

Proper 5
Cycle B RCL
Revised

1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)

Since the sixth century CE, people have identified biblical Ramah with a hill just north of Jerusalem that goes under the name Nebi Samwil. This site commands panoramic views of the ancient territory of Benjamin and the city of Jerusalem. No passage better expresses the ambivalence of the Deuteronomistic Historian (Dtr) to the institution of kingship than this passage. In Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25, Dtr used a slogan to present an idyllic view of life in Palestine before the kings: “In those days there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was upright in one’s own eyes (my translation).” On the other hand, Dtr believed that God had established the kingship despite the manifold failings of that institution that would finally lead to the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. This narrative has God angrily and grudgingly acceding to the wishes of the Israelites after they have been warned of the inevitable consequences of crowning a king, consequences that lingered until the end of the monarchy.

Psalm 138

This is a *thanksgiving* psalm. The most frequent type of psalm in our Psalter is the *lament*, a cry to God for help in time of trouble. (See Psalms 6, 22, 51, *etc.*) Frequently, laments promise that the singer will tell of God’s faithfulness to the congregation by singing a *thanksgiving* in the temple. Thanksgivings always contain specific reference to God’s answer to the singer’s previous *lament*. (Psalm 138:3).

OR

Genesis 3:8 15

Unlike the Greeks, the ancient Semitic peoples regarded the unclothed body as incomplete, and they reserved nakedness for slaves and for people regarded as mentally disturbed. The Yahwist writer (J), who is responsible for this narrative, understood the man and the woman to be living like pampered animals in a great botanical/zoological garden (Eden) like those supported by the Mesopotamian kings in their capital cities. The couple's nakedness signified their incompleteness. As a result of their disobedience to the LORD God's command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the couple gained the divine omniscience (“knowing good and evil,” 3:6). The LORD God replaced the couple's poor attempt at covering themselves with proper clothing and so vested them in their full humanity. In the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh, the wild man Enkidu, who lived with the wild beasts, was seduced by a harlot. After this seduction, the animals would have nothing more to do with Enkidu, and Enkidu lost much of his animal strength, only to have that strength replaced by wisdom. The harlot then tells Enkidu that he has “become like a god (I.iv).”

Psalm 130

This is a *lament* of guilt. The singer acknowledges being a sinner but reminds God of the promise to forgive sins as well as of the disparity of power between them (130:3-4). Verses 7-8 prefigure the song of thanksgiving the psalmist will sing if God brings the psalmist relief from suffering.

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Against those who contended that “real” Christians had already entered the kingdom of God and were immortal, Paul sees positive value in the fact that Christians continue to suffer in the world. The wasting away of “our outer man” (*ho exo hemon anthropos*) makes clearer the strengthening of “our inner (sc. man)” (*ho eso hemon*). Christians could expect suffering, but such suffering reveals more and more the inner person whom God has equipped for the age to come.

Mark 3:20-35

“Beelzebul” is an Aramaic corruption of the Ugaritic *b`l zbl*, “Baal is Lord.” By the time of Jesus Baal worship in Palestine was rare or non-existent; and Jewish tradition had made the old Canaanite God Baal into the prince of the underworld or Satan. Jesus’ argument is a classic rabbinic argument: “The mouth that forbids is the mouth that permits.” A legal argument gains strength when the advocate can admit his adversary’s charges and still contend that his side is correct. Jesus points out that if he is casting out demons by the power of the prince of demons, then Satan’s kingdom is divided and is coming to an end. Consequently, even if he were possessed by Beelzebul, Jesus would *still* be the agent of salvation! In this context it is clear that the unforgivable blasphemy against the Spirit is the claim that Jesus possesses a demonic power.

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