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May 24th: Deuteronomy 25 & Luke 12:54–13:9

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Alastair Roberts

Not blotting out the brother's name. If you do not repent, you will all likewise perish!

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

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Transcript

Deuteronomy 25 If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go into her, and take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother shall not be married to him, and his wife shall not be married to him. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother shall not be married to him, and his wife shall not be married to him. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother shall not be married to him, and his wife shall not be married to him.

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take his brother's wife, then his brother's wife shall go up to the gate to the elders and say, My husband's brother refuses to perpetuate his brother's name in Israel. He will not perform the duty of a husband's brother to me.

Then the elders of his city shall call him and speak to him, and if he persists, saying, I do not wish to take her, then his brother's wife shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, and pull his sandal off his foot, and spit in his face. And she shall answer and say, So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother's house. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother shall not be married to him, and his wife shall not be married to him.

And if the man does not wish to take his brother's wife, then his brother shall not be married to him. And if the man does not wish to take his brother's house, and the name of his house shall be called in Israel, the house of him who had his sandal pulled off. When men fight with one another, and the wife of the one draws near to rescue her husband from the hand of him who is beating him, and puts out her hand and seizes him by the private parts, then you shall cut off her hand.

Your eyes shall have no pity. You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, a large and a small. You shall not have in your house two kinds of measures, a large and a small.

A full and fair weight you shall have, a full and fair measure you shall have, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly, are an abomination to the Lord your God. Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you came out of Egypt, how he attacked you on the way when you were faint and weary, and cut off your tail, those who were lagging behind you, and he did not fear God.

Therefore when the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget. In Deuteronomy chapter 25 we're continuing to work through the Ten Commandments in the penultimate chapter of this section.

Chapter 25 begins with the ninth commandment, you shall not bear false witness, and ends with the tenth commandment, you shall not covet. As we have already seen, the ninth commandment includes a prohibition upon oppression. Verses 1 to 3 continue this theme.

It preserves the dignity of the beaten man. It deals with a case that has gone to court and someone has been found guilty. Not bearing false witness against one's neighbour includes the concern that punishment not be excessive.

The judge supervises the execution of the sentence, ensuring that it is carried out

appropriately. It's important that even a guilty person not be degraded by vicious punishment. No one should be treated like an animal in such cases.

The language of being degraded in your sight is very important. It's all too easy to regard the criminal as subhuman, to care little for their proper treatment, or not to take due concern for their protection from harm or mistreatment. Note that the focus is less upon what excessive punishment does to the person receiving it, but what it does to those giving it, to the way that it dehumanises others in our perception.

The punishment must occur in such a way that they never forget that the person receiving the punishment is a brother. Part of the point here is that the person who has committed a crime can and should be rehabilitated at the end of it. Verse 4 which says that you should not muzzle the ox as it treads out the grain is a peculiar commandment for several reasons.

First, unmuzzling the ox would make it difficult for it to do its job and be extremely impractical. It needed to be muzzled while it worked the grain, then unmuzzled and fed. If the animal weren't muzzled it would probably need to be driven with prodding and whipping.

So being humane to animals may not necessarily be in view here. Rather the potential impracticality and the counter-productivity of the commandment should suggest that something symbolic is going on here and we must determine what that thing is. This commandment is referenced in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 5 verses 17-18.

In 1 Corinthians 9 verses 7-14 it's referenced again. It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. Paul makes clear that he doesn't think that oxen are the chief point of the commandment here at all. Rather it is symbolic of something else.

In these cases the ox is the Christian minister who is working in God's field, preparing his people. The minister must be permitted to eat from God's field, being materially provided for by the people to whom he is ministering. Paul compares this to the priests in the temple.

Interestingly the priests were symbolised by oxen, and the temple was built on the site

of the threshing floor. It might seem from this that the commandment fits well under the principle of not bearing false witness in its extended sense of resistance to oppression. We must take concern that people are not oppressed, that they are given their dues for their labour.

However there might be something more going on here. We'll revisit it in a moment. Verses 5-10 that follow concern the law of the Leveret marriage.

It's a law about taking concern for the preservation of the name of your brother so that his name not be blotted out. It begins with brothers living together in a yet undivided property. One of the brothers dies, and the other brother seeks to raise up his name by bearing a child for his dead brother with the widow of his brother.

This is a very great act of charity as raising up a child for your dead brother would mean that there would be much less of the inheritance left for you. Leveret marriage depended upon the institution of marriage being ordered primarily towards the bearing of seed, not so much of a strong emphasis upon companionship and sexual pleasure. It seeks to preserve the name of the dead brother and to raise up seed for the dead person.

Perhaps the first example that we find of this in the story of scripture is Nahor taking Milcah, the daughter of his dead brother Haran. Some have also argued that Sarai is the daughter of Haran as well. So Abram is performing something similar to a Leveret marriage for his brother also.

The raising up of seed for the dead brother in this fashion is a new life after death. It's a sort of resurrection. Beyond the concern to provide for the widow of the dead brother, it suggests that even after death the dead brother was seen to have some act of investment in life, in the continuation of his legacy and his name.

One of the most important stories of the performance of the Leveret is found in Genesis chapter 38 where we read of the sin of Onan who despised his brother and spilled his seed. This Callum Carmichael suggests helps us to understand the strange ritual of the removal of the sandal as a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan. Genesis chapter 38 verses 7-10 reads Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his, so he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground.

His motive was greed, he didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself. And the removal of the sandal from the foot corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse. Elsewhere in scripture the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals.

The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal. The woman then spits in the man's face, corresponding with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action. The person who failed to perform the duty of the Leveret then receives a dishonourable

name for his house and is shamefully associated with Onan, the great example of someone who failed to perform this duty towards his brother.

There's a further twist here though. The most famous and the fullest example of the performance of the Leveret commandment occurs in the book of Ruth, even down to the removing of the sandal, although in the book of Ruth that isn't presented as a shaming ritual, even though the near-kinsman's reasons for not performing the Leveret is concern for his own inheritance. Ruth chapter 3 verses 1-9 reads Then Naomi, her mother-in-law, said to her, My daughter, should I not seek rest for you, that it may be well with you? Is not Boaz our relative, with whose young women you were? See, he is winnowing barley to-night at the threshing-floor.

Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your cloak and go down to the threshing-floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies, then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do. And she replied, All that you say I will do.

So she went down to the threshing-floor, and did just as her mother-in-law had commanded her, and when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay down. At midnight the man was startled and turned over, and behold, a woman lay at his feet.

He said, Who are you? And she answered, I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer. And then in verses 14 and 15 of that chapter, So she lay at his feet until the morning, but arose before one could recognize another.

And he said, Let it not be known that the woman came to the threshing-floor. And he said, Bring the garment you are wearing, and hold it out. So she held it, and he measured out six measures of barley, and put it on her.

Then she went into the city. The interesting thing that we see here is that all of the elements of the law of the ox treading out the grain are present, and they're performed as a symbolic representation of the law of the leveret. Boaz is on the threshing-floor.

Ruth lies at his feet, as if he were treading her out. Then at the end he presents her with grain, placing it into her garment, which is held in front of her like a pregnant stomach. Treading out the grain then serves as a sort of metaphor for having sexual relations with the Ruth chapter 3 then suggests that the law of the un-muzzled ox is a symbolic expression of the law of the leveret.

How then would this relate to Paul's use of the law? The point is that those raising up the sons of God, children for God's name, should enjoy fruit from their work for his glory,

much as the person performing the leveret should enjoy the use of the inheritance of his dead brother while he was raising up an heir for that brother. This also suggests that the law of un-muzzled ox begins the section devoted to the tenth commandment. Performing the leveret was the paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbor's possessions or their station in life.

It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name. The commandment that follows this is stranger still. It's a law concerning a woman who takes the genitals of a man who's fighting with her husband.

This is reminiscent in some ways of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22. We can see some similarities here. First of all, there are two men fighting and there's a woman caught between them.

In the first case, the man hits out and hits her pregnant stomach, threatening the lives of her children. In the second case, again, there is a woman between two men and in this occasion she attacks his genitals, his capacity for fertility. However, the oddness of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22 suggests it is a symbolic commandment and I have argued that it is related to the story of Rachel.

Something similar might be going on here. Whereas in the first law the woman is wounded by one of Here the woman grabs the man attacking her husband by the genitals. This is a very strange and specific situation to legislate for.

In the preceding commandment, the woman shamed the man by uncovering his foot, removing his sandal, an action symbolically related to uncovering his genitals. Here the woman takes hold of a man's genitals again. Literally, the two men fighting are a man and his brother.

The woman seeks to rescue her husband by taking the assailant's privates, perhaps designing to crush them and render him incapable of bearing offspring. If he is symbolically attacking her dead husband by failing to raise up offspring for him, then she will grab hold of his genitals to get back at him, preventing him from having offspring either. However, what we see here is not dissimilar from the action of Tamar, who took Judah's privates in a sense when he was threatening her dead husband by refusing to give his son Shelah to her to perform the leveret.

By subterfuge in disguise, she lay with Judah, her father-in-law, and conceived through him. The woman's hand must be cut off for this action. Her assault upon the privates of a man who failed to perform the leveret for her husband would be a vicious act of envy or some other sort of assault.

Why lose her hand in particular? It's the offending limb, but that seems like a weak explanation. Is it because she is trying to rescue him out of the hand of his brother?

Again, that seems weak to me. It does remind me of the scarlet thread tied around Zerah's hand at the end of Genesis 38 though.

The woman's hand was cut off, and the infant of Tamar with the scarlet cord around his hand had his line cut off, while his brother broke through ahead of him. Once again, this raises the possibility that this law is a symbolic reflection upon the history of Israel and some events within it. Verses 13 to 16 concern fair weights and measures.

Use of different kinds of weights was often designed to gain more when purchasing and pay less when buying. This could easily have been placed under the 8th or the 9th commandment, but it is here, and it highlights the covetousness that drives such action. Such dishonesty in trade is firmly condemned.

Verses 17 to 19, with which the chapter ends, concerns blotting out the memory of Amalek, a very shocking commandment, and it looks back to the events of Exodus 17 verses 8 to 16. Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek.

Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand. So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek. While Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord, the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

Perhaps one of the strangest things about this commandment is that it is found at this point, sandwiched between a law concerning just weights and measures, and another concerning offering first fruits, in a section of Deuteronomy devoted to the tenth commandment, You shall not covet. It certainly seems badly out of place. What might it be doing here? When we are faced with such strange things in Scripture, people often throw up their hands.

But such strangeness in the Scriptures is seldom without a discoverable purpose. What it does require is much closer attention to the context, and listening to the clues, not least the clue that is found in a section concerning not coveting. What might it reveal? As we look, the answers are near at hand, and the following observations largely come from

Ammi Silva.

The commandment speaks of blotting out the memory of Amalek, but there has already been a reference to blotting out in verse 6, And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. In the Levirate commandment, a brother comes to the aid of a brother in the most vulnerable position of all, in death, without anyone to continue his legacy. Amalek did precisely the opposite.

When Israel was at its very weakest, Amalek attacked his brother and killed its stragglers, its very weakest members. For Amalek, vulnerability is a target. Amalek prevailed over Israel whenever it was weak, but Aaron and Hur presented an alternative approach to the weak brother in need, when they lifted up the heavy arms of Moses.

Amalek was a descendant of Esau and continued Esau's rivalry with his brother Israel down through the generations, a rivalry that Esau himself abandoned. Amalek acted as a predator towards his brother. Whenever Israel was weak, Amalek would turn up to try and destroy him.

For instance, Haman, in the story of Esther, was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite. Amalek was the exact opposite of the faithful brother who performed the Levirate. Amalek is the anti-Levirite people.

Amalek was a hateful and envious brother who could not be reasoned with. He sought to blot out his brother Israel's name when his brother was at his most vulnerable, having just left Egypt. Consequently, his name must be blotted out.

And the point here is less the physical people of the Amalekites, although Israel did have an enduring conflict with the Amalekites who retained their determination to prey on the vulnerability of Israel and blot out their name. The issue is more with what the Amalekites stand for. They face such severe judgment because of their deep, held desire to destroy their brother.

Israel, by contrast, should be defined as a people who come to the aid of their brothers when they are in need and vulnerable, a people who are not concerned with making their own name great, but who give themselves to making great the name of the Lord, and they will be blessed as they do that. A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which we might raise up the names of others in ways like the brother performing the Levirate marriage? Luke chapter 12 verse 54 to chapter 13 verse 9. He also said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once a shower is coming, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say there will be scorching heat, and it happens.

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do

you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny. There was some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, and he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell, and kill them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And he told this parable, A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none.

Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down. In the concluding verses of Luke chapter 12, Jesus observes that people can read meteorological signs, but they can't recognize the times in which they are living. It's imperative that they learn to interpret the present time, to see the signs.

The immediate signs in that context are those of the divisions and families mentioned in verses 52 to 53. These foreshadow what's going to happen in the future, this great division of judgment. The Son of Man is going to come, and they won't be prepared for his advent.

From speaking of interpreting the signs, Jesus moves to speaking of judging what is right. The theme of judgment is important here. Recognizing the signs, they should appreciate that they are hastening towards the time of reckoning.

A similar image to the one that Jesus uses here is found in Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 26, when it is related to the commandment not to murder. But here it seems to have a different purpose. In speaking about settling with the accuser, Jesus is making a different claim in this context.

Jesus calls his hearers to make every attempt to settle with their adversary before being brought to judgment. They should recognize the signs of imminent judgment in Jesus' ministry and get right with God before his judgment falls. As in the case of previous interruptions, such as the man from the crowd in chapter 12 verse 13, or Peter in verse

41 of that chapter, Jesus takes the statements of those bringing up the actions of Pilate as a springboard for developing his discourse.

The people whose blood was mingled with the sacrifices were Galileans, a fact that is repeated three times. This brutal act on Pilate's part isn't recorded elsewhere, but it is in keeping with other things that history records of Pilate. Jesus, of course, is another Galilean whose blood will be shed as a sacrifice by Pilate, so maybe there's something going on there.

The warning that they will all likewise perish is probably looking forward to the events of literal judgment that will come upon Jerusalem in AD 70, where the blood of the slain will fill the temple and where there will also be falling masonry. In discussing these two events then, Jesus is highlighting some of the signs of their own times, signs that point to a judgment that is far more serious to come, a judgment that will fall upon the nation more generally, not just upon a few individuals within it. Jesus speaks of the 18 people who died in the collapse of the Tower of Siloam, which is an interesting detail because the woman in verses 11 and 16 had 18 years of an infirmity.

While I am unsure of the significance of this particular unusual number, at the very least it might serve to connect these two stories together. When we see disaster befalling some other person, self-righteousness and our temptation to explain events neatly tempts us to attribute negative outcomes to things that people did wrong, and positive outcomes to things that people did right. But Jesus stresses that the Galileans and the 18 in the Tower of Siloam couldn't be distinguished from others in such a manner.

Others in Galilee and others in Jerusalem are every bit as worthy of perishing in such a manner. Elsewhere in the Gospels, the fig tree serves more explicitly as a symbol for the nation of Israel. Jesus here seems to be the patient keeper of the vineyard, seeking to delay judgment upon the nation and its temple.

Here the fig tree faces imminent destruction, but it is only the mercy of the vine dresser that allows it to remain, and only for a few years longer. If it doesn't bear proper fruit, it will be destroyed. The parable of course would remind people of Isaiah chapter 5 and the song of the vineyard.

Isaiah chapter 5 verses 1 to 7. Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines.

He built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it. And he looked for it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.

What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I looked for

it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured. I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.

I will make it a waste. It shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up. I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting. And he looked for justice, but behold bloodshed, for righteousness, but behold an outcry. God's mercy allows Israel to hold on for now, but if they do not produce fruit soon, destruction is imminent.

A question to consider. What are some notable signs of cultural decline and imminent judgment to which we should be alert?