

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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Numbers 6:22-27

NRSV

Numbers interrupts the story of preparing to leave Sinai by stating several case laws regarding maintenance of purity and, assuming that members of the Israelite community will keep these laws and others, tells us of the priestly blessing to be bestowed on all. The law in 5:1-4 states that those who have skin diseases ("leprous", 5:2) or have been in contact with a dead body shall be excluded from the tabernacle. 5:5-10 prescribes to whom restitution should be made where the injured party has died and has no next of kin. 5:12-31 state how marital harmony can be restored where a man suspects his wife of adultery. 6:1-21 state the terms of a vow required of a Nazirite, one who separates himself to the LORD for a time, rather like a monk or nun, and what is required of this person if the vow is broken. All restitution shall be before the LORD.

Now, in words used today in Christian and Jewish liturgies, God tells Moses the blessing to be given by the priests ("Aaron and his sons", v. 23) when the Israelite community keeps these and other laws. While "you" is singular in v. 23, it is the whole community who will benefit from God's blessing and protection. May God be present ("face", v. 25) with them and grant them divine favour ("gracious"); and give them "peace" (v. 26, wholeness, well-being, both material and spiritual welfare). In so blessing them, the priests will put something of God's very self ("name", v. 27) on them. He will identify himself with them.

Psalm 8

NRSV

This is a psalm of praise of God as creator and of man as head of creation. Because of the modest means God uses ("babes and infants", v. 2), his majesty is even more evident. The "foes" may be the powers of chaos, as in Genesis 1:1. In vv. 3-4, the psalmist contrasts God's majesty with "the work of ... [his] fingers", especially humans, for whom he cares. ("Mortals" is *ben'adam*, literally *son of man*.) Vv. 7-9 recall Genesis 1:26-28: we share in God's dignity for he has conferred on us mastery of, and responsibility for, the rest of creation.

Galatians 4:4-7

NRSV

Some teachers in Galatia have claimed that a Christian must first embrace Judaism, observing Mosaic law. Paul wrote this letter to rebut this argument, to insist that one comes into union with God through faith in Christ, and not through ritual observances.

In vv. 1-3, he takes the example of an orphaned boy of minor age, an *heir*: although he owns his dead father's property, it remains under the control of trustees until the date his father set (per Palestinian practice.) He cannot speak or act on his own behalf. So it is with Paul and his readers: before "we" accepted Christ, we

had no power to speak or act, being slaves to *spiritual elements*, celestial beings that control the physical elements of the universe.

But, at the time our Father set ("fullness of time", v. 4), "God sent his Son", born a human ("of a woman"), indeed a Jew ("under the law"). God sent him so that we Jewish Christians might be adopted as God's children, be made part of him. Then v. 6: being his children, he sent the "Spirit of his Son", God's Spirit, to empower us to call him Father. ("Abba", v. 6, is Aramaic for *father*. Jesus prayed "Abba, ..." in the Garden of Gethsemane: see Mark 14:36.) So, v. 7, you are free from the obligations of Mosaic law, and being his child makes you an heir to God's kingdom, through Christ.

In vv. 8-9, Paul questions how, now that God has chosen them to know him, can they go back to *spiritual elements*. (Contemporary Jewish belief was that at Mount Sinai the Law was spoken by angels, celestial beings, *spiritual elements*.) How can they want to be enslaved again?

Luke 2:15-21

NRSV

Luke has told us of Joseph and Mary's visit to Bethlehem (his ancestral town) to register in the census, and of Jesus' birth. He lies "in a manger" (v. 12), a trough from which animals eat; he is sustenance for all peoples. Shepherds, living in the field with their flocks have heard the angel's announcement of the birth of "a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11). Many heavenly beings have appeared, praising God and pronouncing peace: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" (v. 14).

Now the shepherds decide to see the glorious event for themselves (v. 15). It is appropriate that the first visitors to the newborn child be shepherds: Jesus is our shepherd. Note "with haste" in v. 16; as Mary set out to visit her cousin Elizabeth "with haste" in 1:39; Jesus will later stress the urgency of his mission. The shepherds look for, and find, the infant where the angel has told them in v. 12, "in the manger" (v. 16). They *make known*, tell Mary and Joseph – and others – the good news the angel has delivered. Mary and Zechariah have already told us something of the meaning of the birth and the destiny of Jesus in 1:31-33, 1:46-55 and 1:68-79. What the shepherds have been told provides another perspective on this event. Mary tries to understand ("pondered", v. 19) all that she has experienced and been told, especially the great news told by the angels, but she does not immediately grasp the full significance of God's action of Jesus being born into the world. Later, after Jesus as a boy has asked his parents "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (v. 49), she understands a little more. Luke does not tell us directly about Jesus' circumcision but infant boys were named on this occasion; being a Jew, he is circumcised (v. 21). As a member of God's chosen people he will bring salvation to the world. Before Jesus was conceived, an angel has said "you will name him Jesus" (1:31). His name means *God saves*. The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of *Jesus* are similar to *he will save*.