

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/

© Chris Haslam

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

NRSV

The book purports to be Moses' final speech to the Israelites before they cross into the Promised Land; however closer inspection shows that Deuteronomy is a reinterpretation of the Exodus legal tradition for a later generation, who now live a settled life. Exodus 23:19 and 34:26 say only: "The choicest/best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring into the house of the Lord your God." Our passage expands on this.

The commandment here is highly specific: the *first fruits* are to be taken in a "basket" (v. 2) to "the priest who is in office" (v. 3): to a central location. Earlier, there were several shrines to God but now there is only one – at Jerusalem. Here the giving is linked to Israelite history: God swore to Abraham ("ancestors", v. 3) to give the Promised Land to Israel. Jacob, the "wandering Aramean" (v. 5), and his children moved to Egypt in a time of famine. There they multiplied, were oppressed and enslaved. When they prayed to God to help them, he used his power to free them. Note v. 9: no longer are they "wandering" semi-nomads; now they live in a prosperous "land flowing with milk and honey". In thanks for God's gift of both the land and abundant crops, Israelites are to give produce to God (v. 10); in recognition of his sovereignty over the land, they are to prostrate themselves ("bow down") before him. God's gifts are cause for celebration by Israelites and foreigners ("aliens", v. 11) who live in Palestine.

Psalms 91:1-2,9-16

NRSV

Perhaps a priest or temple prophet speaks the opening verses of the psalm. Worshippers (the faithful) will trust in God to protect them. He will protect them from attacks by demonic forces day and night (vv. 3-6); he will shield them as a mother hen guards her chicks. Many may succumb to evil forces, but not the faithful (v. 7). Those who trust in God will see evildoers punished (v. 8). God will ensure that no harm comes to those who live a godly life (v. 9). "His angels" (v. 11) will be his agents, guarding the faithful in whatever they do. The roads of Palestine were rocky so the metaphor in v. 12 is apt. Not only will the faithful be safe from accidents, but they will also take the offensive in defeating evil (v. 13). God speaks in vv. 14-16. Knowing God's name includes realizing that he will help those in need. When they seek help, God will "answer them". Perhaps the "long life" (v. 16) is the king's: political uncertainty ensued when a king died.

Romans 10:8b-13

NRSV

Paul has written that the Israelites did strive for law-based righteousness (9:31), a right relationship with God, but failed to achieve it because they sought it through "works" (9:32) rather than faith. By *massaging* Isaiah 28:16 and 8:14, Paul says

that God is the impediment that lay in their way. He desires that they be part of God's plan of salvation because of their "zeal for God" (10:2); however, they lack the right relationship with God that now comes from God: that revealed in Christ. They missed the real meaning of what God has done through Christ, thus failing to embrace Christ as the model for living. Moses said that union with God comes through obedience to the Law (v. 5), but this is close to impossible: it is like a Christian being expected to bring about his own resurrection (v. 6) and ascension (v. 7) – this we are not asked to do!

Rather (v. 8) God's "word", his freely-given gift of love and right living, is readily available ("near you") through faith. We need only acknowledge that "Jesus is Lord" (v. 9) and believe in Christ's resurrection by the Father. One who believes this and recognizes Jesus as sovereign is godly ("justified", v. 10) and will have new life when Christ comes again ("saved"). In v. 11, Paul again *massages* Isaiah: "no one" who believes, whatever his or her ethnic background, will be condemned ("put to shame") at the Last Day. There is one Jesus – for all people. Everyone who sincerely believes will be saved (v. 13).

Luke 4:1-13

NRSV

Luke has told us of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, of "a voice ... from heaven" (3:22) saying "You are my Son ...". On that occasion "the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form", but is this what we today, living in an age with supposedly only one *reality*, would consider *bodily*? Ancient people conceived of several levels of *spirit worlds* with occasional contact between them and earth.

Perhaps Jesus *transcends* between earth and a spirit world in the story of his testing by the devil. (Note the imaginative images in vv. 5 and 9.) During his time there ("forty days", v. 2, meaning a significant period of time), the Holy Spirit sustains him in his travails; human as he is, Jesus is totally dependent on the Spirit being with him, for "he ate nothing". (Moses ate nothing during the time he was on the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments.) In this dependence, Jesus is humanly helpless; he humbles himself before the Father.

The devil *speaks*, but is this like "a voice from heaven" speaking? The devil recognizes him as "Son of God" (vv. 3, 9), the one who fulfils God's plan in creation and, given Luke's genealogy in 3:23-28, in Israel's history. Jesus answers the devil's questions with quotations from the Law, i.e. Deuteronomy, then considered to be the words of Moses.

In v. 4 Jesus, hungry as he is, says: God sustains humans through other means than eating. Whether the devil has the authority to offer Jesus world-wide political power is unlikely (vv. 5-7); however Jesus' answer is plain: God is the ultimate master; only he is to be worshipped (v. 8). In vv. 9-11, the devil invites Jesus to do something extraordinary – a thing not in accordance with God's plan of salvation. Again Jesus refuses to be taken in (v. 12). Jesus opposed the forces of evil throughout his ministry, but the greatest chance ("an opportune time", v. 13) the devil had was on the cross. There he again faces identified temptations.