

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Genesis 12:1-4a

NRSV

In a time of migration of peoples about 4,000 years ago, Terah has travelled west with his son Abram, Abram's wife Sarai and his grandson Lot from Ur, near the delta of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Terah and his family settle for a time in "Haran" (11:31), where Terah dies. Abram now comes to centre-stage.

God makes a pact with Abram: if Abram will leave behind his land and kin (and his pagan past), and live in "the land that I will show you" (12:1, cease to be semi-nomadic), God will honour him in seven ways: (1) make of him "a great nation" (v. 2), (2) confer favour on him ("bless you"), (3) make his name renowned ("great") (4) make him a vehicle of good fortune ("be a blessing"), (5) show favour to those who show him favour ("bless", v. 3), (6) exclude those who show him disrespect ("the one ..."), and (7) as other peoples come to trust in God, they will find themselves similarly blessed. In doing "as the Lord had told him" (v. 4), Abram shows his trust (faith) in God. This covenant marks the start of communal relations with God. Being blessed seven ways is being blessed totally: he, his family and his people. In v. 5, "the land" is identified as Canaan. At Shechem, when Abram erects an altar at a pagan shrine ("the oak of Moreh"), God promises the land to his descendants. At "Bethel" (v. 8), Abram builds another altar. God is god of the whole land. Abram and his family continue southward in stages and, due to famine, go on to Egypt – to return later.

Psalm 121

NRSV

Perhaps a pilgrim asks the rhetorical question in v. 1, as he journeys through *hill* country, where pagan gods were once thought to dwell. He begins to answer his own question (v. 2): his help is from God, the creator. Then another voice, perhaps a priest, continues, telling of God's protection of Israel: God is always vigilantly protecting the way of the pilgrim (v. 3). God is "your shade" (v. 5): he protects him from sunstroke and from moon rays (then thought to be harmful). He protects the faithful "from all evil" (v. 7), throughout their lives.

Romans 4:1-5,13-17

NRSV

Paul has written that one can attain a right relationship with God through faith, without living by Mosaic law. Now he takes Abraham as an example; he asks: what can we conclude about faith vs. Law by looking at Abraham's life? Judaism claimed that Abraham kept the Law before it was given, that he was godly ("justified", v. 2) because his "works" were in accord with the Law. Paul rejects this claim; rather, it was, as Genesis shows, Abraham's faith which counted for him ("reckoned", v. 3) as godliness. God "justifies the ungodly" (v. 5). For the worker, "wages" (v. 4) are expected, but for one who trusts (with no certainty of reward),

such trust counts with God. In vv. 6-9 Paul quotes from Psalm 32 and Genesis, interpreting the verses jointly as showing that those who trust in God obtain his favour, whether they be keepers of the Law or trusters in God. Paul then argues that, because Abraham trusted in God's pact before he was circumcised, Abraham's faith (and not his keeping of the Law) was what counted for him with God (v. 10). Indeed, he says, circumcision was a confirmation of the right relationship he had attained through faith. It made Abraham "ancestor" (v. 11) of all who trust in God, both Jews (v. 12) and non-Jews (v. 11).

So the "promise" (v. 13) that Abraham would be father of many nations ("inherit the world") came as a result of his faith and not his law-keeping. If the only way of achieving union with God is through keeping the Law, faith is irrelevant and the promise to Abraham is nonsense (v. 14). Because it is impossible to keep every law, sin is inevitable; God's response to sin is punishment, breakdown of human relations with God: "the law brings wrath" (v. 15). But for those living by faith, transgression ("violation") of the Law is irrelevant. So a right relationship with God "depends on faith" (v. 16), resting on God's "promise" of "grace", his gift of love – made not only to Jews but also to all those who trust in God, "of many nations" (v. 17). God spoke these words to Abraham; God gives spiritual "life" to the unbeliever; he restored Isaac's life when he was as good as dead; he brought a son "into existence" to Abraham and Sarah, in their old age. They were "fully convinced" (v. 21) that God could do it. If we trust in God and have faith in the power of Christ's resurrection, our trust will count with God too (vv. 24-25).

John 3:1-17

NRSV

Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee and teacher, comes to Jesus to ask him questions. He comes secretly ("by night", v. 2) because a man of his stature could not be seen consulting Jesus. He has understood from Jesus' miracles ("signs") that Jesus is "from God". But Jesus (in v. 3) tells him that he has not yet understood the main point: to "see the kingdom of God", spiritual rebirth is required. Nicodemus misunderstands: he thinks that Jesus is speaking of *biological* rebirth (v. 4). Being "born from above" (v. 3) requires being baptised (v. 5). "Flesh" (v. 6) and "spirit" were seen as constituents of life, of which spirit (breath, wind, *pneuma*) was the life-giving force. Many things can be seen only in their effect; such is birth in the Spirit (v. 8). Still Nicodemus doesn't understand: in order for him to do so, he needs to have faith ("receive our testimony", v. 11). Then, in v. 12, Jesus says: you, Nicodemus, don't comprehend what can be told in analogies ("earthly things", i.e. "wind", v. 8), so how can you possibly believe mysteries? Vv. 13-17 are a monologue. Only Christ has descended and ascended. The "serpent" (v. 14) is mentioned in Numbers 21:9-11: the people were bitten by poisonous snakes; some died; others became gravely ill. Instructed by God, Moses mounted ("lifted up") a bronze snake on a pole. Those who looked at this emblem (trusting in God) were healed, lifted up, given life. God in his love provides eternal life to all who believe (v. 16). If you wilfully do not believe, you will perish (v. 18); there is no third alternative! God's intention is that you believe, rather than be condemned (v. 17).