

Revelation 3:7-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Revelation chapter 3 verses 7 to 22. And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, The words of the Holy One, the True One, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word, and have not denied my name. Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie. Behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth. I am coming soon.

Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

[1:17] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write, The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

I know your works. You are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. Not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments, so that you may clothe yourself, and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and solve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered, and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[2:39] The final two of the messages to the seven churches come at the end of Revelation chapter 3, the messages to Philadelphia and Laodicea. The messages to the churches in Revelation chapter 2 and 3 are ordered with the most positive messages in the second and the second last positions.

The penultimate message here is to the angel of the church in Philadelphia. In Jesus' self-declaration at the beginning of each message, we typically see some element of the vision of the first chapter being taken up.

In the message to the angel of the church in Philadelphia, that element is less clear. However, in the vision of the first chapter, Jesus spoke of himself in the following way in verse 18.

I died, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades. Here, Jesus again has a key, this time described as the key of David.

As we have been going through these messages, we have also observed that they roughly follow the pattern of redemptive history in their allusions. They begin with allusions to the Garden of Eden, then to Joseph, then the Exodus and characters like Balaam and Balak, and then David and Jezebel and the Kingdom Era, then on to the Exile and the Remnant with death and soiled garments.

[3 : 52] Now in the church in Philadelphia, we are moving into the Restoration Era with the establishment of a new Jerusalem and the references to the key of David and the open door. The language of the key of David should draw our minds back to Isaiah chapter 22, where the Lord replaces Shebna, who has been an unfaithful steward, with Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, granting him administrative authority over Judah.

The figure of Eliakim, and the way that he has given administrative authority over the house of David, authority that is removed from his unfaithful predecessor, illuminates the nature of Christ's own authority.

Isaiah chapter 22, verses 20 to 22, reads as follows, In that day I will call my servant Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, and I will clothe him with your robe, and will bind your sash on him, and will commit your authority to his hand.

And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah. And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open, and none shall shut, and he shall shut, and none shall open.

Gregory Beale raises the possibility that there might be a polemic against the local synagogue here. He writes, As it's so often the case in Revelation, the symbolism and allusion are deeply resonant.

[5 : 29] The attentive hearer, who knows the rest of the scripture well, will often discover remarkable theological insight within such echoes. Beale notes the way that the language of the statement made to Eliakim crackles with elusive significance.

In the New Testament, references to the house of David tend to have messianic overtones. And in the context of Isaiah, the language used of Eliakim connects him with other key characters within the book.

The Lord calls him, My servant, language which, apart from being used once to refer to Isaiah himself, and once to David, is exclusively used of the servant in the book.

He is described as a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. He has the key placed on his shoulder.

In chapter 22 verse 23, we are told that he will become a throne of honour to his father's house.

These turns of phrase might make us think of Isaiah chapter 9 verse 6 to 7. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

[6 : 35] Of the increase of his government and of peace, there will be no end. On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore, the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Beal suggests that the intentionality of these allusions is made clearer by the way that verse 9 picks up elements of the servant passages. Isaiah chapter 43 verse 4, Because you are precious in my eyes and honoured, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Chapter 45 verse 14, Thus says the Lord, The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and the Sabaean, men of stature, shall come over to you and be yours. They shall follow you, they shall come over in chains and bow down to you.

They will plead with you, saying, Surely God is in you, and there is no other, no God besides him.

Isaiah chapter 49 verse 23, Kings shall be your foster fathers, and their queens your nursing mothers.

With their faces to the ground, they shall bow down to you and lick the dust of your feet. Then you will know that I am the Lord. Those who wait for me shall not be put to shame.

[7 : 47] We should also hear an allusion to the figure of Cyrus in this description of Christ, again picking up the language of Isaiah in chapter 45 verse 1. Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.

Cyrus opens the doors of the grave of exile, enabling the Jews to return to the land without hindrance. Jesus knows the works of the Philadelphian church, a fact that is a source of comfort and assurance.

They will be vindicated and rewarded for their faithfulness. The church in Philadelphia seems to face strong opposition from the unbelieving Jewish community in the city, which Jesus describes here as the synagogue of Satan.

In John chapter 8 verse 44, Jesus had described the unbelieving Jews as being of their father, the devil. Here they are described as a synagogue of Satan, the same language that is used of the

unbelieving Jews in Smyrna in chapter 2 verse 9.

I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you are rich, and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. The messages to the churches are concentrically or chiasmically ordered, and the second message and the sixth message parallel each other, these expressions being key instances of that paralleling.

[9 : 06] In both Smyrna and Philadelphia, Jesus denies the claim of the unbelieving Jews opposing the church of the city to be called Jews. It is important to remember that the church in this apostolic era was overwhelmingly Jewish, with its leaders and core members being overwhelmingly Jews.

The church was a movement of Jewish origin and largely Jewish composition. The chief persecutors of the church were also other Jews who contested the church's claim that Christ was the one who bore and fulfilled Israel's true destiny.

The division between Christians and unbelieving Jews was a division within Judaism that was playing out over these last few decades and will continue to play out for a number of decades to come.

All of this is hugely important to bear in mind if we are to understand why the fall of Jerusalem is so significant to churches in the province of Asia, many days' journey from Palestine.

To a first century diaspora Jew in somewhere like Ephesus, the fall of Jerusalem might be like the destruction of Mecca for a Muslim in Pakistan. While a diaspora Jew was not in direct danger of losing his life in the fall of Jerusalem, with the fall of Jerusalem, such a person might understandably feel that the bottom had fallen out of their world, leaving them shell-shocked and disoriented.

[10 : 22] The entire world order that had been established by God at the heart of Israel had seemingly collapsed with the temple. The temple had been perhaps one of the greatest causes of opposition to Christians.

Christ himself had been condemned in part because of statements that he was reported as making concerning the temple. The same was true of Stephen. The Jews sought to kill Paul because they accused him of defiling the temple.

The early Christians declared that the temple would be destroyed and that God did not dwell in temples made with human hands. The destruction of the temple would be a powerful vindication of the Jewish Christians and a devastating blow to their adversaries.

Beyond this fact, the shockwaves of the change in the world order were felt in various ways in many quarters beyond Palestine. The significant majority of the Jewish population lived outside of Palestine during this period, perhaps even as many as five million, but they would have looked to Palestine and Jerusalem for identity and religious meaning and a sense of orientation.

The world order that had been established by God was one in which the great empires of the wider inhabited known world were also implicated. Jesus foretells an hour of trial coming upon the whole oikumene to try those who dwell upon the earth or the land.

[11 : 37] Perhaps the land or the earth here refers to Israel in particular. The whole world, the inhabited world of the Roman Empire was about to get shaken up and Israel especially would be tried through this shaking up.

While Jerusalem was destroyed and is the focus of Revelation's prophetic horizon, the shaking up of this period affected everywhere in the Roman world. Rome underwent huge upheavals involving civil war and four emperors within a single year.

At this point the Christian movement was predominantly a marginal Jewish one. Christians and Jews were still worshipping together at this period in history too. In a few centuries time however, the church and Judaism had clearly parted ways.

By the 4th century Christianity was the established religion of the Roman Empire and by the 5th Christians would outnumber Jews in Palestine. This was a radical transformation of the world order and the book of Revelation presents some of the most decisive initial events by which God set the world on course for this.

Jesus declared that he was coming soon. The coming in question need not be presumed to be a physical coming. Rather, it is a coming in judgment and deliverance. Their Jewish opponents would be put to shame and the Philadelphians would be vindicated in their message.

[12 : 50] The Philadelphians are reassured in their struggle of faith and encouraged to hold fast. They will be rewarded and should be certain not to allow anyone to rob them of their crown, their enjoyment of a share in Jesus' victory.

The promise to the one who overcomes here is that they will be made into pillars in the temple of God. The people of God are like living stones being fashioned into a glorious house, a habitation for God by his spirit.

The temple is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. In Revelation chapter 21 verse 14 we see the apostles as part of the architecture of the city of the new Jerusalem and the wall of the city had 12 foundations and on them were the 12 names of the 12 apostles of the Lamb.

In the temple of Solomon there were two prominent pillars at the entrance to the temple, Jachin and Boaz. These pillars seem to represent the rulers of the people, in particular the king and the priest who were the guardians of the people.

In promising that the one who overcomes will be made a pillar, Jesus promises that those who faithfully endure will be established as prominent leaders and guardians of his people. They will never leave the house but will dwell there eternally.

[14:04] The one who overcomes will bear the name of God, the name of the new Jerusalem and Jesus' own name. There seems to be a trinitarian pattern here. The name of God is associated with the Father.

The name of the new Jerusalem is associated with the Holy Spirit in which the communion of the new city is formed and will descend from heaven. And the name of Jesus of course is associated with the Son.

The final church to receive a message is the church in the city of Laodicea. Peter Lighthouse suggests that this church in the historical sequence of allusions should be associated with the intertestamental history and the Israel to which Jesus comes.

Jesus is introduced in this the seventh message as the Amen the faithful and the true witness the beginning of God's creation. Once again this picks up language from the first chapter in verse 5 for instance where Jesus is described as the faithful witness.

As the Amen Jesus is the confirmation of all of God's speech the guarantee of all of his promises. We might think here of 2 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 20 For all the promises of God find their yes in him that is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

[15:16] Jesus is also described as the beginning of God's creation. Once again this is a truth that Paul unpacks in his epistles now in Colossians chapter 1 verses 15 to 20 where he elaborates on four different senses of the opening words of the scriptures in the beginning.

This should help us better to grasp something of the richness of the claim that is being made here. He is the image of the invisible God the firstborn of all creation for by him all things were created in heaven and on earth visible and invisible whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities all things were created through him and for him and he is before all things and in him all things hold together and he is the head of the body the church he is the beginning the firstborn from the dead that in everything he might be preeminent for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven making peace by the blood of his cross indeed we might even see the threefold description of Jesus here as a presentation of him as the comprehensive word of God the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come he is the amen the final word that confirms everything that goes beforehand he is the beginning of God's creation the first word from which everything arises and in which everything coheres he is the faithful and the true witness every word in between the message for the church of Laodicea is however a sobering one they stand in critical danger

Jesus judges them as lukewarm neither hot nor cold Craig Kester challenges the common assumption that there is a reference here to the inadequate waters of the city of Laodicea rather he argues this is a reference to poor hospitality to lukewarm wine that has neither been warmed or chilled which would make it palatable the wine that the church and its angel offer to Christ is a dishonouring of him an indication of their lack of true respect for him the angel faces the danger of being spat out of Jesus mouth which would put the entire church in great danger too the church however is self-satisfied in a supposed self-sufficiency they consider themselves to be rich to have prospered to be in need of nothing when they are in fact wretched pitiable poor blind and naked this is not the first time that one of the messages has declared that a church is not everything that it seems to be Jesus challenged Sardis along similar lines claiming that while they had the reputation of being alive they were in fact dead

Jesus counsels the Laodiceans to buy refined gold from him white garments and salve for their eyes to address their poverty their nakedness and their blindness obtaining these items is a matter of great urgency if the church is truly to be prepared for the advent of Christ we might think here of the parable that Jesus gives in the gospels of the wise and the foolish virgins the need to prepare for the coming of the bridegroom the fact that they have to buy these items and yet they are poor suggests that there is something more complicated going on here we might think of Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1 to 3 come everyone who thirsts come to the waters and he who has no money come buy and eat come buy wine and milk without money and without price why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labour for that which does not satisfy listen diligently to me and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food incline your ear and come to me hear that your soul may live and I will make with you an everlasting covenant my steadfast sure love for David

Peter Lighthouse raises the possibility that there is a connection between the different items that they are told to obtain and different things within the temple the salve is to anoint their eyes but Lighthouse suggests that in the background here is the idea of the eye as the lamp of the body Christ's eyes are burning as we see in the vision earlier on and the eyes of the Laodiceans need to be lit like the lamp stand the oil for their eyes is like the oil for the lamps the white garments are connected with the garments of the high priest and the gold also connects with the treasures of the holy place and the most holy place I've already mentioned the idea of preparing for the advent of the bridegroom and at the end of the message to the Laodiceans we see a further possible allusion to the coming of the bridegroom the bridegroom is standing at the door and knocking here we should recall the song of Solomon chapter 5 verses 2 to 6 I slept but my heart was awake a sound my beloved is knocking open to me my sister my love my dove my perfect one for my head is wet with dew my locks with the drops of the night

[20 : 03] I had put off my garment how could I put it on I had bathed my feet how could I soil them my beloved put his hand to the latch and my heart was thrilled within me I rose to open to my beloved and my hands dripped with myrrh my fingers with liquid myrrh on the handles of the bolt I opened to my beloved but my beloved had turned and gone my soul failed me when he spoke I sought him but found him not I called him but he gave no answer themes from the song of Solomon subtly pervade the book of Revelation Christ is the bridegroom and the church is the bride the whole book moves towards a wedding feast a dining with the bridegroom and here Christ wants to come in to eat with his people this is an anticipation an anticipation that might be Eucharistic in character Christ eats with his bride and tests his bride at the table to the one who conquers they will enjoy the privilege of sitting with Christ on his throne Christ has conquered and sat down with his father and his bride will sit down beside him the queen sitting alongside the king a question to consider what other details in the book to this point might recall the book of Song of Solomon where else in the New Testament do we see these themes being developed■■■■