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December 30th: Psalm 146 & Revelation 21:15–22:5

December 29, 2020



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The description of the holy city.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 146 Praise the Lord. The Lord is with thee. The Lord is with thee.

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In Revelation chapter 21, John is granted a vision of the new heaven and the new earth. Hearing this vision, our minds are drawn back to the original creation. The Spirit hovered over the waters of the deep in the first creation.

Light was called into existence, a firmament was created, and land was brought up from the sea. Now, in the new heavens and the new earth, symbolically the deep has been removed. The hovering Spirit is now bringing down the holy city, the communion formed in Him.

The firmament dividing heaven and earth has been removed, as God now dwells with man. The vision relates both to the not yet, the final consummation of the new heavens and the new earth, which is in focus in chapter 21 verses 1 to 8, and also to the already of the new creation currently being formed by Christ, which is part of what is in view in the verses that follow. Throughout the book of Revelation, there are countless echoes and allusions to Old Testament scriptures and prophecies, although hardly any direct citations.

These echoes and allusions are keys to the meaning of Revelation. But Revelation should also be understood to be a key to the meaning of these Old Testament texts. Through the book of Revelation, we can greatly deepen our understanding of the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel, for instance, scripture teaching us how to read scripture.

Daniel and Ezekiel are especially prominent background for the meaning of Revelation, but texts like Zechariah, Song of Songs, Leviticus, and others are also significant at certain junctures. In these concluding chapters, Genesis and Song of Songs both come into greater focus, as the text brings together the yearning for marital consummation of the Song of Songs and returns us to the themes of the very beginning of the scripture, as the new creation recalls and fulfills the original creation. The concluding chapters of Revelation track with the later chapters of Ezekiel especially closely, and John's vision of the Holy City harkens back to Ezekiel's vision of a new temple in several respects.

In Ezekiel's vision, there is also a very high mountain and a figure who is measuring. Ezekiel 40, verses 2-4 Such measurements in scripture are not recorded indiscriminately. The objects and the edifices of which we are given the measurements are holy objects and edifices.

Noah's Ark, the Tabernacle and its furniture, particularly things like the Ark of the Covenant, Solomon's Temple, Ezekiel's Temple and here the Holy City, all are objects or edifices whose dimensions are given to us. All are holy in some way. The measurements of such objects and edifices are meaningful, and the hearer of scripture is supposed to discern something of the meaning of the measurements that are given to us.

In Ezekiel 43, verse 10, the measurements given in Ezekiel's temple vision are intended to lead Israel to be ashamed of their iniquities, presumably recognizing the temple vision as a vision of holiness that exposes their own wickedness. In the measurements of the city here, the numbers 12 and 10 and squares and cubes are prominent throughout. In verse 12, the city was said to have 12 gates, with 12 angels at the gates, and with each gate having the name of a tribe.

In verse 14, there were 12 foundations, each with the name of one of the 12 apostles. The city itself is 12,000 stadia, 12 times 10 to the power of 3, in length, width and height. The city itself is cubed.

This should instantly draw the hearer's mind back to two previously perfect cubes in scripture, the most holy place of the tabernacle, which was a cube of 10 cubits on all sides, and the related holy of holies of Solomon's temple, which was a cube of 20 cubits on each side. Through such connections, the holiness of the city is underlined. The wall is 144 cubits, likely in its thickness, which is 12 squared.

Some people might want to convert these dimensions into more familiar ones, perhaps observing, for instance, that 12,000 stadia are 1,500 miles. But this would be badly to miss the symbolic force of the measurements. This New Jerusalem has the dimensions of a perfect, complete and holy Israel.

It has the dimensions of a magnified Most Holy Place or Sanctuary. With the perfection suggested by its dimensions, it also recalls the number of the 144,000, whose number also played upon the numbers 12 and 10. Perhaps most important here is the fact that this is a city that has the most holy status of the holy of holies, yet has open gates.

The Most Holy Realm is no longer closed to the people of God. In Hebrews chapter 9, the author of the book described the way that the first section of the tabernacle was symbolic of the age in which the way into the holy places had not yet been opened. In only one ritual per year could the high priest go into the holy of holies.

All of the rest of the rituals took place in the courtyard or in the holy place. All of those rituals, to some extent or other, fell short of entering into God's presence. The holy city of Revelation, however, is all holy place.

There is no longer the antechamber that the tabernacle or the temple had or that they represented. This is the bridal garden of Song of Songs as well. It is also the paradise of Eden, yet now glorified and magnified into a city of vast proportions, clothed with bridal jewels, with gold, with pearls, filled with fragrances and spices, choice fruits and with a fountain of living water in its midst.

The city is bounded and walled, but also open to those who will enter by its twelve gates, which are never shut. Solomon describes the bride in Song of Songs as like a walled garden of delights, containing fruit, fragrance and a fountain. The bride of Revelation has been opened up to the bridegroom and to the faithful also.

This vision is of the people of God raised to their full stature, enjoying the fullness of fellowship with God and also blessing the world as they ought to. Our eyes may glaze over when we see the list of jewels in the foundations of the walls of the city. However, this is not the first time that we have encountered such a list in Scripture.

The first such list is found in Exodus chapter 28, verses 15 to 21, in the description of the high priest's breastplate. You shall make a breastplate of judgment, in skilled work. In the style of the ephod you shall make it, of gold, blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen shall you make it.

It shall be square and doubled, a span its length and a span its breadth. You shall set in it four rows of stones. A row of sardius, topaz and carbuncle shall be its first row, and the second row an emerald, a sapphire and a diamond, and the third row a jacinth, an agate and an amethyst, and the fourth row a beryl, an onyx and a jasper.

They shall be set in gold filigree. There shall be twelve stones with their names according to the names of the sons of Israel. They shall be like signets, each engraved with its name, for the twelve tribes.

A second such list is found in Ezekiel chapter 28, verses 11 to 14. Moreover the word of the Lord came to me, Son of man, raise a lamentation over the king of Tyre and say to him, Thus says the Lord God, You were the signet of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God.

Every precious stone was your covering, sardius, topaz and diamond, beryl, onyx and jasper, sapphire, emerald and carbuncle, and crafted in gold were your settings and your engravings. On the day that you were created, they were prepared. You were an anointed guardian cherub.

I placed you. You were on the holy mountain of God, in the midst of the stones of fire you walked. There are challenges translating these lists, exacerbated by the inclusion of the Septuagint translation of these lists into the mix.

There are a few things to observe here. First, Jasper seems to be associated with Judah, and the walls of the city are Jasper, and the first of the jewels of the foundations is Jasper. The twelve jewels connect with the twelve apostles, who are the foundations of the city, but also with the high priest's breastplate, which associates the twelve apostles with the twelve tribes, each that has their associated company.

There seems to be some logic in the ordering of the jewels. Peter Lighthouse writes, Even if we take John's list as his own rendition of the Exodus list, the order is not the same. As Caird notes, if we take the Septuagint list in Exodus as normative, John's list is 6 5 4 3 2 1 10 11 12 7 8 9. Caird describes the effect this way, The first and second rows are interchanged and reversed, the third and fourth interchanged but not reversed.

John's list is different, but the difference is not arbitrary. In each half of the list we have a gesture towards Jesus' first shall be last principle. The sixth stone, the last in the first half of the breastplate, has taken the first place, the first stone has taken the last place, the last row has been elevated above the third row.

The pearls of the gates show that the city includes treasures of both land and sea. The pure gold recalls the most holy items of furniture of the temple and the tabernacle, the items that belonged in the Holy of Holies. In Genesis chapter 2, the Garden of Eden was a realm of vegetation, but was surrounded by lands with precious stones and metals.

The Garden of Eden in chapter 2 of Genesis still needed to be glorified, but the city here is a glorified garden, a garden city clothed with all of the treasures of the world. It includes not just the treasures of the land, but also the treasures of the sea in the gates of Pearl. There is no temple in the city because God and the Lamb dwell there.

The temple was always an antechamber. The city is now the sanctuary. Almost all of the activity of the temple took place outside of the sanctuary proper.

The temple was the threshold, it wasn't actually the place where God dwelt. The claim being made here is put differently as well. The temple is now God himself and the Lamb.

The righteous dwell in God himself. Christ is the new temple, whom we indwell by the Spirit. The city is the source of light.

It dazzles with its glorious splendour. It illuminates so that people can see. It gives light to the nations.

It is, in a manner reminiscent of Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, The city set on a mighty mountain that cannot be hidden. It is placed among the other nations to give light to them all. This is a fulfilment of Isaiah chapter 2 verses 1-4.

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be lifted up above the hills and all the nations shall flow to it and many people shall come and say Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations and shall decide disputes for many peoples and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more. As a city among the nations, the holy city is a source of light going out but also a site of gathering of riches in.

It is guarded against the entrance of anything impure but is also constantly open to receiving treasures from without being glorified as a result. Leslie Newbigin describes something of the interchange between the church and the world in this passage. The church is in the world as the place where Jesus, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells, is present.

But it is not itself that fullness. It is the place where the filling is taking place. It must therefore live always in dialogue with the world bearing its witness to Christ but always in such a way that it is open to receive the riches of God that belong properly to Christ but have to be brought to him.

This dialogue, this life of continuous exchange with the world means that the church itself is changing. It must change if all that the Father has is to be given to it as Christ's own possession. It does change.

Very obviously the church of the Hellenic world in the 4th century was different from the church that met in the upper room in Jerusalem. It will continue to change as it meets ever new cultures and lives in faithful dialogue with them. The church excludes that which is evil but is also glorified through the treasures of the nations that are brought into it.

In this passage, in many respects, we see the invisible church made visible. With our natural eyes we might see the church like a great construction site but this is what the church really is. A glorious edifice, perfect in its dimensions, pure in its contents.

In chapter 22 the imagery shifts from the imagery of the construction of a city to imagery of a garden reminding the reader of Eden. In particular there is the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and the tree of life. This harks back to Genesis chapter 2 verses 9-10 And out of the ground the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food.

The tree of life was in the midst of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden and there it divided and became four rivers. In Ezekiel's prophecy, after the vision of the new temple there is a river flowing out.

In Ezekiel chapter 47 verse 1 Then he brought me back to the door of the temple and behold, water was issuing from below the threshold of the temple toward the east for the temple faced east. The water was flowing down from below the south end of the threshold of the temple south of the altar. And then in verses 6-12 And he said to me, Son of man, have you seen this? Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

As I went back I saw on the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other. And he said to me, This water flows toward the eastern region and goes down into the Arava and enters the sea. When the water flows into the sea, the water will become fresh and wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live and there will be very many fish.

For this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh so everything will live where the water goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From En-Gedi to En-

Eglim it will be a place for the spreading of nets.

Its fish will be of very many kinds like the fish of the great sea but its swamps and marshes will not become fresh. They are to be left for salt. And on the banks, on both sides of the river there will grow all kinds of trees for food.

Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail but they will bear fresh fruit every month. Because the water for them flows from the sanctuary, their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing. The imagery of the life-giving river flowing out is also found in John's Gospel.

Jesus promises the water of life in John chapter 4 verses 13-14. Jesus said to her, Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

In John chapter 7 verses 37-39 On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Now this he said about the spirit whom those who believed in him were to receive.

For as yet the spirit had not been given because Jesus was not yet glorified. Blood and water flow from Jesus' side when he is pierced on the cross. Later on, as it were, living water flows from the tomb of Christ as it is opened up in his resurrection.

And in John chapter 21 there are allusions back to Ezekiel chapter 47 in the catch of many fish. The tree of life connects with Eden. It was the tree of life from which Adam and Eve were barred when they were cast out of the garden.

It has twelve kinds of fruit, with fruit each month. Twelve months, twelve different kinds of fruit. In the light of the lamb, in the tree of life, and in the water of life, we see light and food and water connecting with elements of the tabernacle.

The lampstand is like a tree that gives light. The twelve kinds of food connects with the twelve loaves of the showbread. The waters that go out connect with the chariots of water that flow out in Solomon's temple.

All of this offers illumination and glory, sustenance and healing, cleansing, refreshment and life. The holy city exists among the nations for the sake of their transformation, a transformation achieved by these holy gifts. In the New Jerusalem, people will see God's face.

It is a place of communion with God. God's name will be on people's foreheads. As Peter Lighthouse remarks, the people of this city aren't merely dressed as priests.

They are priests. They are marked out in their very bodies as holy. This is something that we see in the New Testament elsewhere.

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The reign of this holy city and those within it is not just for a thousand years. It is forever and ever.

This is a city that in many respects is already in existence, that is giving life and light to the world around. It is a place of holiness, a place of God's special presence. It is still descending.

It is not fully here yet, but we already have some experience of it. A question to consider, where else in the New Testament can we find elements of this city described?