

The Use of the Old Testament by the Author of Revelation

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THE author of Revelation states that his name is John. At no time, however, does he identify himself with John the son of Zebedee; in fact, he refers to the twelve disciples as if he had not been one of their company (18:20; 21:14). Furthermore, he never gives any indication that he actually knew Jesus during his earthly career, that he had seen him or had heard him speak. Indeed, the picture that he gives of the apocalyptic heavenly Christ seems to preclude any possibility that he had known Jesus in the flesh. His real name may well have been John, but he was not John the son of Zebedee.

He describes himself as a Christian who had been exiled to the little island of Patmos off shore from Ephesus "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." This apparently means that he had refused to worship the emperors of Rome as gods, but had remained faithful to God and had not denied Christ. He may have been connected with the church of Ephesus, and possibly was a leader of this important Christian church.

He apparently knew some Hebrew, as may be indicated by the inclusion of certain Hebrew terms in his book. However, despite the numerous irregularities in grammar, syntax, and style which his book displays, he writes Greek fluently and with clarity. There is scarcely a sentence where his meaning is obscure. At times he may have made his own translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, but he frequently uses the Greek translation known as the Septuagint, the same

Greek version used by Paul and other Greek speaking Christians.

In addition to the Old Testament he may have had an acquaintance with extra-canonical books like I Enoch. Whether or not this is so, he certainly was well-acquainted with apocalyptic traditions, symbolism and patterns that are to be found in both Jewish and Christian apocalypses. The letter corpus at the beginning consisting of a general letter followed by letters to seven churches may reflect a knowledge of a similar collection of Paul's letters, as does some of the phraseology in these letters. He shows no definite knowledge of any of the canonical Gospels; the few similarities that may be found are probably due to a common tradition rather than to any literary dependence.

The book of Revelation is replete with astralism from the beginning to the very end. Much of this may be due to the presence of astralism in Jewish and Christian thinking; but some of it may have been derived from Gentile sources. Certainly, the highly astrological depiction of the heavenly woman clothed in the sun, with the moon under her feet, and crowned with twelve stars, indicates a Gentile source.

Returning to the Old Testament, John quotes or alludes to it in about two-thirds of the 404 verses in Revelation. Despite this high incidence, he never once specifically states that either a citation or an allusion is from the Old Testament. At no time is there any formula of citation, such as "It is written," "It is said," or "The scripture says." He seldom mentions an Old Testament character by name. He does mention Moses somewhat incidentally: "And they sing the song of Moses" (15:3), as well as David in much the same casual

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manner: "The key of David," (3:7) and "The root of David" (5:5; 22:16).

It is understandable that the author had favorite books: the Pentateuch, but Exodus in particular; the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; the minor prophets, especially Zechariah; Daniel of course; and the Psalms. Very little reference is made to the so-called historical books.

John claims to be a visionary prophet; he asserts that his book is the result of a series of revelations granted to him by the heavenly Christ and by other supernatural means. His claims, to a greater or lesser degree, have been accepted by scholars, even though at the same time there is evidence that Revelation is a literary composition, the product of careful planning and writing, despite the relatively poor Greek used by the author. But a literary production by a person whose command of grammar and syntax is meager is not unexampled. John Bunyan was almost illiterate, but produced *Pilgrim's Progress*, usually regarded as a masterpiece.

The literary plan of the book of Revelation is based upon the number seven. The book begins, as noted above, with a letter corpus consisting of a covering letter followed by letters to seven churches. The main body of the work consists of seven series of "visions," each series being composed of seven "visions" plus an interlude now and then. His book not only has a short preface, but an epilogue as well. It is almost self-evident that the work is a planned, literary composition.

Further evidence that this is the case is provided by the use that John makes of the Old Testament; it is not the frequency of quotations and allusions, but the manner in which he combines and remodels Old Testament material that reveals the work of a creative writer, rather than the sum of the so-called visionary experiences of an ecstatic prophet. A number of the more instructive examples may support this contention.

God on His Heavenly Throne

For one, the scene in chapter 4 depicting God on his throne in heaven surrounded by his heavenly attendants is clearly a reworking of theophanies in Ezekiel 1 and Isaiah 6. Ezekiel wrote that he saw a great cloud driven by the wind coming out of the north. The cloud was surrounded by brightness; fire was flashing from it continuously, with gleaming bronze in the center. Four "living creatures" (cherubim) with four wings each appeared from the midst of the cloud. They were somewhat human in appearance, but each had four faces, with the face of a man in front, of a lion at the right, of an ox to the left, and of an eagle in back. Burning torches were seen moving among them, and lightning went out from the torches. Each living creature was accompanied by a wheel, whose rims were full of eyes.

A shining crystal firmament was above the living creatures, and a throne of sapphire was above it. God in the likeness of a human form, was seated on the throne. The upper part of his body was like fiery, gleaming bronze, the lower like fire itself. He was surrounded by a bright rainbow.

The theophany in Isaiah 6:1-5 is less elaborate. Isaiah relates that while he was in the temple he saw God sitting upon his throne, with the train of his royal robe filling the temple. His attendants, the seraphim, whose numbers are not given, stood above him. These, like the cherubim of Ezekiel, are somewhat human in appearance, but they have six wings. One of them sang: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of his voice the foundations of the threshold shook and the temple was filled with smoke. Isaiah, of course, was overawed by this theophany.

John takes these two theophanies, omits details, adds others, and produces his distinctive theophany, all in keeping with his literary purpose. Since, according to his apocalyptic view, God during

this present world-age is transcendent in heaven, far removed from earth, John transfers himself from earth to heaven where God is on his throne. God is not actually visible in person, as in Ezekiel and Isaiah, but appears like "jasper and carnelian," hence the scene is less anthropomorphic than those of his sources. As in Ezekiel, there is a rainbow around the throne, but it is an "emerald" rainbow or halo, not vari-colored.

Possibly using an astral source, John adds that there are twenty-four additional thrones upon which twenty-four "elders" with golden crown and white robes are seated. These may be star angels, the twenty-four constellations beyond the circle of the zodiac. Their chief function is to praise God with song.

As in Ezekiel, thunder and lightning came from the throne. Ezekiel stated that burning torches were seen among the living creatures. These torches became seven in number in Revelation, and are identified as the seven spirits of God. In Ezekiel the throne of God is above a firmament of crystal or glass; in Revelation the firmament is replaced by a sea of crystal or glass in front of the throne.

In Revelation, as in Ezekiel, God has four attendants, called "living creatures." These, however, combine features of the cherubim of Ezekiel with those of the seraphim of Isaiah. Instead of being four-headed, with the face of a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, the creatures in Revelation have but a single head: the first, that of a lion, the second, of an ox, the third, of a man, and the fourth, of an eagle. Instead of having four wings, as in Ezekiel, they have six wings like the seraphim. The rim of the wheels in Ezekiel were filled with eyes; but, in Revelation, the wings are filled with eyes all around and within. Just as one of the seraphim sang the Trisagion, so the four living creatures of Revelation sing: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty," but they conclude with "who was, and is,

and is to come," rather than with "the whole earth is full of his glory," for God is in heaven during the first world-age, and not in earth at all.

The Eating of the Little Scroll

The appearance of God to Ezekiel is followed by instructions which God gave to the prophet (Ezek. 2:8, 3:3). God held a little scroll in his hand which was written in front and in back with words of lamentation, mourning, and woe. God then told Ezekiel to eat the scroll, and then to go and speak to the rebellious house of Israel. Ezekiel claims that he ate the scroll, which was sweet as honey in his mouth.

John has adapted this scene with but minor changes. It is not God who appears to him, but a mighty angel whose description, in part, is like that of Ezekiel's depiction of God. For he comes from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head. His face is like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. God, of course, would not appear on earth in this world-age; further, as a rule in Revelation he is invisible. This angel, like God in Ezekiel, has a little scroll in his hand. At this juncture John inserts some material not from Ezekiel, for the mighty angel, placing his right foot on the sea and his left on the land, calls out with a loud voice, whereupon the seven thunders sounded forth. He swears that the promised end will soon arrive, will, in fact, be revealed when the seventh trumpet angel sounds his trumpet. By this insertion John integrates the incident of the scroll with the book as a whole. A heavenly voice now orders him to take the scroll from the mighty angel's hand. When he asks for it, the angel says to him: "Take it and eat; it will be bitter in your stomach, but sweet in your mouth," a statement similar to Ezekiel's comment after he had eaten the scroll which he took from God's hand. When he eats the scroll which the angel gave him, John finds that it is both sweet as honey in his mouth and bitter in his

stomach. Then the angel orders him to prophesy against peoples, nations, tongues, and kings (i.e., against Rome), not against the house of Israel as Ezekiel had been commanded to do.

The Millstone Thrown Into the Sea

John's literary dependence upon Ezekiel is quite evident. His modification and adaptation of the material which he borrows is typical of his method of literary composition. Another Old Testament incident involving a book which provides a source for John, which he modifies considerably, is from Jeremiah 51:59-64.

Jeremiah was represented as uttering a series of oracles predicting the fall of Babylon as the judgment of God and the return of the exiles. He then wrote these oracles down in a book, and gave instructions to Seraiah who was going to Babylon. Seraiah was to take this book of oracles of Babylon's doom with him, and then, upon his arrival, he was to read out loud from it, adding that neither man nor beast shall ever dwell in Babylon, which shall be forever desolate. After saying this, he was to bind a stone to the book and cast it into the river Euphrates, saying: "Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the evil that I am bringing upon her."

The adaptation of this incident by John is found in Rev. 18:21-24. A mighty angel takes up a stone like a large millstone and casts it into the sea, and then pronounces an oracle of doom beginning: "So shall the great city of Babylon be violently thrown down and shall be found no more."

A comparison reveals the nature of the changes. Seraiah becomes a mighty angel; the book weighted with a stone becomes a millstone; the river Euphrates becomes the sea, implying that Babylon is actually Rome, and Seraiah's prophetic prediction of the fall of Babylon becomes an angelic prophecy of the coming doom of Rome, the new Babylon. The book of oracles as such

disappears entirely from the modification made by John.

The Heavenly Red Sea

According to Exodus, following a series of ten plagues the enslaved Israelites escaped from their oppressors, the Egyptians, by crossing the Red Sea in safety while the Egyptians were drowned. After crossing the Red Sea in triumph Moses and the Israelites sing a song of praise and thanksgiving to God their deliverer.

For John the persecuted Christians of his day are the new Israel, the chosen people of God, whereas their persecutors, the Romans, are not only the new Babylonians, but also the new Egyptians. Accordingly, the Romans are to be punished by divine action by numerous plagues, some of which resemble the plagues of Egypt. As they are liberated from the Romans by their deaths as martyrs the Christians cross a sea, a red sea, but this is a heavenly red sea, not composed of water, but of glass mingled with fire, similar to the sea before God's throne, if not the same. After their triumphant crossing they, like the Israelites of old, sing "the song of Moses," also called the "song of the Lamb," in praise of God, playing on their harps for an accompaniment (Rev. 15:1-4). Thus Exodus becomes a prototype for the triumph of the Christian martyrs during the Roman persecution through skillful rewriting by John.

The Plague of Supernatural Locusts

The plague of locusts in chapter 9 of Revelation is in part suggested by the eighth Egyptian plague in which the cloud of locusts was so dense that it covered and darkened the land. The locusts ate up all of the plant life, so that no green plant or tree remained (Exodus 10:4-15). The prophet Joel prophesied that swarms of locusts will devastate the earth as harbingers of the

dread day of Jehovah (Joel 1:2-12; 2-1-11).

The locusts in Joel are apparently depicted as ordinary locusts, even though they are to be sent by God as agents of punishment, destroying the vegetation of the earth. They are, however, described metaphorically as an invading army, with teeth like lions' teeth. They are, indeed, like cavalry, ravaging and devastating the land as they run over it, and laying it waste with fire. During their warlike course the earth quakes, and the sun, moon and stars are darkened, for the coming day of the Lord will be great and terrible.

Although John no doubt was influenced by the locust plague of Exodus, it is mainly the account in Joel which he transforms to his own purpose. First of all, a star angel unlocks and opens the shaft of the bottomless pit. When he does this, a great cloud of smoke rises from the shaft and darkens the sun. Swarms of locusts are seen coming from the cloud to the earth. These are not ordinary locusts; instead, they are supernatural creatures dreadful in appearance and possessed of awful power. They are like horses arrayed for battle. They have crowns on their heads, with faces like those of humans, hair like women's hair, teeth like lions' teeth, and scales like iron breast-plates. The noise of their wings is like that of many chariot horses rushing into battle. They have tails like scorpions, with stings like scorpions' stings. They have a king over them, the angel of the bottomless pit, whose Hebrew name is Abaddon (Destroyer) and whose Greek name is Appollyon (also Destroyer).

Unlike the locusts of Exodus and Joel, they do not harm the grass or the trees. But they are permitted to sting all men with their poisonous scorpion-like tails, save those Christians who are protected by God's seal, torturing them for a period of five months. Thus the locusts of Exodus and Joel are

transmuted by John into fearful supernatural agents of destruction.

The following scene in Revelation (verses 13-19) may be a variant of the same theme. When the sixth trumpet angel sounds his trumpet of doom, four angels bound at the Euphrates are released. They are the leaders of a host of supernatural cavalry, 200,000,000 in number, who are about to cross the Euphrates to devastate the Roman Empire, destroying a third of mankind. The horsemen wear breastplates of the color of fire, sapphire and sulphur; the horses had lions' heads emitting deadly fumes of fire, smoke and sulphur from their mouths. Their tails were not like scorpions' tails; instead they are like poisonous serpents with heads that strike and wound humans.

This scene of supernatural horsemen about to cross the Euphrates, is somewhat removed from the locusts of Joel. However, it may, as suggested above, represent an adaptation of the previous scene which is clearly based upon Joel as a source.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

The four horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev. 6:1-8) who are also agents of God's punishment of the Romans represent a combination of two scenes from Zechariah. They exemplify John's skilful method of utilizing his sources.

In Zechariah 1:7-17 the prophet describes a rider upon a red horse, and behind him three other horses, one red, one sorrel, and one white, each, presumably with its rider. The function of these horsemen is to patrol the earth for God, reporting to him what they discover. Later, in Zech. 6:1-8, the prophet describes four chariots which are drawn, in turn, by red or chestnut horses, by black horses, by white horses, and by dappled horses. They also patrol the earth for God, each going to one of the four winds of heaven. The one that goes to the north has the special commission to execute God's

judgment upon Babylon, the chief enemy of his people.

With these scenes in Zechariah in mind, John states that when the Lamb of God breaks the first seal of the book of doom, a white horse appears carrying the rider who wears a crown on his head and has a bow with which he is to conquer. With the breaking of the second seal a red horse comes forth with a rider who has a great sword with which to take peace away from the earth. Following the breaking of the third seal, a black horse is seen with a rider who carries a balance in his hand while crying out famine prices for wheat and barley, symbolizing a coming famine. The fourth horse, livid as death in color, has two riders, Death and Hades, the ruler of the dead. These bring death by the sword, famine, pestilence and wild beasts.

The Heavenly Martyr-Witnesses

The next example is more complicated than any of the preceding. According to the Old Testament, Moses afflicted the Egyptians with every kind of plague, including fiery hail and the turning of water to blood. Moreover, the prophet Elijah was credited with causing a lengthy drought (and breaking it) and on another occasion of destroying one hundred and fifty soldiers who had attempted to capture him with fire from heaven. Even more amazing, Elijah did not die, but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. Nor was this all, for according to Malachi 4:4-6 (cf. 3:1) Elijah was expected to return to earth shortly before the dreadful day of the Lord. This belief was amplified in Jewish tradition so that Elijah was to come back to earth as a precursor of the Messiah. Similarly, an extra-canonical source gives the information that the Devil and the archangel Michael contended for Moses' body, and that Michael was victorious, taking Moses to heaven. Furthermore, the prediction in Deut. 18:5 that God would raise up a prophet like unto Moses came to be in-

terpreted to mean that Moses also would reappear on earth at the proper time. These beliefs are dramatized in the transfiguration scene in Mark 9:2-8, where Elijah and Moses return briefly to earth to be with and talk to Jesus. John uses these themes in his dramatic scene of the two heavenly witnesses in Rev. 11.

But in addition he also uses a couple of scenes from Zechariah. In Zech. 1:16 and 2:2-8 the measurement of the Temple prior to its restoration is described. Later on, in Zech. 4:1-14, the prophet envisions a seven branched lampstand and two olive trees. The lampstand with its seven lamps symbolizes the seven eyes of God going over the entire earth. The two olive trees signify the two anointed ones of the Lord, probably Zerubbabel and Joshua, the political and religious heads of the exiles who were to return to rebuild the Temple.

Out of these Old Testament passages and later traditions John composed his scene of the two heavenly witnesses. First, John is given a measuring rod and told to measure the Temple, the altar, and those who worship there. Then two witnesses who are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord make their appearance from heaven with power to prophesy. Fire can come from their mouths and destroy their foes. They have power to cause a drought, to turn waters into blood, and to smite the earth with every plague. When they finish with their testimony, they are put to death by a beast coming up from the bottomless pit. Their death brings great joy to the peoples of the earth, but after three and a half days they are restored to life, and following a heavenly command they return to heaven.

Quite evidently John has created a new scene out of his varied sources. The two witnesses, Elijah and Moses, who have returned to earth to testify, prophesy and are put to death are mar-

tyrs as well as witnesses (the Greek word "martyrs" has both meanings). They, however, are not overcome by their deaths as martyrs. Instead, they are restored to life and taken up to heaven in triumph. This scene of the martyr-witnesses is a dramatic assurance to the Christians who are persecuted by the Romans that even if they are put to death for witnessing to Christ and refusing to worship the emperors, nevertheless as martyrs they will go immediately in triumph to heaven when they die. This assurance, made elsewhere in Revelation, is one of the most important sanctions for the acceptance of martyrdom in the entire book. The scene as a whole illustrates John's consummate artistry in transforming sources to fit his own literary composition.

The New Jerusalem

Chapters 40 through 48 of Ezekiel depict the rebuilt city of Jerusalem as the prophet said it was revealed to him. He says that he was brought to a high mountain that he might get a better view of the proposed city and its temple (40:2). He relates that he saw a man with a line of flax and a measuring rod to use in measuring the city and the temple. In subsequent passages measurements are given with great detail, as are regulations for the temple services. The prophet describes a river issuing from the threshold of the temple, with many trees on both banks of the river, a veritable Garden of Eden (47:1-23). The leaves of the trees are for healing.

The city itself is described as being square, 4,500 cubits to a side (about 1.6 miles). Its walls have three gates on each side, twelve in all, each one named after one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The city itself shall be called "The Lord is there."

The heavenly Jerusalem described in Revelation has some of the features of the one in Ezekiel, but is more elaborate. John, in imitation of Ezekiel, says

that he was taken to a high mountain that he might see the heavenly Jerusalem descend from heaven to earth. It is four-square like the city in Ezekiel, but is much larger, being 1,500 miles to a side. Furthermore, unlike the city described by Ezekiel, it is a cube, being as high as it is wide. But the walls of the two cities are similar in that in both there are three gates to a side, with the name of a tribe of Israel inscribed on each gate. However, in Revelation there is an angel above each gate, apparently to guard it. Moreover, according to John the wall has twelve foundations, each one inscribed with the name of one of the twelve apostles.

There was, of course, a temple in Ezekiel's city; indeed, this was its most important feature. But there is no temple in the city described by John, for God and the Lamb who will dwell in it eternally will be its temple. Consequently, the river which Ezekiel said came from under the threshold of the temple comes from the thrones of God and the Lamb, who take the place of the temple in the New Jerusalem of Revelation. In both cities there are trees on either side of the river, whose leaves have healing properties. The name that is given to the city of Ezekiel, "The Lord is there," is not repeated specifically in Revelation, but it might well have been, for according to John God descended with the heavenly Jerusalem in order to dwell eternally with men.

There are, of course, some striking differences in the appearance of the two cities other than those mentioned. Obviously, John has combined material from Ezekiel with other sources in describing his city, a process that was quite in keeping with his literary method in general.

There is little need for concluding remarks. According to the examples cited, John has been a creative literary artist who has used and adapted various sources, as he composed his book. Certainly, in view of this we must dis-

count his repeated claim that the scenes which he relates were actually visions which had been granted to him. If this be admitted, then the authority traditionally ascribed to Revelation as a divine revelation must be seriously questioned. Instead, it is a conscious, careful literary composition whose author claimed divine inspiration in order to obtain supernatural sanction for his message. If it is viewed from this standpoint against the background of the persecution of the Christians by the Romans for refusing to worship the emperor gods, Revelation ceases to be a mysterious book subjected to all kinds of fantastic interpretations.

It might be argued that the author of Revelation has used sources in which the Old Testament has already been used and reworked. This is a possibility, at least for some of the scenes, which should not be ruled out. But even if this contention be granted, this would still involve the literary dependence of John upon sources rather than upon "visionary" experiences. On the other hand, throughout the book there is a marked similarity in the utilization and modification of materials from the Old Testament, indicating the work of a single person, the author of Revelation himself.

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