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March 16th: Exodus 23 & Matthew 22:1-33

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Book of the covenant: laws concerning justice and the Sabbath; the Angel and the sanctions of the covenant. The Parable of the Wedding Feast.

Some passages referenced:

Leviticus 23 (the festal calendar); Exodus 34:26, Deuteronomy 14:21 (not boiling a kid in its mother's milk).

Luke 14:12-24 (the wedding feast parable in Luke); Matthew 24:22, 24, 31 (election reframed).

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

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Transcript

Exodus 23. You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man to be a malicious witness.

You shall not fall in with the many to do evil. Nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit siding with the many so as to pervert justice. Nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his

lawsuit.

If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it. You shall rescue it with him.

You shall not pervert the justice due to your paw in his lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the clear-sighted, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right.

You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. For six years you shall sow your land, and gather in its yield.

But the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, that the poor of your people may eat, and what they leave the beasts of the field may eat. You shall do likewise with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard. Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, that your ox and your donkey may have rest, and the son of your servant-woman and the alien may be refreshed.

Pay attention to all that I have said to you, and make no mention of the names of other gods, nor let it be heard on your lips. Three times in the year you shall keep a fast to me. You shall keep the feast of unleavened bread.

As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for on it you came out of Egypt. None shall appear before me empty-handed. You shall keep the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field.

You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God. You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with anything leavened, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning.

The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

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

When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites, and the Hittites, and

the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I block them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do as they do. But you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. You shall serve the Lord your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you.

None shall miscarry or be barren in your land. I will fulfil the number of your days. I will send my terror before you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come.

And I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you, and I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possessed the land.

And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates. For I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them and their gods.

They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. Exodus chapter 23 is the final chapter of this section of the book of the covenant.

These laws continue to refract the fundamental principles of the Ten Commandments in the different situations of life. It's not a comprehensive system, it's just some example case laws that help us learn these basic principles of justice and jurisprudence. The laws concerning slavery and rest of Sabbath are given in chapter 21 verses 1 to 11.

The laws concerning violence and honouring father and mother in chapter 21, 12 to 36. Concerning property and theft in chapter 22 verses 1 to 15. Concerning marriage and sexual and spiritual faithfulness in chapter 22 verses 16 to 20.

And then we've moved into sections concerning oppression and false witness in chapter 22 verse 21 to 23 verse 29, the part that we're in now. And then there are finally some laws concerning Sabbath and Thanksgiving in chapter 23 verses 10 to 19. And some movement through the commandments, starting with the first and fourth, then the fifth and sixth, then the eighth, then the seventh and the second together, and then the ninth and third together, then the fourth and the tenth together.

At least that is my reading of it. This section has a particular focus upon false witness and upon bearing the name of the Lord, I believe. It's connected with the section from verse 21 of the previous chapter.

Both of them deal with the fact that they should not oppress the sojourner, they were sojourners in Egypt. And these bracketing statements help to hold all that material together. It deals with both judicial and non-judicial forms of false witness.

So we can think about rumours and slander, or malicious witness, or perjury in the context of court. The law recognises the power of popular opinion and influence here as well, and the fact that justice is often not found on the side of the majority. There are dangers on all sides that it highlights.

It points out the danger of instinctively siding with poor people. This is something that might surprise us. Christians have often spoken about having a preferential option for the poor, but yet this text is very clear that there must be impartiality in justice, and we should not instinctively side with the poor, with the victims, with the oppressed, etc.

God clearly and strongly opposes oppression, but justice must seek the truth and be impartial, rather than tipping its scales in favour of either party. A desire, for instance, to do away with social inequalities can be dangerous, because it can lead us to undermine justice, and to serve a particular party, rather than actually serving the good and the true and the just. We can start to deal with social groups, for instance, rather than with particular persons and the justice of their cases, starting to think more about who is doing what to whom, and as a result of one party being preferred over the other, we will start to privilege them when we see them doing something, and undermine the other party when we see them doing the same thing.

That is not how justice is supposed to be run. Justice must be impartial. The importance of active concern for other people's property, even that of our enemy, is highlighted after this.

Once again, it moves beyond the logic of friend and enemy relations, and partiality, to more universal principles. We must uphold what is right and good and just over our preferences, over our friendships, over our family attachments, over any of these sorts of things, and this emphasis upon impartiality, an absolute principle, is something that is an important part of the law in general. Justice must be done to the poor and the oppressed, and their case must be heard and not perverted, or God will judge.

The poor man's lawsuit must be heard and rightly adjudicated. A false charge is a matter of extreme seriousness, and those who kill the innocent and righteous will be condemned. The law, then, is not a matter of kinship and familiarity, it's not a matter of social conflict, nor must it be a matter of personal animus, of vendettas, of favouring one party over another for personal reasons.

It must be consistent, it must be just, and it must be equitable. The danger of corruption and bribery is highlighted as a challenge to this. It must be a society of rigorous and consistent principles of justice, and the tasks of judges, of witnesses, of jurors, and other

parties is a weighty one, a task whose seriousness is underlined at every point in this treatment.

The book-ending statement concerning the stranger is a reminder that they were oppressed. Their recognition of what it was like to be oppressed and a sojourner must guide their own practice. They have been placed in the shoes of people like the stranger Hagar, and they must act accordingly.

Israel must always see the world not only from the side of those with power and privilege, but also from the side of those who are marginalised, of those who are the sojourners, as those who are poor and without privilege and power. From this we move into legislation concerning the Sabbath year, and the Sabbath year is given for the land, to give support for the poor of the land, rest to the land itself, and food to the animals. There's a sense here that the land is a commons, it's not an absolute possession which people can dispose of however they please.

It belongs to the Lord, it's been given as a possession, and they must treat it in a way that recognises that it is never fully theirs. It is something that belongs to God, that he has given to them to use, and that they must always use it in a way that honours his title over it, and the needs of those around them. The focus on the Sabbath, as described here, is to give rest to others.

Rest is a form of justice. It's a means by which oppression is prevented, and by which it is ensured that people who could easily be oppressed or overworked are given relief. They must celebrate three annual feasts, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest, and the Feast of In-Gathering.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread, connected with Passover, preceding Passover and leading to the Feast of Firstfruits. The Feast of Harvest is the Feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of In-Gathering is the Feast of Tabernacles. The Festal Calendar will be further developed in Leviticus chapter 23, and these are days of national assembly.

They are key times in Israel's annual life. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is at the beginning of the spring barley harvest. The Feast of Harvest is at the end of the wheat harvest.

And the Feast of In-Gathering is at the end of the agricultural year. They must take the sacrifices of the Lord with the utmost seriousness, and only give God the best. None of these things should be adulterated in any way.

And there is this strange commandment at the end, which is also found at the end of the series of commandments in Exodus chapter 34 verse 26, and then repeated again in Deuteronomy chapter 14 verse 21. In each case, it's a climactic statement, to not boil a kid in its mother's milk. The importance of keeping life and death separate might be part

of the point here, and this also has the effect of placing restrictions upon food that give a recognition that all comes from God and is subject to him.

And a mindfulness about our food and where it comes from, and the way in which it's made and processed, and the dignity with which things are treated, is part of the purpose of this, I think. When we consider what is meant by boiling a kid in its mother's milk, we must recognise that it's taking something that was for the kid to have life, its mother's milk, and we're using that as a means of its death. We're using that to prepare it for our food.

What this commandment forces people to do is to consider the dignity of the animals themselves. The kid should not be prepared for its food in what was supposed to be its food. There's something about that that dishonours the kid and the milk, and the law that we must hold those things separate forces us to consider the dignity of animal life and the way that we cannot just treat animals as our pure possession.

We must give honour to them, and we must eat them in a way that shows that they have a life and a dignity of their own. Pay attention to how many of the commandments in this book of the covenant are devoted to animals and taking care of them. God created the animals, he delights in the animals, and one of the tasks that we have as human beings is to take care of and concern for the animals.

God declares that he will send his angel before them. This seems to be a theophanic figure, a manifestation of God's own presence. He's the messenger of God himself and seems to be identified with God, at least in my understanding.

Looking back at Genesis, the angel appears on a number of occasions. It wrestles with Jacob, it appears to Abraham and to Sarah and declares that they will have a son in Genesis chapter 18. Here we have a section of sanctions following commands.

There are three warnings to listen to the angel, a warning against worshipping foreign gods and again another warning against the gods of the Canaanites. These frame two blessings, blessings for obedience to the angel and then a blessing upon obedience more generally. There are consequences for obedience and disobedience.

They must utterly shun Canaanite idolatry and be faithful to the Lord. If they are faithful, God will bless them with food, with health, with fruitfulness and he will drive out their enemies before them. God is the God of nature and as Israel serves him, nature itself will support them.

This section deals with principles of holy war which can be troubling for us. It's important to remember that this war is primarily a war of God against the Canaanites. The Israelites have to remove the Canaanites but just the Canaanites.

It's not a war against paganism in general. They have to root paganism from the land but

not paganism as such from all over the world. No right was given to them to fight in the name of the Lord to develop a greater empire.

In Genesis chapter 15, God declares that the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure. God gives them time before he judges them. The Canaanites could also leave the land and go elsewhere.

Recognising these things can at least relieve some of our problems. It doesn't actually solve many of the difficulties and questions that we might have about this but at least gives us a clearer sense of what's in view. The emphasis here is upon driving them out, removing them from the land.

Not exterminating them but removing them from the land so that they go elsewhere presumably. A question to consider, what are some of the ways both in our treatment of animals and in our separation of death and life more generally that we can be mindful not to boil a kid in its mother's milk? Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 to 33 The King was angry and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants, the wedding feast is ready, but those invited were not worthy.

Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find. And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad, so the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the King came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment, and he said to him, Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment? And he was speechless.

Then the King said to the attendants, bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, for many are called but few are chosen. Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words, and they sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians, saying, Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances.

Tell us then, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not? But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, Why do you put me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin for the tax. And they brought him a denarius. And Jesus said to them, Whose likeness and inscription is this? They said, Caesar's.

Then he said to them, Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. When they heard it they marvelled, and they left him and went away. The same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection, and they asked him a question, saying, Teacher, Moses said, If a man dies having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up offspring for his brother.

Now there were seven brothers among us, the first married and died, and having no

offspring left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all the woman died.

In the resurrection, therefore, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had her. But Jesus answered them, You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given a marriage, but are like angels in heaven.

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God? I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is not God of the dead, but of the living. And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching.

In Matthew 22, Jesus continues his confrontations with the Jewish religious and political leaders, and a number of different sects and parties challenge Jesus at this point. We start to get more of a sense of the politically, religiously, and socially fraught situation into which Jesus was speaking here. The parable of the wedding feast follows on from the parable of the wicked tenants.

It is still concerned with questions of authority that have been raised in the preceding chapter. The son is the royal brigram, and the invitation being sent out is an invitation to a wedding feast, presumably to various officials and rulers. And the way that the servants are mistreated by those that are being invited is quite extreme.

They are even killed in some cases. They are being invited to a wedding feast, and they are killing the people bringing the invitation. This seems fairly extreme.

But it's important to remember that this is a political event. It's the wedding feast of the son of the king, the heir of the kingdom. And as such, it's a rejection of the son, and an act of treason and insurrection.

Many see the destruction of the city that's referenced as AD 70. But given the second half of the parable, with the further set of invitations, Peter Lighthouse has suggested that it refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It's different from the parable as we find it in Luke chapter 14, which comes in a very different context, and does not have a number of the details that we have here.

For instance, it's not a king in Luke's account, and there's not the second half with the part concerning the wedding garment. It suggests to me that these are two independent parables, and should not be seen to be referring to the same thing. Luke's account is given in a different context, and we shouldn't be surprised that Jesus, as a teacher that's going around from place to place, would repurpose illustrations and parables and change them in different ways for different purposes.

I think that's probably what we're seeing here. We should observe how many details the

parable of the wedding feast shares in common with the parable of the wicked tenants, which precedes it. There's a son.

There are servants being sent out. The servants are being mistreated, etc. All of this serves to indicate that the two parables should probably be read alongside each other, as belonging together and helping to illuminate each other in different ways.

They're not twins, as we've seen elsewhere, but they certainly do illuminate each other and serve a common theme. For many readers who see the destruction of the city as being the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the second set of invitations are the ones sent out to the Gentiles and to others, perhaps like the tax collectors and the prostitutes. That's not necessarily the case.

We can maybe see it as one that's given to Israel as it's brought back to the land, and certain people, including the tax collectors and the prostitutes, are invited in. And there's a rejection of the old Israel that was sent away into exile. There's a second inspection that occurs at the end of the story, the inspection of the clothing of the guest at the wedding feast.

In Revelation chapter 19, we have a reference to wedding garments, and it talks about the bride making herself ready. It was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And here there's an inspection of wedding clothing.

The man without clean garments is dishonouring the king, and presumably willfully so. There's a sorting process here as the king inspects the guests, and there's a warning about presuming upon election. Many were invited.

Israel's story is a story of many being invited, but only a few proving worthy. People were destroyed as a result of their rejection of the prophets, the servants that were sent, and even those that seem to come at this point prove themselves to be hypocrites, to not have the deeds that conform to the wedding feast that they've been invited to. So there's a warning about presuming upon election, and there's a reframing then of the concept of election.

We see this reframing of election, for instance, in chapter 24, verses 22, 24 and 31. For instance, in verse 22, In verse 24, And then finally, This develops the previous parables' challenge to the security of the status of Israel and its leaders. Israel may have presumed upon its covenant election that God had chosen Abraham, and them in Abraham.

But this notion of election, many being called, but few being chosen, is an unsettling of that concept. Jesus is redrawing the concept of election within this and the previous parable. After Jesus gives this parable, the Pharisees join with the Herodians to trap

Jesus.

The Herodians no longer enjoyed power in Jerusalem and Judea, but supporters of the Herodian dynasty presumably still operated there. And we also know from the narrative of the Passion that Herod was in the city over that period. In this and the following two challenges, what we see is a challenge to Jesus' authority and the jockeying for power that exists in Jerusalem at that time, with different parties vying for dominance.

Tax for 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. And the denarius itself probably had blasphemous statements of Tiberius Caesar being the son of God.

One way or another, it seems, Jesus is caught. Either he aligns himself with the tax rebels and revolutionaries against Rome, or he will seem like a compromiser with Rome. And his answer to the question, however, is a profoundly shrewd one.

First of all, he asks them to produce a coin. And this isn't just a visual aid. It's something more than that.

They must reveal one of the coins to be in their possession. The Jews have their own coinage, but they clearly have one of these coins, these coins with a blasphemous statement, an image on it. They have one in their possession.

And Jesus' answer is an incredibly wise one. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. Perhaps one thing we should observe is that it is an ambiguous statement.

To some it might seem to be saying, give Caesar what's coming to him. To others, 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's a willingness in Jesus' teaching to be dispossessed of such items. The opposition between God and Mammon may be playing out here. In Jesus' teaching concerning the temple tax as well, Jesus just does not get into fights about paying money.

The concern for money that the Pharisees and others display is a result in part of the fact that they serve money, that they are in bondage to the love of money. But there's probably more going on. First of all, there are Jews to be paid, both to Caesar and to God.

And Jesus' statement suggests that we need to recognise both and distinguish between them. The coin is Caesar's. And so the tax isn't just an arbitrary imposition, it's something that is for services given.

What did the Romans ever do for us? Well, the aqueduct, the sanitation, the roads, the irrigation, medicine, education, wine, public baths, safety and public order, all these sorts of things. And the expectation that you render back to Caesar something in exchange for that is perfectly reasonable. That doesn't mean a legitimization of everything that Caesar is doing.

Rather, the sense of giving back can indicate a sort of non-investment in that whole economy. That you're giving back, you're not actually participating in the same way, you're not investing yourself in this. You're invested in the Kingdom of God, so you're prepared to give money back to Caesar.

Jesus escapes a trap, but he also makes some important theological points. He treads a line between compliance and resistance. Rendering to God what is God's places clear limits upon what you give to Caesar.

Caesar can't be given worship, for instance. Other people have seen some sort of opposition between the image of Caesar on the coin and the image of God on human persons. You don't render persons and ourselves to Caesar.

Now I think that's a bit of a strange reading, but it's possible, and it certainly is something that's true in principle. Our section ends with a challenge from the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection. They present this strange case based upon the practice of the Levirate Commandment.

The commandment that when a man died, his brother would marry his widow in order to raise up seed for him. And so this is a convoluted story of some really strange, bizarre situation that arose when a woman ended up marrying seven brothers after each other, after each one died. Now there's a much less extreme version of this scenario in Genesis chapter 38, with Tamar, Ur, Onan, and Shelah, and also Judah in that situation.

Each one of them are involved with her in some way, and we might well ask, in the resurrection, whose wife is she? Jesus' answer challenges the idea that resurrection is just a sort of revivification, a return to an extension of our existing forms of life. We will be like the angels. The angels don't marry.

They're a numb, procreating, living host, and they endure, they don't die. However, marriage is given to fulfil the calling to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and also to sustain the human race in response to the reality of death. There is a presumption here that marriage is ordered, in its very institution, towards procreation.

And when procreation is no longer an end, marriage ceases to exist. The Levirate Law is dealing with the problems where marriage fails to raise up seed. It's dealing with the problems of marriage in the face of death.

And marriage, more generally, is dealing with a pre-eschatological situation, where there

is still a need to fill the earth, where there is still the reality of death to deal with. Whereas in the resurrection, there is a new principle of life. There is a new principle of generation, or rather, regeneration.

No longer marriage. We are not born to a husband and a wife in the regeneration, in the event of the resurrection. Rather, we are reborn from the grave.

And as a result, this new principle of regeneration leads to a completely different form of society. We can maybe see the Law of the Leveret against this backdrop. In Deuteronomy chapter 25, the Law is about raising up seed for the dead brother.

There is a sense in which the dead brother is being raised up through offspring, being born to his wife, through his brother. And that principle of resurrection is part of the Leveret Commandment. Although it's resurrection in the context of a society that's shaped by the reality of death.

Jesus then appeals to God's statement to Moses in Exodus chapter 3, that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And it seems to be a strange argument for the resurrection. But it seems to me that the point is, he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Not he was. God is defined in some way as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. As the covenant God.

The God who is not just the God who was the God of those people, but the God who is. And as a result, there is the assumption that they have some continued existence to him. Indeed, the action of the Exodus is being done in part on their account, for their sake.

And so there's the presumption that they live to God, with the implication that they will one day be raised bodily. A question to consider. What does Jesus' teaching in response to the Sadducees have to teach us about the purpose of marriage? And also how the reality of marriages here and now in this age might be transposed into the reality of the new creation and the resurrection.

Thank you.