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March 31st: Exodus 38 & Mark 1:14-31

March 30, 2020



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The bronze altar, laver, and courtyard. Jesus begins his Galilean ministry.

Some passages referenced:

Leviticus 9:24 (the fire of the altar first coming from God); Exodus 21:14 (refuge and the altar); 1 Kings 1:50-53, 2:28-34 (grabbing the horns of the altar for refuge); Amos 3:14 (altars desecrated by removing their horns); Numbers 35:25-28 (the high priest and sanctuary); Leviticus 4-5 (different placing of blood, depending upon the person who sinned); Numbers 5:17 (holy water for the suspected adulteress to drink); 1 Samuel 2:22 (the serving women); Numbers 4:23 (serving men); Exodus 30:11-16 (the census tax); Numbers 1:46, 2:32 (603,550 persons).

Jeremiah 16:16 (fishers of men from exile); 1 Kings 19:19-21 (Elijah calls Elisha); 1 Samuel 16:23 (David relieving Saul of the harmful spirit); 1 Samuel 17:16 (Goliath standing against Israel for forty days); Luke 8:1-3 (women serving Christ).

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

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Transcript

Exodus 38 He made the altar a burnt offering of acacia wood. Five cubits was its length, and five cubits its breadth. It was square, and three cubits was its height.

He made horns for it on its four corners. Its horns were of one piece with it, and he overlaid it with bronze. And he made all the utensils of the altar, the pots, the shovels, the basins, the forks, and the firepans.

He made all its utensils of bronze, and he made for the altar a grating, a network of bronze under its ledge, extending halfway down. He cast four rings on the four corners of the bronze grating, as holders for the poles. He made the poles of acacia wood, and overlaid them with bronze.

And he put the poles through the rings on the sides of the altar to carry it with them. He made it hollow, with boards. He made the basin of bronze, and its stand of bronze, from the mirrors of the ministering women who ministered in the entrance of the tent of meeting.

And he made the court. For the south side the hangings of the court were of fine twined linen, a hundred cubits. Their twenty pillars and their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver.

And for the north side there were hangings of a hundred cubits. Their twenty pillars and their twenty bases were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. And for the west side were hangings of fifty cubits.

Their ten pillars and their ten bases, the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver. And for the front to the east, fifty cubits. The hangings for one side of the gate were fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and three bases.

And so for the other side. On both sides of the gate of the court were hangings of fifteen cubits, with their three pillars and their three bases. All the hangings around the court were of fine twined linen, and the bases for the pillars were of bronze, but the hooks of the pillars and their fillets were of silver.

The overlaying of their capitals was also of silver, and all the pillars of the court were filleted with silver. And the screen for the gate of the court was embroidered with needlework in blue and purple and scarlet yarns with fine twined linen. It was twenty cubits long and five cubits high in its breadth, corresponding to the hangings of the court.

And their pillars were four in number, their four bases were of bronze, their hooks of silver, and the overlaying of their capitals and their fillets of silver. And all the pegs for the tabernacle and for the court all around were of bronze. These are the records of the tabernacle, the tabernacle of the testimony, as they were recorded at the commandment of Moses, the responsibility of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar, the son of

Aaron the priest.

Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, made all that the Lord commanded Moses. And with him was Aholiab, the son of Ahissamach, of the tribe of Dan, an engraver and designer and embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns with fine twined linen. All the gold that was used for the work, in all the construction of the sanctuary, the gold from the offering, was twenty-nine talents and seven hundred and thirty shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary.

The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels, by the shekel of the sanctuary. A beaker ahead, that is half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary, for every one who was listed in the records, from twenty years old and upward, for six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty men. The hundred talents of silver were for casting the bases of the sanctuary and the bases of the veil.

A hundred bases for the hundred talents, a talent a base. And of the one thousand seven hundred and seventy-five shekels he made hooks for the pillars, and overlaid their capitals and made fillets for them. The bronze that was offered was seventy talents and two thousand four hundred shekels.

With it he made the bases for the entrance of the tent of meeting, the bronze altar, and the bronze grating for it, and all the utensils of the altar, the bases around the court, and the bases of the gate of the court, all the pegs of the tabernacle, and all the pegs around the court. We've had the instructions for the tabernacle itself, and then the furniture within the tabernacle, and now we see the courtyard and its furniture in chapter thirty-eight. It begins with the altar of burnt offering.

Now food was offered to God in a number of different ways, by presenting it before him, perhaps by pouring out a drink offering before him on the altar, or by sacrifices consumed with fire on the bronze altar. Fire sacrifice was common within the ancient world, and God is operating within a symbolic medium that would have been very familiar to the Israelites. The sacrifices upon the altar were means by which worshippers could offer themselves and their works to the Lord and draw near to him.

The courtyard can be divided into two squares of equal size, and commentators often suggest that the bronze altar is in the centre of one of these squares, and the Ark of the Covenant is at the centre of the other. The altar itself is of bronze, it's of lesser holiness than the furniture within the tabernacle, which is of gold, while still being a holy item in many respects. It's part of the path into God's presence, it's a boundary between heaven and earth, and the fire on the altar first came directly from God himself in Leviticus chapter 9 verse 24, where God burnt up the sacrifices with fire coming down from heaven.

The horns of the altar are probably not a connection with a bull. That is an attractive association, but it doesn't seem to actually be the case. Refuge from vengeance can be sought at the altar.

We see this in chapter 21 verse 14, where the willful murderer can be taken from the altar where he has sought sanctuary. In 1 Kings chapter 1 verses 50 to 53 and 2 verses 28 to 34, we have stories in which people try to grasp the horns of the altar to find refuge, Adonijah, and then later on in the story of Joab. The horns probably represent divine judgment in some way.

Grasping onto the horns of the altar might be a way of appealing to God's judgment over man's. Altars could be desecrated by having their horns removed, as we see in Amos chapter 3 verse 14, that on the day I punish Israel for his transgression, I will punish the altars at Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground. I have suggested previously that the altar has some association with the high priest, and that the high priest has the horns of his body purified, his right thumb, his right big toe, his right ear, and his genitals by circumcision, and these are consecrated also in much the same way as the altar.

Like the altar offers sanctuary, the high priest is also connected with sanctuary. In Numbers chapter 35 verses 25 to 28, we read, and the congregation shall rescue the manslayer from the hand of the avenger of blood, and the congregation shall restore him to his city of refuge, to which he has fled, and he shall live in it until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the holy oil. But if the manslayer shall at any time go beyond the boundaries of his city of refuge to which he fled, and the avenger of blood finds him outside the boundaries of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood, but he must remain in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest.

But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession. The connection of the altar then with sanctuary and the connection of the high priest and the Levitical cities with refuge probably suggests some connection between those two things. The altar is also like a mountain, representing different parts of Israel, which is also connected with the golden altar of incense inside the tabernacle.

Note the way that Israel was ordered around Mount Sinai in chapters 19 and 24. In Leviticus chapters 4 and 5 we see that blood was placed in different places depending upon the person who had sinned. So the base of the bronze altar seems to represent the lower earth.

But if the priest sins, there is blood placed upon the horns of the golden altar of incense inside the tabernacle. But if it's a leader of the people that sins, then it's placed upon the horns of the bronze altar. And if it's a sin of a poor person, it's placed against the side of the bronze altar and at the base.

So there is symbolism connected with where the blood is applied and the person who has sinned. The basin is described next. While it's mentioned in chapter 30 earlier, in the second seven day sequence that we identified, now it's classed along with the bronze altar and the courtyard, which show that these things belong together.

They all are elements of the third day. They're bronze and over time they would turn green, which perhaps connects with the covering of vegetation upon the earth, which God establishes at the second stage of the third day. Note that the bronze altar represents the land and the bronze laver can be seen to represent the sea.

We should also observe that the basin is connected with women. We've seen elsewhere in scripture that women are often connected with wells and springs and sources of water. In Numbers 5 we see that the woman suspected of adultery was made to drink some holy water, presumably from the laver.

It's the only time that we see someone drinking water from the laver, to my knowledge. It seems likely that some gendered significance is involved, that this water is associated with the water of women. And it's for this reason that this particular item of furniture is singled out as being formed from a donation of a particular group of people.

All the other things were formed from the general contributions but this in particular is formed from a very particular group of individuals and what they have given. Within the worship of the tabernacle more generally we see a number of ways in which gendered symbolism is included, not least in the stipulation of the sex of sacrifices. Men and women aren't interchangeable within this system but each have particular symbolic import associated with them.

In particular then the laver is made with the serving women's mirrors. The serving women are elsewhere mentioned in 1 Samuel 2.22. While the priests and the appointed Levites were exclusively male, there seemed to have been some women who assisted, presumably with female offerers, or in some of the sorts of tasks ascribed to the serving men in places such as Numbers 4.23 and following. The basin is used for washing things to be brought near to God, whether persons or sacrifices.

It isn't given the same attention as the other elements within the courtyard, the courtyard itself or the bronze altar, but yet it is something that's anointed with the anointing oil in chapter 30 verse 28. As elevated water we might also think of the bronze laver, holy water, as water from above. It's connected with the water of the firmament, the waters above in contrast to the waters below which would be the areas outside of the courtyard.

The court itself divides the realm of the tabernacle precincts from the wider world, its holy space, albeit of a lesser sanctity, from the interior of the tabernacle. This chapter records all of the materials used for the tabernacle. It's a reminder of the census back in

Exodus chapter 30.

There are 100 talents and 1,775 shekels as the amount that corresponds to half a shekel for each of 603,550 persons. And the persons counted seem to have been the males over 20 capable of going to war, as we see in Numbers chapter 1-2 where that same number of persons are mentioned again. A question to consider, in what ways can we connect the bronze altar with the golden altar of incense? Matthew chapter 1 verses 14-31 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent, and believe in the gospel. Passing alongside the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.

And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were in their boat mending their nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and followed him.

And they went into Capernaum. And immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and was teaching. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as the scribes.

And immediately there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit. And he cried out, What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. But Jesus rebuked him, saying, Be silent, and come out of him.

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him. And they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, What is this? A new teaching with authority? He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him. And at once his fame spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee.

And immediately he left the synagogue and entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and immediately they told him about her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up, and the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

Mark 1, after setting up the ministry of Christ with the baptism of John, begins the ministry of Christ with the handing over of John the Baptist. The same language is later used for Jesus as he is handed over to the Jews and then the Romans to be crucified. The arrest of John begins Jesus' Galilean ministry more generally, which takes up the first eight chapters of this book.

While John had largely been operative in Judea, Jesus starts off as a Galilean figure in the north of the country. And Jesus' message concerns the gospel of God, the good news that God is coming to reign. The long-awaited time has come at last, God's promised reign is about to arrive, and people must repent and believe the joyful tidings.

Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus is described as one proclaiming. He is a herald, bearing a message of something about to happen in history. Unlike John, however, he isn't just a forerunner, but he's the one announcing and bringing the expected rule of God.

God is now fulfilling his purpose in their days, and they must be ready, repenting of their sins as a people, and responding faithfully to the proclamation being given to them. Jesus passes along the Sea of Galilee, and he calls Simon and Andrew, followed by James and John. These are the three core disciples, Simon, James and John, with Andrew being the fourth disciple in typical ordering.

They're all fishermen from the north of the country, not the most promising material with which to start a religious movement, and they're beside the Sea of Galilee. As we go through Matthew, Mark and John, they all speak about Galilee as the Sea of Galilee. Luke speaks about it as the Lake of Gennesaret, but the Sea of Galilee heightens some of the connotations of the Gentiles and their association with the sea, of the sea as the realm of chaos, as the sea in juxtaposition to the land, and it's a focal point for Jesus' ministry, particularly in the first half of the Gospel.

Jesus' concern with the sea, and with fishermen rather than with shepherds, suggests there's a movement beyond the land as the focal point for the understanding of the ministry. In the Old Testament, the leaders of the people were shepherds, but now Jesus calls fishermen, and there's a transition here that should be noted. However, we never read of Jesus visiting Sephorus or Tiberias, which were the main Hellenistic cities in the region.

Jesus' ministry, although in a region with lots of Gentile and Hellenized populations, is overwhelmingly to Jews. Simon and Andrew, however, have both got Greek names, which suggests that, like other Jews in the area, they had some Hellenistic influences. Simon is connected to the Hebrew name Simeon, though.

They're called to be fishers of men. We've spoken about the Gentiles as fish. The Gentiles, if we go through the Old Testament, are often associated with the fish stories.

Think of Jonah in particular. In the prophets, the Gentile nations are often described as beasts of the sea, as monsters of the sea, perhaps, or as beasts that arise from the sea. In Jeremiah 16, verse 16, there is another association, though.

In verse 14 following, God is searching out his people with fishermen, with hunters, and

maybe the calling of the disciples here as fishers of men is a returning of Israel after exile theme as well. Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings 19, verses 19-21. Like Elijah, Jesus calls his disciples when they're engaged in a symbolically important task.

We're told the number of oxen that Elisha is associated with because it's a number associated with Israel, and oxen associated with Israel too. Likewise, Jesus calling his disciples when they're engaged in the tasks of fishing suggests that their task is of symbolic importance for their later ministry and mission. We should continue to hear the recurring word immediately in these accounts.

Things are happening quickly and it isn't just Jesus himself who does things immediately but those who are called to be his disciples in response to his word. It's possible that Mark's liking for the term immediately, especially in this chapter, plays off the quotation in verse 3 of the chapter, and some translations capture something of the relationship between the word immediately and the statement make his path straight in the quotation by using straightway for immediately. The way of the Lord has to be made straight and Christ is the one who does everything straightway.

John's Gospel suggests that these men weren't unknown to Jesus but were formerly disciples of John and had already been acquainted with him through John's witness. Also, James and John were likely Jesus' cousins. As we compare the list of the women at the cross, this seems to follow from that.

The reference to their leaving their father behind may also be more than just a bare reporting of what happened. It can underline something about the character of discipleship and it contrasts with the actions of Elisha when he's called by Elijah. Jesus then goes to Capernaum which would be the base for his earliest mission but now not merely by himself but accompanied by his disciples.

The next verses recount a series of great works that he performed on a Sabbath morning, afternoon, evening and then early the following morning. First of all he teaches in the synagogue in a way that is remarkable for its authority in contrast to the teaching of the scribes. He's earlier been proclaiming the gospel but now he teaches with authority which seems to be a somewhat different act.

Perhaps by teaching we are supposed to consider something more along the lines of the Sermon on the Mount which provoked a very similar response from the crowd at the end of it who also noticed the contrast between his authoritative teaching and that of the scribes. Jesus is one who is teaching and giving instruction concerning the law and what it means to live faithfully in the age of the kingdom but he's also one who's proclaiming the kingdom and declaring as a herald what's about to take place. He demonstrates the authority of the word of his teaching but then that's followed by a demonstration of his powerful word of exorcism as he casts out the demon who testifies to his true identity as

the Holy One of God.

Now that expression that he's the Holy One of God possibly has priestly connotations. Jesus has authority and power. Power over evil spirits and this is a conflict that's being highlighted.

Mark foregrounds Jesus' ministry of exorcism in this and the following verses. Israel is afflicted by demonic possession and Jesus brings relief. Perhaps Jesus is like a new David here.

After David was anointed by Samuel he went and offered relief to the evil spirit oppressed Saul and Jesus is doing the same thing for Israel. Also after David was anointed Goliath stood against Israel for 40 days before David defeated him. Jesus in Mark is a performer of great and powerful works, a champion who stands against Satan and who defeats the demons.

He goes into the realm of the wilderness, the realm where Satan and his demons had their base of operations and he goes to their very territory and brings his power there. As a result of his work Jesus' fame spreads throughout the region. Maybe we're supposed to remember the story of David again.

David is the one who defeats Goliath and then he wins these great victories against the Philistines and others and his fame starts to rise at that point and eclipses that of Saul. Saul has killed his thousands and David his tens of thousands. In a similar way Jesus' reputation is rising.

People are hearing about him, they're telling the stories of what he has done. He is getting a reputation as one who is a champion, one who's able to stand against Satan and his minions. However even though Jesus' fame is rising, as we'll discover as we go through the Gospel, the crowds do not really understand the nature of Jesus' mission.

The synagogue exorcism is followed by the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. Jesus is someone who heals both in public and in private and it's likely that Jesus stayed in the house with Simon and Andrew and their extended family. It's worth considering the sort of family structure of the society that Jesus was ministering within.

It may help us better to appreciate the sort of radical challenge that he presented to it at points but also some of the ways in which our far more atomized societies are challenged by Christ in their own ways. Jesus took Simon's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up and the fever left her in a way that some have connected with demons leaving people. She then began to serve him.

We might connect her actions to that of the angels who previously ministered to Jesus in verse 13. We might also see a different sort of call here. Simon, Andrew, James and John followed Christ in the ministry of fishing for men but Simon's mother-in-law may be given

a different calling here, the calling of ministering to Christ.

In Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 3 we see that there were a number of women who ministered to Jesus in various ways, providing for his resources, giving him hospitality and serving him in various ways. If Jesus made Peter's house in Capernaum a base of his operations, Simon's mother-in-law would probably have been his primary hostess with all of the honour that that involved and so I suggest that we see this as a sort of calling to her as a hostess, that she is being lifted up, she's being raised up, there's resurrection themes here perhaps and then she is entrusted with the care of Christ. Jesus is doing all of these things upon the Sabbath.

This doesn't yet seem to be provoking controversy but later on in the gospel it will. Jesus is highlighting by these actions something about the true nature of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a time of making things whole, the Sabbath is a time of life and restoring things to life.

The Sabbath is a time of liberty and setting people free and all who would reduce the Sabbath merely to a set of burdensome and onerous commandments are undermining the true purpose of the day that God has given to his people. The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath and Jesus at the very start of his ministry is acting on a Sabbath in a way that reveals the purpose of the Sabbath, that reveals something about the sort of rest, the sort of Sabbath that he is going to give to his people, that his ministry involves at its very heart. A question to consider, how does Mark's focus upon exorcisms and the conflict with Satan in the wilderness help us better to understand the character of Christ's mission more generally?