

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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Jeremiah 31:7-14

NRSV

Jeremiah probably wrote this message of hope about 600 BC. Most of his book is directed to the people of Judah (the southern kingdom, conquered by Babylon in 587 BC) but this passage is directed to Israel, the northern kingdom, which was at the time loosely subject to Assyrian rule. Vv. 7-8 are a call for celebration. "Jacob" refers to Israel; the "chief of the nations" means the *foremost*: Israel is paramount because God cares about it. The "land of the north" (v. 8) is Assyria. The people – even the "blind and the lame" – will be gathered together, and will return from exile. (They were deported in 722 BC.) Such a caravan crossing the Arabian desert will indeed be a miraculous event.

Joy will be mixed with "weeping" (v. 9) and compassion ("consolations"). God will "lead them back", but (unlike in the first Exodus), the going will be easy. Back then water was in short supply (recall that God caused water to spring forth from a rock, Exodus 17:1-7), but this time "brooks" will provide plentifully. Being Israel's father, God will restore the nation to the state already enjoyed by Judah. ("Ephraim" is part of Israel.) Other nations, including the "coastlands" (v. 10) of the Mediterranean, are invited to witness this marvellous happening. In the first Exodus, God rescued Israel ("ransomed Jacob", v. 11) and defeated their enemies ("hands too strong"); he will do so again. When they return, they will celebrate God's goodness with feasting (v. 12). They will be sad no longer. Per v. 14, the priests will have life and prosperity ("fatness") as will all "my people". Bountiful harvests will mark the start of this new era of well-being.

Psalms 147:12-20

NRSV

This hymn is an invitation to praise God for his universal power and providential care. In vv. 1-11, God is praised for rebuilding Jerusalem, gathering the people, healing, creating, and providing for the needs of those he creates. V. 5b says that there is no limit to his wisdom. In vv. 12-14, worship is due to him for protecting Jerusalem, for blessing her children, and for bringing peace and prosperity. Vv. 16-18 tell of the activity of God's "word" (v. 15) in the phenomena of nature, from the winter cold to the spring thaw. Only to Israel has he declared his covenant.

Ephesians 1:3-14

NRSV

Our reading begins immediately after Paul's greeting to his readers. "Blessed be ..." echoes Jewish and early Christian prayers. God has brought us, by way of Christ, "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places", blessings in our hearts which are unseen and eternal, which bring together the physical world and God, "just as" (v. 4, or *because*) (before time) he planned for Christ to come to us, for

Christ's followers (us) to be holy, set apart for him, living "in love", for his followers (the church) to be made members of his family ("for adoption as his children", v. 5), and to be able to appreciate and reflect the Father's splendid gifts to us ("to the praise ...", v. 6). God gave this to us freely; it was his will and his "pleasure" (v. 5). (After Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven says "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you, I am well pleased.", Mark 1:11)

It is through Christ's death that we are set free, rescued ("redemption", v. 7) and forgiven our deviations from God's ways ("trespasses"). Being now "holy and blameless" (v. 4), we have intellectual knowledge of God ("wisdom", v. 8) and are able to apply it ("insight"); so we can know and participate in his plan for creation – which he disclosed in the *Christ-event* (Christ's life, death and resurrection.) This plan, which will come to fruition when God's eternal purposes are completed, is to unite ("gather", v. 10) all creation ("heaven" and "earth") in Christ. In Christ, we Christians have been adopted by God ("inheritance", v. 11), per his plan, so that we, forerunners ("the first", v. 12) of many to "set our hope on Christ", may live to praise God's manifest power ("glory"). In Christ, the recipients of this letter, having heard the gospel and believed in him, were baptised ("marked with the seal of the ... Holy Spirit", v. 13), incorporated into the Church. The inner sanctifying presence of the Spirit is a guarantee ("pledge", v. 14) that God will carry his promise to completion.

John 1:(1-9),10-18

NRSV

Our reading is the continuation of the book's prologue, or the whole prologue. The Word, God, Christ, has been born into this imperfect world – a world that per v. 3, "came into being through him" – but most people did not embrace him as who he is. (To *know*, to a Semite, involves personal commitment as well as awareness.) He came to Israel, but its people generally rejected him, but some did receive him for who he is; some became committed to him. (To *know someone's name* meant more than it does today.) These received the power to be adopted as sons and daughters of God: they were *reborn* into God's family, through the Holy Spirit ("of God", v. 13).

"Flesh", humanity, per Isaiah 40:6-8, was seen as weak, imperfect and transitory. Christ does an amazing thing: he becomes a human being (albeit, being God, a perfect one). The author is a witness to the divine presence shown in Jesus ("glory", v. 14). John the Baptizer was the first of this gospel's witnesses of the *Christ-event*, God become human.

From all that is in God ("fullness", v. 16), we have received gift after gift ("grace upon grace"). The Mosaic Law was given by God, and Christ brought the full revelation of God's ways. Judaism said that God could not be seen (v. 18). (Even Moses, in Exodus 33:30-44, was not permitted to see God's face.) It is through Christ, who is in complete intimacy with the Father, that we have been given access to the Father.

