

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Proper 14 – Year B

RCL Readings¹ – I Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Psalm 34:(1-7)8-15(16-22); Ephesians 4:17-5:2; John 6:37-51

Seasonal Introduction. The Christian calendar revolves around two principal feasts: Christmas (involving Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany) and Easter (involving Lent, Easter, and Pentecost). However, throughout the year there are also smaller feasts. The Thursday in the Twelfth week after Pentecost is a day to remember Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary should be called the most blessed among women, a disciple of Jesus, and is often referred to as the *Theotokos*, the God-bearer. The readings for this feast day include Luke 1:46-55 but also Psalm 34:1-9 as Mary may reference it in her song.

Common Theme. What is it that sustains us and our faith in Jesus the Messiah? Is it the miracles and powerful events in our lives, or perhaps attending conferences and hearing gifted speakers? None of those are bad things, of course, many of them are incredibly helpful in our faith journey, however, the thing they all have in common is that they don't last. The voice of the speaker fades; the powerful experience and emotional music fades; the amazing conference we went to last year reduces to a distant memory that becomes difficult to recall. Nothing in this world endures. The truth is that only the things of God last. Hallelujah, the word of the Lord endures forever.

Hebrew Context. The most common Hebrew word for angel is מלאך "*malach*" which means messenger, indicating one of the primary, but certainly not sole, functions of these heavenly beings is to serve as messengers of God.² Even though angels aren't mentioned in the creation story of Genesis 1-2, their existence is confirmed in the book of Genesis as they interact with Abraham and later his descendants. The time of their creation is, in fact, never confirmed although Job 38:7 may give a hint that angels were created prior to God laying the foundation of the earth.

Angels come from God to interact with men, as an angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven. But the sages also recognized that, in Jacob's dream he saw angels first ascending from earth before descending from heaven. This could be a hint that angels often begin their journey from earth, doing the tasks of God in this world before ascending to heaven to report, as may also have been the case in Job.

¹ Alternate RCL readings: II Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130

² There are other messengers in the Bible. Genesis 32, for instance, uses the same word for both angels and human messengers. First, Jacob met the angels (מלאך) of God. Immediately afterwards, Jacob sent messengers (מלאכים) to investigate the situation with Esau. Due to the antecedent, a reader could be mistaken in thinking that Jacob was able to send angels to do his bidding. The text likely does so on purpose.

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Despite thousands of years of sacred history and tradition much about angels remains largely unknown and mysterious. In Jewish tradition there are multiple opinions as to the true nature of these divine beings.

Modern Judaism suggests that angels are incorporeal in that as spiritual beings they cannot have physical characteristics. Likewise, the prevailing modern opinion, even among Christians, may be that angels are incorporeal beings there is no textual statement to verify this supposition.

They always appear in the Scriptures with anthropomorphic descriptions: that is they have arms, legs, appears as humans and can talk. Angels interact physically with their surroundings for example; Jacob wrestles with a physical angel of the LORD and they potentially had physical intercourse with the daughters of Adam in Genesis 6.³ However as incorporeal beings they would not require food, nor would they eat. Yet the ancient Scriptures suggest that they actually do eat.⁴ Psalm 78:25 describes the manna in the desert given to the Israelites as the “bread of heaven” and “the food of angels”.⁵ The questions we may have about angels—how many kinds of angels are there, how much do they differ, what do they do, do they serve God in different ways, are some physical while others are incorporeal—are both myriad and often unanswerable with confidence.⁶

John of Damascus stated, “An angel, then, is an intelligent essence, in perpetual motion, with free-will, incorporeal, ministering to God.” However, he goes on to state, “All that we can understand is, that it is incorporeal and immaterial. For all that is compared with God Who alone is incomparable, we find to be dense and material. For in reality only the Deity is immaterial and

³ In many early traditions, the sons of God were thought to be angels, such as mentioned in Job 1:6 and 2:1 (specifically fallen angels in Genesis 6:2: I Enoch, Jubilees, Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 22.4, Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian)—later traditions associated the sons of God with the lineage of Seth (Saint Augustine, Saint Jerome, and Genesis Rabbah 26.5). Even among the most learned of scholars, there has been no consensus.

⁴ Abraham not only prepared food for the angels that visited him, the angels actually ate the food provided for them (Genesis 18:8). Hebrews 13:2 may reference this occasion as hospitality always included the provision of food. It may also have referenced Tobit 12 or other times when men showed hospitality to a stranger.

⁵ The Hebrew and the Greek translation differ slightly as the Hebrew does not state that they ate the bread of angels but rather the bread of the mighty (אֲבִירִים), the Septuagint does use the term angels (αγγελων) which most of our English translations borrow from. In John 6:31, the people use the term from the previous verses, Psalm 78:23-24, the bread of heaven. This does not necessarily mean bread from the heavenly realms but simply bread from the sky. Nonetheless, the question has been asked whether angels eat even in heaven..

⁶ Note that I Peter 1:12 seems to state that angels wanted to know things about what God was doing with man just as we might want to know things about angels.

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incorporeal.” This sounds like a paradox, angels are incorporeal but also material and corporal. But this paradox would neither bother the Jewish scholars nor the early Orthodox fathers.⁷

I Kings 19:4-8. Although Elijah wasn't a writing prophet, Elijah was still one of the great prophets of Israel. Not only had there been a three year drought on the word of Elijah but he had also overseen the defeat of Baal on Mount Carmel.⁸ Immediately afterwards, God returned rain to the land. Yet, despite these great miracles that proved God was not only real but greater than the other gods of the region, Elijah was in despair. He retreated from before the wrath of Jezebel because she sought his life. Ironically, Elijah running from death, proceeded to pray for death—how quickly the victories of God faded from Elijah's memory.⁹

But perhaps we should sympathize with Elijah. Not only did Jezebel seek to kill him but these mighty miracles, the drought and famine in Israel and the success at Mount Carmel (and subsequent rain and harvest), may have felt like failures. The miracles and displays of sovereignty did not elicit the hoped for national spiritual revival. Instead, the evil monarchy remained in power and the Israelites continued to reject the Lord—not for a lack of evidence but in spite of the evidence. It was while Elijah was in the depths of his despair that the Lord came to minister to His prophet.¹⁰

⁷ We will try to provide a short Hebraic context regarding angelology, theophanies, the connections between the physical and spiritual realms in the coming week. Some of the information is what Jewish scholars thought at a specific time and place in history (and even then they will disagree with each other) but some of this thinking was known by the writers of Scripture and may illuminate why they wrote some of the things they did.

⁸ Mount Carmel, as it is close to the coast and farther north in the Levant, receives more rain than many parts of Israel or Judah. There were several Baal's in the Levant, but one of the common domains of Baal was control of weather. Another was rebirth, such as the turning of the seasons. The drought, fire (or lightning), and rain proved the power of God in the precise areas that Baal was most known to be powerful.

⁹ Elijah not only hit a low point in his ministry, depression made it difficult for him to think. But God refused to accept Elijah's prayer. Not only did God not take his life in the moment, Elijah was only one of two people in the Scriptures that did not suffer death. Only after his ministry was over and God had nothing left for Elijah to do on earth did God take Elijah from this earth.

One day I will have no ministry left on earth but until God takes me from this earth—whether I'm ten, fifty, or ninety—there must still be a reason for me to be here. Perhaps it is to be given time to repent or perhaps it is because God wants to work with and through me to further the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

¹⁰ Note that God didn't accuse Elijah or tell him that he shouldn't be depressed. Instead, Elijah was shown hospitality.

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First, Elijah received rest and nourishment and then was told to go to Mount Horeb, also known as Mount Sinai.¹¹ Horeb was known as a place to meet with God. It was the place that God called Moses to redeem the people of Israel. It was the place where God introduced His Torah—His teaching guidance and instructions to the world. It would be the place God would give Elijah his final instructions. But it would not be immediate even though God could have easily met Elijah on Mount Carmel, Beersheva, or anywhere in between—Elijah's journey would last for forty days while fasting throughout.¹² Elijah had to maintain the discipline to make the journey in the present despite the pain of the past as he looked with hope towards the future.

Psalm 34:1-8.^{13 14} David started the Psalm with a reminder of his own shortcomings, specifically his own fear and humiliation. However, he immediately continued with thanksgiving and praise for God's protection. David had been delivered from his enemies and his response was suitably

¹¹ Today, the location of the mountain of God is disputed by archeologists and scholars. The first time we encounter the term 'mountain of God' הַר הָאֱלֹהִים is in Exodus 3:1 where Moses was tending the flocks for his father in law in Midian. The exact extent of the territory of Midian is also disputed (although, according to some Egyptian sources, it did extend well into the Sinai) so that doesn't help in locating the place (particularly as Horeb was at the edge, or even just beyond Midian). With our current evidence, to state the definitive location of the Biblical Mount Sinai is likely a statement made from hubris. However, from the text, it appears that Elijah knew the location of Horeb.

Most commentators concur that Horeb, which occurs 17 times in the Hebrew Scriptures, and Sinai, occurring 35 times, are indeed the same mountain. Although there is no literal statement in the Bible that says they are the same location. Interestingly, Deuteronomy uses the name Horeb nine times while only using Sinai once. Perhaps because this was the name Moses was familiar with during his sojourn among Midian.

The meaning behind the names of Horeb and Sinai is unclear. Sinai almost certainly is related to the wilderness of Sin (not related to 'sin', the English word). One tradition suggests that Horeb (the dry place) is related to a sun god while Sinai is related to a moon deity. There is also a Jewish tradition that says one side of the mountain was called Horeb and the other was called Sinai. Interestingly, the New Testament never uses the name Horeb, preferring to always reference the mountain as Sinai.

¹² Forty days (and years) is a common phrase in the Bible. Moses was thought to have fasted for forty days on Mount Sinai, Elijah was given food prior to his travel to Mount Sinai, presumably as he would fast for the entirety of the journey, and Jesus also fasted forty days in the wilderness. All three fasts were directly related to meeting God (Moses and Elijah hearing the voice of God on the mountain and Jesus being sent out into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit before God called out to Him at His baptism).

¹³ ACNA may include Psalm 34:9-22

¹⁴ Psalm 34 has a specific history associated with it and the context can help illuminate what David was thinking, feeling, and declaring. I Samuel 21:10-22:1 tells of when David had to flee from his closest allies, his own father-in-law and his king, to seek refuge from his worst enemies, the Philistines of Gath. The name of the Philistine king is Achish in I Samuel while he is called Abimelech here in Psalm 34. Abimelech simply means, "My father is king" and was a common title taken by would-be rulers (such as Abimelech, son of Gideon, the first prince of Israel.)

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to bless and praise the Lord. Even when David had acted foolishly, God had not abandoned him for, as David wrote afterwards, “This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him”. In I Samuel 21:12 David feared Achish. But when David turned to seek God he was delivered from fear (of man) into fear (of God). For, “the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.”¹⁵

Psalm 34:8 is, perhaps, an unusual concept for the modern reader of Scripture. Using all the senses in worship of God and in walking out our faith was important for the Jewish people. As David declared, “taste and see that the LORD is good.” Too often we focus only on hearing or reading the word of God (often on Sundays) and too little on the thanksgiving, joy, or labour that comes with taste, touch or other everyday senses and activities we should also participate with to walk out our faith. God's goodness is (and should be) physically tangible.^{16 17}

David, however, wasn't the only one that needed to seek God. All the saints need to fear God. The opposite are young lions, likely a metaphor for those who think they are the strongest and

¹⁵ Some scholars take this to be an early example of the belief in guardian angels. Jesus, in Matthew 18:10 speaks of angels watching over children—specifically, children have their own angel as ἀγγελοι (angels) are given the possessive pronoun, “his / of him” (the child). Other passages where angels guard someone start as early as Genesis 19:15-16, when Lot's family are physically removed from Sodom, Psalm 91:11, where the concept of guardian angels is most explicit, to Daniel 6:22 and even Hebrews 1:14.

Other scholars identify the angel of the LORD, as mentioned here in Psalm 34:7, with God Himself (or Jesus). This comes from passages where the angel of the LORD, without literary inference on how or why, starts to talk as God Himself, such as in Exodus 3:2-6. Judges 6:11-18 is similar in that the Angel of the LORD first appeared to Gideon before the LORD spoke to him (although the Septuagint reverts to ἀγγελος Κυριου in Judges 6:14, 16). An example of where the angel of the LORD was not God is found in Luke 1:11, 19 where Gabriel is specifically named as an angel of the LORD.

¹⁶ The role of food was an incredibly important part of the instructions God gave to His people. Whenever Israel celebrated the works of God, often against their enemies, they were to also eat and drink (or fast). The popular Jewish saying “they tried to kill us, we won, let's eat” certainly fits well with Psalm 34. Whenever Israel settled down and were comfortable in their own lives, they were to give thanks for the food and drink God had given them. These were events that families physically did yearly, weekly, and even daily.

But even beyond celebrations of particular events, food was always directly related to God. For instance, Exodus 24:9-11, at first glance, seems quite strange. As Moses was preparing to go up Mount Sinai to receive the instructions of God, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel went with Moses part way towards the mountain (they were allowed to go that far and no further) but as they waited they “beheld God, and ate and drank.”

¹⁷ The RCL breaks Psalm 34 up into three readings: Proper 14 (Psalm 34:1-8), Proper 15 (Psalm 34:9-14), and Proper 16 (Psalm 34:15-22). However, the ACNA reads the entirety of Psalm 34 on Proper 14.

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believe that they do not need the help of God. They will go hungry. David instead invited children, the righteous, the brokenhearted to join with Him in celebration of God's protection.^{18 19}

Ephesians 4:25-5:2.²⁰ At the beginning of Ephesians 4, Paul started to inform the Ephesians how they should live (after stating everything God had done for them in the previous chapters). It's easy to say "walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called." But Paul had to explain what that would actually look like. In Ephesians 4:17 Paul gave the negative side, "you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do."²¹ This is an interesting thing to say as the community in Ephesus was composed mostly of gentiles.

In context, the early church in Asia and the Mediterranean was emerging from among the predominantly pagan, gentile nations of the Greco-Roman world. Roman Hellenism contained an abundance of idolatry, magic, and immorality. It wasn't even that Rome and Greece knew that idolatry, magic, or immorality was morally bankrupt but did them regardless. These activities were considered to be both the normal way of life and even a good thing at times.²² Judaism contrasted and clashed with these normatives as Judaism and the messianic faith brought a very different set of morals and ethics. Judaism had been challenging the concept of polytheism with monotheism for some time (and with some success).²³

The practical living that Paul urged were mainly sourced from the Torah. Put away falsehood, rather speak the truth. Be angry and do not sin.²⁴ Don't steal, instead work—not only so you can

¹⁸ Sometimes we measure ourselves and others by the standards of the world—looking at the young lions with envy. But David reminds us that God seeks those who are humble, who fear God, and who bless His name. We too can be among the righteous and the saints if only we seek God with these characteristics. That doesn't mean life will always be easy. The righteous face many afflictions. But God will still protect and redeem His servants.

¹⁹ The majority of Psalms were viewed with some idea of messianic expectations, regardless of whether the Psalm had any obvious prophetic references. As such, Psalm 34:20, although clearly not about the Messiah in David's writing, was, nonetheless, used in John 19:36 in reference to Jesus' death. In today's hyper-literary analysis, many of the prophecies mentioned in the Gospels (particularly in the Gospel of Matthew) seem like very poor scholarship. However, in the 1st Centuries, they would have made perfect sense as scholars used word association, paradox, and questions rather than our modern hermeneutics or systematic theology.

²⁰ ACNA may include Ephesians 4:17-24

²¹ Note that Paul never commands the Jewish believers to no longer live as Jews.

²² Although Paul does point out in Romans 1:18-32 that even the gentiles should have known better.

²³ The Pauline epistles have a lot to say regarding Jewish-Gentile relations because it was already a reality a generation or two before Christianity started to spread beyond its Jewish roots—God-fearing gentiles already attended synagogues throughout the world. The question Paul had to write about so often was how that relationship should play out.

²⁴ Anger is recognized as a real emotion for people but Paul counselled that we should not act in anger. Anger in and of itself is not sin, as God Himself gets angry. Uncontrolled aggression, however, may result in a multitude of sins and the breaking of fellowship within the believing community. If we do have

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eat but so that you can help someone else eat as well. Paul urged his readers to live by the moral and ethical standards of Judaism (and Jewish Christianity).

When the Ephesians were alienated from God they were far from Him, but now, like the Israelites before them, they could actually grieve God—for they had become part of the body of Christ.²⁵ The way they lived became important. And so, rather than bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, slander, and malice, they were now to be kind, tenderhearted and forgiving—imitating God.²⁶

And imitating God isn't something that we simply believe in or have faith in—it involves actions and behaviour. These are things that we ought to do. The community is not encouraged to think or believe that being kind is a good and worthwhile thing; they are encouraged to physically be kind and compassionate.²⁷

John 6:35, 41-51.²⁸ “I am the bread of life.” Without context and elaboration such a statement is not only confusing but could mean many different things. Jesus used many figures of speech to describe Himself in the Gospels: I am the good shepherd (John 10:11-18), I am the door (John 10:9), I am the true vine (John 15:1), I am the root (Revelation 22:16), etc.

Bread (לֶחֶם *lechem*) is the staple of human life in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jewish sages even state that, “If there is no flour (bread), there is no Torah. And where there is no Torah,

something against our neighbour, we are to stop what we are doing and go to our sister or brother and forgive them. Doing so gives “no opportunity to the devil.” It's interesting that, in the Lord's prayer, the request to be forgiven is paired with forgiving others. But there is a poetic argument that forgiving others is also paired with being delivered from the evil one.

²⁵ See Isaiah 63:10 and Psalm 78:40

²⁶ What does forgiveness look like? How many times have I grieved God? How many times have I walked away to be bitter and angry, selfish and hard-of-heart? How many times have I harmed the body of Christ through my words? Yearly? Monthly? Daily? Hourly? Hopefully not hourly, I have been called to live a life worthy of God. And yet... With this in mind, perhaps we can see how amazing God's forgiveness is—and thus what our own forgiveness should look like.

²⁷ This seems like such a ridiculous statement to have to write, and yet, so often in the Church there is such a huge emphasis put on not having to work for our salvation (because no work of ours can bring us salvation) that we don't even want a hint that works are important. They are important. Faith is more than belief, it is faithfulness—which is why we can say “by grace you have been saved through faith.” Who's faith? Not ours, God and His Messiah's faith—faith that was proven through the actions of God and Jesus. Faith that we know should try to imitate. Not to bring salvation for ourselves but to please God who loved us so faithfully—even to the point of offering up Himself for our salvation.

²⁸ ACNA may include John 6:37-40

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there is no flour (bread).²⁹ So what is the context of Jesus' statement and how did He elaborate on it?

At its core, the bread of life is about what sustains us. But Jesus did not reference a bread that was temporary sustenance—His was life-giving and eternal.³⁰ The manna that the people earlier (and later) asked for was “the bread from heaven”. Once again, Jesus too claimed that He came down from heaven. But unlike the manna, which only sustained Israel for one day at a time before rotting and only lasted for forty years while Israel had no access to grain to turn into bread, Jesus claimed that if they believed Him, if they listened to Him, they would even be raised on the last day.^{31 32}

However, believing that Jesus was from heaven, and yet not an angelic being, would have been difficult to believe. Certainly, they partially understood Jesus' statement for they turned around and said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” But Jesus redirected them to eternal, rather than earthly matters once more. Even those who miraculously ate the bread of heaven, manna, died in the wilderness—they didn't even make it to the promised land.

²⁹ *Pirkei Avot* 3.17 elaborates on the wisdom concerning God and His ways and doing the things of God. “Where there is no Torah, there is no proper behaviour” resonates well with many of us but it is balanced by saying, “Where there is no proper behaviour, there is no Torah.” Similarly it states, “Where there is no wisdom, there is no fear of God; where there is no fear of God, there is no wisdom.” (Tertullian, in *Prescription against Heretics* 43 echoes this statement.) It continues, “Where there is no understanding, there is no knowledge; where there is no knowledge, there is no understanding.” Finally comes the fruit, “Where there is no flour, there is no Torah; where there is no Torah, there is no bread.”

It concludes by stating, “One whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are numerous but whose roots are few, so that when the wind comes, it uproots it and overturns it. But one whose deeds exceed his wisdom, to what may he be compared? To a tree whose branches are few but roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, they cannot move it out of its place... It has no care in a year of drought; it does not cease to yield fruit” Bread, in *Pirkei Avot* 3.17, is related to the fruit of doing the deeds of God.

Vayikra Rabbah 9.3 similarly shares the story of a Rabbi who, though unknowledgeable in Bible, Mishnah, and Talmud, acted in the way of Torah by bringing peace to those he passed by.

³⁰ See also John 4:10-15 in regards to living water along with John 6:35.

³¹ Jesus, along with the crowd, clearly referenced Moses throughout the discussion. John, without directly quoting it, focused much of the debate around Deuteronomy 18 and the prophet like Moses who the people were to listen to and obey.

³² Belief in the resurrection and a portion (life) in the world to come was common in the Galilee without the influence of the Temple-based Sadducees.

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Being taught by God, believing in God (and believing in the full Hebraic sense)—this brings eternal life. And Jesus, coming from God, taught as one with authority. He was the prophet whom they should listen to “and whoever will not listen to My words that He shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of Him.”³³

Being raised in the last days is not the only form of eternal life. Eternal life is not something we receive only when we die. Jesus says, “Whoever believes has eternal life”, not “had eternal life” and not “will have eternal life”, but “has eternal life” right now.

The good news of the kingdom of heaven is that we have eternal life right now and not merely something that we hope for in the future. It's an important feature in the teaching of Jesus. Eternal life is something we have to embrace right now. It's something we have to apply to ourselves in our current circumstances. That knowledge and belief can sustain us in personal tough times, and it can impact our behaviour in so many positive ways for our families and for our communities.

Hebraic Perspective - Throughout recorded history, bread has been the staple diet in many ancient cultures. This is true particularly in the Middle East.³⁴ Bread is also a particularly important food in the Scriptures. In Jewish thought a meal is considered to be a meal only if it contains bread. Bread provides more than physical sustenance, it is also involved in the spiritual life of the community. Bread is a part of worship, such as the daily showbread before the Lord in the Tabernacle, and an essential element of some of the sacred holidays such as Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Bread was a part of the sacred history of Israel, miraculously appearing as manna in the desert and called the ‘Bread of Heaven’ and the ‘Food of Angels’ in the Psalms. The sages note that the manna was only provided for a short time, 40 years in total. It only came to Israel during a time of hardship and wanderings. There was no waste and there was always enough. Yet there were other food sources at the same time, such as meat from quail and dairy from the animals they brought with them from Egypt.³⁵ Heavenly bread was not the only food consumed in the desert.

³³ John 6:51-58 and the living bread that is Jesus' flesh will be further discussed in Proper 15 as this is part two in a three part message from Proper 13-15.

³⁴ Other cultures might compare the importance of bread in ancient Israel to rice, potatoes, cassava, or fufu in their own culture.

³⁵ Because Israelites were slaves in Egypt, there can be the assumption that they did not own anything. But Exodus 9:4 states very clearly that Israelites owned livestock even before they were given many goods from the Egyptians when they left Egypt.

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Nonetheless, the sages believed that bread provided for both the physical and spiritual.³⁶ God provided manna for the physical well-being of His people. But, even though they had other food, He also provided them daily bread so that they could see His provision. When they ate manna in the wilderness or bread made from grain grown in the promised land God's provision, both physical and spiritual, was supposed to be evident.³⁷

Because meal occasions always included bread in Hebraic thought, the blessing for a meal is generally called "*HaMotzi*" regardless of what you are eating, in which the blessing references that God brings forth bread from out of the earth. "Blessed are you, the Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." Interestingly, bread does not actually come from the earth as bread, what literally appears from the ground is grain. Yet, the blessing is not concerned with grain but with bread.

Bread is a finished product produced from grain. Who is involved in making bread? Both God, who makes the grain, and man, who fashions the grain into bread. Thus, simple everyday meal occasions also reveal the partnership that is played out by heaven and earth. There are two kinds of bread being thought of here: the bread of the earth and the bread of heaven. Both are important but the most important will always be the one from heaven.

ACNA Readings

³⁶ A later sage, Shneur Zalman, wrote in *Likutei Amarim*, "Just as physical bread nourishes the body when it is ingested and absorbed within it,... and only then will the body live and be sustained; similarly, through the knowledge and comprehension of Torah by the soul of a person who studies it well,... the Torah becomes food for the soul."

³⁷ The same should be true whenever we pray, "give us this day our daily bread" or pray before or after a meal in thanksgiving.

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Deuteronomy 8:1-10.³⁸ Israel's success and presence in the Land was linked to their morality and obedience in following God's commandments.³⁹ As Moses could not accompany the Israelites into Canaan, he urged the people to not forget the commandment of God when they no longer were receiving the daily miracles provided while they were in the desert.

Moses was speaking to a community that had been born in the wilderness. These were not the Israelites who had departed from Egypt; they had perished in the 40 years of wandering. Moses admonished the people to remember those years in the desert. And there was a lot to remember.⁴⁰

³⁸ The book of Deuteronomy is a single monologue, the longest in the Bible. For the bulk of the narrative, Moses was delivering his last instructions to the people of Israel on the plains of Moab as they were on the eve of the conquest of Canaan. He was exhorting them to prepare to go into the Land and set up a moral and just society that would reflect the character of God to the nations. Following the giving of the Law, Deuteronomy 8 is in the middle of a segment that runs from Deuteronomy 6 through to Deuteronomy 11. In it, the people of Israel were encouraged how to remember (and not forget) all the good things God had and would do and walk accordingly—both them and their descendants after them.

³⁹ This relationship between obedience and blessing very much revolved around the land of Israel. They would remain the people of God whether they were in the land of Israel or exiled. God would also call the people towards repentance, to return to Him and walk with Him, even if the people rebelled or forgot their God.

While there is a correlation in the Bible between morality and blessing there is also a correlation between righteousness and persecution. We should be careful about claiming promises (or even claiming a historical narrative) as ours when it was given to someone else. Particularly when we also ignore the parallel promises.

⁴⁰ For Moses, remembering was not simply the opposite of forgetting. The Scriptures mention that even God remembers. The first time the Bible says God remembered is Genesis 8:19, where it is written, "And God remembered Noah". It is not that the Lord forgot about Noah after the Flood had destroyed the earth, rather the text indicates that the Lord was about to do something. Whenever we see God remembering in the Scriptures we also see Him acting.

God remembered Noah and brought the Ark to rest and the Flood waters began to recede. God remembered Rachel in her barrenness and opened up her womb to allow her to have children. God remembered Israel and brought them out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and a strong arm.

When Jesus told His disciples to celebrate Passover (and what would become the Eucharist) He told them to "do this in remembrance of me". Not only do we mentally remember what He did, we aren't allowed to partake if we forget (don't do) the commands that Jesus gave us to be at peace with our brothers and sisters, forgiving them, and loving them as Jesus loved us.

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Memory should spur us to action.⁴¹ This is the case in this portion of Scripture too. In Deuteronomy 8:2-5, Moses urged the people to remember all the miracles God had done for them in the wilderness. The result of this remembering should have been simple, “So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God by walking in His ways and by fearing Him.”

God called the Land of Israel a “good land”. Good is a descriptive word that God often used. He called the things He fashioned during each day of creation “good”, and here He called the land of Canaan “good”. By definition, God knows what is good and what is not good, so the land of Israel must be good! To conclude otherwise is to question God's judgment.⁴²

This next section of Deuteronomy includes the seven species of agricultural products special to the good land of Israel, these are: wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and date honey. These are known as the שִׁבַּת הַמִּינִים *Shivat haMinim* or the Seven Species of five fruits and two grains. Only the first fruits from these seven products were to be offered in the Temple as the First Fruits offering.⁴³

Deuteronomy 8:10 is the reason Jewish people say grace at the conclusion of the meal and not before the meal, as in the Christian tradition. The text reads that the Israelites should eat and be satisfied, and then bless the Lord! Hence in Jewish tradition ‘Grace’ is said after a meal and not

⁴¹ If you remember your wedding day, I would hope you wouldn't respond with, “Ah yes, that happened once upon a time”. You should go to your spouse and show them that you love them more today than you did even back then. When I remember what God did for me, when I give the testimony of God's faithfulness in taking me from death and leading me to life I shouldn't say, “Huh, cool. At least I was saved. Well, back to being annoyed with my neighbour.”

⁴² Having said that, Moses compared the promised land to the land of Egypt in Deuteronomy 11:10. Egypt! Egypt, which was coveted by every empire in the Mediterranean (including Europe) and the Middle East because of the vast amount of food that could be cultivated along the Nile. Egypt, where whole fields could be irrigated simply by moving a bit of dirt on the ground to let the water flow into the field and then moved back to stop the flow of water. Egypt, one of the four great nations of the ancient world because of the Nile (along with the empires of the Euphrates, India, and China).

Israel is a land of hills and valleys, which requires rain from heaven lest there be drought, famine, and death. Israel was a land of milk (husbandry was generally done on the outskirts of society) and honey (likely from date trees, fruit orchards, and grapes—usually found in places where you couldn't have proper farms such as on the outskirts of the wilderness or on hills.) The land would also be full of rock and copper. If rock were a treasured resource, Israel would have been rich! It was not. Israel was hardly desirable by the standards of man. So why did God call it good?

Because it requires rain from heaven lest there be drought, famine, and death. It requires dependence on God. It is a land that the LORD God cares for; it is a land that the eyes of the LORD God always watches over.

⁴³ *Mishnah Bikkurim* 1.3

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before.⁴⁴ Of course, it is impossible to bless God simply by our words. God certainly didn't bless Israel or us by simply saying, "be blessed" and then letting us perish because He didn't provide us with rain. He blessed us with every spiritual blessing. After we have eaten and are satisfied with all that God has given us, we should bless God by doing the things He has commanded us to carefully live by: His commandments, His rules, and His statutes—we should walk in His ways and fear Him.

⁴⁴ So why do we find Jesus blessing bread before a meal in the New Testament without anyone complaining? The tradition of blessing God (not the food itself) before a meal was an introduction of the late Second Temple period. The conclusion of the rabbis was, if saying a blessing at the end is good, saying one at the beginning and at the end must be better.