

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 Samuel 2:1-10

NRSV

Elkanah has two wives: Peninnah who has borne him children, and Hannah who has not (“the LORD had closed her womb”, 1:5). Last year they visited the temple at Shiloh, on their annual pilgrimage. While Elkanah has been especially generous to Hannah, Peninnah “used to provoke her severely” (1:6). Hannah has prayed to God: if he would give her “a male child” (1:11), she would dedicate him to the service of God “until the day of his death”. After returning home, in due time, a son has been born to Hannah (1:20). She has named him Samuel, meaning “I have asked him of the LORD”. She has kept her promise: she has taken him to Eli, a priest at Shiloh.

Hannah is leaving Samuel with Eli, but before heading home with Elkanah, she recites a prayer of thanksgiving. But look at 2:9-10: what do these verses have to do with Samuel? Scholars agree that an editor has inserted a much later prayer into older material: the notions of guarding the faithful and cutting off (condemning) the wicked are post-exilic (after 450 BC). Notice “king” in 2:10: either this refers to the monarchy (which did not exist yet) or it is speaking of a future ideal king, a messiah. But look again: note “enemies” (2:1), “victory”, “adversaries” (2:10). Hannah has at most one enemy, Peninnah. In Hebrew poetry, an individual (“I”, 2:1) may speak on behalf of the nation: here Hannah speaks on behalf of Israel. At the time, Israel was a small struggling nation with powerful enemies. The editor makes a theological point: God controls the destiny of humankind in every age (2:6); the story of Samuel is an example. Further, God reverses fortunes: see vv. 2:4, 2:5, 2:7 and 2:8. The number “seven” (2:5) can symbolize completion and perfection, so Samuel is a perfect blessing from the Lord. Hannah is raised up but Peninnah is brought low. God can do this because he is omnipotent; even the “pillars” (2:8) on which the earth was thought to rest are God’s.

Psalm 113

NRSV

“Praise the LORD” (v. 1) is the translation of the Hebrew word Hallelujah. This is one of psalms sung at major festivals in the Jewish tradition. Matthew 26:30 tells us that, at the end of the Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang “the hymn” before walking to the Mount of Olives. It was most likely one of Psalms 113-118. The “servants of the Lord” (v. 1) were probably priests or Levites, but perhaps the whole congregation. V. 2b-3 say that God is to be praised for ever and everywhere. Despite being “high” (v. 4) and glorious, he supports (indeed, elevates) “the poor” and “the needy”. Hannah is an example of his compassion (v. 9).

Romans 12:9-16b

NRSV

In the preceding chapters, Paul has told us about the “mercies of God” (v. 1), i.e.

what God has done for those who have faith in him. In vv. 1-8, he began to explain what our response should be, what is involved in living the ethical life, what obedience to God means, what Christian ethics is, what *servicing the Lord* (v. 11) is.

“Let love be genuine” (v. 9) introduces instructions on what it means to be *loving* towards others. V. 10 can be rendered: *Have brotherly love for your fellow Christian; treat him or her with the greatest honour*. Then vv. 11-12: do not allow your “zeal” for Christ to slacken; be fervent in the Holy Spirit; “serve the Lord”. Rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, looking beyond the present suffering to the future, keep praying. We are to *share with* (“Contribute to”, v. 13) the “saints”, the holy ones, our fellow Christians. Paul now says what pursuing “what is good” (v. 9) requires in our attitude to those beyond the community. He seems to be drawing on the gospel tradition (but not the gospels *per se* – they were yet to be written.) V. 14 is in the Sermon on the Mount. Hold all in mutual esteem, not thinking oneself better than others (v. 16).

Luke 1:39-57

NRSV

An angel has appeared to Zechariah in the Temple, and later the angel Gabriel has come to Mary. Zechariah has been told that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child in her old age; Mary has heard that she will bear a son to be called Jesus and “Son of the Most High” (v. 32), of God. God will make him a king of David’s line; he will rule Israel for ever. Now Mary visits her “relative” (v. 36) Elizabeth. In telling us that “the child” (v. 41, John the Baptist) “leaped” in Elizabeth’s womb, Luke intends us to understand that John recognizes his Lord, Jesus. Elizabeth’s reaction, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to praise Mary. Elizabeth “exclaimed with a loud cry” (v. 42, or voice) – the way prophecies were given in the Old Testament. V. 43 translates a Semitic idiom: today Elizabeth might say: *How can I be thought worthy of being visited by the mother of my Lord?* V. 45 portrays Mary as the model believer: she trusted that God would keep his promise made through Gabriel, preposterous as it sounded.

Mary thanks God (vv. 47-55) in a poem known as the *Magnificat*, the first word of its Latin translation. Speaking today, she might begin: *From the depth of my heart, I declare the Lord’s greatness and rejoice in God my Saviour*. “Servant” (v. 48) can also be rendered *slave* or *handmaid*: in v. 38, she has acknowledged that she is a “servant of the Lord”, i.e. obedient to him in all things. She will be hailed by people of every age (“generations”, v. 48) in the new era of salvation launched by her son. Why? Because of the seemingly impossible “things” (v. 49) God has done for her. Vv. 51-53 universalize her experience, to reflect how God deals with all humanity. While the verbs are in the past tense in English, the Greek tense has the sense of: (1) how God customarily acts – as he always has and will continue to do – and (2) what he is starting to do in the conception of Jesus. The “proud” (v. 51), the arrogant, are alienated from God by their very “thoughts”; he reverses fortunes, raising up those in need (“lowly”, v. 52, “hungry”, v. 53) and rejecting the rich, those who think they don’t need God.