

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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Malachi 3:1-4

NRSV

Cyrus, King of Persia, has permitted the people of Israel to return to Palestine. The Temple, gutted in 586 BC, has been restored, but Israel is still a Persian province. People expected that their fidelity to God would be rewarded by (material) prosperity, but life has continued to be hard, so after several decades, they have lapsed into waywardness. It is the ungodly who prosper. In the old days, the king was God's agent, but now (there being no king), the priests have assumed this role. In previous chapters, the prophet has condemned the priests for despising God, corrupting worship and misleading the people.

A "messenger" (v. 1) or angel, God's agent, will come to prepare a way for him. God, long expected, will come to "his temple", to the priests. God's "covenant" with Israel was summed up in the priests. His arrival will be sudden, unannounced. V. 2 implies that when God comes, he will judge the people. (The accused *stands* to hear judgement.) A *refiner* used the heat of a fire to separate ore into pure metal and slag; a *fuller* cared for newly shorn wool or woven garments by cleaning them, purifying them, with lye. The messenger will "purify ... and refine" (v. 3) the priests ("the descendants of Levi") until they hold him in proper respect. Their offerings, on behalf of the people, will then again be "pleasing to the Lord" (v. 4). God will judge adversely those who deviate from proper moral behaviour and from his ways (v. 5). He will bless all who return to his ways, for he still cares for his people. 4:5 identifies the messenger as Elijah (who ascended to heaven without dying: see 2 Kings 2:10-12); hence the popular belief in Jesus' day that Elijah would return: see, for example, Luke 9:7-8.

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.