

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 12:1-9

NRSV

Abram, later to be named Abraham, has moved from Ur (in what is now Iraq) to Haran (v. 5), north of Israel. God calls him to leave Haran, to travel to a new land. His reward for obedience will be that he will be the father of Israel, that God will bless him and give him many descendants (“make your name great”, v. 2). Abram will be God’s representative and God will be at his side (v. 3); he will be a source of blessing for all peoples.

So Abram, a semi-nomad, sets out on his journey, southward, with his nephew Lot, entourage and flocks to the new land. His age, taken literally, looks extreme, but we should realize that numbers were used somewhat differently when Genesis was written. His age should be taken symbolically; we might say that he has reached an age of wisdom. Abram and his clan travel to Palestine (then Canaan), and there he builds two altars: one at Shechem (v. 6) and the other near Bethel (v. 8). Both were pagan worship sites. Building altars there represents God’s special claim to the land, a claim Abram initiates. He then travels on southwards, towards the Negev desert, and on to Egypt – to return later.

Psalms 33:1-12

NRSV

This is a hymn of praise to God as creator and as lord of history. Praising him is a fitting activity for the “righteous”, “the upright”, the godly. Certain rituals required that a new *thing* be used and, by analogy, a “new song” (v. 3). Note the accompaniment used in the liturgy: “lyre” (v. 2), “harp” and “loud shouts” (v. 3). Israel’s God is himself “upright” (v. 4), faithful; he loves godliness and “justice” (v. 5); he is constant in his love. Vv. 6-8 recall the first creation story: God’s “word”, his command, caused creation; his breath (spirit) made life. He brought order to chaos (v. 7) forevermore. So may all people hold him in awe (v. 8). He is supreme ruler. A people who look to him and whom he has chosen are favoured (“happy”, v. 12) by him. Israel is such a nation (vv. 20-22).

Romans 4:13-25

NRSV

In Chapters 2 and 3, Paul has argued that through the gospel, it is faith that brings humans into harmony with God. Now he considers Abraham as an example. At the time, rabbis argued that God’s blessings came to Abraham because he kept Mosaic Law (which, they said, he knew in advance – before Moses received the tablets on Mount Sinai).

In v. 13, Paul argues against this rabbinic lore: Abraham was blessed because he believed, had faith, that he would be father of a nation and a source of blessing for “all ... families” (Genesis 12:3). If only those who keep Mosaic Law are God’s people, faith is meaningless (“null”, v. 14) and God’s “promise” of universal god-

liness is nonsense – because the Law is a contract; in a contract, each party has responsibilities, each *knows* what he will receive (e.g. “wages”, v. 4), but a promise is a gift, and is therefore an *object of faith*: faith that what is promised will be received. Paul now notes: because we all deviate from God’s ways at times, sinning does happen. For those under the Law, a penalty (God’s “wrath”, v. 15) ensues, but for us, not living under the Law (“no law”), there is no contract to violate. Paul now returns to his main argument: so rather than the human relationship with God being legally based, “it depends on faith” (v. 16), on God’s freely given gift of love (“grace”). Were it legally based, continually breaking the pact would make a nonsense of it, but being faith-based, the relationship is “guaranteed” to all peoples in every age – not just to Jews but also to others. Per Genesis 17:5, Abraham is spiritual father of us all (v. 17). Sarah’s bearing of Isaac when beyond child-bearing age (“gives life to the dead”) was due to his faith; it had been promised to him by God. Isaac was *called into existence*. So Abraham is a model for the Christian. Contrary to expectation, in hope (“Hoping against hope”, v. 18) he believed. He had every reason to doubt that he would become a father, but believe he did – because of the hope given by God’s promise – in God’s creative power. Abraham’s faith grew stronger as he thanked God for his gift (“gave glory to God”, v. 20). He attained a right relationship with God (“was reckoned to him as righteousness”, v. 22). Our faith in God’s promises will also be considered worthy by God (“our justification”, v. 25) when Christ comes again.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

NRSV

The tax collector Jesus encounters (called Levi in Mark and Luke) is probably not the author of this gospel. Most likely he already knew about Jesus and his mission; now he makes a decision for Christ. “Tax collectors” (v. 10) were morally suspect: they contracted with the occupying power and practised extortion. By “sinners” Matthew means members of despised trades considered ritually unclean. Jesus answers the Pharisees with a common-sense proverb, but realizes that a physician exposes himself to contagious diseases – here ritual impurities. In quoting God’s words from Hosea (“I desire mercy, not sacrifice”, v. 13), Jesus challenges the Pharisees to examine what being a Pharisee really means. In v. 14, when “disciples of John” the Baptist ask him why his disciples do not fast, he takes fasting as a sign of mourning; having “the bridegroom”, (v. 15, God), with them is a joyous time. Jesus presents a new way of being which should be separate from the old but is compatible with it (vv. 16-17). Vv. 19-22 tell of a woman who is a pariah for, being continuously menstruant, she is always ritually unclean. She touches the “fringe” (v. 20) of Jesus’ prayer shawl; she has faith that Jesus will heal her. God responds to her faith. V. 18 begins the story of a religious leader who has faith that Jesus can restore his daughter to life. The hired mourners (“flute players”, v. 23) play dirges; the crowd shows that she really is dead, but Jesus probably says (v. 24) that the girl is “sleeping” from the viewpoint of the Kingdom: physical death is not final. His words meet with disbelief.