

Discuss the nature and the function of the Hebrew scriptures in the Book of Revelation

Introduction

The function and extent of the use of the Hebrew scriptures in Revelation has been a matter of great debate amongst scholars. One of the most obvious observations is that there is very little *direct* quotation from the OT but that there is a large dependency on Hebrew motifs within the book. Achtemeier et al summarise this thus:

“In light of its frequent and subtle use of and dependence on the Old Testament, Revelation’s lack of direct quotations stands out all the more...the primary method by which Revelation is correlated with the Old Testament is...creative reworking of prophecy’s imagery of judgement and salvation and the application of that imagery to the situation of John and his rulers.”¹

This is, of course, a sweeping and general statement and highlights many aspects of Revelation. One of these is the general literary form of Revelation which is more complex than may at first be apparent. Revelation has the overall form of a classical Greek letter with a big sandwich of the Jewish apocalyptic genre and mini-wafers of the tradition of the prophets of Israel. This essay will examine these differing strands and assert that Revelation presents a coherent theology representing both a development of Old Testament understandings and at the same time compatible and developmental with the theologies of the New Testament.

¹ Achtemeier, P.J., Green, J.B., Thompson, M.M., *Introducing the New Testament – Its Literature and Theology*, Michigan: 2001, p501.

Examining the Book of Revelation

The diverse literary forms within Revelation have meant that particular scholars have applied their preferred overlay to Revelation to try and find an order within the literary narrative. Beale described these as school of interpretation and reviewed what he considered to be representative members of those schools. There is a school that rejects a single authorship or that it represents a coherent narrative. However, there are sophisticated literary devices used within Revelation that has moved it from the lunatic fringe of Judaism to part of a mainstream tradition. The symbolism and use of number and gramatria is consistent throughout the book and although it is written in Greek, it uses a Hebrew idiom written in Greek throughout the book that strongly points to a single authorship. Beale describe these as 'grammatical solecisms'² that underline that understanding of the Semitic context is essential for interpretation. John's solecisms are not because of incompetence with Greek. Bauckham demonstrates how John uses the present participle of the verb 'to come' as opposed to the expected future of 'to be' so that the readers are reminded of the "Coming of the Lord" motifs throughout the prophets³.

The anomalies in the form, 'it lacks one of the chief marks of the apocalypses...and ends with a series of admonitions and the Grace...'⁴, can be seen as the skilful use by John of his own apostolic credentials to present

² Beale, G.K., "Revelation", *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988.

³ Bauckham, R., *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: 1993, p29.

⁴ Sweet, J., "Revelation", *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988, pp160-171.

a profoundly Judaistic message but in a language that is applicable to the Gentile Christians. Beckwith underlines the literary quality of the text, ‘...his style is usually clear, often powerful, sometimes polemical.’⁵ He asserts that his foray into the truly prophetic from the veiled interpretation of 1st century history fails⁶. He thus considers it to be a historical text.

Sweet prefers to view the book as lying strongly within the tradition of the Prophets:

“...John is the heir of the biblical prophets whose vocabulary of judgement and disaster, on which he draws, is directed not against the nations but against Israel itself and its leaders...with a message of encouragement and hope for the faithful remnant.”⁷

This tradition is vivid and uncompromising. The frequent use of battle language, frequent allusions to the Jewish Messiah, violent images of a blood-soaked God of wrath are uncomfortable to many a modern scholar. Sweet writing in a previous commentary expresses this discomfort, ‘Revelation reflects the ambivalence [to violence] which runs through scripture from the beginning.’⁸ Even more uncomfortable from a process theologian’s viewpoint is the use of the Greek words δεσποτης (Rev 6:10) and παρακρατος when referring to God. These are words of absolute rulership and dominion. They express the sovereignty of God over the whole of Creation and that it is His Will that is directing and ultimately manifested in the course of history. Court makes this point emphatically:

⁵ Beckwith, I.T., *The Apocalypse of John – Studies in Introduction with a critical and exegetical commentary*, Michigan:1967, pp16-17.

⁶ Beckwith, op.cit., p18.

⁷ Sweet, J., “Revelation”, *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988, pp160-171.

⁸ Sweet, J., *Revelation*, London, 1979, p169.

“Much as the prophetic tradition modernised itself, so the Revelation of John through the apocalyptic provides a prophetic lens to retrospectively view the scriptural foundation of the Hebrew scriptures. Although the nature is sometime interpretative and differing in significant details, the function remains the same – to focus the reader on the sovereignty, majesty and greatness of One who will see heaven come to earth”⁹

It is these basic theologians assertions within the book that lie at the root of the arguments about the confusion between form and function. Bauckham¹⁰ cites a clear understanding of the historical and cultural context as fundamental to the interpretation of Revelation. This of course assumes that it is possible to understand the culture and context. There was a struggle to accept Revelation into the canon primarily because of the apocalyptic genre that was once considered a fringe aspect of Judaism and as G.K. Chesterton was once known to observe that Revelation is more famous for its crazy interpreters than what John actually said. Sweet reflects this concern:

“...when Revelation came to be regarded as scripture, it was studied as a mine of literal information about the heavenly world and future events, which it was never meant to convey...”¹¹

Of course, this reflects a specific hermeneutical viewpoint challenged by Price that asserts that fulfilled prophetic scripture has always had a literal interpretation and so it is reasonable to assert that future unfulfilled scripture will have a literal interpretation with the qualification of the culture, figures of speech and idiom¹². Price asserts that the interpretation of Revelation will always be subject to the fundamental hermeneutical and theological viewpoint

⁹ Court, J.M., “How Jewish is the Theology of Revelation?”, *Revelation*, Sheffield, 1994, pp119-120.

¹⁰ Bauckham, R., *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: 1993, Preface.

¹¹ Sweet, 1979, p13.

¹² Price, R., *Prophecy*, Special Tape Series, Chichester Christian Fellowship: 1979.

of the interpreter in a much more focussed manner than non-prophetic books. Approaches to prophetic interpretation can be broadly grouped as premillennialism, amillennialism and post-millennialism. It is interesting that the latter two would greatly down play the significance of the Hebrew scriptures, preferring a replacement theology that applies a crude Christian overlay to those scriptures.

However, It would be fair to respond that the genre of Revelation is mixed and some of the imagery would be difficult to be literally interpreted. It is a particularly Western interpretation to visualise the imagery. Thus, Sweet again urges caution when interpreting the visual pictures created by the language as an allegorical overlay:

“Hebrew imagery appealed to the ear rather than to the eye...geography likewise is symbolical..”¹³

Another challenge to the literary integrity is cited in reviews by Beale¹⁴. He argues that previous interpreters such as the school represented by Vos had asserted that John was using the Hebrew scripture ‘disregarding the Old Testament context’. He does not accept this assertion preferring rather that John was using the underlying spiritual meaning, employing ‘structural and theatric outlines’¹⁵. The original context was important but a new Christian-Judaistic import was added to the previously Judaism-only context. This again testifies to the complex literary structure of the book:

“Old Testament patterns...used as forms through which future...eschatological fulfilment is understood and predicted...and

¹³ Sweet, 1979, pp14-15.

¹⁴ Beale, G.K., “Revelation”, *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988.

¹⁵ Beale, op. cit., p323.

[second] as a lens through which past and present eschatological fulfilment is understood...it is not always clear whether or not these Old Testament prototypes are the means or the object of interpretation and perhaps there is an oscillation between the two..."¹⁶

Beale makes the case that Revelation is the 'universalisation of the Old Testament' where 'every tribe and nation'¹⁷ are imported into the original context. Thus, this in no way invalidates the original scriptural context but rather completes the picture. This is consistent with the methods of other New Testament authors such as Paul that frequently made allusions to motifs of the Old Testament and enhanced the meaning with the new covenant interpretation. In his remonstrations with the Galatians, Paul applied a deep theological meaning to the mountains of Israel that is every bit as obscure as anything found in Revelation.

Likewise, Court is one of many scholars to note the rich theology of Revelation. It is said to represent the most Trinitarian book in the New Testament where Yahweh, the God of Israel is clearly identified with the Risen Christ¹⁸. Bauckham illustrates this by reference to the 7 "I AMs" within the text. These are explicit references to 'I AM', the self-existent One that revealed Himself to Moses:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega (1:8)."

"I am the First and the Last (1:17)."

"I am the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega (21:16)."

"I am the Alpha and the Omega (22:13)."

¹⁶ Beale, op.cit., p323.

¹⁷ Beale, 1988, p327.

¹⁸ Court, 1994, p109.

There are three further variations of 'I AM' giving a total of 7. These are not just significant because the Risen Jesus is appropriating the divine title to Himself but that there are 7 repetitions also, 'the number is not likely to be accidental...seven is the number of completion.'¹⁹ Each form of the 'I Am' is drawn from a different portion of scripture. The 'first and the last' is a form drawn from Isaiah (44:6; 48:12) where the prophetic flavour was beginning to change. The prophets were speaking not just as prophets to Israel but were addressing all nations. This motif of Sacrifice, Judge and Redeemer for all nations first seen in Deutero-Isaiah²⁰ reaches its climax in Revelation:

"The designation encapsulates the understanding of the God of Israel as sole creator of all things and sovereign Lord of history...This God...is the One to whom all nations are subject..."²¹

The picture of the God presented here is not the immoral God of the classical Greek pantheon or the modern neutered one of Process Theology but of the παρακρατος. The import of this Greek word is the One who has all power and is directing the flow of history. Pannenburg thus speaks of the work of Christ as 'eternity breaking into the present'²². God is already present in eternity and some of the scenes witnessed within Revelation are of the final eschatological hope that is already being celebrated in eternity, '...God precedes all things, as their Creator, and He will bring all things to their eschatological fulfilment. He is the origin and goal of history.'²³

¹⁹ Bauckham, 1993, pp26-27.

²⁰ Bauckham uses this term to reflect the disputed authorship of this section of Isaiah.

²¹ Bauckham, 1993, p27.

²² Pannenburg, W., *Jesus (God and Man)*, Cambridge:1968, pp44-45.

²³ Bauckham, 1993, p26.

The 'beginning and the end' is a designation that is also found in the Greek philosophical tradition²⁴ suggesting that John is mindful of his Gentile readership also. That Christ is also related in Hellenistic terms provides support to the view that John is 'morphing Jewish eschatology into Jewish Christian eschatology...for him the decisive eschatological event has already occurred: the new Passover Lamb has been slaughtered.'²⁵ An essential component of this Christian eschatology will need to be the new theology to show how the Hebrew Scriptures can be appropriated by the Gentiles. This is not a minor side-show of the book but fundamental to its form.

John is careful with his use of the Greek tenses of the verb 'to come'. He first uses the present participle 'coming' with the imperfect aspect but by 11:17 the future and continuous sense of 'coming' is lost and we have 'the One who is and was...the eschatological Coming of God is taking place. It is no longer future.'²⁶ Further complexity is demonstrated by Aúne where John is mixing the tenses in a formula that points to the Greek gods or the supreme God of philosophy²⁷. At many points he is connecting the Jews with the Gentiles and the Hellenistic with the Judaistic. This is perhaps seen most clearly in the prologue to his Gospel.

Conclusion

The Book of Revelation is most certainly not, as it was once commonly believed to be, a fringe work representing the ideology of apocalypticism. It is

²⁴ Bauckham, 1993, p27.

²⁵ Bauckham, 1993, p72.

²⁶ Bauckham, 1993, p29.

²⁷ Aúne, D.E., *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids: 1983, pp280-281.

most certainly an apocalyptic work but its saturation in the Hebrew scriptures very much places it in the mainstream of Judaism and Christian thought. Without this impregnation and sound use of the Hebrew scriptures there would be little to distinguish John from other apocalyptic works of a similar genre.

John is explicit and subtle in his use of Old Testament motifs such as the Exodus motif, the sacrificial motifs and the apocalyptic imagery of Daniel with a new developed and completed application. He is continually redirecting both the Jewish reader to their covenant and the Gentile world to see the wider salvation history. John presents the Hebrew vision of Yahweh-God and the Gentile *λογος* side by side and of one and the same when viewed through the Christian eschaton.

Word count: 2094

Bibliography

- Achteimer, P.J., Green, J.B., Thompson, M.M., *Introducing the New Testament – Its Literature and Theology*, Michigan: 2001.
- Aúne, D.E., *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids: 1983.
- Bauckham, R., *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: 1993.
- Beale, G.K., “Revelation”, *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988.
- Beckwith, I.T., *The Apocalypse of John – Studies in Introduction with a critical and exegetical commentary*, Michigan:1967.
- Court, J.M., “How Jewish is the Theology of Revelation?”, *Revelation*, Sheffield, 1994.
- Pannenburg, W., *Jesus (God and Man)*, Cambridge:1968.
- Price, R., *Prophecy*, Special Tape Series, Chichester Christian Fellowship: 1979.
- Sweet, J., *Revelation*, TPI New Testament Commentaries, London, 1990.
- Sweet, J., “Revelation”, *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture – Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindas*, Cambridge: 1988.