

Second Sunday after Christmas
Cycles A, B, C RCL
Revised

Jeremiah 31:7–14

Jeremiah 26–35 consists primarily of narratives that show the prophet's relationship to the last kings of Judah. In 597 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem and took many of its citizens to Babylon, placing Zedekiah on the throne as a puppet king. The present passage evidently belongs to the period between that first exile and the final destruction of the city and its Temple in 586 BCE and expresses the prophet's hope for the speedy restoration of the city's fortunes and the return of her exiles.

Psalm 84

Like the *Apostrophe to Zion* from the Dead Sea Psalm Scroll (11QPs^a), this poem addresses itself to Zion herself. Pilgrims sang this song on their way to a major celebration in Jerusalem. The location of *Baca* (84:6) is unknown.

Ephesians 1:3–6, 15–19a

Professor John Knox thought Ephesians served as an introduction to a second volume of Paul's letters. Because of Ephesians' heavy dependence upon Colossians, few researchers now believe that Paul is the actual author and assign authorship to an unknown student of Paul. Since the words "in Ephesus" (1:1) do not occur in many important Greek manuscripts, there is even substantial doubt about its destination. (The heretic Marcion thought that it was an epistle to the Laodiceans.) In most respects, however, this work is a faithful representation of Paul's thought as revealed in the indisputably genuine letters of the apostle.

Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

Herod the Great ruled Palestine from 37 BCE until his death in 4 BCE. Although his mother was Jewish, Herod's instincts ran to paganism, especially to the imperial cult of Rome. To that end he outfitted great temples to Roma and Caesar Augustus in Caesarea Maritima, his showcase capital city by the Sea, and on Mt. Gerizim in Samaria. His greatest temple project, however, was construction of the temple to the Jewish God in Jerusalem, the temple of our Gospels. Just as Herod's building enterprises were legendary among the Jews, so were the accounts of his cunning and personal cruelty. Upon his death, there was very little regret. Herod's three sons divided his kingdom among themselves, and Archelaus (verse 22) became ruler of Judea. Hosea 11:1 "Out of Egypt I have called my Son," originally referred to the exodus of Israel from Egypt. Matthew's Gospel, however, uses a method of scriptural interpretation called *peshet* that refers all scripture to the "last days," the time of God's great judgment and redemption. For our author the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the time of redemption to which the scriptures must point. The origin of the quotation in verse 23 is unknown.

OR

Luke 2:41–52

This is the only story in our Bible about Jesus' activities as a boy. Apocryphal gospels from later centuries have created various pictures of Jesus as a child and as a youth, but the present story

remains as the only one in the canonical tradition. Some have wrongly compared this visit of the 12-year-old Jesus to the Temple with the contemporary Jewish initiation called *Bar Mitzvah*, but the *Bar Mitzvah* ceremony had its origins in the Middle Ages, not antiquity. Consequently, Jesus' parents have merely taken the lad to one of the regular celebrations of a major feast in Jerusalem. The passage reflects the author's emphasis upon Jesus and his parents keeping the customs of their people and upon God, not Joseph, as being the true Father of Jesus.

OR

Matthew 2:1–12

The “wise men” (*magi*) who came to honor the new king of the Jews were not themselves “kings” but most likely Zoroastrian or Mithraic priests, perhaps from Persia. The story as told here alludes to the oracle of Balaam (Numbers 24:17) in which an eastern prince predicts the coming of a great ruler, a “rising star” out of Jacob. The gifts of gold and frankincense reflect the gifts brought by camels from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba in Isaiah 60:6 as gifts to the restored Jerusalem. Psalm 72:10–11 mentions kings of the nations bringing gifts to the messianic king and falling down before him, and this may be the origin of the later Christian tradition that the *magi* were kings.

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