



Shabbat Table Talk

Parashat Eikev - Erev Shabbat 7 August, 2009
Week of 2 to 8 August

Torah Portion: Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25

Haftarah: 1 Kings 18: 46-19: 21

Sunday Readings 9 August: 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:30-5:2; John 6:41-51

In the Torah we find repeated instances of the Israelites being warned to ‘remember’ and ‘observe;’ that is, to remember God’s saving acts in history, and to observe the commandments so as to enjoy continued blessings. In Jewish biblical interpretation, the Torah never repeats itself without reason! Repetition calls for heightened attention. In this spirit, and following Leibowitz (90ff), let us explore an example of this repetitious theme by comparing two texts within our portion, Deuteronomy 8:7-11 and 8:12-18. The two passages are similar. Each describes the blessings of living in the Promised Land, and each follows with a warning not to forget ‘the Lord your God.’ Though similar, there are differences. Read them carefully, aloud, and preferably with a friend. What do you notice?

The first describes the prosperity of the Israelites in terms of the natural fertility of the land, a land of running waters and unlimited supplies of grains, fruits, vegetables and minerals. Seven times the word *eretz* (‘land’) appears in this passage. Note how the flow of the text conjures up a picture of lush countryside, abundance, satisfaction. But why the warning about forgetting the Lord and failing to keep the commandments? What might be the temptation facing the Israelites as they come upon this land flowing with milk and honey?

The second passage also describes the prosperity of the Israelites, but this time in terms of the works of their hands after some time of settlement: fine houses, numerous herds and flocks, riches of silver and gold. Yet, once again, the bright picture is suddenly clouded with a warning about ‘forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt’ (8:14). What might be the temptation contained in this second description of blessing as the Israelites ‘settle in’ to their long-awaited Promised Land? And how does it differ from the first?

According to the sages, the first warning refers to the temptation of being intoxicated by natural goodness, of failing to enjoy blessings in moderation, of allowing instinct to override self-control. Worse still, it is allowing one’s enthusiasm to lead to the wrong god, e.g., the pagan gods of fertility, rather than the true Creator God. The warning in the second passage refers to the temptation of being overly confident in one’s abilities, of thinking that ‘my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’ (8:17) and forgetting that all blessings ultimately depend on the mighty hand of God.

Both temptations refer to complacency, taking for granted God’s gifts, blindness to God’s miraculous hand at work. Nachmanides comments on how the desert-wandering Israelites depended on God’s miraculous gifts (e.g., manna) for their survival, and that recollection of these events should serve to remind us that it is the same God, with the same miraculous powers, who continues to provide for our needs, even if now the miracles in our lives seem ordinary or hidden (Leibowitz, 93). Thus this *parashah* calls us to be alert and responsive to blessing. A blessing from God is no guarantee that fidelity to God will follow. In any given situation, fidelity involves a conscious, free choice. And what better way to choose fidelity than to begin by thanking God for the gifts one enjoys.

Ready acknowledgment of the blessings bestowed by God is central to Jewish prayer. Our *parashah* includes a verse which is considered by the Jews to be the basis of the commandment of *Birkat HaMazon* - blessing God after eating a meal. “You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you” (Deut.8:10). The sages offer multiple reasons for reciting the *Birkat HaMazon*, including the need to counteract the human inclination to forget the Creator when one is feeling full, comfortable and successful. Although the Torah requirement to bless after meals, strictly speaking, applies only if one is totally satisfied, subsequent rabbinic law ruled that even the eating of a piece of bread the size of an olive is an occasion of blessing. It reinforces a person’s faith in the Lord, trusting that, while a little is consumed, the blessing within is great. (Nachshoni, 1243)

There are several blessings in the *Birkat HaMazon*, including one which focuses on thanking God for the land of Israel. The *Zohar* (a Kabbalistic collection of Torah commentaries) questions why all

Jews, even those in the diaspora, are required to recite *Birkat HaMazon* when ‘the land’ which is being blessed may not be the land in which they reside? How would you try to answer? My response is to highlight the Jewish sense of being a chosen people. In the *midrash* we read: “The Holy One said to Moses: The land is precious to Me, and Israel are precious to Me. I shall bring Israel who are precious to Me into the Land that is precious to Me” (Num. R. 23:7). The yearnings of the Israelites in exile accentuate this divinely ordained connection between the people and the land. In today’s *Haftarah* the exiles are heartened by the promise of Israel’s devastated land being rejuvenated and re-inhabited (cf. Isa.49:19). The *Zohar*’s response, however, is different: it is fitting that all Jews bless the land after meals because the whole world is nourished through *Eretz Yisrael*, which is the center of the world’s sustenance. (Nachshoni, 1237)

The world-wide Jewish recitation of *Birat HaMazon* has fascinating implications for Christians. If the land of the Israelites is where the Creator God who sustains the world was revealed, and where the Word became flesh, should not we, too, be blessing the land (and yes, even in the face of all the unresolved political complexities of our day)? Are not we, as spiritual descendants of the Jewish people and the earliest Christians, also deeply connected with that tiny piece of earth on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea? Christianity is an historical religion. True, the resurrection breaks through temporal and spatial boundaries, yet it never eclipses the fact that *the Word became flesh* in a particular person, time and *place*. Thus our faith can never be reduced to an immaterial idea, a philosophy, a moral code, a spiritual ethos. For *our God entered human history*. Dust and stones, vines and olive branches matter! The land of Israel is intrinsic to the reality of the Incarnation and forever underpins our sacramental instincts as a church.

Today’s *parashah*, with its focus on miracles, blessings and the goodness of the land, can refresh our Christian experience of mealtime ‘grace.’ How so? We might pause a little longer to wonder at the ‘hidden’ miracles of this ordinary day. Instead of thanking God ‘for our food,’ we might name the specific joys of this meal: the bread, the meat, the vegetables, the wine, the setting, the individuals at table. Can we also imagine including a prayer for the Holy Land and its inhabitants, remembering the fruitfulness of this land where the story of God’s intense involvement in human history all began?

Finally, how do the Sunday readings resonate with our *parashah*? Briefly, God’s miraculous feeding of the near-to-death Elijah (first reading) is reminiscent of God’s care for the Israelites’ in the desert. And John’s Gospel presents an unsurpassed and controversial ‘feeding’ miracle, in the revelation of Jesus as ‘the living bread that came down from heaven’ (6:51).

For Reflection and Discussion: After working through the questions in the above discussion, return to the two texts Deut. 8:7-11 and 8:12-18 and compare/contrast another theme of interest. E.g., [1] What emphasis is added by the desert description in the second passage (vv.14-17)? [2] Exactly what is God being remembered and blessed for in each passage, and what further insight is gained by this comparison? Compare: ‘for the good land that he has given you’ (v.10) and ‘who brought you out of the land of Egypt’ (v.14).

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, 1996); *The Artscroll Interlinear Siddur* (NY, 2002); Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (NY, 1989). Scripture quotations: NRSV.

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