

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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Acts 9:36-43

NRSV

Peter is visiting people who are already Christians (near modern Tel Aviv). In Lydda, he has healed a paralysed man (Aeneas); he has said to him “Jesus Christ heals you” (v. 34). Now he visits Joppa. “Tabitha” (v. 36, an Aramaic name) and “Dorcas” both mean *gazelle*. Luke often emphasizes helping the poor (“acts of charity”, v. 36). V. 37 echoes the story of Elijah reviving the widow’s son; Peter’s action here is in continuity with the Old Testament and with Jesus’ acts of healing, especially of Jairus’ daughter (Luke 8:40-42, 49-56). Luke calls followers “disciples” (vv. 38, 36). Christian “widows” (v. 39) generally devoted their time to good works. As was the custom, people wept openly when someone died. The widows remember Tabitha’s help to many, in sewing inner garments (“tunics”) and cloaks for them. As did Jesus, Peter gets *peace and quiet* (here, by sending the mourners outside, v. 40.) With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter commands Tabitha to rise, be resurrected, be brought back to life. In Aramaic, his command to her sounds like Jesus’ words to Jairus’ daughter: *talitha koum[i]*. Peter shows members of the Christian community (“saints and widows”, v. 41) that Tabitha is alive again; God’s action through him leads many to faith (v. 42). We do not know whether “Simon” (v. 43) is a Christian. He is a “tanner”, a person Jewish law considered defiled, for he worked with animal carcasses, which were ritually unclean. Peter has begun to disregard Jewish practices.

Psalm 23

NRSV

In the ancient Near East, the king was seen as shepherd (vv. 1-4) and as host (vv. 5-6). God faithfully provides for, and constantly cares for, his sheep. He revives our very lives (“soul”, v. 3), and guides us in godly ways (“right paths”). Even when beset by evil (“darkest valley”, v. 4), we have nothing to fear. God’s “rod” (a defence against wolves and lions) protects us; his “staff” (v. 4, for rescuing sheep from thickets) guides us. The feast (v. 5) is even more impressive, for it is in the presence of his foes. Kings were plenteously anointed with oil (a symbol of power and dedication to a holy purpose). The psalmist trusts that God’s “goodness and mercy” (v. 6, steadfast love) will follow (or *pursue*) him (as do his enemies) throughout his life. He will continue to worship in the Temple (“dwell in the house of the LORD”) as long as he lives.

Revelation 7:9-17

NRSV

What will happen at the end of time? Will our persecutors be brought to justice? Will God really give us victory over death? These were important questions to early Christians. John is in the midst of a vision of God’s throne and the heavenly scene around it. He describes the scene using symbols, only some of which have

meanings known to us. Around God’s throne are “twenty-four elders” (4:4, perhaps patriarchs and apostles), spirits, and “four living creatures” (4:6, representing creation). These are symbols from the Old Testament. A “Lamb” (Christ) is the only one worthy to open a scroll perfectly sealed with seven seals (5:4-9), containing God’s plans for the end-time. Now, as each seal is opened, we learn of the events of the end-time.

Six seals are opened in 6:1-17, the last in 8:1-5. They reveal images of end-time happenings: (1) a “white horse” (6:2), symbolizing liberation from the Romans by the Parthians; (2) a “bright red” (6:4) horse presenting war; (3) a “black horse” for death by famine, a time when basic foods will be very expensive; (4) a “pale green horse” (6:8) standing for fear and death, a time of wide, but not total, devastation; (5) a vision of the souls of those martyred for the faith, who ask: *Lord, how long will it be before you judge, and render justice, on those who killed us?* (6:10) Each soul receives a “robe” (6:11) of victory and joy, but must wait until all persecutors have been killed; and (6) natural catastrophes on a huge scale (6:12), probably as vengeance for the martyrs’ deaths. At that time, the self-centred will seek refuge, for the Lamb will judge them adversely (6:14-17). Chapter 7 contains two visions, telling us that God’s people will be safe from these horrors. Vv. 1-8 say that the end-time will be delayed until the godly, both Christians and Jews, have been marked with God’s seal, protection from the destruction to come. The second vision, our reading, tells us that Christians will survive the *troubles*.

“Palm branches” (v. 9), a sign of victory and thanksgiving, were strewn on the road during victory parades. In vv. 11-12, the whole court of heaven join the “great multitude” (v. 9), the elect, in praising God, in triumph. Then v. 14: the elect are the members of the Church who have remained faithful through the end-times (“great ordeal”); they have received the gift of Christ, (purity, sinlessness), through his death (“made them white in the blood of the Lamb”). So they ceaselessly celebrate a celestial liturgy in God’s presence, protected by him (“shelter them”, v. 15.) Vv. 16-17 tell of their happiness, using metaphors from previous books of the Bible. Christians will no longer suffer.

John 10:22-30

NRSV

Jesus’ claim to oneness with God and pre-existence with him (8:58) has aroused some listeners. Some think he is demented but others doubt it, for he heals (vv. 20-21). Later, at Hanukkah (“Dedication”, v. 22), Jesus is in a cloister in the Temple grounds (“the portico of Solomon”, v. 23). They ask whether he is the “Messiah” (v. 24), the one whom Jews expected to come to establish a godly kingdom. To understand the answers he has given requires faith – which they lack. His Godly actions (“works”, v. 25) show who he is. To those who do believe, who are his “sheep” (v. 27), he gives “eternal life” (v. 28) and assurance that they will not be condemned to annihilation (“perish”) at the end-time. He will ensure that they remain his. What his Father has given him (v. 29) is a “command” (v. 18): that through his voluntary sacrifice on the cross and return to life he will bring his “sheep” (followers) to oneness with both the Father and the Son (vv. 14-18).

