

Revelation and Rewritten Prophecies

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Scholars never grow tired of pointing out that Revelation is permeated with OT imagery and terminology and that it has more references to the OT than any other NT document. It has also been observed that at least one reason for this indebtedness to earlier biblical writings is John's¹ apparent concern to close any divine predictions that had remained unfulfilled,² though this approach is still a road less traveled among the students of Revelation. However, the examination of John's composition specifically from the perspective of the "Rewritten Bible" (RB) appears to have remained largely virgin territory.³ The purpose of this essay is to make a foray into this area by asking the question, If we were to explore Revelation from the perspective of RB, what would we find?⁴ I will begin with a brief discussion of RB vis-à-vis Revelation, then proceed to analyze a selection of instances where John utilizes existing traditions, and finally offer some reflections on the question at hand.

1. The Rewritten Bible and Revelation

It is common for the term RB to appear in discussions of documents such as *Biblical Antiquities*, *Jubilees*, *Genesis Apocryphon*, and Josephus's *Antiquities*. Yet even a brief survey of scholarly publications reveals that RB is not a very precise category with carefully defined edges.⁵ In this essay, I will neither try to settle the issue, nor offer my

¹ On the traditional assumption regarding the author's control over his composition, see M. Jauhiainen, *The Use of Zechariah in Revelation* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament – 2. Reihe, 199; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 7–8.

² See, e.g., *ibid.*, 153–9.

³ One trailblazer is P. B. Decock, who examines various debates regarding John's use of the Scriptures. One of his conclusions is that "John's use of the Scriptures could be called the most basic one and most traditional one, that of re-written Scripture" ("The Scriptures in the Book of Revelation," *Neotestamentica* 33, no. 2 [1999] 406), contiguous to practices such as charismatic exegesis, midrash, and targum.

Of course, as an approach to Revelation, RB contains many elements that could appear in a typical "John's use of the OT" study as well. The exact amount of overlap varies as articles and monographs in the latter group tend to address a variety of different issues, while RB has potential to be a more focused approach.

⁴ In this essay, I use "Bible" in the term "Rewritten Bible" to refer to the Christian Old Testament. I am thus more interested in analyzing how John uses documents that are found in the OT than in investigating his understanding of "Bible" and/or OT canon. Another debate I refrain from entering into is the thorny question regarding (real or hypothesized) first-century versions and recensions of Hebrew and Greek documents that today comprise the OT. On John's sources, see Jauhiainen, *The Use*, 9–13, and the references cited therein.

⁵ Cf., e.g., G. W. E. Nickelsburg, "The Bible Rewritten and Expanded," in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Secreterian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. M. E. Stone; CRINT 2/II; Assen: Van Gorcum / Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 89; G. Vermes, "Biblical Midrash," in *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)* (E. Schürer; rev. and ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman; vol III.1; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986) 326; J. L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, Mass. / London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1998) 1–41; B. Pitre, "Rewritten Bible," in *The Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric* (ed. D. Aune; Louisville / London: WJK, 2003), and M. Segal, "Between Bible and Rewritten Bible," in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran* (ed.

own definition. Rather, I will follow the lead of James Kugel, who argues that RB is more about the modifying of individual exegetical motifs than about the retelling of stories or even of whole biblical books.⁶ Thus, while there is some uncertainty regarding John's employment of certain OT books (or segments thereof) as "literary prototypes" for his own composition⁷ à la the narrower definitions of RB, there is no doubt that his use of individual motifs fits under the umbrella spread by Kugel.

There are many approaches to the interpretation of Revelation and sometimes it is difficult to see the forest for the trees. As already noted, John's general indebtedness to the OT is rather obvious, but his simultaneous use of emerging Christian traditions, together with his fascinating and often bizarre imagery, has not led all interpreters to fully appreciate the Jewishness of the document. John is not merely borrowing OT language to express an exclusively Christian message but is primarily addressing issues and expectations raised by the Jewish Scriptures (albeit in light of Jesus, whom he believes to be Israel's Messiah). As such, he can be seen as functioning in the line of later prophetic teachers in ancient Israel who not only built on earlier oracles, but also had a marked concern to close unfulfilled predictions and prophecies.⁸ It is this keen interest of John in earlier biblical material that makes his composition an intriguing object of study from the perspective of RB.

2. A Sampling of Rewritten Prophecies

In this section, we will look at ten OT prophecies or expectations that are picked up and somehow reworked or used by John.⁹ In most cases the exact source can be pinpointed, but occasionally John exploits a motif that appears in a number of passages. These ten motifs have been selected primarily because they are significant, well known, and/or illustrate the variety of approaches to OT texts by John. As the total number of OT allusions in Revelation may be up to several hundreds or more,¹⁰ this is only a very small sample, yet gives us a good idea of how John is interacting with the ancient material.

M. Henze; *Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature*; Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005). It does seem, however, that D. J. Harrington ("The Bible Rewritten," in *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* [ed. R. Kraft and G. Nickelsburg; BMI 2; Atlanta: Scholars, 1986] 243) is on the right track with his observation that RB should be understood more as an activity or process than a distinctive genre. As various scholars have pointed out (for references, see Pitre, "Rewritten Bible," 414), examples of this activity can be seen in the NT as well.

⁶ Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 23–35.

⁷ See, e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (The New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 86–8; cf. Jauhainen, *The Use*, 151–2.

⁸ M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 465; cf. D. S. Russell (*The Method & Message of Jewish Apocalyptic, 200 BC – AD 100* [London: SCM, 1964] 178–202), according to whom apocalyptic writers "were particularly concerned with the predictive element in prophecy and, within that, with the problem of unfulfilled prophecy" (*ibid.*, 181).

⁹ This is not the place for an in-depth exegetical analysis of each passage or motif; the reader will be referred elsewhere as necessary.

¹⁰ On the number of OT allusions in Revelation, see J. Paulien ("Criteria and the Assessment of Allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. S. Moyise; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001) and the references given therein.

2.1 The sealed words

It is difficult to measure the influence an antecedent document may have had on the composition of Revelation, but if shared imagery and the number of allusions are used as the criteria, then it is obvious that the book of Daniel has been quite influential.¹¹ In fact, it has been suggested that Rev 1:19 alludes to Dan 2:28-29, 45 (LXX) and functions as an/the interpretive key to the book.¹² While reactions to this specific proposal have been varied, Danielic influence is not thereby diminished, for the book provides an interpretive key far more significant than the one allegedly provided by 2:28-29, 45.

In ancient documents the first sentence or first paragraph would often give important information regarding the subject matter of the document and Revelation is no exception.¹³ The book begins by telling that it contains an ἀποκάλυψις which concerns “what must soon take place” and which was “shown” to John by an “angel”. If the reader follows these three explicit signposts provided John, s/he will discover that this “revelation” is at first sealed in a scroll which is given to the Lamb to open in chap. 5; the seals of the scroll have finally been opened by the end of chap. 16; and its contents begin in 17:1.¹⁴ While it is possible to locate this revelation by studying Revelation only, it cannot be fully appreciated unless one realizes that much of the book is in fact an answer to the question posed in Daniel 12:8: “What is the outcome of these things [i.e., the period of the final tribulation of God’s people]?” Daniel (and his audience) never learned the answer, for according to the angel, “the words are ‘unrevealed’¹⁵ and sealed until the time of the end” (Dan 12:9), but John picked the story up where Daniel left off: the ἀποκάλυψις within John’s prophecy concerns the hitherto unrevealed outcome of the struggle between the beast and the saints.

What John is doing here is not far from the “this is that” –technique used in Acts 2:16, for example, where the events at Pentecost are interpreted as the fulfilment of Joel 2:28-32.¹⁶ The reference is less explicit, but to an informed reader John’s prophecy offers the resolution to the cliffhanger created by the author of Dan 12. By providing the next installment in the divine drama Revelation also implicitly claims the same authority as the work whose prophecy it claims to fulfill.

¹¹ In Beale’s (*The Book of Revelation*, 77) view, Daniel is the most influential. For an example of a debate regarding the amount of influence an OT book has had on John, see the discussion on Ezekiel vs. Daniel in Revelation 4–5, *ibid.*, 366–9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 152–77.

¹³ Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, 1414b; Lucian, *Vera Historia* 53; D. E. Smith, “Narrative Beginnings in Ancient Literature and Theory,” *Semeia* 52 (1990) 1–9.

¹⁴ For details, see Jauhiainen, “‘Αποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ’ (Rev. 1:1): The Climax of John’s Prophecy?” *TynB* 54, no. 1 (2003) 99–117. ‘Αποκάλυψις in Rev 1:1 is not a genre marker, despite occasional claims to the contrary. Ironically, “apocalypse” as a genre owes its name to a document that not only explicitly claims to be a “prophecy” but also does not easily fit the modern definition of “apocalypse” without special pleading. On “apocalypse,” see the classic article by J. J. Collins, “Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979) 1–20, and on Christian apocalypses, see A. Y. Collins, “The Early Christian Apocalypses,” *Semeia* 14 (1979) 61–121.

¹⁵ While the LXX κατακαλύπτω is usually used in connection with clothing and is thus translated with ‘to cover or veil’, ἀποκαλύπτω ‘to reveal, unveil’ would work well as its semantic opposite in this context.

¹⁶ Cf. also the way the Gospels present aspects of Jesus’ life and ministry as a/the fulfillment of various OT texts.

2.2 The mourning for the pierced one

Another significant verse for the interpretation of Revelation is 1:7, the motto verse of John's prophetic letter. It activates simultaneously the eschatological framework of the three primary narratives available to the early church regarding the final events: Zechariah's version, Daniel's version, and Jesus' version, which has come to us in the form of the Synoptic Apocalypse.¹⁷ Our interests lie in the allusion to Zechariah 12:10,¹⁸ where the pierced one appears to be Yahweh: "[T]hey will look on me whom they have pierced and they shall wail... as... over the firstborn son." The verse in the MT is syntactically and linguistically perfectly understandable but has proved theologically challenging to many an interpreter and scribe.¹⁹

In the context of Zechariah, it is possible to understand the piercing of Yahweh in chap. 12 in relation to the references to shepherds and shepherding in chaps. 11 and 13. As in Ezekiel 34, Yahweh himself would shepherd the flock through his righteous representative, but his candidate (and therefore Yahweh himself as the shepherd of his people) is rejected.²⁰ The piercing of Yahweh in 12:10 could thus refer to this rejection, which people "on that day" will realize to have been a serious mistake. We do not know how Zechariah's original audience understood his message,²¹ but there is no doubt about how John and other Jews in the early church read these chapters. For them, the piercing of Yahweh was not simply metaphorical, but took place on the cross, where the righteous Davidic shepherd set up by Yahweh died on behalf of his flock.²²

In addition to recalling and activating Zechariah's narrative regarding the restoration of Israel, John's exploiting the possibilities of Zechariah 11–13 achieves three other things. First, it provides an explanation of how Yahweh could be pierced.²³ Second, it keeps the expectation created in Zech 12:10–12 alive, albeit in a slightly modified form.²⁴ Third, by attributing to Christ a role belonging to God, John sets the tone for the rest of the book where Christ frequently takes over or shares the roles and/or attributes of God.²⁵

¹⁷ See further Jauhiainen, *The Use*, 102–7, 142–4.

¹⁸ There is some debate regarding the immediate source of this allusion; see, e.g., M. J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel: Studies in Textual Form* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); cf. the discussion in Jauhiainen, *The Use*, 103–5. For our purposes, however, it makes no difference as to who is responsible for the interpretation appearing in Rev 1:7. Notice also John's reference to Jesus as the πρωτότοκος two verses earlier in 1:5; cf. Zech 12:10 LXX, where the grieving is ὡς ἐπὶ πρωτότοκῳ.

¹⁹ See, e.g., the discussions in H. Mitchell, J. Smith, and J. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi and Jonah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912) 334–5; and K. J. Cathcart and R. P. Gordon, *The Targum of the Minor Prophets: Translated, with a Critical Introduction, Apparatus, and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 14; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989) 218–9.

²⁰ As P. D. Hanson (*The Dawn of the Apocalyptic* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 343–5) has pointed out, Zech 11:7–17 reverses many of the promises of Ezek 34:1–31 and 37:15–28.

²¹ As with many — if not most — of the other prophets, the people certainly did not heed Zechariah's overall message, but it is difficult to know how much of that is due to the lack of understanding.

²² Cf. John 19:37.

²³ John is addressing the theological difficulty, but is he also combating competing readings of Zech 12:10?

²⁴ As commentators usually point out, the scope of the prophecy has been enlarged from national (all the tribes of the land) to international (all the tribes of the earth).

²⁵ On this phenomenon, see R. J. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 54–65.

2.3 “I am coming”

The promise of the coming of Yahweh is one of the OT motifs connected to the expectation of the restoration of Israel.²⁶ It takes various forms, one of which is found in Zech 2:10: “Behold, I am coming”.²⁷ In Revelation, this phrase (or one of its variants) appears seven times, but is spoken by Jesus Christ rather than Yahweh.²⁸ Yet while the idea of Jesus’ coming probably goes back to the traditions recorded in the Gospels,²⁹ John’s selection of words also reads as a comment or interpretation of the OT expectation of Yahweh’s coming.³⁰

Just as with the reference to the pierced one in Rev 1:7, so also the affirmation, “I am coming,” can be understood in terms of John’s high Christology. The roles of Christ and God are again blended: the expected visible, imminent coming of Yahweh is realized in the coming of Jesus,³¹ which will take place “soon”.³²

2.4 The restoration of the tribes

One of the motifs frequently appearing in the OT is that of the restoration of the twelve tribes.³³ According to many, this expectation was fulfilled or at least significantly altered by Jesus’ choosing the twelve disciples who formed the nucleus of the reconstituted people of God.³⁴ However, when we enter Revelation, we are met with 144,000 “servants of God... sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (7:3-4). How are we to understand this sudden reference?

²⁶ E.g., Isa 35:4; 40:10; Ezekiel 43; Zech 2:10 ET [MT/LXX 2:14]; Mal 3:24. For other motifs, see, e.g., N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 280–338.

²⁷ הִנְנִי בָּא / ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἔρχομαι.

²⁸ 2:5, 16; 3:11; 16:15; 22:7, 12, 20. This is one of the phrases in Revelation that are repeated several times but never occur twice in the exact same form. See further Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 22–37.

²⁹ Though cf. Wright’s take on the issue, *The New Testament*, 280–99.

³⁰ On a purely verbal level, Zech 2:10 contains the only first-person statement by Yahweh (or Jesus) in the Bible outside of Revelation where the speaker uses ἔρχομαι to affirm his coming. While the Hebrew הִנְנִי בָּא can be rendered, “Behold, I am coming,” הִנְנִי + participle (with reference to situations that are future) often express the idea of imminence (B. K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 37.6f): “I am about to come”. In Revelation, John has conveyed this sense of imminence by adding five times the word ταχύ, “soon”.

³¹ In the narrative of Revelation, this does not exhaust the motif of Yahweh’s coming but rather expands it. As with many other motifs where this kind of blending occurs, Christ does not replace God but instead shares with him.

³² Of course, John is thinking in terms of theology rather than time. That is, just as the OT prophets, he is primarily interested in motivating his audience to adopt the right attitude and take right action. Failing to appreciate this leads to calculating dates for Jesus’ return, on one hand, and to the charges that the early Christians were mistaken in their imminent expectations, on the other.

³³ E.g., Isa 11:11-16; 27:12-13; Jer 3:12-18; 50:4-5; Ezek 37:16-22; 39:25. This hope was not lost even during the exile; see, e.g., Zech 9:13; 10:6-10.

³⁴ See, e.g., C. M. Pate, J. S. Duvall, J. D. Hays, E. R. Richards, W. D. Tucker Jr, and P. Vang, *The Story of Israel: A Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press / Leicester: Apollos, 2004) 129–31; though cf. Jas 1:1.

The breakdown and the exact purpose of the sealed in the four verses that follow have generated a fair amount of scholarly discussion.³⁵ Especially popular seems to be the view of Richard Bauckham, according to whom the list is in a form of a military census and the 144,000 represent a messianic army.³⁶ This may well be a prominent part of John's agenda, but it is hard to avoid the impression that another rationale for John's including this section is his desire to transform the expectation of the return or restoration of the tribes. Indeed, the concept of a messianic army and the restoration of the tribes are not mutually exclusive, for at least one form of the motif of the return of the tribes appears to expect that the returned tribes will fight alongside Judah against the enemies of the people of God.³⁷ The idea of the twelve tribes of Israel "fighting" alongside the lion of Judah in Revelation is thus not as strange as it may seem at first.

What, then, would be John's purpose in picking up and revitalizing yet another OT expectation for his audience? Regardless of how we imagine that Rev 7:3-8 will be realized, John achieves at least two things. First, Yahweh's ancient promise regarding the return of the tribes of Israel has not been thwarted or cancelled; a perfect number of Israelites will be saved.³⁸ Second, in Revelation John clearly redefines the way Judah and other tribes are to wage war and conquer – by adopting the strategy of their leader, the lion of Judah, who conquered by remaining faithful and being slain as the Lamb. This would have been crucial to John's audience in the face of persecution, among whom some may have been tempted to resort to the methods of the Beast, who conquers by military might and power. Rather, they were to trust in the Lord, to whom the battle belongs.³⁹

2.5 *The seven eyes, seven lamps, and seven spirits*

A passage in Zechariah notoriously difficult for modern interpreters is the vision of a golden lampstand and two olive trees in chap. 4.⁴⁰ Whether it was equally difficult for ancient students of prophecy we do not know, but at least it appears to have been enigmatic enough to invite certain type of attention.⁴¹ In Revelation, we find several references to this influential prophetic vision. We will first look at the seven eyes, seven lamps, and seven spirits, and then, under a separate heading, the two olive trees.

In Rev 5:6, John states that the Lamb had "seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth". There is a wide consensus among the commentators that this alludes to Zechariah 4, where the *angelus interpretis* identifies the seven lamps of the golden lampstand as seven eyes of Yahweh "that range through the whole earth".⁴² By

³⁵ See the discussion in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 416–23, and the references cited therein.

³⁶ Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 215–29.

³⁷ See, e.g., Zech 9:13–15; 10:6–7.

³⁸ See the major commentaries for discussions on the identity of the sealed, the purpose of the sealing, the significance of number of the sealed, and other such issues peripheral to our present purpose.

³⁹ Thus the call for the endurance and faith of the saints in Rev 13:5–10. John's fear of Christians picking up the sword to defend and promote their cause was not in vain, as the sad history of the Christian church shows. For John, there is no "just war" except for the one that takes place in 19:11–21.

⁴⁰ See, e.g., C. L. Meyers and E. M. Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 25B; New York: Doubleday, 1987) 227–77; cf. Jauhainen, *The Use*, 46–9.

⁴¹ The Targum, for example, interprets Zechariah 4 messianically, albeit differing from Revelation in its development of various motifs.

⁴² So the MT; the LXX uses ἐπιβλέπω to translate שׁוּט.

forging this link John therefore makes yet another contribution to the relatively high Christology of Revelation: the seven eyes of Yahweh from Zechariah 4 are now the eyes of the Lamb.

In Rev 4:5, John sees seven flaming torches or lamps, which he also identifies as the “seven spirits of God”. The identity of the seven eyes with seven lamps has thus been transferred from Zechariah 4, but with a novel interpretation: both of these represent the seven spirits of God. There is no consensus regarding the origin of the idea of seven spirits, but many would point to John’s exegetical activity vis-à-vis Zechariah 4.⁴³ After all, though the interpretation of the vision concerns God’s Spirit, the exact relation of the Spirit to the elements of the vision is left ambiguous. By using two “X is Y” statements in 4:5 and 5:6, John makes the relationship explicit: the seven eyes and lamps are God’s seven spirits. As burning lamps, they speak of his active presence, but as eyes, they have been sent to the whole earth, symbolizing omniscience.⁴⁴

2.6 *The two olive trees*

A classic example of John’s commenting on earlier Scriptures appears in 11:4, where the two witnesses are identified: “These are *the* two olive trees...” Without any knowledge of Zechariah 4, this statement would remain rather puzzling, but as we have seen already, John’s ideal reader is well acquainted with Zechariah’s prophecies. Yet there is a twist in John’s version: rather than flanking a single lampstand, the two olive trees are now identified with two lampstands.

Though this development of Zecharian imagery may appear surprising in terms of the original vision, it makes sense in John’s circumstances and in light of his overall narrative. While the exact import of the lampstand symbolism in the OT may be difficult to capture, there is reason to believe that continually burning lamps (and the light they provide) in a lampstand were a symbol of Yahweh’s presence with his people.⁴⁵ Moreover, it is possible to understand the lampstand as a synecdoche for the temple in Zechariah 4, where the issue is the [re]building of the temple. Its seven lamps, each having seven wicks, symbolize perfect brilliance of light, which, together with the accompanying words of Yahweh, evokes an expectation of a resplendent new temple.⁴⁶ The reason why John is able to equate the two witnesses with the lampstands is that after Pentecost, God’s presence is no longer tied to a temple in Jerusalem, but through his Spirit he is present with his people, who are his temple.⁴⁷ Moreover, since John has already identified lampstands as symbolizing churches who stand by their master – Jesus rather than Yahweh⁴⁸ – identifying them with the two witnesses is in many ways appropriate in the story of Revelation.⁴⁹

What is especially interesting for our purposes is how John uses another “X is Y” statement to clarify and revitalize an ambiguous OT prophecy. While many modern

⁴³ For the seven spirits as the seven principal angels or as an interpretation of the seven “spirits” listed in Isa 11:2-3a LXX, see Jauhiainen, *The Use*, 86–7.

⁴⁴ For further details, see *ibid.*, 84–9.

⁴⁵ See the discussion *ibid.*, 90.

⁴⁶ For further details, see *ibid.*, 46–7.

⁴⁷ Cf. 1 Cor 3:16-17; Eph 2:21.

⁴⁸ Rev 1:12-21; cf. Zech 4:14, Rev 11:4.

⁴⁹ See further *ibid.*, 91–3.

commentators see the two olive trees as depicting diarchic leadership in general, or Joshua and Zerubbabel in particular, the text itself leaves the issue open.⁵⁰ John seized the opportunity and identified the “two anointed ones” with the witnessing church who in the power of the Spirit fulfils its prophetic vocation by being engaged in the building of the eschatological temple.⁵¹

2.7 *The destruction of Babylon*

Many critical scholars have adopted what is known as the recapitulation theory as it comes to understanding the chronology of certain segments of Revelation.⁵² Some forms of the theory hold that the three battles mentioned in Rev 16:14, 19:19, and 20:8 all refer to the single “final eschatological battle,” each offering a slightly different perspective. This view is rather unfortunate in that it completely fails to appreciate how John skillfully weaves three very different OT traditions into his narrative and uses each for very different purposes, yet along the lines suggested by the traditions themselves. Here we will look at the first event, the destruction of Babylon, and then, under separate headings, the other two events.

The downfall of Babylon is prophesied in a number of passages in the OT, among which the most important for our purposes are Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51. Rev 16:14–18:24 contains a number of allusions to these passages which clearly play a significant role in John’s depiction of the great Babylon and its judgment. The picture that emerges from these passages is that of many kings and nations that are gathered together (Isa 13:4; Jer 50:9, 41–42; 51:27–28) for battle against Babylon, whom they will make desolate (Jer 50:13; 51:29, 37), burn (Jer 51:25), and devour (Jer 51:34–35). This is precisely what takes place in Rev 16:14–18:24.⁵³ Evil self-destructs as the Beast and the kings and their forces annihilate Babylon.

The section in Revelation describing the great whore Babylon and her fate is rather long. If we were to analyze every verse and compare it to its OT source(s), we would no doubt find examples of both careful preservation and novel twists. On a larger scale, it seems a reasonable assumption that John — who shared with other early Christians the identification of Rome as Babylon⁵⁴ — searched the Scriptures for prophecies concerning

⁵⁰ See, e.g., D. L. Petersen, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 230–1; and Meyers and Meyers, *Haggai, Zechariah 1–8*, 258–9; 275–7; cf. E. J. C. Tigchelaar (*Prophets of Old and the Day of the End: Zechariah, the Book of Watchers and Apocalyptic* [Leiden: Brill, 1996] 43), according to whom the olive trees may represent ideal future servants of Yahweh.

⁵¹ On the role of the church’s prophetic witness, see especially Bauckham, *The Climax*, 238–337.

⁵² For a recent proposal regarding recapitulation in Revelation, see Jauhiainen, “Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective,” *NTS* 49, no. 4 (2003) 543–59.

⁵³ Seeing 16:14–16 as referring to the destruction of Babylon makes in all kinds of ways better sense than taking it as a somewhat unexpected proleptic reference to the encounter between Christ and the Beast and its forces three chapters later in 19:19–21. Moreover, it is likely that ‘Armageddon’ in 16:16 is best understood as a wordplay arising from the prophecies concerning the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 13–14 and Jeremiah 50–51. For a more detailed argument, see Jauhiainen, “The OT Background to *Armageddon* (Rev 16:16) Revisited,” *NovT* 47, no. 4 (2005) 381–93.

⁵⁴ Cf., e.g., 1 Pet 5:13.

her fate, combined his discoveries with his interpretation of the contemporary situation,⁵⁵ and produced an expanded, up-to-date version of the ancient expectations.

2.8 The destruction of the beast and the kings of the earth

Having first destroyed Babylon, the Beast and the kings of the earth next take on the Lamb who now appears as the Divine Warrior in Rev 19:11-21. In this passage, John is drawing on a number of OT texts, but two texts especially prominent are Dan 7 and Ps 2.⁵⁶ The former concerns the defeat of the Beast and the following heavenly judgment (cf. Revelation 20), and the latter the gathering of the kings of the earth against the Lord and his Christ, i.e., anointed king.⁵⁷

The kings in John's narrative do not heed the warning of Ps 2:10-12 and so the wrath of God the Almighty is kindled with the result that the kings and their forces are slain. The Beast, too, is defeated, though its body is "given over to be burned with fire" alive rather than dead as Dan 7:11 suggests. Thus, while Rev 19:11-21 is a prophecy that builds on a number of antecedent texts, John seems to present it both as a "fulfillment" of the ominous threat in Ps 2 and as an expansion of Dan 7:11.

2.9 The destruction of Gog and Magog

The third candidate for the "final eschatological battle" is Rev 20:7-9. Again, in order to appreciate John's adaptation of the motif it is helpful to have a brief look at the original. In Ezekiel 38-39, we find Israel as having been redeemed from the nations and restored to her land, living in peace and security with the ideal Davidic king ruling over the people. Yet in order to demonstrate his holiness and the eternal physical security of Israel, Yahweh summons Gog and his allies against them. However, just as they have reached the land, Yahweh pours out torrential rains, hailstones, fire and sulfur on them, and they are utterly destroyed before there is any battle.

It seems quite clear that Rev 20:7-9 plays a role in John's prophecy similar to that of chaps. 38-39 in Ezekiel's.⁵⁸ Yet there are notable differences, among which the following are especially worth highlighting: (1) John's description of the event is considerably shorter than Ezekiel's; (2) it is not Yahweh but Satan that is presented as responsible for this final conflict;⁵⁹ and (3) "Gog from Magog" has turned into "Gog and Magog," which is identified as "the nations that are at the four corners of the earth". The first difference is understandable, given the long account in Ezekiel and the different

⁵⁵ See, e.g., the insightful essays by Bauckham on the economic critique of Rome in Revelation (*The Theology*, 338-83) and on Nero and the beast (*ibid.*, 384-452).

⁵⁶ Another conspicuous use of the OT is the borrowing of the sacrificial feast motif from Ezekiel 39 in 19:17-21; see S. Bøe, *Gog and Magog: Ezekiel 38-39 as Pre-text for Revelation 19,17-21 and 20,7-10* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament – 2. Reihe, 135; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 274-300.

⁵⁷ Cf. Ps 2:9 LXX / Rev 19:15.

⁵⁸ See further Bøe (*Gog and Magog*, 342-3; 380-1) whose entire monograph is devoted to Ezekiel 39-39 in Revelation 19-20.

⁵⁹ Of course, even in Revelation the one ultimately in control is God, whose actions are often hidden behind unidentified voices and "divine" passives.

emphases of the books.⁶⁰ The second difference is probably the most crucial one. It fits not only John's narrative but also the theological developments present elsewhere in the NT but largely absent in the OT.⁶¹ As for the third major difference, it may perhaps be best explained as a universalization of the original motif, which focused on a particular prince, Gog, from a particular country, Magog, as leading the coalition against the saints. Since the role of the leader has been given to Satan, Gog and Magog have been relegated to represent far-away nations from around the world.⁶²

2.10 *The eschatological temple*

Another classic example of John's commenting on the OT is his vision of the New Jerusalem. Most scholars sensitive to John's use of the OT would point out a number of similarities between Rev 21:9–22:5 and Ezekiel 40–48 and many would claim that John appears to be following Ezekiel in several places.⁶³ Of course, there are many differences as well, but on the whole it seems very likely that John's composition has indeed been profoundly influenced by Ezekiel's vision. It is thus all the more surprising that while Ezekiel's apparent focus is the eschatological temple,⁶⁴ John declares that he "saw no temple" (21:22a).

John does not leave his statement unexplained, however: "for its temple is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb" (21:22b). In terms of the Jewish national symbols and traditional expectations, the absence of a temple is a radical reinterpretation. Yet it is in keeping with the early Christian understanding of the temple as the locus of God's presence, as we have seen already. Moreover, on one hand, the whole city is a temple, for God is present there. On the other hand, there is no longer any need for a separate temple, for God now dwells among his people as he did at the beginning; there are no decrees of holiness or steps that one must follow in order to enter into God's presence.

It is difficult to know whether or not early Christians expected another temple after 70 C.E. on the basis of Ezekiel 40–48, but John addressed the issue nevertheless and settled the matter: history is about to reach its climax and there is no earthly temple building in sight. Yet, should one desire a temple or benefits available through it,⁶⁵ John has a deal much better than the one offered by Ezekiel's nationalistic vision: people from *all* nations

⁶⁰ The view that John tends to abbreviate his OT sources would work well here, though there are also plenty of examples of his expanding an OT verse or motif.

⁶¹ E.g., the concept of Satan, who leads humanity's rebellion against God. Rev 20:7-8 also offers a justification for the necessity and severity of God's judgment on evil: even a thousand years of Christ's reign (and presumably ideal conditions) does not change the human heart which is deceived as soon as Satan is released from his prison.

⁶² Though modified, the phrase "Gog and Magog" nevertheless functions as a very effective sign pointing to Ezekiel 38–39.

⁶³ See, e.g., Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1065; and B. Kowalski, *Die Rezeption des Propheten Ezechiel in der Offenbarung des Johannes* (SBB 52. Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2004), *passim*; cf. also the insightful survey in S. Moyise, "Intertextuality and the Use of Scripture in the Book of Revelation," *Scriptura* 84 (2003) 391–401.

⁶⁴ This does not mean, however, that Ezekiel necessarily intended to offer a blueprint for a new temple, for the measures he gives only rarely indicate the height of the structure or element being measured.

⁶⁵ According to G. Stevenson (*Power and Place: Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation* [BZNW, 107; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2001]), John uses temple symbolism in Revelation to meet the needs of Christians who experienced "displacement" due to their being cut off from access to physical temples.

willing to accept God's gracious offer can enter the holy city and fully enjoy his presence (Rev 21:1-8).

The absence of the physical temple building is not the only twist in John's story, for here we also have yet another tributary flowing into the high-Christological stream of Revelation. The temple is not equated with God only, but also with the Lamb, who shares God's throne (22:1, 3).⁶⁶

3. Reflections & observations

In a study such as this, two questions immediately come into mind: What was the author doing?, and, Why was he doing it? Not far behind these is a third question: How do we know the answers to the first two questions? In what follows, I will try to outline the contours of possible answers to these questions, first on a general level and then more specifically in the case of John and Revelation.

As I have argued elsewhere, the identification of underlying biblical sources and traditions John is reworking or using is primarily a matter of being a competent reader, for when the author does not use quotation formulas or other such devices to point his audience to the original text(s), the readers are expected to identify them themselves.⁶⁷ This can be a tricky exercise when the author is using a specific verse from a specific book, but less of a problem when he has taken up a motif appearing in several places. Once the original text or motif has been identified, however, then finding out what the author has done is a matter of a close analysis and comparison.⁶⁸ Assessing differences and similarities will then hopefully answer the "what?" question.

The "why?" question is much more difficult to address. After all, in RB studies the author has been dead for centuries and our knowledge of his persona, location, and context is rather limited. Of course, this does not mean that we cannot venture a hypothesis; it merely reminds us that we are skating on much thinner ice than with our first question.⁶⁹ The shape of the hypothesis obviously may vary from author to author, but it seems we always need to begin with the answer to the "what?" question. In other words, once we have seen what the author appears to have done with various texts and motifs — which is all our direct evidence — we may then proceed to connect our findings to the overall theological, cultural, historical, and social contexts⁷⁰ of him and his audience and to try to

⁶⁶ This blending of roles and identities climaxes in 22:13, where Jesus claims the titles "the Alpha and the Omega... the beginning and the end" both of which belonged to God in 21:6.

⁶⁷ Jauhainen, *The Use*, 165; this obviously applies to a large number of other texts as well.

⁶⁸ In contrast to identifying the underlying tradition(s), comparing single verses is obviously easier than analyzing a motif which can appear in various forms in the OT.

⁶⁹ The nature of the problem is perhaps well exemplified by the ongoing "John's respect for the OT context" debate and especially the recent exchange between Beale and Moyise (for details and references, see *ibid.*, 14–16; 139–140). At the core of the debate is the fact that we cannot be certain our reading of Revelation has recovered the author's intention and understanding of his source texts. Similarly, certainty will elude us regarding his motives.

⁷⁰ As these key components or dimensions change, so will the resulting hypothesis. Yet the closer the contexts of any two authors, the more likely are the hypotheses regarding their activity to resemble one another. Therefore a NT document, for example, has in its use of the OT probably more in common with another NT document than with a non-biblical writing discovered in Qumran (cf., e.g., G. J. Brooke, "Rewritten Bible," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* [ed. L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam; 2 vols; Oxford: Oxford

come up with a viable hypothesis. Ultimately, of course, the hypothesis that best explains all the data (and hopefully sheds most light on the text) is to be preferred.

As for Revelation, in the previous section I have sought to offer examples of possible explanations for the data uncovered in comparing John's version of certain OT prophecies and expectations to the originals. I have also tried to describe the various ways John seems to be treating the OT traditions. Here I will try to summarize the primary findings in a more general form, beginning with the "what?" question and then moving on to the "why?" question.

Among the texts selected, we saw how John has expanded, clarified, universalized or otherwise modified ancient visions, prophecies, and expectations.⁷¹ Sometimes this is done in a subtle way, but sometimes he helps his reader along by offering explicit "X is Y" identifications. Sometimes he exploits the ambiguity of the original text or motif, sometimes the original is clear enough but is radically redefined or refashioned in light of Christian theology. Especially frequent are occasions where Jesus steps into the role of Yahweh.⁷²

Why, then, is John doing what he seems to be doing? There are a number of possibilities and it is obvious that no single reason can adequately explain everything. I have placed several possible explanations into two groups, the reasons arising from the existing texts, or John's Scriptures, and the reasons arising from John's agenda.⁷³ In the former case, the emphasis is on the texts which themselves seem to invite attention, as it were, and in the latter case, the texts appear largely subordinate to John's own concerns. There is thus tension between John's voice and the voice of the antecedent texts, between creativity and faithfulness to the tradition.

As we noted earlier, and saw in the course of our brief analysis, John fits the mould of an ancient prophetic-apocalyptic writer rather well, for there appears to be a marked tendency to reveal divine mysteries and close divine predictions.⁷⁴ In addition to this, there is a tendency to explain and clarify obscure, ambiguous or difficult readings and passages. Finally, John gives many an old prophecy a new lease of life, showing how ancient texts were still relevant for the audience in their different theological, cultural, historical, and social circumstances. By doing this, John also addresses the issue of

University Press, 2000] 1.781-3, whose list of various motivations behind the rewriting activity apparent among the DSS is somewhat different from our proposals regarding John and Revelation). One consequence of this is that the results of RB study in one set of documents are not necessarily directly transferable to another set of documents.

⁷¹ While our sampling was relatively small, studies in the area of John's use of the OT suggest that the observations that follow apply more widely. Absent from the sampling, however, were examples of certain techniques similar to the exegetical practices identified in later rabbinic literature; see, e.g., Bauckham, who maintains that John has used *gezērâ šāwâ* in Revelation (*The Climax*, 296–307).

⁷² This is not a novel development in Revelation; cf. the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels.

⁷³ It could be argued that everything John does is in one sense related to his agenda, so the line between these two categories is obviously blurred.

⁷⁴ Similarly Bauckham (ibid., 262n32): "But just as late Old Testament prophecy already takes up, interprets and develops the authoritative oracles of its predecessors, so John's prophecy gathers up and interprets all the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets which he regarded as relating to the eschatological coming of God's kingdom."

continuity and discontinuity between his Scriptures and the new traditions and fresh revelation birthed by the coming of Jesus and the events that have followed.⁷⁵

It is not only that the ancient texts and promises demand attention — John is more than eager to use the opportunity and further his own agenda. By utilizing authoritative texts, he achieves a number of things. First, the imitating of earlier writers and sacred texts confers greater authority to his text. Second, the texts provide him with a language that contains familiar yet powerful metaphors, imagery, literary devices, and other ready-to-use expressions. Moreover, by crafting even a tiny allusion John can economically tap into the vast resources of his Scriptures and invoke whole scenes, events and story lines in support of his own narrative.⁷⁶ Third, in true apocalyptic fashion, he is able to place the current developments into the context of God's overall plan and story — everything that his audience is now undergoing has in fact been known long ago. Though their circumstances and the future may look rather bleak, the alternative and true version of reality presented by John demonstrates that God has not missed a beat but is in firm control and consequently the days of their enemies are numbered. Fourth, John uses earlier texts to offer fresh theological insights.⁷⁷ This is especially seen in his assigning roles to Christ that are traditionally reserved to Yahweh. Finally, John addresses the issue of restoration of God's people that was modified, but not abandoned by the coming of Jesus.⁷⁸ The ancient promises will indeed be fulfilled and the restoration of God's people will take place, but in a manner indicated by John.⁷⁹

4. Conclusion

Our rather cursory peek at Revelation from the perspective of RB suggests that the combination has great potential for fruitful research. Discovering *what* John has done with the OT texts is the first step and serves as a springboard for the second and more demanding step, the purpose of which is to try to explain *why* he has treated the Scriptures the way he has. In addition to describing some of the phenomena apparent in John's composition, we also offered a few possible answers to the latter question, along with some reflections on the applicability of our observations to RB studies in general.

As for John, it appears that a lot can be explained by his position at the crossroads of two Ways. As a Jew, he is firmly anchored in the Scriptures of his people, but as a Christian, he believes that the ancient prophecies can have — indeed, have already had — surprising fulfillments in the present age, whom he and other early Christians understand to be the last days. As a prophet, it is therefore his task to revitalize the texts of old for his

⁷⁵ Cf. Bauckham (ibid.): "Because the Old Testament prophecies are authoritative for him, his fresh revelation cannot be discontinuous with them, but must be closely related to interpretation of them, thereby providing the culmination of the whole prophetic tradition."

⁷⁶ Cf. Moyise (*The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* [JSNTSup, 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 118–38), who looks at John's use of the OT from the perspective of Thomas Greene's typology of "forms of imitation".

⁷⁷ Though the original texts do not change, this type of activity tends to create tensions as the OT is now often read in light of the NT.

⁷⁸ Cf. Acts 1:6.

⁷⁹ Incidentally, not all promises of restoration are revisited in Revelation. Notably absent are the coming of the eschatological Spirit, the return to the land, and the establishing of a new covenant.

audience, upon whom the end of the ages has come, and show how the prophetic Scriptures will remain relevant until the consummation of all things.

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