

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 24:34-38,42-49,58-67

NRSV

Isaac has grown up, and Sarah his mother has died in Hebron. Abraham has insisted that his son marry a woman of his own clan, of his choosing. He has therefore made a pact with his head servant (v. 2): to return to "Aram-naharaim" (v. 10, Haran) to find a wife for Isaac. The servant has come to the well at Haran, where he has prayed to God that he will give a particular sign to identify the woman God has chosen. Rebekah, daughter of "Bethuel" (v. 15), has shown that she is the one (by offering water to both the servant and his camels); she has said that she is kin to Abraham, and has offered hospitality. When she has told her brother Laban, he has welcomed the servant and his party and has offered them a meal. But first, the servant insists, he must state the purpose of the trip.

It seems that the family worships Abraham's God (v. 50), although they also have household gods (see 31:19, 30). "Bethuel" (Abraham's nephew) and his son "Laban" recognize the servant's mission as divinely inspired; they decide that Rebekah shall become Isaac's wife, but they will ask her for her consent. She concurs (v. 58). Laban and Bethuel bless her: may she become the mother of many; may they be politically and militarily powerful ("gain possession ...", v. 60): a blessing given to Abraham earlier (22:17). Isaac now lives at an oasis in the Negev Desert, in southern Canaan (v. 62). ("Beer-lahai-roi" means *well of the living one who sees me*; it was so named by Hagar when she saw God, appearing as an angel, there.) That Rebekah notices Isaac before she knows who he is shows that God brings them together. The servant calls Isaac "my master" (v. 65), so it seems that Abraham has died while he was away. Custom forbade a bride seeing her future husband's face before marriage, so she dons a "veil". Isaac welcomes her to his house ("tent", v. 67) and they are married.

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

NRSV

This book is a collection of love songs; dialogues between a man (identified as a shepherd in 1:7, and as a "king" in 1:4, 12) and a woman. In our passage, the woman (the bride) speaks first. She sees and hears her beloved approaching, coming powerfully, swiftly and gracefully, "like a gazelle" (2:9), until he reaches "our wall", the enclosure within which the "daughters of Jerusalem" (1:5) are. He peers within. In 2:10-13, the bridegroom speaks to her, his "love", his *darling* (in another translation). It is Spring; he celebrates creation and nature. He invites her to "come away" (2:13) with him, (as can be deduced from the sexual symbols in the book), to enjoy sexual intercourse. In 2:14, the bridegroom beseeches her, "my dove", to let him see her and hear her voice. She responds (2:15): she is not as inaccessible as he thinks. In 2:16-17, she invites him to be with her "on the cleft mountains".

Judaism has seen these songs as having another level of meaning: the love between God and his people; the man and woman are then the Lord and Israel. Christians have also allegorized mutual love: between Christ and the Church. But the basic meaning is literal: love, including sexual love based on human instincts, is blessed, a part of God's created-ness, to be valued and enjoyed.

Romans 7:15-25a

NRSV

Paul has written of two ways of being: (1) the old, where being subject to the Law, people continually contravene it (sin), are dependent on God's love to restore them to harmony with him, and in sinning ensure that they have no spiritual life after death, and (2) the new, attained through baptism, where through Christ sin is no more, and physical death leads to eternal life. But we have not yet fully attained the new, so we are still influenced by evil. Now Paul asks: how could sin (personified) use the Law, which is good, to destroy humans? Humans are at fault, not the Law. He endures conflict between what he does, his "actions", his exterior, and his "inmost self" (v. 22), his "mind" (vv. 23, 25). His true self abides by "the law of God" (v. 22), by God's ways; it sees that what he does is not what he wills, and is what he hates (v. 15). Vv. 17 and 20 seem to say that sin, not he, is responsible for his actions, but realize that the "sin" is his sin. He is caught up in sin; he *wills* to obey God, but he can't! (v. 18). So it seems to be a principle of life ("law", v. 21) that whenever he *wills* good, the devil is never far away. His body is "at war" (v. 23) with his being. It is God, through Christ, who "will rescue" (v. 24) him from this sorry estate.

Matthew 11:16-19,25-30

NRSV

John the Baptist has sent his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is the expected Messiah. Jesus has invited John to decide for himself: does he not do deeds of healing as foretold of the Messiah in Isaiah? John, Jesus has said, is indeed a prophet, the "messenger" (v. 10) sent to prepare for the Messiah (foretold in Malachi, and there named as Elijah), and the greatest human. For people of faith, John heralds the dawn of the time of fulfilment of God's promise.

Vv. 16-19a are a parable in which the "children" are John and Jesus; the people of Israel ignore their message, whether it be told austere (by John, as at a funeral, "mourn") or in merriment (by Jesus, as at a wedding). But God's "wisdom" proves them right by their results. Then vv. 20-24: people in Jewish towns, where Jesus has invited conversion through miracles ("deeds of power"), have ignored his message and will be condemned at the Last Day, while people of Gentile towns would have been much more receptive. In vv. 25-26, Jesus thanks his Father for choosing the simple, uneducated ("infants") over the religious leaders ("the wise ..."). He is totally the Father's representative; only the Father knows him, and only he and those he chooses know the Father. He invites the downtrodden to accept his "rest" (v. 28). Rabbis spoke of the "yoke" (v. 29) of the Law, with its many regulations. Jesus' way is "easy" (v. 30): love God and each other! He is both teacher and the one to emulate.