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The Book of the Law discovered in the Temple. The start of Paul's first missionary journey.

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

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Transcript

2 Kings 22—Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Judida the daughter of Uddiah of Bozkath. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left.

In the eighteenth year of King Josiah, the king sent Shaphan, the son of Azaliah, son of Meshulam, the secretary, to the house of the Lord, saying, Go up to Hilkiyah the high priest, that he may count the money that has been brought into the house of the Lord, which the keepers of the threshold have collected from the people. And let it be given into the hand of the workmen, who have the oversight of the house of the Lord. And let them give it to the workmen who are at the house of the Lord, repairing the house, that is, to the carpenters, and to the builders, and to the masons.

And let them use it for buying timber and quarried stone to repair the house. But no accounting shall be asked from them for the money that is delivered into their hand, for they deal honestly. And Hilkiyah the high priest said to Shaphan the secretary, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord.

And Hilkiyah gave the book to Shaphan, and he read it. And Shaphan the secretary came to the king and reported to the king, Your servants have emptied out the money that was found in the house, and have delivered it into the hand of the workmen who have the oversight of the house of the Lord. Then Shaphan the secretary told the king, Hilkiyah the priest has given me a book, and Shaphan read it before the king.

When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahicham the son of Shaphan, and Achbor the son of Micaiah, and Shaphan the secretary, and Assiah the king's servant, saying, Go inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us.

So Hilkiyah the priest, and Ahicham, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Assiah went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shalom, the son of Tikva, son of Barhash, keeper of the wardrobe, now she lived in Jerusalem in the second quarter. And they talked with her. And she said to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Tell the man who sent you to me, Thus says the Lord, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place, and upon its inhabitants, all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read, because they have forsaken me, and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the work of their hands.

Therefore my wrath will be kindled against this place, and it will not be quenched. But to the king of Judah who sent you to inquire of the Lord, Thus you shall say to him, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Regarding the words that you have heard, Because your heart was penitent, and you humbled yourself before the Lord, when you heard how I spoke against this place, and against its inhabitants, that they should become a desolation and a curse, and you have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. Therefore behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place.

And they brought back word to the king. In 2 Kings chapter 22 Judah is on the brink. After over fifty years of Manasseh's reign and the wickedness that had flourished within it, we might think that the threat of judgment that the Lord had declared concerning Jerusalem and Judah would soon come upon them.

The prophetic judgment hangs like a sword of Damocles over the sinful nation and city.

At any time the thread of grace by which it hangs might be cut, and destruction and exile befall the people. Yet in the very twilight of the kingdom Judah is granted a brief reprieve.

Under the reign of Josiah the nation undergoes a spiritual reformation, and their judgment is postponed. Chapter 22 and 23 recount Josiah's reign, where there is a temporary reversal of Judah's trajectory. These should be read as a unit.

Josiah is the son of Ammon, the wicked son of the wicked Manasseh, who only reigned for two years and was killed by a conspiracy. Josiah does not have promising parentage, but he proves to be a very faithful king. He walks in the ways not of Ammon and Manasseh, but of David.

Josiah begins his reign in his youth at the age of only eight, and presumably he was thrown into his reign relatively unprepared, his father being assassinated before he could enjoy a full education as the crown prince. As a boy king who ends up seeking to restore the temple, Josiah should naturally remind us of Joash. Peter Lighthouse observes the way that this sets up a broader parallel sequence in the book of 2 Kings, running from chapter 11 to the end of the book.

The structure as he sees it is as follows. First, Athaliah, daughter of Ahab, kills the royal seed in chapter 11 verse 1. Then there's Joash's reign in chapters 11 to 12. Then there's a quick sequence of kings of Israel and Judah in chapters 13 to 16.

In chapter 17, there's the fall of Samaria, and the first iteration of the sequence concludes with the revival of Judah under Hezekiah in chapters 18 to 20. The second sequence begins with Manasseh as a king like Ahab, promoting idolatry and killing the innocent in chapter 21. In chapters 22 and 23, Josiah reigns.

In chapter 24, there is a quick succession of kings of Judah, and in chapter 25, the fall of Jerusalem. And finally, the concluding element of the sequence is the elevation of Jehoiachin in chapter 25 verses 27 to 30. Josiah reigns from 640 to 609 BC.

In the 18th year of his reign, at around the age of 26, Josiah determines to repair the temple. This wasn't the first reforming action that Josiah engaged in. 2 Chronicles tells us that he was seeking the Lord from his youth, and that he had already started a widespread purge of idolatry from the land in his 12th year.

2 Chronicles 34 verses 3 to 7 read, For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father. And in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images. And they chopped down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them.

And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made

dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder, and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel.

Then he returned to Jerusalem. Josiah cleanses not just Judah, but also the remains of Israel. As the Davidic king, he is concerned not just for the southern tribes, but also for the remnant of their northern brothers.

The text's description of Josiah's reforms invite a parallel between him and Joash back in chapter 12, who also repaired the temple some years into his reign. As Lysert Beal notes, the parallels also reveal contrasts between Joash and Josiah. Josiah is far more directly overseeing the repairing of the temple than Joash.

However, despite Joash's extensive purge of idolatry from the land, and his repairs of the temple, these primarily set the scene for a far greater event, which is the discovery of the Book of the Law in the temple. When the Book of the Law is discovered, the repairs of the temple move to the background. The Book of the Law is given to Shaphan the secretary by Hilkiah the high priest, and it is then read to Josiah by Shaphan.

The Book of the Law was likely the Book of Deuteronomy, the second giving of the Law, as Israel was on the brink of entering into the promised land. Besides the Ten Commandments, it contained extensive material exhorting Israel to remember the lessons of the Exodus in the wilderness, as they prepared to possess the land. The book concludes with blessings and curses, and witnesses called against the people.

Hearing the book, Josiah is devastated by its message. He tears his clothes and weeps in response. It is clear that neither the people nor their rulers had obeyed the Book of the Law, and as a result, they had called down the judgment of the Lord upon them.

Indeed, both the people and their king were supposed to be familiar with the Book of the Law. In Deuteronomy 17, verses 18-20, the king is instructed, And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel.

In Deuteronomy 31, verses 9-13, we see that the people are supposed to be made aware of the contents of the Book of the Law, reminded of them as an entire congregation every seven years, besides the teaching that they would receive on a regular basis from the priests and the Levites in their cities and towns. 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. Once he hears the contents of the Book of the Law, Josiah realises just how serious the sin of Judah is, and their desperate need to seek the mercy of the Lord. It is clear that the Lord is angry with Israel, but perhaps there is some chance that the Lord will spare them if they turn to him.

Josiah assembled a delegation of his highest officers, Hilkiah the high priest, Shaphan the secretary, and Ahikam his son, Akbor, and Asaiah, and he sends them to a prophetess called Huldah, who lived in Jerusalem. A number of people in the delegation are mentioned favourably in the Book of Jeremiah. There were several prophets who were active during the reign of Josiah.

Whether or not they were as accessible as Huldah was, Huldah was the one to whom Josiah turned. She obviously had a high reputation as a prophetess. There are not many examples of prophetesses in scripture, and they are especially rare within the Old Testament.

Relatively speaking, women engage in more prophetic discourse in the New Testament. While priests were exclusively male by divine establishment, and the reigning monarchs of Israel and Judah were exclusively male, Athaliah was the only potential exception to the rule, although she wasn't considered a true monarch in the text. Prophetesses, though relatively rare, did exist.

Miriam, Deborah, Isaiah's wife, and Huldah are all described as prophetesses in scripture. As we see in the Lord's response to Miriam and Aaron in Numbers chapter 12, prophetic revelation and authority could vary from prophet to prophet. Some prophets performed many mighty works of power, like Elijah and Elisha.

Some performed none. Some wrote lengthy prophetic books, and others only delivered lesser oracles. Some prophesied routinely, others prophesied on just a few occasions.

Some developed movements of disciples around them, while others did not. Some were leaders, while others were only consulted by leaders. Some had far more powerful and revelatory visions, while others, like Moses, had more direct conversation with the Lord, and yet others only had dim dreams.

Some prophets had words of great and direct authority, while others functioned more as a sort of non-authoritative counsel. While Huldah was not a prophet writing scriptural prophecies like Jeremiah, nor likely a miracle-working prophet like Elisha, she is an eminent prophetess and counsellor to the king, as she delivers authoritative words of the Lord to Judah and to Josiah. She declares the Lord's judgement first upon the nation of Judah.

They have forsaken the Lord and served other gods, so all of the words of the judgement of the book of the law would come upon them. There is, however, a more positive message for Josiah. Because he was penitent and humbled himself, he will be spared the judgement himself.

This is similar to the reprieve that Hezekiah enjoys. However, Josiah's response to it is a better one than Hezekiah's. Similarities to the repentance of Ahab can be drawn here as well, but now the fate of the entire nation hangs in the balance, not just that of a particular dynasty.

The concluding promise of the Lord to Josiah here is rather surprising considering the death that Josiah dies. Perhaps we are supposed to read it in a more relative manner. Although he dies in a blow upon the nation, it is not yet the final death blow that is to be delivered.

A question to consider, what would have been some of the key teachings of the book of the law that would have caused Josiah to tear his clothes and to weep? Acts chapter 12 verse 25 to chapter 13 verse 12. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon, who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manion, a lifelong friend of Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul.

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus.

When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews, and they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God.

But Elamus the magician, for that is the meaning of his name, opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith. But Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said, You son of the devil, you enemy of all

righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time. Immediately mist and darkness fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand.

Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Acts chapter 13 begins Paul's first missionary journey. It is part of a transition from Jerusalem and out into the wider world.

With it comes a shift in focus, a movement into travel. There are several missionary journeys which accent travel much as we see in the book of Luke, as over a third of the book is concerned with the movement from Galilee down to Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul going down to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 11 and returning at the end of chapter 12 bookends the story of Peter's deliverance from prison.

It also marks a sort of passing on of the baton. Whereas the focus has been upon Peter to this point, now the narrative focus shifts to Paul and his companions. John Mark accompanies them from Jerusalem.

He is the son of Mary and whose house the Jerusalem church met for prayer. The church in Antioch was introduced to us back in Acts chapter 11 verses 19 to 26. There the church had been founded primarily among a diaspora population, but the message of the gospel had spread further by some Cyrenians and Cypriots.

Barnabas, a Levite of Cyprus himself, was sent there from Jerusalem at a later point. Here we learn of the prophets and the teachers in the Antioch church. They clearly have a number of gifted men working there.

The church has a number of leaders, perhaps overseeing different constituent communities of the larger Antioch church. One of the features of the early church, as we see it in Acts, is to have a number of teachers and leaders in each church, rather than simply one. Some suggest that there are two different groups mentioned here, the first set of three, Barnabas, Simeon and Lucius, being prophets and the second set of two, Manion and Saul, being teachers.

As Craig Keener claims however, this is likely too neat a division, not least because we see Paul exercising prophetic gifts at various points. The earliest church had more charismatic forms of ministry, prophecy and other things like that, alongside more institutional forms of ministry, and the Antioch church provides an example of this. The list of prophets and teachers is a diverse one.

The cosmopolitanism of the early church is something that should always strike us as we read the book of Acts. Many of the leaders of the church were extremely widely travelled, familiar with several different cultural settings, able to speak in a number of

different languages, and certain of them were also very well connected. Barnabas, of whom we have heard several things so far, is one of them.

Simeon, called Niger, is another. Many have reasonably speculated that given his name, he might have been a black African. Niger was a common name among Romans, so this doesn't prove his ethnicity one way or another.

If he was an African however, he wasn't the only one, as Lucius, who was most likely one of the founders of the church, was from Cyrene, in present day Libya. The Roman Empire included much of the very north of Africa. The empire surrounded the Mediterranean on all sides.

As it is often a matter of modern concern, we should note that the groups populating Roman North Africa would in many cases be very similar to those found in other parts of the Mediterranean part of the empire. Cyrene was originally a Greek settlement with a sizeable Jewish population. Much of the population of many parts of Roman North Africa would have consisted of Romanised North Africans, living alongside Greeks, Romans, Jews and others.

However, there would have been darker skinned Africans in many of these places, so we shouldn't be surprised at the possibility that Simeon might have been one. We've already encountered a black African, the Ethiopian eunuch, as the first gentile convert back in chapter 8. Some have identified Lucius with Luke, an identification that has a long history in the church. It is however an unlikely one.

Mannion is another important figure. As he was raised with Herod Antipas, he was likely an older man of some social status, although it is possible that he was a higher class slave, who might later have become a freed person. The Antioch church was engaged in worship and fasting when the Holy Spirit instructed them, most likely through prophecy, to set apart two of their most valuable men for a work appointed to them.

They fasted and prayed for them and then they laid their hands on them, appointing and charging them for their mission and sending them forth. The church, directed to send them by the Spirit and laying their hands on them, is the means by which the Holy Spirit himself sends out Saul and Barnabas upon their journey. They begin by going to Seleucia nearby on the Syrian coast and then they sail to Cyprus, a large island in the eastern Mediterranean beneath modern day Turkey.

Barnabas, we should remember, came from Cyprus and the church of Antioch had strong Cypriot connections. As Paul will generally do on his missionary journeys, he proclaims the word of God in Jewish synagogues on the island, his messages to the Jews first and then later to the Greeks. We should recall that most of the Jewish population at this period lives outside of the land of Palestine, in many parts of the Roman Empire.

In practically every city the early church missionaries would visit, there would already be Jews to be found. Barnabas and Saul are assisted and accompanied by John Mark, who was Barnabas' cousin, who had joined them in Jerusalem. They arrive at Salamis, the main port city, and they make their way throughout the island.

Salamis may have had as many as 150,000 inhabitants, something that's derived from the fact that it had a theatre that could sit 15,000. With its large population of Jews, there are a number of synagogues there and after spending some time there, Barnabas and Saul go through the entire island as far as Paphos, which is about 115 miles away by the southern coastal route. At Paphos they encounter a Jewish magician and false prophet named Bargeses.

He is associated with the pro-consul, Sergius Paulus. Apparently word of the mission of Barnabas and Saul has spread because Sergius Paulus wants to hear from them about the Yet this Jewish magician associated with him, Bargeses, also called Elemus, seeks to oppose them and to prevent the pro-consul from turning to the faith. Jeff Myers has highlighted the fact that this is a Jewish sorcerer.

He's a false prophet who's providing false counsel to a gentile ruler. He's like the character of Wormtongue with Theoden in the Lord of the Rings. He's leading someone astray and making it hard for him to see the truth.

In this particular conflict, we're seeing a broader conflict between the church as the counselor of the rulers of the nations and the false Jewish counsel that is provided by unbelieving Jews like Bargeses or Elemus. We've previously seen conflicts with magicians in the story of Simon the Sorcerer back in chapter 8. There Simon was juxtaposed with Philip and here Elemus or Bargeses will be juxtaposed with Saul. Elemus has two names within the text, Bargeses and Elemus, and here we see that Saul has another name.

He's also called Paul and hereafter that will be the name that Luke uses of him. Luke is always attentive to the names that he gives to characters and when he uses two different names for a character, those names are seldom used without close consideration. It is noteworthy that Saul is called Paul in the same narrative in which we encounter Sergius Paulus who has the same name.

In verse 9 we read But Saul who was also called Paul and we might wonder what the also refers to. Does it mean that Paul had two names, Saul and also Paul? Or is it rather about connecting the name of Paul with the name of Sergius Paulus who's also called Paul? I think that might be the case. In this context, there are significant word plays with names.

The name of the sorcerer Bargeses does not seem to be the same word as Elemus. Bargeses seems to mean the son of Jesus much as Barnabas is referred to as the son of encouragement. Why is he called Elemus? What's going on there? How do you get from Bargeses to Elemus and what's the significance of these names? That is one question to

consider.

Another question is what sort of play is going on with Paul's name? Should we focus upon the meaning which means small? Perhaps he is called that because he is the least of the apostles, not worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church. Maybe that's part of it. But more likely in this immediate context is that it is related to the name of the proconsul.

There is the conflict between a false counsellor and a true counsellor. Now it would seem that if your name is Sergius Paulus, your fitting counterpart might well be called Paulus too. And so Paul is the fitting counterpart and counsellor to the man who is his namesake.

Bargeses is also an interesting name. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus is the name that we associate with Christ almost exclusively. In the book of Acts there are a couple of occasions where we see another character called Jesus.

We have a reference to Joshua as Jesus in the Greek form of that name. But it seems strange that we would have Bargeses mentioned at this point, only for him to be called immediately afterwards by another name. His name seems to connect him with Jesus or with the Jesus movement.

Maybe his name, literally Son of Jesus, highlights this falsehood. It might indicate that he is someone who is seemingly affiliated in some way with the early church. But he is a false Jewish prophet and an opponent.

His opposition to Paul is framed along these lines. You have a false Jewish prophet who has an identity, a name, that threatens the movement of the church because of its proximity to the name of Christ Jesus. And he is named as if he was the Son of Jesus.

But he is in fact no Son of Jesus. He's not a disciple of Jesus at all. Later on we encounter the sons of Sceva who try to cast out demons in the name of Christ.

And then the demons attack them and drive them away, wounded and naked. Earlier on we have Simon the sorcerer who's confronted by Peter. He claims to be a magician and he wants the power of the Holy Spirit.

Once again there is a conflict with someone who is close but in some way claims to represent or be associated with the Jesus movement. But who is actually false. He's actually an opponent.

Paul's conflict with Bar Jesus here might highlight plays of identity, indicating that he is the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus because he is Paulus himself. And on the other hand that he is the one who reveals the true identity of the magician, not as Bar Jesus, a true son of Jesus, but as Elemus the sorcerer. Now what does Elemus mean? Rick

Strullen has suggested a connection with the character of Elam who is a descendant of Shem.

Elam is the one whose line leads to the Persians and the Medes and the Persians are associated with magic. They were famed for it. This name then would present him not as part of the Jesus movement, not as someone associated with Jesus Christ, a son of Jesus, but as a false magician like the magicians of Pharaoh or the false advisors that were in Herod's court in Matthew chapter 2. Beyond playing their names off against each other in different ways, there is also a play of the character of Paul over against the character of Elemus.

Saul's name is switched to Paul in the narrative in the immediate context in which Paul speaks the word of judgment to Elemus the sorcerer. And what he says is quite arresting. It's almost exactly the same as the judgment that befell him on the road to Damascus.

Elemus is struck blind and he has to be led by the hand. And there are other details that might recall that story. In Acts chapter 9, Ananias is instructed to lay his hands upon Saul so that he would regain his sight.

In this chapter, the hand of the Lord rests upon the false prophet Elemus so that he loses his sight. There is a play here with Saul's older identity and with his new identity. And this I believe is why his name is shifted at this point.

The judgment that falls upon Elemus is the judgment that fell upon Paul's old identity as Saul. Elemus is said to make crooked the straight paths of the Lord. We saw a street called Straight back in chapter 9 of Acts.

It was the street to which Saul went after his vision. Now he is no longer making straight paths crooked. The hand of the Lord came upon him in a street called Straight.

And this juxtaposition between the two characters, between Saul and Elemus, really comes to the foreground in the narrative as the two are held over against each other as Saul judges the sorcerer. We saw a similar juxtaposition between Philip and Simon the sorcerer back in chapter 8. Paul, having his name changed, is dissociated from the old Saul, the false persecutor. His conversion was a judgment upon his old identity, a judgment on persons like Bar-Jesus who present themselves as false associates of Christ, like the sons of Sceva or like Simon, but who are not of Christ at all.

The juxtaposition of Saul or Paul and Bar-Jesus sets up Paul as the true counsellor to Sergius Paulus, the Christians as the true counsellors to the rulers of the Gentiles. And as the false counsellor is struck with blindness, something about his true spiritual state is revealed. Sergius Paulus can now be counseled by another Paul, one who has his same name, and now he will be advised well, taught the message of the kingdom, no longer

guided by a blind man.

The false Jewish prophet, who in spite of his other name is not in fact associated with Jesus, but is the son of the Elamites, associated with the magicians, the Persians and that sort of false religion, he's judged. Here in Saul, who is also called Paul, we have the true wise man, a wise man who will bring counsel that will lead to the healing of the nations. A question to consider, looking at the references to the Holy Spirit in this passage, how can we see the Spirit working in the mission of Saul and Barnabas?