

St. Matthew's Church
Thursday Night Bible Study
Revelation
Bp. Stephen Scarlett and Fr. Hayden Butler

Session IV | 18 October 2018 | The Letters to the Seven Churches (Continued)

- I. Who are the adversaries of the churches?
 - A. Roman Government / Pagan Pantheon
 - B. The Jewish Synagogue System
 - C. False Prophets / Heretics
 - D. All are symbolically represented in Revelation

- II. Historical Notes
 - A. *Paganism*: pretty much every dimension of life (government, religion, economics, social activities, etc.) were conducted with relation to the temple of the local deity or to the imperial cult. So to keep oneself free from such things was a serious reorientation of the whole of one's life.
 - B. *Christian/Jewish Separation*: while the early Christian community experienced a wide-scale intermingling with the synagogue system around the Mediterranean world, toward the end of the century there was an increasing separation of the communities owing to pressure to collaborate with Rome. Sometimes, this meant that Christians were given over to the Romans by the Jewish synagogues under claims that they were eccentric and dissidents, which may have been an attempt to buy time from Rome, which was exerting increasing pressure on the Jewish communities, despite their historical tolerance of Jewish monotheism.

- III. Textual Notes: Chapter 2 (Cont'd) and Chapter 3
 - A. "Satan's throne" at Pergamum might refer to the massive temple to Zeus situated there, which would have featured a throne on which the idol was seated.
 - B. "Balaam and Balak" refers back to the episode in Moab after the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. There is apparently knowledge of a prophet figure that the Moabites hire to issue a curse against Israel to safeguard Moab. Instead of cursing Israel, though, Balaam blesses Israel and loses the bribe money he was promised. Balaam is an image of selling out sacred duty for financial gain, or of trying to play on both sides, playing at allegiance to God while trying to cut a deal with the world. This does not end well in the Balaam story, and it will not end well here.
 - C. "The hidden manna"--those who conquer are nourished with the bread of heaven, figured by the manna that was kept in the ark of the covenant and again fulfilled

in the anti-type of Christ's own body which is the bread of heaven to sustain those who travail in the wilderness.

- D. "The white stone" with a "new name" is a complicated and, frankly, a mysterious image. One interpretation associates it with the white stone used in Roman trials by juries to cast as a vote of innocence. Another interpretation associates it with the stones in the breastplate of the high priest of Israel, each of which had a name of one of the tribes. The new name references the several instances of God giving a new name to a person to signify their covenant-identity.
- E. "Eyes like flames of fire" suggests a perception that is both penetrating and purifying. Christ is present to inspect but also to provide the means of amendment for things that need to change. This draws from the description of Christ from earlier in chapter one.
- F. "Feet like fine brass" suggests that Christ has been purified like a fine, precious metal. But there is also reference to an image of a giant figure in the prophetic writings of Daniel, which symbolically figures the kingdoms of the earth. That statue had feet of clay which broke easily. Christ's feet of brass suggest permanence.
- G. "Jezebel" a reference to the very evil wife of King Ahab, likely a priestess of a Baal cult that led Israel into a pervasive idolatry and hunted the sole faithful prophet Elijah and then his successor Elisha. John's use of it here invokes the idea of a person who seduces people into incremental compromise with the surrounding pagan culture to the point of drawing them by degrees into infidelity to Christ. This is an image, as well, that draws a connection between fornication (sexual immorality of all kinds) with complicity to other gods.
- H. "I will lay on you no other burden." Reference to Acts 15 and the addressing of pagan sacrifice. The context is that the Gospel has gone to the Gentiles through St. Paul, and the Christian community in Jerusalem were perplexed about this. The phrase "no greater burden" refers to the requirements of the Jerusalem Council for the initiation of the Gentiles (former pagans) into the Christian community. The phrase is an apostolic idiom, here used by Christ in addressing the church at Thyatira.
- I. The word for "overcome" derives from the Greek word *nike*, which can be more strongly translated as "victory." It is a term of conquest, and the picture here is that the "conquering" of faithfulness on the part of the churches is a sharing in the conquest of Christ who sits in dominion over the whole world and all of its nations. Faithfulness is victory and share in the rule of Christ, so long as one does not renounce that share of victory by compromise, which amounts to a surrender to the conquest of other gods or to the things of the world.

- J. “Rule with a rod of iron” is a reference to the declaration of the authority of the Messianic King recorded in Psalm 2.
- K. “The morning star” that will be given to the victorious is an image of Christ referenced in Ephesians 5 and Romans 12, which themselves refer back to Isaiah 51, 52, and 60 as well as Malachi 4.
- L. “The Seven Spirits” and “the seven stars” are invocations of the imagery of chapter one. The Seven Spirits collectively refer to the Holy Spirit, and the stars are the angels of the churches, which as we discussed last week might represent anything from a spiritual guardian of the church to the pastor of the church to the congregation of the church itself.
- M. “Who have not defiled their garments...white garments.” One of the prominent uses of wedding garment images is associated with Baptism, of putting off the ‘old man’ so as to put on ‘the new man’ Christ. In the final vision of New Jerusalem, all the citizens are clothed in pure linen, which symbolically represents the righteousness of the saints.