

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Liturgical date – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 37:1-4,12-28; Psalm 105:1-6,16-22,45b; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

ACNA Readings – Jonah 2:1-10; Psalm 29; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:22-33

Introduction. The readings on this eleventh Sunday after Pentecost give us rich insight into how the righteous come to righteousness by faith in Christ, and also how they continue to live by faith in Christ during the ups and downs of life.

Common Theme. The theme of the whole Bible is about coming to know God and walking with him – by faith – trusting in him and his word and these readings today in particular. The goal and purpose of Torah – teaching – is to lead us to God and his incarnate Word in Yeshua. To quote the introduction to one of our passages: “The telos/goal of the Torah is Messiah” (Rom 10:4). In our readings, this theme is expounded theologically (Rom), and illustrated in practice in the life of a disciple (Matt), and of Joseph (Gen & Ps).

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28. What will become of your dreams? Unlike the stories of the patriarchs, Joseph's story is presented as one coherent narrative – mainly in Egypt. Strangely, there are no appearances of God but the implication is that God is working in a hidden way, guiding events, and even bringing good out of human wickedness (JSB).

This reading connects with the previous section in Genesis about Esau's genealogy and then opens a new section about Jacob's genealogy. The previous section – chapter 36 – starts: “These were the generations of Esau,” and goes on to list all his offspring – including chiefs, kings, and cities. In contrast, this chapter starts with Jacob still a nomad (37:1) with no chiefs, kings, or cities mentioned just the simple words: “These are the generations of Jacob. Joseph, being 17 years old,” and just a humble shepherd! Notice the numerical balance across Joseph's life. Joseph lives with his father – Jacob – for his first 17 years (37:2) and for his father's last 17 years (47:28).

The use of the word *lad* (*na-ar*, v. 2) suggests Joseph was helping or even serving his older brothers, who were the sons of his father's concubines. Alter suggests: “The adolescent Joseph is working as a kind of apprentice shepherd with his older brothers.” Where will such a humble beginning lead? Hardly an impressive indication of a thriving dynasty here, but there may be something in the name – Joseph means *he shall add* and this suggests Jacob's hope for a significant lineage. As the full story to the end of Genesis shows in God's purposes the apprentice shepherd will one day shepherd his brothers!

Regarding the opening verses, NET says:

Some interpreters portray Joseph as a tattletale for bringing back a bad report about them [i.e., his brothers], but the entire Joseph story has some of the characteristics of wisdom literature. Joseph is presented in a good light—not because he was perfect, but because the narrative is showing how wisdom rules. In light of that, this section portrays Joseph

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as faithful to his father in little things, even though unpopular—and so he will eventually be given authority over greater things.

However, the parental favouritism expressed here by Jacob is a recurring theme in these patriarchal narratives, tainting his mother and father and damaging his brother. And here he is, repeating the same with his wife Rachel's son! The term *coat of many colours* – made famous even in musicals today – is not certain. The only other reference to this term is a garment worn by Tamar in 2 Sam 13:19. The usual translation of *many colours* is from the Greek LXX, but the Hebrew word could be from a root meaning “with long sleeves” (NEB, NRSV) or “richly embroidered” (NIV). But everyone knew it set Joseph apart as the favoured one! Hertz adds: “We now know from the painted tombs of the Bene Hassein in Egypt that, in the Patriarchal age, Semitic chiefs wore coats of many colours as insignia of rulership. ... Jacob ... marked him for the chieftainship of the tribes at his father's death” (p.142).

Notice where the hatred of Joseph's brothers leads literally: “they were not able to say to him ‘shalom’” (v. 4). And the contrast when Jacob sends Joseph to Shechem to find out about his brothers' well-being. The words are literally: “Go now and see the shalom of your brothers and the shalom of the sheep” (v. 14). Interestingly, Joseph did eventually reach Shechem in peace, but after his death, as told in the book of Joshua (24:32) (JSB).

The brothers enjoying a meal together at a time like this (v. 25), shows extraordinary callousness and cruelty to Joseph but in God's providence again later in the narrative the tables are turned, and Joseph arranges a meal in which he is the master, and they are his nervous dependents (43:29–34).

The verbs for *shed*, *throw*, and *lay* (v. 22) all sound alike in Hebrew – from verbs *shapach* for *shed* and *shalach* for *throw* and *lay-on* – so the phonetic repetitions draw attention to Reuben's emotional appeal. Reuben clearly shudders at the thought of taking life and shedding human blood, which is in keeping with the command to Noah after the flood (9:6). And not giving a person a proper burial – throwing him in a pit – was considered an atrocity in this culture. In following Reuben's proposal, it suggests they are unwittingly following God's plan. They do not kill Joseph but throw him in the pit alive. “The key word of the chapter, not surprisingly, is ‘brother,’ culminating in Judah's ironic words (2.27): ‘let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother....’” (Fox).

The reading gives lots of details that are sometimes obscure to modern readers as we try to understand the geography and culture. For example, it helps to know that Dothan lay on a trade route which went from Gilead – the country northeast of Jordan – west across the valley of Jezreel and south along the Philistine coast to Egypt. The reference to Ishmaelites and Midianites in the narrative may be confusing, but they appear to have had an overlapping relationship at the time (Judg 8:24). Ishmael was the brother's great uncle and the only Ishmaelites at this point would have been second cousins. The

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narrative was written later, and this was a generic term for the semi-nomadic traders of Arab stock whose homeland was east of Jordan.

Our reading is just a snippet of the long narrative of Joseph. But our next reading, in the Psalms, will give us a perspective on his life after the fact. Standing back from the early details, we come to see Joseph as the beloved son of his father, who sought the shalom of his brothers, and who was betrayed and sent into a pit; but in God's divine purpose, he was sent ahead of his brothers for their salvation. Joseph is, therefore, a *type* of the Messiah, which hints at the telos of the Torah in Christ.

Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b. Recall his miraculous deeds...children of Jacob, his chosen ones. The psalmist summons Israel to praise God because he delivered his people from Egypt in history and in fulfilment of his covenantal promises to Abraham (vv. 6, 9–11). The psalm is a historical psalm covering stories from Genesis to the promised land and includes the way God sent Joseph ahead of his family, to save them from famine (NET).

God's deeds and wonderous acts are those recorded in the Torah, which the psalm goes on to recite and reinterpret. The "portents" in v. 5 probably refer to the wonders in Egypt and "judgements" probably recalls the giving of the law at Sinai. The audience is addressed as the seed of Abraham and the children of Jacob (v. 6) thereby making them the fulfilment of God's promise to give Abraham many offspring (Gen 15:3–6) and to connect the readers of the psalm as *his chosen ones* with the *chosen* forefathers.

Later, the psalm also shows the providence of "the LORD our God" working in Joseph's story. We would not have known from Genesis, but the psalm tells us, that God was in fact behind the famine in Egypt, and it was God who sent a man – Joseph – ahead of his chosen people! Joseph probably did not feel *at the time* that his suffering, servitude, and exile were for God's purposes, but he realised it at the end (Gen 50:20)! Also, the allusion to Joseph in shackles (v. 18) does not come directly from the words of Genesis but may be the psalmist's application of Joseph's experience to the later experience of the exiles from Judah, encouraging them to believe in God's providential care. And it applies to our sufferings also!

The psalm tells us Joseph's sufferings were for a time, "until the time his word came (to fulfilment)." This may be referring to Joseph's original dreams, but in this context, it may refer to Joseph's prediction about the fate of Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker (Gen 41:9–14). The parallel half of the verse says literally: "the word of the LORD refined him." The implication is that God spoke with Joseph in many personal ways throughout his life, and the word he heard kept him trusting in the Lord and refining his faithfulness. Joseph could never have known at the time that God was behind it all, and he now gets "the ruler of nations" – the Pharaoh – to set him free from prison and to put him in charge of all his palace, property, and personnel (vv. 20–22)!

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How encouraging for us to have the psalmist's perspective on the story of Joseph, and this should encourage us to trust God in the toughest times and to act faithfully on the basis of his word.

Romans 10:5-15. The Telos of the Torah. This passage has an unusual variety of translation challenges. Unfortunately, some of the translation choices which have been made through the centuries have been from a *super-successionist* or *replacement theology* point of view. This is not the place to weigh all the issues and arguments but to point out the nuances for your understanding.

The use of the English word *law* for translating the Greek word *nomos* in the New Testament – when translating the Hebrew word *Torah* – is one of the generic problems! The English and Greek words tend to be more *legal* and bring to mind courts and lawyers arguing over semantics. However, the Hebrew word *Torah* means more like *instruction* or *teaching* and is always set in a biblical narrative context. Later, the term came to be used for the first five books, as *the Torah*. It is clear in our reading that Paul is not dismissing the Torah – he uses quotations from the Torah – and the *Torah* of the wider Tanakh/Hebrew Scriptures – to argue his case for righteousness by faith. To give the intended nuance, we will use the word *Torah* for *teaching* and *instructions* from now on.

Paul's argument actually starts in chapter nine (Rom 9:30) and continues through the whole of chapter ten. Our reading is an excerpt in the middle of this, but we need, at least, to pick up the thread from nine about “the righteousness out of faith” – or the righteousness based on faith – if we are to follow the argument.

A literal translation of 9:31 would be “but Israel, pursuing the Torah about righteousness, did not attain to the Torah.” This is saying that the scriptures were intended by God to bring Israel to righteousness, but Israel misunderstood or misapplied them and so did not achieve their goal.

Why not, says Paul, in verse 32? Put very directly, he says it was because they pursued the Torah about righteousness “not out of faith, but out of works.” If they had pursued the Torah out of faith, they would have come to the same goal or conclusion that Paul did! But instead of using faith – or trust in God – they determined to achieve the goal of the Torah through their own self-motivated works.

And why was that, says Paul. Well, they stumbled over the stumbling stone (9:33)! In this, Paul is quoting from the prophet Isaiah (28:16.) God had put a stone – a rock – in Zion that many stumbled over. The Rock was meant to wake up those who were trying to reach the goal of Torah righteousness in their own way. As the quote from Isaiah shows, this Stone/Rock was a *him* – a person! The one believing in *him* would not be put to shame. Isaiah – and Paul – are saying that the one believing in the Rock would not fail to reach the goal of the Torah but would come to God's righteousness in *him*.

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So, in chapter ten, Paul explains that he yearns for the salvation of his fellow Israelites (v. 1). He says they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not according to this true knowledge (*epi-ginōskō*); that is, the knowledge that righteousness in the Torah is ultimately achieved through faith in the Rock (v.2). He uses word play to say that instead of going for this knowledge (*epi-gnosis*) about the righteousness that comes from God, they ignore it (*a-ginōskō*), and they spend their efforts seeking to gain their own righteousness their own way, instead of submitting to the Rock to gain God's righteousness (v.3).

And then, suddenly in the argument, Paul introduces the Messiah – Christ – which is immediately obvious in the scriptures he has been quoting. But if we follow the argument from 9:30, the Rock that God has laid in Zion was a person! Paul sees that Rock as God's Messiah. But here comes the real teaser! Many translations have stumbled over verse four and translated it as saying that the Messiah/Christ is the end or termination of the law.

However, the Greek word here is the word *telos* – τέλος – and usually means *goal, culmination, purpose, or fulfilment*. The translation of the verse is then: “For the telos of the Torah is Christ, for righteousness for all the ones believing.” It seems good to retain the phrase “the telos of the Torah” as it points us to the deep meaning here and also benefits from the alliteration. And, bringing out the essence of this whole passage – the telos of the Torah is Christ with a view to righteousness for all the ones believing and trusting in him. So Christ is not the end of the Torah, but the purpose of it! Everyone who stumbles over this Rock humbles himself before him, trusts in him, and comes to know the very essence and purpose of the Torah and so comes to God's righteousness by faith in him. What an amazing truth!

Paul continues to show the foundation of this view in the Torah itself. He says, Moses writes – in the present tense, as if present there with us – about the righteousness based on the Torah and then quotes from the centre of the Torah (Lev 18:5): the one who does these things will live by them (v.5). So, Torah-righteousness is gained through doing the things written in the Torah. But Paul then refines our understanding of this Torah-righteousness, arguing from a series of quotations from Deuteronomy that it is the right acting that comes from trusting God and his word, not in religious compliance for its or one's own sake.

It is wise first to read this passage to understand the context of the extracts being quoted by Paul. If we read Deut 9:1-5, we see Moses is commanding Israel at the beginning of the book to cross over into the land that the Lord has promised them. He warns Israel: “Do not say in your heart ... it is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess the land.” Moses is warning them not to be proud as if it's their own achievement because it is, in fact, God's gift to them.

Paul starts with the words from chapter nine, in the first section of Deuteronomy – “Do not say in your heart” – and then jumps to the last section of the same book and uses three quotes from Deut 30. If we also read Deut 30:11-20 and notice the context there. Moses is saying: The word of God to his people is

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not at a great distance, high or low, so you have to work hard to get to it, but it is near you, in your mouths and hearts. Moses concludes: “Therefore, choose life ... loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days.” Paul uses three quotes from this very passage, and in each, he changes “the word,” as it is in Deut 30, and makes it the Messiah personally and specifically! The righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, Who will ascend into heaven? – that is, to bring Messiah down – or “who will descend into the abyss? – that is, to bring Messiah up from the dead. What does it say? The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart? *That is the word of faith that we preach.*

Paul has argued that the Rock is a person and that the *telos* of the Torah is the Messiah; now, it is clear that the word of God is that same Messiah. Paul applies the words of Deuteronomy 30 to the Messiah – we don’t need to work to get to heaven to bring God’s Word down, as he has already come down to earth in the Incarnation of the Messiah. We don’t need to struggle with death itself – as the Messiah has died, gone into the Abyss, conquered death and hell, and risen again. God has come near to us in the Messiah, and he is the one about whom Paul preaches, and he is the one in whom we must trust for salvation, righteousness, and life. So if we confess with our mouth Yeshua is YHWH – assumed here and in the quote from Joel 2:32 in verse 13 – and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead; we will be saved.

Paul then quotes Isaiah 28:16 again – as he did at the start, in 9:33 – to confirm that *everyone* who believes like this – in the Messiah, the Rock – will never be ashamed because they will have the righteousness of God (v.11).

And smoothly, Paul then picks up the word *everyone* and argues that, therefore, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek for the same Lord – YHWH – is Lord of all, who richly blesses all who call on him (v.12). Paul adds another scripture from Joel 2:32 that proves the same thing: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord (YHWH) will be saved.” Finally, another scripture is brought in to show how beautiful all this is, how timely, that people can come to call on the name of the Lord through those sent with this message, quoting from Isa 52:1: “How beautiful – timely – are the feet – the arrival – of those who proclaim the good news.”

So Stern says: “Israel was correct in believing that the Torah offers righteousness. But they were wrong in thinking that righteousness could be obtained on the ground of works apart from trusting, for God honors only ‘trust-grounded obedience ... Paul spends 10:1-13 explaining how the Torah of Moses is grounded in trusting” (p.393). Yeshua the Messiah is the *telos*/purpose/goal of the Torah, and in him and through him we come to the righteousness and right actions the Torah of God always intended.

Matthew 14:22-33. Little-faith one, why do you doubt? Notice, as we saw with Joseph, that Jesus sent the disciples into this testing experience – in fact, the clause is literally “he compelled them!” They were

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obeying his word at this point and so they could trust his word implicitly and move out by faith. And how beautifully Jesus modelled the faithful human being – in caring for the crowd and the disciples – and after all that, at the end of a demanding day, he went up the mountain to pray alone for a few hours – “the fourth watch of the night” was 3 am to 6 am.

When the storm hit, the boat was many stadia from the land – a stadion is 185 metres – it was probably a mile or two, and it says the boat was being battered by the waves. Jesus comes to them walking on the sea, and they wondered whether it was a ghost – probably a spirit from the abyss. This terrified the disciples more than the storm. He tells them to be courageous and not afraid. As we have seen, Jesus commanded them to take this journey, so they need to have no fear. But note Jesus' use of “It is I.” This is *ego eimi* – *I am* in Greek – and in Matthew is probably an allusion to the divine name in Exodus 3:14 (and Isa 41:4; 43:10; 47:8, 10). As Beale says: “In demonstrating his mastery over wind and waves, Jesus clearly is exercising prerogatives previously reserved for Yahweh himself (cf. Job 9:8; Ps 77:19).”

And as our eyes turn from Jesus to Peter, how rich is this example of the life of faith? When we step out in obedience to the voice of Jesus; we can walk on the waves, but when we take our eyes off the Master and look at our turbulent circumstances; we sink beneath them! What a wonderful metaphor for salvation and a faithful life. And in keeping with Paul's theological argument in Romans ten, when we are sinking and cry out “Lord save me;” he reaches out his hand and saves us. This is the faith that saves and the faith that maintains us in our walk.

Both Jesus and Peter then walk back to the boat and get in, and the disciples are led to spontaneous worship: “Truly, you are the Son of God.” This title for Jesus is used a number of times in Matthew (2.15; 3.17; 4.3, 6; 8.29). To show how unique this was, JANT states: “No Jewish text identifies the Messiah as the son of God.” We are being called to recognise the Rock is Messiah, and he is Yeshua – the Son of God, who saves us and walks with us in a faithful relationship.

Further reading.

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ACNA Readings

Introduction. My husband and I had planned a boat trip down to the lake to watch the celebratory fireworks explode in rainbows over the placid waters. Then our guests told us that they couldn't go in boats. "We are terrified of deep water." As we listened to them, we realized that a fear of deep water can be an overmastering terror.

Common Theme. Today's readings reflect the fear of both real and symbolic deep waters. For Jonah and Peter, the deep water pressed hard on them. For the psalmist, St. Paul, and us, the waters may be largely symbolic of troubles that we feel are ready to drown us. Whether the waters are real or metaphoric, how do we deal with fear when God takes life out of our control? That is the question asked in today's readings.

Jonah 2:1-10. It is a little unfair to start today with Jonah as his poem in Jonah 2 provides the final answer to today's question. Looking for more behind the answer, we see that Jonah was a prophet to Jeroboam II – the king of prosperous and independent Israel (788-744 BCE). Jonah is loyal to his king and country (2 Kgs 14:25-27).

To his dismay, he has been told by God to do something deeply repugnant to him. It is not only a matter of ethnic hatred or even national policy – although these were probably involved. The Assyrian hordes were infamous in antiquity for their surpassing brutality. For Jonah to save these people from what Jonah must have considered a just punishment by a righteous God was unthinkable, and so he ran.

Or rather he set sail. The vessel was beset by a storm that only grew worse until Jonah decided he must be thrown overboard to save the ship. He was eventually thrown overboard, sank, and was swallowed up. God had taken drastic control over his life – not to mention the life of the obedient fish, who, like Balaam's donkey, obeyed his Creator better than Jonah did. Imagine if the fish had refused to swallow Jonah because Jonah – as was later proved – was unfit for piscine digestion!

Jonah 2 is Jonah's description of what happened to him after he was thrown into the sea. It is a prayer to God in which he describes calling out to the Lord from the belly of Sheol – often translated as *the land of the dead*. Instead of turning his back on the Lord, he held the Lord responsible for God's full control of what had happened to him. Furthermore, Jonah affirmed that the Lord heard his voice, and though Jonah was cast into the heart of the seas and the terrifying flood surrounded him and all God's waves passed over him, Jonah was convinced he would "look again upon your holy temple." Jonah's final word was "Salvation belongs to the Lord." Following this beautiful poem filled with glorious affirmations of

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faith, the most ironic chapter ending in all Scripture tells us, the fish vomited Jonah up on dry land. At the end of chapter two, Jonah is left on the shore in a puddle of fish guts – or plankton pieces depending on your understanding of the identity of the sea animal.

Jonah may be written in the ancient literary form which puts the high point of the story in the middle. If this is the case, then the high point – the major teaching of the book of Jonah – is Jonah's declaration, "Salvation belongs to the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). When we lose control over our lives, when God takes us down to the roots of the mountains and the deep waves roll over our heads, he is still the God of our salvation. Out of his experience of running away from God, Jonah is saved.

Psalm 29. In the reading from Jonah, we saw God's power over both the sea and the living creation – Jonah and the fish. Psalm 29 extends our view of God's power in an ecstatic psalm of praise. In it, the heavenly beings – Hebrew has "sons of God" – are enjoined to ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, which are the themes of the psalm.

First God's strength is referred to here as the voice of the Lord. This is reminiscent of the creation account in Genesis 1, in which the Lord speaks – uses his voice – and the world is created. In the psalm, the voice of the Lord destroys and dominates the waters thundering over them (v. 3). The voice that creates is also the voice that can destroy.

The voice then moves onto the dry land breaking the largest trees – the cedars of Lebanon – with an earthquake in Lebanon and Sirion – Mt. Hermon to the north of ancient Israel. The earthquake may be reminiscent of God's theophany at Sinai at the time of the giving of the Law (Exod 19:17-20). He then dominates the desert in verses seven and eight, as in the 40 years Moses and the Israelites wandered there.

God next dominates the animal world in verse nine. This text could be modified to read either "causes hinds to calve and ewes to [give] early birth," or "causes oak trees to tremble and strips forests bare." These emendations create parallelism, but many texts have the deer calving and the trees being stripped. In any case, the deserts are in God's control.

Finally, as Jonah did, we come to God's temple where God is worshipped by human followers at the end of verse nine All say Glory! Could this be a reference to the psalmist's present time? The heading for the psalm is "Psalm of David" in which case the temple is still a tabernacle, with Solomon's temple still to be built with David's provision.

So, we return to the waters, the Flood, upon which God sits enthroned forever. This may be reminiscent of God's great destruction by the Flood in the time of Noah. Could this also be for us a suggestion of Revelation 22:1, in which the river of the water of life flows from the throne of God?

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The psalm concludes with a prayer for God's people to have both strength and peace. The waters may be metaphoric, but the problems are no less difficult. God, however, will, in his foreseen time, resolve them.

Romans 9:1-5. The Romans passage is very brief but — like Psalm 29 — calls to mind past events. Paul reprises for us the legacy of Israel including the glory, the giving of the law at Sinai, and the Temple worship that we saw in Jonah 2 and in Psalm 29.

Oddly he does not remind us of the *water* events — the crossing of the Sea and the Jordan as Israel leaves Egypt and enters the Land. Perhaps the crossing of deep waters was so well known it went without saying.

However, Paul does remind us additionally of the adoption (Eph 1:5), the covenants — at Sinai, Exod 6:7; and to David, 2 Sam 23:5; the New Covenant, Jer 31:31-34 — and the promises beginning with the promises to Abraham; of people, place, and blessing for all. He then turns to the heritage of the patriarchs which includes, most significantly for Christians, the human ancestry of Christ himself and his heritage as a Jew.

Paul does not stop there, however. He reminds us in verse five that Christ is God over all blessed forever. This is our faith and our hope this very day!

Matthew 14:22-33. I have always thought that Jesus was rather curt with Peter when he says that Peter has little faith. Wouldn't it take a lot of nerve to get out of that boat and step into the storm? Surely what Peter had was faith? Or was it mere physical courage? Or was Jesus making the point that faith should take us not just out of the boat but all the way to him? I would love to hear your sermons!

About the RCL author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010-2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.

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