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THE PROPHET AND THE TEACHER

I lived near the Salt Sea, so it wasn't unusual to see the Prophet. His name was John. If you saw him you would remember him. Most of the people around here make their clothes out of sheep's wool or linen. A few may use the rougher goat's hair. The Prophet wore camel hair. This was understandable since he spent much time living outside, and camel hair makes the best garments to keep one warm in cold weather and cool in the heat common in this area. He left his garments plain, although camel hair takes dyes quite readily. Around his waist he wore a leather girdle. This was a sort of belt that was usually hollow, so money or other objects could be kept inside. For a man like the Prophet, who appeared to have no home, most of his worldly goods would be carried inside the girdle.

The Prophet seemed to be a simple-living man. His diet consisted mostly of locusts and wild honey, and of course water. He wandered around the wilderness of Judea, mostly staying near the Jordan River.

He was called the Prophet because he preached a message he said came from God. It was always the same message. "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." The prophet Jonah had limited his message to a single sentence, and so did this Prophet. He stayed near the Jordan because those who obeyed his message also submitted to ritual immersion. This, of course, had always been the Jewish manner of purification, as specified in the Law of Moses.

The Prophet was not always popular. When groups of Pharisees and Sadducees came out to listen to him, he regularly called them a "brood of vipers." He told them they needed to bring fruits worthy of repentance. Imagine that! Saying the "purest of the pure" needed to act repentant. That was not designed to go over well. And then telling them not to brag about being children of Abraham because God could turn ordinary rocks into children of Abraham. That had to sting. And then he implied that they were trees with bad fruit. No wonder he spent time in the wilderness. He wouldn't last long living in the city.

But then he told them something cryptic. Many were calling the Prophet the Messiah, but he said someone

greater than he was coming. Not just greater; so great that even he was unworthy to touch his sandals. That one would "baptize with the *Ruach ha Kodesh* and with fire." The Prophet baptized with water, but apparently this one would be even stricter than he was.

Then came the day that one walked by and asked to be immersed, and the Prophet refused. Not the way he refused the Purishim and Sadducees, but because he was unworthy to immerse this one. Could this be the one of whom he had spoken? But he looked like any of the other people coming out to hear the Prophet. Nothing called him out as being different, although some murmured that he might be a relative of the Prophet.

The Prophet objected that he was the one who should be immersed by the other. The Teacher replied, "Let it be so immediately. It is fitting that we make full all righteousness."

I could see the Pharisees in the crowd react to that. Here was a man demanding that the Prophet do that which would make him a *Tzaddik*, a fully good, fully human person. They aspired to this status through their actions, through the keeping of the traditions. Here this man was, saying that he could become *Tzaddik* through the immersion that the Prophet denied to them.

Then came the kicker. As the Prophet and the Teacher came up out of the water, the *Ruach ha Kodesh* descended and lit upon the Teacher in the form of a dove. A voice came from the heavens saying "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." No wonder the Pharisees came to hate the Teacher. He had shown himself to be fully human, and the voice had shown him to be fully the Son of God. Surely this was the Messiah.

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SUBORNING PERJURY

On courtroom dramas there are a couple of crimes that seem to be more serious than the original crime. One is jury tampering, the bribing or intimidation of a jury member. The other is witness tampering. This crime even has different classifications. There is the making of threats to get the witness not to testify. There is even the kidnapping or killing of a witness to prevent their testimony. And then there is suborning perjury, offering an inducement to make the witness lie on the stand.

If one of the big lies we tell people is saying we are fine when they casually ask, “how are you?” (*Minutes With Messiah*, January 2021), is it not possible that we tell that lie because others have made that lie the expected answer? Do we say we are fine when we may not be because others have in one way or another suborned this perjury?

Suborning

The idea of taking or giving bribes has been condemned throughout the Bible. As early as Mount Sinai,

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God has spoken against it. “And thou shalt take no bribe: for the bribe blindeth the wise, and perverteth the words of the righteous.” (Ex 23:8) This does not specify whether it is bribing the judge or the witness; either one is unacceptable. Moses repeats this in his final speech to Israel.

Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a bribe: for a bribe doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. (Deut 16:19)

In that verse Moses seems to address both jury tampering and suborning perjury. Bribes blind judges, but they also cause witnesses to speak untruths.

“Gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with bloody men: In whose hands is mischief, and their right hand is full of bribes.” (Ps 26:9-10) David equates bribes with murder.

One of the reasons the Israelites demanded a king when Samuel got old was that his sons were taking bribes

to “pervert justice.” (1 Sam 8:3) As a result, God allowed them kings, and that ended up in the destruction of the whole nation.

By the time of Isaiah that destruction was well on its way. One of his first complaints was that the princes of Israel were taking bribes. If ignoring the plight of the homeless was one of the leading sins of Israel, doing so for a bribe was much worse.

Thy princes are rebellious, and companions of thieves: every one loveth bribes and followeth after rewards: they judge not the fatherless, neither doth the cause of the widow come unto them. (Isa 1:23)

Perhaps the most vile examples of suborning perjury are recorded in two New Testament trials. Stephen was a successful preacher of the gospel. Some men objected.

Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council, And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. (Acts 6:11-14)

Stephen made a brilliant defense. Nevertheless, those who had suborned perjury prevailed and he was stoned to death.

Even more heinous, perhaps, was the suborned perjury against the purest of defendants. When Jesus was being tried, they could find nothing on which to convict him. They even had to suborn several witnesses just to get two to agree. (It’s pretty bad when you bribe multiple people and tell them what to say, and they still say different things.)

Now the chief priests, and elders, and all the council, sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death; But found none: yea, though many false witnesses came, yet found they none. At the last came two false witnesses, And said, This fellow said, I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to build it in three days. (Matt 26:59-61)

Suborning someone to mislead others about how they are feeling or what they are facing may not seem as serious as lying about the Son of God. If there are degrees of seriousness in sin, it probably isn’t as serious, but God still objects to the crime. Perhaps it is because it got his Son crucified that he objects so strenuously.

Indifference

One way we encourage others to lie is through indifference. We ask a question, but don't even wait for an answer, and would be shocked if we got a truthful answer.

Psychologists say this is a conditioned thing. Most of the time someone asks how we are doing and we make an automatic reply. Often we do not even realize what we said. Somebody could say, "How ya doing?" and you reply "monkey business" and neither party would realize what was said, just that something was said. All you know is that you greeted the other person.

Such a conditioned response may not seem that important. After all, we may not even realize what we said. Jesus, however, addresses even the lies told through indifference.

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. (Matt 12:36)

We should be aware of everything that we say. If we ask a person a question, we should be aware of their answer. Otherwise we encourage others to speak idle words, unto their own hurt.

Intimidation

One of the classic ways to suborn perjury is witness intimidation. On the crime dramas this can run the gamut from threatening the witness to kidnapping the family members of the witness. In the church, suborning perjury through witness intimidation often takes the form of a history of gossip, whether perceived or real.

In a congregation it may begin fairly innocently. One person tells another something seemingly inconsequential. The recipient of the information, not seeing it as something that needs to be held in confidence, shares it, thus hurting the feelings of the originator. Soon the word gets around that the recipient of the confidence is untrustworthy. But so are those who shared the information. Then someone shares something that might have significant consequences, and the same thing happens. Maybe it even reaches outside the congregation itself. Now people are afraid to "confess your faults one to another" (Jas 5:16), lest the matter spreads beyond all bounds.

There is another form of intimidation that suborns perjury. It makes people afraid to confess their sins because they will be judged. This form of intimidation is an inflexible adherence to teaching against our pet sins.

Sin is sin, and should be pointed out as such. Paul upbraided the Corinthians for not pointing out sin in their midst.

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not

rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. (1 Cor 5:1-2)

The point of identifying sin, though, is to induce repentance. We tell the world what is sin, but if they don't repent we move on to someone who will. Within the church we expect repentance. Sometimes, though, when we get repentance we still intimidate the one who had sinned.

Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him. (2 Cor 2:6-8)

When we fail to forgive when one repents, we set an example for others. Too often we suborn the perjury

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that they are fine and not in need of repentance because they have seen that repentance bears no fruit within the church.

Embarrassment

Often we tell others that we are fine, even though we are not, because we are embarrassed to admit the truth. Sometimes that embarrassment is self-inflicted. We lie of our own volition. But sometimes the embarrassment comes from the reaction of others. It may be in the form of, "I can't believe you did that." Or it may come in other forms.

There have been a number of times that a congregation has been compiling a prayer list and one of the children asks for prayers for a sick pet. What is the most common reaction by the adults? Laughter. The child has asked in all seriousness, and the adults embarrass them. What is that child going to do the next time they have a serious concern? Many times they will choose not to make a request because the adults have made them think their concerns are insignificant. As they grow up the memory of this incident prevents them from admitting a need or a concern. The adults of the congregation have suborned perjury through laughter.

We are supposed to "Confess faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed." (Jas 5:16) That means we have to be willing to open ourselves up to the congregation. That becomes more difficult if the congregation has a habit of suborning perjury.

WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

A recent episode of the quiz show *Jeopardy!* had a category called “Poly-Esther.” The writers had found six women named Esther sufficiently famous to write clues about them. The name Esther has been in the top 500 names for girls in the United States ever since such statistics have been kept. (The name placed 153rd in 2018.) In the Bible, Esther’s role in the Purim story made her so familiar to Jews and non-Jews that the writers of the play *Fiddler On the Roof* turned the Sabbath blessing for girls into “may you be like Ruth and like Esther.” (The traditional blessing is, “May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.”) On the other hand, the name Jezebel, in that form, ranked 3,383rd in popularity in 2018, and didn’t rank anywhere at all before 1994. Since that date a total of 284 girls in the United States have been named Jezebel. (In 2018 the more popular variant of the name, Isabella, was ranked number 4, and in 2009 it was the most popular name for newborn girls.)

Taken at face value, both names are innocent enough. Esther means star. Jezebel/Isabella (the accent in Hebrew is, incidentally, on the next to last syllable: YE-ZAH-vel) means pure. Their popularity, though, is affected by the characters of the women with those names in the Bible. That Jezebel is hardly pure.

The book of Esther is about the institution of the holiday of Purim (February 26 in 2021). From a casual reading, one would think the book should be named for Mordechai. For the first several chapters, Esther, when mentioned at all, appears to be inconsequential. When her people are threatened, however, she becomes brave and resourceful. The enemy of her people, Haman, was a

clever man. He had used his shrewdness to threaten an entire nation. He did not count on the cleverness of one woman.

Esther had to defend the Jewish people. She knew it would be difficult to just accuse Haman directly. She manipulated the situation to where she could present his crime to her husband in such a way that Haman could not escape. It is this cleverness that has made Esther a common name even to this day.

Iezavel, on the other hand, was the embodiment of evil. It used to be said that nobody named their child Jezebel, and that is still mostly true. A simple change of pronunciation made the name much more popular.

Jezebel was in some ways the opposite of Esther. She clearly wore the pants in the family; Ahab was wishy-washy at his best. She caused a significant portion of the Israelites to continue in sin by worshiping the Baals. She even had 450 prophets of Baal on the government payroll. (1 Kings 18:19) Like Esther, she was clever; but she turned that cleverness into cruelty, as in the taking of Naboth’s vineyard. (1 Kings 21) Her name became so synonymous with evil that it was used in the Revelation to John to symbolize all that God hated. (Rev 2:20)

Some people think reputation is not all that important. They think nothing of besmirching the family name. After all, it’s just a name. But is it? Esther and Jezebel may just be names, but because of what two women did, those names have taken two completely different paths. It has taken almost 4,000 years for the name of Jezebel to begin to recover. Which leads one to wonder, what am I doing with my name?

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