

Triennial Torah Study – 4th Year 21/12/2013

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We continue this weekend with our regular Triennial Torah reading which can be found at https://sightedmoon.com/sightedmoon_2015/files/TriennialCycleBeginningAviv.pdf

Gen 15-16	Judges 9	Ps 33-34	Mat 20:17 – 21:22
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Standing on the Promises (Genesis 15)

Once again, the promises God made to Abraham are about to be expanded. This is a frequent pattern in Genesis—promise or covenant followed by expansion.

The events narrated here occurred some years after Abraham had come out of Haran and into Canaan in obedience to God’s call. He had as yet no child, neither by Sarah nor by any other woman. Here he was an old man, years after God’s promise was first given, and there was no sign of the fulfillment of that promise. But, as Paul wrote in the book of Romans, speaking of Abraham when he was even quite a bit older and at an age when he would be unexpected to be able to father children, “Not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead” (Romans 4:19). Abram had confidence that God would fulfill His word. For he walked by faith, not by sight. Nevertheless, the wait was difficult.

When God appeared to Abram in a vision and assured him of protection and reward, Abram reminded God that he had as yet no child, and that according to custom Abram’s steward, Eliezer, would become his heir. God then took Abram outside into the night and showed him the stars, saying: “Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them. So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5). The magnitude of this promise can often be lost on us in our modern world, for man has so fouled the air with pollution and has so obscured the starry brilliance of the heavens with our city lights that the number of stars we can behold on any given night is often a paltry few. But go out into the desert, or up on a mountain, on a clear night and, with this scripture in mind, you will be astounded by what you behold. Imagine, then, how Abram felt. Though awestruck, no doubt, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (verse 6, NIV).

Slavery and the Promise of Deliverance (Genesis 15)

God promised multitudinous descendants to Abram, but He also promised that they would be enslaved for a period of time before being delivered with great wealth. The period of 400 years mentioned in verse 13 is not the period of their slavery. Biblical chronology indicates that Israel was enslaved for just over 200

years. The 400 years appear to date from Abraham's death to Israel's possession of the Promised Land (though there are other possibilities).

But why was there to be a delay in Israel's possessing the land and servitude to a foreign nation? One reason is expressly stated. God says that the iniquity of the Amorites, who dwelt in Canaan, was not yet full—meaning that God was extending mercy to them, allowing them time to repent. God deals justly with all people, and He often delays punishment until the situation shows no hope of betterment. But another reason for the delay and servitude was probably to condition Israel. If Israel had developed in the land, unmolested, they may have acquired a general disposition of rejecting any dealings with God whatsoever—"Who needs God if everything is fine," human reasoning says. But by allowing Israel to be enslaved, they would be humbled and willing to listen. Though they ultimately displeased God by rebelling against Him, they undoubtedly went further in serving Him than they otherwise would have. As God told Paul, in weakness we can be made strong (2 Corinthians 12:9; compare Hebrews 11:34). Additionally, if Israel would be taken out of slavery and made great, the credit for the greatness would more obviously be God's.

Sarai's "Solution" (Genesis 16)

The wait for the promised son was long and hard. Abram looked forward to the fulfillment of the promise and we can see that his thoughts were firmly fixed on it. But for Sarai the wait appears to have been the most difficult. She, like most women, wanted a child of her own, and the social stigma of barrenness only added to her sorrow. In such a condition, Abram and Sarai made a fateful mistake for which we are still paying the price.

No doubt Sarai longed for the fulfillment of the promise, just as Abram did. But with no fulfillment in sight, Sarai began to consider other options. Was not Hagar able to bear children? Did not God promise Abram a son without limiting Himself to providing the son through Sarai? Perhaps the promised son would come through Hagar. Besides, if it was not God's will, wouldn't He simply close up Hagar's womb? So goes human reasoning. Impatience produced the "solution" to the problem: Abram should go into Hagar and father children by her. That Abram offered no resistance to the idea seems to suggest that he, too, found the reasoning compelling.

This might strike us today as a very strange way to attempt to solve the problem. There is, however, more than meets the eye here—a cultural factor that would have provided a rationalization for Abram and Sarai. Dr. Eugene Merrill explains in his book *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*: "Certain peculiar actions of Abram and his wife in Genesis 15 and 16 require some attention to ancient Near Eastern custom and law, especially a few Hurrian practices attested in the Nuzi tablets [documents from northern Mesopotamia of the patriarchal age]. [An] example is Sarai's barrenness and the steps she took to ensure offspring in spite of it (Gen. 16:1-6). She simply offered her slave girl Hagar to Abram as a surrogate mother, and the child of that union, Ishmael, came to be regarded as the son of Abram and Sarai. This is paralleled by Nuzi texts which describe the same remedy for a similar situation" (1987, pp. 38-39).

Yet Ishmael, despite cultural precedent, was clearly not Sarai's son—neither in her own eyes nor in the eyes of God—and trouble and heartache ensued within the family. Furthermore, Ishmael would ultimately become the father of many of the Arab peoples so that, even today, we still live with the tragic results of Sarai's solution—i.e., major facets of the perpetual Middle East conflict.

The lesson ought to be obvious. What would have happened if Sarai and Abram had simply waited for God to provide the solution? Perhaps generations of strife could have been avoided. The geopolitical scene today might be very different, with the ever-present threat of war much diminished. We must learn to live with what God gives us, trusting that if He has made a promise He will fulfill it at just the right time and in just the right way. Man cannot bring about the fulfillment of God's promises on his own. To attempt to do so is presumptuous and inevitably leads to misery. But to patiently wait for God to act, knowing that He cannot lie, builds faith and character, and avoids what could be generations of strife.

King Abimelech (Judges 9)

As stated in yesterday's reading, when Gideon died, the Israelites went right back to their old ways, fornicating with the gods of the Canaanites. How quickly do men turn when the restraining influence of a righteous man is removed!

Although Gideon did not become an actual king, he did have a heavy influence on all aspects of public life. In fact, the large number of sons born to him after his victory—70!—indicates that Gideon amassed a rather large harem (8:30), something usually reserved for kings. So although he did not become a king *de jure*, he was apparently the *de facto* king in Israel. This is also indicated by the name of one of his sons, whom he actually gave the royal title of Abimelech (verse 31), which means “My Father Is King”—and Abimelech's remarks indicate that Gideon's 70 sons were placed in important positions of leadership (compare 9:1-2).

While Gideon earlier realized that he should not be crowned king, it is possible that he later didn't see things so clearly, particularly when we consider what happened with the ephod and his having many wives. (The multiplying of wives to oneself was forbidden to the kings of Israel in Deuteronomy 17:17 because it carried the danger of turning the one doing so away from God—and this principle was certainly applicable to anyone.) Furthermore, Gideon's strong leadership, the deference of the people of Israel toward him, his personal lifestyle and the role of his sons in governing Israel probably did little to dispel the notion among the people that, even if he was not an actual king, he might as well have been.

Nevertheless, it is nowhere stated that Gideon ever actually assumed the title of king—and, with what is made of this issue in chapters 8 and 9, we would certainly expect the account to say so if he had. Thus, it is most likely that he never did. Naming his son Abimelech was perhaps a recognition of what he effectively was—not what he truly was. And perhaps he was even hopeful of being blessed with some kind of dynastic succession of leadership, as presumptuous as that seems to be.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Gideon's son Abimelech did want to be acknowledged as king. Upon his father's death, Abimelech realized that if he did not move immediately, he would forever lose his opportunity for that honor. His first action was to gain the support of his mother's influential Shechemite family, who saw that if Abimelech reigned in Israel, they would likely obtain high posts in the new government and all the benefits that went with them. This led the men of Shechem to throw their support, and money from the temple of Baal-Berith there, behind Abimelech. With the new money, Abimelech hired an entourage to accompany him—putting on the airs of a king, a public relations move. With the support of a significant city, and a personal entourage, Abimelech next eliminated any potential competition by murdering all his brothers, Gideon's sons. Immediately, the men of Shechem and Beth Millo crowned Abimelech king. Pathetically, this occurred at the terebinth tree at Shechem, where Jacob, so many years before, had commanded those of his household to put away the foreign gods that were among them (Genesis 35:4).

Jotham, the youngest of Gideon's sons, was the only survivor of the massacre. His long parable of the trees who sought a king charged the men of Shechem and Beth Millo with the grossest foolishness and the most treacherous dealings against Gideon, and he called forth a destruction upon them in repayment. Being the only blood descendant of Gideon, he knew Abimelech would do all he could to take his life, so he fled and hid.

The pact between Abimelech and his Shechemite supporters lasted for three years. Thereafter, "God sent a spirit of ill will between Abimelech and the men of Shechem" (verse 23). What caused the breach is not stated, but the disaffection caused the men of Shechem to support one Gaal, son of Ebed, in his bid for the throne. The rebellion was brought to a quick end—Abimelech killed Gaal and destroyed the city, including its pagan temple—and thus the treachery of the Shechemites against Gideon was repaid.

On the heels of this victory, Abimelech attacked another city, Thebez. But during the attack, a woman dropped a grinding stone down onto Abimelech's head. Dying, he ordered his armor-bearer to kill him, lest it be said that he was killed by a woman. And so Abimelech's treachery against his father Gideon was repaid.

God watches over His people. When the righteous cry out to him for deliverance from their enemies, God will act, although the unfolding of the events may, to all outward appearances, seem to have little to do with God. In the case of Abimelech, all God had to do was break the league between the Shechemites and Abimelech. The natural wickedness of the players involved would serve to bring things to a conclusion. And, true to His word, those who seek to exalt themselves will be abased.

Psalm 33 is one of the few anonymous psalms in Book I of the Psalter. However, its placement here makes it likely one of David's (see 72:20). It is interesting to note that the last verse of Psalm 32 seems to lead right into the first verse of Psalm 33. Yet Psalm 33 is clearly independent, ending the section of psalms beginning with the alphabetic acrostic of Psalm 25. Though not itself an alphabetic acrostic like the psalm that follows it, Psalm 33 is arranged in 22 Hebrew verses—22 being the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. (Perhaps there was a thought of making this into an alphabetic acrostic.)

The psalmist states that God finds pleasure and beauty in the rejoicing of the righteous (verse 1). He encourages others to praise God with various instruments (verse 2) and to “sing to Him a new song” (verse 3). Note here that worshipful music is directed “to Him”—He is the audience. And the singing of a new song, besides implying finding new ways to praise God in music (especially as we constantly discover new things to praise Him for), probably also means always singing with renewed appreciation and love—always thinking anew about hymns we are singing and not just droning out stanzas by rote. Capable musicians are told to “play skillfully” (verse 3), as we must offer only our best to God. And our attitude in musical praise is to be expressed in joy (same verse).

Indeed, there is so much to be joyful for, as the psalm goes on to detail. God’s Word is right and all His actions are done in truth, righteousness and justice, which He loves (verses 4-5). And despite the evil that Satan’s present rule has wrought, “the earth is full of the goodness of the Lord” (verse 5)—“the goodness that manifests itself every time the sun rises, a bird sings, and a mother lovingly embraces her child. Out of His goodness, God holds together the earth and provides for the sustenance of all people. One day God’s goodness will prevail over all evil (98:2)” (Nelson Study Bible, note on verses 4-5).

There is joy and praise to be found in God’s awesome work of creation (verses 6-9) and the fact that His plans and purpose will never be thwarted (verses 10-11). The people of God are so wonderfully blessed (verse 12).

God is to be praised as Sovereign above all nations. He watches from heaven over everyone on earth and is aware of everything they do—understanding them better than they do themselves as He is the one who fashioned their hearts (verses 13-15). And in His watchfulness, He is lovingly attentive to “those who fear Him...who hope in His unfailing love” (verse 18, NIV). For them He is a shield, a deliverer, a helper, so that they may truly rejoice (verses 19-21).

The psalm closes in verse 22 by addressing God Himself, praying for and affirming hope in the blessings of God’s covenant love.

The Righteous Redeemed, the Wicked Removed (Psalms 34-35)

Psalms 34-37 form a “small grouping of four psalms...framed by two alphabetic acrostics that contain wisdom-like instruction...in godliness and related warnings concerning the fate of the wicked—instruction and warnings that reinforce key themes in the two enclosed prayers (Ps 35; 36)” (Zondervan NIV Study Bible, note on Psalms 34-37).

In introducing Psalm 34, The Nelson Study Bible says it’s “an acrostic, with one verse for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet...[except that] one verse appears to have dropped out at some point; there is no verse for the Hebrew letter waw, that would otherwise appear after v. 5.” However, this “missing” letter is found at the beginning of the second line of verse 5.

We read this psalm earlier in the Bible Reading Program in conjunction with the events described in the superscription (see the Bible Reading Program comments on 1 Samuel 21:13-15; Psalm 34). David had fled from Saul to the Philistine city of Gath and the protection of King Achish (Abimelech here, meaning “My Father King,” being the title of Philistine rulers rather than a personal name). Yet in this situation David might have been set to work against Israel or tortured for information. To render himself worthless to the Philistines and to keep himself out of the king’s court, he feigned madness. The superscription here tells us how the episode ended—with David being driven away, which spared his life.

David composed this psalm in thanksgiving for God’s deliverance (verse 4). He welcomes others to experience God and His blessings (verse 8). Verses 9-10 assure us that God will meet all of our needs.

As in 33:18, the instruction in 34:9 to “fear the Lord” does not mean one is to be terrified of God. These words “gradually became a standard phrase for a good relationship with God. A good relationship begins with a reverent sense that God is so powerful and righteous that we dare not take Him lightly. But it goes on from awe to a sense of deep security, as this psalm fully demonstrates” (Zondervan The New Student Bible, note on verse 9).

David advises those who want to have long life to not speak evil or lies, to turn from wrong ways to right ways and to seek and pursue peace (verses 12-14)—counsel found in many other verses. God blesses those who follow Him. He sees the righteous (verse 15). He hears the righteous (verses 15, 17). He is close to the righteous (verse 18). They can rely on Him for help in time of physical and spiritual trouble (verses 18-22).

In contrast, God sets His face against those who live in opposition to Him (verse 16). They ultimately bring on themselves death and condemnation (verses 16, 21)—“evil” in verse 21 denoting calamity.

But God redeems His servants from condemnation (verse 22). And although the righteous will experience many difficulties, God will in time deliver them out of all of them (verse 19). Guarding the bones of the righteous, with not one broken (verse 20), is figurative of God’s special care to protect the person’s whole being in all its aspects (compare 35:9-10). Yet this may also entail ensuring that His servants are perfectly presentable to Him—deriving from the fact that the Passover lamb was to have no broken bones (Exodus 12:46; Numbers 9:12). These words from Psalm 34:20 are applied literally in John 19:33-36 as prophetic of Yeshua’s bones not being broken when He was executed, the death of this perfectly righteous Man—the sinless Lamb of God—being the actual fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice.

Psalm 34:22, the psalm’s concluding verse, is outside the acrostic pattern of the psalm—just as the final verse of Psalm 25 lies outside of its acrostic pattern. Curiously, both psalm endings begin with the letter pe and both deal with the subject of redemption.

Mat 20:17 – 21:22

22 But Yeshua answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask.

The mother of James and John asked a question that came from her lack of understanding. (Similar to Matthew 18:1). Again, Yeshua stresses the aspects of humility and servanthood.

22 Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?

A full discussion of this “cup” and baptism will be presented in chapter 26 of this study.

27 And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant:

Again referring to the idea of the “mighty in the Kingdom,” serving others in humility (with Moses being our best human example.)

5 thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass ...

One of the problems posed by the Tenakh’s prophecies, regarding the Messiah, is that He would arrive both on the back of a donkey as well as in the clouds of glory. As it did not seem possible for one person to fulfill both prophecies, there developed a theory that if the people were righteous, Messiah would come on the clouds, if they were not, He would arrive on a donkey:

However, even the Talmudists recognized that Scripture did not truly offer an “if-or” option, hence the idea of two Messiahs came into being. The first, Messiah ben Joseph would be more of the humble suffering servant. He would in fact be killed. The second, Messiah ben David, would come, avenge the death of Messiah ben Joseph and usher in the Millennial Kingdom.

8 others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way.

The cutting of branches alludes to the feast of Sukkot (Tabernacles), most closely associated with the coming of the Messianic era (See comments on Matthew 17:4).

Leviticus 23:39-42- Also in the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when ye have gathered in the fruit of the land, ye shall keep a feast unto the LORD seven days: on the first day shall be a sabbath, and on the eighth day shall be a sabbath. And ye shall take you on the first day the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook; and ye shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. And ye shall keep it a feast unto the LORD seven days in the year. It shall be a statute for ever in your generations: ye shall celebrate it in the seventh month. Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are Israelites born shall dwell in booths.

It is clear from the behavior of these people that they thought Yeshua was at least a great prophet, if not the Messiah.

9 Hosanna to the son of David

The term “Hosanna” is Hosheanu, meaning, “save us.” The cry of the people (Hosheana, ben David), is also tied to Sukkot. The 7th day of Sukkot is called, Hosheana Rabba, meaning “the great save us.” As mentioned earlier, “son of David” is a Messianic title.

Interestingly, the time of this occasion is the spring and not the fall, (when Sukkot takes place). Also, even though Yeshua is the final Yom Kippur sacrifice (another fall feast), He was killed in the spring on Pesakh

(Passover). The resolution to this lies in deeper levels of study (at the Sod level) and will be addressed more fully in our Revelation study. Suffice it to say that although the feasts of God seem separate and unique from our point of view in this physical world, in the spiritual realm there is less distinction and far greater unity (enabled by the Messiah).

13 ye have made it a den of thieves.

The people were required to make offerings at the Temple. As it was too difficult for those living far away to bring animals with them, they would instead purchase the animal when they arrived at the Temple. Also, it was not permitted to use pagan money to make offerings (or pay the Temple tax), so coins would be evaluated and exchanged for shekels. The men providing this service had found it too easy to cheat people however, and it is for this dishonesty that Yeshua drives them out.

The verse Yeshua quotes is from both Isaiah 56 and Jeremiah 7. As the prophets state, the Temple of the Lord was to be a house of prayer for all nations, thereby including gentiles into the faith of Israel. The actions of the money changers were a perversion of justice, taking advantage of people, which is a perversion of the essence of God's Torah. By such evil works, the name of the God of Israel would be blasphemed among the gentiles. This acted against God's Temple being a house of prayer for them, in fact keeping salvation from the gentiles.

As Paul similarly wrote of some of his fellow Jews:

Romans 2:23-24 – Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written.

16 Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?

Yeshua quotes Psalm 8, which is highly Messianic in its nature, thus offering the people a “hint” as to who He was:

Psalm 8 – O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens. Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!

19 And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.

There is a deep, “hidden” significance to this brief encounter with the fig tree, having to do with Israel's lack of faith. An interesting comparison can be made to an ancient Hebraic mystical text, which speaks of the “attribute” of God that abides with Israel (also referred to as the Shekinah):

When Israel diverges from God's way, then this attribute is found to be lacking, meager and low. She is like foliage whose leaves have shrivelled in a garden without water. Then she is like a tree whose fruit has fallen off ... ²

21 if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed? 22 whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

As God would not want all of us hurling huge mountains about, it is easy to see that there are deeper meanings to these verses.

First, if we take these verses at a more literal (p'shat) level (even considering the allegorical terms of "mountains" and "seas"), it would seem that great miracles should be "commonplace" among those who are righteous in God's sight. As this is not the case today, one has to ask what the problem is.

The answer may be found in another statement made by Yeshua:

Luke 18:8 – Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

As "faith" is defined by God in terms of a relationship with Him based on His instruction, His Torah, (i.e., Deuteronomy chapter 6, Luke 18:18-22) and the majority of those claiming to follow His Messiah today preach that they are "not under the Law," (i.e., not submissive to His Torah), then Messiah's words are a indeed frightening prophecy. (See notes to Matthew chapters 5 through 7 on Torah as part of faith.)

There is a deeper meaning to these verses however, that is actually applicable to their immediate context. The question must first be asked, What is the purpose of Messiah's teachings in these surrounding chapters (21-23)? As we are seeing, Yeshua is both, a) rooting out the false teachings (leaven) of the religious leadership, and b) presenting the offer of the Kingdom to His people. (See Isaiah 61 as well.)

The metaphorical terms "mountains" and "seas" have to do with leaders and the spiritual abyss. As Yeshua points out in these chapters, the Pharisees were actually keeping people away from the Kingdom of God through their teachings (though the people were at fault as well for allowing them to do this). Yeshua is thus instructing His disciples that with faith, not only can the falsehood of the Pharisees be overcome (the mountain being tossed into the sea), but the Kingdom itself can be ushered in, (where "miracles" will be commonplace, i.e., "whatever you ask you will receive.")