

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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Isaiah 63:7-9

NRSV

To understand when the prophet wrote these words, we need to skip forward to the next chapter. 64:10 speaks of “Jerusalem a desolation” and 64:11 says, with reference to the Temple, “Our holy and beautiful house ... has been burned by fire”. So this passage was written after the Babylonian conquest of 587 BC.

The prophet begins by recalling God’s “gracious deeds” (v. 7) of the past: how he has kept his covenant with his people. (“Steadfast love”, Hebrew: *hesed*, is a technical term for this.) He has given freely to them, trusted them (v. 8) and saved them from danger. In “days of old” (v. 9) God *in person* (“his presence”) – not a “messenger” (prophet), not an “angel” – “saved” (protected) them, “redeemed them” and “lifted them up” to him. We Christians believe that he has been present with us again: in Jesus being born into the world. V. 11 tells us that God was present with Israel in the days of “Moses”; then, God “brought them up out of the sea”. Exodus 15:5,8 tells of God saving Israel (under Moses) as they crossed the Red (Reed) Sea. Recall also the finding of baby Moses: Pharaoh’s daughter “named him Moses, ‘because ... I drew him out of the water’” (Exodus 2:10). In the following verses, the prophet is clearly distraught over the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. He implores God to again have compassion on his people. So upset is he that he accuses God of making people stray from faith! (v. 17) V. 19 indicates that the prophet writes after the return from Exile: for years, the people have been ruled by those who do not consider God to be king of kings. May God come into their midst, as he did during the Exodus!

Psalms 148

NRSV

The psalter ends with five hallelujah (“Praise the LORD”) psalms, of which this is one. In vv. 1-6 the psalmist invites the heavens to praise God, then in vv. 7-12 he bids all on the earth to do so. Even inanimate objects (e.g. “sun and moon”, v. 3) are to praise him. Ancient cosmology held that the sun, moon and stars travelled on concentric hemispheres above the earth, and above them was God’s storehouse of “waters above the heavens” (v. 4), the source of rain and snow. God commanded that the heavens be created (v. 5). The movement of the celestial bodies follows an everlasting law (v. 6). The heavens shall praise him for creating them and making their existence permanent. In vv. 7-12, the list of created *things* proceeds from the lowest forms (“sea monsters”) to the highest, humans. The “wind” (v. 8, Hebrew: *ruah*) does God’s will; *ruah* also means *spirit*. In v. 11, “all peoples” are invited to praise the Lord.

Hebrews 2:10-18

NRSV

To ancients, the present world was controlled by angels; however, the “coming

world” (v. 5), the way of being beyond time, was not. The author sees the source of the quotation in vv. 6-8 as irrelevant, for all scripture is to him the word of God. As translated here it shows that God has made humans, in this earthly life, inferior to angels; however in eternal life humans will be superior to “all things” (including angels.) We do not see this now (“as it is”, v. 8), but “we do see Jesus” (v. 9) – who became human temporarily, and is now exalted (“crowned”) as a consequence of dying. He died so that, as God’s gift to us, he might take on our deaths. (See v. 14: Jesus, in sharing our humanity, destroyed the “devil”, who caused death to be separation from God.) God is creator of all things; they exist for his purposes (v. 10). It was per God’s saving plan (“It was fitting”) that God, in bringing many of us to share eternal life, should bring Jesus, the one who goes before us (into eternal life) and points the way for us (“pioneer”), to the completion of his mission “through sufferings”.

We share with him (“the one who sanctifies”, v. 11, sets us apart, for God’s plans) the same “Father” (God, and also *proto-human*, Adam) through the birth of Jesus. This the author demonstrates by quoting from three psalms (vv. 12-13). The glorified Christ praises God in the midst of the “congregation”, *ekklesia*, church. Perhaps in v. 13 the author alludes to the context in Isaiah: there Isaiah states the trustworthiness of God’s word – that others have rejected. (In v. 14, “flesh” is human nature, in its weakness.) Hellenistic Judaism held that God did not plan for humans to die, that the devil introduced death into the world. Jesus came to help believers (“descendants ...”, v. 16), not angels. Christ, as compassionate and trustworthy “high priest” (v. 17) ended severance from God in death, through removing sin. Jesus was “tested” (v. 18), tempted to desert his mission throughout his life, so he is able to help those whose faith is weakened now.

Matthew 2:13-23

NRSV

“Wise men from the East” (v. 1) came to Herod the Great asking “‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’” (v. 2) They have visited “the child with Mary” (v. 11). “paid him homage” and “offered him gifts”. They have now returned to “their own country” (v. 12). A divine messenger warns Joseph to flee with his family. The wise men “tricked” (v. 16) Herod by leaving “by another road” (v. 12). In Hosea, “my son” (v. 15) is Israel, the people of God. A verse that recalled God’s acts to save Israel from bondage is now applied to Jesus, he who offers to save all people. (Herod has all the infants in the Bethlehem area killed because he fears that Jesus may succeed to his throne, rather than a son of his.) In Jeremiah (v. 18), Rachel weeps over the exile of her sons; a mother’s grief is unique. V. 20 is much like God’s words to Moses, as he sends him to lead Israel out of bondage. Jesus is the new leader of God’s people. Herod Antipas, Herod the Great’s son, governed “Galilee” (v. 22) benignly compared to the way his brother “Archelaus” governed Judea. Joseph may also have chosen to make his home in “Nazareth” (v. 23) because he could find work on the reconstruction of neighbouring Sepphoris. The quotation is not from the Old Testament. Perhaps Matthew is provoking his readers to think; perhaps he harks back to Isaiah 11:1: “a branch [*nezer*] shall grow” out of Jesse’s “roots”. David was Jesse’s son.