



MAAFA

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 14, 2010

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Lection - 2 Kings 25:8-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 8) In the fifth month, on the seventh day of the month—which was the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon—Nebuzaradan, the captain of the bodyguard, a servant of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. (v. 9) He burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house he burned down. (v. 10) All the army of the Chaldeans who were with the captain of the guard broke down the walls around Jerusalem. (v. 11) Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried into exile the rest of the people who were left in the city and the deserters who had defected to the king of Babylon—all the rest of the population. (v. 12) But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Although this liturgical moment coincides with Valentine's Day—a day set aside to celebrate love and, for us, Black love—we must remember that as Christians all the laws and prophecy hang on our ability to love others as ourselves. Without knowing our history, we can't love ourselves. If we're ashamed of our history and from where we've come, then we're ashamed of the God who fearfully and wonderfully made us into that which was considered good from our very beginning.

This passage highlights the attempts to obliterate all that was considered great and good about the children of God. It maps the tragic history of the *Maafa*. During WWII, "holocaust" was used to describe Nazi atrocities against European Jews. Thereafter, the term has been employed primarily as a proper noun ("the Holocaust") in order to refer specifically to the genocide of Jews during WWII. When describing the horrific devastation of African colonization and enslavement, the term *Maafa* has a similar resonance to the term holocaust. Derived from a Swahili word meaning terrible occurrence, great tragedy or disaster, *Maafa* evokes the five centuries of sorrow and suffering that have raged people of African descent as manifested not only through slavery but also mass murder, invasion, captivity, imperialism/colonialism, poverty,

legalized oppression, brutal dehumanization, and relentless exploitation. The *Maafa* describes the original trauma of enslavement but also grapples with the continuing effects of white supremacy as it wreaks havoc with the lives of Black women, men, and children.

And in this moment of celebrating Black love in Black history, the MAAFA helps Black people to remember a horrific part of their history and learn from that history so they can be free to love themselves, their neighbor and their God more fully and freely.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 2 Kings 25:8-12

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

On his recent trip to Ghana, President Barack Obama, along with his family (First Lady Michelle Obama, mother-in-law Marian Robinson, and two daughters, Sasha and Malia), visited what is inaccurately referred to as the Cape Coast Castle. I say inaccurately referred to because this structure is far from a castle, it is a dungeon—a slave dungeon to be exact. I realized this when I made my first *Sankofa* voyage to Ghana with students of mine. Although the majestic building appears to be impressive in stature, there was nothing pristine about it. Much like white supremacy, it loomed large, was thoroughly white, and had a chapel towering above the dungeons that imprisoned Africans and sought to make out of a noble people starved, beaten and depraved slaves. That chapel along with the many slave ships with names such as the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and John the Baptist, was used to give the white enslavers the religious right to execute their heathenous wrongs in the name of God.¹

During his trip, President Obama said slavery is a terrible part of the United States' history and should be taught in a way that connects that past cruelty to current events, such as the genocide in Darfur. Moreover, to evoke further understanding to Anderson Cooper, the CNN interviewer who stood in awe of these unique words spoken not only by the first black president but also the first US president who had done justice in addressing this topic, President Obama compared the legacy of slavery to the history of the Holocaust of the Jews in Nazi Germany. He then went on to state that both are horrible historical points that cannot be ignored and their lessons must not be forgotten. Yet, while Jewish Americans celebrate their love for their God and ancestors by mandating that to be observant of their religion is to “never forget” the horrors of the holocaust and that they were once slaves in Egypt, we, as African descendants of a noble people who were enslaved have no such motto inextricably linked to our faith tradition. Unfortunately, rather than remembering that our ancestors were enslaved, we have regarded our ancestors, and thus ourselves, as slaves – not a people that had a wrong done to them but as a beings who were only slaves, chattel, not humans made in the image of God.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

These verses (II Kings 25:8-12) describe the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem (the capital of Judah), the destruction of the Temple, and the exile of most of the Israelite population to Babylon - all on the orders of the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar. All the valuable equipment and property of the Temple was plundered and carried back to Babylon, and much of the priestly leadership was executed.

Our biblical passage has as its backdrop an account of how Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, led an insurgency against Babylon because the aristocracy of Jerusalem prevailed upon him to throw off the yoke of Babylonian repression. It is worth noting that Zedekiah's name is derived from the Hebrew term "*tzedek*," which means justice or rectitude. The fact that Zedekiah rebels against the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, albeit to the ultimate demise of his sons and himself (his sons were killed before his eyes, then his eyes were poked out and he was carried captive to Babylon, where presumably he died [see II Kings 25:1-7 and II Chronicles 36:12]), is critical because it symbolizes the extent to which the Babylonians sought to pursue and destroy any evidence of justice amongst the people of Jerusalem. Zedekiah gets defeated; Babylon comes in and they seek to destroy Jerusalem. The four verses (25:8-12) that serve as our biblical text outline the destruction of the city and temple that takes place a month after the Babylonian army entered Jerusalem. This conquest ushers in the period known as the Babylonian exile, which one can argue serves as the primary biblical paradigm for theological, historical and existential Diaspora, exile, and physical displacement of all forms.

Biblical scholars, historians, and archaeologists tell us that this destruction was so systematically designed and implemented that it had to be executed by high-ranking officials even though there was no king in the city (it is for this reason events were dated according to Nebuchadnezzar's reign [v. 8]).² Nebuzaradan, the Babylonian chief commanding officer (whose name literally means "chief of the slaughters"), wanted to be certain that the destruction of Jerusalem was so absolute that even those who remained would be without the wherewithal to rise up again. His first task for his army of slaughterers was to burn the Temple (v. 9). To burn a temple is to burn down the house of one's god. Symbolically, when the followers of Marduk, the Babylonian god, burn down the House of Yahweh, this speaks to Marduk's sovereignty over and against Yahweh. Theologically, this suggests an ongoing attempt of oppressors to destroy a people by way of their cultural symbols. In other words, one must possess and destroy what is sacred to a people in order to enslave a people. If one's god is destroyed, what then does it say to those who are made in the image of that very same god?³

The slaughterers second task was to burn down the palace and every great house in Jerusalem (v. 9); thus reserving destruction to both the temple and the surrounding majestic buildings served to let people know how vulnerable their once thought of "great" God and people were. To complete the ravaging of the city and insure its annihilation, the walls of Jerusalem were literally broken down so those within the city could not sustain an offense nor withstand the defense of Nebuzaradan's army (v.10).

It is no coincidence or mere convenience that fire was used as the main method of destruction. The word "holocaust" is derived from the Greek word "*holokauston*," meaning "whole/entire burnt offering to God," such as an animal sacrifice to God entirely consumed by fire. The Greek word was used as a translation of "*olah*" - the Hebrew word in the Bible for a burnt offering to God that was entirely burnt/consumed on the altar (i.e., none was separated or left behind for priestly/human consumption). Its Latin form ("*holocaustum*") was used as early as the 12th century to refer specifically to the massacre of Jews. In modern English, the word "holocaust" subsequently came to be used in reference to massive slaughters of human life. In the twentieth century, the biblical word/term "*shoah*" ("catastrophe," "calamity" or "destruction")

became the standard Hebrew word used to refer to the Holocaust. *Shoah* is the standard Jewish theological term used to refer to the Holocaust, primarily because it avoids associating/justifying the destruction of European Jewry (and, more broadly, the historical murder of Jews) with/as a theologically-mandated “offering” to God.⁴ Likewise, the word *Maafa* attends to the African holocaust as it commemorates the great sacrifice and tribulation of millions of Africans who were killed and millions who were brought into captivity to the Americas and enslaved.

But why set afire and burn down the great houses, why not every house? This question might ring loud in our minds if total destruction was the aim of the annihilation of a people. History reveals that when an empire destroyed another kingdom in the ancient world, they didn’t kill all the people—they only destroyed its force – those who have the power, privilege, and prestige. It is the class that can foment rebellion that must be overthrown, made vulnerable, subdued and used to build kingdoms for new kings and new nations. Those who are left, remain as the remnant remains, a people reminded of their devastation and the defeat of their god. These verses can also be associated with the dynamics of occupation and appropriation, in that the conquering Babylonian empire left behind the “poorest in the land...to be vinedressers and field hands” (v. 12); thus, taking with them into exile those Judeans whom they viewed as being most useful and valuable (including the priestly leaders of Israelite society), and leaving behind those who could facilitate their desire to reap the physical/financial benefits of the conquered land.

This leads to another unfortunate consequence brought on by enslavement. The trials and tribulations of conquest, appropriation, exile, etc. can ultimately lead to unfortunate internal divisions and contention along cultural, social and religious lines—lines keeping us who make up the African Diaspora, a dispersed and held captive people. Drawing lines in the burning sands of internalized racism and xenophobia has caused us to either hate the Africa of our heritage and the blackness of our skin or to deny our other brothers and sisters their birthright into our community and noble lineage because they aren’t black enough or black like us. Our mis-education about our *Maafa* has left us to be co-conspirators with our own oppression, as Carter G. Woodson states in his text The Mis-Education of the Negro:

When you control [people’s] thinking you do not have to worry about [their] actions. You do not have to tell [them] not to stand here or go yonder. [They] will find [their] “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send [them] to the back door. [They] will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, [they] will cut one for [their] special benefit. [Their] education makes it necessary.⁵

This MAAFA, let us learn to love our God with our minds, hearts, and souls and to let ourselves and our people into wholeness no longer divided from our history, our former selves, or our God who made us black and beautiful.

Celebration

The African slave trade resulted in the hollowing out of Africa, the gutting of the motherland, the rape of a people’s resources and population, and the destruction of a great civilization. Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the symbols of Ancient Jerusalem. White supremacists took away our African homes, ripped our language away, tore our families apart, murdered, lynched and raped

our ancestors while still denying us our freedoms and our rights. And, yes, like the Israelites of old, we, too, as God's beloved children, sat by the waters of our own Babylon, as the group Sweet Honey and the Rock sings so beautifully, "and we wept as we remembered Zion" for how could we sing a praise song in a strange land?! But, what we, that remnant that remains, now well know is that weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning.

Just as Easter Sunday's shout is the evidence of victory over the crucifixion at Calvary, so too is our present day praise the assurance of our triumphant faith over, against and in spite of the MAAFA, the holocaust that sought to take us out of our natural land and right minds. We who remain today, who were assumed to be the weakest link to a great people, are the descendants of a great people: Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass, David Walker and Maria Stewart, Richard Allen and Jarena Lee, Benjamin Mays and Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King and Ella Baker, and President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama—we are the living proof in spite of the Babylonian intellectual design of annihilation and holocaust, that our God whom they believed was local is global!

God can take descendants of an African royal priesthood who were enslaved and regarded as chattel and field hands and allow them to build a White House that a Black man and woman would become the master and mistress over. That's God! Our God, who they thought was only located in Jerusalem, became omnipresent, showing up in Babylon, Birmingham, and Brooklyn. So, no weapon formed against us shall prosper, no matter how many crosses get burned on our front lawns or on the lawns of our churches. And as the liberating theology of my youth reminds me, we serve a great big wonderful God who's so high you can't get over, so low you can't get under, and so wide you can't get around our God!

III. Descriptive Details

The descriptive details evoked by this passage include:

Sights: Ancient ruins of torn down walls; demolished temples; and burning chariots, palaces and homes;

Smells: Smoke, stifled air filled with dust, and the stench of burning flesh; and

Sounds: Booming bombs; crackling sounds of fire, whips, guns, guttural voices of people trying to survive, children crying for their parents, screams of women being raped, men being beaten, rattling chains, marching, and moans and groans as petitions to God.

IV. Making the Moment Memorable

To make the *Maafa* memorable for your congregation and community, find scenes/stills of the Middle Passage (see www.maafa.org); also, use scenes from the movies *Roots* and *Amistad*. For contemporary visual aids, find images of crosses burned on lawns, burned Black churches, bombing of Black neighborhoods (MOVE 1985, Philadelphia); bombing of the church during which four little girls were killed in Birmingham); bombing of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s home, and images of the killing of great Black heroes and heroines.

Notes

1. See, Albert Raboteau, Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans. New York, NY: Oxford, 2001. Also visit Emory University's Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database. Online location <http://www.emory.edu/home/news/releases/2008/12/trans-atlantic-slave-trade-database.html> accessed 12 October 2009
2. Jones, Gwilym H. 1 and 2 Kings: Based on the Revised Standard Version. New century Bible commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984. p. 643.
3. Wiseman, Donald J. 1 and 2 Kings: An Introduction and Commentary Tyndale Old Testament commentaries, 9. Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993
4. Special thanks and appreciation to my collaborator and colleague, Dr. W. David Nelson, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, TX, for his help in exegeting this text for its accuracy in transliteration and its importance for Jews in commemorating the Holocaust in antiquity and modernly. David and I are presently writing a book entitled Exodus in America: The Unlikely Alliance between Black Christians and White Jews for Fortress Press.
5. Woodson, Carter G. The Mis-Education of the Negro. New York, NY: CreateSpace, 2001. p. 5.