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June 4th: Ezekiel 9 & Acts 9:32-43

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Destroying men sent throughout the city of Jerusalem. Peter's healing of Aeneas and raising of Tabitha.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>). My reflections are searchable by Bible chapter here: <https://audio.alastairadversaria.com/explore/>.

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Transcript

Ezekiel chapter 9. Ezekiel chapter 9. Ezekiel chapter 9. Ezekiel chapter 9. In Ezekiel chapter 8, the Prophet was transported in a vision to Jerusalem. There he saw idolatrous abominations being performed in the Temple and in its courts, abominations that gave grounds for the law's imminent abandonment of his defiled sanctuary and destruction of Jerusalem and its leaders. This vision was received a little over a year after Ezekiel's first vision, presumably while he was still performing the prophetic sign act described in chapter 4. The elders of the Judahite exiles were with Ezekiel in his house while the hand of the Lord came upon him and he received this vision.

The vision proceeds as a narrative through chapters 9, 10, and 11 and in chapter 9 the Lord sends a destroying force through the city. The causes for the Lord's abandonment

of his Temple and judgment of the city were seen in the preceding chapter in the four scenes of the abominations. Ezekiel was the witness to all of this.

Chapter 9 begins with executioners being sent out to carry out the sentence that was cast at the end of the preceding chapter. Six armed figures come forward in verse 2 along with a man clothed in linen with a writing case, presumably a scribe along with the warriors. The six warriors and the scribe might be associated with the archangels.

In Revelation chapter 8 verse 2 for instance we read of the seven angels that stand before the Lord. We might also consider here the Talmudic identification of the scribal figure with the archangel Gabriel. The scribe is dressed in linen which would have been associated with the priests and also with the angels and I think for similar reasons priests play something of an angelic role and angels play something of a priestly role.

The seven figures enter through the upper gate and stand beside the bronze altar ready to serve. Ezekiel at this point sees the glory of God has gone up from the cherub. It has now moved to the entrance of the temple.

The Lord's glory was understood to be enthroned above the cherubim between the two cherubs on the mercy seat above the Ark of the Covenant. The fact that the Lord has gotten up from his throne and is moving towards the threshold of the temple is a sign that he's about to leave the house. He's abandoning his earthly palace and throne room.

The scribal figure is addressed first. He is instructed to go through the whole of the city of Jerusalem and put a mark or a tau, the final letter of the Hebrew alphabet, upon the foreheads of all of those who sigh and groan over all of the sins committed in the place, the sins we saw in the preceding chapter. The mark to be placed upon their foreheads within the script of the time would have been like an X. Later it would become a T. Perhaps with marking their foreheads with the final letter of the alphabet we're seeing something of the finality of the judgment that's about to come upon the place.

Other possible aspects of its meaning would be as a mark of ownership and a signature. Daniel Bloch and others recognize a parallel between the mark placed upon the foreheads here and the mark placed upon Cain back in Genesis chapter 4 after he killed Abel and was saved from being killed himself as the Lord placed a mark of ownership and protection upon him. Peter Lightheart speculates about the possible significance of the fact that the word for sign back in Genesis chapter 4 verse 15 has its final two letters reversed for the tau mentioned in this chapter.

He writes, those who mourn over the sins of Jerusalem are not marked Cains but anti-Cains. In such a manner they are associated more with Abel. The themes of this chapter would invite comparisons with the events of the Passover where blood was placed upon the lintel and the doorpost so that the destroying angel would not kill the people within the house.

We might also recall the two angels inspecting the city of Sodom and delivering the family of Lot before the whole city was destroyed. Also the scarlet cord that Rahab displayed in order to protect her and her family from being destroyed in the overthrow of Jericho. In Revelation chapter 7 verses 1 to 3 we have a very similar account in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem there.

After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth holding back the four winds of the earth that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree. Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun with the seal of the living God and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea saying do not harm the earth or the sea or the until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads. In that chapter 144,000 of the tribes of Israel are sealed.

The weak and the vulnerable people who are left in the city are marked out for destruction. Old men, young men and maidens, little children and women. This sort of universal judgment is associated with Heron warfare.

We witness this in the most signal events of God's judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain. The land of Egypt where all the first born were killed.

Jericho and the cities of Canaan. When God's holiness breaks forth no flesh is safe. All human beings that aren't explicitly marked out or atoned for are cut off as sinful flesh.

This was one of the purposes of circumcision. It was a mark upon the body symbolically cutting off the flesh in the organ with which it was most associated so that the person bearing that mark would not be cut off with all flesh when judgment came upon them. No one is to be spared and the judgment must begin at the sanctuary.

The place where the holy presence of God is most focused. The angels begin their judgment with the elders who are before the house. Whether these are the 70 elders within the room that Ezekiel saw or the 25 men who were outside or old men just in the precincts of the temple.

It's a matter debated by commentators. There seems to be a fusion of two sets of men here. The men who are inside the building who make the statement that we see in verse 9 and then the 25 men who are outside.

The six men are explicitly commanded to defile the house. The house is going to be abandoned by the Lord and the great temple of Solomon that was once holy to the Lord would be defiled by the bodies of the slain. As the angels depart Ezekiel falls on his face and laments the seeming destruction of all of the remnant of Israel.

Perhaps the hearer might hear some sort echo here of the story of chapter 18 of Genesis as the two angels leave for the judgment of Sodom and Abraham is left with the Lord

interceding for the place. However no pity will be shown by the Lord to the city of Jerusalem. Four reasons are given.

The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah. The land being full of blood defiled by the slain. The city being full of injustice.

Its leaders corrupt and oppressive. Something that we see also in the book of Jeremiah and then also their statement justifying their sin. This is a repeat but a reversal of the order of that statement in chapter 8 verse 12.

There it is spoken by the 70 elders who are secretly worshipping their images. The repetition of their statement here tides this part of the vision with that which preceded it. The Lord is not going to show any mercy to the city of Jerusalem.

All of the wicked will be wiped away. At this point the scribe returns declaring that he has put the mark on all of the people who would be saved from the city. A question to consider.

We earlier observed the association between priests and angels. How might this connection help us better to understand angels and help us better to understand priests? Where else in scripture might we look to to find support for it? Acts chapter 9 verses 32 to 43. Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda.

There he found a man named Aeneas, bedridden for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Rise and make your bed.

And immediately he rose. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord. Now there was in Joppa a disciple named Tabitha, which translated means Dorcas.

She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died. And when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room.

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him urging him, Please come to us without delay. So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room.

All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. But Peter put them all outside and knelt down and prayed. And turning to the body, he said, Tabitha, arise.

And she opened her eyes. And when she saw Peter, she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up.

Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. And it became known

throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a Tanner.

Acts chapter 9 concludes with two miraculous healings performed through the apostle Peter. From here until the end of chapter 12, Peter will be the focus, before Peter largely disappears from the text of Acts, save for a brief appearance in chapter 15. Luke often has male and female pairings in his gospel, and here we find another male and female pair of healings.

There are also features of these two healings that might remind us of healings in the gospel, or healings in the Old Testament, as we will soon see. The section begins with Peter traveling from place to place between various Christian congregations. He seems to be consolidating these early gatherings of Christian disciples, encouraging them in the faith and connecting them with the heart of the Judean Christian movement in the city of Jerusalem.

As he's doing this, he spends some time among the saints that live at Lydda. While there he encounters Aeneas, who's been bedridden for eight years, a paralytic. Jesus heals a paralytic in Luke chapter 5, forgiving his sins at the same time.

It's not clear whether Aeneas was a Christian or not, but Peter heals him in the name of Jesus the Messiah, instructing him to rise up and make his bed. He is immediately healed, and the news of this healing travels throughout the entire region, and many people turn to the Lord. This gives a window into the spread of the gospel in Judean regions beyond Jerusalem.

The church is clearly growing, expanding outwards into these various parts of the land. Only a year or two previously, the disciples themselves had gone throughout all these different regions as Jesus had moved towards Jerusalem. At that time, they had declared the good news of the kingdom of God that was coming.

During that period, they had performed signs and wonders. This work presumably prepared the ground for what was taking place now. As they went to these various towns and villages, they were going to places that had already received messages about Christ prior to his crucifixion and resurrection, and now they could be filled in on the rest of the story.

The fame of Christ and of the gospel is spread by these marvellous works, works that are performed in the name of Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter does not claim miraculous power of his own, rather he claims to act as the emissary of Jesus Christ, speaking and healing in his name. As has happened in many other occasions in the history of the church, miraculous healings and signs are a means by which God's kingdom announces itself in a new region.

The power of the name in which the church acts, and a reality-filled promise of the healing and the restoration of the kingdom that it proclaims, are both conveyed in such signs and wonders. Some have seen in the name Aeneas some reference to the mythical founder of Rome, perhaps in giving us the name of this man, Luke is drawing our attention to the direction in which the gospel is moving. Lydda, where Peter was currently working, was about 12 miles from the city of Joppa.

Joppa was a port, perhaps most famously where the prophet Jonah had sought to catch a ship to take him to Tarshish when he was running from the mission of the Lord. At Joppa a female disciple has just died, a woman named Tabitha, which is translated as Dorcas. Tabitha means gazelle and Dorcas would be the equivalent name in Greek.

Burial usually occurred quite swiftly after someone died, as we saw in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, but this woman after she has died is washed and placed in an upper room and the disciples hurry to summon Peter from Lydda. When someone dies it's most common to bring their bodies down, to bring their bodies down towards the earth where they will finally rest. The bringing of a body up into an upper room might remind us of two stories from the books of 1st and 2nd Kings.

In 1st Kings chapter 17 Elijah carries the body of the dead son of the widow of Zarephath up into his upper room. In 2nd Kings chapter 4 the Shunammite woman brings the body of her dead son up into the upper room of the prophet Elisha. In each of these cases there is a movement of the body away from the realm that is associated with death, the lower realm and a raising of the body up.

Tabitha is presented to Peter and to us as a woman noted for her good works and her charity. Her ministry is one of making clothes for needy people and she is particularly of service to the widows. After Peter places them all outside he raises Tabitha up.

As Tabitha is brought back to life the miracle is another proof of the power of Christ to the surrounding region and many people throughout Joppa believe in the Lord. Peter had been present at a similar raising by Jesus in the Gospels. In Mark chapter 5 verses 40-43 we read, But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was.

Taking her by the hand he said to her, Talitha kumi which means little girl I say to you arise and immediately the girl got up and began walking for she was 12 years of age and they were immediately overcome with amazement and he strictly charged them that no one should know this and told them to give her something to eat. Talitha kumi might remind us of Tabitha arise. Only one letter differs between these two words and it is one of many details that makes this raising of Tabitha reminiscent of Christ's raising of Jairus' daughter.

It is also as we have already noted reminiscent of Elijah's healing of the son of the widow

of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17-17-24 and of Elisha's healing of the son of the Shunammite woman in 2 Kings 4-18-37. Comparable miracles of Christ occur in Luke 7-11-17 and 8-41-42 and 49-56. Robert Tannehill is one of various commentators who observe different family resemblances between these stories.

Not every story has all of these details but each one contains enough of them to connect them with the other stories. First the dead body is placed in an upper room. Second the healer is absent and must be summoned.

Third the healer encounters people weeping. Fourth the healer excludes the public. Fifth the healer prays in private.

Sixth there is a command to rise. Seventh after the command or healing action the dead person's eyes open. Eighth the dead person sits up.

Ninth the healer either grasps the hand of the dead person or after they are revived gives them their hand. Tenth the healer calls relatives or friends to show them the person alive. Eleventh the report of the person being raised up goes round about.

There will be another similar story in Acts 20 when Paul raises Eutychus. The effect of all of this is for the gospel to grow in its influence in these various parts of Judea. More and more people are hearing and responding and Peter's missionary journey which anticipates the missionary journeys of Paul among the Gentiles leads to a great number of converts in the land of Palestine.

A question to consider, what might we learn from Luke's portrayal of Tabitha's ministry?