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March 6th: Exodus 13 & Matthew 15:29–16:12

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The firstborn and the departure from Egypt. The feeding of the four thousand and the leaven of the Pharisees.

Some passages referenced:

Deuteronomy 15:19 (eating the firstborn sacrifice); Numbers 18:16, Leviticus 27:6 (principles for redemption); Numbers 3:40-49 (the firstborn males and the Levites' substitution for them); Genesis 49:3, Deuteronomy 21:17 (the meaning of the firstborn).

Isaiah 29:13-14 (multiplied wonders not being perceived); Deuteronomy 32:5, 20-22 (an evil and adulterous generation provoked to jealousy); Acts 2:41 (three thousand on the Day of Pentecost).

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

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Transcript

Exodus 13 The Lord said to Moses, Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both a man and a beast, is mine. Then Moses said to the people, Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt,

out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the Lord brought you out from this place.

No leavened bread shall be eaten. Today in the month of Abib you are going out. And when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month.

Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord. Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days. No leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory.

You shall tell your son on that day, It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt. And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand, and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt.

You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year. When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's.

Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it, you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, What does this mean? You shall say to him, By a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of slavery.

For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem. It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes.

For by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt. When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.

But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him.

For Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here. And they moved on from Succoth and camped at Ethem on the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night.

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people. Exodus chapter 13 continues to be concerned with the establishment of some ritual perpetuation of the memory of the Exodus and the Passover. The sacrifice of the son is a theme throughout the story of Genesis and into Exodus.

God will claim the firstborn son one way or another. The Passover was the time when Israel became God's firstborn son in a special way, in a manner similar to the event of the binding of Isaac. God in that event claimed Isaac as his own and Abraham was blessed for his faithfulness.

But Isaac was also brought into a new status as a result of that event. The Passover creates a new situation, a situation in which Israel was taken as God's own. It's important to recognise how this is fulfilling so many of the themes of the story of Genesis, within which the question of firstbornness and the sacrifice of the son to God, the lostness of the son but then God claiming that son for himself, that theme is prominent throughout.

Israel was supposed to be the people that was the firstborn of the nations, to lead the rest of the nations, providing the bridge between God and the other peoples. As they were the firstborn they provided the example that others would follow. And all of this helps us to understand why chapter 13 begins with the law concerning the consecration of the firstborn.

The individual firstborn symbolise and manifest the identity of the nation as a whole. The Levites took the place of the firstborn of Israel later on, standing for the priestly vocation of the people as a whole. It's important that we appreciate the logic of representation here.

The nation as a whole was the firstborn son. But this doesn't mean that every individual in the nation was a firstborn son, so much as that the firstborn sons of Israel manifested, symbolised and represented something that was true of the nation as a whole, as a unity. And as a particular subset of the nation they stood for something that was true of the whole.

We can think about this in terms of the body. There are certain aspects of the body that can stand for the whole. The strength of the body can be particularly focused upon the hand.

The sense of the self of the body can be focused upon the face. The face is the soul of the body as some have called it. We can think about other aspects of the way, for instance, the mouth and the tongue start to represent the expression of the self from within what comes forth.

In all of these respects we can see an analogy to the way that human societies work where individual groups or subsets of the larger whole can stand for some aspect of that

which is true for the entire body. The nation then was the firstborn son and that firstborn son character was represented first of all by the literal firstborn, males of Israel, but also later on by the priests. Likewise the nation was a priestly nation but most of the people were not priests, rather it was just a subset of the tribe of Levi and the priestly character of the nation was represented by those figures within it.

The consecration of the firstborn implies sacrifice. No humans are being sacrificed, they are substituted for, but they are subject to the logic of sacrifice. Either the firstborn are killed or they are claimed and if they are claimed they have to be substituted for and symbolically offered in that substitute.

All of this is connected with the time of the Passover and the Passover occurs in the spring when livestock would typically bear their young. It's connected also with the historic event of the Passover. There are themes of firstfruits and firstborn here that relate both the agricultural feast and also to the redemptive historical feast.

The festal pattern of Israel connected specific times of the year and agricultural patterns with redemptive events in history. This continues into the new covenant where Easter for instance is connected with the feast of firstfruits and that connection is seen in Christ as the firstborn from the dead and the first fruits of the grave. The grain harvest was associated with Passover as were the animals bearing of their young.

Once again Moses emphasises the ongoing rituals that are instituted in association with the historical events and the ways that those have resonances with other aspects of the life of the people. They will be starting an agricultural life when they enter into the land. They're not yet engaging in agriculture, they're on the move, but there will come a time when the agricultural calendar is something that shapes their self-understanding and when that occurs they will understand the events of the exodus in terms of that.

The ongoing rituals that are instituted are arguably eclipsing the actual recounting of what happened at many points. The point is not so much the focus upon what happened as a historical event that's important in its place but what is really important is that the force of this event, Israel being taken as God's firstborn and claimed as God's firstborn, continue throughout the life of the nation. The feast of unleavened bread is the cutting off of what came previously.

The consecration of the firstborn, however, is about the new, about the opening of the womb, about some new order being instituted and established. The changed calendar and the yearly festival serves to keep that historical event of the exodus in people's attention and memory. It has continuing significance for Israel's life and identity as God's firstborn son.

And there's a concern for future life in the land On three occasions within these chapters Moses talks about what will happen when they come into the land. It would be easy

when Israel were brought into the land to forget the lessons of the exodus and what that meant for their self-understanding. The exodus wasn't merely to deliver Israel from slavery, to achieve the purpose of removing them from the bondage of Pharaoh.

It was also to reveal who God was and to bring them into a new relationship of sonship with him. And the continuing ritual is very much concerned with passing these things on, with such things as the instruction of children, an element that is highlighted on several occasions in chapters 12 and 13. The firstborn males of the animals would belong to the Lord and be sacrificed to him.

They would also be used for the provision of the priests and could be eaten before the Lord by the worshipper on occasions. You can see that in Deuteronomy chapter 15 verse 19. Donkeys, as they were an unclean animal that Israelites might own, couldn't be sacrificed but must have their neck broken or preferably be redeemed by a lamb.

The firstborn males were to be redeemed. How exactly this was to take place isn't fully explained here but presumably it was with five shekels. You can see that in Numbers chapter 18 verse 16 compared with Leviticus chapter 27 verse 6. The distinction between the sexes here is also noteworthy.

The firstborn seems to refer to males in particular and I think in places like Numbers chapter 3 verses 40 to 49, the firstborn seem to be far more clearly specified as the firstborn males. Throughout the Old Testament in particular there is a lot of attention given to the difference between the sexes. The firstborn sons who must be circumcised stand for the identity of the whole people in a particular way.

They stand for the strength of the people. They're the first fruits of the people. They're preeminent among the passing on of the life of the people to the next generation.

They are the preeminent ones of that next generation. They're also the ones that are most particularly the image of the father of the previous generation. They carry on that image and represent that image particularly among the sons.

The firstborn male would bear the mantle of the father as the father passed on and would for that reason receive a double portion of the inheritance. As we live in a highly individualistic society it's difficult for us to understand how these things operate but this is the way the church is supposed to be understood too. Israel had differentiated roles and identities within it.

The mother was not the same as the father. The father was set over against but in a very clear relationship with the firstborn son that differed from his relationship with the younger son or with his daughter. All of these different places within the life of Israel served to stand for the larger identity of Israel.

Same with things like the Levites. The Levites stood for the priestly identity of the whole

nation but they were just one particular tribe. In Genesis chapter 49 verse 3 we have a sort of definition of the firstborn.

Reuben you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. It is essential that we understand the way that the firstborn represented aspects of other people's characters. The firstborn was the one who opened the womb and so represented something very powerful for the mothers of Israel.

The firstborn was the one who's the first fruits of his father's strength and also preeminent in dignity and might among his brothers and the one who provided the bridge between the generations. The one who set the pattern for the younger generation being the particular image of the father. In all of these ways we need to see that the firstborn was not just a detached individual.

The firstborn stood for the whole reality of Israel itself conceived from a particular vantage point. It stood for something for the wife and the mother. It stood for something for the brothers and the sisters.

It stood for something for the father. For God to claim the firstborn was to claim something about Israel as a whole and also for each individual in Israel. It was saying to women you must give up that child that represents your transition into motherhood, becoming a new sort of person and you must give up the fruit of that to recognize God's claim upon that.

Saying to the fathers that firstborn son that you have that represents your legacy, your strength being passed on to the next generation. That one belongs to God. He has claimed that for himself.

He was saying to the brothers and the sisters that one that you look to as your model, that one is claimed by God and as a result you must follow a model that has been set by God. Now we can see that this was not the only figure within the life of Israel that was important. Fathers were the heads of their household.

The oldest son was a sort of miniature head, one that was as it were the image of the father's headship among his brothers. And then we can think about the character of the wife and the mother as the heart of the household, the beating heart that gave the unity and the sense of cohesion to its life. Each of these figures represented something essential about the existence of the nation as a whole and represented part of each person's identity to them.

A person's mother is not just an individual that they relate to. A person's mother is part of them. It's an aspect of their identity held by someone else.

In the same way as someone's father represents a part of themselves outside of

themselves. This is the way the Bible operates and it's very difficult for our individualistic society to understand but once we do the power of God's claiming of the firstborn will begin to make a bit more sense. God sent them out of Egypt and took them the longer way around, sparing them from immediate warfare.

Had they taken the way of the Philistines they would have been invading Canaan very quickly, something for which they really were not ready. They travelled around in military formation. They went out in ranks in groups of 50 or fives maybe.

They moved in an orderly manner and this isn't just a rag-tag bunch of people in the wilderness. They're prepared to some degree for what lies ahead and they go up with Joseph's bones. They're delivering that lost son from Egypt.

The one who had been sent down into Egypt is now being brought back up. What went wrong in Genesis chapter 37 is being set right now and that is a core theme of the Exodus. God is going to redeem that son that was lost in Egypt.

He's going to bring him back to the land and he's going to be buried in Shechem, the place where it all went wrong. They are setting right something that had gone wrong at the beginning of the story. It's also a reminder of the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

The Egyptian maid afflicted in the house of the Hebrews now has been replaced with the Hebrews afflicted in the house of the Egyptians as their servants and they have experienced the world from Hagar and Ishmael's perspective. Hagar and Ishmael had a sort of Exodus experience. Hagar was afflicted and she fled from the presence of Sarah and then later on they wandered in the wilderness and then had a similar experience to that of Israel.

God is replaying this history but in a different way and so Israel is entering into the experience that they inflicted upon others and until they can recognize themselves in the experience of Hagar and Ishmael as they have come to, they cannot truly be the people that will represent the whole. They cannot truly be the firstborn unless they feel that affinity with their brothers in humanity. Unless they can recognize that they too are connected with the Egyptian Hagar.

This is one of the reasons why it matters that they go up from Egypt with a mixed multitude with many people who aren't descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but people who have joined the nation from outside and are going to be assimilated into its life. They are going to be adopted into its life. The outsiders, the outcasts, the foreigners, the people who don't belong, the strangers are now going to become part of the family.

That is an event that is reversing the pattern that we see in the story of Ishmael and Hagar or the story of Joseph where the one who belongs to the family is being cast out. Now it is going the other way. They are led up by a pillar of fire and cloud.

The divine chariot is a manifestation of God's glorious presence and I think that is what is taking place here. You can maybe contrast this with the ways that God generally revealed himself in Genesis where God would come in the form of the angel of the Lord and he would be present in a more human form and relate to people in that way. This is a step up in glory and perhaps the pillar of fire should also throw our minds back to the burning bush.

The pillar of cloud and fire is a manifestation of God's own constant presence with them. The Lord is going up before them and he is never going to leave them. He is not going to forsake them.

He is going to be with them every step of the way. A question to consider. How might the interplay of narrative and ritual instruction in such a passage as this help us to understand the purpose of law in scripture more generally? Matthew chapter 15 verse 29 to chapter 16 verse 12.

The disciples were in the midst of the crowd and they were looking and the blind seeing and they glorified the God of Israel. Then Jesus called his disciples to him and said I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now three days and have nothing to eat and I am unwilling to send them away hungry lest they faint on the way. And the disciples said to him where are we to get enough bread in such a desolate place to feed so great a crowd.

And Jesus said to them how many loaves do you have? They said seven and a few small fish. And directing the crowd to sit down on the ground he took the seven loaves and the fish and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied and they took up seven baskets full of the broken pieces left over.

Those who ate were four thousand men besides women and children. And after sending away the crowds he got into the boat and went to the region of Magadam. And the Pharisees and the Sadducees came and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

He answered them when it is evening you say it will be fair weather for the sky is red and in the morning it will be stormy today for the sky is red and threatening. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.

So he left them and departed. When the disciples reached the other side they had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus said to them watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And they began discussing it among themselves saying we brought no bread. But Jesus aware of this said oh you of little faith why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand and how many baskets you gathered? Or the seven loaves for the four thousand and how many baskets you gathered? How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

The concluding half of Matthew chapter 15 begins with Jesus performing a series of healings on a single occasion. He goes up on a mountain, a site which could be chosen for orientation to God. It's where you would go to have communion with God to pray or something else and he sits down and people come to him and bring him people for healing.

The outcome of the event is that people glorify God. This is the heart of the purpose of the healings. Very often when we're reading through the gospels we can think that with the conflicts with the religious leaders that what really matters about the signs is establishing credentials and authority and a demonstration of power but that's not the main thing at all.

It's about God coming near to his people and his people drawing near to him and that's exactly what we see in this particular incident. This event provides the context for a miraculous provision of food to the crowd. Having healed and taught the people and led them to glorify God, Jesus does not want to send them away hungry and in an event reminiscent of the earlier feeding of the five thousand, Jesus repeats the pattern of the Lord's Supper.

In verse 36 he took the seven loaves and the fish and having given thanks he broke them and gave them to the disciples and the disciples gave them to the crowds. Already in reference to the feeding of the five thousand I noted the way that this is representing a church scene in part. The disciples are receiving the bread from Christ, the bread that makes us think of the institution of the Lord's Supper later on and they are passing it on to the people, the people that are being gathered around and under their leadership.

This is preparing us for the later ministry of the church under the teaching and the guidance and the rule of the apostles. This seems to occur in a largely gentile region, particularly emphasized in the book of Mark and it's suggested in part also by the coming of the Canaanite woman to Christ. Jesus is feeding not only Jews but presumably many Gentiles too and we must now think back to the conversation with the Canaanite woman.

Gentile God-fearers are feasting with the lost sheep and so the dogs that many would dismiss are now eating at the same table with the Jews. There are five thousand in the

earlier account connected with Israel's military ordering, the 50s that they're divided into and 12 baskets are gathered up afterwards. They're fed with five loaves of fish and two fish.

Here we have four thousand maybe connected with the four corners of the earth and there are seven baskets gathered up. The word for basket is different. The feeding of the five thousand is the primary act and miracle but the Gentiles are also blessed with the Jews.

There are leftovers, leftovers for others. There's a super abundance, more than enough for others beside Israel. Five loaves, seven loaves, makes 12 loaves all together.

Israel was represented by 12 loaves of the showbread and maybe we're supposed to see a new Israel, a new people of God being formed here. There are 12 baskets, then there are seven baskets. The 12 baskets are connected maybe with the 12 disciples, also with the symbolism of Israel more generally.

This is the establishment of a new Israel around the meal table of the Messiah who provides for his people in the wilderness. After this the Pharisees and the Sadducees come together to test Jesus. It's interesting these were rival sects within Judaism and yet they're united in their opposition to Jesus.

Suddenly they find that they're friends in this particular endeavour. They both oppose and resist Jesus and so they can come at him together even though they're coming from different sides. Nothing brings enemies together like a greater enemy.

They ask for a sign but Jesus has already given them more signs than they would know what to do with. You can maybe think back to Isaiah chapter 29 verse 13 that he referenced earlier. The Lord said, because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men.

He goes on, therefore behold I will again do wonderful things with this people with wonder upon wonder and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden. That's exactly what's happening here. They're asking for signs but they've been given a multitude of signs and just not seen them.

They're being bamboozled by Christ. Their wonders are just leaving them befuddled. They may be able to read the weather from the sky but they can't read the signs given from heaven in the events of their own day.

Jesus describes them as an evil and adulterous generation. This harkens back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 5 and 20. They have dealt corruptly with him.

They are no longer his children because they are blemished. They are a crooked and twisted generation. And again, and he said I will hide my face from them.

I will see what their end will be for they are a perverse generation, children in whom is no faithfulness. He proceeds, they have made me jealous with what is no God. They have provoked me to anger with their idols so I will make them jealous with those who are no people.

I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation for a fire is kindled by my anger and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. They will be given no sign save the sign of Jonah. Just as Deuteronomy chapter 32 warns, God made Jonah and the people of his day jealous by those who are not a people.

People who are not called by his name. God sent his word not to part of the nation of Israel but to the Assyrians and to Nineveh. And as he did that he showed grace to people who are not a people and brought to jealousy his own people.

This is the same thing that Christ threatens here in part. The sign of Jonah will be seen as the gospel goes out to a different people and they will be provoked to jealousy. Jesus warns about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees which his disciples don't understand.

But the point is that teaching is like leaven which when hidden in hearts produces loaves of particular character. Jesus is forming a new set of people as loaves, cutting off the old leaven of the teaching of the Pharisees and the Sadducees but introducing the new leaven of his words and his spirit. Now we need to recognise that leaven is not the same thing as yeast.

Leaven is part of the dough of the old bread that is taken and put into the new bread to cause it to rise in a sort of sourdough form. And that continuing tradition is one part of the bread being passed on to another. It's generations of bread.

And that generational character is like a tradition. And the point of cutting off leaven is to cut off the tradition, to break with the past, to make this cut with the former pattern of life. Leaven then is passed on as a tradition from loaf to loaf and the disciples need to make a clean break with the Egyptian loaves of the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

Jesus challenges them to pay attention to the miracles that had just occurred and the numbers associated with it. We may find this very difficult to understand. The numerology of such events just seems opaque to us.

But Jesus clearly wanted his disciples to see meaning in those events. Those events were signs. They weren't just great works of power.

They were great works of meaning as well. Five loaves for five thousand. Seven loaves.

But only four thousand fed. Some have suggested that this might be an anticipation of the feeding of three thousand at the day of Pentecost. Seven loaves should feed seven thousand but there's three thousand left over.

And maybe that's an anticipation. I'm not sure. I'm less convinced by that but it's a possibility some have raised.

Jesus' teaching concerning leaven and loaves and these other themes can draw our mind back also to the teaching of the parables in chapter 13 where many of these themes are also present. Jesus is teaching in a way that challenges us to recognize the tradition and the way that it forms us. When you've been taught by a particular person it's as if there's part of their dough that is placed within you.

Something that has formed them that has their character and it becomes part of you and you need to be very very careful what you take into yourself. And so cutting off the old leaven of wickedness, the old leaven of false teaching, the old leaven of the traditions that lead us away from God is absolutely imperative. Because if you take that on it will eventually determine your character.

There is a flip side to the warning of course. In the book of 1 Corinthians we see the church described as a loaf and a loaf that is formed of many different people were all one loaf. Now Christ's forming of a new loaf is formed in part through the gift of a new pattern of life, of new leaven that Christ has placed within us.

His words and his spirit and as a result we take on a new character, a character of a loaf for God's glory. And so it matters a lot the way that we live as bread. We're supposed to think also maybe of the relationship between the other themes of growing, of wheat and tares and these other ways in which those symbols maybe feed into the symbolism of bread and yeast.

There's a process here. God is making bread for himself. And then think how that might relate to our celebration of the Lord's Supper which concentrates the life of the church in the celebration of a shared eating of a loaf which we all are.

We are one loaf and so we share in one loaf. A question to consider. What might be learned about our gathering together in worship from this passage and its various elements?