

Greco-Roman Symbolism in the Book of Revelation

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Introduction

The Book of Revelation has as is widely recognized makes many allusions to the Old Testament, but never quotes from it directly. Thus the UBS *Greek New Testament*, in its Index of Quotations, has no entry for Revelation quoting any Old Testament book, but its Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels has some 632 entries for Revelation.¹ My own experience of teaching Revelation for many years on the seminary level has convinced me that these allusions can be very useful in helping us think through what may be the meaning of various disputed passages.²

Some of these Old Testament allusions are simple references to a specific theme or passage. For instance, Rev 1:7, He is coming with the clouds is clearly a reference to Dan 7:13, A one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. Likewise the next phrase Every eye shall see him, even those who pierced him refers to Zech 12:10: They will look on me, the one they have pierced. On the other hand, the reference to A lamb, looking as if it had been slain (Rev 5:6) is a clear allusion to the theme of sacrifice found throughout the Old Testament.

Other allusions are more complex than these. Some allude to a combination of Old Testament passages. For instance, the several references to a (two-edged) sword coming from Jesus' mouth (Rev 1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21) seem to pick up both Isa 49:2, He made my mouth like a sharpened sword, and Isa 11:4: He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Other allusions are modifications of Old Testament pictures; for instance, the beast of Revelation 13 is a combination of the four beasts of Daniel 7. Still others seem to be new applications of Old Testament passages. For instance, the two olive trees of Zechariah 4 seem originally to refer to the high priest Jeshua and the governor Zerubbabel back in the 6th century BC, whereas the two olive trees of Rev 11:4 seem to point to figures still future when John received his vision.

Besides Old Testament allusions, commentators have regularly suggested that

Revelation also contains allusions to non-biblical materials. For instance, the above-mentioned *Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels*³ has some 32 entries for Revelation connecting with apocryphal and pseudepigraphal Jewish works.³ As interesting as it would be to explore these, that is not our subject here. Instead, we want to concern ourselves with Greco-Roman connections rather than extra-biblical Jewish ones.

A number of Greco-Roman allusions have been identified by William M. Ramsay in the letters to the seven churches, Revelation chapters two and three.⁴ Here numerous references are made to specific features of the cities in which these churches were located. For instance Sardis had never been taken by storm, but only by stealth at night, and Rev 3:3 says to the Christians at Sardis: *If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.*⁵ And the city of Laodicea was plagued with a water supply which provided only an unpleasant lukewarm water by the time it reached the city; Jesus (Rev 3:16) says to its church: *Because you are lukewarm I neither hot nor cold I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*⁶ In general, such allusions are not controversial.

Evangelicals have been more skeptical about alleged allusions to Greco-Roman paganism. This is no doubt partly due to our desire to be faithful to the biblical teaching against idolatry. And in addition, we are particularly skeptical when commentators give the impression that this material was borrowed by the author of Revelation in an attempt to invent a literary vision when he himself had seen no vision at all. Concern about this way of reading the book is certainly understandable.

Here, however, I wish to suggest another spin on this data, since there do appear to be examples of symbolism in Revelation which connect with the Greco-Roman world,⁵ and even with its paganism. This state of affairs can be understood without endorsing paganism or faking of visions if we will pay serious attention to the claims of the book itself. For Revelation does not claim to be John's composition, but rather God's revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon come to pass⁷ (Rev 1:1). If indeed we take the source of Revelation to be God, then he may perfectly well have chosen to communicate his message by using pictures that would be understandable to his Greco-Roman readers, most of whom had grown up in paganism. Let's see.

Symbols in Revelation with Little or No Old Testament Background

Let us begin in a very natural way. Given the large number of Old Testament allusions in Revelation, what pictures or symbols occur in the book which seem to have very little or no Old Testament background?

1. The white stone. Most would agree that one of these is the reference in Rev 2:17, where the one who overcomes is promised by Jesus, AI will give him a white stone with a new name written on it.@ What does that mean?

Both Keener and Charles note that juries sometimes gave their verdict by voting with colored stones, where a white stone stood for innocent and a black one for guilty.⁶ This is seen in Ovid=s *Metamorphoses* 15.41: AIt was the custom in ancient times to use white and black pebbles, the black for condemning prisoners and the white for freeing them from the charge.@ To a reader familiar with this custom (or with Ovid=s work), Jesus= promise would be seen as giving his followers acquittal at the last judgment.

Another possibility mentioned by both Charles and Keener is the custom of giving pebbles of various colors as admission tickets to public celebrations.⁷ This connection might then be understood to mean that Jesus is promising his followers admission to the festivities celebrating his return (in Jewish terms, the Messianic banquet).

Charles gives a number of other suggestions for the white stone, finally opting for an amulet engraved with a name.⁸ But none of these others seem as cogent as the two above B acquittal at the judgment or admission to the banquet. As for choosing between these two, both are very appropriate. Perhaps God has chosen a figure which can do double duty.

2. Deep secrets and mysteries. The reference in Rev 2:24 to the Adeep secrets@ of Satan and in 10:7 to the Amystery of God@ may be intended to bring to mind the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world, with the attraction produced by their secret rites and initiations. Everyone would have had some acquaintance with these.

3. The seven hills. The reference to the harlot seated on seven hills in Rev 17:9 would immediately suggest Rome to nearly any reader of John=s time, whether

Jewish or Gentile in background. This was a familiar expression in the classical writers, such as Horace, Virgil, Martial, Cicero, and Propertius.⁹ This picture would provide the reader with a hint that the harlot is not only (in some sense) Babylon B as she is explicitly named B but also Rome.

4. *Title on her forehead.* The harlot is pictured in Rev 17:5 as having a title on her forehead. This is not unique in Revelation, where the mark of the beast on the foreheads of his followers is the beast=s name (13:16-17), and God=s seal on the 144,000 is the name of the Lamb and the Father (14:1). Likewise in the Old Testament, the high priest had a gold plate on his forehead with God=s name on it (Ex 28:36-38), so this might be an Old Testament allusion. Yet it is noteworthy that the title on the harlot=s forehead is *her* name, and ARoman harlots wore a label with their names on their brows@¹⁰

Symbols with Old Testament Background But Unique Features

5. *Crowns to the overcomers.* In Rev 2:10 a Acrown of life@ is promised to the one who overcomes, and in 3:11 believers at Philadelphia are warned to hold on to what they have, Aso that no one will take your crown.@ Though crowns are mentioned frequently in the Old Testament, the figure here seems to be more that of crown as a reward, as was common for victors in both military victories and athletic events of the Greco-Roman world.¹¹

6. *The four horsemen.* The horses and riders which come forth as Christ opens the first four seals in Revelation six have a background in Zechariah chapter one (and to a lesser extent, in the chariots of chapter six). Yet the figures riding the horses and the color of the horses seem to be allegorical in a way they are not in Zechariah. This fits well with the Greco-Roman penchant for allegorical figures, which is seen in their artwork and especially their coinage.¹² Thus, whatever the first rider may represent, the second is surely War, the third Famine, and the fourth Death. My own guess is that the first rider is Conquest rather than Christ, as some would think, or the Antichrist, as others have suggested.

7. *The seven-sealed scroll.* In Revelation chapter five, the Lamb receives a scroll from the One seated upon the throne, a scroll sealed with seven seals, which only the Lamb is worthy to open. Though sealed documents were a standard practice in the ancient near east to protect legal transactions from fraud, and though both Dan 12:9 and Isa 29:11 refer to sealed documents, the reference to *seven* seals has no

Old Testament background. Roman wills were typically sealed with seven seals, and so were some other legal documents.¹³ One might suggest this picture conveys the idea that Jesus (having died) is opening his own will. Or perhaps the scroll is the title deed to earth, lost when Adam fell into rebellion, but won back by Jesus who conquered through his death.

8. *He who is, and was, and is to come.* This triple characterization of God (Rev 1:4, 8, 4:8, with a shorter double version in 11:17 and 16:5) clearly has roots in his self-revelation to Moses in Ex 3:14. Yet this triplet form is more elaborate than either the Hebrew there or its Greek translation. G. K. Beale notes that a similar threefold formula is found in pagan Greek literature as a title of the gods, which may have sparked John's appeal to the Jewish formulas as an apologetic.¹⁴

9. *The seven stars.* These stars in Jesus' hand (Rev 1:16, 20) are the seven angels associated with the seven churches, represented by the lampstands. The number seven is thus sufficiently explained by this correspondence. Yet some have felt there is an additional reference to some prominent group of seven stars in the sky B perhaps the Pleiades, or the Great Bear (Big Dipper), or the seven planets known to the ancients (Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn).¹⁵

Symbols Resembling Pagan Mythology

10. *The Woman, the Child and the Dragon.* This incident in chapter twelve has probably attracted the most attention as a suggested allusion to Greco-Roman pagan mythology. Though each item individually could be reproduced from Old Testament and Jewish sources, this is not true of the whole. The shape of the story is close to (1) the Egyptian myth of Isis begetting Horus, opposed by the red dragon Typhon, with Horus later killing the dragon; and (2) the Greek myth of Leto bearing Apollo, opposed by the dragon Python, and Apollo later killing Python.¹⁶ Charles' take on all this is that the chapter is full of mythological features which could not have been the original creations of a Jew or a Christian, but that international myths have been used and transformed to higher ends.¹⁷ Keener, from a more orthodox perspective, says the vision reapplies imagery that was widely known in ancient mythology.¹⁸ Keener also notes that Virgil and other Roman writers also extolled the birth of a divine boy who would bring deliverance to the world.¹⁹

What should we make of this? The proposal of C. S. Lewis, found in his books

Pilgrim=s Regress and *Till We Have Faces*, may be worth exploring.²⁰ He suggests that God has not left himself without witness among the pagans, and that B in addition to sending them rain, crops, food, and joy (Acts 14:17) B God has somehow implanted stories among the pagans, which (though distorted and corrupted by them), nevertheless continue to testify about God=s redemptive activity. This approach would also explain Jesus= remark in John 12 when Greeks arrive requesting an audience with him. We are not told whether they got it or not, but if Jesus= words in verses 23-24 were spoken to them, they would surely have thought of the dying and rising grain gods when he said Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.@

Charles, I think, is right when he says that this vision Acould not have been the original creation of a Jew or a Christian.@ Besides claiming that a Agoddess with child@ is quite foreign to Jewish thought, he notes that a Christian would not have left out any reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. But of course, we are not claiming that a Jew or Christian invented this vision, but that God did! In that case, God might be calling attention to a story which the pagans knew well, and which God approved of (in its original form), for he himself had put it there!

This, in fact, is what a number of evangelical missiologists have been exploring under the rubric Aredemptive analogies,@ the most famous work of this sort being Don Richardson=s book *Eternity in Their Hearts*.²¹ It is also one of the things which makes the AGospel in the Stars@ theory so attractive, though at the moment it does not appear that the details of the classical constellations go back to the patriarchal period.²²

Speaking of stars, Ernest L. Martin has suggested that the picture of the woman Aclothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet@ (Rev 12:1) provides an astronomical date for the birth of Jesus.²³ The woman he takes to be the constellation Virgo (the virgin), which being one of the twelve constellations of the Zodiac, is clothed with the sun for about one month each year. The moon makes a complete circuit of the heavens each month, and for one day is just below the virgin=s feet. For the year Martin believes is that of Jesus= birth (3 BC), that day would have been September 11. Martin may have something here, which I hope to explore in a paper at the ETS national meeting in November of 2000.

Following this suggestion, the dragon in the vision might be represented by one of the dragon or snake constellations in the sky, probably Draco, which encircles the north polar region above Virgo, or possibly Hydra, the water snake, which extends alongside Virgo to the south.

11. The harlot riding the beast. In Rev 17, John sees another vision B a woman who is identified as a harlot, as Babylon, and as seated upon seven hills. She is riding upon a beast that is clearly the beast of chapter 13 and which, as we noted above, is a combination of the four beasts of Daniel chapter 7.

The harlot figure has a significant Old Testament background along two lines. One of these is Israel as harlot, as seen, for example, in Isa 1:21; Jer 2:20; and Ezekiel 16. The other is the pagan city as harlot, referring to Tyre in Isa 23:17 and to Nineveh in Nah 3:4. The description of Babylon given in Revelation 18 seems to suggest that it is the latter of these two pictures which is being called up in Revelation.²⁴

The riding motif does not occur in the Old Testament, but is unique to Revelation. Commentators have often taken the fact that the woman is riding the beast to be an indication that she initially is in control of the beast, but that the beast later rebels and destroys the woman (Rev 17:16): *A*The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked...*@* Those of us (like myself) who have only ridden horses on rare occasions are not so inclined to feel sure the rider is in control!

However, if we look into the Greco-Roman background for an analogy to the woman riding the beast, we find a striking parallel in the Europa myth. According to Apollodorus and Ovid,²⁵ Zeus sees Europa, daughter of the Phoenician king, playing with friends at the seashore, and loves her. He disguises himself as a bull and eventually get Europa to climb on his back. He then heads out to sea and takes her to Crete, where he has children by her. Clearly in this case, the rider was not in control of the mount.

For believers seeking to correlate Revelation with current events, it is intriguing to note that the Europa symbol has recently been used to represent the European Union (formerly the Common Market). The British government issued a 16 pence stamp to commemorate the 2nd election



of the European Parliament which featured Europa riding the bull.²⁶ *TIME* magazine also used the Europa motif in three illustrations for an article about preparations for the European Community=s Maastricht Treaty.²⁷ Perhaps we are to read the harlot picture as alluding to Europe as well as Babylon and Rome.

Conclusions

Well. That was a quick tour of the book of Revelation, looking for possible items in which allusion is made to Greco-Roman symbols. We found a number of good candidates, more than ten by our count. The count would be higher if we subdivided the various elements involving the horsemen, mother, child, dragon, harlot and beast. Doubtless others could be found; I have in fact omitted some rather minor examples which I did not think would add anything to our discussion. I suspect a scholar versed in Greco-Roman antiquities could find more, and probably a real inhabitant of that ancient culture more yet.

What have we learned? It looks like most of the pictorial elements chosen to make the message of Revelation vivid to its original recipients were drawn from Scripture. This is not surprising since the recipients are professing Christians. Yet a significant number were drawn from the culture in which they lived, some even from pagan mythology.

It is true that Revelation does not tell us it is drawing on pictures from the culture, but then neither does it tell us that it is drawing on pictures from the Old Testament. As Ramsay has shown, some of the elements would only be obvious to a person who was familiar with the particular background involved. We of evangelical heritage are familiar with the biblical background. The inhabitants of the various cities of Asia would be familiar with their local background. And those who had lived all their lives in the Greco-Roman world would be familiar with the general cultural background.

Regarding the question of contextualizing the Gospel, I think this feature in the book of Revelation adds one more element to be included in any discussion of the matter. If we are right about these allusions to Greco-Roman culture, we see God doing something of this sort right here.

This material should also cause us to ponder the question, AWhat sort of presence did God maintain among the gentiles during those long centuries in which he more

or less confined his activity to Israel?@ While we must take the biblical statements about his Agiving them over@ to various sins (Romans 1) full weight, we should not use these statements to evaporate other biblical evidence that the matter is not quite black and white. In particular, the question of what sorts of special revelation may have continued outside Israel needs some further thought.

Reference Notes:

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3. Aland, *Greek NT*, pp 900-901.
4. William M. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963).
5. AJohn wrote in Greek and used Old Testament, Jewish, and sometimes Greco-Roman figures of speech and images.@ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), p 760.
6. Keener, p 771;. R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:66.
7. Keener, p 771; Charles, p 66.
8. Charles, pp 66-67.
9. Charles, 2:69; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p 870, gives references.
10. Charles, 2:65.
11. Charles, 1:58
12. Harold Mattingly, *Roman Coins* (London: Methuen, 1927), pp 67-71; Zander H. Klawans, *Reading and Dating Roman Imperial Coins* (Racine, WI: Whitman, 1953), pp 44-50.
13. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp 120-23.
14. Beale, p 188.
15. Charles, 1:30.

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16. Charles, 1:299ff; Keener, p 793ff; Isis and Horus: Didorus of Sicily 1.21.3; Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*; Leto (Latona) and Apollo: *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 10-140, 350-375; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.4.1. There seems to have been some confusion between these two women, see Herodotus 2.156.
17. Charles, 1:300, 299.
18. Keener, p 793.
19. Ibid, p 794.
20. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), pp 151-54; *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1956).
21. Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1981).
22. For the proposal, see E. W. Bullinger, *Witness of the Stars* (1893) and J. A. Seiss, *The Gospel in the Stars* (1891); for the problems, see Robert C. Newman, A3919 *kokab* in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 2:610.
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25. Apollodorus, *Library* 1:298-99; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 2:830-875.
26. *This Week in Bible Prophecy* (May 1993): 9.
27. Bruce W. Nelan, AWhich Way to Maastricht, Mijnheer?@ *TIME* (December 9, 1991): 38-41.