

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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Exodus 20:1-4,7-9,12-20

NRSV

The giving of the Ten Commandments marks the starting point of Israel as a self-defining community. They form a covenant between God and Israel but, unlike God's agreements with Noah and Abraham, here both parties have a stake in it, and either can break it.

The Israelites have arrived at Mount Sinai. They clean themselves physically and ritually, but it is Moses and Aaron who ascend the mountain. God speaks to all, to the whole community. He enters into the pact because "you shall be for me a ... holy nation" (19:6). They are to have "no other gods before [or beside] me" (v. 3). In the ancient Near East, people commonly encountered gods in sculpted images, but the Israelites are not to do this (v. 4), because God is different: he demands loyalty to him alone (v. 5); he punishes for a long time those who intentionally reject him, but rewards with compassion those who love him and follow his ways. Those who use God's name for a false or evil purpose (e.g. for casting spells, doing magic) will not be *acquitted* (v. 7) or *held harmless*. Each week, time is to be reserved for praying to, and worshipping, God. The Israelites must honour older people; doing so will contribute to their own longevity. Then vv. 13-17: life, marriage and property are sacred. Testifying falsely against another (or even spreading innuendos) is prohibited. Even coveting, *desiring greatly*, the possessions of others is prohibited. This scene of God's presence among humans ends as it began (in 19:16-19) with "thunder and lightning" (v. 18), trumpet blasts and "the mountain smoking". There being no evidence of vulcanism on the Sinai Peninsula, scholars think the description is poetic rather than literal: perhaps of a mountain storm in which God is present. In 19:2-25 God has appointed Moses as intermediary; in v. 19, the people accept Moses' role.

Psalms 19

NRSV

To the Israelites, the "firmament" was a giant pudding bowl over the earth, beyond which was a hierarchy of "heavens". God's glory is told "day" (v. 2) and "night", yet silently (v. 3a), to all people. He has created the sun as his agent (v. 5); it rises early in the morning, as does the "bridegroom" from his night's rest, traverses from one edge of the heavens to the other, making God's presence known with its "heat" (v. 6). Vv. 7-9 present the wonders of the law, as an expression of God's will for Israel. Here we find synonyms for the Law, characteristics of it, and its benefits for humankind, e.g. it *makes* "wise the simple", those immature in understanding and judgement. It warns the psalmist ("servant", v. 11). If he accidentally break it ("hidden faults", v. 12), may God forgive him. May God protect him from those who intentionally go against God's ways ("the insolent", v. 13), lest he be influenced into sinning intentionally ("great transgression").

May his words and his thoughts be acceptable to God, who restores him to godliness (v. 14).

Philippians 3:4b-14

NRSV

Paul has warned his readers about those who try to convince them that being a Christian requires acceptance of Jewish law, including circumcision. True circumcision is *of the heart* – and not of the "flesh", i.e. following legal precepts, as in Judaism. Inner circumcision is what is required of us.

He cites his own experience as an example. In early life, he was as true to Judaism as anyone could be: he was circumcised; he is from the elite tribe ("Benjamin", v. 5), as Jewish as one can be ("a Hebrew born of Hebrews"); like other Pharisees, he knew the Law well and applied it in daily life. He zealously persecuted Christians and faultlessly kept the Law. And yet, knowing Christ has made him realize that a Jewish, law-based, approach to God is a "loss" (vv. 7-8) for Christians: it obstructs God's free gift of love. True "righteousness" (v. 9) comes through "faith in Christ", not self-assessment of godliness, per legal precepts. He has cast aside all his Jewishness in order to realize the gain Christ offers (v. 8).

He wants to "know Christ" (v. 10) as risen and living. This involves attaining oneness with him through sharing his sufferings and participating in his death. Out of this, he will come to know "the power of his resurrection". He is still working on understanding Christ completely (v. 12), an obligation he has for Christ has chosen him ("made me his own"). He has made progress not on his own, but through God's grace (v. 13); however he has left his past behind and eagerly seeks what lies ahead. As the winner in a Greek foot race was called up to receive his "prize" (v. 14), so he seeks God's call to share in eternal life. ("Heavenly" is literally *upward*.)

Matthew 21:33-46

NRSV

The Sanhedrin members who first heard this parable would recall Isaiah 5:1-7, where God tells what will happen to his unfruitful "vineyard", "the house of Israel, and the people of Judah". In vv. 33-39, Jesus tells the parable: the landowner plants the vineyard, leases it out, and leaves. At harvest time, he sends successive sets of slaves "to collect his produce"; all are mistreated. When he sends his son, he is killed. If a landowner died without an heir, the land passed to the first claimant, so by killing the son (presumably the only one), the tenants become landowners. Jesus' hearers answer his question: the first tenants will suffer "a miserable death" (v. 41) and other tenants will be found who will deliver.

Here, the landowner stands for God, the first tenants for Israel's leaders, and the time the landowner is away for their period of stewardship of God's chosen people. So the second tenants are replacements for Israel, probably those who follow Christ. Is Jesus "the son" (v. 38, Aramaic: *ben*) and the "stone" (v. 42, *'eben*)? Then v. 43: to oppose God will be disastrous; his patience will be exhausted. The leaders of Israel recognize his reference to Isaiah; were it not that Jesus was widely accepted as God's "prophet" (v. 46), they would have arrested him.