

**Bethel AME Church**  
**Insights from the Rabbis 2B**  
**Class Notes 5/8/22**

We have taken a slight detour in my planned course topics to look at a little known story in the life of the apostle Paul, pieced together from his letters: his efforts to raise money to take to the economically struggling community in Jerusalem, which he undertook knowing that it might well lead to trouble for himself. And in fact it did end up in Paul being arrested in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities for disturbing the peace, accused of bringing Gentiles into the Temple.

We have seen that Paul's purpose in raising this collection was to help create a bond of solidarity between the Jewish and Gentile wings of the church. He has encouraged the largely Gentile members of the churches he has been working with in Asia Minor and Greece to give generously to their suffering Jewish sisters and brothers in Judea. He views this offering as an exercise in community building.

When we left off last time, we had just begun to look at the final passage in his letters where Paul speaks of this offering: Romans 15. Paul has written to introduce himself to the Roman churches and explain his purpose in ministry. Paul is particularly concerned about the growing divisions between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. The Gentiles, who are certainly in the majority in Rome, seem to be looking down on their Jewish brothers and sisters, and the letter is largely directed to those Gentiles. Paul writes to encourage them to live together in harmony and love. So he brings up this offering, not because he is trying to raise money from them, but as a concrete example of that love.

Paul insists in this passage that Jesus came as a servant to the Jews ("the circumcised," vv. 8-9) in order to confirm the promises made to the ancestors, the promises to Abraham that I started this discussion with. Jesus didn't come to overturn Judaism or start a new religion. Jesus came to affirm and fulfill God's promises to Israel, to demonstrate that God is faithful, truthful, trustworthy and merciful, so that even the Gentiles will come to glorify the God of Israel. As I have been arguing, Paul always has the story of Israel in the center of his thinking and because the church soon began to ignore the significance of that story it misunderstood what Paul is saying.

In verses 9-12, Paul quotes a chain of four different biblical passages that look forward to the day when the Gentiles will recognize and glorify the God of Israel. He quotes from the Law (Deut. 32:43), the Prophets (Isaiah 11:10), and the Writings (Psalm 18:49; 117:1), demonstrating that this hope is contained throughout Israel's Scriptures. It is not a "Christian" hope, but rather one that was first expressed in God's mission statement to Abraham, that through Abraham's family all the nations of the world would find blessing (Gen. 12:1-3). This is the basis for Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, a ministry that is not a rejection of his own people but a realization of their purpose in the world. Paul sees his mission to Gentiles as what it means for him to be a good and faithful Jew.

Paul then goes on to talk about the meaning of the offering he is taking from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem saints. We saw in the passage from 2 Corinthians 8-9, Paul sees this offering as an act of thanksgiving to God, an act of worship. Here it is significant that

Paul uses language associated with the Jerusalem Temple and its worship to speak about what he is doing. Paul envisions his ministry as a “priestly service,” offering the whole Gentile church as a sacrifice “acceptable to God” (v. 16). He has already exhorted the Romans to present themselves as a sacrifice acceptable to God (12:1). Here the phrase “offering of the Gentiles” (v. 16) is ambiguous and I think intentionally so. Paul is speaking both of the financial gift the Gentiles are giving Jerusalem and the gift of themselves to the Christian assemblies, their physical presence as part of the community of faith. The Gentiles accompanying Paul are indeed following his exhortation in Romans 12, presenting themselves as living sacrifices to God by serving other people. So “the offering of the Gentiles” is both the money and the whole community.

Here Paul speaks about his entire vocation as “priestly service,” symbolically gathering up the whole Gentile world and presenting it as a sacrificial offering before the world’s rightful Lord. The unspoken message here for the Romans is that they are to offer themselves as living sacrifices to the God of Israel, the God who is worshipped in the Jerusalem temple, rather than to Caesar and the other gods that are worshipped in the temples in Rome. This is not just a religious statement: it is a deeply political one.

So the collection is more than just a charitable exercise, more than just an offering to the poor. It has a strong theological purpose, a concrete act demonstrating the Gentiles’ connection to Jewish salvation history, to God’s purposes for Israel. ***This collection is Paul’s way of offering the Gentile church as a sacrifice in Jerusalem***, and he prays that it might be acceptable (v. 31—a technical OT word for sacrifices that meet the requirements in Torah, also found in Rom. 12:1 and 15:16). The Gentiles have been an unclean people, but now that they have been *sanctified* by the Holy Spirit, they are an acceptable sacrifice. Even the Gentiles can be shaped by God into a community of holiness. This is Paul’s grand vision.

And that sacrifice is not a sacrifice for sin, which is the normal way most Christians think about sacrifice. It is a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God for what God has done. It is an act of worship. Paul talks about this sacrificial offering as a *koinonia* (vv. 26-27), a “sharing together,” having in common the resources of the community. We saw when we looked at the sacrifices in Leviticus that one of the principal offerings was what was called the fellowship or peace offering (Leviticus 3). Unlike other types of sacrifice, this one was mostly eaten by the people bringing it, which meant that the occasion became a big dinner party, since the whole animal had to be eaten right there and then. You had to invite enough people to finish off a whole goat or lamb or heifer. It was what Rabbi Sacks calls “happiness shared,” a concrete lesson that worshipping God necessarily involves sharing with others, that the joy of giving thanks to God was not a private individual act but a communal one. I think Paul has this type of sacrifice in mind when he talks about the Gentile offering as *koinonia*, sharing with each other and fellowship with God. That is precisely what this type of offering in Leviticus 3 is about.

Paul makes it clear that such fellowship is not simply a vague abstraction or religious cliché. Paul says that the Gentiles have obtained a *koinonia*, a share in the spiritual resources of the Jews, which is how they have been made holy, and so they ought to

reciprocate by sharing their financial resources with their Jewish brothers and sisters (v. 27). So Paul puts the spiritual blessings the Gentiles have received from the Jews on the same plane as the material blessings they are sending to the Jews. Love must always be incarnate, made flesh.

Paul speaks of what the Gentiles have received from the Jews as a kind of debt. He never wants the Gentile Christians to forget that their roots are in Judaism, in the story of what God has done for Israel and what God has promised to the chosen people. The Gentiles are a wild branch miraculously grafted on to Jewish roots (Rom. 11:17). Literally in this verse, from which I took the title to this class, Paul says that the Gentiles have come to “share the fatness of the root” of the tree. They share the same life, the same *koinonia*. The offering will complete the circle and tie the two communities together. This is why Paul feels bound in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, even if it costs him his life. He is doing it to unite the church.

Paul himself has faced opposition from the Judean church, yet he is purposefully concerned to bring them assistance. He wants to give aid to the poor, but also hopes that their acceptance of this offering will indicate that the Jewish followers of Jesus now recognize the Gentiles as part of the *koinonia*. The collection would be a concrete demonstration that Jews and Gentiles have accepted each other as part of the same family. That, I would argue, is what justification by faith is all about (see Romans 4.)

Paul tells Gentile Romans that they really owe a spiritual debt to their Jewish brothers and sisters and so they also ought to bless them materially (Rom. 15:27). If, as I am arguing, Paul always has Israel’s story in mind, then here Paul’s understanding of God’s promise to Abraham is relevant. Paul wants the Gentile Christians to be a blessing to the descendents of Abraham, and in so doing they will be blessed by God as well (Gen. 12:3). God’s faithfulness to the promises made to Abraham find their “yes” in Christ and in the community of his followers who understand and appreciate their Jewish roots. Paul’s travel itinerary is organized to bring this all about, and that is why he alludes to them briefly in the verses in 2 Cor. 1 where he talks about God’s promises.

For Paul this offering goes to the heart of his purpose in ministry. The acceptance of the offering in Jerusalem would also mean an acceptance of his ministry to the Gentiles and of his vision of the church as Jews and Gentiles united in Christ without the adoption of Torah by the Gentiles or the abandonment of Torah by Jews. Sadly, Paul’s vision for the church was never realized. Instead, over the next two centuries the church became increasingly a Gentile phenomenon and developed a hostility towards Jews that we have examined at length in this class. Paul’s hope that Gentile Christians would minister to Jews in very practical ways, caring for their needs and being united with them in service to the world, never came to pass. Instead the church turned against the Jews and shortly began persecuting them. And Paul himself was turned into a champion of an anti-Jewish gospel message that still largely defines our church to this day.

Perhaps if we had paid more attention to Paul’s travel plans and his purpose behind them, we might have viewed him and his message in a different light, and understood what the phrase “God’s promises” really means.

#### D. The Unfinished Symphony

In James Joyce's magnificent and often frustrating novel *Ulysses*, published February 2, 1922, just 100 years ago, the main character is an Irish Jew named Leopold Bloom. In the novel Joyce draws some interesting parallels between the political situation of the day in the novel (1904 Dublin, when the Irish were still under British rule) and the history of the Jews, especially the Exodus. At one point Joyce actually reproduces part of a nationalist political speech that makes this connection explicit. The speech imagines a proud Egyptian high priest (representing the British) addressing a youthful Moses (representing the Irish living under British rule):

*“Why will you jews not accept our culture, our religion and our language? You are a tribe of nomad herdsmen: we are a mighty people. You have no cities nor no wealth: our cities are hives of humanity and our galleys, trireme and quadrireme, laden with all manner merchandise furrow the waters of the known globe. You have but emerged from primitive contitions: we have a literature, a priesthood, an agelong history and polity. You pray to a local and obscure idol: our temples, majestic and mysterious, are the abodes of Isis and Osiris, of Horus and Ammon Ra. Israel is weak and few are her children. Egypt is an host and terrible are her arms. Vagrants and daylabourers are you called: the world trembles at our name.”* This perfectly captures the presumptuous, cultured self-importance of Empire. We have seen that this is precisely the temptation that Israel faced when called by God to head out into the wilderness on a risky venture to look for the land God had promised them. “Look at all the stuff Egypt has to offer. We're better than you and stronger than you: why can't you just continue being our workforce?” This, of course, accurately reflects the attitude of the American empire towards many other countries and peoples.

The speaker continues: *“But, ladies and gentlemen, had the youthful Moses listened to and accepted that view of life, had he bowed his head and bowed his will and bowed his spirit before that arrogant admonition he would never have brought the chosen people out of their house of bondage, nor followed the pillar of the cloud by day. He would never have spoken with the Eternal amid lightnings on Sinai's mountaintop nor ever have come down with the light of inspiration shining in his countenance and bearing in his arms the tables of the law, graven in the language of the outlaw.”*

Just a brilliant piece of rhetoric. (When Joyce was asked to make a recording of himself reading from *Ulysses*, he chose this passage.) The final sentence, the punchline of the speech, alludes to the resurgence in Ireland of the use of the Irish language, Gaelic, by the Irish nationalists, who viewed English as the language of the conqueror. English was the mother tongue of the British Empire and those who spoke another language, like Irish, were looked down upon as ignorant peasants or potential rebels. For those looking to overthrow British rule, it was the language of the outlaw. This speech is an example of how the story of the Exodus has spoken to many oppressed peoples throughout history, including enslaved Africans in America, and given them hope for the future.

Later in the day, Bloom enters a pub where the conversation is dominated by an brash

Irish nationalist only called “the citizen.” As the banter proceeds, because of Bloom’s presence a strong undercurrent of antisemitism begins to emerge, especially from the citizen, who is suspicious that a Jew might not really be loyal to Ireland. Finally, the normally amicable Bloom has had enough, and he launches a verbal assault.

*“Mendelssohn was a jew and Karl Marx and Spinoza. And the Saviour was a jew and his father was a jew. Your God....Your God was a jew. Christ was a jew like me.”* This is too much for the citizen. *“By Jesus, says he, I’ll brain that bloody jewman for using the holy name. By Jesus, I’ll crucify him so I will.”* And he angrily chases Bloom out of the pub.

There are many ironies in this scene, not the least of which is the contrast between the citizen’s hostile attitude towards Jews here and the nationalist identification with the Jews in the earlier speech. Joyce brilliantly captures how Christians have wanted to appropriate the Jewish story for themselves while rejecting the Jews as a people. The citizen’s profane outburst also indicates that such antisemitism is in fact crucifying Jesus over and over again. Joyce pointedly, and ironically, makes Bloom the most Christ-like character in the novel, and the lengthy, convoluted story builds to its high point of the day: Bloom’s simple act of compassion and love for someone else. That is really what this whole complicated novel is about.

At one point in the pub discussion, one of the characters who is sympathetic to Bloom says about the Jews: *“Well, they’re still waiting for their redeemer. For that matter, so are we.”* In the context of the discussion, the word “we” has a double meaning. “We Irish” are still waiting for our redeemer (in 1904), still waiting for a Moses to free us from the power of the British Empire. The earlier speech makes it clear that the Irish see themselves as living a life of oppression in Egypt under foreign rule. (American nationalists had thrown off the same yoke of British oppression some 130 years earlier.)

But there is a second implication to that word. It also means “we Christians,” who are still waiting for our redeemer, for our Messiah to come again. Jews and Christians are in the same boat. The whole human race is still waiting for redemption. Redemption is unfinished business.