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The priests and Levites. Jesus anointed at Bethany and eats the Passover with his disciples.

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

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Transcript

Numbers chapter 18. So the Lord said to Aaron, You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear iniquity connected with the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear iniquity connected with your priesthood. And with you bring your brothers also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may join you and minister to you while you and your sons with you are before the tent of the testimony.

They shall keep guard over you and over the whole tent, but shall not come near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar, lest they and you die. They shall join you and keep guard over the tent of meeting for all the service of the tent, and no outsider shall come near you. And you shall keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar, that there may never again be wrath on the people of Israel.

And behold, I have taken your brothers, the Levites, from among the people of Israel.

They are a gift to you, given to the Lord, to do the service of the tent of meeting. And you and your sons with you shall guard your priesthood for all that concerns the altar and that is within the veil, and you shall serve.

I give your priesthood as a gift, and any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. Then the Lord spoke to Aaron, Behold, I have given you charge of the contributions made to me, all the consecrated things of the people of Israel. I have given them to you as a portion and to your sons as a perpetual Jew.

This shall be yours of the most holy things, reserved from the fire. Every offering of theirs, every grain offering of theirs, and every sin offering of theirs, and every guilt offering of theirs, which they render to me, shall be most holy to you and to your sons. In a most holy place you shall eat it.

Every male may eat it. It is holy to you. This also is yours, the contribution of their gift, all the wave offerings of the people of Israel.

I have given them to you and to your sons and daughters with you as a perpetual Jew. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. All the best of the oil and all the best of the wine and of the grain, the first fruits of what they give to the Lord, I give to you.

The first ripe fruits of all that is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.

Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, whether man or beast, which they offer to the Lord, shall be yours. Nevertheless, the firstborn of man you shall redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And their redemption price, at a month old you shall redeem them, you shall fix at five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty garrows.

But the firstborn of a cow, or the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem. They are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar, and shall burn their fat as a food offering, with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

But their flesh shall be yours, as the breast that is waved, and as the right thigh are yours. All the holy contributions that the people of Israel present to the Lord, I give to you, and to your sons and daughters with you, as a perpetual Jew. It is a covenant of salt forever before the Lord for you, and for your offspring with you.

And the Lord said to Aaron, You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion, and your inheritance among the people of Israel. To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting, so that the people of Israel do not come near the tent of meeting, lest they bear sin and die.

But the Levites shall do the service of the tent of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a perpetual statute throughout your generations, and among the people of Israel they shall have no inheritance. For the tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as a contribution to the Lord, I have given to the Levites for an inheritance.

Therefore I have said to them that they shall have no inheritance among the people of Israel. And the Lord spoke to Moses, Moreover you shall speak and say to the Levites, When you take from the people of Israel the tithe that I have given you from them for your inheritance, then you shall present a contribution from it to the Lord, a tithe of the tithe. And your contribution shall be counted to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor, and as the fullness of the winepress.

So you shall also present a contribution to the Lord from all your tithes, which you receive from the people of Israel. And from it you shall give the Lord's contribution to Aaron the priest. Out of all the gifts to you, you shall present every contribution due to the Lord, from each its best part is to be dedicated.

Therefore you shall say to them, When you have offered from it the best of it, then the rest shall be counted to the Levites as produce of the threshing floor, and as produce of the winepress. And you may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it is your reward in return for your service in the tent of meeting. And you shall bear no sin by reason of it, when you have contributed the best of it.

But you shall not profane the holy things of the people of Israel, lest you die. To understand the placing of Numbers 18, we should remind ourselves of the end of chapter 17, in verses 12 to 13. And the people of Israel said to Moses, Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone.

Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish? Once again, appreciating the interplay between law and narrative in Numbers illuminates a passage like this. It helps us to understand why it is where it is.

The law here grows out of the narrative, and the narrative also helps us to understand the law's rationale and purpose. The whole chapter also settles issues raised in the rebellion of as the Lord explicitly states the various duties and prerogatives of the priests and the Levites. At the start of this passage, God directly addresses Aaron, which is very unusual.

God almost invariably addresses either Moses alone, or occasionally Moses and Aaron together. Leviticus chapter 10 verse 8, after the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, is the only other case outside of this chapter where the Lord addresses Aaron by himself alone. The Lord is giving Aaron a sense of his more particular office and privileges here, which I think explains why he is addressed in such a manner.

The provision of Aaron and his sons and the Levites ensured that the tabernacle could be in the midst of the camp without the people being destroyed. Aaron and his sons would serve on behalf of the people in the tent of meeting, while the Levites would guard Aaron and his sons and the tabernacle. By guarding the tabernacle, the Levites would ensure that no unauthorized person entered it and brought wrath upon Israel.

If they transgressed by coming near to the vessels of the sanctuary or to the altar, both they and Aaron would be judged. So there are restrictions upon the more general Israelites, but also restrictions upon the Levites. And this is elaborated further.

Aaron and his sons keep guard over the sanctuary and over the altar and serve in those matters, while the Levites are given by God to Aaron to guard and to do the more general service of the tent of meeting. Now we should observe that the two key verbs here describing the tasks of Aaron, his sons and the Levites, guard and serve, are the same verbs that we find in Genesis chapter 2 verse 15. The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

Recognizing that connection, we can see that Eden was a sanctuary and also that the tabernacle is a new Eden. If the sanctuary is violated, the judgment will fall upon Aaron and the Levites. As Gordon Wenham remarks, they act as spiritual lightning conductors.

They address the concern of the Israelites that's expressed at the end of chapter 17 in this way. They are a hedge of protection given by the Lord to the Israelites. And this also helps us better to understand that the priests aren't being exalted for their own personal sakes, as Korah had suggested.

Rather, it's for the sake of all the people. All the people are benefiting from having the Levites and the priests in this position. Aaron and the priests do not have the regular inheritance in the land that the other tribes enjoy.

Rather, the Lord is their inheritance. They are the palace servants of the divine king. They receive as their portion food from the Lord's table.

They receive Jews from the holy things, from the parts of the grain offerings, the purification offerings, and the trespass offerings that are not offered on the altar itself. These can be eaten by clean males of Aaron's house in a most holy place. The wave offerings and the contributions from the peace offerings, all devoted things such as things dedicated to God and vows, the first fruits and the flesh of firstborn clean animals, and the redemption money for unclean animals and firstborn children would be Aaron's and his family's.

And this would be a covenant of salt. Why salt? Because salt endures and preserves. So it's an everlasting covenant between the Lord and Aaron's household.

The Levites, as their inheritance, receive all of the tithes of Israel for their service of the

Tent of Meeting and for serving to protect the rest of Israel from the threat of divine judgment. The final section of this chapter is addressed not to Aaron but to Moses, which is fitting because it's concerning what the Levites had to give to Aaron. And had that been given to Aaron as an instruction, it would seem that he was putting himself over the Levites rather than God instructing this.

The Levites themselves have to present a tenth of the tenth that they receive, the first and the best part to the priests. After they have done that, the rest is theirs to consume as they wish. The Levites portion is a very large one.

However, it depended upon the people's faithfulness in paying it, which was a very real problem as we see in places like Malachi 3 verses 8 to 10. Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, How have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions you are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. The chapter ends with a warning that the Levites don't profane the holy things of Israel lest they die.

And this, I think, draws our attention once more back to the story of the rebellion of Korah. The judgment that fell upon Korah and the rebels was precisely for their failure to observe this commandment. This chapter then serves to formalise and gather in one place the prerogatives of the priests and the Levites.

It addresses the presenting issue of the rebellion of Korah. And by doing all of this after the people's recognition of their great danger and their need for protection from the glorious presence of God in their midst, it gives the rationale for the priesthood and the Levites. In so doing, the interplay of law and narrative in chapters 16 to 18 gives us a sense of the necessity, the importance, and the nature of the Levitical and priestly offices and roles.

A question to consider. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9 verses 11 to 14, the Apostle Paul writes, If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

How, considering this passage and others in the New Testament, might the Old Testament teaching concerning the Levites and the priests inform us and our practice in the new covenant? What significance, for instance, can be seen in the dependence of

ministers upon the gifts of the people of God? Mark chapter 14 verses 1 to 25. It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him. For they said, not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people.

And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor. And they scolded her.

But Jesus said, Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want you can do good for them, but you will not always have me.

She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money, and he sought an opportunity to betray him. And on the first day of unleavened bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover? And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you.

Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, The teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples? And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. There prepare for us. And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

And when it was evening he came with the twelve, and as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, Truly I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me. They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, Is it I? He said to them, It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him.

But woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would have been better for that man if he had not been born. And as they were eating he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, Take, this is my body.

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank

of it. And he said to them, This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.

Mark 14 begins by telling us that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread was coming after two days. The timing was important. The Passover was the 14th of the month of Nisan, followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, recalling the deliverance from Egypt.

The Passover lamb, the death of the firstborn, all of these things were associated with that time. Passover was an event charged with significance in the memory of Israel, and so the events of the Passion and the Resurrection occurring at this time was of great significance. It's important to consider that as this was one of the pilgrim feasts, Jerusalem would have been packed with people coming up for it, maybe over a couple of hundred thousand people.

All of Israel's attention would be drawn towards Jerusalem over this week, so Jesus' death and resurrection were occurring at a crucial time, when people from all Israel gathered together in its capital. The chief priests and the scribes were then seeking to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. Jesus is a genuine threat to their power and influence, as has been seen in the previous chapter, where his support from the crowd and his ability to outwit them really puts them in a difficult position.

They don't want to capture and kill Jesus during the feast, and certainly not to do so openly, precisely because that would draw so much attention, and the unmanageable crowd might cause all sorts of problems. While Jesus is staying in Bethany, in the Mount of Olives, in the house of Simon the leper, he is reclining at a meal, and a woman comes with an alabaster flask of nard and pours it over his head. There are similar yet different anointing stories in each of the four Gospels, although Luke's story in Luke chapter 7 verses 36 to 50 is set much earlier in the narrative, and focuses upon themes of love and forgiveness.

It suggests that this might be a different event that's being recorded. Each of Matthew, Mark and John, however, connect their anointing story with the death and the burial of Christ. It anticipates the fate of his body, and directly leads into the Passion narrative in some way or other.

In John, it's connected with Jesus' own wiping of his disciples' feet. In Matthew, as in Mark, it introduces the Passion narrative itself. Something very important is happening here.

It's an extravagant and a costly action, and Jesus sees it as preparing him for his burial. It's an act that values Jesus himself. Jesus is being treated like a king, but also in other ways, he's being treated like a lover.

In Song of Songs chapter 1 verse 12, I think we see part of the background for this. While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance. Song of Songs, this song of the love between the king and a woman.

And here I think we have that alluded to. Jesus, throughout the Gospel of Mark, is the kingly figure. And here we have a woman treating him as the kingly figure, but also as the kingly bridegroom.

The disciples are indignant over the cost of the ointment, but they fail to appreciate the value of the one to whom it is given. Jesus declares that it is a beautiful thing that she has done, and that the poor they will always have with them. The timing of this action is critical.

This isn't just an action performed upon Christ at any point in his ministry. The importance of this action is seen in the fact that it occurs in the few days running up to his death. This is preparing Christ for his burial.

This is an action that anticipates that Christ won't be with them for much longer. They will have the poor with them after that week, but they will not have Christ with them to anoint in the same way. And indeed, after Christ has departed, it will be in the service of the poor that the anointing of Christ occurs.

We minister to the body of Christ and show our devotion and love for him by taking care of his people who are in need. Jesus declares that it's the story of the establishment of the kingdom through the action of Jesus Christ in his life, his death, and his resurrection. And that the woman is playing an important role within that story that she has a noteworthy part to play.

At this point, Judas goes to the chief priests and betrays Jesus. This would have been a stroke of good fortune from the chief priest's perspective, because they would struggle to arrest Jesus secretly and do so before the start of the feast otherwise. But Judas's willing involvement and his knowledge of where Christ would be and his involvement in different locations would enable them to do so in a far more efficient manner.

The presence of money in both these stories, the question of why the ointment wasn't sold for money rather than being expended upon Christ's body, and then the sale of Christ's body as it were for money by Judas, maybe helps us to see something of a common theme connecting these two stories. The failure to perceive Christ's value and the value of Christ's body is beneath both of these accounts. Money is valued more than the person.

At this point, it's the first day of Unleavened Bread. Now presumably this is not strictly speaking the first day of Unleavened Bread. It's the first day of the feast.

It's the Passover. It's the 14th of the month and the next day would be the first of the

seven days of Unleavened Bread, but the larger festival could be spoken of as the Feast of Unleavened Bread connected with the Passover. It would be on that day, the 14th of the month, that they would kill the Passover lamb in preparation for the feast.

The dating and the timing of these events and particularly the way that we are to reconcile the events as they're told in John's Gospel with the events as they're narrated in the Synoptics is a matter of considerable debate. It might be possible for instance if we reckon the day from sunset to sunset that this is all taking place on the night before the afternoon in which the Passover lamb would be sacrificed, and so it's the same day but not as we would recognise it. As we would recognise it in our reckoning of a day, it's the day beforehand.

So this is happening on the evening and then Jesus ends up being taken that evening. He's brought to Pilate in the morning and then he's crucified around the time that the Passover lamb would be sacrificed. This would explain for instance why certain actions that are performed by Joseph of Arimathea and others could be performed without a breaking of the laws of the feast and the Sabbath.

Various other suggestions have been made however. They prepare for Jesus to eat the Passover meal and it's interesting that Jesus is spoken of as the one who's eating the Passover meal as if it's Jesus' meal not the meal of all of them together. He sends his disciples into the city to prepare to celebrate the Passover together.

They're sent and they're told that they will see a man carrying a jar of water. Jesus knows in advance who they will meet and it's important in the context that it gives them assurance that he knows what's ahead, that he's not stepping into these events blind. He knows exactly what's taking place and from the triumphal entry when they were given the instructions to go into the town and to get the donkey, they have been assured that Jesus knows what's taking place, that things are under his control even though he's facing a terrible fate.

Again the request is made to the man, where is my guest room where I may eat? The suggestion once again being that the meal is particularly associated with Christ. It's Jesus' meal. He will eat with his disciples but he is the one who's the host.

He's the one that the meal is about. Jesus eats the meal with the twelve, presumably the only ones present with him and the shadow of the original Passover is starting to be felt. This is a Passover meal or at least a Passover associated meal and they have a sense that something is off.

Jesus' tone may be sombre in a way that they do not yet fully understand and then Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him and they become sorrowful. They're wondering who is it? Each question, is it I? They doubt their own hearts more readily than they doubt Judas who's one of their number. Jesus goes on to make clear that the

son of man goes as it has been written of him.

This is his destiny. This is not something that's happened accidentally, that's blown things off course. This is what was always intended.

It was what was written and though there will be judgment upon the person who brought this betrayal about, the betrayal is what God intended and purposed. Jesus and his disciples are eating a Passover meal or at least a meal associated with the Passover. It's crucial to see that Jesus isn't just taking up any old food and drink.

He's taking up elements that are charged with great historical and symbolic and ceremonial meaning. These are elements that are part of a larger meal and when those elements are taken, they take with them the fabric of the symbolism of the meal itself. So what Jesus is doing is taking something already freighted with meaning and symbolism and taking that pre-existing symbolism and relating it to himself.

In this case, the symbolism is that of the unleavened bread associated with the Messiah. It's broken and distributed and participated as his body. It's a self-communication in symbol, a real communication of himself in the symbol of something that was already associated with the Messiah.

Jesus speaks of the blood of the new covenant poured out for many, taking words I think from Isaiah chapter 53 verse 12. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many and he shall divide the spoil with the strong because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors yet he bore the sin of many and makes intercession for the transgressors. The pouring out of blood is also a sacrificial action.

Poured out as part of the blood right around the base of the altar. For instance, Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Exodus chapter 24 verse 6 as the covenant of Sinai is being established.

The story of Exodus 24 is an important one for the background. This is where the covenant is established through sacrifice and the blood of the covenant is spoken of in that particular context. Blood sprinkled on the people and cast against the altar.

This blood right was for purification, for disinfecting as it were the people and the temple of the pollution of their sins. It is also a means of establishing a new covenant. In Exodus chapter 24 verse 8 and Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said behold the blood of the covenant the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.

And then in Zechariah chapter 9 verse 11 as for you also because of the blood of my covenant with you I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. God is going to deliver his people through this blood of a new covenant. The wine also anticipates drinking in the kingdom.

The wine is associated both with the blood that Christ is about to shed but also with the wine of the wedding feast of the kingdom that is anticipated. These two things meet together in Christ's gift of the wine. There's also a statement of abstinence that he will not drink of it again until this point.

It might make us think of the Nazarite vow. The Nazarite vow to abstain from wine and fruit of the grape. A vow of temporary dedication to a sort of priestly status for a period of time often for a specific mission maybe warfare.

It seems appropriate in this context here that Christ would take such a vow. That Christ would be in preparation for his great act of deliverance, his great battle with the enemy that he would take this vow of abstinence. That he would dedicate himself fully and then go out on the battlefield.

A question to consider. Many of the details that we've encountered within our passage might remind us of details that we meet in 1st Samuel chapter 9 and 10. Can you identify some of these details and what might we learn from the associations between these stories?