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June 6th: Joshua 4 & Luke 20:1-26

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Memorializing the Jordan crossing. The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers.

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

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Transcript

Joshua chapter 4. When all the nation had finished passing over the Jordan, the Lord said to Joshua, Take twelve men from the people, from each tribe a man, and command them, saying, Take twelve stones from here out of the midst of the Jordan, from the very place where the priest's feet stood firmly, and bring them over with you, and lay them down in the place where you lodged tonight. Then Joshua called the twelve men from the people of Israel, whom he had appointed, a man from each tribe. And Joshua said to them, Pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, that this may be a sign among you.

When your children ask in time to come, What do these stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So

these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial for ever.

And the people of Israel did just as Joshua commanded, and took up twelve stones out of the midst of the Jordan, according to the number of the tribes of the people of Israel, just as the Lord told Joshua. And they carried them over with them to the place where they lodged, and laid them down there. And Joshua set up twelve stones in the midst of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood.

And they are there to this day. For the priests bearing the ark stood in the midst of the Jordan until everything was finished that the Lord commanded Joshua to tell the people, according to all that Moses had commanded Joshua. The people passed over in haste, and when all the people had finished passing over, the ark of the Lord and the priests passed over before the people.

The sons of Reuben, and the sons of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh passed over armed before the people of Israel, as Moses had told them. About forty thousand ready for war passed over before the Lord for battle to the plains of Jericho. On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him just as they had stood in awe of Moses all the days of his life.

And the Lord said to Joshua, Command the priests bearing the ark of the testimony to come up out of the Jordan. So Joshua commanded the priests, Come up out of the Jordan. And when the priests bearing the ark of the covenant of the Lord came up from the midst of the Jordan, and the soles of the priests' feet were lifted up on dry ground, the waters of the Jordan returned to their place, and overflowed all its banks as before.

The people came up out of the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month, and they encamped at Gilgal on the east border of Jericho. And those twelve stones which they took out of the Jordan Joshua set up at Gilgal. And he said to the people of Israel, When your children ask their fathers in times to come, What do these stones mean? Then you shall let your children know, Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God for ever. Joshua chapter 4 recounts the crossing of the Jordan, which the chapter beforehand has already done, however it draws attention to different dimensions of the event. A very consistent feature of great deliverances and events in the Pentateuch and elsewhere is a concern for memorialisation.

It should not come as a surprise to see it here as well. God's great works must be remembered by and taught to coming generations. You can think about the event of the flood, which is memorialised in the sign of the rainbow, or the calling of Abraham and the

covenant made with him in circumcision, or the events of the Exodus in the sign of the Sabbath.

There are twelve pillars set up in Exodus chapter 24 verse 4, which is similar to what we see here. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Festivals were also a form of memorial. Think of the Passover and unleavened bread, which commemorated the first departure from Egypt. The feast of weeks, again, would be connected with the events at Sinai.

The feast of tabernacles, again that first departure from Egypt. There are covenant renewal ceremonies. There's the second publication of the law on the plains of Moab.

All of these are ways to imprint in the mind of Israel the great deeds of deliverance of the Lord, to ensure that they will never forget what has happened to them. The song of the sea is another example. The calling of Abraham, the events of the Exodus, all these things are recalled in first fruit celebrations.

We see a similar thing in the Psalms, as the events of God's history are recalled in song. Chapter 4 begins by more or less repeating the words of the last verse of chapter 3. It then picks up the seemingly orphaned command of chapter 3, verse 12, the instruction to take one man from each tribe, and now we learn the purpose. There are a number of odd repetitions like this within these chapters, and we need to recognise the way that they tie the material together.

Anticipation and confirmation and command and fulfilment can be a feature of such stories. It shows that what God has commanded was perfectly carried out, what God declared was perfectly fulfilled. Note the way that, for instance, chapter 3, verse 7 is fulfilled in verse 14 of this chapter.

In chapter 3, verse 7, the Lord said to Joshua, Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. And then in verse 14 of chapter 4, On that day the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him, just as they had stood in awe of Moses all the days of his life. The stones are literally to be caused to rest in the place where they lodged that night.

Perhaps we are to see a closer symbolic connection between the stones and Israel themselves. One stone for each tribe drawn out of the water is very clearly something that corresponds with the Israelite tribes, particularly as they're taken one each by twelve men of the tribes. But being laid to rest in the place where they lay to rest for the first time might suggest an even closer symbolic association between the two.

Just as the stones are placed in the water, drawn out of the water, and then brought into the land and laid to rest in the land, so Israel is brought across and laid to rest in the land also. Such a miracle had a once-for-all character. However, Israel was to recall it down through their history.

Joshua relays the Lord's command faithfully to Israel, and then Israel faithfully performs it. And part of what is being highlighted here is the faithfulness of Israel and Joshua at this point. They're performing what God has told them perfectly.

They are entering into the land on the right foot. The reference to the stones in verse 9 is unclear. Was there a second set of stones on the riverbed of the Jordan that would perhaps be revealed when it was really low water? Probably not.

Rather, the stones were most likely placed at the site where the priests would stand first, and then were taken up and carried to Gilgal. Verses 11-14 recount the crossing again, this time focusing upon the military character of the crossing and the faithfulness of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh in going ahead of the others. There's another reference to Jericho in the crossing narrative.

It's only seven miles away. They're about to attack it, and it gives us this sense of anticipation of where the narrative's about to go. On that day, the Lord exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they stood in awe of him as they had stood in awe of Moses all the days of his life.

Joshua then is established as the successor of Moses by this event. Just as Moses was set up by the event of the Red Sea crossing in the eyes of Israel, so Joshua is set up by the crossing into the land through the Jordan River. Verses 15-18 repeat details we've already had.

However, they are no longer crossing over, but coming up. The narrative vantage point now lies within the land. And this is something that we often see in Scripture.

Something seems to be just repetitive, saying the same thing again. If you look closely, there are subtle details, and those details carry a wealth of significance. In this instance, I believe that is the case.

Verse 18 is the mirror image of verses 15-16 of chapter 3. And those flowing down towards the Sea of the Arava, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. They cross on the tenth day of the first month. This looks back to Exodus chapter 12 and the institution of the Passover.

Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month, every man shall take a lamb according to their father's houses, a lamb for a household. That's Exodus chapter 12 verse 3. The Passover by which they left the land is replayed in several respects as they enter into the land. In the verses that follow, Joshua instructs the

Israelites in how to teach their descendants concerning the stones.

It connects the Red Sea crossing with the Jordan crossing. The purpose of the crossing of the Jordan was to demonstrate the might of the Lord to the people of the land. And note how this is fulfilled in the first verse of chapter 5. And all the kings of the Canaanites who were by the sea heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan for the people of Israel until they had crossed over.

Their hearts melted and there was no longer any spirit in them because of the people of Israel. There are two reactions then. The first is the reaction of Israel and the exaltation of Joshua in their eyes in verse 14.

And now there's a second reaction. It's the reaction of the people of the land before the Israelites as they see that God is mighty and on their side. They might also have remembered having heard of the crossing of the Red Sea.

And now they're seeing something that recalls that event. The same God who brought them out of Egypt and wrought great plagues upon the Egyptians has now come into the land with his people and is about to wreak great judgment upon them. A question to consider.

What are some other examples of the sort of catechetical questions from children to fathers in the Pentateuch? Luke chapter 20 verses 1 to 26. One day as Jesus was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders came up and said to him, Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority? He answered them, I also will ask you a question. Now tell me, was the baptism of John from heaven or from man? And they discussed it with one another, saying, If we say from heaven, he will say, Why did you not believe him? But if we say from man, all the people will stone us to death, for they are convinced that John was a prophet.

So they answered that they did not know where it came from. And Jesus said to them, Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And he began to tell the people this parable.

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed.

And he sent another servant, but they also beat and treated him shamefully and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third, this one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son.

Perhaps they will respect him. But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves,

This is the heir. Let us kill him so that the inheritance may be ours.

And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What then will the owner of the vineyard do to them? He will come and destroy those tenants and give the vineyard to others. When they heard this, they said, Surely not.

But he looked directly at them and said, What then is this that is written? The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him. The scribes and the chief priests sought to lay hands on him at that very hour, for they perceived that he had told this parable against them.

But they feared the people. So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said, so as to liver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. So they asked him, Teacher, we know that you speak and teach rightly and show no partiality, but truly teach the way of God.

Is it lawful for us to give tribute to Caesar or not? But he perceived their craftiness and said to them, Show me a denarius. Whose likeness and inscription does it have? They said, Caesar's. He said to them, Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.

And they were not able in the presence of the people to catch him in what he said, but marvelling at his answer, they became silent. Luke chapter 20 comes after Jesus has entered the city of Jerusalem like a king and declared judgment upon the temple. There are people gathering around him and behind him.

He's the head of a movement. And we have the privilege of knowing how the story ends, and so we anticipate the direction it's taking. But imagine what it was like for people there at that time.

They're thinking that the kingdom's about to come imminently. They're asking Jesus about this. Jesus has to teach them concerning it, teaching them things they do not yet understand, that like a nobleman he will have to go away and receive a kingdom and then come back.

Seeing the growing popularity of Jesus and the movement around him, the leaders of the people are threatened, and they immediately try and trap him. They do this by asking the source of his authority. If his authority is from man, it can be dismissed.

If he claims it is from God, they have other grounds by which they could move against him. And Jesus answers their question with a question. Yet the answer to the question that Jesus asks is the answer to the question that the chief priests and the elders have asked him.

John the Baptist was sent by God, and his prophetic ministry was one through which God authorized and bore witness to his son. Jesus traps those seeking to trap him, as he does on several occasions. The parable of the tenants that follows is important to read in the light of Israel's identity as the vineyard.

Jesus introduces the parable in a way that highlights the background of Isaiah chapter 5 and Psalm 80. Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7 read, Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.

He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it, and he looked for it to yield grapes. But it yielded wild grapes.

And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard, that I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured.

I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briars and thorns shall grow up.

I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry.

Isaiah's parable focused upon the failure of the vineyard to produce good fruit. Jesus' focuses upon the wickedness of those working within it. The fruit seems to be there, but the workers are rebellious.

In his ministry, Jesus talks about the fields wiped to harvest, and the desire that labourers would go out and harvest it. And yet the workers in God's field are not faithful. Likewise, there is a flock, and the shepherds are abusing the flock.

The distinction between Israel and its leaders is important here. It's part of the meaning of the parable. The master sends his servants, the prophets, and finally his own son, and all are being rejected.

Jesus is foretelling his own death within this parable, and people who are involved in his death are hearing it. In Genesis chapter 37, verses 18 to 20, I think we see part of the background that Jesus is alluding to here. They saw him from afar, and before he came near to them, they conspired against him to kill him.

They said to one another, Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits. Then we will say that a fierce animal has devoured him, and we will see what will become of his dreams.

Joseph, in that case, is the threat to his brothers. They believe he's the one that's going to inherit, and they want to destroy him. Likewise, driven by envy, the wicked tenants seek to destroy the son.

The tenants will be deprived of their position. This isn't a claim about Israel itself being dispossessed, but about the wicked tenants of the chief priests and the scribes. Their places will be taken by the Twelve and others, who are the true tenants now of the vineyard of Israel.

This looks forward to fruit from Israel. The vineyard isn't abandoned. It's given into different hands.

Jesus quotes as an interpretation of much of his teaching in this parable, Psalm 118 verse 22. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. And this quotation interprets the parable.

It shows something of the necessity that Christ must die, that he must be rejected by the wicked tenants. This was also a verse used for apologetic purposes by the early church. We see it in 1 Peter 2, verses 4 and 7, and also in Acts 4, verse 11.

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. This is one of the texts that looks forward to Christ's rejection by his people and his resurrection. The parable reveals that the Davidic Messiah had to die, and the verse confirms this.

The rejected son is the rejected stone, and the builders are associated with the religious leaders, as they were associated with the wicked tenants. Note also the way that this brings temple themes to the forefront. There is a cornerstone being set up.

A new building is going to be erected. Christ is the rejected stone, but becomes the cornerstone of a new temple that the Lord is building. There are also allusions here to Isaiah 8, verses 14-15, and Daniel 2, verses 44-45.

Isaiah 8, and he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. And many shall stumble on it, they shall fall and be broken, they shall be snared and taken. And then in Daniel chapter 2, And it's interpretation sure.

The chief priests and the scribes now send spies to try and trap Jesus. Tax to Caesar was a deeply fraught political and religious question. To pay the tax was a seeming acknowledgement of its legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the Romans' authority in the Holy Land.

The Denarius itself likely had blasphemous statements of Caesar's being the son of God. One way or another, Jesus is caught, it seems. Either he aligns himself with the tax

rebels and the revolutions against Rome, and can easily be handed over to the governor and put to death for that, or he will seem to be like a compromiser with Rome, and he will lose credibility with the crowd.

And his answer is a profoundly shrewd one. First of all, he asks them to produce a coin. They must reveal that they have one of the coins in their possession.

The Jews could have their own coinage, the temple coin for instance, but they clearly had such coins in their possession. The answer, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's, is an ambiguous one. To some it might be saying, give Caesar what is coming to him, and to others it might be seeming to say, pay your taxes.

But there is a logic to it. If you have this blasphemous object in your possession, why not give it back to Rome? There is a willingness to be dispossessed of such an item. That's part of it.

There are also dues to be paid both to Caesar and to God. The claims of God put limits upon the claims of Caesar. The reasoning of Jesus is that the coin is Caesar's, and so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, but something for services given.

All the different ways in which Caesar provides security for the land, and resources and services within the land. Those things do give a reason to pay taxes to him. Also, God has established him as the ruler, and for that reason they must acknowledge that he is the bearer of the sword.

Even an occupying force could be a legitimate authority under certain conditions. Jesus makes an important point here. He's not just escaping a trap.

He treads a line between compliance and resistance. Rendering to God what is God's limits what Caesar gets. Caesar can't be given worship, for instance.

A question to consider. Can you think of any ways in which Jesus' teaching concerning paying taxes to Caesar, and the way to treat authorities like Caesar, is developed in other parts of the New Testament concerning the authority of rulers?