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May 11th: Deuteronomy 12 & Luke 7:11-35

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A centralized sanctuary. Messengers from John the Baptist.

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

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Transcript

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Deuteronomy chapter 12. Deuteronomy chapter 12. The Book of Deuteronomy lays out the law given at Sinai once again before Israel enters into the land.

Chapter 5 contains the Ten Commandments and the chapters that follow can be read as a general unpacking of those core commandments, with passages broadly devoted to each commandment in sequence from the first to the tenth. Chapters 6 to 11 unpack the first commandment, the core commandment, the truth that lies at the very heart of the covenant, the uniqueness of the Lord and his fundamental, exclusive claim upon his people. In chapter 12, however, we move into exploration of the second commandment, the prohibition on idolatry and false worship.

In chapters 12 to 13 there is discussion of true and false forms of worship and religious mediation, and the need to root out all false forms. A key concern is that the Israelites don't adopt the religious practices of the Canaanites that they're coming in to dispossess. Israel must destroy the many sacrificial sites of the Canaanites and establish just one in their place.

The restriction of the site of sacrificial worship to a single location is the main subject of this chapter, and perhaps it may be a bit surprising to us, but this restriction would have very far-reaching consequences. One of the temptations that the Israelites would have faced coming into the land would be that of religious syncretism, maintaining the pagan worship sites and many of their practices, but tweaking and mixing them with the worship of the Lord. The pagan sites of worship seem to have been, for the most part, outdoor sanctuaries associated with geographical landmarks, trees or tops of hills or mountains, and these sites would often be named after the pagan deities that were worshipped there.

Israel, however, is supposed to destroy these sites completely and to obliterate their names, presumably by changing the name of the place that has been named after the pagan deity. Israel, for its part, must worship only at one location, where the Lord determines to establish His name. The Lord establishes His name in a specific spot, the Lord dwells there, but only after a kind, not in the fuller literal sense.

There seems to be something of a resistance to immanentisation of God within this chapter, a containing of God within space, the way in which God can be located, pinpointed on a map. That's not the type of God that Israel is supposed to worship. The Lord does dwell in the midst of His people and in a specific location, but He places His name there, and that placing of His name is a sign of ownership and possession, but it

might also warn against the idea that the Lord is contained in buildings made with hands.

Later in the history of Israel we see that they often failed on these specific points, they often established false worship, the sort of worship of pagan shrines or high places. Sometimes these had a syncretistic flavour, ostensibly dedicated to the worship of the Lord, but worshipping the Lord after a pagan manner. On other occasions, however, they were simply the worship of idols and false gods.

In 2 Kings 17:9-11 we have an example of this failure of Israel. Why would the site of worship be limited to a single location only? Private altars, perhaps, can be a temptation to a domesticated God, a God who is placed at our own disposal, perhaps a territorial God tied to various locations, rather than the one creator God over and above all. Territorial deities are a feature of polytheism.

Often these would be deities with a specific portfolio, a God of the sea, or a God of this particular river, or a God of these particular mountains, whatever it is, and worshippers can bargain with these Gods. Israel's centralised worship and single site of sacrificial worship was connected to their firm monotheism. There was one God, and worship must be unified.

The worship of polytheism was typically characterised by varying customs and rituals that were changed from place to place, each shrine projecting a God suited to the needs of the worshippers in that specific location. All of Israel's sacrifices, however, have to be brought to the central sanctuary, and presumably this would mostly occur during the pilgrimage festivals. This chapter presents feasting before the Lord as a key feature of Israel's worship.

It's easy to call out to the Lord in our distress. That's the time when we think about the Lord. It's something different to rejoice in the Lord's presence, to enjoy His gifts before Him, and celebratory meals are a very important part of the religious worship presented by Deuteronomy.

This sort of festal worship is a worship that will protect Israel from forgetting the Lord in times of prosperity. It's worship that guards against decadence. And in these times of festivity, it's important for them to include the Levite.

Within every single one of their locations, there are Levites who are dependent upon them, who do not have the same stake in the land as they do. Rather, they are God's servants, and the attitude of the Israelites towards God's servants is expressive of their attitude towards God Himself. If they honour the Lord, they will honour His servants.

And the Levites, because of their dependence upon the charity and the hospitality and the tithes of the people of Israel, are associated with the poor of the land. The change to

the sanctuary here is a movement from a situation that verse 8 describes as everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, to one of everyone doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God, in verse 28. Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes is not presented as a positive thing.

We have that as a refrain within the book of Judges. There's no king in the land, there's no one to unify the land under a single principle of behaviour, and so everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Once Israel is securely established in the land, the current situation, where they seem to be sacrificing in various locations, seemingly against the instructions of Leviticus chapter 17, verses 1 to 9, that would change.

Perhaps the situation had become one of the Israelites being semi-settled in the Transjordanian territory, and their sacrificing animals for meat on private altars, as the tabernacle was now too far away from many of them. The requirement for centralised worship was emphasised in the Kingdom period, mostly against the practice of the people, which was a reversion to the habits of paganism. Israel is judged for setting up local shrines in high places and sites of sacrificial worship, most notably that set up at Bethel by Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

With the removal of these very sacrificial locations, there would need to be a change to Israel's eating practices. While they were in the wilderness, it wasn't too hard for them to sacrifice in the tabernacle if they needed to sacrifice. But when they became much more spread out, they either had to have these private altars, or they would have to go a long distance to sacrifice.

And so there needs to be a change to the practice. They could formally kill and eat non-sacrificial animals, but had to sacrifice the sacrificial animals first. Now this was no longer necessary.

They could eat the meat of animals that would be of the kind that could be offered, without having to offer them. If they were going to give a sacrifice, they would have to eat that in the presence of the Lord, and this would include voluntary sacrifices. So that meant that they couldn't have voluntary sacrifices on their own private altars.

They had to go to the altar of God at the temple, or the tabernacle, and offer there, and then they could have it in the presence of the Lord in that location. The result of all of this is that much of their meat-eating, which formally would have been religious, they would have to sacrifice the animal to the Lord first, and then they would eat the meat as a sort of peace offering, is now secularised. They don't have to offer that in order to eat it as meat.

But if they are going to offer a peace offering, they have to eat it in the presence of the Lord. Moses charges Israel utterly to reject the religious practices of the Canaanites. They were being wiped out of the land for these things.

They should not enquire about the sort of ways in which the Canaanites worshipped their gods. It is not an example for them to follow. The most egregious practice, of course, is child sacrifice.

They must not adopt such practices, but must worship the Lord only as He commands. The centralisation of sanctuary worship is an important part of the reforms of figures such as Josiah and Hezekiah. We read of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18 verses 3-4.

It was called Nehushtan. Part of the impact of all of this teaching is to establish a sense of orthodoxy in worship. Worship is not this superstitious thing, nor is it a matter of practice that is vernacular to a particular location, something arising out of the customs, the needs, the habits and the traditions of a specific location.

No, there is a single site of sacrificial worship, and there is a single mode of sacrificial worship. God must be approached on His own terms, not in terms of each location's customary religious traditions and practices. A question to consider.

How do you imagine that the centralisation of the sanctuary would have caused the average Israelite's experience of his faith to differ from those of the surrounding pagan nations? Luke chapter 7 verses 11-35. As he drew near to the gate of the town, behold a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a considerable crowd from the town was with her. And when the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said to her, Do not weep.

Then He came up and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And He said, Young man, I say to you, arise. And the dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother.

Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, saying, A great prophet has arisen among us, and God has visited His people. And this report about Him spread through the whole of Judea and all the surrounding country. The disciples of John reported all these things to Him.

And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? And when the men had come to Him, they said, John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another? In that hour He healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind He bestowed sight. And He answered them, Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them, and blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.

When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John. What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then

did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are on king's courts. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

This is He of whom it is written, Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. I tell you, among those born of women, none is greater than John, yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptised with the baptism of John.

But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptised by Him. To what then shall I compare the people of this generation? And what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we sang a dirge and you did not weep. For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, he has a demon.

The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, look at him, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Yet wisdom is justified by all her children. In Luke 7, following the healing of the centurion's servant, Jesus raises the son of the widow of Nain.

Jesus in his sermon in Nazareth in chapter 4 verses 25-27 compares his ministry to that of Elijah and Elisha. We have already seen parallels between Naaman the Syrian and the healing of the centurion's servant. We might notice a further parallel between the widow of Zarephath and the widow of Nain.

In both cases their sons are raised by a prophet. In 1 Kings 17 verses 8-24 we read of the widow of Zarephath. It seems to me that Luke wants us to remember this story, to connect this with the sermon at Nazareth, and to see that Jesus' ministry is proceeding after the pattern of these great prophets, Elijah and Elisha.

In the centurion and the widow of Nain we have a male-female pairing, as we see on many other occasions in Luke, where Luke will often bring forward a man and a woman to express something of the scope and the comprehensive nature of the kingdom ministry of Christ. Just as the healing of the centurion's servant is particularly done on behalf of the centurion, so this raising of the widow's son is done for the widow. The healing is performed not primarily for the dead man, but for his mother, upon whom Jesus takes compassion.

The bereaved mother is restored in the gift of her son. John has heard accounts of Jesus' ministry, but he is himself now in prison. He preached an imminent judgment.

But Jesus is healing and restoring people. You might be uncertain whether Jesus is in fact

the one that he awaited. You might be wondering where the promised fire is.

While John's messengers are with him, Jesus performs a number of miracles, which serve as signs. They confirm the nature of his identity and the character of his mission. Are you the one who is to come? Jesus is judging by showing mercy.

You can see allusions back to Isaiah chapter 61, verses 1-3 for instance. Then in Isaiah chapter 35, verses 3-8. And those who have an anxious heart, be strong, fear not.

Behold, your God will come with vengeance. With the recompense of God, He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

In the haunt of jackals, where they lie down, the grass shall become reeds and rushes, and a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness. The unclean shall not pass over it. These passages talk about the vengeance of God.

They talk about the fire, as it were. But they speak much more about this restoration of the people, about healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf, and enabling the lame to leap. Blessed is he who does not stumble because of me.

I don't believe Jesus is rebuking John the Baptist here. John the Baptist may be confused and uncertain, but that doesn't seem to be the same thing as stumbling. Indeed, Jesus goes on to praise John the Baptist in some of the highest possible terms.

He takes the occasion provided by the messengers from John to discuss the character of John's ministry with the crowd. Who was John? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone who is weak, easily moved, or pressured? The Lord will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers. 1 Kings 14-15 may be an example of this imagery being used elsewhere in scripture.

John the Baptist wasn't that sort of person. He was a man of strong character, a man who stood firm as a prophetic witness. A man dressed in soft clothing, a dignitary such as you might find in king's houses.

No, he's a prophet, and more than a prophet. As we know from elsewhere, he is the Elijah who is to come. John the Baptist and Elijah are connected in a great many ways, not just in their clothing.

He's prophesied in Malachi. He's a man associated with the wilderness, a forerunner of a

man who's a prophet in the land. He's a man clothed in camel skin with a leather belt.

He fulfills the words of Malachi 3-1 Something that is connected to Exodus 23-20. The common people and the tax collectors recognise the justice of God, but the Pharisees and the lawyers reject God's saving justice. John the Baptist and Jesus as the Son of Man come in contrasting ways, and the Pharisees and the scribes reject both, for different and perhaps contradictory reasons.

They do not know the times. They're so out of sync with God's justice that they want to dance when they should be mourning, and to mourn when they should be rejoicing. We've seen this already earlier in the context of Jesus' teaching concerning fasting.

Why fast when the bridegroom is with you? They describe Jesus, the faithful son, as a glutton and a drunkard. And to understand the meaning of this reference, we should look back to Deuteronomy 21-18-20. If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and though they discipline him, will not listen to them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, at the gate of the place where he lives.

And they shall say to the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice, he is a glutton and a drunkard. Of course, Israel is actually the rebellious son, the son that rejects the word of the father. But Jesus will suffer the fate of the rebellious son, taking the judgment of the nation upon himself.

Our passage ends with a peculiar statement that wisdom is justified by all of her children. The meaning of this statement, most likely, becomes plain as we look back to verse 29. When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptised with the baptism of John.

Wisdom is justified by all her children is then paralleled with that statement that the tax collectors and the people declare God just. The children of wisdom recognise her ways, they affirm her ways and align with her purposes. While the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus are misunderstood and subject to great slander by the Pharisees and the scribes, the common people and the tax collectors recognise what's going on.

They see the signs, they recognise the times, and they act accordingly. Wisdom is justified by her children. A question to consider.

How does this discussion of John's mission further underline the importance of John the Baptist within the theology of Luke?