

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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Micah 5:2-5a

NRSV

Micah wrote at a time when the Assyrian army had invaded the northern kingdom, Israel, and when corruption was rife in Judah. The rich cheated and robbed the poor; priests and prophets adapted their words to suit their audiences. In 701 BC, Jerusalem was besieged and Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. The invaders occupied part of the coastal plain, menacing Micah's home city, Moresheth. The prophet speaks "the word of the LORD that came" (1:1) to him: in 4:9-5:1, he tells of the humiliation and difficulties Israel must experience in the near future. Despite "many nations [being] ... assembled against you" (4:11), God will give the Israelites victory over their enemies: this is God's plan.

But a time will come when a ruler will arise from the Ephrathah clan of the tribe of Judah (Ephrathah being the area round Bethlehem); he will "rule in Israel" (v. 2) and will be of ancient lineage ("from of old ..."). (David being from Bethlehem, people understood the lineage to be his; as Matthew 2:5-6 shows, at the time of Jesus, they understood this figure to be the Messiah, the ideal future king, who would bring misery to an end and usher in God's glorious kingdom.) God will "give them up" (v. 3, allow his people to be oppressed) until the right time. The woman in v. 3 is this king's mother. When he is born, oppression will end and all Israelites will be reunited. He will be like a shepherd, feeding his people ("flock", v. 4) through the power and authority of God. He will bring an era of peace. He will rule in Jerusalem (v. 7).

Psalms 80:1-7

NRSV

This is a prayer for deliverance from Israel's enemies, calling on God to "shine forth" (smile), be favourably disposed towards his people. God was seen as enthroned invisibly on the "cherubim", the half-human, half-animal winged creatures on the Ark. From the mention of three northern tribes in v. 2 we can guess that this psalm was written shortly before the conquest of the northern kingdom in 721 BC. Vv. 3, 7 and 19 are a refrain: please take us back, God, into the covenant relationship with you! The nation's current plight is seen as due to God's anger (v. 4). Vv. 5 and 6 tell of the present evils besetting the nation; in contrast, vv. 8-11 recall God's gracious hand in the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan. Why, asks v. 12, have you made Israel vulnerable? Please Lord, look after us! Vv. 17-19 seek deliverance: may you be with our king, "the one at your right hand", so we will never desert you (v. 18). Give us strength ("life") to seek favours from you. Be with us, so that "we may be saved" (v. 19).

Hebrews 10:5-10

NRSV

In v. 1, the author has stated that the sacrifices offered annually in the Temple on

the Day of Atonement (according to Jewish law) foreshadow (point forward to) "the good things [that are] to come" through Christ. He then argues: if the temple sacrifices were "good things", i.e. cleansing of all inner guilt that sin causes, why did these sacrifices need to continue? (v. 2) These sacrifices, he says, did not *wipe the slate clean* (v. 3); they can't (v. 4).

Now, quoting Psalm 40, the author explains that God prefers obedience ("a body ...", v. 5) to sacrifices: doing God's will is what counts (v. 7). In v. 8 the author interprets the psalm. He lists the four types of sacrifice offered in the Temple, offered according to Mosaic "law" (v. 8). Jesus, he says (v. 9), came to do away with "the first" (the sacrificial system) and to inaugurate "the second" (the self-offering of Jesus). It is "by God's will" (v. 10), carried out through Christ, that we have been "sanctified", been made ceremonially clean and been perfected, made complete, through Christ's death on the cross – "once for all" time.

Luke 1:39-45,(46-55)

NRSV

An angel has appeared to Zechariah in the Temple, and later the angel Gabriel has come to Mary. Zechariah has been told that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in her old age; Mary has heard that she will bear a son to be called Jesus and "Son of the Most High" (v. 32), of God. God will make him a king of David's line; he will rule Israel for ever.

Now Mary visits her "relative" (v. 36) Elizabeth. In telling us that "the child" (v. 41, John the Baptist) "leaped" in Elizabeth's womb, Luke intends us to understand that John recognizes his Lord, Jesus. Elizabeth's reaction, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to praise Mary. Elizabeth "exclaimed with a loud cry" (v. 42, or voice) – the way marvellous prophecies were given in the Old Testament. V. 43 translates a Semitic idiom: today Elizabeth might say: *How can I be thought worthy of being visited by the mother of my Lord?* V. 45 portrays Mary as the model believer: she trusted that God would keep his promise made through Gabriel, preposterous as it sounded.

Mary thanks God (vv. 47-55) in a poem known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking today, she might begin: *From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord's greatness and rejoice in God my Saviour.* "Servant" (v. 48) can also be rendered *slave* or *handmaid*: in v. 38, she has acknowledged that she is a "servant of the Lord", i.e. obedient to him in all things. She will be hailed by people of every age ("generations", v. 48) in the new era of salvation launched by her son. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible "things" (v. 49) God has done for her. Vv. 51-53 universalize her experience, to reflect how God deals with all humanity. While the verbs are in the past tense in English, the Greek tense has the sense of: (1) how God customarily acts – as he always has and will continue to do – and (2) what he is starting to do in the conception of Jesus. The "proud" (v. 51), the arrogant, are alienated from God by their very "thoughts"; he reverses fortunes, raising up those in need ("lowly", v. 52, "hungry", v. 53) and rejecting the rich, those who think they don't need God.