

The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple

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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Malachi 3:1-4

NRSV

Cyrus, King of Persia, has permitted the people of Israel to return to Palestine. The Temple, gutted in 586 BC, has been restored, but Israel is still a Persian province. People expected that their fidelity to God would be rewarded by (material) prosperity, but life has continued to be hard, so after several decades, they have lapsed into waywardness. It is the ungodly who prosper. In the old days, the king was God's agent, but now (there being no king), the priests have assumed this role. In previous chapters, the prophet has condemned the priests for despising God, corrupting worship and misleading the people.

A "messenger" (v. 1) or angel, God's agent, will come to prepare a way for him. God, long expected, will come to "his temple", to the priests. God's "covenant" with Israel was summed up in the priests. His arrival will be sudden, unannounced. V. 2 implies that when God comes, he will judge the people. (The accused *stands* to hear judgement.) A *refiner* used the heat of a fire to separate ore into pure metal and slag; a *fuller* cared for newly shorn wool or woven garments by cleaning them, purifying them, with lye. The messenger will "purify ... and refine", (v. 3) the priests ("the descendants of Levi") until they hold him in proper respect. Their offerings, on behalf of the people, will then again be "pleasing to the Lord" (v. 4). God will judge adversely those who deviate from proper moral behaviour and from his ways (v. 5). 4:5 tells us that the messenger is Elijah; hence the popular belief in Jesus' day that Elijah would return.

Psalm 84

NRSV

This psalm praises God as the longed-for goal of the pilgrim. The "dwelling" of God is the Temple (and perhaps also the land of Israel). To live in the Temple is greatly to be desired: those who live there have security and happiness, even the birds (v. 3) who nest in the Temple area. Making a pilgrimage to the Temple offers these hopes. When the pilgrims pass through the arid "valley of Baca" (v. 6) en route to the Temple, it becomes fertile. They become more and more godly ("strength to strength", v. 7) as they travel, increasing in their knowledge of God. V. 9 is a prayer for the king. (The word translated "anointed" is *messiah*; later it was taken as referring to the ideal future king who would restore the nation.) Perhaps v. 10 contrasts the fate of the godly and the *wicked*. God is both "sun and shield" (v. 11), bestower of blessings. (In Malachi 4:2 he is "sun".) Life for those who trust in God is clearly superior.

Hebrews 2:14-18

NRSV

Hebrews couches the good news in Jewish terms: it sees Jesus as the great high priest. V. 10 says something like *It was appropriate that God, the creator, should*

– in bringing us to share in his glory – make Jesus (the forerunner of our salvation), a priest, but (unlike other priests) a priest who suffers. Why? V. 11 says: because Jesus and we have the same Father. God reveals himself in the church. There is a solidarity between Jesus and his followers.

In v. 14, "flesh" refers to human nature, considered in its weakness and infidelity. The writer sees the devil as having the power of death – perhaps a reminder of the link between sin and death portrayed in the story of the Garden of Eden. Jesus, through his redemptive act, frees us from the fear of death – death is no longer separation from God. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, the nature of death has changed: it has become the way out of the domain of sin. The "descendants of Abraham" (v. 16) are those who believe in Christ. Old Testament priests were expected to be "faithful" (v. 17), but Christ, the "high priest" is unique in being "merciful", compassionate. Before Christ, when (1) one deviated from God's ways (sinned), (2) God became angry and separated one from him, (3) one offered a sacrifice (thus obtaining purification), and (4) regained a right relationship with God. Christ's "sacrifice", death, ends this cycle: he continually takes sins on himself, keeping us in unity with God. Then v. 18: it is because Christ was "tested" in life and when dying that he is able to help those who are tempted to abandon his ways.

Luke 2:22-40

NRSV

Jesus has been circumcised, marking him as a member of God's chosen people, Israel, through whom world salvation was to be achieved. After childbirth, it was 40 days before a mother could be purified before a priest in the Temple, so it is at least that long since Jesus' birth. She was expected to offer a lamb, along with a turtledove or a pigeon; if she were poor (as Mary is), two turtledoves or pigeons sufficed. Exodus required that every firstborn boy be consecrated to God. Jesus' presentation in the Temple is like Samuel's. Jesus and his family fulfil the requirements of Mosaic law.

Simeon looks forward to the coming of the Messiah to restore Israel to favour with God ("the consolation of Israel", v. 25). The Spirit has told him that he will see the Christ before he dies (v. 26). Simeon's words in vv. 29-32 are known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, from the first words in Latin. He begins by saying that God is setting him free, as a slave is granted liberty. He is now free to die (for the Spirit's revelation to him is now fulfilled), and Israel is free of bondage. God has saved Israel, as he promised to "all peoples"; his salvation is for Gentiles too. In v. 33, Joseph is Jesus' legal father. Simeon prophesies in vv. 34-35 through the Spirit (v. 25). Jesus is destined for the death and resurrection ("the falling and the rising", v. 34) of many; he will meet opposition, and will cause many to think deeply about him. Mary too will need to decide for or against Christ ("own soul", v. 35). Simeon and Anna together stand before God; to Luke, men and women are equal in God's eyes. Anna praises God, and tells many the meaning of Jesus, as Simeon has prophesied. Like Samuel, "the favour of God was upon him" (v. 40).