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THREE WELLS

There are accounts in the Pentateuch of three wells, and the search for wives that occurred there. (Actually two were the same well, but at different times.) Rabbi Barry Freundel of Synagogue Keshet Israel in Washington DC, to whom I am indebted for the concept of this article, relates the stories to the importance of the proper treatment of water resources, a part of our obligation to take care of the earth God gave us. While that may be a symptom of man's decline, the stories of these wells certainly show the decline of society over time when a group of people doesn't follow God.

The first time we see the well is in Genesis 24. Abraham had sent a servant to the territory of his family to find a bride for Isaac. The servant arrived at an open well and determined a test to see who should be the bride to his master's son. He would ask the women who came to the well for water, and the woman who offered to water his camels as well would be the one he chose. This would be the one with the generosity appropriate to marry the son of the most generous man alive. This test, though, depends on a cynical, or at least practical, view of the society around the well. These people did not follow God. When Abraham had gone on under the direction of God they had stayed behind. The servant knew, then, that most of the women coming to the well would be less than generous. They would be concerned with their own business, and might offer him a drink but wouldn't take the time to water his camels.

This is one stage of a people who don't know God. If there is no God, then the highest concern is for ourselves. The degree to which we make ourselves God is the degree below the ideal at which we find ourselves. Unconcern for others is a beginning of the decline of a people.

The next time we see this well (Genesis 29) it has acquired a stone cover. Almost sixty years had passed, and for some reason the society now had to guard its well. The shepherds gathered at midday, not normally the time for watering, because everyone had to be present before the stone was rolled away. This was not because of the size of the stone, but to ensure nobody

took water without everyone having an equal chance at it. Jacob broke custom by rolling the stone away and watering Rachel's flocks before everyone was gathered.

In just over half a century the society had deteriorated. Not only were they concerned primarily for their own welfare, they had become jealous of others. Lest someone gain an advantage at the expense of others, a stone had been rolled over the well. The same stone had been rolled over their hearts. A lack of concern for others had become jealous suspicion of others.

The third well is mentioned in Exodus 2. Moses had fled Egypt and come to the well. As he sat there the seven daughters of Jethro Reuel came to water their flocks. After they drew water the neighboring shepherds came to molest them. They drove the women's flocks away and took the water for themselves. This was apparently a daily occurrence, because after Moses defended them they got home earlier than usual; so early, in fact, that their father noticed the difference.

The society in Sinai had reached another level. They let someone else do the work, then took what they wanted. They were not only jealous of the water, they were violent and lazy. Not only did they not obey God, they had elevated themselves fully to gods in their own eyes.

Three wells; three levels of depravity. The tendency is toward worse behavior. But that tendency is away from God. Let us, rather work to make a society of Rebekahs. As the old maxim goes, "God first, others second, me last."

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OUR SCHOOLMASTER?

“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” (Gal 3:27)

I don’t know how many times I have seen or heard this scripture misapplied from the pulpit, in Bible classes, in articles, and even in commentaries. The usual statement goes something like this: “The Old Testament was intended to teach us about Christ.” Sometimes the person goes on to say that the main failing of the Jews in respect to the Law is that they failed to recognize the Messiah when he came. While many did fail to recognize him, Paul hardly implies that that was the main, or even a significant, failing of the Jews.

One reason this passage is so misunderstood is the word, in the King James Version, “schoolmaster.” A transliteration of the Greek word used is our word “pedagogue.” The word has come to mean a teacher, particularly one who teaches by rote without paying attention to the needs of the students; thus its use in the

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sense of a teacher by those who give the explanation above. Unfortunately, that is not what the word meant when Paul used it.

A second reason the passage is so misapplied is that it is often wrestled out of its proper context. Let us look at both of these reasons in order to come to a proper understanding of what the passage really means.

What is a Schoolmaster?

Contrary to our modern usage the pedagogue is not a teacher. Vine defines the word,

A “child-leader.” ... The *paidagogos* was not the instructor of the child; he exercised a

general supervision over him and was responsible for his moral and physical well-being. ... To understand it as equivalent to ‘teacher’ introduces an idea entirely foreign to the passage, and throws the Apostle’s argument into confusion. (*Vine, New Testament Words*, p. 329)

The schoolmaster was a slave, possibly even one who was illiterate. His job was to get the student to school and home, and possibly to make sure that he attended to his studies. He did not teach the student; that was the job of the teacher.

How does this relate to the function of the Law of Moses? It is specifically the Law of Moses that Paul referred to as a pedagogue, not the period before the Law in which Abraham and others lived. The Law was our pedagogue. There are several implications from the true meaning of the word in question.

First, the Law was not meant as a teacher. This in itself means several things. The Law of Moses, which applied specifically to the Jewish people, was not intended to teach them about the Messiah. The Law and the Prophets did teach about Christ, but that wasn’t the primary purpose of the Law. In some cases it was a purpose of the prophets, but even then not usually the primary purpose. If some of the Jews did not recognize the Messiah, the Law was not at fault. The Law was not to teach about the Messiah, so a failure to learn about him can not be attributed to the Law, but (as we will see) failure to follow the Law.

Nor was the Law intended to bring non-Jews to Christ. Since most Christians today are not, and have never been, Jews, either religiously or ethnically, the Law was not directly intended to bring them to Christ. Not Paul’s use of the words “our,” “us,” and “we.” Whenever he uses those words in Galatians, he is frequently talking about the Jews, of which he was one. It is true that the Jews were to be “a light unto the nations”, and therefore the Law may have been an influence indirectly on the Gentiles, but it was not intended to teach the Gentiles anything directly. This is not to say that the Law of Moses, or the Old Testament as a whole, has no value to those of us who are not Jewish. All of the Old Testament, not just the Law, “was written for our learning.” (Rom 15:4) We can, indeed must, use it to understand the New Testament. But again, that was not the primary purpose of the Law, as stated by Paul in Galatians.

Second, the Law's true function was as a disciplinarian. It was, in Paul's phrase, "to bring us to Christ." In that sense it was to prepare the Jews for the Messiah; it was to take them to the Messiah so they could learn from him. Earlier in the chapter Paul had further expressed the thought. "Wherefore then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made." (Gal 3:19) Because the son needed discipline, because in Egypt they had almost sunk as low as they could go, God gave the Law to the Jews "until the seed should come." However, even the chosen people misunderstood the meaning of the Law. "But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law." (Rom 9:31-32)

The Schoolmaster In Context

This second implication of the meaning of the word goes directly to the context in which Paul refers to the law as a pedagogue. Even if we did not have scholars of the Greek language to tell us what it meant during the first century, one would think people would have gotten the message from the context.

As pointed out above, the function of the schoolmaster was to "bring" to Christ. Why are the Jews God's chosen people? For what were they chosen? There is a Midrash (teaching/story) in the Oral Law that says God offered the Law to all other nations before the Jews, but none would accept it but them. Why were the Jews destined to accept the Torah and not everyone else? One idea, and a concept taught by Paul in the verse in question, is that the Jews were chosen to be the line through which the Messiah came. The Law was instrumental in keeping that line pure.

Another thought is that it was the Jews who were to be brought to Christ, specifically and independently of the rest of the world. Why were the Jews to be brought to Christ? Why not the entire world? Again Paul explains in this same book, Galatians. It has, in part, to do with the last part of the verse. Justification by faith is one of Paul's recurring themes. It appears here in Galatians, and in Romans and Hebrews. (See the article, "The Just Shall Live" in the September, 2000 issue of this bulletin.) The reason the Jews were chosen to accept the Law of Moses was so that they, specifically, might be made just by faith, as was our father, Abraham. It seems almost contradictory; I will give you a law so that you may be made just in spite of the law. Actually, though, that may be what is meant. The Law tends to make legalists out of people, or it makes anarchists. Either one tries to live by keeping the law in

detail or one gives up on keeping the law altogether. In either case, justification comes through one's own efforts, if at all. It also shows, though, that one can not keep any law perfectly. That should bring about the third option, faith in the mercy and grace of God. That was the purpose of the Law of Moses for the Jewish people.

But how does that relate to the rest of us? After all, God's mercy and grace are available even to those not under the Law of Moses. Paul found it significant that Jesus was Jewish. "But when the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." (Gal 4:4-5) Why is this significant? For the same reason that the Law was to bring the Jews to Christ. Jesus lived under the law to prove that justification by faith was possible under the Law. If he had been born a Gentile, then it would be possible to argue that salvation came through him only to the Gentiles, but the Jews could be justified by legalistic works of the Law. Paul says Jesus came as a Jew so the Jews could also receive the

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adoption that was to be offered to the whole world. If Jesus could save those under the Law, through faith, how much more so can he save those of us who were never under the limitations of that law!

The Law of Moses was not an instructor, but an escort. It disciplined God's people until they could learn the meaning of justification by faith that had been originally expressed to their, and our, father, Abraham. Because it served so well as an escort and disciplinarian, even those of us who are not bound by that law may have the adoption as sons, just as those who had been accompanied by the Law of Moses. We are both taught, not by the Law, but by the lawgiver, the Messiah of God.

TOO MANY CONGREGATIONS

The congregation in Corinth had problems. Boy, did they have problems! One needs only to read either of Paul's letters to the Corinthians to see some of their problems. People couldn't agree on how to worship. They couldn't agree on a preacher. They accepted blatant sin among them, and later wouldn't forgive it when requested. They couldn't work out their problems without going to court. They even had to be instructed on how to give. If they had a church building they might have argued over which direction the door should face. Maybe they even argued about which songbook to use. It seems they had almost every problem individual congregations have faced since then.

Some would say that the Corinthian church had some major disadvantages. On the other hand, maybe they had an advantage that churches in many cities don't have. They were the only congregation in town.

I can hear many Americans thinking, "That is an advantage?" After all, in many towns of even moderate size, if I disagree with something my congregation is doing, all I have to do is change my membership to another congregation. The congregation leaves me out of their meals; I find one that accepts me even if I can't afford to provide a dish for the potluck. I don't like the preacher; I go to a different congregation until I find one I like. They withdraw from me because I am clearly sinning; I go to a congregation that doesn't know about it yet—and then another and another until I run out of congregations. It seems that having more than one congregation in town has distinct advantages.

Does it really? The average size for a congregation of the churches of Christ is less than 100 members. Granted many of the smaller congregations are in small towns where there is only one congregation. But in a city of half a million people, where several congregations have a Sunday morning attendance between 250 and 500 people, there are congregations of less than 100 members. Why? Maybe not always, but in some cases there are fifteen small congregations in town because of problems like Corinth had. If you disagree with someone, start a new congregation. No wonder that in most cities the population of the church relative to the whole is no larger than the Jerusalem church after only one day of existence!

The danger of many congregations in a town is that it actually weakens the church. Perhaps the Corinthian church was stronger because of their problems. They had to work them out. Instead of going somewhere else, they had to work on their "interpersonal relationships," which is newspeak for love. Today it is too easy in some places to replace love with relocation. If I don't have to work at being a Christian in the trenches, I am weaker. "My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience." (Jas 1:2-3) If I face and go through problems I am better able to deal with the same, and other, problems later on.

When one has the choice there is nothing wrong with finding a congregation that is a good "fit." It is good to be in a congregation that is right for you. We just have to be careful that it is not at the expense of the "problems" that can make us grow.

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