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XV. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION¹

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It cannot be demonstrated *with certainty* that any passage in the book of Revelation is *quoted directly* from the Old Testament. However, the language and ideas of the book of Revelation are clearly derived from the Old Testament. Of the 404 verses of the book of Revelation, 278 are based directly on Old Testament language and thought.² Obviously, it would be impossible to deal with only a fraction of these texts in any meaningful way in a brief essay such as the present one. Accordingly, my intention here is to make a few observations concerning the Hebraisms in the book of Revelation, examine a handful of passages in the book which are based on the Old Testament, and draw some tentative conclusions.

The Language of the Book of Revelation

To anyone who knows the Greek language, it is immediately clear that the author of the book of Revelation had not mastered idiomatic Greek of his day. Rather, his native language was Hebrew. This has led some scholars to argue that the book of Revelation was originally written in Hebrew, and later translated into Greek.³ Others have contended that its original language was Aramaic, which was later translated into Greek.⁴ However, neither of these views has gained widespread acceptance among scholars, because neither accounts for all the data presented in the book itself. Charles is undoubtedly correct when he states: "while he [the author of the book of Revelation] writes in Greek, he thinks in Hebrew."⁵ Thus, meanings of words, tenses, cases, and syntactical constructions which do not make sense in the Greek of the book of Revelation, make excellent sense when the Hebrew behind them is understood.

This is a very technical issue, which requires a knowledge of Hebrew and Greek to appreciate fully. Here we may cite three simple examples. (a) In Revelation 3:8, the Greek text says: "Behold, I have given (*dedōka*) before you an open door." This does not make sense or fit the context. But when one realizes that the writer is thinking of the Hebrew qal of *n-t-n*, "give" in the sense of "set," he translates logically, "Behold, I set before you an open door."⁶ (b) The Greek text of Revelation 12:7 runs: "And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels to fight (*tu polemēsai*) with the dragon." Again, this does not make sense. But when one recognizes that the aorist imperative is an attempt to render a Hebrew niph'al infinitive into Greek, he immediately detects a normal Hebrew idiom and reads: "And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels *had to fight* with the dragon."⁷ (c) The Greek present *pheugei*, literally, "and death *flies* from them," in Revelation 9:6 does not agree with the context. But since it undoubtedly

represents a Hebrew imperfect, it should be translated future, "and death *will fly* from them."⁸ The examples could be multiplied.⁹

Specific Passages in the Book of Revelation Based on the Old Testament

The far-reaching dependence of the author of the book of Revelation on the Old Testament becomes clear when one begins to compare passages in the book of Revelation with the Old Testament. The following examples are of necessity selective, but tend to point out the breadth of the author's knowledge of the Old Testament, the ways he uses the Old Testament, and the total dependence of the author on the Old Testament in writing his book.

Revelation 1:6 and 5:10 are based on Exodus 19:6 and Isaiah 61:6. These Old Testament texts declare that Israel was to function as priests between Yahweh and the nations, bringing Yahweh to the nations and the nations to Yahweh. The author of Revelation proclaims the same role for Christians, which agrees with I Peter 2:9-10.

To be a Christian is to be both king and priest, but with a sovereignty and priesthood derived from Christ, as his were derived from God. John does not think of Christ as having withdrawn from the scene of his earthly victory, to return only at the Parousia. In and through his faithful followers he continues to exercise both his royal and his priestly functions.¹⁰

Revelation 20:6 uses this same terminology, but has reference to the relationship of the faithful to Christ at his second coming rather than to the present situation.

Revelation 1:7 combines Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10. We find this same combination in Matthew 24:30, but in reverse order. Both passages refer to the second coming of Christ, and the mourning of the nations over him as the one whom they have crucified. In the context of Daniel 7, the "one like a son of man" is "the saints of the Most High," as verses 18 and 27 show. The subject of verses 13-14 is a "figure," not a real person, as the comparative "like" indicates.¹¹ The New Testament quite understandably applies such passages to Jesus Christ, since the term "Son of Man" is used of him frequently in the first century setting.

Revelation 2:14 is based on Numbers 25:1-9 and 31:16. After Balaam had "blessed" the children of Israel on four occasions from the mountains above them, allegedly he returned home (Num. 22-24; notice especially 24:25). However, a comparison of Numbers 25:1-9 with 31:16 (and its context) indicates that he counseled the women of Moab and Midian to entice the men of Israel to come in to them to sacrifice to their gods at Baal-peor, to partake of sacrificial meals, and to commit fornication as an act of worship to Baal. The author of Revelation saw the same kinds of sins being practiced in the church at Pergamum (and probably Ephesus, since the Nicolaitans seem to be identical with those who follow the "teaching of Balaam," cf. Rev. 2:6, 15).

Revelation 2:27 is based on Psalm 2:9. Three points need to be stressed here. First, Psalm 2:9 refers to the *king* who has just taken the throne on Zion and is threatened by a rebellion on the part of certain nations that had been subject to Judah under the

former king (note verses 6-8, 1-3) whereas Revelation 2:27 refers to Christians at Thyatira who were under severe persecution and whom the author is urging to be faithful to God and Christ. In light of this, it is noteworthy that Psalm 2:9 also forms the basis of Revelation 12:5 and 19:15, both of which refer to Christ as conqueror of Satan (the great dragon) and ruler of the nations. Second, there is an interesting variant between the Hebrew of Psalm 2:9 and the LXX rendering of that verse, which is followed by all three passages in Revelation. The Hebrew text uses the root *r-c-c*, "to break in pieces, destroy," while the LXX root *poimainō*, "to rule," translates the Hebrew *r-c-h*, "to shepherd, rule." The context and

parallel verbs in the three passages in Revelation make it quite clear that the idea of "destroy" is required.¹² Third, these three passages in Revelation contain the thought that Christ and his faithful followers will ultimately render vengeance on their adversaries, and exalts them for so doing. One is reminded of the imprecatory psalms, in which the authors ask God to render vengeance on their adversaries (see e.g., Psa. 58:6-11; 79:6, 10, 12; 139:19-22); frequently such are condemned as "sub-Christian." How, then, is one to evaluate passages like Revelation 2:27; 12:5; 19:5? (See further below.)

Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27 are based on Exodus 32:32-33; Psalm 69:28; Daniel 12:1. The idea of God writing a book containing the names of the citizens of his kingdom is well-established in the Old Testament (in addition to the above-mentioned passages, see Psalm 56:8; Malachi 3:16; and possibly Nehemiah 13:14). There, to have one's name written in the book of life meant to share and enjoy the earthly blessings of God's rule among his people. To have one's name blotted out of the book of life meant to be deprived of these divine blessings, which was the same as to die. In the New Testament, this concept is reapplied to the next life, to the eternal kingdom of God in Christ (see Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Heb. 12:23).

The Theophany in Revelation 4 is based on Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6:1-4. The similarities in detail are far too many to be listed here. As examples one may cite God sitting on a heavenly throne (Rev. 4:2; Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 1:26), a rainbow round about the throne (Rev. 4:3; Ezek. 1:28), lightning and thunder issuing from the throne (Rev. 4:5; Ezek. 1:4, 24, 27), four living creatures with appearances like a lion, an ox, a man, and an eagle (Rev. 4:6-7; Ezek. 1:5,10), each creature having six wings (Rev. 4:8; Isa. 6:2), and the cry of these creatures in praise to God, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty (Rev. 4:8; Isa. 6:3). The vision of Ezekiel 1 is repeated in Ezekiel 10 and (in much briefer form) in Ezekiel 43:1-5. Similar theophanies may be found in Exodus 24:9-11 and I Kings 22:19-23. All such theophanies draw attention to the majesty and glory of God.

The different-colored horses in Revelation 6:1-8 are based on Zechariah 1:7-17 and 6:1-8. The purpose of the horses and their riders in Zechariah is to patrol the earth and return with the report that all is at peace, so that the Jews might be inspired to get back to their work of rebuilding the temple. By way of contrast, the horses and their riders in Revelation bring death and destruction on the earth. Still, the similarities are striking and compelling. Note, for example, the reference to the measuring line stretched out over Jerusalem in Zechariah 1:16 and to the balance in the hand of the rider in Revelation 6:5.

Revelation 6:12-14 is based on Joel 2:10-11, 31 and Isaiah 34:4. The description of a cosmic earthquake which will unsettle mankind with the sun being blackened, the moon becoming like blood, the stars falling to the earth, and so on, is common in the Old Testament and Jewish Apocalyptic of the intertestamental period.¹³

Revelation 7:16-17 is based on Isaiah 49:10. This text in Isaiah describes the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylonian captivity after the decree of Cyrus the Great, King of Persia, in 539 B.C. The author of Revelation applies this language to the eternal bliss of Christians who have been faithful through the great tribulation.

The description of the locusts in Revelation 9:3-11 is based on Joel 2:1-11. In both passages, the locusts come forth after the blowing of a trumpet (Rev. 9:1; Joel 2:1); their appearance is like horses (Rev. 9:7; Joel 2:4); the noise they make is like the noise of chariots (Rev. 9:9; Joel 2:5); people before them are in great fear and anguish (Rev. 9:6; Joel 2:6).

Revelation 9:16 is based on Psalm 68:17 and Daniel 7:10. But there is a striking contrast here. In Psalm 68:17, "twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands" refers to the chariots of God as he came from Sinai to the holy place, and the similar number in Daniel 7:10 refers to the angels who stand before God as his servants, whereas this number in Revelation 9:16 alludes to the army which comes from hell.

The eating of the scroll in Revelation 10:8-11 is based on Ezekiel 2:8-3:3. The same concept appears in Jeremiah 15:16 in abbreviated form. In both cases, a heavenly voice instructs the prophet to take a scroll from the hand of the heavenly person who is holding it and to eat it; when the prophet does so, it is sweet as honey in his mouth, but becomes bitter in his stomach.

Revelation 11:1-6 is based on Ezekiel 40:3, 5; 43:13, 18 and Zechariah 4:1-6, 11-14. The concept of measuring the temple, the altar, and the court outside the temple (Rev. 11:1-2) has its parallel in Ezekiel. The figure of the two olive trees and the two lampstands (Rev. 11:4) is derived from Zechariah. In Zechariah, there is only one lampstand, which represents the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel that he will complete the building of the temple, not by human might or power, but by God's Spirit; whereas the two lampstands in Revelation represent the churches loyal to Christ under Roman persecution who would be God's witness to the world.¹⁴ Also, the two olive trees in Zechariah are Zerubbabel and Joshua, the political and religious leaders of the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from captivity, and who were guiding their people in rebuilding the temple and remolding their lives for God (Zech. 4:14); while the two olive trees in Revelation are Elijah and Moses (Rev. 11:5-6). This kind of borrowing and reapplication of Old Testament texts is quite common in the book of Revelation, and indeed throughout the New Testament.

Revelation 12:7-9 is based on Daniel 10:12-14, 20-21; 12:1. The book of Daniel relates a heavenly battle scene between the angelic "prince," Michael, and his angels, and the prince of the kingdom of Persia. Michael defends God's people from their Persian overlords. In a similar way, the passage in Revelation 12 relates a heavenly battle

scene between Michael and his angels and "the great dragon, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world," in which Michael and his angels cast the Devil and his angels down to the earth. One is reminded of the reference to the archangel Michael contending with the devil, disputing over the body of Moses in Jude 9.¹⁵

Revelation 13:1-7 is based on Daniel 7:3-8, 21, 25. The passage in Daniel describes four great beasts coming up out of the sea, one like a lion, one like a bear, one like a leopard, and one indescribably horrible. The fourth beast had ten horns, among which was a little horn (Antiochus IV Epiphanes). The little horn prevailed over the saints of the Most High, spoke blasphemous words against the most High, and ruled over his saints "for a time, two times, and half a time" (on this last point, cf. Rev. 12:14). Ultimately, God overthrew this little horn. Similarly, the text in Revelation depicts a beast rising out of the sea, which was like a leopard, whose feet were like a bear's, and whose mouth was like a lion's. He had ten horns with ten diadems upon them. He uttered "haughty and blasphemous words" against God, and conquered God's saints. Ultimately, he was overthrown.¹⁶

Revelation 14:8 is based on Jeremiah 51:7-8 and Isaiah 21:9. The cry goes out that Babylon has fallen. She had made other nations drink the wine of her impure passion; now she must drink the wine of God's wrath. For this figure, one should also compare Isaiah 13:19; Jeremiah 25:15-29; Isaiah 51:21-23; Psalm 75:8; Habakkuk 2:15-16. "Babylon" actually means Babylon in the Old Testament texts, but has reference to Rome here in Revelation (see the description of the fall of "Babylon" or Rome in Rev. 18).¹⁷

Revelation 14:14-20 and 19:15 are based on Joel 3:13 and Isaiah 63:1-6. In these texts, there is a figure of God or an angel putting in his sharp sickle, reaping a large harvest of grapes, and casting them into the winepress. Then God treads the winepress until blood flows from it freely. The passage in Joel has reference to the nations who had defeated God's people and scattered them among the nations. The text in Isaiah announces the destruction of Edom. The passages in Revelation concern the destruction of the enemies of

God's people, the Christians to whom the book of Revelation is addressed. One should note that the description of the destruction of the enemies of Christians is as gory as that of the description of the destruction of the enemies of Israel in the Old Testament. Commenting on verse 20, Ladd writes:

The metaphor suddenly changes from the treading of grapes to a military slaughter. The flow of *blood* is incredible, literally conceived: *one thousand six hundred stadia* is a distance of about a hundred and eighty-four miles – the entire length of Palestine. The entire land is pictured as being inundated in blood to a depth of about four feet. The thought is clear: a hostility to the reign of God.¹⁸

Revelation 18 is based on Isaiah 13:1-14:23; 47; Jeremiah 50-51. All of these Old Testament passages describe the fall of Babylon. Here it is impossible to call attention

to all the parallels. Two examples may suffice. Revelation 18:7 describes Babylon's boastings when she seemed to be in control of all the peoples under her. The idea and language is strikingly similar to the boastings of Babylon recorded in Isaiah 47:7-8, 10. In fact, the thought that such boasting is a major cause of her fall in Revelation 18:8 calls to mind the same concept in Isaiah 47:11. Again, the comparison of Babylon's (Rome's) fall with casting a heavy stone into the sea in Revelation 18:21 has obvious affinities with the symbolic act of binding a stone to a book or scroll containing all the evil (destruction) that was to come upon Babylon and casting it into the midst of the Euphrates in Jeremiah 51:59-64.

Revelation 20:7-10 is based on Ezekiel 38-39. In Ezekiel, Gog is the prince of the land of Magog, but here in Revelation Gog and Magog are nations which Satan deceives to come out against God's people. The identity of Gog and Magog has never been made satisfactorily. These terms are clearly symbolic for Satan's hosts in Revelation. In Ezekiel and Revelation, the attack comes when God's people appear to be enjoying safety and security (see Ezek. 38:8, 11, 14).

Revelation 21:1 is based on Isaiah 65:17; 66:22, and Revelation 21:4 is based on Isaiah 25:8. The passages in Isaiah all refer to God's blessings on the exiles returning from Babylonian captivity. The previous seventy years in Babylon are obliterated like the heavens and earth of God's initial creation, and their homecoming is like a new beginning with new heavens and a new earth. Their years of mourning are over, so that their tears will be replaced by smiles of joy. The texts in Revelation pertain to faithful Christians living with God eternally. Their home will not be on earth as a physical place, but in a totally new environment. And all the sorrows brought on by their persecutions will give place to eternal joy. The picture of removing every tear from their eyes also appears in Revelation 7:17.

The description of the wall and gates of Jerusalem in Revelation 21:12-14 is based on Ezekiel 48:30-35. Of course, the details and wording are not identical. But in both passages there are twelve gates, and on each gate the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. Further, there are three gates each on the north, the south, the east and the west.

Revelation 1:8; 21:6: and 22:13 are based on Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 48:12. All of these texts allude to God (the Father) as "the Alpha and the Omega," that is, "the first and the last," which is a comprehensive term for his sovereignty. But Revelation 22:13 applies this same expression to Jesus Christ, suggesting that he is also divine (God the Son).

Conclusions

In light of the data which have been gathered in the research done for this essay, some of which is reflected in the information given above, several conclusions emerge.

1. The books of Matthew, Hebrews, and Revelation draw from the Old Testament more than any other New Testament books. This suggests that their authors were steeped in Old Testament thought, and that their readers knew the Old Testament well.

2. The author of the book of Revelation uses material from all parts of the Old Testament, but his favorite books are Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Exodus, and Psalms. This is because he is concerned with prophetic, eschatological, and apocalyptic language and concepts; he uses figures based on the sea and the plagues (evidently derived from the crossing of the Sea of Reeds and the plagues in Egypt); and he praises God for standing by his persecuted people and overthrowing their enemies.
3. The author of Revelation does not intend to show that Old Testament predictions are fulfilled in events involving Christ and the church. Instead, he used Old Testament language to describe the situation facing his readers. He draws parallels between Old Testament events and ideas and the circumstances in which he and his readers find themselves.
4. There is an underlying assumption of continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church reflected in the statements and language of the book of Revelation. What happened to God's faithful servants in Old Testament times is happening now to God's faithful servants in New Testament times. And the same God who delivered his people then will deliver them now again.
5. What is said of God in the Old Testament is said of Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation. This is possible because Jesus has shown himself to be divine, especially as him who was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father.
6. Passages in the book of Revelation which call for or describe God's vengeance on the enemies of his faithful people (as 6:9-10; 11:18; 14:9-20; 16:5-7; 18) caution against being too hasty in assigning Old Testament imprecations (as Psa. 58:6-11; 79:5-7, 12; 139:19-22) a "sub-Christian" status. This whole question needs a careful, sober, scholarly examination.¹⁹

Footnotes:

- ¹ It is with grateful appreciation that we offer this essay in honor of a beloved professor, Dr. Frank Pack, whose serious, responsible study of the book of Revelation has benefited many younger scholars for decades.
- ² See Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with introduction, Notes and Indices* (third edition; London: MacMillan and Co., 1911), p. cxl; Angelo Lancellotti, "L'Antico Testamento nell'Apocalisse," *Rivista Biblica* 14 (1966) 369; Jean-Louis D'Aragon, "The Apocalypse," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary II* (edited by Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 468a. See the list in R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John I* (The International Critical Commentary; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), pp. lxxviii-lxxxii.
- ³ So M. Mieses, "Hebräische Fragmente aus dem jüdischen Urtext der Apokalypse des hl. Johannes," *Monatschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 74 (1930), pp. 345-362.
- ⁴ So C.C. Torrey, *The Apocalypse of John* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1958), pp. 47-48.
- ⁵ Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John I*, p. cxliii; see also Lancellotti, "L'Antico Testamento nell'Apocalisse," pp. 373, 383.
- ⁶ See Charles, *ibid.*, pp. cxlviii, 41, 87; Lancellotti, *ibid.*, p. 374.
- ⁷ See Charles, *ibid.*, pp. 321-323.
- ⁸ See Charles, *ibid.*, pp. cxlix, 243-244.
- ⁹ See Charles, *ibid.*, pp. xciv-clii, Lancellotti, "L'Antico Testamento nell'Apocalisse," pp. 372-383.

- ¹⁰ George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*. Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 77.
- ¹¹ See Louis F. Hartman and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Book of Daniel*. The Anchor Bible 23 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1978), pp. 218-219.
- ¹² Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* I. pp. 75-76, tries to make a case for understanding *poimainō* as having meant both "shepherd-rule" and "destroy." However, this view flounders for lack of substantial evidence, and is unnecessary in light of the explanation offered here.
- ¹³ Note the references cited in Charles, *ibid.*, pp. 180-181; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*. New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1974; softback edition, 1981), p. 138; J. Massyngebde Ford, *Revelation*. The Anchor Bible 38 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975), pp. 111-112.
- ¹⁴ Compare Zechariah 4:6 and Revelation 11:3, 6-7; and see Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, pp. 134-135; and Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 176-181.
- ¹⁵ See D. Stuart, "Michael," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 3 revised, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), pp. 347-348.
- ¹⁶ See William Barclay, "Revelation 13, Great Themes of the N.T.," *The Expository Times* 70 (1958/59) 260-264, 292-296; D'Aragon, "The Apocalypse," pp. 484-485; and S. MacLean Gilmore, "The Revelation of John," *The Interpreters One-Volmne Commentary on the Bible* (edited by Charles M. Laymon; London: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1972), pp. 960-961.
- ¹⁷ Cf. C. Anderson Scott, *Revelation*. The Century Bible (Edinburgh: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1902), p. 246; D'Aragon, "The Apocalypse," p. 485, referring to I Peter 5:13, which uses "Babylon" in referring to Rome.
- ¹⁸ George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), p. 202.
- ¹⁹ For further study on the use of the Old Testament in the book of Revelation, see Adolf Schlatter, *Das Alte Testament in der Johanneischen Apokalypse. Beiträge zur Förderung Christlicher Theologie*, XVI/6 (Gutersloh: Gutersloher Verlag, 1912); J. Cambier, "Les images de l'A.T. dans l'Apocalypse," *Nouvelle Revue Theologique* 77 (1975) 113-123; G.W. Grogan, "The New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967) 54-76, especially pp. 68-72; and D. Moody Smith, Jr., "The Use of the Old Testament in the New." *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays. Studies in Honor of William Franklin Stinespring* (edited by James M. Efird; Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. 1972), pp. 3-65, especially pp. 61-63. On the problem of asking vengeance on the enemies of God's people in the book of Revelation, see A.T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957); W. Klassen, "Vengeance in the Apocalypse of John," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966) 300-311.

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