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December 20th: Psalm 119:129-152 & Revelation 12

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The woman and the dragon.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 119 verses 129 to 152 My whole heart I cry, Answer me, O Lord! I will keep your statutes. I call to you, save me, That I may observe your testimonies. I rise before dawn and cry for help.

I hope in your words My eyes are awake before the watchers of the night, That I may meditate on your promise. Hear my voice according to your steadfast love. O Lord, according to your justice give me life.

They draw near who persecute me with evil purpose. They are far from your law. But you are near, O Lord, and all your commandments are true.

Long have I known from your testimonies that you have founded them forever. Revelation chapter 12 And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was

pregnant, and was crying out in birth pains and the agony of giving birth.

And another sign appeared in heaven. Behold, a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on his head seven diadems. His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven, and cast them to the earth.

And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth, so that when she bore her child he might devour it. She gave birth to a male child, one who was to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was caught up to God and to his throne, and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, in which she is to be nourished for one thousand two hundred and sixty days.

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.

He was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come. For the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them. But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.

And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time and times and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood.

But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea.

In Revelation chapter 12 the temple of God in heaven has just been opened and two signs appear in heaven following this. This isn't an interruption of the flow of the prophecy, but rather an unfolding of the seventh trumpet. It reveals how the kingdom of this world becomes the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ.

It is about the coming of the Son who will rule with the rod of iron. The end of Revelation

chapter 11 alluded to Psalm 2 and the allusions continue into Revelation chapter 12. Revelation chapter 11 verse 18 reads, 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.

Behind this it isn't difficult to hear the opening words of Psalm 2, Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his anointed. Psalm 2 comes more to the foreground in chapter 12 as the Son born to the woman is described as one who is to rule all the nations with the rod of iron. This is a reference to Psalm 2 verses 8-9.

Throughout the book of Revelation the hearer is presented with the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies and events of the first century. The hearer is presumed to be highly familiar with the prophecies of Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah in particular, and to hear their prophecies constantly being alluded to within John's prophecy. Explicit quotation or reference is very rare, but if you do not know the prophecies of these Old Testament prophets extremely well, you are highly unlikely to make much progress in understanding the book of Revelation.

The book of Revelation is a book that seems to require a kind of reading that is difficult to find. Its readers are expected to be profoundly literate in Old Testament scripture, with a very sharp ear for biblical allusion, typology, symbolism and complex literary structure. This book is probably not one that the average Christian in the first century, even a Jewish Christian who knew the scriptures well, could understand unaided.

Rather, the sort of reading that such a text seems to require is close and sustained communal reading, guided by persons peculiarly skilled in the scriptures. While reading with the aid of commentaries and pastors is a contemporary approximation of this, our typical attitudes and approaches to reading, which privilege the individual with little presumed background understanding of the scriptures, may not be sufficient to the task of understanding such a book. It is important to remember that the scriptures were not written for detached individual readers, but for communities of faithful readers in sustained communal engagement with the scriptures over the course of centuries.

If you and I struggle to understand this book, we should bear in mind that it wasn't written for us as detached modern readers, but for principally Jewish communities who were skilled readers in conversation, centuries of accumulated scriptural insight and instinct for scriptural texts, and for practices of reading and hearing that cultivated a much greater attentiveness than those of modern readers, who are accustomed to reading countless thousands easily digested texts without any need for deeper reflection and meditation. If we want to stand a chance of understanding this text, we need to pursue habits of reading that may be strange and deeply challenging for us. Revelation

chapter 12 is yet another instance of a text that requires skills, practices, and communities of reading that will stretch us as modern hearers of the text.

Back at the very beginning of the scriptural story, in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15, the serpent was cursed after the fall, and the Lord declared that he would put enmity between the woman and her seed and the serpent and his seed. In Revelation chapter 12, this enmity is played out as the great conflict between the woman and the dragon. At the heart of this conflict is clearly the struggle between Satan and Christ.

The more exact identity of the dragon and the woman remain to be considered though. Revelation employs astrological symbolism. This is based upon signs in the heavens.

The woman and the dragon are symbols that would have been familiar to many from the Zodiac and from mythology. The woman is clothed with the sun, she has the moon under her feet, and is crowned with twelve stars. The celestial woman is Virgo or the Virgin.

Being clothed with the sun means that the sun is passing through her in the daytime. The moon under her feet refers to the positioning of the moon relative to the feet of the sign of Virgo in the heavens. Austin Farris suggests that the point may be that she is the reigning sign, with the moon beneath her feet representing her reigning over that specific month.

This positioning might also identify a more exact time at which an important event occurs. The stars that form the woman's crown might be like the eleven stars that bow down in Joseph's vision, a reference to signs of the Zodiac, not individual stars. The point of the crowning, according to Farris, is that Virgo is the one among the twelve constellations that is ruling at that time.

The twelve stars also connect the figure of the woman with Israel. Israel is subtly related to the Zodiac at various points in scripture, an identification that was developed in various ways by Jews over history, not only in scriptural and theological reflection, but also in art, albeit not without controversy, given the pagan superstitions and idolatrous beliefs that could attend astrology. This is definitely not the only place in the book of Revelation that we encounter imagery associated with the Zodiac.

Farris notes that the faces of the four cherubim relate to the middle of the four seasons in anti-calendrical order. So we begin with the lion, for Leo, moving to the bull, for Taurus, moving to the man, for Aquarius the water-bearer, with the eagle, for Scorpio, last in order. Scorpio formerly was related more closely with the sign of Libra, which intervened between the woman, Virgo, and the scorpion, eagle or dragon of Scorpio, as Libra was seen as Scorpio's claws.

G.B. Caird argues for the extensive commonalities between this scene and stories from pagan mythologies. He writes, In the folklore of many nations there are found stories of

the usurper who, doomed to be killed by a prince as yet unborn, attempts to cheat the fates by killing the prince at birth. The prince is miraculously snatched from his clutches and hidden away until he is old enough to kill the usurper and claim his inheritance.

The same theme is found in many forms in the mythology of the ancient world. In Greece it is the dragon Python who attempts to kill the newborn son of Zeus and is foiled by the escape of the mother Leto to the island of Delos. There Apollo is born and he subsequently returns to Parnassus and kills the dragon in its Delphic cave.

In Egypt it is said the red dragon who pursues Isis and is later killed by her son Horus. These two stories were forms of the solar myth. The dragon of darkness tries to kill the sun god only to be killed by him when the new day dawns.

This passage does not merely share commonalities with stories from pagan myths. As Caird argues, the emperor, who typically would be identified with the son of the goddess, is now one of the lesser minions of the dragon. There is a profound challenge to pagan mythology taking place here.

The heavenly woman is pregnant and in agony to give birth. Zion is represented elsewhere in scripture as a pregnant woman at various points in the book of Isaiah for instance. In Isaiah chapter 66 verses 7 to 9 we read, before she was in labour she gave birth, before her pain came upon her she delivered a son.

Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Shall a land be born in one day? Shall a nation be brought forth in one moment? For as soon as Zion was in labour she brought forth her children. Shall I bring to the point of birth and not cause to bring forth, says the Lord? Shall I, who cause to bring forth, shut the womb, says your God? The representation of Israel as a woman struggling to give birth should also recall the story of the Exodus where the story begins with women struggling in birth. The Hebrew midwives, the women of Israel, Jokabed, with the dragon Pharaoh seeking to kill her sons.

At the beginning of the story of the Exodus, Israel herself is in birth pangs, needing to be delivered from the dragon. The story of the Exodus is associated with the opening of the womb, which is why the law concerning the opening of the womb is central to the instructions given in its context. In Exodus chapter 13 verses 1 to 2 and 11 to 16 we have this law given.

Israel is God's firstborn son, but Israel is also the woman to whom God grants birth. Pharaoh and the Egyptians are represented as the sea monster Rahab and also called a dragon in later scriptures. They seek to kill the offspring of the woman Israel as soon as she gives birth.

The dragon and his minions pursue the woman into the wilderness, seeking to drown

Israel in the Red Sea, from which Israel is rescued and is reborn as a nation as they pass through the narrow passage into a new life. In Revelation, the symbolic Exodus narrative of the woman, the dragon and the firstborn son is played out on a grander scale. Here we see, behind figures such as Egypt, behind the other great antagonists of Israel's history, and even behind the celestial signs of the zodiac themselves, we see Satan.

The dragon has seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his horns, all signs of power and authority. That the dragon has seven heads might remind us of the beasts of Daniel. They have seven heads between them.

The sea beast in the following chapter will also have similar features. The dragon is the archetypal monster, the monster behind all of the other monsters. The dragon here brings down a third of the stars of heaven with his tail, casting them to earth.

We might recall the scorpion locusts of chapter nine, whose stings were in their tails. The dragon is attended by his hellish servants. In chapter nine, it is the star fallen from heaven to earth with the key of the bottomless pit who releases the scorpion locusts.

That a third of the stars are brought down might remind us of the first four trumpets, within which a third of several things are struck. Now, in the dragon's descent, a third of the stars are struck. The story of Israel is the story of the archetypal woman struggling to give birth to the seed who will rule, assaulted by the great serpent of old.

This story is seen in the story of Sarah and Pharaoh and Abimelech, in whom the dragon seeks to devour Isaac before his birth, for instance. It is seen in the story of Jochebed, Moses and Pharaoh. It is seen in the story of Mary, Jesus and Herod.

The woman here is not simply to be identified as Mary, as some commentators have done. Rather, Mary is arguably the most important of her historical faces. The woman herself is Israel though.

Her child is Christ himself. The birth of the child can be connected not merely to Christ's incarnation, but also to his resurrection, which is his birth from the dead. Jesus describes his resurrection in such terms in John 16.21. When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come.

But when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Peter Lighthouse suggests that this vision of Mother Israel needs to be considered in terms of the allusions to Zechariah that are ongoing in the book. The woman is like the high priest Joshua, with his dirty robes in Zechariah chapter 3. There the high priest is opposed by the accuser, Satan, with the angel of the Lord coming to Joshua's aid.

Here Israel is the bride before the throne of God in the now open temple, opposed by the serpent, Satan. She is vindicated by giving birth to her child. The child is destined to be

the great Davidic ruler of Psalm 2, the one to rule the nations with a rod of iron.

As he is lifted up, through his cross, his resurrection and ascension, Satan will be cast down. This is referred to by Christ in John 12.31-32. Now is the judgment of this world. Now will the ruler of this world be cast out.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself. Mother Israel is not only giving birth to one son, but as in the case of Isaiah chapter 66, the one son is the firstborn of many children. The woman flees into the wilderness, where she is protected and nourished by God.

Much as Hagar fled from Sarah, Israel went into the wilderness from Pharaoh, or Elijah went from Ahab and Jezebel. She remains there for 1260 days, incidentally the same period of time of Elijah's drought. This 1260 days is likely related to the 42 months that we read of elsewhere.

In verses 7-12 we read of a heavenly war. This occurs after the male child born of the woman is caught up to God and to his throne. It is easy to forget the cosmic and heavenly dimensions of the gospel, and the book of Revelation and particularly this chapter bring these dimensions into clearer focus.

We might wonder who the character of Michael is. His name means who is like God, or he who is like God. As a figure we encounter him earlier in the scripture, in Daniel chapter 10 verses 4-14.

There he is described as one of the chief princes, who comes to aid against the kings of Persia. In Daniel chapter 10 verse 21 we read, But I will tell you what is inscribed in the book of truth. There is none who contends by my side against these except Michael your prince.

And then in Daniel chapter 12 verse 1, At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book.

Michael seems to be a sort of angelic guardian of Israel, who will play a crucial role in the last days. In Jude chapter 1 verse 9, But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, was disputing about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a blasphemous judgment, but said, The Lord rebuke you. That description of Michael recalls Zechariah chapter 3 and the angel of the Lord rebuking Satan.

We have already seen Zechariah chapter 3 in the background of this chapter. Many have identified Michael with Christ himself, much as the angel of the Lord is often so identified. Others have regarded Michael as a powerful angel, or perhaps a powerful angel who is closely associated with the Son, his personal assistant perhaps, maybe like

Joshua is to Moses.

In Daniel chapter 10 verses 5-6, we see the man of Beryl who seems to be Michael himself. I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist. His body was like Beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.

This matches very closely with the description of Christ in Revelation chapter 1 verses 12-15. Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe, and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow, his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.

If we are, as I believe we ought, to identify this character of Michael with Christ, we face a problem in the shift from the child to Michael. This does represent a shift of perspective. However, there are many shifts in imagery in the book.

For instance, from the child to the lamb, or the lamb to the lion, the kingdom of the male child is contested, and Michael and the angels have to fight against the dragon to secure it. The dragon is situated in heaven. He's a most powerful serpent, with power over the nations, suggested by his offering of the nations to Christ at his temptation.

They are under his dominion. His power has a number of different forms. As James Jordan suggests, he's the destroyer, he's the one who ruins God's creation and brings death.

He is the deceiver, the one who misleads and outwits. He is also the accuser, whose power comes from the law and the condemnation that he can bring. He is the adversary, who opposes the great enemy.

He has been active from the beginning. He's the serpent from of old. The victory over him is won by the blood of the lamb.

It is won as the sacrifice of Christ overcomes his work, opening up a living way to God, an eternal life in fellowship with him, to defeat the power of Satan that is exercised through death. It is won as the truth of Christ is spread abroad by the illumination of the Spirit, overcoming the deception and darkness of the serpent. It is won as Christ's intercession, as our eternal high priest overcomes the accuser's condemnation, justifying God's people.

It is won as one stronger than the adversary arises and binds his power and his tyranny. It is won as the serpent is cast down from the heavens, losing much of his former

authority. The victory in heaven is also attributed to the martyrs, who conquered the dragon with the blood of the lamb and their faithful testimony to death.

The victory in heaven has to be played out on earth too. The devil is cast down to earth. He has lost the definitive battle, but he can still inflict considerable damage.

The dragon now pursues the woman, to whom he still has access. The woman, we might note, is no longer crowned in heaven. The woman, Mother Israel, was crowned in heaven when she gave birth to her son, the one who was destined to rule the nations.

But now that the time of performing that mission has passed, she is one of the other nations upon the earth. She is vulnerable to the assaults of the dragon in many ways. This is halfway through the final week of Daniel's 70-week vision of Daniel 9, verses 24-27.

The time, times, and half a time are a symbolic three and a half years. It's a broken week, which is the same length of time as 1260 days and 42 months. The water that the serpent pours from his mouth might remind us of the Red Sea from which Israel is delivered.

It might also be a reference to the speech of the serpent, the way that he seeks to destroy and corrupt through false teaching. Wormwood turned the waters bitter, and now the dragon is doing the same thing. The woman is given the wings of the great eagle to fly from the serpent into the wilderness, much as the Lord describes his deliverance of Israel in Exodus 19, verse 4. The dragon, furious that the woman has escaped him, seeks to attack the rest of her offspring, the faithful ones who keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus.

He stands on the sand of the sea. In the following chapter he will call up the beast of the sea, in order to assault the woman's children on both the land and the sea, attacking Christians both in the land of Israel and also within the sea of the Gentiles. A question to consider, where in scripture might we see examples of the assault of the dragon upon the woman?