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December 22nd: Psalms 122 & 123 & Revelation 14

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Alastair Roberts

Seek the peace of Jerusalem. The 144,000 and the harvest of the earth.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 122, A Song of a Sense, of David. I was glad when they said to me, Let us go to the house of the Lord. Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem, built as a city that is bound firmly together, to which the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord. Their thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David. Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

May they be secure who love you. Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers. For my brothers' and companions' sake I will say, Peace be within you.

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good. Psalm 122 is a pilgrim psalm. It's a song of a scent, associated with the journey up to Jerusalem for worship.

Israelites were expected to go up to worship in Jerusalem for three major festivals, Unleavened Bread or Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. The psalm begins and ends with references to the psalmist and his companions, I and R, going up to the house of the Lord, which is mentioned in both places. The centre is flanked by descriptions of the city of Jerusalem, and at the heart of the short psalm are the thrones of judgment, connected with the house of David.

Alternatively, the psalm can be divided into an opening statement in verse 1, followed by two short sections in verses 2-5 and 6-9. Each line of verses 6-9, as John Goldengay observes, ends with a reference to you, speaking of the city of Jerusalem. A parallel is set up between the thrones for judgment that the Lord has established in his house, and the throne of David.

The house and the throne of David is elevated by virtue of its association with the house and throne of the Lord. Conrad Schaefer notes the echoing of the beginning of the name of Jerusalem in the word for city, and the end of it in the word peace, which is repeated three times in the last four verses. The psalmist declares and celebrates the glory of the capital, a glory that arises from the Lord's dwelling there.

The hearer or the singer of this psalm can feel the exhilaration of the pilgrims going up to God's presence and house, and to the holy city, which represents Israel's dwelling in, peace and security within, and exaltation by God's presence. Beyond being the site of God's house, the city of Jerusalem is also the place where the decisions are made. It's the place of political rule.

It's the place of the house of David. The city is a remarkable city, tightly bounded by constraining geographical features, and a place of commanding elevation containing buildings of great beauty and splendor. It is a place of focal significance for the life of Israel, in its political life as a nation, as in its religious worship.

The Lord is never directly addressed within this psalm. It isn't directly about the Lord. It is rather addressed to and concerns the glory and peace of Jerusalem, which reflects the glory of the God who dwells there.

The great symbol of this city represents the way that God has blessed his people, and the psalmist ends with an exhortation to pray for and to seek the peace of the city, the endurance of this great concrete symbol and site of enjoyment of God's blessing of his people. Psalm 123, a song of ascents. Psalm 123 is a short pilgrim psalm, or song of ascent.

It begins with an expression of trust before moving to a prayer to the Lord. Faced with the contempt, derision, and scorn of those who were at ease, the psalmist and his company seek the Lord and his grace and mercy in their situation. As a work of poetry, the psalm is carefully strung together by repeated elements.

John Golding's psalm is a poem of the Lord's prayer. John Golding describes this in terms of a terse parallelism, binding the whole together. Gracious in verses 2G and 3A, Become so full in verses 3B and 4A, and Shame in verses 3B and 4C.

The key image of the psalm is concerned with the direction of the eyes. The eyes of the worshippers' hearts are drawn to the Lord who is enthroned in the heavens, and the psalmist compares this to the way that the eyes of servants look to the hands of their masters or mistresses. The relationship between the servant and their master or mistress is a relationship of obedience and service.

It is also one of dependence. The master or mistress have the duty to provide for their servant. The servant looks to the hand of their master or mistress for the slightest gesture or indication of what they ought to be doing.

The servant also looks to the hand of their master or mistress for everything that they need to survive. By the use of this imagery, used to develop the notion of the direction of the worshippers' attention, the relationship between God and his people is presented as one of service and obedience and dependence on the one side, and on the other side provision, rule and vindication. In the very fact that the one enthroned in the heavens is the master of the one who comes as his worshipper, that worshipper can find comfort and assurance in the Lord's commitment and justice in providing for them.

Then I looked and behold on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders.

No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes.

These have been redeemed from mankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless. Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.

Another angel a second followed, saying, Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passions of her sexual immorality. And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with

fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus. And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this, So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped. Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle.

And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe. So the angel swung his sickle across the earth, and gathered the grape harvest of the earth, and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress as high as a horse's bridle for 1,600 stadia.

Revelation chapter 14 in many ways parallels with chapter 13. It views the events of that chapter from a differing perspective. The sea beast here is no longer the chief active party, rather it is the lamb.

Whereas those who would not take on the mark of the beast were killed by the land beast, here they are a faithful army of martyrs harvested by the lamb. Revelation chapter 14 opens with the lamb upon Mount Zion, surrounded by the community of the 144,000. Immediately before the chapter break, there was another company of worshippers.

The worshippers of the sea beast marked on their right hand and forehead with the name of the sea beast, or with the number of his name. And here, in contrast to the worshippers of the beast, the lamb's followers are marked by his name and his father's name on their foreheads. Seeing the lamb and the 144,000 immediately after the beast and those marked with his number or name, underlines the parodic character of the latter.

The dragon, the sea beast, the land beast and the image of the beast are a parody of the Trinity and the Church. The land beast is a parody of the lamb, and the worshippers of the sea beast in the land parody the 144,000. The lamb was formerly in the throne scene in heaven, but now he stands upon Mount Zion in fulfilment of Psalm 2 verses 5-6.

Then he will speak to them in his wrath and terrify them in his fury, saying, As for me, I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill. As Austin Farrow points out, the lamb connects the scenes in heaven with the scenes on earth. There seems to be a fusion of Mount Zion and the throne scene here.

Beyond the fact that Psalm 2 continues to be in the background here, there is also the background of Daniel chapter 7 and the establishment of the Son of Man who will deal with the beasts. In verses 13-18 of that chapter, and the visions of my head alarmed me. I approached one of those who stood there and asked him the truth concerning all this.

So he told me and made known to me the interpretation of the things. These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth, but the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever. Earlier we saw the lamb by himself, the one like the Son of Man, but now he stands in the midst of a company of the saints who will be raised up with him.

They will inherit the kingdom too. They also, as we will see, have the character of sacrificial lambs. There is a roaring sound of worship from heaven above them, a song that they alone are taught.

This is connected with their dedicated character and their martyrdom. They are described in a five-fold way. They are described in a number of different ways.

They are not defiled, they are virgins, they follow the lamb everywhere, they are redeemed as first fruits, there is no lie in their mouth, and they are blameless. This brings together an array of different images. First of all, they are like holy warriors.

While engaged in holy warfare, when the Lord was in the camp, Israelite warriors were not to have relationships with women. They were dedicated servants for that period of time and had to remain in a state of cleanness. This company is also like holy warriors.

They have been set apart for the Lord. They follow the lamb everywhere, like a military company. But there are also elements of a bridal company here.

The image of a company of virgins would be far more likely to be associated with women, and women in a bridal party. We see such an image, for instance, in the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins in the Gospel of Matthew. This company of male virgins not defiled by women is not to be taken literally.

Rather, it is a reference to those who have not been defiled by intercourse with the whore of Babylon. We might also here recall the character of Jezebel, about whom the church in Thyatira is warned. These are people who have avoided idolatry with the beast.

They are also a sacrificial company. Here we might think of Isaiah chapter 53, verses 7 to 9. He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away, and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? And they made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his

mouth.

These 144,000 are in the company of the lamb, the sacrificial lamb. They also have no deceit in their mouth. They are blameless, they are without blemish, as the sacrifice was supposed to be.

The fact that there is no lie in their mouth is a reference also to the fact that they are faithful witnesses, and they are those who have not compromised with the beast. In these respects, they are faithful companions to the lamb, persons who have been formed into the image of the lamb. Back at the end of chapter 8, the eagle flew overhead, announcing the coming of three woes.

Now the angel flies overhead, calls with a loud voice, and it's a similar description. The declarations of the woes provided the structure of chapters 8 to 12, and the angels who fly overhead and call out with a loud voice do the same here. Peter Lighthouse observes the pattern.

The first angel anticipates chapters 15 to 16. In chapter 15 verse 4, This is anticipated in the statement of the first angel here. That angel also announced the advent of the hour of judgment, which is what happens next as the bowls are initiated.

He also declares God's sovereignty over heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water, and judgment begins and falls upon the sites that are mentioned there. The second angel declares that Babylon the Great is fallen. This expression is found once again in chapter 18 verse 2, and chapters 17 to 18 are being summarized in this statement.

This is the first reference to Babylon, before she is properly introduced to us at the beginning of chapter 17. There is also reference to the wine of her immorality and the wine of God's wrath, which come together in various ways. It is the wine of the blood of the saints that will first of all be drunk by her, and then poured out upon her in judgment.

The Lord will prepare this wine for her at the end of the chapter. The third angel cry refers to the events of chapters 19 to 21 verse 8. In chapter 19 verse 20 we read, The false prophet who in its presence had done the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast, and those who worshipped its image. These too were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur.

After this third angel, there is a voice from heaven, presumably the voice of the Lamb, declaring blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. This voice is answered by the antiphonal voice of the Spirit, blessed indeed that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them. In these firstfruits who are made like the Lamb, and enter into his sufferings, the church begins to enter fully into the life of its Lord.

As he was raised up through his sufferings, they will be raised up through their

sufferings. The bride will be joined to the bridegroom. And at this point the state of the people of God changes.

In Hebrews chapter 11 verses 39 to 40 we read, And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. As the church fills up the suffering of Christ, all the people of God from all ages can be made perfect together, and from that point on, the fuller union between Christ and his bride that is made possible by these firstfruits, will be something enjoyed by all of the saints. The chapter ends with a harvest scene.

There is a harvest of grain followed by a harvest of grapes. The harvest is of the 144,000. They have earlier been described as the firstfruits, and here they are actually reaped.

The symbolic use of the growing and the reaping of grain is common within the scripture. We might think back to the Old Testament and the way that the great feasts of Israel were often connected both with agricultural events of harvest, and with specific events within redemptive history. Jesus also uses the language of harvest on many occasions.

Harvest can be seen as the time of judgement when things are divided and things are brought in. After the harvest of the grain, there is a second harvest, which is the harvest of the wine. And here the harvested wine is trodden underfoot in the winepress outside of the city.

Being outside of the city, they are associated with Christ's own crucifixion. The 144,000 are trampled underfoot as we saw earlier. But where as we saw earlier, their being trampled underfoot was a sign of the dominance of their enemies, here they are being trampled underfoot in order to be made into wine.

What seems from one vantage point to be a power given to their adversaries is here presented as the means by which their enemies are unwittingly rendering them effective agents of God's wrath to themselves. They are making wine, and they will have to drink this wine at some point in the future, wine that will bring the wrath of God down upon them. The church, symbolically suffering in the same place where Christ suffered, outside of the city, is being conformed to Christ and his sufferings.

Thinking back to the images that we have of the beasts and also of the lamb, we should think of their composite character. They include many different things, they have horns that represent different powers and kings, they can have a number of heads and diadems. They are composite creatures that hold together many different things within themselves, they represent a number of different rulers, they represent empires stretched over time, they represent a large company of people.

And the lamb is the same. Christ gathers many peoples within himself. And once we recognise this, it will become clearer that the gathering of the people within Christ is part of the means by which Christ himself is raised up.

Christ can't fully be glorified if his body, the church, is not fully glorified. Israel is God's field of grain. Israel is also God's vine or vineyard as we see in Psalm 80 or Isaiah chapter 5. And now the blood flows from the winepress for 1600 stadia.

This is the entire length of Israel from north to south, and is flowing up to the height of a horse's bridle. That might be an allusion back to Zechariah chapter 14 verse 20. Images of winepressing can be used as images of judgement in places like Joel chapter 3. Here however, the image seems to be used in a more complicated way.

It is an image that seems to be one of judgement. The people of God are being trampled underfoot, but yet they are being prepared to be made into wine. And in the chapters that follow, it will be the wine of the blood of the saints that brings down God's wrath upon the whore and those who are associated with her.

1600 stadia, besides being roughly the length of the land of Israel, is also a square number. It is the number 40 squared. As a square number it should recall the number 144,000 which is itself connected with the square of 12 as 144.

A question to consider. Within this chapter we see events that we have seen earlier from one perspective presented to us from another perspective. Where else can we see this happening in the book of Revelation? How might these differing perspectives upon the same situation help us better to understand the situations within which we find ourselves?