

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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Jeremiah 31:31-34

NRSV

This prophecy was written after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. V. 30 says “all shall die for their own sins”: collective sin, in which descendants were punished for wrongdoing, will be replaced by *generational* or personal sin: punishment will no longer extend beyond a lifetime. God promises to “make a new covenant” (v. 31), with the whole people, both Israel and Judah. It will be unlike the covenant made at Sinai, which the people “broke” (v. 32), even though God was their “husband” or *master*. The law, once written on stone tablets, will be written “on their hearts” (v. 33) – the people will be faithful, and following the Law will be a matter of individual conscience and will power. Intermediaries (“teach”, v. 34) will no longer be needed because all will “know the Lord”, for each will recognize him in all actions, in every situation: each will approach God in a godly way. God will forgive them for turning against him (“iniquity”) and forget all their deviations from his way. In vv. 36-40, we read that this agreement will last for ever, and that “the days are surely coming” when God’s people will be so numerous that Jerusalem will need to be enlarged.

Psalms 51:1-12

NRSV

This psalm speaks of rebuilding Jerusalem (v. 18), so we know that it was written during, or shortly after, the Exile. The emphasis is on an *individual's* sin, and prayers for personal pardon and restoration. The psalmist seeks cleansing from “iniquity” (vv. 2, 9) and “sin(s)”. The notion of lifelong sinfulness (v. 5) is also in Genesis 8:21: “... for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (although the psalmist may simply be confessing that he has been thoroughly sinful.) In v. 6, he knows that God will seek truth in his very being; this is where he will receive understanding (“wisdom”). Perhaps v. 8b says he is ill – because of his sin. He even asks God to *hide his face from his sins* (v. 9), to be so gracious and compassionate as to *turn a blind eye*. May God restore him, bring him back to godliness, give him a clear conscience, a “clean heart” (v. 10), “new” “right” (God-oriented) “spirit”. Only God can purify. May God give him joy and sustenance, through his “holy spirit” (v. 11).

Hebrews 5:5-10

NRSV

The author has spoken of the Jewish high priesthood; he has said that a (human) high priest was “put in charge of things pertaining to God” (v. 1), on behalf of the people, to offer sacrifices for their sins. Since he himself from time to time offended God by sinning unintentionally, “he is able to deal gently” (v. 2) with others who commit such sins, and “must offer sacrifice for his own sins” (v. 3) as well. Further, one could only become a high priest when called by God – “one does not presume to take this honour” (v. 4).

Now the author tells us how Jesus, whom he sees as a high priest, is like (and unlike) a Judaic high priest. Jesus too was called by God (v. 5): some manuscripts of Luke 3:22 record that, at his baptism, the “voice” speaks the words quoted here. But Jesus, per Psalm 110:4, is different: he is a priest “forever” (v. 6). (“Melchizedek” is mentioned in Genesis 14:17-20; there he brings bread and wine, and blesses Abram. In Hebrews, he resembles the Son of God and lives for ever: he is a supernatural figure foreshadowing the eternity of the Son of God – see 7:2-3.) During Jesus’ earthly life (“the days of his flesh”, v. 7), he prayed to God, to the one who could deliver him from death. But, although he was already God’s “Son” (v. 8), he “learned obedience”, he obeyed the will of the Father, he submitted *reverently* (v. 7): this involved suffering and death. But the Father did hear his plea: he rose again from death. He was then “made perfect” (v. 9): his priesthood was completed in his sacrifice for the sins of us all, and he was raised to be with the Father. In this way, he brings salvation to all who follow him. This salvation is forever (unlike the limited duration of that brought by Judaic high priests). He is high priest for ever.

John 12:20-33

NRSV

At the time of the Passover (“the festival”), some Gentiles (“Greeks”) travel to Jerusalem, probably because they believe in God. Their request “to see Jesus” (v. 21, to understand his message), is conveyed to him by “Andrew and Philip” (v. 22), the two disciples with Greek names. Jesus takes this opportunity to announce that his “hour” (v. 23), his time of self revelation, determined by God, has come. He can now tell what it means for the Son to be glorified. When Jesus is glorified, then all people will truly be able to see him, but this is not the time for interviews.

He uses an example from nature to speak of the significance of his death: the paradox that a “grain of wheat” (v. 24) only bears fruit after it seems to have died and has been buried. Jesus’ death makes salvation possible for others. That the meaning of life eludes those who *live it up* is also a paradox; self-centeredness ends up destroying a person. (“Hate”, v. 25, is a Semitism for *love less*.) Serving Jesus involves following his example; this will be honoured by the Father (v. 26). In v. 27, Jesus struggles with his impending death: should he ask the Father to free him from the need to suffer and die? No, he says: such avoidance would negate his mission; his death is God’s will (v. 28a). The voice from heaven reassures: his lifework and teaching have been signs of God’s glory, of his power and presence; God will act again in raising him. The crowd miss the point of the message (v. 29), so Jesus tells them that God has spoken so that they may believe that he comes from God; he already knows this (“not for mine”, v. 30). This is when (“now”, v. 31) those who willfully turn away from him (“this world”) are condemned (it is they who are judged, not him), and when the devil (“the ruler of this world”) ceases to have power over people. When he is “lifted up from the earth” (v. 32), i.e. crucified and exalted in glory, salvation of all will be possible. This is the paradoxical “kind of death” (v. 33) he will endure.