

The Complexity of Mission

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[0 : 00] Again, we last week celebrated Easter. Anybody here for Easter last week? It was a good time? Yeah, it was pretty great. And we talked about resurrection, and we talked about being a multi-theological community.

We've got lots of different thoughts about the resurrection. And it's almost a cliché in churches and preaching calendars, one, to have the week after Easter have somebody else give the sermon, but we're like, no, no, no, like somebody who's not on the staff.

We're like, no, no, no, we're going to be the paid person this week. And then the cliché is like, Jesus rose from the dead. Now what is the sort of preaching calendar pattern that a lot of churches fall into?

And we're doing something similar. But I know that question, that Jesus rose from the dead, now what question can raise a lot of anxiety for folks. So let me list some reasons why that may raise some anxiety.

One, you don't know if you believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead, or you do believe it, but you can't like prove it or anything. Like you've got a debate on Twitter trying to prove the resurrection to somebody, you would lose, and you're fine with that.

[1 : 01] But it's like not your fun hobby to learn apologetics. But you believe it, that's good enough, but you can't really prove it. So there's some anxiety there. There's anxiety because, you know, what are you meant to do with that information?

Like in some ways, Advil is more helpful than knowing that Jesus rose from the dead, right? If somebody has a headache, you're not like, well, you know, Jesus rose from the dead, so put that headache away, like, no, you're going to hand them some Tylenol.

And that seems like an immediately more helpful thing to do. So again, Jesus rose from the dead, now what? I'm not sure. Another reason is that it seems like the main thing that people did after Jesus rose from the dead was tell people about it.

And so if there's a sense that like, I have to tell somebody about it, that gives me heartburn. And then like, there's Matthew 28, 19, which gives people some heebie-jeebies. It says, therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything that I've commanded you.

And like, not only do I not want to go around knocking on doors, making disciples and baptizing and teaching, you might think, but you also know, because you live in Washington, D.C.

[2 : 09] and you go to a church like the Table Church, that is tied up with colonization. And colonization, if you didn't know, is real dang bad. So please, count me out, you might say.

So Jesus rose from the dead, now what? Preacher, pastor, please don't say evangelize in missions because, ew. Say any other now what than that, please and thank you.

So, because Tanetta and I have very easy lives that never have any stress, drama, medical issues, crises, flooding basements, sick kids, and never, ever, not once have we ever had a fight with our spouse, we decided to increase the difficulty level of this sermon question and talk about the book of Deuteronomy instead.

Okay? Now, why Deuteronomy? It's hard to overstate the importance of the book of Deuteronomy and the foundational status it has for both Jewish and Christian theological thought.

It is a bedrock core foundational book for how Judaism sort of conceptualizes itself and for how Christianity sort of answers some big theological questions about Yahweh God and the Old Testament.

[3 : 26] Other than the Psalms, which kind of makes sense, other than the Psalms, it is the portion of the Hebrew Bible that Jesus quoted the most. So, yes, Jesus quoted Psalms. That makes sense.

It's the national sort of hymn book of Israel. Jesus, of course, is going to quote it. Outside of the Psalms, the number one book that Jesus quotes is the book of Deuteronomy. So, it's important.

It's foundational. Jesus quotes from it a lot. Deuteronomy also gets at the conquest and possession of promised land, which has implications for how we understand evangelism and mission and the kingdom of God.

It has big implications for how we understand the idea of covenant. And covenant is this massive sort of mega meta theme for the entirety of Scripture. We call the Bible the Old Testament and the New Testament because that's how they translated the word covenant back in the day.

And so, we talk about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. It is the massive mega theme. And if you want to understand that theme, you've got to understand Deuteronomy. And Tanetta chose the book of Deuteronomy because Deuteronomy is this really clear example of how to do improvisational jazz with the Bible because that's what Deuteronomy is doing with its own Scripture, looking back on Genesis, Leviticus, Exodus numbers.

[4 : 51] And it's because what we continue to do as a theological community today, and that's at least part of what a church is. Yes, a church is a place where you get some coffee and some drinks, and you sing, and you listen to some teaching, and maybe you're part of a small group.

And it's also a theological community. We do theology together because we're thinking about questions about God and how that applies to the world. So, today's sermon is not sort of like your classic three-point, here's a nice sort of summary at the end, so you feel good, send you on your way kind of sermon.

This is a groundwork sermon for about five weeks of sermons on the book of Deuteronomy. So, we're not going to answer all of your questions about this book and ideas of conquest and possession and mission all in one week.

So, just so you know, there's a podcast. There's a YouTube channel. Maybe if you have like a perfect attendance kink, you could come for all five weeks. That's fine. Or you can just subscribe to the podcast.

Up to you. All right. Let me give you two contexts. So, most biblical books and books in general have two contexts.

[6 : 00] The first one is what you call the literary context. I'm sorry if you're having like English class post-traumatic stress. Okay. You have the literary context. The literary context is what is the story inside the narrative that you're reading.

It's the context of the world within the story. And the second is the, it's a German phrase, comes from German biblical scholarship, the Sitz in Leben. I did not learn German.

Don't quote me on that. Sitz in Leben. It is the setting in life. And the Sitz in Leben that we got taught as seminary students is not the world within the story, but the world from which the story was written.

Okay. So, every biblical book, most books that you read have the world within the story, the context of the story, and the world from which the story was written.

And there could be years, days, months, years, decades, centuries between the context of the world and the context of the world in which the story was written. For instance, Bridgerton.

[7 : 05] Any cheers for Bridgerton? Okay. Okay. You're willing to admit that at church. Very good. Okay. Bridgerton's literary context is 1800s London high society.

It's Regency romance. But the Sitz in Leben is 21st century America. Okay. She's not writing from the 1800s. She's writing as a 21st century American. Therefore, the themes that might be important to a 21st century American romance writer and their audiences, themes like race and diversity and the equality of women and the voice of women and literature that maybe show up in the books, maybe show up in the show, are imported into an older story where those themes wouldn't have been as important.

So, Bridgerton tells us a very little tiny bit about 1800s London and a whole lot more about 21st century America. Does that make sense? Okay. So, Deuteronomy has a literary context, the world within the story.

And it's right before Moses dies and Joshua leads the Israelites into the promised land. So, a little bit of background. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt.

You have Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments. And then there's some disobedience within the Israelite community. And according to the story, they have to wander around for 40 years in the wilderness, waiting for the disobedient generation to die off and the young kids to grow up and then to take the promised land.

[8 : 32] Moses is about 120 years old at the time. And he has the responsibility of retelling the story to this new generation before they go and take the promised land.

The children are mature. They're ready to take possession. And since they were just kids during the going-ons of Mount Sinai and the ABC Ten Commandments special, Moses had to repeat everything back.

And that's a large, significant theme of the book of Deuteronomy. Remember, remember, remember. Do not forget. Forgetfulness will lead you astray. You must remember.

So, that's the literary context. But the zitz in leben, the world by which the story was written, is not that. So, pause for a moment.

There can be sort of like a gasp moment when you begin to talk about the Bible as a collection of literary documents. If you are having one of those gasp moments, please come talk to me.

[9 : 30] I do not want to create like this crisis of faith for you. All I want to say is that the Bible is a collection, a library of different literary documents written throughout history that are all telling a big, large story, but may not have been written in the moment in which those events happened.

Okay? That's all we're going to say right now. So, the literary context is Moses passing off the torch, but the zitz in leben, the world in which the story is written, is hundreds of years later.

The northern kingdom of Israel, at this point in history, is being threatened by the Assyrian empire. So, you're talking of Moses is in the 1200s BCE. You fast forward to about the 800-700 BCE.

Assyria is a big empire, and they keep threatening the northern Israelite border. And so, the kings don't have much choice but to begin to make treaties with the Assyrians in order to protect their kingship, their monarchy, and to some extent, their land, even though they keep sort of dishing off some land to the Assyrian empire.

The Israelite kings keep making deals, and the religion of Yahweh, Yahwism, the name of God given to Moses, is also being overtaken by other gods and religions instead.

[10 : 50] So, the entire culture of northern Israel is being threatened by this external force called Assyria. Now, listen. The context in which Deuteronomy is composed is a period of time in which a people is watching their nation's leaders betray them to foreign powers, use religion as a way to make it seem okie-dokie cool, and engage in violence as a form of nationalistic pride.

Now, you and I know that that wouldn't happen today, right? Are you picking up what I'm putting down? Deuteronomy is composed in a period when the people are watching their nation's leaders betray them to foreign powers, use religion as a way to make it seem okie, and engage in violence as a form of nationalistic pride.

So, somebody, or more likely a community of somebody's writers and editors and redactors is sort of the biblical studies word. People are pulling all of these sources together. They decide to take the old traditions of Moses and Mount Sinai and the commandments and the Torah and the law, and they begin to riff on them, remix them, do a mashup, and a subversive one at that.

Go ahead and put that image on the screen. So, this is an image of the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond, Virginia, not too far from here. And on the monument, you see projections and some art of folks who have been killed by police brutality.

It's a Black Lives Matter sort of art installation on the Robert E. Lee Monument in Richmond. And on the bottom, you see memorials and candles and names are written of all of the black folks who have been killed by police brutality.

[12 : 33] And so, this is a form of protest art. They're taking a symbol, a monument to white supremacy and the confederacy of the United States, and they are co-opting it for a different purpose.

Now, you can imagine, say somebody finds this image 500 or 1,000 years in the future. Somebody finds this image and begins to write like their, you know, sophomore college essay on it.

And you can imagine somebody getting the wrong idea. Well, in 21st century America, the Black Lives Matter movement appreciated Robert E. Lee's legacy and decided to use Robert E. Lee's legacy to prop up their own, like, their own message of police brutality.

Like, no, no, no, no, you got it completely wrong, sophomore in college writing in the future. This is not an endorsement of Robert E. Lee. It is co-opting his message and using it to make a different one entirely.

So, Deuteronomy is doing something similar. It is literary protest. The format of the book of Deuteronomy is very similar to the format of an Assyrian treaty.

[13 : 40] The Assyrians are making these treaties with Israel. Israel is giving up its power and its culture to the empire of Assyria and doing it in the format of an Assyrian treaty.

So, it seems like a group of folks got together, took the old traditions of Moses and Sinai and Yahweh God, and imported them onto a problematic, troublesome format called the Assyrian treaty.

It's like they're saying, hey, you like your treaties so much, leaders who have betrayed us. You like them so much, the ones that deal in death. How about a new kind of treaty that seems more like the ones our ancestors used to believe in?

So, Deuteronomy is kind of like the punk rock of its day. It's the alternative beat poet scene. It's taking the literary forms of oppression of its time and undermining them to make a different point.

It's taking what's new and old and bringing it back same as before, yet somehow new and different. So, that's Deuteronomy in a real quick nutshell.

[14 : 44] Now, let's talk about the genocidal elephant in the room, and that is the conquest of Canaan. The conquest of Canaan, if you're not familiar, is the stories in the book of Joshua and sort of before and after, where Israel is commanded and is said to follow through on this command to kill every man and woman and child in the land of Canaan so that they can take over and possess the promised land.

In biblical studies, it's called the ban, which is a very polite word for kill everybody. So, let me say this first. I am a bit of a biblical historical maximalist, meaning if the Bible is making some claims to history, my basic assumption is that it's getting at something that's true and something that may have happened in history.

I start with the basic assumption that the biblical story is at least getting at a kernel of truth or history before I just sort of dismiss it out of hand. For instance, as an example, there was an ancient, powerful, significant people and empire called the Hittites.

And before the 1900s, the only source of information for the Hittites was the Bible. So, prior to 1900, it was pretty standard to say the Hittites didn't exist.

Yes, the Bible sort of made them up or they were just a tiny people. They weren't significant. But then archaeology caught up what was already in the Bible. And now we know loads about the Hittites and they were significant and powerful and an empire.

[16 : 17] And it turns out the Bible didn't just sort of make them up. The Bible was right. So, hear that before I say this. The conquest of Canaan probably didn't happen.

At least the archaeology on the ground doesn't reveal anything like what the Joshua conquest narrative describes. So, you have these stories of Israel sort of marching out of Egypt, wandering around, going over the Jordan, and engaging in mass slaughter of the Canaanite people.

But the archaeology on the ground tells a very different story about the same sort of ethnic group all living within what we now call Israel or Palestine today. And eventually separating out on religious and cultural grounds where some of the people began to worship a territorial god called Yahweh and some of the people did not.

And then they had some skirmishes and some just sort of integration with one another. Nothing like this idea of millions of people walking out of Egypt and conquering another land.

Now, the Bible actually seems to reveal some knowledge about this because there's disagreement about the conquest narrative even within the book of Joshua itself.

[17 : 34] Joshua, the book, talks about Israel going into the land and succeeding in, you know, committing genocide, of killing all of these nations and people groups. And then you get to the end of the book of Joshua, and the end of the book of Joshua has to answer the question, but what do we do with all the people that we didn't kill?

So, you can see the tension there. The Bible has some knowledge that the conquest didn't actually happen or wasn't as successful as it says. At the end of Joshua, 1 and 2 Samuel, there's this acknowledgement.

There are still people who live in Canaan that Joshua says were totally destroyed. Ezekiel, the prophet, which was written about the same time that the book of Deuteronomy was put together, acknowledges that Judah and Israel were just a fact of a group of wandering nomads.

Ezekiel chapter 16 says this, by origin and birth, you are from the land of the Canaanites. Your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. So, the Bible is not sort of has one voice about this story.

There was a conquest. Israel took everybody over. That's the end. Rather, there's different sort of narratives all woven and fighting throughout the Bible of we imagined ourselves as these conquerors, but the reality is we were just sort of wandering Canaanites like our neighbors were as well.

[18 : 53] So, saying the conquest narrative may be some political propaganda isn't actually all that anti-biblical. I'm not up here trying to tell you to stop believing in the Bible.

Rather, I'm trying to tell you the Bible is much more interesting and complex than a single univocal story might lead you to believe. The Bible actually has this interesting feature where it puts a bunch of theological perspectives all together and then has them sort of duke it out, which is kind of cool and interesting for a community like ours where you have a bunch of theological perspectives all smushed together and hopefully we don't duke it out but find a way to find some harmony together.

If you want to read more about this, I encourage you to read a book called *The Bible Tells Me So* by Dr. Pete Enns, which goes more into sort of how the Old Testament was put together. Now, okay, you have Deuteronomy.

You have the conquest narrative. Archaeology seems to say that the conquest narrative didn't actually happen the way it's described and even the Bible itself seems to shed a little bit of doubt on that narrative.

But that's sort of kicking the theological problem just down the road. Cool, maybe it didn't historically happen, but we're still reading this theological history book of a people who wanted it to happen.

[20 : 12] Is that better? So again, I want you to think about today. Have you ever heard of, or heard whisperings of, a nation or a people group that put together a collective myth of greatness in order to justify other atrocities?

Does that ring any bells? Now, there could be this sort of modern moralistic instinct. The Bible. Oh, it's about a group of people who put together mythological, violent myth-making for the sake of justifying other atrocities.

We just need to get rid of this. Meanwhile, we live on stolen land. Could it be more interesting and more helpful to take a book like the Bible or a collection of narratives like the Bible and see, oh, if people back then were doing this and people today are still doing this, might there be something to learn?

Another reason for studying Deuteronomy is its importance in understanding another large theological theme, and that's the idea of the *missio dei*, a Latin phrase that means the mission of God.

And this begins in Genesis chapter 12, God's covenant with Abraham, where God tells Abraham, I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

[21 : 37] Israel is called a kingdom of holy priests. The entire nation is called a priesthood because it's understood that the Israelite nation is meant to be mediators between the one true God, Yahweh, and the rest of the nations.

They are meant to be a people and a nation who connects the world to God. A running theme of the Torah, the books Genesis through Deuteronomy, is this idea that you are going to do these things, Israel, so that the nations may know that Yahweh is God.

And Deuteronomy restates this theme. Deuteronomy, for all of its sort of intricacies and interests and mentions of genocide, surprisingly also has a lot about how to be a good neighbor.

State Farm be damned. You don't need insurance if you know that if I kick over my neighbor's donkey, I need to get him a new one plus some interest.

You don't need insurance if you know that if I take somebody's property, they deserve reparations for that property. So Deuteronomy restates this theme of you're going to act this in this way so that the nations may know that Yahweh is God.

[22 : 56] And then it's about neighborliness. It's about how to manage a relationship with your neighbor and with the nations. It's about justice and equity. Whenever you read the word righteousness in the Old Testament, it's also the same word that's used to get at justice.

And so Deuteronomy is all about this. The opening chapter, Deuteronomy 1, verse 16, is talking about how Moses set up the judicial system. And Moses gives these instructions.

Give the members of your community a fair hearing and judge rightly between one person and another, whether kin, Israelite, or alien, a stranger, somebody from a different world, a different nation, a different land.

So this idea of equity and justice is built into the DNA of the book. And because of that, it's meant to be understood that if Israel is responding to justice in the right way, the nations will know that Yahweh is God.

And then that good news can expand. So when we begin to understand this concept of mission, then we begin to understand a concept of what Jesus is getting at when he says something like, go and make disciples.

[24 : 06] It's not merely about... Pause for a second. I was doing some research for the sermon and reading up on one of my favorite books called *The Mission of God* by Christopher Wright, and I was reading a review of the book.

And the reviewer was getting upset at the author of this favorite book of mine because the author was not really talking about heaven and hell and sort of like the dire circumstances by which people must choose Jesus or else.

And I had to laugh at this review because the reviewer is sort of ignoring the book of Acts, where you have multiple sermons given by the apostles and the disciples and Paul and Peter who are all doing this sort of act of evangelism and never mention heaven or hell once.

Not a single time. So the idea of evangelism and mission can seem off-putting for any one of us who our only experience with it is somebody knocking on the door and saying, do you know where you're going to go if you die tonight?

Sort of that fear-based approach. Now again, read the Old Testament. Read Genesis through Deuteronomy and beyond. You're not going to find references to people going to heaven and hell.

[25 : 13] The idea of mission, the idea of Genesis 12, I will bless you so that all nations will be blessed by you and in you and through you is not about where you're going to go when you die.

It's rather about the flourishing of human life on earth now. And so Israel was meant to be set up as this alternative community, this alternative nation where they were meant to define their relationships by equity and justice and the nations would look on and want to be a part of that.

If your God behaves in this way that's predictable and kind and does exodus, does the redeeming of people before the people even light a single sacrifice to God, maybe we would want to know that God as well.

Now, this gets into my final point. And that's the context that Israel was coming from. And the context that Israel was coming from was all about sacrifices that fed the gods.

And Leviticus comes around and has a very different idea about the relationship between God and people. People do not exist to feed God. People exist to have a relationship with God.

[26 : 24] There's not a single mention in Leviticus of having a sacrifice, slaughtering a lamb or an animal so that Yahweh God is fed. Rather, there is something about sacrifice being a sort of detergent against the powers of death.

But there's this notion that the altar is not there to feed the divine, but rather to share a meal with the divine instead.

Now, it's hard to argue that clearly the sacrificial system was, at least in the minds of the Israelites and the priests, somehow pleasing God in some way.

And it should be noted that the first sacrifice mentioned in Genesis chapter 4 with Cain and Abel, it's a sacrificial system that I believe Tanetta said last week, God never asked for.

And Jeremiah, the prophet, actually makes a similar point in his writings. He questions the entire point of the sacrificial system. And even it goes so far to say that God never wanted it in the first place, that it never entered God's mind that when the Israelites left Egypt that they would have a sacrificial system.

[27 : 37] And so there seems to be some amount of divine accommodation to what the Israelites were used to, a system where you had to feed the gods. And God doesn't let that happen, but God does at least let the sacrificial system happen.

But then the prophets keep coming around and they keep saying things like, well, that wasn't God's idea in the first place. And God says, I desire mercy, not sacrifice. At its best, Deuteronomy is about feasts and festivals and meals and a generous inclusion of everyone in the nation to be a part of them, Israelite or foreigner.

The entire calendar system of Israel is based off of festivals. Deuteronomy tells people to spend 10% of their income on feasts and parties, things that Dave Ramsey would make, make his skin crawl.

So Jesus takes this notion, I desire mercy and not sacrifice, to its natural conclusion. Instead of humans making sacrifices to please God, God sacrifices himself at the hands of humans in order that humanity might become one with God.

As one theologian put it, it's not that Jesus is a better sacrifice. Rather, Jesus is better than sacrifice itself. And that says something about what we do at the communion table each week.

[28 : 59] It's a way of saying that God doesn't actually desire or need a sacrifice. That we don't need to offer ourselves to God in some sort of way to get God on our side.

But rather that at the table and at the cross, God offers themselves to us. That when we take the bread and the cup into ourselves, that bread and that cup represent the body of God.

And then we become partakers of the divine nature. We become one with God. The New Testament is a heck of a lot more mystical than we sort of give it credence for.

This idea of God becoming man so that humanity might become divine is there in the pages of Scripture. And so we go back to Deuteronomy to see some of the beginnings of these themes, where the feasts and the festivals and even the sacrificial system was not about getting God on our side.

God was already on our side. God moved towards us in love first. God redeemed Israel out of Exodus before a single sacrifice was made first.

[30 : 16] And in that book, we see the invitation to all people everywhere to join in the feast. Would you pray with me?

Try and God, we thank you for a faith that is older than today or yesterday. We thank you for a belief system and a way of life and a practice that predates us and our parents and our grandparents.

A faith that is ancient and well-established. And so, God, we look back with a sense of wonder and awe and mystery, knowing that we are continuing a story that goes long, long before us.

And also, we look forward, knowing that we are not here only to repeat the same patterns and rhythms of yesteryear, but also to riff, to remix, to make new, try new things, to have both continuity with what came before and discontinuity with it as well.

And so, God, as we come to this communion table, this table of your grace, help us to be connected to an old, old story and to leave this place helping write a new one.

[31 : 52] We pray these things in the unity of the Spirit, in the name of Jesus. Amen.