

March 10, 2019

Who was scripture written for?

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

PODCAST START:

[intro music]

Brian: Welcome to the Queer Theology podcast!

Fr. Shay: Where each episode, we take a queer look at the week's lectionary readings. We're the cofounders of QueerTheology.com and the hosts for this podcast. I'm Father Shay Kearns —

B: And I'm Brian G. Murphy. Hello hello hello! Today we're taking a look at the lectionary reading for Sunday, March 10th. We're going to look at Deuteronomy 26:1-11. We'll read it to you now from the Common English Bible.

Once you have entered the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, and you take possession of it and are settled there, take some of the early produce of the fertile ground that you have harvested from the land the Lord your God is giving you, and put it in a basket. Then go to the location the Lord your God selects for his name to reside. Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him: "I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."

The priest will then take the basket from you and place it before the Lord your God's altar. Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God:

"My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt, living as an immigrant there with few family members, but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous. The Egyptians treated us terribly, oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us. So we cried out for help to the Lord, our ancestors' God. The Lord heard our call. God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression. The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, with awesome power, and with signs and wonders.

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He brought us to this place and gave us this land—a land full of milk and honey. So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.”

Set the produce before the Lord your God, bowing down before the Lord your God. Then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done for you and your family—each one of you along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you. [CEB]

Okay, Shay. What do you *do* with this – this beautiful passage here?

FS: The thing that really stuck out to me is this kind of middle section where you are basically told what to pray when you're bringing your offering. It's this kind of litany, right, of 'My father was a starving Aramaean, he was an immigrant, the Egyptians oppressed us and then we were brought forth and brought into this land.' I love this sense of reciting your history, and that's part of what you're offering and giving thanks for. And also that, often – especially in our current context – there's all of this sense of like, either the Hebrew scripture is all about law and judgement or whatever, and the 'New Testament God' is about love, and that's just bullshit. [Brian laughs] Or, that social justice isn't an actual thing, like it's not really in scripture. Or that God is really concerned with your spiritual life but not your physical wellbeing. And I think that this passage just puts that to rest. The whole idea of what God's work is in the world is that our family was starving, they were oppressed, and now they're not. And it's because of God. And that God cares about that, and that's what we're giving thanks for – that it was God who brought us out of that oppression.

I just think that's really important. It's important to also say that, as people of God, this is the story that we're a part of. Caring for immigrants and for people who are starving and for people who are oppressed, that's the point. So I really love this passage. I think it's really beautiful. What about you?

B: Just in this one litany-prayer, it covers food insecurity, it covers immigration, it covers fragile family structures, it covers mistreatment, oppression, labor, *and* God taking care of all of those needs. It's just like, justice. Deuteronomy, right? [laughs] Right there.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

For me, what stuck out, though, was this first sentence. 'Once you have entered the land your God is giving you as an inheritance, and take possession of it and settle there...' In some other translations they say 'conquer it.' Even again at the end of this litany it says 'the fertile ground that you, Lord, have given me.' Just sort of like my sensors go off on how many times throughout history God has been invoked as a justification for conquest, for taking over lands. Sometimes even for genocide, right? White European Christians came to what is now known as the Americas and said, "God gave us this land," and took it by force and settled it and committed a terrible genocide. We see genocides happening all over the world still, unfortunately. That this is what God wants.

I now am sort of wanting to live in that tension. God being on our side and God taking care of us is such an important idea, and also, how do we prevent that from then becoming 'God is empowering me to oppress others'?

And I think it's sort of baked in there, right? 'When we were oppressed, God was on our side.' We see throughout the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, when that pendulum swings and people who were oppressed start becoming oppressors, God is no longer on their side. You can sort of lose God's favor in that way. I don't think this is a fault of the text necessarily, but I think when you zoom in on any one passage, it's important to sort of take the full context into consideration. The context of scripture and the context of your life and situation. Remember it's not like a one-size-fits-all rule. God doesn't give some land to some people to kill and conquer. Sometimes we look back in the Bible and see like, 'this is my interpretation of what happened.' I'm sort of wrestling with that. You know what I mean?

FS: Yeah, totally. I mean, it's wise to continually be wrestling with scripture and wrestling with even the ways that we understand or have been taught to understand. And also, as folks who are reading from a place of privilege, right – you and I are both white and we're both male-identified, and we're living in the United States. Making sure that we wrestle with the fact that, like, we're not who scripture was written for, and we're not generally the groups of people who are writing scripture from our places of privilege – it's important that we recognize our own privilege as we're reading, and that we're not reading into scripture from our own place of power and our own complicity with oppressive structures.

B: God, that reminds me – one last closing thought. [laughs] So often, queer people, or women, or black folks, people of color, get critiqued for reading themselves into scripture. And I think it's important that we remember that that is

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a natural human inclination. All theology has a perspective. We've just sort of collectively decided that straight white male theology just gets called theology. When Christian leaders who are imperialistic or who are anti-women or who oppress LGBT people say, "God says this, the Bible says that," they're reading their perspective into it just as much as queer folks or people seeking liberation. It's important to be cognizant of who you are and where you are as you read the Bible and do theology.

[outro music]

B: The Queer Theology podcast is just one of many things that we do at QueerTheology.com, which provides resources, community and inspiration for LGBTQ Christians and straight cisgender supporters.

FS: To dive into more of the action, visit us at QueerTheology.com. You can also connect with us online on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram.

B: We'll see you next week.

PODCAST END

Transcript by Taylor Walker

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