

Proper 17
Cycle C RCL

Jeremiah 2:4-13

Reference to the Exodus and conquest, absent in Judean prophecy of the 8th century BCE, makes its first appearance in the 7th-century prophecies of Jeremiah. The themes of the oracle in verses 4-13, concerning the mighty acts of God and the ignorance of God by the very people God delivered, are northern themes that probably did not enter into southern prophecy until after 722 BCE when Sargon II destroyed Samaria and the political identity of the northern kingdom of Israel. Brought to Jerusalem by escaping bands of northern prophets, the northern traditions of complete destruction at the hands of an angry God fitted much better the situation of 7th-century Judea than it did the Davidic royal theology of the previous century. Kedar is in northernmost Arabia, so both Kedar and Cyprus are sufficiently removed from Jerusalem to show the wide expanse over which one might travel while still not finding pagans who have deserted their gods as Israel has deserted the Lord (2:10-12).

Psalms 81:1. 10-16

Formally classified a *hymn*, this psalm is part of a liturgy many believe was used during the fall harvest festival of *Sukkot* (“booths”). Verses 9-10 contain allusions to the first words of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21), and treats the rebellion of Israel in the desert after leaving Egypt as a violation of the first commandment. Verses 13-16 suggest that repentance and submission to God’s Law are the principal requirements for Israel to continue to live fruitfully in the Land of Promise.

OR

Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) 10:12-18

Joshua (Jesus) ben Sirach began a wisdom school in Jerusalem around the turn of the second century BCE for the instruction of young men in the Law of Moses. Ecclesiasticus is actually a two-volume work (Volume I = chapters 1-23, Volume II = chapters 24-51), composed around 180 BCE. Some 50 years later, ben Sirach's grandson, who had taken a Hebrew manuscript of his grandfather's work to Egypt, translated it into Greek. Ben Sirach’s words about pride in this reading may reflect the Greek tradition of moral philosophy wherein pride over against the gods results in divine punishment. Fragments of the Hebrew text of Sirach came to light in 1896 thanks to the joint efforts of the twin sisters Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Smith together with Solomon Schechter. Note: A recent biographical study of the Smith sisters, *The Sisters of Sinai* (Knopf, 2010) by Janet Soskice is now available and makes for fascinating reading.

or

Proverbs 25:6-7

Proverbs 25:1-29:27 comprise a separate collection of sayings attributed to Solomon: “These also are the proverbs of Solomon that the men of Hezekiah passed along (FH).” Unlike the collections of aphorisms in Proverbs 10-24, this Solomonic supplement shows considerable structure, and verses 6-7 derive from an *inclusio*, (a composition marked out by repetitions at the beginning and end). In this case the *inclusio* is framed by 25:2 and 25:27 where the word *kavod* (“honor” or “glory”) occurs twice in each verse. In those same verses the sayings in verses 6-7 envision the court liturgy whereby the members of the court take their proper positions

before the king to conduct the business of the realm. Much better for the king to call you up from a lower position to a higher one than for you to have to cede your position to a *nadiv* (“noble” in rank). The purpose of the entire *inclusio* is to establish proper social and political relationships on the basis of wisdom instead of ambition.

Psalm 112

This is an *alphabetic acrostic*, *i. e.* each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In terms of its form and function, the psalm is a *wisdom psalm*, a composition that celebrates the life of wisdom and piety. The poem probably had no liturgical function in the Temple. Instead, it was probably composed during the Babylonian Exile to call the demoralized Jewish community to faithful service to God despite the loss of the Temple.

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

One might misinterpret the teaching of Hebrews to be that one must hold onto certain Christian principles in order to be saved. Our author, however, believes that faithfulness, while requiring adherence to what the readers have learned, must always issue in ethical action to be genuine. So the author ends the long discourse of Hebrews with injunctions about faithfulness in marriage, loyalty to leaders, and fundamental hospitality.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

At one level Jesus appears only to be relating the traditional wisdom about taking a modest place at table when invited to a banquet. See Proverbs 25:1-7. He also appears to endorse the virtue of inviting guests, especially poor guests, to a Sabbath meal, a virtue the Pharisees made every effort to practice. These teachings, however, are but a prelude to the parable in 14:15-24 that deals with the eschatological banquet of the Lord at which God will be the host. Within that context, therefore, the traditional wisdom about proper manners at a banquet and the virtues of inviting poor people to dine finds itself transformed into a teaching about the coming Kingdom of God.

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