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Messages to Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum.

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

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Transcript

Psalm 99 Psalm 101 Psalm 102 Psalm 136 Psalm 147 to seventeen. To the angel of the church in Ephesus write, The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands. I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

I know you are enduring patiently, and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary, but I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen, repent, and do the works you did at first, if not I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. And to the

angel of the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slanderer of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation.

Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write, The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is, yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. But I have a few things against you.

You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols, and practice sexual immorality. So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Therefore repent.

If not, I will come to you soon, and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone, that no one knows except the one who receives it.

In Revelation chapter 2 we begin the letters to the seven churches. When we're reading a book as complicated as the book of Revelation, it is important to pay attention to the structure, as in the process of assembling a jigsaw puzzle, paying attention to the shape of all of the pieces is extremely important. As we do so, we'll be able to put things together in ways that we would not otherwise.

And there is great structure to the book of Revelation, something that will be apparent in this particular section. When assembling a jigsaw puzzle, we also pay a lot of attention to the images on a piece, and as we go through the book of Revelation this will be extremely important. When reading the book, we will so often find it to be the case that one particular detail reminds us of something that we've read in the prophets in the Old Testament, or perhaps something in the Gospels, or maybe something later on in the book of Revelation.

Recognising this helps us to put things in their proper place. When we do not have this knowledge of Scripture that we bring to the text, so many of its references will completely pass us by, and we will be in considerable danger of forcing things into

places that they do not belong. The letters to the churches are addressed to the angels or the messengers of the churches.

Some have seen these as the guardian angels of the churches, but it might be best to see them as the leaders of the churches, the pastors. These figures are associated with the seven stars at the end of chapter 1, and the churches themselves are connected with the seven lampstands. To understand this sort of symbolism we need to know the Old Testament pretty well.

The Old Testament presents us with the lampstand as part of the furniture of the tabernacle. The lampstand has seven branches. The lampstand is placed in the holy place.

The lampstand is also like a tree in certain respects. It has almond blossoms. It is connected with the almond tree.

Exploring the symbolism of the lampstand a bit more deeply in the Old Testament, we can also see a connection with the high priest. Aaron's rod produces almond blossoms, connecting him with the lampstand. It is also like a burning bush, a golden tree that is on fire without being consumed.

Each of the letters written to the seven churches follows a similar pattern. Ian Paul breaks down the pattern as follows. First, to the angel of the church in, write, second, thus says he who, and some reference to an element of Revelation chapter 1. Third, I know your some characteristics or actions of the church.

Fourth, but this I have against you. Fifth, command to repent or amend ways. Sixth, whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

And finally, seventh, to those who conquer with the promise of a gift or reward. The letters move through different periods of history. This is something that James Jordan, Peter Lighthouse and David Chilton have all noted.

In chapter 2 verse 7, the tree of life is in the paradise of God in Eden. In chapter 2 verse 10, people are thrown into prison and tested before receiving a crown. It might remind us of the story of Joseph.

2 verse 14 and 17, reminders of Balaam and Balak and promise of hidden manna, a reference to the time in the wilderness. Chapter 2 verses 20 and 26, Jezebel and rule over the nations like the Davidic king and the kingdom period more generally. Chapter 3 verses 2 and 4, exile and remnant, soil garments of the high priest in the book of Zechariah.

Chapter 3 verses 7 and 12, restoration, Eliakim in Isaiah chapter 22 as an anticipation of Cyrus as the one who opens doors. In chapter 45 verse 1 of the book of Isaiah, a pillar in

the rebuilt temple of God. And then finally in chapter 3 verse 16, it's a reference to the Israel of Jesus' day, to the Pharisees and others who are proud but fail to recognize their nakedness and blindness.

We should also note the way that the letters to the churches draw upon the imagery of the vision of Christ and the description of him in chapter 1. This is arranged in a broken chiasm with that chapter. The details included are as follows. First, walking among the lamps with stars in hand.

In the second letter, he's the first and the last, he's the living one. In the third, there's a sword in his mouth. In the fourth, his eyes are like fire and his feet like bronze.

In the fifth, seven spirits of God and seven stars. In the sixth, the key of David and the keys of death and Hades. And then seventh, Amen and faithful witness.

The letters are loosely arranged chiastically. The first letter, the letter to Ephesus, there is a promise to eat of the tree of life, which is paralleled with the last letter to Laodicea, an invitation to eat with Christ. The second and the sixth are paralleled also.

Smyrna, the Jews are a synagogue of Satan and there's coming tribulation. And in Philadelphia, the Jews are a synagogue of Satan and there is tribulation coming soon. In Pergamum, the third, it is paralleled with the fifth of Sardis.

There's a white stone, a new name received and Jesus is coming to them soon. In Sardis, there's a white garment, a name in the book of life and Jesus is coming soon. And then in the center, you have Thyatira, Jezebel and the need to hold fast.

The first and the last churches are promised a single gift and all of the middle ones are offered a double gift. The gifts are as follows. First, Ephesus, eating from the tree of life.

Second, Smyrna, a crown of life and rescue from the second death. Pergamum, the third, hidden manor and white stone with a new name on it. Fourth, Thyatira, authority and a rod of iron and the morning star.

Fifth, Sardis, white garments and a name not to be erased from the book of life confessed by Jesus. Sixth, Philadelphia, made a pillar in the temple and receiving the name of God and the new Jerusalem. And then seventh and finally, Laodicea, to sit with Jesus on his throne.

Peter Lighthouse suggests that these gifts can be arranged with the seven days of creation, especially as they are fleshed out and developed in the creation pattern structure of the tabernacle instructions in Exodus chapter 25 to 31. I'm less persuaded by some of the connections that Lighthouse draws here, but I suspect he is right in seeing some general association. Here are some of the associations that we can think about.

The first day, there's a focus on the tree of life, the lamp stand, as in Exodus chapter 25. It's the light at the heart. Christ is the light bearer, the one with the seven stars in his hand.

On the second day, there's much weaker connections. Perhaps we should see the division between death and life as associated with the firmament. On the third day, there's the land divided from the sea and plants from the earth and that's associated with stones and manna.

Perhaps the contrast between the bronze altar and eating food sacrificed to idols. Again, this is fairly weak. On the fourth day, we have the creation of the heavenly lights in Genesis and oil for the lamp in the tabernacle in Exodus.

The son of God is a ruler with fiery eyes who promises rule and the morning star and this fits rather well. The fifth day is associated with fish and in Exodus with the priest's garments. Here, attention is given to the garments of the Sardis church.

Again, this might be a neat fit. The sixth day is associated with the formation of humanity and the consecration of the priests who are invested with garments declaring them to be holy to the Lord, crowned and placed in the tabernacle. This fits rather neatly with the Philadelphia letter, especially in chapter 3 verses 11 to 12.

Then finally, on the seventh day, there is rest and the Sabbath. It's the promise of sitting in rest with Christ on his throne and eating with Christ in the wedding feast. So much of the book of Revelation depends upon recognising these deeper patterns and structures.

Sometimes they're very weak and tentative and other times they bear a lot more weight. As we go through the book, we'll see the significance of the number seven in the structure and the details of the book. It is not accidental that John is writing to seven churches.

There are seven lampstands, there are seven stars, there are seven seals, there are seven trumpets, there are seven bowls, there are seven of a great many things in the book of Revelation. This should inspire us to look deeper to try and see patterns that we might have missed. The letters anticipate the themes of the rest of the book of Revelation.

Perhaps the rest of the book of Revelation is supposed to be read as a letter to an eighth church. David Chilton and James Jordan and Peter Lighthouse have all pointed this out. Jordan writes, for instance, Moreover the seven letters anticipate Revelation as a whole.

The enemy of the seven churches are the Nicolaitans, literally people conquerors, Judaizers, the false apostles pictured in Ephesus. Chapter 2 verse 6. The Jews, Judaizers of Smyrna take the main focus in chapters 6 to 12. The beast and false prophet, Balak and Balaam, literally people eater, are in chapter 13 and Pergamum.

The harlot Jezebel, chapter 17, is in Thyatira. The judgment on Jerusalem, chapter 18, is threatened against Sardis. The conquering army of saints, chapter 19, is pictured in Philadelphia.

The choice whether or not to enter the New Jerusalem is set before Laodicea, chapter 3 verse 20. Austin Farrer has argued for several connections between the letters and the rest of the book, observing different literary parallels and contrasts. Lighthouse lists both the promises and the enemies highlighted in the seven letters and shows that they anticipate the rest of the book.

First the promises. Ephesus, the tree of life, which is referred to in chapter 22 verse 2. Smyrna is promised escape from the second death, which is referred to in chapter 20 verse 6. Pergamum is promised the hidden manor, the stone and the name, which corresponds with invitation to supper and a name in chapter 19 verse 9 and 12. A rod of iron is mentioned in the letter to Thyatira.

It is also mentioned in chapter 19 verse 15. Sardis are told that they will walk or ride with Christ in white. In chapter 19 verse 14 we see him in that position.

Philadelphia is promised that there will be a pillar in the New Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem and its pillars are declared to us in chapter 21 verse 2 and 9 to 10. Laodicea is told that they will sit on Jesus' throne with him and the saints will reign with Christ in chapter 22 verse 5. The letters and the rest of the book should not be separated from each other. Second, the enemies or the threats can also be paralleled.

Lighthouse doesn't see any threats or enemies corresponding to the first or last churches, Ephesus and Laodicea, but the other five have connections. Smyrna with the synagogue of Satan, the demon horde from the inverted temple in chapter 9 verses 1 to 11. Pergamum with Satan, Balak and Balaam is connected with Satan and the two beasts or the beast and the false prophet in chapter 12 and 13.

Thyatira, Jezebel is associated with the harlot of Babylon in chapters 17 and 18. Sardis, the threat of lethargy with Jesus as the thief who comes, with chapter 16 verse 15. And Philadelphia, the synagogue of Satan and the coming testing relates to the harvest of chapter 14 verses 14 to 20.

One of the effects of recognising all of this is that it will invite us to read the epistles to the seven churches as a sort of apocalypse in miniature and the apocalypse that follows as if a longer letter to another city. It also invites us to bring the rest of the letter into correspondence and dialogue with these letters to the seven churches to see in the larger body of the text some clues to reading these particular parts. The first of the seven churches addressed is the church at Ephesus.

The apostle Paul had ministered in the city of Ephesus for a number of years in Acts

chapter 19 with the message of the gospel spreading from there throughout all Asia. On his return from his third missionary journey, Paul had met up with the Ephesian elders in Miletus. In Acts chapter 20 he had told them about the danger of wolves arising among their number and that the sheep will be threatened.

It seems from the letter to the church of Ephesus here that this had come to pass. The description of Christ here is as the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. Whereas no such description is given in chapter 1, here Jesus is walking around.

The lampstands could be compared to trees. They are associated with the holy place as well. Jesus being described as walking among them might be like the Lord walking in the midst of the garden of Eden, the gardener tending the trees.

Christ praises the church for three virtues and three actions which are possibly paralleled. They are praised for their work, their toil and their patient endurance. Their works might be paralleled with the fact that they cannot bear with those who are evil, their toil with their testing of the false apostles and their patient endurance with enduring patiently and bearing up and not having grown weary.

Nevertheless, Christ does have something against this church, against the church or more particularly against the angel of the church, most probably the pastor. He is charged with having abandoned his first love. He must consider what he has fallen from.

This is the first stage of repentance and then he must return to his first works. His first love and his first works should be connected together. The love that has grown cold that he must return to is probably a love not just for Christ but also for the body.

These two things naturally go together. The fact that a threat of removing the lampstand is given to the angel, seemingly dependent upon the angel's action, maybe highlights the danger of a bad pastoral guardian. He is supposed to protect and to tend this lampstand and yet if he is failing to do so, the lampstand may be removed.

This threat of removing the lampstand would leave that city in darkness. It would be the loss of the light within that particular place. Ephesus is the one city of the seven that has given this warning.

Christ is the priestly custodian of the lamps and under him are the angels that he has sent as messengers that must represent his guardian care over these particular churches. They are praised for having hated the works of the Nicolaitans. It is not clear who these people were.

The etymology suggests people conquerors. Some have suggested that this is a play on a Jewish etymologisation of Balaam's name as the consumer of the people. We do have a possible clue in verses 14-15.

They seem to have supported the eating of food sacrificed to idols and the practice of sexual immorality. They are compromising with the pagan society. And pagan worship was very important in the city of Ephesus, as we saw back in Acts chapter 19 with the riot there.

There would be a great many temptations to compromise and fortunately the guardian of this city has stood against that. Food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality are mentioned in a number of points in these letters. We see the importance of these issues for the early church in Acts chapter 15 as these are part of the requirements that are sent out by the Jerusalem council to the Gentiles that are converting to the gospel.

We also see it in 1 Corinthians as Paul writes on both of these matters to the Corinthian church. The formula, he who has an ear let him hear what the spirit says to the churches is similar to statements that we find in the Old Testament and also in the teaching of Jesus. This requires some spiritual insight.

To understand what is being said here you need some sort of spiritual insight and scriptural literacy. The promise for those who overcome is that they will be able to eat of the tree of life, something that we see later on in the book. This is associated with the Garden of Eden.

In the book of Genesis those who eat of the tree of life live forever. The second letter is to the church in Smyrna. It is structured as a chiasm.

Here Christ is introduced to us as the first and the last, the one who died and came to life. This is language drawn from the prophet Isaiah. The fact that it is language used in the context of the vindication of Israel maybe gives it a particular resonance in this context.

He is the first of creation. He is the first of the new creation. He is the one who is the first born from the dead.

All of these themes are explored in more detail in the great poem in Colossians chapter 1. He is the last. He is the one who is the climax, the one who sums up and perfects everything in himself. He is the goal and the end of everything.

He is the alpha and the omega. He speaks of the tribulation that they have suffered. They have suffered slander from those who say that they are Jews and are not.

It is likely that the Christians in Smyrna were suffering persecution from ethnic Jews of the Diaspora. They were accusing them of not being Jews so that they would lose their privileges and protections as those who practiced a form of Judaism. Through this slander and through the accusations that they levelled against them, the Jews would get them persecuted by the Romans.

The Romans would cast some of them into prison and they would be tested and tried there. But the Jews that are accusing them are not true Jews. They are a synagogue of Satan.

They are children of the evil one as Jesus teaches the Jews who accuse him in the Gospel of John. Gregory Beals suggests that the reference to ten days of tribulation might refer back to the story of Daniel and the testing of Daniel and his friends for ten days concerning the food that they ate. They would not eat food that had association with idols and so they only ate vegetables.

As a result, they were blessed by the Lord. And these people will be tested for seven days too. As noted earlier, this testing in prison also brings back memories of the story of Joseph.

If they are faithful to death, they will get the crown of life. There's an irony here. As they lose their lives, they will gain them.

And as we see in the next verse, this is an act of overcoming, even as they are being killed. The person who overcomes in this way as a faithful martyr will not be hurt by the second death. He's escaped death by dying faithfully.

The angel of the church in Pergamum is the third to receive a letter. He is addressed by the one who has the sharp two-edged sword. This is the one whose word judges and divides.

Christ describes the Christians in Pergamum as dwelling where Satan's throne is. This might be a reference to the great throne of Zeus or his altar that was shaped like a throne on the conical hill that was behind Pergamum, which contained a great many temples and other places for deities. Such a centre of pagan worship was a site of demonic and satanic authority.

While false teachers accusing the eating of food sacrificed to idols thought it was nothing, it was really consorting with demons and with Satan himself. The church is praised for holding fast to the name of Christ, not denying the faith under trial. We are told here of Antipas, the Lord's faithful witness.

The language of faithful witness is the way that Christ himself is described in the previous chapter. Here is a servant who is like his master. He was faithful to death, but also a model of the sort of persecution that the other Christians in Pergamum might face.

However, despite its resilience against external threat and trial, there are internal problems in the church in Pergamum. They have compromised in a number of different ways. There are some within the church that have not been rooted out who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel.

In the story of the Book of Numbers, King Balak tries to get Balaam to curse the people of Israel. Balaam, a mercenary prophet, fails to do so and he is stopped by the angel of the Lord bearing a sword on the way. His donkey will not move forward.

Later on, however, rather than directly cursing Israel, he compromises Israel by getting them to have sexual relations with the daughters of Moab, who then invite them to celebrate sacrifices with them. The connection with sexual immorality and sacrifice is then very important for understanding the story of Balaam. It is also important for understanding this.

Sexual infidelity is connected with spiritual infidelity. The people of Israel were warned both about intermarriage with pagans because it would lead them to sacrificing their gods, and warned against sacrificing to their gods because it would lead to intermarriage and assimilation to the pagan nations. Here there is a triad, Satan, Balak and Balaam, which corresponds with the dragon, the beast and the false prophet.

That archetypal triad will be seen later on in chapters 12 and 13. The Nicolaitans are another group that are a problem within the city of Pergamum. If they do not repent soon, Christ will come to them and they will war against them with the sword of his mouth.

This warning connects with the description of Christ at the beginning of the letter as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword in his mouth. It is also yet another example of the way in which these are mini-apocalypses. Christ is coming soon on this grander scale to destroy the city of Babylon and to establish his bride.

He is also coming to these specific churches to act against them, to judge them. The one who overcomes is promised some of the hidden manna that might be connected with the manna that is hidden in the Ark of the Covenant. This, along with other details of this particular letter, is associated with the wilderness period of Israel's life.

Along with the hidden manna is promised a white stone, or more literally, a dazzling stone. Many suggestions have been put forward for what this might be. Some have connected the white stone with the Urim and the Thummim, suggesting that they are a white and a black stone.

Others that the stone is one that is used for declaring innocence. Perhaps there is a connection with the stone mentioned in the book of Zechariah chapter 3, verse 9. For behold on the stone that I have set before Joshua, on a single stone with seven eyes, I will engrave its inscription, declares the Lord of hosts, and I will remove the iniquity of this land in a single day. As already noted, the elements of the letters to the churches anticipate the rest of the book.

Could this help us to figure out the identity of this white stone? As I have already

mentioned, Lightheart argues that the enemies of the letter to Pergamum relate to the dragon Satan, the beast Balak, and the land beast or false prophet of Balaam in chapters 12 and 13. Are there clues here? The woman pursued by the dragon is nourished in the wilderness, as Israel was nourished by the manna. The beast causes people to be marked on their right hands and foreheads with his mark.

This is an inversion of God's marking out of his people on their foreheads. Is there an association with the two gifts of the church at Pergamum here? If there is, then the white stone might be designed to be worn on the forehead also, as we see the servants of God sealed on their foreheads in chapter 7, verse 3. We might also consider the onyx stones with the names of the tribes of Israel on the shoulders of the high priest, Ephod. In Exodus chapter 28, verses 9 to 12, he was to bear these into God's presence as a memorial.

However, there is another possibility, that the stone is a brilliant, shining or dazzling stone, not just a white one, and is associated with the golden stone on the high priest's forehead, something suggested by Beal. This might not be the most initial probable reading of the white stone, but the argument for it can be bolstered in a number of different ways. It is a stone with a name written upon it.

Again, we should note the parallels with the letter to Sardis, where the person is clothed in white and his name is confessed before God. In both cases, we would be seeing an emphasis upon the garments of the high priest. The Balaam-Balak connection also suggests a connection with Phineas, who overcame in Numbers chapter 25 and was given a covenant of peace and a perpetual high priesthood.

The gifts or rewards mentioned in the letters to the churches also turn up later in the book, in ways that might shed further light upon their meaning. In chapter 19, verse 12, Christ wears many diadems and has a name written, which no one knows but himself. Again, the association with the diadems suggests that the stone might be worn on the forehead.

We shall see the background in Isaiah chapter 62, verses 3 to 5, and also note the contrast with both the dragon and the harlot. What the connection between chapter 19, verse 12 and 2, verse 17 implies is a sort of context of marital intimacy between Christ, the bridegroom and his bride, with each believer enjoying a stone with a name upon it. Each stone doesn't necessarily bear a unique name.

They could all bear the name of the Lord, but only truly be known by those who receive them. The name in chapter 19, verse 12 seems to be a divine name, but one only known by the one who bears it most intimately. The fact that both Christ and the one who overcomes bear this unknown name stresses both the marital intimacy that exists between Christ and his people, and underlines the priestly connotations.

A question to consider. Of these three churches, the church in Smyrna is the only one that is not rebuked in some manner. How, looking at the church in Smyrna as a positive example, and the churches in Ephesus and Pergamum as both positive and negative, do we learn what Christ desires from a faithful and true church?