

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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1 Kings 17:8-16,(17-24)

NRSV

Ahab (king of the northern kingdom, Israel, ca 870-850 BC) and his wife Jezebel “did evil in the sight of the LORD” (16:30); they worshipped Baal, the Canaanite (or Phoenician) god of storms and fertility rather than the God of Israel. In v. 1 Elijah, seemingly on his own authority (“by my word”) and claiming to be God’s servant (“before whom I stand”), has decreed a drought – apparently as punishment for Ahab’s waywardness. Elijah has not been commissioned as a prophet – but read on. In vv. 2-3, God gives him instructions for avoiding arrest by Ahab and starvation. In vv. 4-7, he shows himself to be God’s servant by obeying God’s orders. He, like the Israelites during the Exodus, is fed by God.

When the drought gets worse, God sends him to “Zarephath” (v. 9), out of reach of Ahab and where Baal is worshipped. He assures the widow claiming to speak for God: they will not starve. V. 16 shows that Elijah is indeed God’s messenger. That they have enough to eat is a miracle. In v. 18, the widow interprets her son’s death as punishment for her sins. She thinks that hosting a “man of God” has brought them to God’s attention. Vv. 20-22 tell us that Elijah can intercede with God, and that God will respond. In v. 24, the Baalist woman recognizes the power of Israel’s God and asserts the validity of Elijah’s claim to speak for God. Elijah is indeed a prophet.

Psalm 146

NRSV

The psalmist will praise God throughout his life. We should not look to human leaders for security and help because they are finite: when they die, so do their “plans” (v. 4). (“Princes”, v. 3, are probably powerful and rich leaders rather than kings.) But God is to be trusted for he is creator, and maintains his pact with us forever; he is the guardian of moral order (vv. 5-6). He supports the disadvantaged: the hungry, the prisoner, the oppressed. (“Opens the eyes of the blind”, v. 8, per Isaiah 42:7, probably means *frees captives*.) He loves those who live in his ways (“the righteous”, v. 8) but works against the evil-doers. He cares for “strangers” (v. 9), aliens. He helps the exploited and status-less: “the orphan and the widow”. God rules eternally (unlike “princes”); he is Israel’s (“Jacob”, v. 5) in all ages.

Galatians 1:11-24

NRSV

Paul has begun his letter to the churches in central Asia Minor as he does other letters, but with two differences: (1) he stresses that his apostleship is divinely instituted, not commissioned by humans, and (2) he skips the usual thanksgiving and prayer for his addressees. V. 6 gives his reason for writing: Christians in Galatia are “so quickly deserting” the true faith, influenced by certain false leaders. We

need to discover what they were teaching from Paul’s rebuttal.

Vv. 11-12 present the core of Paul’s defence. His detractors claim that he is not a *real* apostle, because he did not accompany Jesus in his ministry. They say that he was commissioned for mission by humans (in Antioch, see Acts 13:3); real apostles received the good news directly from Christ. Paul argues that he was commissioned “through a revelation of Christ”, through his vision on the road to Damascus. In vv. 13-16, he rebuts the false teachers further: they accuse him of weakening the faith by excusing Christians from Jewish practices, e.g. circumcision. Paul points out that he was ardently and strictly Jewish until his vision, his commissioning by Christ. God had *set him apart* for his purposes first as a Pharisee and then as one sent, as an apostle with a distinct mission: “among the Gentiles”. In v. 16, the word translated “confer” means *consult for interpretation*. Paul did not need help in interpreting his vision, not even from the apostles who were with Jesus, for God gave him its meaning. It was divinely given.

Later (“After three years”, v. 18) he spent two weeks with Peter (“Cephas”). The word translated “visit” means *get to know*. Fifteen days is long enough to be fully instructed in the faith. His sessions with Peter probably had substantial *information content*, supplementing and/or correcting what he had learnt as a *persecutor* (v. 13). In other letters, Paul freely acknowledges his dependence on traditions he has received. He did “see” (v. 19, and only see) “James the Lord’s brother”, the leader of the Jerusalem church. V. 20 has the force of a (legal) oath: my commission and authority are from God, not from humans! (It appears to be intended for some who disputed his version of his first visit to Jerusalem.) Paul is not weakening the faith, but applying it in a different culture. “Syria and Cilicia” (v. 21) were at the north-east corner of the Mediterranean. The word translated as “by sight” (v. 22) denotes a person’s presence: he was not in Judea during this period, so he could not have been influenced by anyone in Judea (outside of Jerusalem). The only response of churches there was to praise God for him, so his missionary work was acknowledged as authoritative by the mother churches.

Luke 7:11-17

NRSV

In Capernaum, Jesus has been approached by Jewish leaders to heal the slave of a centurion who has paid for the building of a synagogue. They argue that, despite being a Gentile, he is worthy to receive the blessings that God grants to Israel, his elect. But Jesus has healed him for his faith.

Now Jesus is in Nain, near where Elisha raised the son of a wealthy woman. The body of a dead man is being carried out of the town, through the “gate” (v. 12). Burial was not permitted inside Jewish towns and cities. In a patriarchal society, a widow’s loss of her “only son” would render her destitute. By touching “the bier” (v. 14), Jesus makes himself ritually unclean. The story recalls Elijah raising a widow’s son; indeed the words translated “gave him to his mother” (v. 15) also appear in the then-current Greek translation of 1 Kings. All are struck with awe (“fear”, v. 16): restoring life is beyond the limits of human understanding and shows the power of God. Jesus is a prophet; God shows his mercy through him.

