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April 30th: Deuteronomy 1 & Luke 2:1-21

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Moses recounts Israel's rebellion. The birth of Jesus and the angels appearing to the shepherds.

Some passages referenced:

Deuteronomy 26:16-19, 27:9 (Deuteronomy as a formal renewal of the covenant); Deuteronomy 1:1-5 (Preamble); Deuteronomy 1:6—4:49 (Historical Prologue); Deuteronomy 5—11 (General Stipulations); Deuteronomy 12—26 (Specific Stipulations); Deuteronomy 27—28 (Blessings and Curses); Deuteronomy 30:19, 31:19, 32:1-43 (Witnesses).

Acts 5:37 (Judas the Galilean and the days of the census); Genesis 46:32-34, 47:3 (Hebrews distinguished from the Egyptians as a shepherding people); Psalm 23, Jeremiah 3:15, 23:1-4, Ezekiel 34 (shepherding imagery); Isaiah 63:11-13 (Moses the shepherd leading Israel like a flock); Exodus 3:12 (the sign given to Moses); Ezekiel 34:23, Micah 5:2-5 (the promise of the Davidic shepherd); Luke 23:53 (wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb); 24:4 (dazzling appearance of angels after the resurrection); Luke 24:12 (the sign of the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb, with marvelling in response); Luke 24:52-53 (the apostles' respond with worship).

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

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Deuteronomy 1 Deuteronomy 1 Israel is about to enter into the Promised Land. The book is a reiteration and renewal of the covenant of Sinai with Israel on the plains of Moab just as it is about to enter into the promise. The focus is upon preparatory teaching with a series of lengthy addresses from Moses unpacking the meaning of the covenant.

It is also the conclusion of Moses own life and his leadership of Israel. He is going to have to die before entering the land and the book concludes with his final blessing of Israel. There's a transition here in Moses role.

Moses has formerly been the deliverer, the intercessor, the lawgiver, the leader and the ruler, the prophet but now he is primarily the teacher. He's instructing Israel in the way of the Lord. There appears to be some sort of ceremony involved in the book as the background for all these things that he's teaching.

The nation is assembled to hear Moses words and it seems to be a formal renewal of the covenant. This is suggested in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 16 to 19. We see the same thing in chapter 27 verse 9. Instructions are given for a covenant ceremony to be performed upon their entry into the land in chapter 27.

Joshua is established as the successor for Moses. Instructions are given for the placing of the covenant document of the book of the law in the Ark of the Covenant as a witness and further instructions are given for later covenant renewal ceremonies at specified intervals. Moses speaks a song of witness to Israel and teaches it to them.

Deuteronomy then solidifies what was first established at Sinai and ensures that it will be an enduring reality in Israel's life, repeatedly brought to their attention and Israel reconstituting itself on the basis of what God did at Sinai at key intervals in its life. Many have maintained that the book exhibits the structure of what has been called a suzerain vassal treaty. So these would be established in the ancient Near East between a greater king and the lesser power that would come under him and that structure is basically seen in the literary form of this document.

So we have a beginning in the preamble in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, then there's a historical prologue telling the events that led to that point in chapter 1 verse 6 to 4 verse 49, then there's general stipulations in chapters 5 to 11, specific stipulations in chapters 12 to 26, blessings and curses in chapters 27 to 28, witnesses being called in places like

30 verse 19, 31 verse 19 and 32 verses 1 to 43 and then there's a concern for succession. How is this going to be continued in the future? What ways is this going to be reiterated and re-established at certain key intervals? There are a great many common features that we can observe then. However we should beware of a complete association or identification.

Israel is not just a vassal. Israel is the son of Yahweh. Israel is the bride of the Lord.

The covenant is not a contract. It's a loving bond unilaterally established by a gracious act of deliverance as God delivers his people from Egypt. So while we can recognize certain similarities that give us a sense of the provenance and also the genre of the book, we must also be alert to the many differences.

We could in many respects see this as an act of preaching. He's unpacking the Word of God and addressing it to the conscience of the people for the sake of action. He wants to call them to do something at the end, to make a particular decision, to choose life and the way of the Lord as opposed to their own way and the way of death.

And in order to achieve this he's unpacking Scripture. The law of Deuteronomy is the law that we find at Sinai much more unpacked and illuminated. The rest of Deuteronomy chapter 1 recounts the experience of Israel to that point, beginning at Horeb or Sinai, when the Lord charged them to move on from the mountain and take possession of the land.

At this point Moses describes the choice of elders to place over the people, something that, among other things, establishes the agency of the people distinct from Moses himself. In what follows, the movement between I and you is one that's established in part upon the fact that there are elders representing the people towards Moses and it's not just Moses over the people. The placing of this choice also suggests that it occurred at the end of the time at Sinai and that Exodus chapter 18 is placed out of chronological sequence for theological reasons.

One reason why we might have this mentioned here is that much of the law will be addressed most particularly to the elders and leaders of Israel. They will bear a special responsibility to teach, to administer, to uphold and to judge according to the law. The book of the law is addressed to the people as a political body, not just as private individuals, so keeping the law depends a very great deal upon the men who are their rulers and representatives.

The elders were given the responsibility of judges and the exposition of the law that Moses is about to give is an articulation, among other things, of jurisprudence. In Moses addressing all Israel we should not presume that Moses is speaking to every individual. That wouldn't be possible.

There are over 600,000 people here. But rather he's addressing their elders and rulers and the priests and Levites in particular who would then instruct the rest of the people accordingly. Nevertheless the law is by no means exclusively or even overwhelmingly addressed to rulers.

It is addressed to everyone as members of the covenant body. It is a civil, moral and religious code for all to abide by. Moses recounts the refusal of Israel to enter the land and their rebellion against God at Kadesh.

The Lord condemned that generation to wander in the wilderness until they all perished save for Caleb and Joshua who would then lead the people into the land. The Lord was even angry with Moses on their account. Moses' association with them and his failure to resist the contagion of rebellion in chapter 20 of Numbers caught him up in their consequences even though he was able to intercede with them on many previous occasions.

The retelling of the history to this point foregrounds many of the issues of the book as a whole. Moses is reminding Israel where it has come from. He is reminding Israel of the incredibly costly errors that they have made in rebellion.

A journey that should have taken no more than a couple of weeks ended up taking 40 years. Israel is reminded of how they went off course so that now they can take the right route. Deuteronomy is a book about the decision between life and death and in the choice not to enter the land Israel's fathers chose death except for Caleb and Joshua who are held out as the examples for Israel at this point.

The fact that after being told that they could not enter the land they tried to enter in under their own power and failed so abysmally serves as evidence of their need to depend upon the Lord for this. So they find themselves at this juncture in history about to enter the land. They're looking back on what has happened in the past and they're being instructed as they go forward.

A question to consider what might Deuteronomy chapter 1 highlight for us about the importance of reflecting upon the past within the task of obedience? Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 21. In these days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And all went to be registered each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea the city of David which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David to be registered with Mary his betrothed who was with child. And while they were there the time came for her to give birth and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them fear not for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. When the angels went away from them into heaven the shepherds said to one another let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

And when they saw it they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them. And at the end of eight days when he was circumcised he was called Jesus the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Luke chapter 2 begins with a census of the whole world by Caesar Augustus.

This sets Luke's story within the context of the wider Empire of Rome much as the later story of Israel in the Old Testament is placed within the context of larger empires such as Assyria Babylon the Medo-Persians as the influence of Israel and the Lord is felt throughout the wider world that Israel inhabits. Luke's narrative in Luke and Acts will conclude with Paul in Rome. By mentioning Rome at this point this wider world provides a backdrop for the gospel even though most of the action within it will be contained within Israel's borders and population.

It also makes clear that Israel is under foreign control. Under the shadow of Roman rule an heir of David is returning to the city of David. Much ink has been spilled on the subject of Luke's census as there immediately seems to be a number of problems.

First of all Quirinius was not the governor of Syria at the time of Jesus's birth. Second there's no evidence that people would have to return to their ancestral town to be registered or that Mary would need to accompany Joseph. And third Judea wouldn't be included in such a census because it was a client kingdom of the Romans under the rule of Herod the Great.

While I won't get into all of these issues here, here are a few observations in response.

First of all it's likely that Bethlehem was not just Joseph's ancestral home, that it was his family home. Mary's home was in Nazareth where Joseph had gotten betrothed to her.

They then moved down to Bethlehem together as their initial home as a couple as Joseph presumably owned property and had family there. This was where he came from. Joseph takes Mary with him because Bethlehem is his family home and he intends that having been betrothed in Nazareth they marry and settle in Bethlehem.

The census provides the occasion for this but he goes back because that's where he owns property, that's where he belongs. Later as we read in Matthew chapter 2 they move back to her hometown of Nazareth for the safety of the infant and there we get the impression that Joseph and Mary belonged in Bethlehem. They weren't just visiting there for a short period of time.

Perhaps the best explanation I've found for the census is that advanced by Stephen Carlson who argues that Augustus's census was not a once-off general census but that Luke is referring here to a larger census policy. The reference to the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria is better translated he argues as this became a very important registration when Quirinius was governing Syria. Now why would he refer to this? Because the 6 AD census under Quirinius was the time and context of the rise of Judas the Galilean and his resistance to the Roman Empire.

He started the movement of the Zealots which eventually led to the Jewish war with Rome in the late 60s AD. This was a hugely important event within people's memory and it's referred to elsewhere in scripture in Acts chapter 5 verse 37 further evidence that Luke has some idea of the relevant history. In Acts 5 37 he writes after him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him.

He too perished and all who followed him were scattered. Other options have been suggested some have suggested two periods of office for Quirinius. Perhaps one of the most important things to bear in mind here is the limited character of much of the historical evidence that we're working with and how often we are in danger of jumping to conclusions on the basis of silence or very limited evidence.

There are a great many occasions where skepticism about the historical veracity of details in the Gospels has been challenged by later emergence of evidence that directly supports them. The infant is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger because there's no room for them in the inn. We've all seen nativity plays in which the innkeeper turns away Mary and Joseph.

Usually the assumption is that there were such crowds of people in the town for the census that they didn't have space in all lodgings. This is almost certainly mistaken. Joseph is just a young man returning to his family home not to his ancestral home.

There wouldn't be that much movement around nor should we expect that the registration was all occurring on a single day or a short succession of days. These censuses could last many years. They weren't just over a period of days.

Others have imagined that there was some sort of prejudice against Mary and Joseph and so the innkeeper didn't let them in. But there was a far simpler answer. There was no inn and there was no innkeeper.

It doesn't even need to mean that there was no room in the family guest room so that they had to camp out with the animals, although it could mean that. Rather the more likely explanation is that they weren't short-term visitors to Bethlehem but had moved back there on account of the registration and the marriage and lived there. The simplest way to understand it is that they were living with Joseph's wider family.

They would have a smaller marital room attached to the house but that room didn't have room for her to give birth and so they had to relocate to the main room of the house where the animals would also be present in order to give birth. When he's born Jesus can then be placed into one of the feeding troughs of the animals. While fishermen are prominent in the New Testament in which the gospel goes out beyond the land to reach the Gentile peoples, shepherds dominate in the Old Testament.

The patriarchs were shepherds. They were distinguished from the Egyptians by that fact. Moses was a shepherd as was David.

In a familiar Old Testament image both God and the leaders of Israel were regarded as shepherds of the people with the nation as their flock. See that in Psalm 23 or in Jeremiah chapter 3 verse 15 or 23 verse 1 to 4 and most strikingly perhaps in Ezekiel chapter 34. Moses was a shepherd and he delivered Israel from Pharaoh as a shepherd using a shepherd's rod to strike the enemy of his people and leading Israel through the wilderness like a flock.

This is the way it's described in Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11 to 13. Moses first encounter with the Lord was while keeping watch over his father-in-law's flock. He saw an angelic appearance with glory phenomena, something that probably occurred at night considering the appearance of fire and he was given the further sign that he would later worship the Lord on Mount Horeb with the people after bringing them out of Egypt.

The shepherds and Luke are watching their flocks when they are given a glorious angelic appearance accompanied with the glory of the Lord and are also given a further sign and I think we should notice the parallels between Exodus chapter 3 verse 12 and Luke chapter 2 verse 12. In Exodus 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. In Luke chapter 2 verse 12 and this will be a sign for you you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

The contrast within the parallel is striking however. The sign received by Luke's shepherds is that of a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths laid in a manger. The sign given to Moses, the pyrotechnics of Israel's encounter with and worship of the Lord at Sinai is eclipsed by the sign of an infant in a feeding trough.

In both cases shepherds are led to an encounter with the Lord. In the first the Lord is shrouded in the dread darkness of the thundering and fiery glory cloud and in the second he has come as a swaddled child in a manger. The significance of the sign of the swaddled child in a Bethlehem manger being given to shepherds probably arises from Old Testament prophecy.

The Old Testament foretold the coming of a messianic shepherd from the line and the town of David. Ezekiel chapter 34 verse 23 and I will set up over them one shepherd my servant David and he shall feed them he shall feed them and be their shepherd. In Micah chapter 5 verse 2 to 5 but you O Bethlehem of Rather who are too little to be among the clans of Judah from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel whose coming forth is from of old from ancient days therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel and he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God and they shall dwell secure for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth and he shall be their peace.

An infant in a sheep's manger in Bethlehem the town of David's own birth is a sign that she who is in labor has brought forth. We can hear the story of Rachel in the background of Micah's prophecy just before the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel Jacob is told that kings will come from his loins and while journeying towards Bethlehem Rachel gives birth to Benjamin and dies. That story lies in the background of Micah chapter 4 and 5 but now Bethlehem has been reached and the true king is to be born.

The shepherds symbolizing the leaders of Israel encounter the promised great shepherd however there's a surprise the one who was to feed the people as his flock is himself in the feeding trough. The Messiah will feed his flock but not in the way that people might have expected. He will be their food.

Moses had a significant and foreshadowing encounter with the shepherds at a well in Midian prior to his encounter with the Lord at the burning bush. He delivered the seven daughters of Jethro from the abusive shepherds and watered their flocks. The one drawn from the water became the one who gave water in the wilderness and his later ministry involved resisting false shepherds and leading and watering the people as the Lord's flock in the wilderness.

And there's also foreshadowing in Luke's account of the shepherds. Later in Luke's gospel he describes Joseph of Arimathea requesting the body of Jesus from Pilate in Luke chapter 23 verse 53. The comparison with the description of the birth of Jesus is a

pronounced one.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn. The child wrapped in linen cloths and laid in the manger is later wrapped in linen garments and laid in the tomb. The comparisons don't end here.

Shortly after the wrapping of the body of Jesus and laying it in the manger or the tomb there is a dazzling appearance of angels. Once again a sign is given but the sign is no longer the wrapped body of Jesus in a stone container but it's the unwrapped linen garments and the empty tomb. The women within Luke's resurrection account both received the angelic message and serve as the angels the apostolic shepherds.

And in both cases the result is marvelling. We see that in chapter 2 verse 18 and in chapter 24 verse 12. The conclusion of Luke's gospel also tells the story of the shepherds.

There the apostolic shepherds are charged as witnesses of the resurrection who will make widely known the fulfilled sign concerning the Son. We could compare chapter 24 verses 45 to 49 with chapter 2 verse 17 here. The gospel ends with words that echo the end of the account of the shepherds visit.

In Luke 24 52 to 53 and they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the temple blessing God. In Luke 2 verse 20 and the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them. Luke's account of the shepherds is the story of a wondrous and remarkable sign.

It's reminiscent of the sign of the burning bush. It's anticipatory of the sign of the empty tomb and it's revelatory of the promised arrival of the Davidic shepherd. The shepherd Moses' burning bush anticipated the greater sign of the burning mountain of Sinai as the Lord's presence descended upon it appearing to the people that Moses shepherded out of Egypt.

The wrapped child in the manger seen by the Bethlehem shepherds anticipated the greater sign of the unwrapped linen garments in the empty tomb to the apostolic shepherds. The account of the shepherds as witnesses, the bursting forth in praise, the theme of rejoicing and people pondering things in their hearts also connects this account with that which precedes it in the account of John the Baptist's birth and Zachariah's song of praise. Once again the purpose of such an account is to help the reader to interpret the meaning of the events.

The angels are bringing good news of the birth of the Davidic Messiah to shepherds. Some have observed that the language of Lord, good news and Savior were all terms that were promptly used within the imperial cult concerning the Emperor with whose

action in calling a census this chapter was opened. If Matthew frames Jesus as a challenger to Herod as the king of the Jews, Luke might be framing Jesus as one whose kingdom will eclipse that of Rome.

A question to consider. This chapter begins with the actions of the great Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus but rather than sending heavenly emissaries to give the news of the birth of this new king to Caesar, God sends them to some small-town shepherds on the night shift. What are some of the things that we learn about the character of the kingdom of God from our passage?