

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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1 Kings 18:20-21,(22-29),30-39

NRSV

It is a time when many people in Israel, the northern kingdom, prefer worshipping foreign pagan gods (including Baal, the rain god), to worshipping the one true God. Indeed, King Ahab's wife, Jezebel, from Tyre, has promoted Baal worship and persecuted those who follow God's ways. It is also a time of drought and famine. Elijah has fled for his life, but God has told him that the drought will soon end (v. 1), and directed him to visit Ahab. Elijah has met Obadiah, head of Ahab's household, who is still faithful to God (v. 7). He has asked Obadiah to tell Ahab that he is willing to meet the king. Despite being concerned for his own life, Obadiah does tell Ahab (v. 16).

Ahab sees Elijah as a trouble-maker; Elijah retorts that the fault is with Ahab: he has deserted God and followed Baal. The stage is set for a contest to settle the issue: whose god can end the drought? The Israelites, together with the many "prophets" (v. 20, perhaps disciples) of Baal, and Elijah, assemble on Mount Carmel, a highland with a view of the Mediterranean (near modern Haifa). Elijah calls on the people to stop dithering: choose between Baal and "the LORD" (v. 21, God).

The "prophets of Baal" (v. 25) prepare a bull for sacrifice, and call on Baal to consume it with fire. Nothing happens for hours, despite the ritual of gashing themselves (v. 28). They keep trying until about 3 p.m. ("until the time of the offering of the oblation", v. 29). Then Elijah repairs the altar to God (probably destroyed by Baalist fanatics) and, to show how great God is, has wood put on the altar, and much water (a precious commodity during a drought) poured on and around it (vv. 33-35). Immediately the fire of God consumes all (v. 38). For the author, this is a miracle, even if for us soaking the tinder-dry land is likely to attract lightning, which is often followed by rain. The people of Israel return to worshipping God.

Psalm 96

NRSV

This psalm celebrates God's kingship. The singing of a "new" song signifies the start of a new era. (The Ark received a new cart for its journey to Jerusalem.) All peoples are invited to "sing to the Lord" and to share in God's kingship (v. 10a). Vv. 1-3 are a summons to worship. In vv. 4-5, God is more to be "revered" than other gods; in fact, all other gods are just idols; it is God who is creator. Then v. 8: recognize him as the supreme God! He is to be held in awe by all humanity (v. 9b). Then vv. 11-12: let the whole universe rejoice in God, now and when he comes as judge. His basis for judgement of all people will be godliness ("righteousness", v. 13) and truth.

Paul structures this letter like many letters of his time with an opening formula (the names of the sender, that of his addressees, and a short greeting), the message (the body of the letter), and a final greeting. His other letters have a thanksgiving before the message, but not this one.

There is another difference, which scholars see as significant: while in other letters Paul introduces himself simply as "a servant of Christ" (in Romans, and Philipians is similar) and/or as "an apostle" (in Romans and in 1 and 2 Corinthians), here he is keen to point out, from the start, what he is not: his authority is not from humans, but from God. We need to figure out what causes Paul to be so emphatic.

We don't know where Paul was when he wrote this letter, nor who "all the members of God's family who are with me" (v. 2) are. (Philippians tells us that Timothy is with him; in 1 Thessalonians, Silvanus is also named.) "The churches of Galatia" were in north central Asia Minor (modern Turkey). His greeting ("Grace ... and peace", v. 3) is both Jewish and Greek. "The present evil age" (v. 4) contrasts with the age to be inaugurated when Christ comes again.

The lack of a thanksgiving suggests that there are serious problems in the churches. He is "astonished" (v. 6) or amazed that Christians in Galatia have turned from the good news of God, as taught by Paul ("the one who called you"), and are accepting a "different gospel", not that there is one! They are being led astray by false teachers who are twisting the good news. As vv. 8-9 show, Paul is distinctly upset: "let that one be accursed!" (The Greek implies cut off from God for ever). V. 10 suggests that some think that he makes practising the faith too easy, but in v. 11 he insists that what he teaches is the real thing. In 6:12-13, Paul rebuts the deviant teachers head-on: they "try to compel" male Gentile Christians to be circumcised, in accord with Mosaic law. This, they say, will increase oneness with God. Paul disagrees.

Luke 7:1-10

NRSV

After choosing his apostles, Jesus has descended to the north-western shore of the Sea of Galilee, where he has taught many. Now he enters the town of Capernaum.

An unusual "centurion" (v. 2), an officer in the Roman army of occupation, has a slave who is gravely ill. So loved by the Jewish community is he, that he can send emissaries to Jesus; they ask Jesus to *bend the rules*, to treat him as he would a Jew (vv. 3-6). (They think that Jesus came to bless Jews, not Gentiles.)

As Jesus walks towards his house, the officer sends others to him: don't enter my house because, being Gentile, entering it would make you ritually unclean (v. 6). All the centurion asks is that Jesus command the disease to leave his slave (v. 7). He believes that Jesus can order diseases around much as he does soldiers (v. 8). In v. 9, Jesus tells the crowd that he has more faith than Jews ("in Israel"), who were expected to believe. The slave is found to have been healed (v. 10).

