. It has some grounding in history. There was at some point a large scale exodus (with a small "e") from Egypt. While little can be said for certain as to the identity of Moses, it seems clear to me that such a man existed. His Egyptian name (*Mose* was a common name in second millennia BC Egypt.) and his Midianite wife are both elements that are at such variance with the Israelite history within which they and this narrative occur that it is impossible to imagine that they just sprang up *de novo*.

At the same time, not all the people who constituted the people of Israel at the time of the composition of the book of Exodus were descended from those who'd fled. There is ample evidence that a large number of the Israelites were natives of Canaan. Some of this can be deduced from the different sources that make up much of the Hebrew Scriptures. (This I recall from my early studies.) In other Divergences I've written about the four sources that were edited together ("redacted") to create the Pentateuch and much of the histories, J (Yahwist), E (Elohist), D (Deuteronomist), and P (Priestly). In the J source, God is referred to by the tetragrammaton, YHWH, but in the E source, God is "Elohim." Even back in the early days of my study it was thought that these two tendencies derived from two groups, one that had escaped Egypt (and therefore carried the story of the burning bush and God's self-naming) and one that had not, the dwellers in the land of Canaan.

I did read one article this week that cast some additional light on this for me. While we have the story in Exodus of the escape of the descendants of Jacob/Israel from the land of Egypt, it would not be only those people who would have experienced the oppression of "Pharaoh." This particular article suggested that the reason that Pharaoh is never named in Exodus is that this character serves as a collective memory of several pharaohs under whom the Israelites had suffered slavery. During the height of Egyptian influence in that time Egypt demanded tribute from her conquered territories. Some of that tribute was required to be a certain number of slaves. Slaves may have been gathered from among the conquered nation, or might have been taken from some other defeated country or city, but there are extant documents indicating the number of slaves that were sent in tribute.

If then multiple pharaohs had taken slaves from the region of Canaan, some of whom (or perhaps their descendants) had escaped and returned, we would have a longer term memory of "Pharaoh" as slave holder than just the one (not) named in Exodus. Or perhaps it was only the memories of the families left behind that reinforced the multi-generational experience of Egyptian oppression.

Whichever the case, there remains a strong ancestral memory of Egyptian slavery and escape that lies behind our texts. These same memories may have coalesced with certain other memories of plagues that struck the region (there are records of such epidemics) to constitute other parts of the story of the Exodus. Personally, I suspect that the Israelites already had instituted certain cleanliness practices (that were later written into Leviticus) that protected them from a plague that struck the Egyptians, leaving them largely untouched. But then, I'm married to a former epidemiologist.

Our reading this week comes at the climax of those plagues and the moment of deliverance. We as Christians have long associated the Passover meal with the meal

eaten by Jesus and His disciples on the night before He died. I wrote about this unfortunate conflation in my Divergence for Maundy Thursday. I won't rehash those arguments here, but the Last Supper was not the Passover meal. If you'd like to read what I had to see back during Holy Week, please [click here](#).

This week I'd like to subject you to some of my own musings on the relationship of the Passover event to the Passion of Jesus.

Jesus, as the Spotless Lamb, is the One whose blood protects us from the coming of the destroyer, just as the lamb's blood on the lintels of the doors did for the Israelites. At first glance, there may appear to be a significant difference. Jesus' blood protects us from the consequences of our sin (death), but the lamb's blood doesn't seem to function in the same way. That is, the Israelites don't seem to have done anything worthy of the destruction that fell upon the Egyptians. But that would seem to suggest that they were without sin. And I suppose that Paul would have agreed, "for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law." (Romans 5:13) But then, that would go for the Egyptians, too!

So where does this leave me? The plagues were not a "punishment" from God. They were simply signs intended to indicate the cost, the consequence of holding as slaves God's chosen. The blood of the Lamb spares the Israelites from the last, most devastating of those signs. In the same way, the Blood of Jesus spares me that last, most devastating cost. I will still die, but it won't be as "punishment for sin." I won't ever equate my death with God's wrath. I am protected.

Because it was never about punishment for sin. Sin has its consequences, but the wrath that it inspires was always, "from the foundation of the world," covered by the Blood of the Lamb who was slain. (Rev. 13:8) But humankind has always listened too much to the whispers of the enemy, who tries to convince us that punishment is our due, that God demands our blood for our sins. But to trust in God's forgiveness is to trust in the Blood of Jesus, which covered us long before the Cross entered into human history. And somehow, the Israelites grasped that truth 1700 years or more before Jesus was ever born. Moses grasped the efficacy of the Blood of the Lamb even then, and instructed the people of Israel to place their trust in the power of that Blood to protect them.

There's probably a lot wrong with what I've just written, but that's the point of the Divergences, to struggle with these truths and to grow in them through the struggle.

One last point that I try to bring to folks' attention with regard to the "Blood of Jesus." During the trial of Jesus in Matthew, when Pilate says, "I am innocent of this man's blood, see to it yourselves," all the people reply, "His blood be on us and on our

children!” When Pilate says “his blood” he means the guilt of his blood. But I believe that Matthew intends his readers to hear the irony of “His blood be on us and on our children.” They too mean the guilt of Jesus’ blood, but Matthew and his congregation know better. The blood of Jesus speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:24) So this verse that has been used for centuries to justify all kinds of antisemitism in fact means quite the opposite of what it has been read to mean.

Just my thoughts...

Ezekiel reading, track two

Our text from chapter 33 of Ezekiel for this week occurs (largely, but not entirely) in chapter 3 as well. That the editors of Ezekiel’s prophecies chose to include it twice speaks volumes about its importance to them, and to us if we’re paying attention.

This bit of Ezekiel’s story isn’t really a prophecy. I would call it a prophetic vision, rather like Isaiah’s, in which they both are called by God to their work of speaking to the people on God’s behalf. Within this vision I see two significant paths that I’d like to highlight.

The first and perhaps most obvious is the prophet’s understanding of his call. Ezekiel is called to speak to the people of Judah in the early years of their exile to Babylon. He will be given words of reproof. Harsh reproof in some cases. It would be easy for him to choose not to lay another burden on the shoulders of those who have already been driven from their homeland. But God is clear. If someone dies in their sin without having heard the warning that God has given Ezekiel to share, then the prophet will bear responsibility for their state. Their blood will be on his hands.

I cannot think of another prophet whose understanding of their task was like this. Jeremiah complained about what he’d been given to prophesy, but nowhere does he suggest that he’d be failing his kinspeople (in addition to God) if he kept it to himself. There is something deeply personal about Ezekiel’s understanding of his intermediary status.

Ezekiel’s personal responsibility for his task segues fairly well into the second element of our reading that is worth considering. This is because Ezekiel is considered by some to be the prophet of “personal responsibility.” (Remember his parable of the sour grapes, and whose teeth would be set on edge.) Not that scholars would phrase it exactly that way, but a lot has been written (not so much recently) about the place of personal responsibility in the work of Ezekiel. This is/was significant because so much of God’s judgement, especially prior to the exile, had heavily focused on communal guilt rather

than individual. A nation or family line suffered because of “the guilt of their fathers” whether they had done wrong or not. Ezekiel is seen to depart from this thinking.

One article I came across this week brought greater nuance to this subject than its predecessors had done. In his essay, Barnabas Lindars demonstrates that, while Ezekiel emphasized personal responsibility in new ways, individual responsibility was clearly evident in the Bible prior to his time. In his conclusion, Lindars suggests that Ezekiel doesn’t innovate, but rather, applies differently notions of individual responsibility that already exist in *Torah*. And he does this without abandoning notions of communal or national guilt. Instead he adds on this nuance to existing ideas.

Second Reading

Our reading from Romans this week contains (as did last week’s) more of Paul’s teaching on general modes of behavior that are in keeping with one’s status in Christ and especially as those for whom the end is nearer now than when they came to faith. I think that it would be interesting to do a study of the evolution of Paul’s eschatology from his writing of 1 Thessalonians to this chapter of Romans, but that’s beyond me at this point. I suspect it’s been done, but I haven’t been able to find it yet.

What I would like to focus on for this week though, is Paul’s “summary of the law.” “For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Paul’s summary lacks the first half of the Summary of the Law that we find in Matthew 22 and the Gospel parallels, of course. The command to love God with all one’s being is missing. Is this because Paul had not heard of Jesus’ combination of the two commands? This Epistle to the Romans was written at least 15 years before Matthew, after all (or any other Gospel, in my estimation).

I have done some searching, and I can’t find any scholarly work that definitively connects the two halves of the Great Commandment together in Jewish thinking prior to Jesus. But having said that, there is a distinct possibility that they had been. The difficulty that presents itself is in the analysis of some pseudepigrapha called The Testaments of the Patriarchs. These texts claim to be the last words of the twelve sons of Jacob to their descendants, but date from the intertestamental period. They were clearly taken up by early Christian writers who were struggling to understand their connection to their Jewish forebears, but they were also clearly edited (redacted) to suit their purposes. That there are verses that have been added by later Christian editors is

beyond doubt. But sorting out which was added and which was not, or even which Jewish texts were the product of which Jewish sects has proven to be much more difficult than when R. H. Charles first wrote on the Testaments and confidently identified the Christian interpolations.

What is true, though, is that 1) The Testaments make clear reference to both love of God and love of neighbor as the core elements of the law, and 2) in some places they are combined, if not in exactly the wording we have from Jesus. When I combine this with Luke's decision to place the Summary first on the lips of the lawyer who had questioned Jesus rather than originating with Jesus Himself, I am persuaded that (because I find that Luke makes frequent attempts to build bridges between Jewish and Gentile Christians) he (Luke) believed these each to be a part of Jewish thinking that had in some quarters been combined by Jewish thinkers. Whether or not Luke was correct, I think this was how he saw things. This leads me to think that the combination of the two commands in the Testaments may well have had (Hellenistic) Jewish origins.

But Paul only cites the command to love one's neighbor. I can only infer from this that he had not heard yet of Jesus' combination of the commands to love God and neighbor, nor had he encountered any such Jewish combination of the two. I wonder, if Paul had written a Gospel of his own, what it would have included. It seems to me that a good deal of what the four Evangelists wrote would have been missing. I just wonder.

One other thought before I leave this second reading. Paul was a Pharisee. He had been trained in that tradition and had excelled in it. He was deeply steeped in every last particle, every last crevice of the Law. Imagine what it took to bring him from that approach in which every last jot, every tittle was important, to this one, in which everything he'd studied, everything he'd given his life to, could be summarize in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The shift must have been seismic.

Gospel Text

The Gospel text for this week really demands that I treat a few sections separately. Some because they just don't fit together very well and some because I just want to give them individual attention.

- 1) "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

What Jesus lays out for us is a simple means of dealing with offense within the church. It gives us all pause before we run to our favorite other member and spill out how hurt we were by George who didn't invite us to be on his committee this year. We're asked to go and speak to George privately first, and then see if the issue can be resolved. Maybe he just forgot?

But what if he didn't and he's not willing to budge. Then get a couple other people involved. Not just "supporters," but those who can hear both sides and render judgment. Maybe I'm the jerk? But don't go blabbing to the whole community. Then, if the other two (or three) agree that I belong on that committee and George is just being mean, but he still won't listen, yes, then tell the church. (I have to think that Jesus had in mind a small congregation, not all your Facebook friends.)

This makes for an orderly way of dealing with conflict that doesn't bring undue stress on the fabric of the community.

But what if you were wronged and the other two stick up for the offender out of loyalty? What if they agree with you but the congregation won't listen because the offender has too much influence or they don't want to bring a scandal to light?

I've been reading lately on Twitter (I refuse to call it "X".) about the vast numbers of abuse victims who've been silenced by the abusing pastor or the church, because of the pastor's standing. Unfortunately, this text from Matthew has often been used to condemn those who go outside the church to get support when the church has refused to act. People have been forced to leave congregations they've been in for decades because they dared sully the reputation of dear pastor. As I read those stories I am glad that I am a part of a denomination that takes these issues out of the hands of the local congregation quickly. It doesn't mean that the victim may not be further victimized by some in the congregation, but it does mean that the story is more likely to get a fair hearing.

All this to say that the pattern Jesus lays out for dealing with offense within the Body is simple and can be effective, but it doesn't always work.

- 2) "And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

It's amazing to me that so many Christians over so many years have read this as an excuse to treat the unrepentant offender as someone worthy of contempt, or to kick them out of the congregation. But to that I ask the question, "How did Jesus treat Gentiles? Tax collectors?" As beloved children who haven't yet known the joy of their

identity before God? As those who, if they only knew how precious they were, wouldn't cling to whatever it is that causes them to give offense, to do harm? As those on whom one showers the most love, not the least?

To hearken back to my comments on number one above, it probably doesn't mean leaving them in positions of power or leadership. One would not ask an unbeliever to make decisions for the whole congregation, or even a committee. But they might still be given voice, if not vote.

- 3) "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This verse fits poorly with that which came before it. It echoes that which Jesus said about Peter after his confession in Matthew 16. *And it uses the same future perfect tense.* This is important. It's important because this verse does not grant to the "you" (whether the individual or the church) the authority to decide what will be loosed or bound in heaven, it declares that we will only loose or bind *that which is already loosed or bound in heaven.* Because that's the correct way to translate the future perfect (the future of "to be" combined with a perfect tense participle). So this verse should read, "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." Frankly, it's inexcusable to go on translating it any other way. It calls upon the believer to remember what God has bound and whom God has loosed, freed. This is why Matthew could tack this teaching on to the saying about Gentiles and tax collectors, because his hearers/readers understood that these people had already been loosed already by God and would treat them as such.

- 4) "Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them."

"I'm agreeing with you in prayer that you'll have that new Cadillac!" Somehow, I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when He said what's above. And yet it's been distorted to mean that and some things that are probably worse. This way of reading that verse overlooks what came immediately before it, that we are to seek out what has already been bound and released in heaven, *and then agree about those things.* It seems to me that the inclusion of a second person (or a third) is intended to put a brake on my tendency to see God in my own image, wanting for me what I want for myself. Not to find someone who can agree with me that "I deserve this," or "they deserve that." This is really akin to 1) in this section. Get two or three unbiased individuals to help me discern if this thing I'm asking really is already bound or loosed in heaven. If they agree, then

I/we can pray for the realization in the now of that which is already true in the
heavenlies. But it probably doesn't include a Cadillac. (Or, as I'd prefer, an Audi.)