

OpenTheo

April 21st: Numbers 17 & Mark 13:14-37

April 20, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Aaron's blossoming rod. The abomination of desolation.

Some passages referenced:

Exodus 25:31-39 (the lampstand); Jeremiah 1:11-12 (almond as watcher); Zechariah 4:1-4, 10-14 (the lampstand, the trees, and the eyes of the Lord); Exodus 28:36-38 (the blossom on the forehead); Numbers 15:37-41 (tassels—'tzitzit'—on the garments).

Daniel 11:30-35 (the abomination of desolation at the time of Antiochus Epiphanes); Daniel 9:24-27 (the abomination of desolation in AD70); Josephus, The Jewish War 4.3 (the Zealots' appointment of Phannias as high priest); 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 (the man of lawlessness); Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History 3.5 (the Christians flee to Pella and the abomination of desolation fulfilled); Isaiah 13:10, 34:4 (cosmic symbolism and the destruction of Babylon); Ezekiel 32:7-8 (cosmic symbolism and the judgment of Egypt); Daniel 7:9-14 (the coming of the Son of Man); Deuteronomy 30:4, Isaiah 27:13 (God gathering his people); Isaiah 51:6 (heaven and earth passing away, yet the Lord's salvation enduring).

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

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X330?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Numbers 17. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, And Moses deposited the staffs before the Lord in the tent of the testimony. On the next day Moses went into the tent of the testimony.

And behold, the staff of Aaron for the house of Levi had sprouted and put forth buds, and produced blossoms, and it bore ripe almonds. Then Moses brought out all the staffs from before the Lord to all the people of Israel. And they looked, and each man took his staff.

And the Lord said to Moses, Put back the staff of Aaron before the testimony. Be kept as a sign for the rebels, that you may make an end of their grumbings against me, lest they die. Thus did Moses, as the Lord commanded him, so he did.

And the people of Israel said to Moses, Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord, shall die. Are we all to perish? Numbers chapter 17 continues to deal with the fallout of the rebellion of Korah.

The Lord vindicates the authority of Aaron the high priest against all potential challenges with a great sign, the sign of the budding and blossoming rod. Gordon Wenham observes that it is a symbolic reenactment of the Korah scene of the previous chapter. The twelve chieftains of the tribes, there is one chief for each tribe, put their names on the staffs.

And it is worth noting that staff and tribe are the same word in Hebrew. The rod symbolizes Aaron and also the tribe of Levi. And it is placed among the other rods, the rods of all the other tribes of Israel.

The rod is placed before the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies by Moses. And Moses returns the next day and Aaron's rod has budded and blossomed and borne almonds. Aaron's rod, representing Aaron himself, the head of the Levites, is then placed back before the Ark of the Covenant as a sign to all potential rebels that God has chosen Levi, and of Levi he has chosen Aaron as the one to be high priest over his people.

The people's response at this point is to fear. In the previous chapter they have seen the destruction of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and the 250 chiefs. And now God has decisively vindicated Aaron, the one that they were speaking against.

Learning the lessons of these chapters, they realize that they cannot come near to the Holy Tabernacle of the Lord or they will perish. They need someone else to do that for them. This is a very short chapter, but there are a number of details within it that we should be curious about.

Why the rods? Well, we've seen the rods are connected with the tribes. Staff and tribe is the same word. Why then have the blossoms? And why have almonds? Why almonds in

particular? What are we to make of this detail? I think one clue can be found in Exodus chapter 25 where we're given the instructions for the lampstand.

Exodus chapter 25 verses 31 to 39. And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups made like almond blossoms, each with calyxes and flowers. And a calyx of one piece with it under each pair of the six branches going out from the lampstand.

Their calyxes and their branches shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single piece of hammered work of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it and the lamp shall be set up so as to give light on the space in front of it. Its tongs and their trays shall be of pure gold.

It shall be made with all these utensils out of a talent of pure gold. The lampstand then is connected with almonds. It's also something that gives light and keeps watch over the table of the presence representing Israel.

And so the connection of the lampstand with the almond and the connection of Aaron's rod with the almond suggests that there's associations between the two. Both of them are to be present in the holy place. Both of them are to give light to Israel and to watch over Israel as a nation.

The lampstand over the bread of the presence which represents Israel and Aaron over Israel itself. Now the almond is also the watcher tree. The word itself is the word for watchman or watcher.

Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 11 to 12 highlights this particular pun. And the word of the Lord came to me saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, you have seen well for I am watching over my word to perform it.

That play on words is the same play on words that I think is going on here. The blossoming of Aaron's rod with almond blossoms, the connection of Aaron with almonds, is the connection of Aaron with the task of the watcher. It's the connection of Aaron with the task of the lampstand.

Such symbolism of the lampstand can be elaborated even further in Zechariah chapter 4 verses 1 to 4 and 10 to 14. And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me like a man who was awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, what do you see? I said, I see and behold a lampstand all of gold with a bowl on the top of it and seven lamps on it with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on top of it.

And there are two olive trees by it, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left. And I said to the angel who talked with me, what are these my Lord? He said, these seven are the eyes of the Lord which range through the whole earth. And I said to him, what are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand? And a second

time I answered and said to him, what are these two branches of the olive trees which are beside the two golden pipes from which the golden oil is poured out? He said to me, do you not know what these are? I said, no my Lord.

Then he said, these are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth. So what we see here is an association between the anointed ones, the ones that are established by God to rule over his people and the lampstand. We also see an association of the lampstand with watching, with the eyes.

And I think that can help us further to understand what's going on with the establishment of Aaron's rod as a blossoming almond and then the connection of that with the lampstand in the holy place. There's more to be observed here though. In Exodus chapter 28 verses 36 to 38 we're told, Now this may seem to have no connection whatsoever with what we've just read but there is a connection.

And the connection is found in the fact that the word for plate is the word flower. It's the same word that we have here for the blossoms of Aaron's rod. And in the Pentateuch it's the word that is only ever used either in this chapter of the blossoms of Aaron's rod or elsewhere of the plate that is on Aaron's forehead.

There's a connection it seems to me. The blossom of the rod and the blossom on his forehead, they're both statements of his holiness to the Lord. Both statements that God has set him apart as a minister.

And so the blossoming of his rod is connected with the plate of gold. Now there's one other thing that could be observed here. The description of that plate of gold and the way that it's held on to the turban.

It's held on in a way that reminds us of something we've read about just a couple of chapters earlier. It reminds us of the tassels, the cords of blue. Cords of blue that associate Israel with holiness to the Lord.

They associate Israel with the status that the high priest has in some sense. Now those cords of blue are called a tzitzit. And here we have the tzitzit.

The connection between these two words I believe explains even further why the rod blossoms. As we recognise such connections we should also appreciate that the book of Numbers, which for many readers is just an assortment of random material that's not held together very strongly, is actually a coherent argument that there are deep connections leading us all the way through. And as we see these connections we'll be able to trace the way in which later events answer to earlier ones and the ways in which law responds and corresponds to narrative.

A question to consider. Where in the New Testament do we see a reference to Aaron's budding rod? Mark chapter 13 verses 14 to 37. Then let those who are in Judea flee to

the mountains.

Let the one who is on the housetop not go down nor enter his house to take anything out. And let the one who is in the field not turn back to take his cloak. And alas for women who are pregnant and for those who are nursing infants in those days.

Pray that it may not happen in winter. For in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation that God created until now, and never will be. And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved.

But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days. And then if anyone says to you, look, here is the Christ, or look, there he is, do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and perform signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, the elect.

But be on guard. I have told you all things beforehand. But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. From the fig tree learn its lesson.

As soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the sun, but only the Father. Be on guard.

Keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake.

Therefore stay awake. For you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you, I say to all, stay awake.

In Mark 13, Jesus is addressing his disciples' question about when the destruction of the temple that he foretold would occur. A critical sign of this is the abomination of desolation that Daniel foretold in Daniel 9, verses 24-27. The abomination of desolation is the abomination that provokes the desolation of the temple, not the desolation of the temple itself.

Abominations are typically performed by Israel itself. It's the perversion of the bride. It's not the sin of the nations.

In the Old Testament it could be seen in the sins of the sons of Eli, for instance, or the idolatry of the nation in Ezekiel's day. The abomination of the temple, then, is caused by flagrant sin and or apostasy. And the more specific reference to the abomination of desolation is found in Daniel 11, verses 30-35.

For ships of Kittim shall come against him, and he shall be afraid and withdraw, and shall turn back and be enraged and take action against the Holy Covenant. He shall turn back and pay attention to those who forsake the Holy Covenant. Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the regular burnt offering, and they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate.

He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action. And the wise among the people shall make many understand, though for some days they shall stumble by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder. When they stumble they shall receive a little help, and many shall join themselves to them with flattery.

And some of the wise shall stumble, so that they may be refined, purified, and made white, until the end of the time, for it still awaits the appointed time. In Daniel chapter 11, the king is Antiochus Epiphanes, an early 2nd century BC Hellenistic ruler of the Seleucid Empire. Yet the abomination of desolation is not directly set up by him, but by forces aligned with him, which may be those who are described as forsaking the Holy Covenant.

I believe it's the apostate Jews, particularly the high priests Jason and Menelaus, who are the ones who set up the abomination that makes desolate in around 168 BC. This also is connected with Daniel chapter 9 verses 24 to 27. 70 weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to put an end to sin, and to atone for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal both vision and prophet, and to anoint a most holy place.

Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem, to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again with squares and moat, but in a troubled time, and after the sixty-two weeks an anointed one shall be cut off, and shall have nothing. And the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary, its end shall come with a flood, and to the end there shall be war.

Desolations are decreed, and he shall make a strong covenant with many for one week, and for half of the week he shall put an end to sacrifice and offering, and on the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out

on the desolator. So we have an earlier desolation, or an earlier abomination of desolation in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes and the Maccabees, and now we have a later one that's being foretold, and I believe this is the one that Jesus is referring to, the events in AD 70. And I think there's a candidate described in Josephus, in the Jewish War, Book 4, Chapter 3, he writes of the Zealots, that they undertook to dispose of the high priesthood by casting lots for it, whereas, as we have said already, it was to descend by succession in a family.

The pretense they made for this strange attempt was an ancient practice, while they said that of old it was determined by lot, but in truth it was no better than a dissolution of an undeniable law, and a cunning contrivance to seize upon the government, derived from those that presumed to appoint governors as they themselves pleased. Hereupon they sent for one of the pontifical tribes, which is called Eneakin, and cast lots, which of it should be the high priest. By fortune the lot so fell as to demonstrate their iniquity after the plainest manner, for it fell upon one whose name was Phaneus, the son of Samuel, of the village Aptha.

He was a man not only unworthy of the high priesthood, but that did not well know what the high priesthood was, such a mere rustic was he. Yet did they hail this man, without his own consent, out of the country, as if they were acting a play upon the stage, and adorned him with a counterfeit face. They also put upon him the sacred garments, and upon every occasion instructed him what he was to do.

This horrid piece of wickedness was sport and pastime with them, but occasioned the other priests, who at a distance saw their law made a jest of, to shed tears, and sorely lament the dissolution of such a sacred dignity. I believe this could be connected to the man of lawlessness mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2 1-12. But the people of the church in Jerusalem had been commanded by a revelation, vouchsafed to approve men there before the war, to leave the city and to dwell in a certain town of Perea, called Pella.

And when those that believed in Christ had come there from Jerusalem, then, as if the royal city of the Jews and the whole land of Judea were entirely destitute of holy men, the judgment of God at length overtook those who had committed such outrages against Christ and his apostles, and totally destroyed that generation of impious men. But the number of calamities which everywhere fell upon the nation at that time, the extreme misfortunes to which the inhabitants of Judea were especially subjected, the thousands of men, as well as women and children, that perished by the sword, by famine, and by other forms of death innumerable, all these things, as well as the great many sieges that were carried on against the cities of Judea, and the excessive sufferings endured by those that fled to Jerusalem itself, as to a city of perfect safety, and finally the general course of the whole war, as well as its particular occurrences in detail, and how at last the abomination of desolation proclaimed by the prophets stood in the very temple of God, so celebrated of old, the temple which was now awaiting its total and final

destruction by fire, all these things, anyone that wishes, may find accurately described in the history written by Josephus. But it is necessary to state that this writer records that the multitude of those who were assembled from all Judea at the time of the Passover, to the number of three million souls, were shut up in Jerusalem as in a prison, to use his own words, for it was right that in the very days in which they had inflicted suffering upon the Saviour and the benefactor of all, the Christ of God, that in those days, shut up as in a prison, they should meet with destruction at the hands of divine justice.

Just as the perversion of the priesthood in the days of Antiochus Epiphanes led to judgment upon Jerusalem and its temple, so in AD 70 the perversion of the high priesthood again would lead to a similar fate. The language of this passage seems so extreme and so cosmic that many people can't imagine it relating to anything other than the destruction of the universe on the last day. But it needn't be read this way.

Those familiar with the Old Testament prophets will know that there are many similar passages that use the same sort of imagery to refer to judgments in history, judgments upon places like Egypt or Babylon. Isaiah 13, verse 10 speaks of the destruction of Babylon. And again in Isaiah 34, verse 4. Ezekiel chapter 32, verses 7 to 8 speaks of Egypt.

We need to be alert to the fact that the fall of Jerusalem is being described like the fall of Babylon and Egypt. Later in Revelation, Jerusalem will be spoken of as Babylon the Great. We focus upon the coming of the Son of Man often as a downward movement from heaven towards earth.

But it is the coming of the Son of Man into heaven itself that is in view here. The background is that of Daniel again. Daniel chapter 7, verses 9 to 14.

The gates were placed, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool. His throne was fiery flames, his wheels were burning fire.

A stream of fire issued and came out from before him. A thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

I looked then because of the sound of the great words that the horn was speaking. And as I looked, the beast was killed, and its body destroyed, and given over to be burned with fire. As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but their lives were prolonged for a season and a time.

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven, there came one like a Son of Man. And he came to the Ancient of Days, and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and

languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed. The sign of the coming then is the vindication of the exalted Son of Man by the dispossession of the wicked tenants. They shall see this coming in the sense of the proof of it.

And this will be demonstrated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. All of this is about establishing the new age of the kingdom. The angels, or literally the messengers, will then be sent out to gather from the four winds.

It's a new beginning, it's a new covenant order being established. And this is referring I think to places like Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 4. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. God is going to gather all of his children.

See the same thing in Isaiah chapter 27 verse 13. And in that day a great trumpet will be blown, and those who were lost in the land of Assyria, and those who were driven out to the land of Egypt, will come and worship the Lord on the holy mountain at Jerusalem. After this Jesus speaks of the fig tree.

He's connected the fig tree with Israel earlier. They will see these signs and they should recognise that the time has come. That generation will not pass away until everything has occurred.

There's a time limit on this. Within about 40 years of the time Jesus is speaking, everything will have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away but his words will not.

This maybe refers to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 6. Lift up your eyes to the heavens and look at the earth beneath, for the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner. But my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed. Recognising the fulfilment of Jesus' words in AD 70 and the specific detail that he gave to his disciples to flee at a crucial moment, we should see that Jesus is not a false prophet.

Jesus is not someone who foretold an eschaton that never occurred. This all took place and he prepared his disciples for it. And as Eusebius recounts, they took that preparation and escaped the great and terrible fate that was suffered by Jerusalem and the people within it.

Jesus concludes the teaching of this passage of the Olivet Discourse by focusing upon the absolute necessity of watchfulness and wakefulness. Everything will seem to be going on as it always has, and then suddenly everything changes in a single day. Your entire world order, everything you thought to be so rock solid and certain, collapses.

When the master of the house comes, the servants have to be ready for him. They cannot predict the time of the Son of Man's coming, but the signs will be there for the watchful and the faithful and the wakeful servants. They are called to be such servants and they are reminded again and again because this is of paramount importance.

A question to consider. The theme of wakefulness is very prominent at the end of this passage. Where else can we see such a theme within the New Testament? And how can it give us an insight into the way that the early disciples saw themselves and how we should see ourselves?