

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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Baruch 5:1-9

NRSV

This book is set in the time of the Exile, when some Jews had been deported to Babylon and others had dispersed around the Mediterranean. The author has stated that the Exile happened because many Jews did not obey the Law of Moses (4:12): the speaker there is Jerusalem, the personified mother of the nation. She is a prophet of events to come. God, she says, has noted the people's return to obedience to him, so the time of the return home is imminent. The time of the city's mourning for the loss of her "children" (4:12, v. 5) is nearing its end.

Now the author speaks to Jerusalem. It is time to remove mourning attire, to don forever splendid garments given by God, guarantees and symbols of harmony, security and prosperity. Exodus tells us that Aaron, as priest, wore a "diadem" (v. 2, or *mitre*) inscribed "Holy to the LORD", a symbol of divine regal splendour. Now personified Jerusalem is made a priest of God ("of the Everlasting"), succeeding Aaron, as a sign of God's power. The city will receive two titles forever: "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory" (v. 4). From now on, Jerusalem will be a place where justice and peace prevail and where God's glory will be seen. Vv. 5ff tell of a procession, a pilgrimage to the holy city. The exiles will return from "the east" (Babylon), and from elsewhere, God having spoken ("the word") and remembered them. They departed the city "on foot" (v. 6) but will return regally, as if borne on *thrones*. V. 7 echoes Isaiah 40:3-4: a road will be levelled through the Arabian Desert, so they can return safely. It will be surrounded with trees ("woods", v. 8) which will have miraculously grown in the desert "at God's command". God will be present with them ("in the light of his glory", v. 9), as will "mercy and righteousness", attributes of God.

Luke 1:68-79

NRSV

Zechariah has been struck mute upon hearing that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in old age. Later, she has given birth to a son, and his parents have brought him to be circumcised and named. Elizabeth has favoured the name John, and Zechariah has agreed. Now Zechariah "filled with the Holy Spirit ... spoke this prophecy" (v. 67), known as the *Benedictus* – the Latin translation of "Blessed" (v. 68).

Vv. 68-69 tell of the blessing Israel's God brings to "his people": the Jews are the elect. (While the verbs in translations are in the past tense, the present is equally appropriate. The tense in Greek shows that they describe how God characteristically acts and what he is inaugurating in Jesus.) God gives them one who will save them from sin ("mighty saviour", v. 69), descended from David, in fulfilment of prophecies he made through the Old Testament "prophets" (v. 70) who told of rescue from "enemies" (v. 71). God fulfils his promises, especially his pact with

Abraham (vv. 72-73), so Israel may from now on hold him in proper respect but not fear his wrath. The "child" (v. 76) is John the Baptist. He will be thought to be Elijah, "the prophet ..." (although Luke sees the prophet long expected as Jesus). John's mission will be to bring people to an ethical, godly, way of living, thus preparing the way for "the Lord". Vv. 78-79 return to Jesus' role: he will be the "dawn" (new light) from heaven, the one through whom God fulfills his purpose for humanity. At a time when hopes are at low ebb and people are particularly in need, he will be a beacon guiding them into "peace" (v. 79), i.e. wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity and security.

Philippians 1:3-11

NRSV

In the verses following the salutation of the letter, Paul thanks God for the Christians at Philippi, "praying with joy" (v. 4, a pervasive quality of the book), because of their participation ("sharing", v. 5) in spreading the good news, "from the first day", since their conversion. Paul is "confident" (v. 6) that God ("the one") will finish what God has begun among them by "the day of Jesus Christ", i.e. when he returns at the end of the era. Paul is particularly close to the Philippians because they "share" (v. 7) in Christian community, "in God's grace", with him: in suffering, and in defending and confirming the good news. (At his trial, Paul will have the opportunity to defend the gospel and show its power, v. 16). He longs to be with them with deep affection ("compassion", v. 8).

Vv. 9-11 are his prayer for them: may they grow in love of God through knowing more of the Christian reality, marked by keen awareness of its meaning ("insight"), that they may discern the difference being Christians makes ("best"), so that when Christ comes again, they may be ready – having achieved a right relationship with God ("harvest of righteousness", v. 11), through being in and with Christ, thus augmenting God's "glory", the showing forth of his inherent absolute goodness, and being ideally suited to praising God, rendering him homage, for it.

Luke 3:1-6

NRSV

As did classical Greek authors, Luke places an event (John's ministry) in the context of rulers, here both secular and religious. (V. 1a gives the most precise dating of the start of Jesus' ministry in the gospels, i.e. 26-29 AD.) "Herod" here is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. "Caiaphas" (v. 2), Annas' son, is now high priest but his father retains his prestige (and power). The Greek translated "the word of God came" (v. 2) is the same as in Jeremiah: Luke sees John as continuing Jeremiah's role of announcing judgement at the end of the era and a new pact with God, available to all. John travels throughout the Jordan Valley, preaching return to God's ways and being ethically and spiritually renewed, here (vv. 4-6) expressed through metaphor. (These verses are from Isaiah 40:3-5.) Luke makes one change in the quotation: "his" (v. 4) emphasizes that it is Jesus for whom he prepares the way. To Luke, "all flesh" (v. 6), all people, not only Jews, will have the opportunity to be rescued from sin.