

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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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, his harem) 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.

Psalms 45:1-2,7-10

NRSV

The psalmist, a court scribe, a skilled writer (“a ready scribe”) feels inspired to write an ode for a royal wedding. In vv. 2-4, he lists the admirable qualities of the king: he is “the most handsome”, full of God’s grace, splendid (“glory”, v. 3), a conqueror “for the cause of truth” (v. 4) and of justice. The “throne ...” (v. 6) is probably God’s rather than the king’s (although the word translated “God” can mean *superhuman being*, so it may say the king is superior to all other humans.) God has made the king greater than the kings of other nations (v. 7). His robes are perfumed with fragrance: with “myrrh” (v. 8, an aromatic gum from Arabia, Ethiopia or India), “aloes” (a fragrant wood) and “cassia” (a tree native to India and the Far East). Stringed instruments play music in his palace; it is decorated with “ivory” (v. 8).

The ladies of the court include daughters of fellow kings (v. 9). The bride’s dress is ornamented with gold from Arabia or east Africa (“Ophir”). She (vv. 10-13) is a foreigner. She is to forget her people, to please and honour the king, her master. The rich seek her favour with expensive gifts. She is a glorious sight (v. 13). Vv. 14-15 tell of her entrance, followed by bridesmaids; it is a joyous occasion. Finally, the psalmist wishes that the king may have male heirs who will be “princes” (v. 16), rulers over all peoples; may his reign be celebrated for ages; may the people (or all nations) praise him for ever.

James 1:17-27

NRSV

This book is an exhortation to conduct befitting Christians: who are *aliens* in a *world* which has become evil, and are also heirs of God’s relationship with Israel. The author cautions them (v. 16): “Do not be deceived, my beloved”. The very “act of giving” (v. 17) is what matters, not the size of the gift. God, “the Father of lights”, gives the “perfect gift”: in Genesis 1:14-18 he gave the planets and stars, which vary in position and brightness (“shadow”, v. 17) in the sky, but God’s love and goodness to us are never diminished. He created according to his own intent; he now gives us the new creation, i.e. baptism (“birth”, v. 18), into the gospel (“word of truth”), his saving revelation fully expressed in Christ. Why? So that we may be forerunners (“first fruits”) of all humans in offering ourselves to God. So (v. 21) cast aside worldliness, and welcome the faith received (“implanted”) at baptism, a faith that can save you from the evil in the world. But this “word” (v. 22) is not just to be *heard* but also to be *done*: baptism places ethical demands. To be a *hearer* (v. 23) but not a *doer* is like looking in a “mirror”: it reveals blemishes; the *hearer* sees them, but then forgets them (or ignores them): he or she does nothing to correct the deficiencies. But those who “look into” (v. 25) and “persevere” with the gospel (“the perfect law, the law of liberty”) are *doers*, are “blessed” for following God’s ways.

Now v. 19: *doers* have three characteristics: they are “quick to listen” (so do not “deceive themselves”, v. 22), “slow to speak, slow to anger” (v. 19) – sinful and prolonged anger is not striving for the integrity (“righteousness”, v. 20) demanded by God. Vv. 26-27 offer a practical application: “care for orphans and widows”. If our “religion” is *all talk*, it is “worthless”; it must include caring actively for others. Also, we must keep a detachment from the *world*.

Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

NRSV

Mark has told us that Jesus has gained an audience among the common people, who have sought sustenance and have responded to his compassion in healing. Now we hear of his opposition to the legalism and *pickiness* of the Pharisees. They are “from Jerusalem”, so represent official Judaism. Mark’s note (vv. 3-4), written for Gentile readers, explains that Pharisees consider the “tradition of the elders” to be binding, as are the laws of Moses. (They wished to extend the laws of ritual purity, which once applied only to priests, to all Jews, thus making all people priestly.) Rather than answer the question (v. 5), Jesus calls them *phonies*. (In Greek, *hypokrites* were actors who masked – hid – their faces.) He quotes Isaiah 29:13: their religion is empty; they “hold to human tradition” (v. 8) rather than the Law. Then vv. 14-15: Jesus says that what you eat (“going in”) is immaterial, but what *comes out* does matter: it is from the very being of a person that “evil intentions” (v. 21) and actions come. (The “heart” was seen as the source of will and not just of emotions.)