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January 11th: Genesis 11 & John 6:1-21

January 10, 2020



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

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Transcript

Genesis 11. Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.

And they said to one another, Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. And they said, Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the children of men had built. And the Lord said, Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.

Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel,

because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth.

And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth. These are the generations of Shem. When Shem was one hundred years old, he fathered Arpachshad two years after the flood.

And Shem lived after he fathered Arpachshad five hundred years and had other sons and daughters. When Arpachshad had lived thirty-five years, he fathered Shelah. And Arpachshad lived after he fathered Shelah four hundred and three years and had other sons and daughters.

When Shelah had lived thirty years, he fathered Eber. And Shelah lived after he fathered Eber four hundred and three years and had other sons and daughters. When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he fathered Peleg.

And Eber lived after he fathered Peleg four hundred and thirty years and had other sons and daughters. When Peleg had lived thirty years, he fathered Reu. And Peleg lived after he fathered Reu two hundred and nine years and had other sons and daughters.

When Reu had lived thirty-two years, he fathered Sarug. And Reu lived after he fathered Sarug two hundred and seven years and had other sons and daughters. When Sarug had lived thirty years, he fathered Nahor.

And Sarug lived after he fathered Nahor two hundred years and had other sons and daughters. When Nahor had lived twenty-nine years, he fathered Terah. And Nahor lived after he fathered Terah one hundred and nineteen years and had other sons and daughters.

When Terah had lived seventy years, he fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran. Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran.

And Haran fathered Lart. Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his kindred, in Ur of the Chaldeans. And Abram and Nahor took wives.

The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife, Milca, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milca and Isca. Now Sarai was barren. She had no child.

Terah took Abram his son and Lart the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.

The story of the Tower of Babel is one of the most important stories in the Old Testament. It's an origin story for the nations and provides a backdrop for the events that occur in the chapters that follow. These are the nations formed as an act of

judgment, and later on we'll see a nation that's formed through an act of blessing.

This occurs in the context of Nimrod's kingdom in the land of Shinar, and all the people of the world have the same language, they have the same words, they're seeking to avoid being scattered abroad. And so they're gathering together and building this great empire. They invent a new technology, a new way of firing bricks, and they burn these bricks thoroughly, and so they can build things on a far greater scale than they ever would have built before.

It's worth thinking about the way that the action of building the city and the tower comes after the invention of the new technology. Often when we invent something new, it gives us a new sense of our power, and the urge to build something is almost an imperative arising from the existence of the technology. Once we have the power to do it, we must do it.

And this dream, this hubristic vision of what man could make for themselves arises out of this new technology. How many times have we experienced that within our society, where we develop a new technology or a new capacity, and we seek to express our pride and our power and our ability to master the world for our wishes around that new technology and express through it? They build, on the one hand, a city, and on the other hand, a tower. These are two things, not just a tower.

The city is to gather all people together, a one world society, and the tower is to present this power structure, this ladder to heaven, as it were, this ability to commune with the gods, to have the power of the gods, this religious centralisation as well. So the tower, with its tops in the heavens, relates the heavens to the earth. They want to make a name for themselves.

Think about the situation that man faces. Man is faced with the struggle of death. Death has entered into the world and death wipes away all the things that we build, like sandcastles on the beach as the tide comes in.

Nothing we build is left behind. And so what they want to build is something that will outlast them, something that will express their power, their name, their vigour as a society, and it will be something that outlasts them. Even the power of death won't take this away.

And God comes down and he sees the city and the tower which they have built. There is plural language used at this point, come let us go down, and they have confused their language so that they may not understand one another's speech. Here I think we should see in the background the divine council.

This is not just God, but this is God surrounded by his angels, surrounded by the principalities and powers and the divine forces, and they are going to put humanity in

their proper place. Again, let's think about part of the importance of this as God curbing mankind's intent to express its sinful, wicked will in a way that is unchecked. God is going to prevent that will from achieving its full intent.

This is an act of grace among other things. God does not want human sinfulness to reach its full flourishing and so he prevents human hubris from achieving its purposes. God scatters them upon the face of the earth.

In part, this is fulfilling the intent that God had for humanity, that they would fill the earth and subdue it. It would not just be ruling in a particular centralised location and forming a one world government, but it would be a scattering abroad forming many different peoples and niches and societies and God divides them as a result. God confuses them by dividing their language so that they can't understand one another's speech.

Now often people see this as an instantaneous action. It's not necessarily the case. This may have occurred over many decades that the speeches of the different peoples started to become disparate and they become divided from each other, not as an instantaneous event so much as a gradual divergence.

God disperses them across all the face of the earth and the place of the city is called Babel because God confused the languages there. And the name of Babel and other features of this text involve all sorts of punning and we'll maybe return to this at certain points as there are allusions back to it in the later story, not least as we get into the New Testament and we read something like the story of Pentecost. It calls back to this event in a number of different respects.

From there we read the story of the generations of Shem. We've already read some of the people groups that arose from Shem in the previous chapter in the Table of the Nations but now there is this genealogical succession from Shem and ten generations. We've already seen ten generations coming from Adam to Noah and now we have another list of ten generations ending in Terah, Abram, Nahor and Haran.

This list of people again gives the number of the years that the father had before he fathered the child and then how long he lived afterwards. So it's similar to chapter five in that respect. The ten generations invites comparison with the events of chapter five, not least in the fact that at the end we meet Terah with Abram, Nahor and Haran, much as we met Noah with Shem, Ham and Japheth a man with three sons.

Haran, the son of Terah, dies when he is still in the land of Er of Chaldeans and Abram and Nahor take wives. Abram's wife is Sarai and Nahor's wife is Milcah, the daughter of Haran. We should note here that Nahor is performing leverette marriage.

By taking the daughter of Haran, his brother, he is seeking to raise up children for his

dead brother, seeking to maintain his name within the earth. Sarai, some have suggested, is the same person as Isca, the suggestion being that Abram is also performing leverette marriage for the sake of his dead brother. Thinking about the brother who has died and the importance of Lot, the son of Haran, to Abram, maybe we could think the symmetry between this and the story of Ham and his son Canaan.

Whereas Shem and Japheth acted to maintain their father's honour, their brother Ham and his son Canaan were judged on account of Ham's sin. In the case of Terah and his sons we see a different situation. Abram and Nahor act on behalf of the dead brother and Abram takes into his household Lot, the person who is playing in many ways a similar role to the character of Canaan.

But yet there's a problem because Sarai is barren, she has no child. The story is set up for what follows next. Terah, even before Abram is called, sets out from Ur of the Chaldees and goes to Haran.

And when they arrive in Haran they settle there and he dies in Haran. Haran is a different word from the name of the son Haran but the similarity does invite some sort of connection between the two. If we think about what happened in the earlier part of the chapter, there are people trying to make a name for themselves, trying to make some name that endures beyond their death and maybe we could see some connection between the similar names of Haran and Haran.

And we've already seen in the story of Genesis the naming of cities after a particular person so that their names would not die out. This is a way of making a name for themselves. But yet the story of Abraham is a story of a name being made but yet it will be God that makes the name great.

Abram is also one who is concerned to maintain the name of his dead brother as an act of charity. He takes in his nephew as a result of it in the same way Nahor takes the daughter of his dead brother in order to raise up descendants for his dead brother. There seems then to be a different ethos that is seen at the end of this chapter as we saw at the beginning in the story of the Tower of Babel.

One question. The story of Genesis contains a number of different accounts of human attempts to usurp God's place or to gain some sort of divine power through technology, through some other means. How does the Tower of Babel present us with a paradigm for thinking about such projects within our own day and age? John chapter 6 verses 1 to 21.

After this Jesus went away to the other side of the Sea of Galilee which is the Sea of Tiberias and a large crowd was following him because they saw the signs that he was doing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain and there he sat down with his disciples. Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews was at hand.

Lifting up his eyes then and seeing that a large crowd was coming toward him Jesus said to Philip, where are we to buy bread so that these people may eat? He said this to test him for he himself knew what he would do. Philip answered him, 200 denarii worth of bread would not be enough for each of them to get a little. One of his disciples Andrew, Simon Peter's brother said to him, there is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish but what are they for so many? Jesus said, have the people sit down.

Now there was much grass in that place. So the men sat down about five thousand in number. Jesus then took the loaves and when he had given thanks he distributed them to those who were seated.

So also the fish as much as they wanted. And when they had eaten their fill he told his disciples, gather up the leftover fragments that nothing may be lost. So they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten.

When the people saw the sign that he had done they said this is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world. Perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself. When evening came his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat and started across the sea to Capernaum.

It was now dark and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat and they were frightened.

But he said to them, it is I, do not be afraid. Then they were glad to take him into the boat and immediately the boat was at the land to which they were going. At the beginning of John chapter 6 we read of Jesus' fourth and fifth signs.

The first of these being the feeding of the five thousand and the second being the walking upon the waters. The feeding of the five thousand is a story found in each one of the four gospels. As such it is one of the few stories that finds its way into each of the gospels is an independent account.

Reading the stories though there are differences in the way that they are told, the ways that they are situated within the larger panels of the gospels. And these different situations can help us to see different facets of the stories. They are easily harmonised but sometimes there are ways in which certain details of the story are thrown into sharper relief.

In John's account the story begins with a crossing of the Sea of Galilee or the Sea of Tiberias and he is followed by a large multitude, a large crowd who have seen the signs that he has been doing. He goes up a mountain and there he sits down with his disciples

and this is all around the time of the Passover, the feast of the Jews. Now by this point all of the alarm bells that alert us to typology should be ringing loudly in our heads.

Around the time of the Passover, crossing over the sea, followed by a great multitude, going into the wilderness, going up a mountain. This is the story of the Exodus. It's the Exodus pattern.

It's all taking place at the time of the Passover. Now Jesus sees this crowd and he provides, he seeks to provide food for them. First of all he asks Philip where are we to buy bread and when we consider in the other Gospels the situation in which this occurs, it's one of those details that gives some sort of witness to the historicity of these events.

Philip comes from this particular area so it's natural that Jesus would ask Philip where to get food because this is his neighbourhood and yet Philip can't really provide food. He doesn't know where to get the food. He presents the scale of the problem.

I mean 200 denarii of bread would not be enough for each person to just get a little scrap. So Jesus needs to feed this great number of people with his disciples and the disciples are presented with the problem. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother brings forward this boy who has five barley loaves and two fish.

Yet what use is one boy's packed lunch for such a multitude? Jesus instructs his disciples to get the people to sit down and it's observed at this point that there's much grass in that place. It's an interesting and strange detail to mention at this point. I suggest that maybe if we read further on in the Gospel it will help us to understand why this is mentioned here.

I think it's because Jesus talks about leading people out so that they might find good pasture. Much grass is the pasture that he has led out the sheep to. Like Moses he's the shepherd that leads the people through the wilderness.

Here he leads them to a place where they find good pasture. And so the men sit down about 5,000 in number. It's interesting that it's just the men that are counted.

We'd think if you're feeding people you'd count the men, women and children but yet it's just the men. This might be associated with the counting of a military number. Israel goes out of Egypt in ranks of 5 or 50 and enters into the Promised Land in the same way.

Counting the people in this way and dividing them into groups as we see in the other Gospels is a sort of military arrangement. Now what might that have to do with anything? In the story of the Exodus as they are led into the wilderness the leadership of the people is divided among the elders by Moses under the advice of Jethro and it's the same time there's the feeding of the people with the manna just beforehand. And this I think is a bringing together of those two events.

They're led into the wilderness, there's going to be a miraculous feeding of them which will later lead into a conversation concerning the manna. But Jesus is dividing the people among the leadership of his disciples. They are the elders of a new Israel.

And so he gives the disciples this task of leading the people, dividing the people among them, numbering them as a military numbering would be, a numbering of the assembly of the people, the rulers of the people. Then he takes the loaves, he gives thanks, he distributes them to those who are seated. And what I think we're seeing here is playing out in principle of the pattern of the Eucharist or the pattern of the supper.

We do not have an institution of the supper within John's Gospel but yet we do have all sorts of supper themes within this chapter. I've already mentioned the possibility of a panel structure for the seven signs of John's Gospel with the first, second and third signs paralleled with the fourth, fifth and sixth signs. And if the first sign is paralleled with the fourth sign then we have a parallel between the turning of the water into wine and the provision of bread at this point which would be an interesting parallel to observe that Jesus is providing both wine and bread.

And when the people have sat down they distribute the food to all who are seated and they each get all that they need. And then he instructs his disciples to gather up the leftover fragments and they gather up, fill twelve baskets with the fragments from the five barley loaves. Now that reference to the number of baskets filled is found in the other Gospels and is seen as a sign in itself.

It's a matter of importance that they gather up twelve baskets. Is that associated with the number of Israel? Is it particularly a sign to them that they will have more than enough left over for each one of them as individual leaders of the people? I'm not entirely sure so I'll leave that as a question for you to ponder. The people see that he has performed this great sign and proclaim him to be the prophet who has come into the world.

Once again these are themes from the Exodus. The prophet is the one who Moses spoke of. The prophet like Moses and he's the one who's to come into the world.

He's played out these Moses themes and so the people are ready to make him a king. But seeing this he goes off and he leaves them. And the disciples go into a boat around the time of evening and start out towards Capernaum.

Jesus has not come to them yet and the sea becomes rough. There's a strong wind blowing. These are things that might be associated with the original creation.

Darkness upon the face of the deep, the spirit of God hovering over the water or upon the events of the Exodus. The waters being troubled by that great wind and the darkness that is during the night of the crossing of the Red Sea. And they see Jesus coming on the

sea towards them, nearing the boat and they're frightened, they're afraid.

These are again events of a sign. What is the sign that might occur here? Well we might think perhaps as an anticipation of the resurrection. In the other Gospels we see clearer anticipations of this in the sea events.

For instance Jesus sleeping in the boat, the storm outside, earthquake and all these sorts of things. And then Jesus rising up and bringing peace and calm. That's the event of the resurrection presented in a symbol.

Here I think we're seeing something of that but in a less clear form. Jesus is the one who brings peace when they are in trouble in the boat. He's the one who presents himself, it is I, be not afraid.

And the statement it is I or I am is a statement of his divinity in part. And so they take him into the boat and immediately they're at the land to which they were going. This is then a story I think that anticipates other events that will happen later on.

It's also a statement for the church that the church is in many respects like a boat that's gone out to sea. When we think about the disciples that Jesus calls in the New Testament they are fishermen for the most part. The key disciples are fishermen.

In the Old Testament things are dominated by shepherds but in the New Testament it's fishermen. And the church is a body that has gone out to the sea of the Gentiles and is in the storms and the unsettled world of that Gentile world. And yet God has control over the storms, over the waves just as we see in the story of Jonah which is concerned to a mission to the Gentiles.

So in the New Testament these stories of shipwrecks, the stories of storms, the stories of struggles at sea are stories that have to do with a Gentile mission. And the church as this part of the land that has gone out to the sea, I think this is partly what the sign is supposed to present. And so we can see in the feeding of the five thousand that there is a mosaic theme, a theme of Exodus and here we see God's power over the waters and God's power over the Gentile nations.

A question to think about. In the ministry of Elijah and Elisha we have a number of parallels with the ministry of Christ particularly in the miracles that are performed. What is an example of a miracle in the story of Elisha that reminds you of one of these miracles?