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November 10th: 2 Kings 23 & Acts 13:13-43

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Josiah's reforms. Paul's first sermon in the book of Acts.

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

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Transcript

2 Kings 23. Then the king sent, and all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord.

And with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before the Lord to walk after the Lord and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book.

And all the people joined in the covenant. And the king commanded Hilkiah the high priest and the priests of the second order and the keepers of the threshold to bring out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron and carried their

ashes to Bethel.

And he deposed the priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem, those also who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and the moon and the constellations and all the host of the heavens. And he brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord outside Jerusalem to the brook Kidron and burned it at the brook Kidron and beat it to dust and cast the dust of it upon the graves of the common people. And he broke down the houses of the male cult prostitutes who were in the house of the Lord, where the women wove hangings for the Asherah.

And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Judah and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geba to Beersheba. And he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua, the governor of the city, which were on one's left at the gate of the city. However, the priests of the high places did not come up to the altar of the Lord in Jerusalem, but they ate unleavened bread among their brothers.

And he defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech. And he removed the horses that the kings of Judah had dedicated to the sun at the entrance to the house of the Lord, by the chamber of Nathan-Malak the Chamberlain, which was in the precincts. And he burned the chariots of the sun with fire.

And the altars on the roof of the upper chamber of Ahaz, which the kings of Judah had made, and the altars that Manasseh had made in the two courts of the house of the Lord, he pulled down and broke in pieces and cast the dust of them into the brook Kidron. And the king defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem to the south of the mount of corruption, which Solomon the king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth, the abomination of the Sidonians, and for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites. And he broke in pieces the pillars, and cut down the Asherim, and filled their places with the bones of men.

Moreover the altar at Bethel, the high place erected by Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, that altar with the high place he pulled down and burned, reducing it to dust. He also burned the Asherah. And as Josiah turned he saw the tombs there on the mount, and he sent and took the bones out of the tombs and burned them on the altar and defiled it, according to the word of the Lord that the man of God proclaimed who had predicted these things.

Then he said, What is that monument that I see? And the men of the city told him, It is the tomb of the man of God who came from Judah and predicted these things that you have done against the altar at Bethel. And he said, Let him be, let no man move his bones. So they let his bones alone with the bones of the prophet who came out of

Samaria.

And Josiah removed all the shrines also of the high places that were in the cities of Samaria which kings of Israel had made, provoking the Lord to anger. He did to them according to all that he had done at Bethel. And he sacrificed all the priests of the high places who were there on the altars, and burned human bones on them.

Then he returned to Jerusalem. And the king commanded all the people, Keep the Passover to the Lord your God, as it is written in this book of the covenant. For no such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel, or of the kings of Judah.

But in the eighteenth year of King Josiah this Passover was kept to the Lord in Jerusalem. Moreover, Josiah put away the mediums, and the necromancers, and the household gods, and the idols, and all the abominations that were seen in the land of Judah and in Jerusalem, that he might establish the words of the law that were written in the book that Hilkiah the priest found in the house of the Lord. Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to the law of Moses.

Nor did any like him arise after him. Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, My name shall be there.

Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and all that he did, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Judah? In his days Pharaoh Necho king of Egypt went up to the king of Assyria to the river Euphrates. King Josiah went to meet him, and Pharaoh Necho killed him at Megiddo, as soon as he saw him. And his servants carried him dead in a chariot from Megiddo, and brought him to Jerusalem, and buried him in his own tomb.

And the people of the land took Jehoahaz, the son of Josiah, and anointed him, and made him king in his father's place. Jehoahaz was twenty-three years old when he began to reign, and he reigned three months in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hermutal, the daughter of Jeremiah of Libna.

And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done. And Pharaoh Necho put him in bonds at Riblah, in the land of Hamath, that he might not reign in Jerusalem, and laid on the land a tribute of a hundred talents of silver, and a talent of gold. And Pharaoh Necho made Eliakim the son of Josiah king in the place of Josiah his father, and changed his name to Jehoiakim.

And he took Jehoahaz away, and he came to Egypt and died there. And Jehoiakim gave the silver and the gold to Pharaoh, but he taxed the land to give the money according to the command of Pharaoh. He exacted the silver and the gold of the people of the land, from every one according to his assessment, to give it to Pharaoh Necho.

Jehoiakim was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Zubida, the daughter of Padiah, of Rumah. And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to all that his fathers had done.

Second Kings chapter 23 belongs with chapter 22. It continues the account of Josiah's reforms, especially following the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. While Hezekiah had responded to the news that Judah would not meet its end in his reign with a complacent relief, Josiah responds to the same news with a reforming urgency.

He is not merely concerned to be reprieved himself, he is concerned for the well-being of the nation. He assembles the entire congregation to hear the book of the covenant, everyone is brought together, which was the procedure for a covenant renewal ceremony. Deuteronomy had mandated such a ceremony every seven years during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Deuteronomy chapter 31 verses 9-13 reads, Then Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. And Moses commanded them, At the end of every seven years, at the set time in the year of release, at the Feast of Booths, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God, at the place that He will choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, men, women, and little ones, and the sojourner within your towns, that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, and be careful to do all the words of this law, and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land that you are going over the Jordan to possess.

We find such comprehensive covenant ceremonies in Deuteronomy chapter 29 and in Joshua chapter 24. Josiah stands beside the pillar as he makes the covenant on his own part, and the people join in. This is not just a renewal of the commitments of kingly office as such, it's a renewal of the Mosaic covenant.

Josiah also stood by the pillar back in 2 Kings chapter 11 verses 12-14. Some have taken the pillar to be a reference to a platform upon which the king would stand. It might perhaps be the pillar of Boaz however, representing the king alongside the priestly pillar of Jacob.

These are the two pillars which represent the two leaders of the nation. Having renewed the covenant, Josiah undertakes comprehensive reforms. He purges the land of idolatry,

beginning in the temple.

2 Chronicles chapter 34 verses 3-7 mentions such reforms beginning in the twelfth year of Josiah's reign. So this is probably a great intensification of reforms that were already ongoing, after the initial reforms had led to the discovery of the book of the law in the temple. Josiah might hold out hope for a reprieve of Jerusalem and Judah.

However whether or not such a reprieve would be forthcoming, he pursues the reforms because they are the right thing to do. Every single idol and false form of worship is purged from the land. He deposes the priests who had been involved in worship on the high places.

He removes the priests of Baal and the worship of the heavens. He removes the Asherah from the house of the Lord. Manasseh had set up an Asherah in the house and then removed it in the course of his repentance.

Perhaps we are to assume that Ammon simply reversed the reforms of Manasseh in his short reign. Josiah is concerned not merely to remove such idols and idolaters but utterly to remove them, spiritually to scorch the earth where they once were so that they will never return and take root there again. This is generally accomplished by defiling their sites with dead bodies or grinding things to dust and putting them in a defiled place.

We get a sense of how bad things had become when we learn of the non-priestly men which some have taken to be male cult prostitutes and women serving the shrine of Asherah in the temple. He deposes the unfaithful priests, reducing them to the status of lay Levites. The reforms are extensive.

They run throughout the land before returning to Jerusalem and dealing with the ways that pagan worship had become embedded at the heart of the nation. He follows the pattern of Deuteronomy chapter 12 verses 1-4. These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations which you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their ashram with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place.

You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. Josiah tears down and purges the whole stubborn legacy of idolatry and false worship in the land. Altars and shrines to false gods set up by Ahaz, Manasseh and Solomon are all destroyed.

These may have been destroyed on previous occasions but they seem to have been re-established afterwards. Josiah is concerned that their destruction be complete and

irreversible. The legacy of idolatry goes all the way back through the Book of the Kings, right back to Solomon.

Josiah extends the reach of his reforms, beyond Jerusalem and up to Bethel, which had been the principal cultic site of the northern kingdom of Israel. It was at Bethel that Jeroboam erected one of his golden calves. Just as he uproots the idolatry of Solomon which set the southern kingdom on its false course, he goes down to the root of the northern kingdom's idolatry, in the altar and high place of Jeroboam in Bethel.

His actions fulfil the prophecy of the man of God from Judah, way back in 1 Kings chapter 13, shortly after the split in the kingdom. 1 Kings chapter 13 verses 1-5 read, And behold a man of God came out of Judah by the word of the Lord to Bethel. Jeroboam was standing by the altar to make offerings.

And the man cried against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, O altar, altar, thus says the Lord, behold a son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name, and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who make offerings on you, and human bones shall be burned on you. And he gave a sign the same day, saying, This is the sign that the Lord has spoken. Behold, the altar shall be torn down, and the ashes that are on it shall be poured out.

And when the king heard the saying of the man of God, which he cried against the altar at Bethel, Jeroboam stretched out his hand from the altar, saying, Seize him. And his hand, which he stretched out against him, dried up, so that he could not draw it back to himself. The altar also was torn down, and the ashes poured out from the altar, according to the sign that the man of God had given by the word of the Lord.

The words of the prophet having been fulfilled, the mind of the hearer of the books of the kings should be taken back to 1 Kings chapter 13, considering the story of the man of God from Judah and the old prophet from Bethel, considering the ways that it is a sign of the fate of the two nations. The fulfillment of all of this is underlined as Josiah sees the monument that was set up to the man of God from Judah and asks concerning it, learning of the prophecy that the man of God from Judah had made, he leaves the monument alone. The old prophet of Bethel is referred to as coming from Samaria, which is anachronistic, as Samaria wasn't built until the time of Omri.

However, as the land was later referred to more generally as Samaria, this isn't improper, and it has the effect of underlining the symbolic association between the northern kingdom and the old prophet. Josiah sacrifices priests of the high places on their altars in Samaria too, completely defiling them, so that they could never be restored. Continuing his reforms, Josiah establishes a great Passover celebration, according to the instructions of Deuteronomy chapter 16 verses 1 to 8. The Lord will give you the land of Egypt in haste, that all the days of your life you may remember the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.

No leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory for seven days, nor shall any of the flesh that you sacrifice on the evening of the first day remain all night until morning. You may not offer the Passover sacrifice within any of your towns that the Lord your God is giving you, but at the place that the Lord your God will choose to make His name dwell in it. There you shall offer the Passover sacrifice in the evening at sunset, at the time you came out of Egypt, and you shall cook it and eat it at the place that the Lord your God will choose.

And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents. For six days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a solemn assembly to the Lord your God. You shall do no work on it.

2 Chronicles chapter 30 records a great Passover celebration held by Hezekiah, which isn't recorded in 2 Kings. This might make the hearer of 2 Kings wonder whether the book's claims about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover are really accurate. However, 2 Chronicles, which records Hezekiah's Passover, is no less clear about the uniqueness of Josiah's Passover.

2 Chronicles chapter 35 verse 18 reads, No Passover like it had been kept in Israel since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings of Israel had kept such a Passover as was kept by Josiah, and the priests and the Levites and all Judah and Israel who were present, and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Hezekiah's Passover had been irregular in its timing, and he had prayed to the Lord to cleanse the people, as many of them weren't ceremonially clean.

Josiah's Passover, by contrast, is celebrated at the proper time and on a grander scale. It is described in great detail in 2 Chronicles chapter 35. We get some sense of the scale of that Passover in verses 7-9 of that chapter.

Then Josiah contributed to the lay people as Passover offerings for all who were present, lambs and young goats from the flock, to the number of 30,000, and 3,000 bulls, these were from the king's possessions. And his officials contributed willingly to the people, to the priests and to the Levites. Hilkiah, Zechariah, and Jehoiah, the chief officers of the house of God, gave to the priests for the Passover offerings 2,600 Passover lambs and 300 bulls.

Cunaniah also, and Shemaiah, and Nathanael, his brothers, and Hashebiah, and Jeiel, and Jezobab, the chiefs of the Levites, gave to the Levites for the Passover offerings 5,000 lambs and young goats and 500 bulls. Josiah was utterly unprecedented as a king in his faithfulness. He acted according to the great charge of the law in Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 5. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

However, despite everything that Josiah did, the Lord did not relent from the judgment

that he had declared upon the nation, a judgment that especially resulted from the provocations of Manasseh. Despite Manasseh's repentance and Josiah's great faithfulness, the wickedness of Manasseh's reign still had irrevocable consequences. Josiah's life ends tragically.

Pharaoh Necho of Egypt is going up to the king of Assyria at the river Euphrates. Egypt and Assyria were allied against Babylon at the time. Pharaoh Necho is just passing through the region on his way up to fight alongside the king of Assyria.

But Josiah unwisely inserts himself into the situation and he is killed by the Egyptians. There is a sort of unravelling that is occurring in the reign of Josiah. He removes idolatry and false worship from the land right down to its roots in Jeroboam and Solomon, taking us back to the very beginning of the books of the kings.

He then celebrates a great Passover celebration before being killed by the Egyptians. It is as if Josiah is moving backward through the history of the nation, setting its house in order before its inevitable descent into the grave of exile, symbolically foretold in the story of the man of God from Judah. In fulfilment of the prophecy of Huldah, he dies in relative peace before Babylon finally comes upon the nation.

Josiah is replaced by his son Jehoahaz, elsewhere called Shalom, who is chosen by the people of the land over some of his elder brothers. He only reigns for a short period of three months. Even in that brief time, however, he reverts to the wickedness of the former kings.

He is deposed by Pharaoh Necho, who had killed his father. Pharaoh Necho brings him in captivity to Ribla and places the land under a heavy tribute. Eliakim is put in his place and his name is changed to Jehoiakim.

Eliakim is the second son of Josiah and presumably is appointed as one who will support Egypt. The changing of his name is a curious detail, as Eliakim means God establishes, but Jehoiakim means Yahweh establishes. Perhaps this is designed to increase support from faithful worshippers of the Lord in Judah.

The tribute is required of the people of the land. According to the command of Pharaoh, it isn't raised from the king's treasuries or from the treasuries of the house of the Lord, but it seems to be a punitive tax upon rebellious people in a tributary nation. Jehoiakim reigns for 11 years and he continues the pattern of wickedness of his younger brother who preceded him and of the former kings of Judah.

A question to consider. Throughout the books of the kings we see much about the legacies of unfaithful rulers. Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, is the greatest example.

The sins of such men long outlived them and are still having their impact centuries later. When Jeziyah seeks to reform the nation, he needs to dislodge the stubborn roots of sin

that go all the way back to Solomon and Jeroboam, well over 300 years earlier. While several reform efforts had preceded him, none actually succeeded in uprooting these.

They seem to be removed, but they can spring back to life again. How do the books of the kings serve as a commentary upon the effects of sin over a great many generations in the life of a nation? How might this help us to think more carefully about some of the sins of our own nations? Acts chapter 13 verses 13 to 43 Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia, and John left them and returned to Jerusalem. But they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in Pisidia, and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down.

After the reading from the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it. So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hands, said, Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it, and for about forty years he put up with them in the wilderness.

And after destroying seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. All this took about four hundred and fifty years. And after that he gave them judges and told Samuel the prophet.

Then they asked for a king, and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, I have found in David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all my will. Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Saviour Jesus, as he promised.

Before his coming John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel, and as John was finishing his course he said, What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but behold, after me one is coming, the sandals whose feet I am not worthy to untie. Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation, for those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers, because they did not recognize him, nor understand the utterances of the prophets, which are read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him.

And though they found in him no guilt worthy of death, they asked Pilate to have him executed. And when they carried out all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. But God raised him from the dead, and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people.

And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm, You

are my son, today I have begotten you. And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David. Therefore he says also in another psalm, you will not let your holy one see corruption.

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption. But he whom God raised up did not see corruption. Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Beware therefore, lest what is said in the prophets should come about. Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish, for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you. As they went out, the people begged that these things might be told them the next Sabbath.

And after the meeting of the synagogue broke up, many Jews and devout converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who, as they spoke with them, urged them to continue in the grace of God. The heart of Acts chapter 13 contains one of the great sermons of the book of Acts, comparable to Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost or Stephen's speech in chapter 7. This is Paul's inaugural sermon in the book of Acts, and it might play a special role in characterising his message more generally. Craig Keener notes a number of elements of distinctively Pauline style, and some prominent themes of Pauline theology within it.

Paul, Barnabas and their companions had begun their mission on the island of Cyprus, from which they now sailed for the mainland of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey. From Perga they go about 100 miles north as the crow flies, up to the highlands. Pisidian Antioch is a different Antioch from the one from which they set out.

There were 16 different Antiochs in the ancient world. According to Josephus, there was a large Jewish population in the city, and about 2,000 Jewish families in the region. Paul and his companions go into a synagogue, and there's a reading from the law and the prophets, which would have been part of a regular synagogue service.

It's important to consider that such public readings of the scriptures were commonplace and routine. They would have sometimes been accompanied by some exposition, although this was likely less regular. Keener suggests that the messages were likely more focused on moral exhortation and comfort.

Those attending such synagogues would be expected to have a substantial familiarity with the scriptural text though. Paul and his companions are invited to speak by the rulers of the synagogue after the regular parts of the proceedings have occurred. This might be because it's become known that Paul is someone who has studied the law more

formally, and because Barnabas is a Levite.

Paul gets up to speak and he addresses the Jews present, along with the God-fearing Gentiles. It has been suggested that Paul would have been weaving together some of the liturgical readings in his message, connecting their message together and moving them into a greater message about Jesus. He retells in summary the entire history of the nation, from the Exodus to the raising up of David, recounting the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of the land, a period taking roughly 450 years.

He skates over the period of the judges prior to Samuel, before discussing King Saul, Israel's first but unsatisfactory king of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul of Tarsus' name has only just been switched to Paul in Luke's narrative, and the reference to Saul here might make us wonder whether there is a connection between the two. I believe that there is.

If we look through the Old Testament, we see that King Saul is in many ways a paradigmatic persecutor. He is the one who fights against the true king. He is the king of Israel, but he opposes David, the rightful successor.

He tries to kill him with his spear, he tries to put him in harm's way, fighting the Philistines. He is implacable in his pursuit of and his opposition to David. And yet God arrests him in his steps at various points, and there are some very strange twists in that story.

As we look through the story of Saul of Tarsus, we will notice a similar pattern. Saul begins as a zealous persecutor of the church, breathing out murderous threats, seeking to take the disciples into prison and bring them before the high priest and eventually put them to death. There is a similarity between these two characters, and within the Book of Acts, this is presented not just as a matter of persecuting the individual disciples, but as persecuting Christ himself.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Not just my disciples, but why do you persecute me? The greater David is asking Saul of Tarsus why he is pursuing him, why he is persecuting him, what he has done to deserve his opposition. In 1 Samuel chapter 20, we find David asking Jonathan a similar question about Saul. What have I done? What is my guilt? And what is my sin before your father that he seeks my life? Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? In 1 Samuel chapter 19, there is also an interesting incident that might remind us of Saul's conversion, or his illumination on the road to Damascus.

King Saul goes to pursue David to Niath in Ramah, and the Spirit of God comes upon him and he prophesies until he comes there. And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel, and lay naked all that day and all that night. Thus it is said, is Saul also among the prophets? It is a remarkable event, and it might recall some of the things that are described in connection with Saul's conversion event on the road to Damascus.

There is an interruption of his course of persecution and pursuit, and there is a period of waiting, all day and all night in the story of King Saul, and a number of days for Saul of Tarsus before Ananias comes and baptises him in the story of Acts. These parallels, a potential conversion event in what happens to King Saul when the Spirit comes upon him and he prophesies, and the question that David asks Jonathan, why is your father persecuting me, recall the events on the road to Damascus. But whereas King Saul arrests his pursuit of David only for a time, and it doesn't really amount to anything in the end, the arresting of Saul of Tarsus leads to a complete change.

From that point on, his character is completely transformed, he becomes the key apostle, even though he was the least of the apostles on account of his persecution of the church. King Saul said that he was from the least tribe, from the least family of that tribe in Israel, and yet God raised him up to be king. And there is something quite similar in the story of Saul of Tarsus.

He was the least qualified, the least worthy to be an apostle, but God raised him up in many ways to be the greatest of the apostles, or a leader among the apostles. Another thing to notice about these parallels is that David, as he is pursued by Saul, is let down through a window by Michael and escapes. A similar thing happens to Saul after his conversion.

He is let down through a gap in the wall of Damascus in a basket, and escapes while they are guarding the gates. That pursuit of Saul of Tarsus might remind us of the pursuit of David and his escape from King Saul, but there is a switch of the characters. The king who pursued the lion of the tribe of Judah is now changed to the one who is converted, and is a true servant of the king, and takes on the character of that king.

He too is trying to escape as King David did now, no longer the persecutor, but the one who is being pursued. Saul is the king who is removed in order that David, from whom comes the Messiah, will come on the scene. So that framework of Saul being replaced by David is at play within the book of Acts.

This might help us to understand why, in the immediately preceding passage to this, there is a switch from Saul to Paul. That switch of names draws our mind back to that replacement, that changing of the character of Saul. In his speech, Stephen had focused upon the characters of Joseph and Moses, and now Paul focuses upon David, because David is the ancestor of Jesus, who is his true son, and the one in whom the messianic hope of Israel is fulfilled.

Having introduced Jesus as the true son of David, he proceeds to tell the gospel story, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist and ending with the resurrection and the appointment of witnesses to it. It's worth remembering that Paul is addressing diaspora Jews here, who were distinct from the Jews of Palestine, whether in Jerusalem in particular, or Judea more generally. They had quite possibly gotten wind of some of the

events that had happened in Jerusalem concerning Jesus, and of the rapid rise of a new sect there, but they might not have known much beyond that.

However, they might be more familiar with the ministry of John the Baptist, which might be why Paul gives rather more attention to John's witness. Jesus was condemned by those who lived in Jerusalem and their rulers, because of their failure to recognise him or to understand the scriptures. They ironically fulfilled the scriptures by condemning Christ.

Speaking to diaspora Jews, the gospel's unflattering portrayal of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem might have had a different resonance. It's important that we bear in mind how diverse the Jewish population was, how widely spread out they were, how many internal sects and factions they had, and the differences between, for instance, a Jew of the ruling classes in Jerusalem, a poorer member of the crowd in Jerusalem, a Jew living in a Galilean village, a Samaritan, or an educated diaspora Jew with Jerusalem connections like Paul, or even a diaspora Jew without such connections, or extensive travel, living in a place like North Africa, for instance. Perhaps this might be one of the reasons why Paul mentions that Jesus' followers came with him from Galilee to Jerusalem.

They weren't Jerusalem insiders. In Jesus, God fulfilled the promises made to the fathers by raising Jesus up as the Davidic King. There is a fulfilment of the second psalm here, You are my son, today I have begotten you.

His raising from the dead fulfills the promises concerning the Davidic King, promises referenced in Isaiah chapter 55 verse 3 as being for the benefit of the whole people. The Davidic covenant concerns the elevation of the whole nation, in which all of the people are glorified. As in Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts chapter 2, Paul references Psalm 16 verse 10, making much the same argument from it as Peter did.

The psalm promises the raising up of David, but it can't ultimately refer to David himself, who died and was buried. Rather, it must refer to David the dynasty. The Davidic dynasty is raised up in Jesus of Nazareth.

Not just Jesus, but the Davidic dynasty seemed utterly dead. It's been removed, leaving only the stump of Jesse. But like a root out of dry ground, this one will rise up, the one who will fulfil the promises given to David, even when it seemed that David and his house were no more.

Through God's action in the resurrection, David does not see corruption, but reigns eternally in his greatest son, Jesus of Nazareth. Through Jesus, forgiveness of sins is proclaimed. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance in preparation for the forgiveness of sins that Jesus brings.

Through Jesus, justification is offered, total forgiveness, total clearing of the slate, which

the law of Moses could never offer or achieve. The term that Paul uses here is the term that he typically uses for justification. Translated as freed here, it helps us to capture some sense of the term justified that is often neglected.

We also encounter such a use of the verb in Romans 6, 7, for one who has died has been set free, or justified, from sin. In Christ, people can be placed in good standing with God through him, which they could never be by the law. They are released from the debt by forgiveness.

There is, however, a warning from Habakkuk 1, 5 attached. When God acts so powerfully and decisively in salvation, it is a most serious thing to reject, to neglect, or to scorn his deliverance. Responding faithfully is imperative, a matter of the utmost urgency and importance.

Those who scoff at God's salvation will perish utterly. The response of the people is very positive. After the meeting is over, many of the Jews, and the proselytes, and the God-fearers, follow after Paul and Barnabas.

They want to find out more, and Paul and Barnabas urge them to continue in the grace of God. A question to consider. In this, Paul's first sermon in the book of Acts, what are some of the connections that we could draw between his message here, and various themes that he brings out in his epistles?