

Sermon the 7th Month 2018 9 9 d1

Title: "In the Seventh Month" – On Jewish and Christian Relations

Scripture:

Numbers (B'midvar) 29:1, 29:7 [NASB]: [Moses is speaking to the Israelites] Now in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall also have a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work. It will be to you a day for blowing trumpets. ⁷ Then on the tenth day of this seventh month you shall have a holy convocation, and you shall humble yourselves; you shall not do any work.

Deut 8 ¹⁰ When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.

[Next a reading from the New Testament:]

Romans 11:17-24 [NASB with some changes][Paul is writing to Christians generally.]

¹⁷ But if some of the [Hebrew] branches were broken off, and you, being a savage¹ [Gentile] olive, were grafted in among[] [the Hebrews] and became partaker with them of the ^[h]rich root of the [Hebrew] olive tree, ¹⁸ [] do not be arrogant toward the [Hebrew] branches; but if you are arrogant, *remember that* it is not you who supports the root, but [rather] the root [that] *supports* you.

¹⁹ [Now] you [might] say [], "[Hebrew] branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ Quite right, they were broken off

¹ Usually translated as "wild" olive, I think "savage" conveys the intensity of aversion that regularly attends Jewish characterizations of Gentiles in this era – a characterization that is by and large well-deserved and soon-to-be reconfirmed in 70 CE. The image originates with Esau, the prototypical "wild man," who is considered the ancestor of Rome in Jewish lore.

for their unbelief, but you stand [solely] by your faith. Do not be conceited, but [instead] fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, [neither will] He [] spare you [] [if your faith falters]. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God: to those who fall [comes] severity, but to you [has come] God's kindness, [provided] you [manifest] His [impartial²] kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And the Jews, as well, if they do recover their belief, will be restored, for God is able to graft them in again.

²⁴ For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural *branches* be grafted into their own olive tree?

[Finally a reading from the Gospels, the Parable of the two sons:]

Mt 21:28-31²⁸ [Jesus is speaking to the chief priests in the Jerusalem temple. He said,] "But what do you think? A man had two [f] sons, and he came to the first and said, '[g] Son, go work today in the vineyard [today].'²⁹ And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he [repented] and [obeyed]. ³⁰ The man came to the second [son] and said the same thing; [this son] answered, 'I *will* [go], sir'; but he did not go. ³¹ Which of the two did the will of his father?"

[the children may leave at this point]

Thank you for the opportunity to speak once again today. I appreciate your coming to BFC, despite many competing events taking place today.

² God's kindness is described as impartial in Mt 5:44-48. That emphasis fits Paul's intention here, where Christians are urged to find and express kindness to (certain) Jews who may be persecuting Christians at this point in history.

I had planned to continue my exploration of the roots of Quakerism in the Reformation and in the Puritan culture that swept across England roughly 400 years ago. I hope to return to that topic later this month. However, this week, I received an inspiration to talk, instead, about the season of the year that we are entering and to explore the relationship between Christians and Jews which Paul writes about in the scripture passage that we have just read.

For the past 8 months, the Bible class has been studying a book about Paul on Tuesday evenings and this provides some the ideas that I will elaborate upon here. It's not too late to join us in that class.

However, before we turn to Paul, I will point out something you probably won't hear about on the television or internet. We are in the final hours of the Jewish Year 5778. The new year, 5779, will begin today at sundown. It will be marked, not by drunken revelry and popping firecrackers, but instead by lighting of candles, prayers, sermons, and confessions of sins. These sober rituals will resume tomorrow and the next day, and will culminate 10 days from now with another full day of prayer and confession, accentuated by a day-long fast, while wearing clothing that reminds people of their mortality. This may strike you as a peculiar way to observe a new year and it may arouse your curiosity, if you are not already familiar with these customs.

The Jewish New Year commemorates the creation of the world as recounted in the first chapter of Genesis, but this section of the Bible is not read in synagogues for several more weeks. Instead, the passage of the Bible read on New Years day is the casting out of Hagar and her son Ishmael, as recounted in the 21st chapter of Genesis. That story ties in quite well with Paul's warning in the passage we read from Romans, to the effect that we adhere to the covenant through grace, and that no one is secure in their relationship with God through their own strength, virtue or social status. Therefore, humility and fear should replace entitlement and arrogance, whether one is a Christian or a Jew. This same theme is emphasized by the sober tenor of the Jewish rituals for the New Year. Hence New Year is a time of rededication to the covenant – and to the demands of

covenant – rather than a light-hearted celebration of creation and human existence. The Creation may itself be deemed “very good,” but the role of humans in Creation is consistently problematic.

In these ways and more, the Jewish New Year illustrates the contrarian tendency in Jewish outlook and tradition. A band of slaves that left Egypt over 3000 years ago to create an independent society turned the world on its head, especially so, when Hebrew Bible became the key religious text for the Roman Empire and for European culture over 1700 years ago, with the Edict of Milan in 313. I doubt that Constantine knew what he was doing at that moment, but nevertheless, here we are today, reading the Torah rather than the Aeneid. Anyone who needs to find a miracle can meditate on this highly improbable fact.

Given the contrarian Jewish spirit, it should not surprise us that many Jewish customs appear to be adopted simply to show that Jews can be different. Here are some examples:

1. The day does not need to begin with sunrise; it can begin at sunset.
2. The year does not necessarily begin with spring equinox or with winter solstice; it can begin in autumn.
3. The year does not have to start in the first month; it can begin in the seventh month.
4. Conversely, the first month of the year does not need to be numbered the first month; it can be the seventh month.
5. The new year can be celebrated with fasting rather than festivity.
6. The color of death and mourning does not have to be black; it can be white.
7. Writing does not have to go from left to right; it can go from right to left.
8. Grace for food does not have to precede a meal; it can follow a meal: as the reading from Deuteronomy says, “You shall eat, be satisfied, and then bless the Lord.” Hence the Jewish custom is to give a short blessing before a meal and a much longer blessing after a meal.
9. The eldest son does not have to inherit the family fortune. It can be the second son. As the last chapter of Numbers points out, daughters are also

entitled to the family fortune – and nothing in the New Testament makes an equivalent claim to that precedent.

The cumulative effect of these counter-intuitive Jewish customs is disorienting. In the words of the gospel, “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first.” Life does not have to be logical. Nonconformity is a blessing and often a sign of God’s favor. However, for conventional people, this contrarian habit can produce an intense dislike of Jews. Aristocracies, in particular, like predictable customs and obedient citizens, and Jews are often seen as rabble-rousers and misfits. Not surprising, therefore, that aristocrats often malign the Jews, and blame them for all sorts of problems that have nothing to do with Jews.

Non-conformity is something that Quakers, too, can identify with. Hence we might find some common interests with Jewish efforts to reconstruct consensual reality. Like the Jews, Quakers have accepted the role of a peculiar people, with sober habits and somber dress, who strive to keep apart from “the world’s people.” The Jewish Sabbath is a practice of structured inactivity. So is Quaker worship. This is not to say, however, that Quakers have often recognized these similarities. Like Jews, Quakers have reinvented themselves several times over the past 370 years, in response to shifting cultural patterns: initially charismatic, Quakers hunkered down under persecution, emerging as quietists, then as evangelicals, later as Holiness Methodists, then in the 20th C, some Quakers became secular or universalist. Like Jews, Quakers were blamed for many problems during the Interregnum under Cromwell.

Because Jews have been masters of non-conformity, they frequently resist conformity with other Jews. Hence Jewish culture has also reinvented itself repeatedly throughout history. The ragtag band of Hebrew slaves led by Moses through the desert becomes an organized military force under the leadership of Joshua, who takes the Hebrews into the Promised Land. [However, I should add that the archeological record appears to dispute any actual military invasion of the Palestine in that era.] After the Hebrews are settled in the Promised Land, there is a period of relative anarchy, when everyone was free to do what they

pleased. Apparently this period of anarchy unravels, and the prophet Samuel initiates the imperial phase of Judaism under King Saul and King David. Later, under the reign of King Josiah, priests “discover” a new book by Moses, centuries after Moses has died, and Josiah, acting under that authority, persecutes Jews who honored the Queen of Heaven as God’s consort. The prophet Jeremiah continues the attack on the Queen of Heaven and promotes a strict Jewish monotheism. The imperial phase of Judaism ends with the invasion of Assyria and the Babylonians and Jews were forced into captivity – and many adapted very well. Like the Quakers in Philadelphia, “they stayed to do well” in Babylon. Never satisfied, Ezra and Nehemiah led a resettlement effort and built the second temple in Jerusalem. However, more Jews stay in Babylon than follow Ezra to Jerusalem. The second temple period ends with the Roman invasion to quash a civil war between Jews in Jerusalem. There are still more Jewish rebellions culminating in 132 AD with the Bar Kochba rebellion, and then, Jews abandon militarism for nearly 1800 years, and the rabbinic phase of Judaism begins in earnest. That phase continues today, but innovations continue.

Jewish non-conformity generated many Jewish sects, often with violent conflicts between them, and conflicts with non-Jewish pagan authorities. Here is a very short list. Even while Moses led the Israelites, there were several rebellions recorded in the Bible. The Maccabees revolted against Greek rulers, but also ignited a civil war in Jerusalem. Under the Roman rule, several Jewish factions fought with one another. One of these factions were Christian Jews who had encountered Jesus as a resurrected Messiah. Another faction were rabbis who predicted a general resurrection. The rabbis and the Christians were the two leading Jewish factions that survived the series of rebellions following the destruction of the 2nd temple by Rome. Most other factions simply disappeared.

Paul is writing in the early 6th decade of the first century, roughly from 51 to 54 AD. This is about a decade before Jerusalem degenerates into civil war once again. Paul sets about to rethink Jewish theology and practice, based upon the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah. In so doing, he turns the Jewish religion on its head. But that is exactly the nature of the Jewish religion; it is always

reinventing itself. So in a sense, Paul is doing what Jews have done time and time again. Moreover, the rabbis would also reinvent Judaism at about the same time that Christianity is taking shape, and the rabbinic version of Judaism is a dramatic revision of the 2nd Temple Judaism depicted in the New Testament.

There are, in fact, several parallel developments between rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity. As we noted before, both groups anticipate a general resurrection of the dead. Both groups renounce animal sacrifice. Both groups promote prayer. Both groups go a long way toward renouncing violence. This is more explicit among the Christians, but it is more carefully observed among the Jews. Three revolts and a thorough trouncing by Rome left the rabbis of the 2nd C. leery of further military exploits. As minority members of European, Middle Eastern and North African society for the next 1818 years, Jews nearly become pacifists, meekly accepting whatever restrictions the dominant society imposes upon them for living space and livelihood. Not until the rise of Zionism in the 19th C. do Jews consider another claim to statehood and military strength, and not until 1948 does militarism become the dominant Jewish strategy. Even today, there are many Jews who reject the allure of Zionism.

The situation is very nearly the reverse for Christians. Starting out as a tiny persecuted minority, led by a charismatic but non-violent leader and His ragged band of apostles, Christianity spreads slowly for almost 300 years with no aspirations to power or militarism. When it is embraced by Constantine in 313, Christianity merges with the Roman Empire and succumbs to the allure of political and military power. Only a tiny minority of monks, lay Franciscans, Catholic Workers, Anabaptists and Quakers will [], in the distant future [], return to the original gospel of the Prince of Peace.

Long before Christianity is absorbed by the Roman Empire, however, Paul maintains that only those Jews who acknowledge the resurrection of Jesus and His role as the Messiah are included in the Abrahamic covenant. All the rest have been cast aside. Paul has figured it all out, and he expects Jesus to return to Jerusalem in glory to set the record straight. Now, almost 2000 years later, there

is much that we can attribute to the influence of Jesus on the world, yet no Messiah has appeared in visible glory. It would appear that Paul was mistaken on this central claim and, if so, this calls into question some of his other claims. Moreover, Paul does not foresee a time when Christians are no longer a persecuted minority, but will actually constitute the nominal majority of the Roman Empire. But at that point, what does faith in the Risen Lord require of Christians, when there is no price to pay for it? Is it the same faith that Paul writes about? As Wm Penn said, when there is no cross, there is no crown.

When we consider the parable of the two sons, which we just read, we may have to consider that Jews have renounced violence, on the whole, with more fidelity than Christians have done. For most of the past 2000 years, Jews have relinquished personal power and prestige in order to preserve a religious legacy. Perhaps Jesus will favor these Jews over Christians if He actually does arrive with visible power to judge the world. Once again, Christians should approach the question of salvation with fear and trepidation, rather than with certainty.

In the meantime, we have to consider how Jews and Christians can cooperate today, despite making conflicting claims about the role of Jesus. I think the place to begin is humility [], recognizing [], as Paul reminds us [], that whatever favor that Christians have enjoyed from God is based on the terms of the Abrahamic covenant. Hence it is not our strength or virtue that determines God's grace, but rather God's grace that includes **us** – and that inclusion depend upon our willingness to manifest God's impartial kindness. [Rom 11:22 above, Mt 5:44-48] {Could end here.}

There are several other reasons for Christians to be humble in the company of Jews:

1. We should recognize that Christians have fallen far short of the gospel which we proclaim and, at times, Christians have mis-used the gospel to obtain worldly power, prestige, security, wealth, empires, and privilege.
2. Christians have enslaved non-Christians with the blessings of the Pope. [Before Columbus discovered the New World, the Pope encouraged

Christians to enslave, dispossess and eradicate non-Christians who would not convert. This became the basis of colonial policy, and it is incorporated into American federal law today.]

3. Christians have often waged war against other Christians.
4. Christians have often subordinated Christian allegiance to national allegiance.
5. White Christians have frequently refused to recognize the full humanity of non-white Christians, even in the same nation.
6. European Christians – and many American Christians – have reviled and rejected Jews, and at times Christians have assaulted and organized mob violence against Jewish neighbors. At times, entire nations have sought to eradicate Jewish inhabitants. This Christian animosity is the basis Zionism, because many Jews no longer believe that they can be safe in a Christian country.
7. As much as we may decry the plight of Palestinians under Zionism, very few Christians acknowledge the role that Christianity has played in this tragedy, due to the centuries of Jewish persecution that set the stage for the rise of Zionism in the 19th C.

Quakers have not, by and large, been at the forefront of these sins and failings. Even so, we – and I certainly include myself in this – we have often been too weary or preoccupied or simply reconciled to the sins of the world to object to the worst of these sins and crimes. In this regard, there are things we could learn from our Jewish neighbors, many of whom practice the adage, "If you see something, say something." Jewish *chutzpah* or "pushiness" is often abrasive, but it requires the same devotion and energy that motivated early Quakers to address kings and sultans[, judges and juries with prophetic confidence. If we want to regain some of the vigor of those early Quakers, we could do well by visiting our Jewish neighbors to see how they do it today. What better time to begin than on the New Year of 5779?

Initial outline notes:

7th day/7th month/7th year/jubilee

Jewish tradition of reversals: bet, 2nd child favored rather than primogeniture, erev, new year in the fall, writing R to L, blessing follows the meal, white the color designated for mourning. Sabbath as a temple created in time, not in space.

(Quaker parallels: a peculiar people, naming months by number, God is worship in a designated time and place, through a structured inactivity (Shabbat and silent worship) rather than an activity; narrow restrictions on instrumental music and, for Quakers, all music for the first 200 years.)

Things don't have to be "logical." You can do things differently. Nonconformity is a blessing and a sign of God's favor.

Jewish predestination/freedom: limited freedom in the 7th month. Rest of the year is predestined. Again, not "logical" but efficient.

Paul sets about to rethink Jewish practice and apocalyptic expectation based upon the revelation that Jesus is the Messiah. In so doing, he turns the Jewish religion on its head. But that is exactly the nature of the Jewish religion; it is always reinventing itself. So in a sense, Paul is doing what Jews have done time and time again. Previous reformers: the Deuteronomist adds a 5th book to the Torah, under the reign of Josiah and insists "this is the final redaction; don't tamper with the text; don't change anything" the Judges continue the model of Joshua, Samuel invents imperial Judaism under the Davidic dynasty, Josiah attacks the consort of Adonai and produces a more consistent monotheism, Jeremiah attacks the Queen of Heaven and continues the tradition of consolidating monotheism, Jews adapt to the captivity in Babylon, Ezra redacts the Torah to encourage Jews to return to Jerusalem (most choose to stay in Babylon) under conditions of the late 6th C. (This is probably the final major redaction.)

Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity are step-siblings left behind by the demise of 2nd Temple Judaism.

Rabbinic Judaism is contemporaneous with Christianity. It does some of the same things, and it produces a substantial revision of 2nd temple Judaism with several parallels to Christianity (no more sacrifices. The bloodless offering, prayer not sacrifice)

At the same time, Rabbinic Judaism defines itself foremost as “not Christian.” While Christians define themselves as “not Jewish.” This process is well underway during the 6th decade of the first C. before the end of the 2nd Temple. This is the controversy that preoccupies the 11th Chapter of Romans: How do Christians and Jews relate to the each other and to the Jewish tradition?

How do we approach this today? What are some of the pitfalls? Christian Zionism. What would be a healthy approach?