

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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Isaiah 7:10-15

NRSV

Assyria, under Tiglath-pileser III, is intent on expanding westwards. The kings of "Aram" (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, Syria) and of Israel (also called "Ephraim") have formed a coalition to resist the advances of their common enemy. They have tried to convince "Ahaz" (v. 1), king of Judah and of the "house of David" (v. 2) to join the alliance; he has refused. Now they seek to put a puppet king on Judah's throne. God has commanded Isaiah to "meet Ahaz" (v. 3) as he inspects the water supply vital to Jerusalem's defence. Isaiah tells him: "take heed ... do not fear ... these two smoldering stumps of firebrands" (v. 4) who have "plotted evil against you" (v. 5). "If you do not stand firm in faith" (v. 9, trust in God) but rely on human counsel, you will be defeated.

God now speaks again to Ahaz: ask any "sign" (v. 11), any confirmation of my promise delivered by Isaiah – any at all in all creation. ("Sheol" was the subterranean abode of the dead.) But it seems that Ahaz has already made up his mind (v. 12) so, through Isaiah, God gives to the "house of David" (v. 13) not a "sign" (v. 11) to convince Ahaz, but one which speaks to future generations. God will keep the promise he made to David (through Nathan): "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me" (2 Samuel 7:16). "The young woman" (v. 14, most likely Ahaz's wife) is pregnant; David's line will continue; she will name her son "Immanuel" (meaning *God with us*). (This son was Hezekiah.) In a devastated land (paying heavy tribute to Assyria), where only basic food is available ("curds and honey", v. 15), he will develop moral discrimination – unlike recent kings, who were deemed wicked, ungodly people. By this time, Assyria will have conquered both Syria and Israel (v. 16).

Psalms 132:6-10,12-13

NRSV

These are the words of a liturgy commemorating God's choice of Zion and the dynasty of David. Vv. 8-10 are quoted in 2 Chronicles as used at the dedication of the Temple, so this psalm may well have been used at the annual celebration of the dedication. Vv. 1-5 ask God to remember David's diligence in finding a proper "place" (v. 5) for God's sanctuary. Vv. 6-10 may have accompanied a dramatic ceremony reenacting David's finding the Ark ("it", v. 6) at Kiriath-Jearim ("Jaar"). ("Ephrathah" is Bethlehem, David's city.) God's "footstool" (v. 7) is the Ark. It was borne joyfully in procession to Jerusalem, preceded by godly "priests" (v. 9). V. 10 asks God to continue to favour the current king ("your anointed one"), remembering David's actions. While vv. 1-10 centre on David, vv. 11ff focus on God. He has vowed to David that a descendant of his will, if his heirs keep their side of the pact, rule "forevermore" (v. 12). David chose Jerusalem; so did God (v. 13). "Zion" will be God's earthly residence "forever"

(v. 14). In the Temple, the divine and human realms meet, so God will be able to bless the city's inhabitants (v. 15). God will give the priests power to forgive sins ("salvation", v. 16). A "horn" (v. 17) was a symbol of a king's strength; here it speaks of David's line, his seed continuing. The king's "crown" (v. 18), in its radiance, reflected the power (glory) that he possessed as a reflection of God's glory; here it is contrasted with the disgrace which will cover the king's "enemies".

Galatians 4:4-7

NRSV

Some teachers in Galatia have claimed that a Christian must first embrace Judaism, observing Mosaic law. Paul wrote this letter to rebut this argument, to insist that one comes into union with God through faith in Christ, and not through ritual observances. In vv. 1-3, he takes the example of an orphaned boy of minor age, an *heir*: although he owns his dead father's property, it remains under the control of trustees until the date his father set (per Palestinian practice.) He cannot speak or act on his own behalf. So it is with Paul and his readers: before "we" accepted Christ, we had no power to speak or act, being slaves to *spiritual elements*, celestial beings that control the physical elements of the universe. But, at the time our Father set ("fullness of time", v. 4), "God sent his Son", born a human ("of a woman"), indeed a Jew ("under the law"). God sent him so that we Jewish Christians might be adopted as God's children, be made part of him. Then v. 6: being his children, he sent the "Spirit of his Son", God's Spirit, to empower us to call him Father. ("Abba" is Aramaic for *father*. Jesus prayed "Abba, ..." in the Garden of Gethsemane.) So, v. 7, you are free from the obligations of Mosaic law, and being his child makes you an heir to God's kingdom, through Christ.

Luke 2:1-7

NRSV

God's messenger, "the angel Gabriel" (1:26) has been sent by God to the tiny village of Nazareth, to Mary, a young woman engaged to Joseph. He is descended from David. Gabriel has told her the awesome news (1:31-33): she will "conceive ... and bear a son" to be named Jesus. He will occupy "the throne of his ancestor David" and reign over Israel; "of his kingdom there will be no end". When she has asked the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (1:34), he has replied "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of ... [God] will overshadow you ... he will be called Son of God" (1:35). She has conceived through God's power, his intervention in human affairs, and not by Joseph.

Luke now tells us of Jesus' birth, which he says occurred when Joseph and Mary travelled south from Nazareth to Joseph's ancestral town (and David's place of birth), Bethlehem. They were required to be registered in the first empire-wide census ("the first registration", v. 2). It is also possible that they were registering as resident aliens, not being Roman citizens. "While they were there" (v. 6), staying in the barn on the lower floor of the inn, Jesus is born in a "manger" (v. 7), normally a feeding trough for the animals. He was wrapped in "bands of cloth", as was any infant of the time. In vv. 10-18, the angels announce that Jesus is "great joy for all the people", "a Saviour", and a bringer of "peace" and God's love.