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Israel's religious compromise and the Lord's judgment. Sons of the flesh and sons of promise.

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

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Transcript

Judges chapter 2. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-Herez, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers.

And there arose another generation after them, who did not know the Lord, or the work that He had done for Israel. And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt.

They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtoreth.

So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel. And He gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And He sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies.

Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress. Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.

Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they hoarded after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord. And they did not do so.

Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge. And He saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning, because of those who afflicted and oppressed them.

But whenever the judge died, they turned back, and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

And He said, Judah and Joseph go up, and then the angel of the Lord goes up in chapter 2 verse 1. The identity of this figure is a matter of some debate. Literally the messenger of the Lord, a case could be made for him being a prophet, an angel, or a theophanic manifestation of God himself. Back in Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 24, the angel of the Lord was introduced.

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries.

When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. It seems most likely to me that this is the figure that we encounter in Judges chapter 2. The angel of the Lord goes up from Gilgal to Bokim. Perhaps we are to identify the angel of the Lord here with the same commander of the army of the Lord that Joshua met near Gilgal at the end of Joshua chapter 5. The angel casts judgment upon Israel for its failure.

He recounts the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and condemns Israel for its failure to destroy the altars of the people of the land and their breaking of the requirement not to

enter into covenant with them. As a consequence of their unfaithfulness, the Lord will not drive out the Canaanites before them. Rather, the Canaanites will be a continual threat to them in fulfillment of the warning in Numbers chapter 33 verses 55 to 56.

However, we should note that in the angel of the Lord's speech, the people are not judged for failing to drive out all of the Canaanites. Rather, it is their failure to tear down the false worship of the Canaanites and to refrain from entering into covenant with them that they are condemned for. Israel's response to the angel's indictment suggests some degree of remorse or contrition for what they have done.

They even name the place after their weeping. However, as soon becomes apparent, even though they weep and make sacrifices, there is no significant and deep change. Bochem was most likely near Bethel, as the two are identified in the Septuagint.

The visit of the angel might also recall the judgment upon Adam and Eve in the garden. Verse 6 is a jarring break with the flow of the narrative, presuming that we are reading the preceding verses as having occurred after the death of Joshua. It seems that after the encounter with the angel at Bochem, Joshua dismisses the people.

However, this is likely a flashback. The first chapter had focused upon Israel's military failure. The second chapter focuses more upon their religious failure and their going after false gods.

Joshua dies at the age of 110. It's the same age as Joseph died at. If Joseph brought Israel out of the land, it was Joshua, a descendant of Joseph, who returned them.

Moses lived to be 120, 12 times 10, a number suggesting a full measure of Israel. However, 110 is 10 times 11, falling short from 12. There is a sense of incompleteness here.

Indeed, as James Jordan and James Bajon have observed, multiples of the number 11 occur at several points in the book of Judges. And here in Judges, we certainly get a sense of the way in which the work of Joshua was incomplete. And we also see reminders of the original situation of the Exodus, when we are told that Joshua and his generation died out, and a new generation arose who did not know the Lord or what he had done for Israel, especially when we consider the parallels between Joshua and Joseph.

Exodus chapter 1 verses 6 to 8 reads, Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation. But the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly. They multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. It's the same sort of thing that's happening here. The people of this new generation did not know the Lord.

They also have a very different character from the generation that preceded them. They

have not experienced his deliverances. Generations that have not had certain formative experiences can easily forget the lessons painfully learned by past generations.

So much of the Pentateuch was devoted to memorial, to remembrance, and to institutionalization of events, precisely in order to guard against such a scenario, to ensure that Israel never forgot the Lord in such a manner, never forgot the lessons that they had been taught in the time of the Exodus. The failure of Israel on the military front, their failure to drive out the Canaanites in chapter 1, was bad enough. However, here we see far more serious failures, as Israel goes after the gods of the Canaanites, the Baals and the Ashtoreth.

These are the gods of the people of the land. They're foreign gods that Israel had not known. These are gods that had not delivered them, that they had not experienced in salvation before.

Barry Webb notes the succession of verbs here that put the gravity of their sin into the sharpest relief. Served, abandoned, went after, prostrated themselves, abandoned and served. We should consider that they probably served these gods in large measure as a form of treaty making and assimilation to the ways of the Canaanites, who continued to dwell in their midst.

Religious syncretism, alliances and intermarriage went together and were the sort of strategies that people in Israel's precarious position in the land would be extremely tempted to adopt. The prospect of remaining distinct from the people in whose midst they dwelled or who dwelt in the midst of them was one that probably scared many of them. Such people could easily turn against them if the balance of power shifted.

So it seemed to make sense to worship their gods, to enter into treaties with them, to intermarry with them and in all ways possible to get on good terms with the neighbours. As a result of their unfaithfulness the Lord gave them into the hand of plunderers and acted against them. The Lord however took pity upon his people even in their unfaithfulness and raised up judges to deliver them.

He heard their groaning much as he had heard the groaning of the Israelites in Egypt. The judges were raised up as deliverers for Israel. They also, as implied by verse 17, served to proclaim the truth of the Lord and to establish some sort of true worship.

However, even if Israel temporarily improved in the days of a judge, they would soon return to their unfaithfulness becoming even worse than they were before. And as a consequence of their disobedience and unfaithfulness they would not enter into the full possession of the land. The Lord had declared by Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 24, Every place on which the sole of your foot treads shall be yours.

Your territory shall be from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the river, the river

Euphrates, to the western sea. However, now their territory would not expand beyond the gains made by Joshua. There would be people left in the land and they would become a snare and thorns in their side.

A question to consider, what lessons might we draw from Judges chapter 2's portrayal of the providence of God in the affairs of men in history? Galatians chapter 4, I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, crying, Abba, father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods.

But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain. Brothers, I entreat you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are.

You did me no wrong. You know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first, and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What then has become of your blessedness? For I testified to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me.

Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you, my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.

I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you. Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.

Now this may be interpreted allegorically. These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery.

She is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia. She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.

But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written, Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear! Break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labour! For the children of the desolate one will be more than those of the one who has a husband. Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.

But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the spirit, so also it is now. But what does the scripture say? Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave, but of the free woman.

Paul has just described the way in which the law served as a guardian, indeed as a jailer, until Christ came, and now in chapter 4 he develops that image further. Verses 1 to 7 of this chapter are largely a recapitulation of the verses that precede them in chapter 3 verses 23 to 29. Now before faith came we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

So then the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come we are no longer under a guardian. For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

It can be illuminating to read these verses alongside chapter 4 verses 1 to 7 and see the parallels between statements such as but now that faith has come and but when the fullness of time had come. There are also parallels between verses 3 to 6 of chapter 4 and chapter 3 verses 13 to 14. Paul gives the illustration of a child who is the heir of a great estate.

As long as the child is a minor though he does not have the management of the estate and can himself be under the supervision of the stewards of his father's estate. This period of subjection involves being under sin in verse 22 of chapter 3, under the law in verse 23 of chapter 3 and enslaved to the elementary principles of the world, verse 3 of this chapter. What the elementary principles of the world are is much debated.

Some have argued that they are rudimentary principles or basic teachings, others that they are elemental spirits. However I think the strongest case is that they refer to the physical elements. Another reference to these elements is found in Colossians chapter 2

verse 8 and 16 to 23.

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world and not according to Christ. Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come but the substance belongs to Christ.

Let no one disqualify you insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind and not holding fast the head from which the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used according to human precepts and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

In Colossians chapter 2 as in verses 8 to 10 of this chapter the elementary principles seem to refer to the physical cosmos. Old covenant religion was religion ruled by, ordered around and focused upon physical elements, upon times and seasons, upon matters of diet, upon various physical rituals such as circumcision and the various sacrifices etc. These things are not bad in themselves and properly used, some things like them can still have a place in worship and broader Christian practice.

However they represent a religion under the rule of the natural elements of the physical world, composed of sacrifice, principles of clean and unclean and calendrical feasts. In this respect faithful Jewish religion had a great deal in common with the religion of the pagans. This was religion in the flesh, religion under the guardianship of fleshly elements.

Israel had to relate to God in terms of physical sacrifices of specific animals, in terms of physical building and its furniture and the like. This system constructed of the elementary principles guarded and guided Israel in its childhood. However in the new covenant there is a move from the shadowy elements to the substance which is Christ.

We don't come under the rule of a physical temple but we relate to the body of Christ. We don't have the same physical sacrifices that we perform but we perform spiritual sacrifices on the basis of the once for all sacrifice of Christ. Our worship still involves symbolic mediation where physical elements can function as effective symbols of the spiritual acts we are performing.

But we no longer act in terms of symbolic intermediation where physical elements stand in the place of the spiritual realities so that we relate to the physical elements rather

than to the spiritual realities more directly. When the fullness of time came God sent his son. The son is born of a woman.

He is human. He is born as a human being of a human being. He is also the seed of the woman promised way back in Genesis chapter 3 15.

I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and her offspring. He shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel. He is born under the law, born under the old order of the elementary principles within the sacrificial system, the dietary laws, circumcision, the temple etc.

He redeems those under the law delivering them from slavery to the guardianship of the law so that they can enjoy the status and privilege of full sons entering into their inheritance. Just as God sent the son, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts so that we might relate to him as full sons and heirs. The period of supervision by the elementary principles was temporary.

It ended when the time came for the child to enter into the inheritance. For Gentiles the situation was different. They too were under the elementary principles also functioning within society subordinated to physical and cosmic principles in their sacrificial systems with their idols, their temples and all these other things but they were not as those set apart as the appointed heirs.

The way that Paul aligns the status of Gentiles and the status of old covenant Jews both being under the elementary principles of the world really should be startling to us. It would have been to his first readers. Paul is shocked that the Galatian Christians having been delivered from their subjection to the elements as Gentiles and brought into the freedom of sonship in Christ would turn back to the subjection to those elements characteristic of Jews.

This is like the son who is no longer a minor but the heir of all going back to the stewards as if they were his masters. Or perhaps to be more precise it's like someone who's been adopted into a family and given the right to enjoy the full run of the inheritance seeking to come under the rule of stewards that had ruled his fellow heirs before they had entered into their majority. While the heir is privileged even when he hasn't entered into the inheritance if he turns back from entering into his inheritance and continues to subject himself to the guardians that privilege becomes meaningless.

At this point Paul expresses some of the more personal character of his dismay. He reminds the Galatians of the bond that they once shared speaking of himself as if a mother struggling in childbirth for them. Paul became as the Gentile Christians of the Galatian churches.

He ceased living as a Jew and lived as a Gentile. He speaks about this in 1 Corinthians

chapter 9 verse 21. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ that I might win those outside the law.

He now wants them to become as he is to live as those who are not under the law. The Gentiles were never under the law in the way that the Jews were but they should recognize the similarities between the elementary order to which Israel was subject under the law and that to which they were subject as pagans. When Paul first encountered the Galatians he was suffering from a physical infirmity perhaps as a result of some cruel punishment that had been inflicted upon him.

Later in the epistle he speaks of bearing the marks of Jesus in his body in chapter 6. We might also think of the thorn in the flesh that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians chapter 12. Some have speculated on the basis of the strange reference to the removal of their eyes in verses 15 and in verse 11 of chapter 6 where Paul refers to the largeness of his writing that his infirmity might be related to his eyesight but I think it's most likely that the expression in verse 15 is just proverbial. The Galatian Christians are being led astray by the Judaizers resulting in a cooling of their affection for Paul.

The Judaizers are zealous to win them over so that the Galatian churches would be zealous for their Judaizing cause. Paul is perplexed feeling that he must begin all over again with them. It's like going through the agony of birth again even after you thought you brought a child to birth.

He concludes the passage with an allegorical argument from Genesis. The law isn't merely the commandments but it's also the narrative parts of the Pentateuch. Paul's allegory of Sarah and Hagar and their two sons is a strange and confusing argument to many people.

However, examined more closely it should make more sense to us. There is a strong logic to it. It involves a series of contrasts between two sets of sons, between Ishmael and Isaac, and the realities that define them, spoken of as their mothers, Hagar and Sarah respectively.

Hagar is associated with slavery, Sarah with freedom, Hagar with the flesh, Sarah with the promise and the spirit, Hagar with Mount Sinai, Sarah implicitly with the heavenly mountain, Hagar with the old covenant, Sarah with the new covenant, Hagar with the present Jerusalem, Sarah with the Jerusalem above. Paul's purpose is not to wrench the story of Ishmael and Isaac from its context in Genesis and use it as an illustration of some general truths. First, the theme of being sons of Abraham was a central one in the preceding chapter so this isn't something that's chosen as an example at random.

He is drawing a contrast between two different types of sonship of Abraham, already witnessed to in the Old Testament itself. Second, he's revisiting the text of Genesis and we should see that Paul's use of the story arises from themes that are very much at play

there. In Genesis, Isaac is the child of promise and the spirit, while Ishmael is born of the flesh.

In the fullness of time, Gentiles have been brought to birth as the sons and daughters of Abraham and this is a wonderful event, although it's against the regular course of nature. It's a gracious act of God by his spirit, not an achievement of the flesh. The same God who miraculously opened the womb of Sarah has brought the Gentiles to birth.

Much as Ishmael, the child of the flesh, wasn't the true heir, so true inheritance belongs to the children of promise like Isaac. For the Galatians, this means that their status must rest on something more than fleshly descent from or fleshly association with Abraham. They are free children who are no longer minors.

James Jordan describes the analogy in some depth. The fact that Ishmael was relieved of that burden when Isaac took it up was a message to Israel that they would be relieved of it when the Messiah took it up. Hagar and Ishmael made an exodus into the wilderness but came only as far as Paran.

This is the truth also about Israel. Though they entered the promised land in a physical sense, they did not really enter it. As Paul writes in Hebrews, if Joshua had really given them rest, there would not remain a greater day in which the rest would be entered.

Hebrews chapter 4. As Ishmael was to Israel, so Israel was to Jesus. Ishmael was born into the faith of Abraham, came under the law, circumcision, and heard the promise. But the promise was not to him directly but to a replacement, Isaac.

Just so, Israel was the seed of Abraham, came under the law, and heard the promise. But the promise was not to them directly but to a replacement, Jesus. The circumcised Ishmael initially contested with Isaac to be the true heir of the promise.

Just so, the circumcision was contesting with Jesus and his people to be the true heirs of the promise. Ishmael needed to be cast out so that Isaac's role might be clarified. Just so, Israel needed to be cast out so that Jesus' role might be clarified.

Ishmael was delivered from being under the yoke of circumcision and became a God-fearer. Just so, Israel should accept being delivered from the yoke of the law, considered as a death-dealing burden, and become God-fearers. Now this would raise questions for us about the current state of Israel.

Israel descended from Abraham according to the flesh and indeed Paul takes up those questions later on in the book of Galatians to an extent but also elsewhere in places like Romans. Israel's place is not simply negated. Casting out the bondwoman and her son becomes necessary as they persecute and obscure the status of the true heirs.

So the Galatians need to recognise what side of the allegory they stand on and deal with

those acting on the side of Hagar accordingly. A question to consider, in what ways might Jesus be compared to Isaac?