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December 19th: Psalm 119:89-104 & Revelation 11

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Alastair Roberts

Gaining wisdom through the Law. The two witnesses.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

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Psalm 119 verses 89 to 104. The law is the great source of wisdom for the psalmist, requiring and rewarding sustained reflection and deep meditation. Wisdom is insight into reality.

Those who begin with fear of the Lord and delight in His law have light upon reality that others lack. Israel was promised in Deuteronomy chapter 4 that the law would be the source of their wisdom in the eyes of the nations. The law given by the Lord illumines

natural law.

On account of his attention to the law, the psalmist has outstripped the cunning of his enemies, the understanding of his teachers, and the wisdom even of the aged, because God Himself has given him insight within His law. His commitment to God's rules protects him from evil and from folly, which on account of his delight in the law of the Lord he discerns, hates, and eschews. The Lord is his true teacher, and His word is like rich food that enlightens the psalmist's eyes.

A question to consider. How does God's revealed word relate to the natural law that the wise seek out? Revelation chapter 11 These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth, and if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes. If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed.

They have the power to shut the sky, that no rain may fall during the days of their prophesying, and they have power over the waters to turn them into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they desire. And when they have finished their testimony, the beast that rises from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that symbolically is called Sodom and Egypt, where their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days, some from the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb, and those who dwell on the earth will rejoice over them and make merry and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to those who dwell on the earth.

But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them, and they stood up on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, Come up here. And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them.

And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven. The second woe has passed.

Behold, the third woe is soon to come. Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven saying, The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever. And the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God, saying, We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, who is and who was, for you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

The nations raged, but your wrath came, and the time for the dead to be judged, and for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and those who fear your name, both

small and great, and for destroying the destroyers of the earth. Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

In Revelation chapter 11, the little book has been given to John by the mighty angel, and he has been commissioned to prophesy, and now finally the seventh trumpet will be blown. The thunders commission John to measure the temple. The measuring of the temple marks it out as holy space.

The dimensions of the tabernacle and the temple and of their furniture is given to us in the Old Testament, as they are holy items. Generally things are not measured out as these things are. We are still in the period of time after the blowing of the sixth trumpet here, and before the blowing of the seventh.

We should recognise parallels between the extended period of time before the final trumpet, and the extended period of time before the opening of the seventh seal a few chapters earlier. During that period is the second vision of the sixth seal. The 144,000 were marked out upon their foreheads, protected from the judgment that was about to come.

Here, in the second vision of the sixth trumpet, there is a comparable action in the measuring of the temple, the altar, and its worshippers. In the preceding chapter, the book of Ezekiel was clearly in the background, in the book being given to John to eat. Ezekiel is once again in the background in this chapter, more specifically the latter part of that book, from Ezekiel chapter 40 to 48.

The vision is introduced in Ezekiel chapter 40 verses 2 to 4. In visions of God, He brought me to the land of Israel, and set me down on a very high mountain, on which was a structure like a city to the south. When He brought me there, behold, there was a man whose appearance was like bronze, with a linen cord and a measuring reed in his hand, and he was standing in the gateway. And the man said to me, Son of man, look with your eyes, and hear with your ears, and set your heart upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you.

Declare all that you see to the house of Israel. The measuring of the temple continues up to Ezekiel chapter 43, where Ezekiel is told in verses 10 and 11, As for you, Son of man, describe to the house of Israel the temple, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities, and they shall measure the plan. And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple, its arrangement, its exits, and its entrances, that is, its whole design, and make known to them as well all its statutes, and its whole design, and all its laws, and write it down in their sight, so that they may observe all its laws, and all its statutes, and carry them out.

John's measuring task is a task of division. He is called to measure certain realms, and

pointedly instructed not to measure others, as they will be trampled by the nations. The effect of the measuring is to mark certain places for protection, and give others over.

As a symbolic action, it might be related to his act of prophecy. He is given a reed for the task, which is also a writing instrument, perhaps because it will be through his speaking and writing that he brings about the division. The numbering of the 144,000, and the measuring of the temple, both involve the numbering or measuring of that which is holy, much as the Holy of Holies is a square, so the Holy Company from the Twelve Tribes is a square.

Later the Holy City of the New Jerusalem will be measured in chapter 21, and will again be a square, or a cube. This measuring seems to anticipate that later measuring. The court outside of the temple is excluded from the measuring, or perhaps more strongly, it is cast out, not being measured by John.

There are various interpretations of the identity of the temple, the altar and the court. Some relate them to various parts of the church. The church is exposed to persecution in its bodily aspect, but not in its spiritual dimensions, for instance.

However, this does not seem to me to be the true reading. Given the first century context, where there was still a temple standing in Jerusalem, and the reference to the temple here is another argument in favour of a pre-70AD dating of the book, it would be natural to relate the court to the unbelieving Jews. They relate to the temple, but are profane, excluded and cast out on account of their unbelief.

The statement that they are given over to the nations, and that the nations will trample the holy city for 42 months, recalls Luke 21-24 in Jesus' Olivet Discourse. They will fall by the edge of the sword, and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The outer court of the Jews is given over to the nations.

However, the true worshippers of the temple, the faithful Jews, are marked out. The question of who is trampled is unclear. Lighthouse argues that it is the church that is trampled, suggesting that this is a reference to the period of persecution by Nero, which lasted approximately 42 months.

It is the holy city that is trampled, and the holy city is the measured portion, not the profane part that is excluded. The rest that is excluded will be given over to the Gentiles, but the holy part will be trampled underfoot too, but only for a limited period of time. The 42 months is the same length of time as 1,260 days.

42 months is also three and a half years, or a time, times, and half a time. It is a broken week of years. The same period of time is referenced in relation to the drought that came upon Israel in the ministry of John the Baptist in Luke 4-25 and in James 5-17.

We also find references to a time, times, and half a time, and related periods in days and also half a week in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 9, in the prophecy of the 70 weeks of years, the final week, for instance, is divided into two half weeks. Here we are introduced to the two witnesses, who are given authority and will prophesy for 1,260 days.

Why the difference between the 42 months and the 1,260 days? James Jordan suggests that it is the difference between measuring by the moon and measuring by the sun. The former is a time of persecution, but the second is a time of authority. In the following chapter, in chapter 12 verse 6, the woman is nourished for 1,260 days, while in chapter 13 verse 5, the beast is given to exercise authority for 42 months.

The two witnesses are described in ways that remind the hearer of characters and accounts from the Old Testament. Working with the background of Zechariah chapter 4, they are the two olive trees and a sevenfold lampstand that stand before the Lord. In that passage, the olive trees are distinguished from the lampstands that they sustain with their oil.

The olive trees there seem to be angelic guardians of the lampstand, powering it with their anointing. Here the olive trees and the lampstands are associated in the witnesses. The witnesses have angel-like authority.

As we saw earlier in the book, for instance, the angels of the seven churches or lampstands are likely human pastors rather than angels. The two witnesses clearly resemble Moses and Elijah. Like Elijah, the witnesses have power over fire.

They can shut up the sky, preventing rain. Like Moses, they can turn waters into blood and strike the earth with plagues. As two witnesses, they are like the two angelic witnesses sent to Sodom, Moses and Aaron sent to Egypt, or the two spies sent to Jericho.

They are to inspect the city prior to its final destruction. The two witnesses breathe fire, like the creatures released from the Euphrates in chapter 9. Their tongues have been set aflame, like the church was given tongues of fire at Pentecost. As Lighthouse observes, in their striking of the heavens, the waters and the earth, they demonstrate the authority that they have over every level of the world.

The two witnesses are related both to the 144,000 and to the woman of the following chapter. A beast rises from the bottomless pit to attack them. Once again, there is clear Old Testament background for this in Daniel chapter 7, where four beasts arise from the sea and one of the horns of the fourth beast makes war upon the saints and prevails over them.

We will see more of the beast mentioned here in the following chapters. We shall connect him with the fourth beast of Daniel's vision. The beast seems successfully to

prevail over the witnesses, killing them.

The bodies of the slain witnesses are left lying in the street of the great city, the identity of which is given symbolically as Sodom and Egypt and identified with the place where their lord was crucified. As Sodom, it is associated with great wickedness and abomination and also with inhospitality. As Egypt, it is a site of oppression, bondage and persecution.

The final identification, the place where their lord was crucified, suggests that the city was Jerusalem, although many commentators argue that this is another symbolic identification, presenting the site of the witnesses' martyrdom as the symbolic human city of violent hostility to Christ, the city of man, as it were. However, Jerusalem is the natural identification. It is the city renowned for killing the prophets, upon whom the blood of all the saints from Abel to Zechariah would come.

These faithful witnesses live out the pattern of Christ's own life. They are killed in the city where their lord was crucified. They are raised from the dead after three and a half days.

They ascend into heaven in a cloud. The three and a half days connects with the 42 months and 1,260 days earlier in the chapter. While the wider body of the nations gaze on the bodies of the witnesses, the people of the land, the Jews, rejoice over them and celebrate their apparent demise.

However, soon after the witnesses are raised and vindicated, it seems as though the witness of the church had perished in its persecution, but it rises up again and is vindicated by God. Much as there was an earthquake at Jesus' resurrection, there was an earthquake killing 7,000 people, perhaps a number associated with the remnant in the days of Elijah. One might also wonder whether this group repents.

The rest, in fear at the power and justice of God, give glory to him. This should not be read as conversion. Rather, it is the acknowledgement, quite likely involuntary, that the Lord is God and that he rules in history.

This is the second woe, and now the third takes place with the blowing of the trumpet. The angel takes his trumpet and blows it, and the celebration of heaven follows. The Lord and the Messiah have achieved their great victory.

The kingdom of the world has become their kingdom, ushering in the time of judgment upon the dead, the rewarding of the righteous, and the destroying of those who have ravaged the earth. As Lighthouse puts it, each movement of revelation pre-echoes its final crescendo. We have here an anticipation of the final end.

Also, as the witnesses finally share in the death of Christ, the heavenly temple is opened up. A question to consider. What are some examples of the righteous sharing in the

pattern of Christ's life and death in the book of Revelation?