

THE USE OF OLD TESTAMENT IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

It is an undisputable fact that John, the author of Revelation makes allusions to the Old Testament writings. Ranko Stefanovic observes that out of 404 verses in Revelation, 278 contain references or allusions, direct or indirect, to the Old Testament.¹ He comments that the prophecies of Revelation are especially built on the greatest and key events from sacred history. These include; the creation, the flood, the exodus, God's covenant with King David, and the exile to Babylon.² According to Jenkins, Revelation speaks the language of the Old Testament prophets of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.³

It is observed that the book of Revelation contains citations from, or allusions to, 28 of the 39 books of the OT. There are 505 such citations and allusions, some 325 of which are to the prophetic books of the OT – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel in particular. Of the Minor Prophets, references to Zechariah, Joel, Amos, and Hosea are most common. Of the books of the Pentateuch, greatest use is made of Exodus, and of the poetic sections, Psalms (see on Luke 24:44).⁴

Robert posits that John's constant allusions to biblical stories suggest that he composes his book of visions in conversation with the Old Testament. Not only is much of his rhetoric borrowed from the biblical prophets, but his visions can often be catalogued according to the types of people and events which the prophets themselves used to rehearse the constitutive features of salvation's history.⁵

¹ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, Second (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 2009), 18. See also, Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament In The Original Greek* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1911); H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of Saint John* (London: The Macmillan Co., 1911. Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d).

² Ibid., 19.

³ Ferrell Jenkins, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972), 22.

⁴ Francis D. Nichol ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1980), 725–726.

⁵ Robert W. Wall, *Understanding the Bible Commentary Series: Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 17.

In her own comment, Ellen White says, “In the Revelation all the books of the Bible meet and end. Here is the complement of the book of Daniel.”¹ Ranko stresses that in order to unravel the symbols of Revelation, the reader must search for the most suitable Old Testament background adding that whoever endeavors to comprehend Revelation without a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament will find it virtually impossible to understand the book.²

Hence, argument has been raging concerning John’s use of the Old Testament. Does John quote the Old Testament or allude to it? Although, it seems scholars agree that John alluded to the OT “but no one agrees about the exact number of allusions, because it is difficult to determine partial quotations, allusions, and echoes of the OT in the book of Revelation.³ If he alludes, does he take cognizance of the historical context of his allusion? What is the significance or the role of the use of Old Testament in the book of Revelation? All these questions beg for answer. This paper attempts at examining John’s use of OT and its role in his apocalyptic writing. Further effort will be made to ascertain whether or not the allusion is indeed a direct or merely an echo.

Thus, the findings in this paper will help to understand the roles of Old Testament’s allusions or echoes in understanding and interpreting the book of Revelation. While this study considers the use of OT in the book of Revelation, it does not study every occurrence of Old Testament imagery or allusion in the book of Revelation.

A brief Overview

It is observed that Revelation contains more references to the Old Testament books than any other document in the New Testament.⁴ John, the Revelator, draws on many books in the Old Testament, including the Pentateuch, Judges, proverbs, Song of Solomon and Job. The author of Revelation frequently uses Daniel, as well as echoing regularly the prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah.⁵

Stephen Cook asserts that Revelation alludes to many types of Hebrew Bible texts, including the Bible’s creation accounts and its narratives of the exodus. Revelation brims with the language and images of Hebrew prophecy, including the words and visual symbols of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and Zechariah.⁶

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2005), 585.

² Stefanovic, 19.

³ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2002), 25.

⁴ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2005), 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stephen L. Cook, *The Apocalyptic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 196.

Ranko states that “the vision in Revelation 4-5 is built on the coronation of Israelite kings (cf. Deut. 17:18-20; 2 Kings 11:12); that the Old Testament covenant curses (cf. Lev 26:21-26) lie in the background of the vision of the seven seals; that the 144, 000 standing victoriously on the sea of glass and singing the song of Moses and of the lamb is a clear allusion to Exodus 15; and that the scene of Revelation 16:12-18:24 is built on the capture of historical Babylon by Cyrus the Persian and his armies (cf. Isa. 44:26-45:7; Jer 50-51).”¹

Donald also maintains that the influence of the Old Testament on this book is undeniable. He comments that the two main sources are undoubtedly Ezekiel and Daniel, both of which use similar imagery.² Beale devoted a monograph to the task of demonstrating the strong use of Daniel in Revelation.³

It is further argued that Revelation uses the OT in a manner that is both creative and attentive to OT context. Revelation’s evocations of the OT make sense against the background of key presuppositions:

1. Christ corporately represents the true Israel of the Old and New Testament
2. History is unified by a wise and sovereign plan, so that the earlier parts of canonical history are designed to correspond typologically to later parts.
3. The age of end-time fulfillment has been inaugurated with Christ’s first coming
4. The later parts of biblical history interpret earlier parts, so that Christ as the centre of history is the key to interpreting the earlier.⁴

It may be concluded that a proper understanding of the use of OT is necessary for an adequate interpretation of the book of Revelation.⁵

Difference between Quotation, Citation, Allusion and Echo

Understanding of the differences between quotation, allusion, citation and echo will help in determining what John did with his OT sources.

Citation is described as when an author reproduces the words of an original text and identifies the source from which he drew those words. Quotations on the other hand involve the selection of significant amounts of wording from a previous passage, sufficient to make it certain that the writer had the previous work in mind. Allusions are limited to a word, and

¹ Stefanovic, 19.

² Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 18.

³ G.K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Book of Revelation* (University Press of America, 1984). Further support for Daniel as a main source may be seen in the work of Austin Farrer (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Oxford, 1964).

⁴ Vern S Poythress, “John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 1 (2000): 145.

⁵ Smalley, 9.

idea, or a brief phrase that can be traced to a known body of text.¹ Echoes do not depend on the author's conscious intention. An echo indicates that the author picked up an idea that can be found in previous literature, but was probably unaware of the original source.²

Further, Paulien asserts that allusive references to previous literature can enter a work in two ways. First, the writer may use a source directly and consciously with its original context in mind. This means the writer is completely conscious of the source and also of its relevance to his writing. Second, a writer may "echo" ideas, the origin of which he is unaware. In this situation, the writer does not point the reader to a specific background source, but merely utilizes a "live symbol" that would be generally understood in his original situation.³ Paulien emphasizes that the distinction between allusions and echoes is very significant for the study of Revelation. Failure to do so will make people interpret echoes as though the author intended his reader to incorporate a source context into his understanding of Revelation.⁴

The Text Used in OT Allusion

Jenkins observes that John might have used the Hebrew text or the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew. He refers to Swete who provides a table of the 278 verses in the Apocalypse which contain reference to the Jewish Scriptures. Swete indicates, with each reference, whether it is taken from the LXX or some other text.⁵ It is further observed that John translated from the Old Testament text, and did not quote from any Greek version, but was often influenced by the LXX and another Greek version which was later revised and incorporated into Theodotion.⁶

An examination of the citations and allusions makes evident that John translated directly from the Hebrew OT, though at times under the influence of the LXX or a later Greek version.⁷

¹ Jon Paulien, "Elusive Allusions: The Problematic Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," *Biblical Research* 33 (1988): 39.

² *Ibid.*, 40.

³ Jon Paulien, "Elusive Allusions: The Problematic Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," *Biblical Research* 33 (1988): 37–53.

⁴ Paulien, 53.

⁵ Jenkins, 26. See also, H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of Saint John* (London: The Macmillan Co.), 1911

⁶ *Ibid.* See also, R.H. Charles, "The Revelation of St. John." *International Critical Commentary* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1920), Vol. I, 1xviii.

⁷ Nichol ed., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 7:724.

In his own opinion, Jauhiainen posits that until a thorough and methodologically sound study of John's sources for the rest of the OT has been undertaken, it would seem best to pay equal attention to both the LXX and the MT in analyzing John's use of the OT.¹

Moyise maintains that John knew and used Greek and Hebrew sources.²

Types of Old Testament Usage

G.K. Beale analyzes different usages of Old Testament in Revelation. They are:

1. Combined Allusions – Sometimes, five or more OT references are merged into one picture. Examples are the descriptions of Christ (Rev 1:12-20), God on the throne and the surrounding heavenly host (Rev 4:1-11), and the diabolic beast (Rev 13:1-8). It is observed that John consciously used such allusive combinations for their “evocative and emotive power.” Thus, it is unnecessary to attempt to understand the meaning of each reference in its OT and NT context.³

2. Contextual and Non-contextual Use – There is a consensus that John uses the OT with a high degree of liberty and creativity. Many people conclude that John did not consider the original context of his allusions. The reasons for this conclusion are:

i. John does not use quotation formulas in introducing OT references. However, informal citation or allusion does not entail non-contextual use of the OT.

ii. It is also argued that John's apocalyptic style is dependent on his prophetic spirit, which creates in order to proclaim for his own purposes and does not consciously quote from other authorities in order to teach or argue. In contrary, John does not view himself as a prophet independent of his OT tradition or heritage but applies to himself the language of OT prophetic commissions.

iii. Another argument for John's disregard for OT context is that his readers were illiterate, from pagan Greek background or both and would not have been able to understand the interpretative use of OT literature. This objection does not take into consideration the fact that the churches in Asia Minor were composed of a core of Jewish believers and Gentile.⁴

It appears that non-contextual use of the OT can be expected to happen where there is unconscious allusion.

¹ Marko Jauhiainen, “‘Behold, I Am Coming’: The Use of Zechariah in Revelation,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 160.

² S. Moyise, “The Language of the Old Testament in the Apocalypse,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 76 (1999): 112.

³ G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 79.

⁴ Beale, 81–82.

Old Testament Allusions in the Book of Revelation

It has been established that Revelation is saturated with allusions from the Old Testament. This chapter examines various allusions from the OT in the book of Revelation.

Thematic Uses. The writer of Revelation develops important OT themes. John develops extensively such OT themes as end-time judgment and salvation, each of which has thematic subcategories. Examples are Daniel's "abomination of desolation" theme, OT divine warrior concept, ancient Near Eastern/ OT covenant form in Revelation 2-3 and throughout the book, and the concept of the "day of the Lord."¹

Analogical Uses. Beale considers this as the most general description of OT usage in the Apocalypse, since the very act of referring to an OT text is to place it in some comparative relationship to something in the NT. However, the concerned here are on specific well-known persons, places, and events. The pictures do undergo creative changes this could be expansions, condensations, supplemental imagery. A key idea in the OT context is usually carried over as the main feature or principle to be applied in the NT situation. For example, the image of the deceiving "serpent of old" in Rev 12:9 (cf. 20:2) evokes an episode of primitive religious history, which maintains the same meaning for final, eschatological phase of theological history.²

Universalization. The apocalyptic has a tendency to apply to the world what the OT applied only to Israel or to other entities. Examples are; the title the Yahweh gave Israel in Exodus 19:6 ("kingdom of priests") is applied in Rev 1:6 and 5:10 to the church, which is composed of kingly priests "from every tribe, people, and nation" (Rev 5:9). This very phrase of universality in Rev 5:9 is most likely taken from Dan 7:14, where it refers to the nations of the world subjugated to Israel's rule, which is now extended to the rule by all these very nations (cf. Rev 5:10). Another example is the extension of the Exodus plague imagery from the land of Egypt to the whole "earth" in Rev 8:6-12 and 16:1-14.³

Possible Indirect Fulfillment Uses. It is noted that Revelation does not contain any formal OT quotations (with introductory formulas) used as proof texts to show prophetic fulfillment. However, it is still probable that some OT texts are informally referred to in order to designate present or future fulfillment of OT verbal prophecy. The introduction of Revelation alludes to Dan 2:28-29, 45, "to show...what must take place", followed directly by "quickly," with Daniel 2:28, "he showed...what must take place in the latter days," (Rev 1:1). John's "quickly" is replaced for Daniel's "in the latter days," so that what Daniel

¹ Beale, 88, 89.

² Ibid., 89.

³ Beale, 91.

expected to occur in the distant future, the defeat of cosmic evil and ushering in of the kingdom, John expects to begin in his own generation.¹

Further, Dan 12:4, 9 is used likewise in Rev 22:10: whereas Daniel is commanded to “conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time” (12:4), John is given the consummatory command not to “seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” This use of Daniel in Rev 22:10 intensifies that of 1:1-3 since it is directly linked to a verbatim repetition of 1:1 in 22:6.²

Inverted Uses. It is further observed that some allusions to the OT are on the surface distinctly contradictory to their OT contextual meanings. Examples are Rev 3:9 which refers to Isaianic prophecies that the Gentiles will come and bow down before Israel and recognize Israel as God’s chosen people (Isa 45:14; 49:23; 60:14). Beale asserts that this Jewish hope is turned upside down. Now it is Jewish persecutors of Christians whom God will make to submit to the church.³ The terminology of cosmic universality from Dan 7:14 in Rev 5:9 also reveals an intended inversion. Whereas in Daniel the phrase refers to the nations subjugated to Israel’s rule, now these very nations rule together with the Messiah.⁴

Illustrations of Allusion from Revelation

1. The Four Horsemen: Revelation 6 describes the opening of the seven seals by the Lamb which draws upon many Old Testament symbols. John saw four horses – the white, the bright red, the black and the pale horse. These four horsemen seem to be based upon the four chariots of Zechariah chapter 6. The similarities in these two accounts make it possible to conclude that the symbol of the horsemen in the book of Revelation is rooted in Zechariah. Both use different colored horses to go forth from God to control the activity on earth and to execute judgment, and the colors are similar. However, the order of the horses is different. Also, in John’s vision, the horses bear riders but in Zechariah’s vision, they pull horses.⁵
2. The Sealing of the Servants of God: John tells of seeing four angels standing at the four corners of the earth to hold back four winds. He saw another angel with the seal of the living God who spoke to the four angels to hold on until the servants of God are sealed (Rev 7:1-8). The context reveals a hundred and forty-four thousand were sealed so that they would not be harmed when the four winds were let loose to blow upon the earth. This concept of sealing is rooted in Ezekiel 9:1-8. Ezekiel records the six executioners of the city of Jerusalem; each one had his weapon for slaughter in his hand. A man clothed in linen was with them whom the Lord instructed to go through the city of Jerusalem and put a mark upon the

¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

² *Ibid.*, 94.

³ Beale, 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Jenkins, 42.

foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it (Eze. 9:4).¹

3. The Great Harvesting: At the time for the righteous judgment of the wicked, John says that one like a son of man, seated on a white cloud, came with a sharp sickle in his hand (Rev 14:14-20). An angel called upon him to put in the sickle to reap the harvest of the earth which was fully ripe. This harvest is an echo of Joel 3: 11-13.²
4. The overthrow of Babylon described in Rev 18:21 seems to be based upon a similar incident from Jeremiah's ministry (Jer 51:60-64).
5. The vision of demon locusts in Rev 9:1-12 draws directly on Joel and its devastating locust plague, presaging doomsday. As the locusts are released from the cosmic Abyss (Rev 9:2), the sun in heaven darkens just as in Joel (2:10, 31; 3:15). Both Revelation and Joel experience the invading locust armies as stampeding horses, arrayed in battle armor (Rev 9:7; Joel 2:4), possessing the teeth of lions (Rev 9:8; Joel 1:6), and surrounding like chariots rushing to battle (Rev 9:9; Joel 2:5). As in Joel, Revelation's locusts reveal humanity's state of crisis and need of God. Whereas Joel experienced the crisis in microcosm, in Revelation's visionary landscape it comes to its ultimate head.³
6. Revelation 11:3-6 is another text reverberating with the Hebrew Scriptures. Here, two witnesses of God, representing the community of faith, appear on earth during the end-time tribulation period. The text presents them using the symbolism of Zech 4, where two olive trees in the Jerusalem temple supply oil to the temple lampstand – an archetype of God's fiery presence and power. The olive trees are ideal human leaders, whom Zechariah envisions sharing in God's witness and outreach to humankind.⁴
7. The mention of the 'tree of life' takes us back to Gen 2:9. (cf. Gen 3:22, 24 and Eze 31:8).⁵
8. Revelation's image of an apocalyptic Antichrist figure also derives from Hebrew Bible symbolism, particularly from Daniel. The "beast" of Revelation 13:1-10 resoundingly echoes Dan 7's description of the arrogant "little horn" of the end times. Both figures arise out of the sea, the waters of cosmic chaos (Rev 13:1; Dan 7:2-3). Like Daniel's little horn, Revelation's beast makes blasphemous boasts

¹ Jenkins, 44, 45.

² Ibid., 45.

³ Cook, 196.

⁴ Cook, 197.

⁵ Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 37.

(Rev 13:1, 5, 6; Dan 7:8, 11, 20, 25; cf. 11:36) and has a reign so tyrannous that God limits it to a symbolic three and a half years (Rev 13:5; Dan 7:25; cf. 12:7).¹

9. Strand compares the vision of the “Ancient of days” in Daniel 7 with the vision of Christ in Revelation 1; the four beasts of Daniel 7 with the characteristics of the first beast of Revelation 13; the judgment scene of Daniel 7 with that of Revelation 20; the four living creatures and cherubim of Ezekiel 1 and 10 with the four living creatures of Revelation 4; the “four sore punishments” of Ezekiel 14 with the mission of the fourth horseman in Revelation 6; the work of marking people in Ezekiel 9 with the sealing work of Revelation 7; the horses and chariots of Zechariah 1 and 6 with the horsemen of Revelation 6; and the doom of Babylon and call out of Babylon in Revelation 17, 18, and 14:8.²
10. The seven fold nature of the Spirit as presented in Rev 4:5 and 5:6 has its root in Zechariah 4. There is also connection between Rev 11:4 and Zechariah 4.³

Reasons for Allusions

Jenkins⁴ develops three reasons for OT allusions. They are:

1. The periods of the most active miraculous activity of the Old Testament teach lessons similar to those taught in Revelation.
2. The book of Revelation shares in the images and terms common to apocalyptic literature, and to literature written under similar circumstances.
3. The terminology for the visions in revelation is often drawn from similar Old Testament visions.

Significance of the Use of Allusion in Revelation

The following purposes are suggested for John’s use of Old Testament:

1. The better way for John to describe his visions is to employ the language used by the OT prophets to describe similar visions.⁵
2. Apocalyptic writing demands certain figures to express its meaning. That is, to get across the meaning symbolically, symbols whose meaning was already understood were used. They may be given new meaning and application but anyone acquainted with understand their new usage.⁶
3. The symbols and images of the Old Testament simply flowed into John’s writing with ease because they fit the circumstances about which he wrote.⁷

¹ Cook, 197.

² Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Naples, Florida: Ann Arbor Publishers, 1979), 26.

³ Cullen Tanner, “Climbing the Lampstand-Witness-Trees: Revelation’s Use of Zechariah 4 in Light of Speech Act Theory,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20, no. 1 (2011): 82, doi:10.1163/174552511X554591.

⁴ Jenkins, 52.

⁵Beale, 96.

⁶Jenkins, 28.

⁷Jenkins, 28.

4. The NT writers were concerned even with the human intention of OT prophets in their immediate historical situation, since they would have believed that God inspired them to speak to Israel for a particular purpose which was important to understand also for the distant future.¹

Summary

From this study, it is evident that there is no direct quotation from the Old Testament in the book of Revelation. It is apparent that John alludes to the OT in about two-thirds of the 404 verses in Revelation.²

This study reveals that the OT provides the major source for the language and imagery of the book of Revelation, especially the Major Prophets. John seems to have been steeped in the language and thought forms of the OT so that he always used them, whether intentionally or unintentionally, with a freedom and naturalness that makes the work distinctively his own.³

Since John never uses citations or direct quotations, his use of sources is limited to either allusions or echoes.⁴

It is observed that Old Testament is the major key to unlock the symbols in the book of Revelation.

Conclusion

Although, John claims to be recording what he has seen and heard while “in the spirit,” his diction to describe these visionary experiences seems to be indebted to previous prophetic and apocalyptic works.

Thus, to have an adequate and proper understanding of revelation, one needs to be acquainted with the Old Testament contexts of his allusions.

¹ Gregory K Beale, “A Response to Jon Paulien on the Use of the Old Testament in Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 39, no. 1 (2001): 29.

² Martin Rist, “The Use of the Old Testament by the Author of Revelation,” *Iiff Review* 17, no. 2 (1960): 3.

³ Edwin Earl Reynolds, “The Sodom/Egypt/Babylon Motif” (PhD dissertation, Andrews University, 1994), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

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