

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 16:9-15

NRSV

Paul has set out on his second great missionary journey. Starting from Caesarea Philippi, he has travelled north to Antioch, then generally northwest through Asia Minor. He, Silas and Timothy have now arrived at "Troas" (v. 8), a seaport.

Now he has a dream, which he understands to contain instructions from God. "Macedonia" (vv. 9, 10) was the Roman province in northern Greece, so Paul is bidden to enter Europe for the first time, to begin spreading "the good news" (v. 10) there. "Samothece" (v. 11) is an island mid-way between "Troas" and "Neapolis", the seaport for "Philippi" (v. 12). Philippi was settled as a "Roman colony" when veterans from a battle in 42 BC were granted land there. Paul visits the Jewish community first; they meet for prayer "outside ... by the river" (v. 13), perhaps because they lack a synagogue building. Gentile women were attracted to Judaism by its ethical standards. One of them is "Lydia" (v. 14): she already worships God; she is receptive to Paul's message. "Thyatira", in the province of Lydia in Asia Minor, is addressed by John in Revelation 2. She is a business woman, selling luxury fabrics ("purple cloth"). She and her household are the first in Europe to convert to Christianity and to be baptised. Paul and his associates are reluctant to accept her hospitality, but she insists and they accept.

Psalms 67

NRSV

This is either a psalm of thanksgiving for an abundant harvest (perhaps written for use at the Feast of Tabernacles) or a prayer for a good harvest. Vv. 1-2 recall the priestly blessing God instructed that Aaron and his sons impart to the Israelites, but here it is extended to "the nations" (v. 4). Vv. 3-4 say: may all nations recognize Israel's God as lord of all peoples (and not just of Israel), that he is the universal just ruler and "guide" (as exemplified in how he treats Israel.) In the NRSV, v. 6a indicates that the harvest is in; however, another rendering is *May the earth yield her produce*. May all people everywhere hold God in awe (v. 7).

Revelation 21:10,22-22:5

NRSV

God is revealing the events of the end-time to John. In his dream, an angel has carried him into the desert to see a whore and decaying "Babylon" (18:21), i.e. Rome; now he sees, in another vision, "the wife of the Lamb" (21:9), the spouse of Christ, i.e. the glorified Church, the new "holy city Jerusalem" (21:10). The "glory of God" (21:11, his presence) permeates the Church and transfigures her. The symbols are largely drawn from Ezekiel 40-48. John sees inscribed on the city gates "the names of the twelve tribes" (21:12), and on its foundations those of "the twelve apostles" (21:14): probably both faithful Jews and Christians are celestial citizens. The numbers in the vision are 3 (times 4), 12 and multiples of 12:

twelve symbolizes the continuity between God's people in the Old Testament and the Church in the New. The city's cubic shape (21:16) is a symbol of perfection. In the Greek, it is *12,000 stadia* long: a thousand is a very large number. The height of the city "wall" (21:17) is minuscule by comparison: it serves only to delimit the city from the land round it. The "foundations of the wall" (21:19) are adorned with precious stones, as is the priest's breastplate in Exodus. The city is magnificent indeed.

The city lacks a physical temple, for the presence of God, Father and Son ("the Lamb", 21:22) pervade the entire godly community, and they illuminate it (21:23). All peoples and all rulers will be guided by this light (21:24). Gates of an ancient city were kept closed against enemies, but those of the city of God will be open to give everyone free access at all times (21:25), for they will live in perfect safety. People will, in entering, reflect God's "glory ... and honour" (21:26). While there will still be a distinction between those who trust in God and those who worship other gods ("abomination", 21:27), the realm of those accepted by God will extend to all who dwell in the city, whose names are in Christ's "book of life". (God's record of the faithful is mentioned numerous times in the Bible.)

In Ezekiel 47, a sacred life-giving stream runs from the Temple; here a "river" (22:1) flows from "God ... and ... the Lamb" (Christ). John's vision includes both the original bliss of the Garden of Eden and the hoped-for restoration of Ezekiel. In the Greek, "tree" (22:2) is *collective*, so many trees will provide nourishment for the godly, for the "healing" of all: this is the goal and result of God's new creation. There will be no sin in the city, so "nothing [will be] accursed" (22:3). In Exodus, to see God's face was to die, but now the godly will see it joyously (22:4). Being marked with God's "name", God will protect them. Those who worship God will reign with him for ever.

John 5:1-9

NRSV

The Copper Scroll found at Qumran mentions the Pool of "Beth-zatha" (v. 2, or *Bethesda*), with its five porticos. It was to the north of the Temple area. By "Hebrew", John probably means *Aramaic*, the common language of Palestinian Jews at the time. V. 4 is not in the best manuscripts, so we are dependent on other verses for the context of the healing. The man, "ill for thirty-eight years" (v. 5), had been at the pool for some time. His answer to Jesus (v. 7) gives us a clue: only the first person (or persons) into the stirred-up waters was cured. This was either a belief, or the *stirring* only lasted for a short time.

The man is cured at Jesus' command (vv. 8-9). Whether the man became a believer is left in doubt. John wishes his readers to understand that the waters of life Jesus offers are more effective than those of a Jewish pool. To carry one's bed on the Sabbath was forbidden in rabbinic law. The religious authorities first castigate the man for breaking the law (v. 10), but then, learning the identity of the healer from the man, they "started persecuting Jesus" (v. 16) for breaking the Sabbath. When Jesus tells them that *my work is God's work* (v. 17), they accuse him of blasphemy.