

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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Genesis 28:10-17

NRSV

Isaac has dispatched Jacob to find a wife for himself in "Haran". He, like his father, is expected to marry one of his own clan, but unlike his father, is sent on the journey himself. On the way, Jacob stops for the night at Bethel (meaning *house of God*) and dreams. (Travellers slept on the ground using hard pillows!) The word translated "place" (v. 11) implies that the place is sacred. The scene is reminiscent of a ziggurat, on which there was a stairway ("ladder", v. 12) to the top, where the deity was believed to live. The Tower of Babel (meaning *gateway to a god*) was probably a ziggurat. The angels "ascending and descending" suggest contact with God. God speaks, identifying himself as God of the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac, i.e. not just a local god of that place alone, as was common in the region. The promises in vv. 13-14 are those made to Abraham, but the one in v. 15 is specially for Jacob: God will watch over ("keep") him wherever he is; God is present everywhere, not just here.

In v. 17, Jacob is awe-struck ("afraid") and says that the place is awe-inspiring ("awesome"). This, he says, is the "house of God" (hence *Bethel*) and the "gate of heaven". Next morning, Jacob sets up his stone pillow to mark the presence of a deity, as was the local custom. He consecrates it with "oil" (v. 18).

Psalms 103:19-22

NRSV

This psalm is both one of thanksgiving and a hymn of praise. After recalling that God cares for the oppressed, forgives sins, loves dearly those who hold him in awe, and that he is a compassionate father, it contrasts him with humankind: our lives are transitory but God's love is for ever. Then, in the verses we say or sing today, it says: may all over whom he rules, the heavenly court ("angels ... mighty ones", v. 20, "hosts ... ministers", v. 21), creation ("all his works", v. 22) and the psalmist himself "bless" (praise) "the LORD"!

Revelation 12:7-12

NRSV

The book begins: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John ..." John has a vision of the future, of the age to come – but also presents an understanding of his times and of the past. To us, this book is *strange stuff*, but no more so than a novel (or a who-done-it) would be to a first-century person. It is an *apocalypse*. Many Jewish apocalypses were written, but this is a Christian one. It was written in a time of persecution of Christians for refusing to worship the Roman emperor as a god. It is written in symbols, most of which may have been known to people at the time, but whose meaning we can only guess. (In 14:8, 16:19, 17:5, etc., we know that "Babylon" is a code-name for Rome.)

In vv. 1-7, we read that a male child, a messiah, is about to be born to a woman, but a red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems on his head is ready to devour the child as soon as he is born. "But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne" is clearly a reference to the ascension of Christ. (Red is a symbol of war in Revelation.)

In today's reading, we learn that the dragon (also called "that ancient serpent", v. 9, the one in the Garden of Eden) with whom Michael and his angels fight, is "the Devil and Satan"; both these names mean *accuser*, one in Greek and the other in Hebrew. Michael and his angels win; the Devil and his forces are thrown out of heaven, down to earth to make trouble here. Vv. 10-12 are a hymn praising the triumph of God and Christ; the victory is indeed God's, Michael being his agent. With this victory, the reign of Christ has begun. Jewish literature of the time refers to Satan as the unceasing *accuser* of Israel; he continues to accuse, frustrate, Christ's followers, but he is ineffectual because he has been conquered through Christ's sacrifice on the cross ("the blood of the Lamb", v. 11) and his followers' continuing "testimony", even when facing death for refusing to worship a second god. Rejoice! But in the end-times the Devil will be intensely active ("with great wrath", v. 12) in the whole universe ("the earth and the sea"), trying to subvert good intentions – because the second coming of Christ is near: the devil's "time is short". (Daniel and Mark 13 are other examples of apocalyptic writing.)

John 1:47-51

NRSV

This book begins by paralleling the first story of creation in Genesis. Its first words are "In the beginning"; it then works its way chronologically through seven days. The days (after the first) begin at 1:29, 1:35, 1:41, 1:43 and 2:1; in 2:1, "on the third day" means *two days later* (in ancient times, counting was inclusive). On Day 5, Jesus invites Phillip to follow him, and Phillip tells Nathanael, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth" (1:45). In spite of making a crack against Nazareth, Nathanael comes to Jesus.

Jesus says to Nathanael: here's a true Israelite: in popular etymology, *Israel* meant *one who sees God*. Nathanael answers: how could you possibly recognize me? We haven't met. Jesus answers him: I saw you (possibly when he was somewhere else, conversing with Phillip). This is clearly miraculous: Nathanael proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah ("Son of God", v. 49, and "King of Israel").

Jesus asks him rhetorically: did you believe because of this miracle? As your faith grows, you will understand much more about me; in fact, you will see the meeting of God with people. V. 51 is like Genesis 28:12 (read today) but different: the angels ascend and descend "on the Son of Man" rather than on the ladder from earth to heaven. Jesus is our way of reaching the immortal. In the Genesis passage, the ladder is the means of communication between heaven and earth; in this passage, Jesus declares that he is the medium of communication, the mediator between God and humankind.