

SOME GREEK WORDS WITH HEBREW MEANINGS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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In two previous articles I examined closely the use of certain prepositions in the book of Revelation, and the conclusions were fairly clear: The Greek of Revelation is under significant Semitic influence, and this influence is far more than surface deep.¹

The present study takes this investigation one step further, for whereas my previous articles concentrated upon prepositions and prepositional phrases, the present essay opens up the whole question of Semitic influence upon the general vocabulary of the Apocalypse. This question is of potential importance, for if it can be shown that the author of Revelation sometimes had a Hebrew or Aramaic word in mind as he wrote a Greek one, exegetes and translators alike will need to take careful note, allowing in each case for the possibility of Semitic encroachment upon individual Greek words.

1. *A Survey of Recent Scholarship*

In recent years there have been two major studies on the Greek of Revelation: Steven W. Thompson's *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* (1985),² and G. Mussies' earlier lengthy work, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Revelation of St. John* (1971).³

¹K. G. C. Newport, "The Use of *Ek* in Revelation: Evidence of Semitic Influence," *AUSS* 24 (1986):223-230; and "Semitic Influence in Revelation: Further Evidence," *AUSS* 25 (1987):249-256. See also K. G. C. Newport, "Semitic Influence on Prepositions in Revelation: Some Examples," *BT* 37 (1986):328-334.

²Steven W. Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985). The book contains the main findings of Thompson's Ph.D. dissertation, completed at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, in 1976.

³G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John*. Supplement to *NovT* 27 (Leiden, 1971). For a summary see G. Mussies, "The Greek of the Book of Revelation," in J. Lambrecht, ed., *L'Apocalypse johannique et*

Neither of these works, however, deals extensively with matters of vocabulary. Thompson devotes one chapter to a study of "Greek verbs with Hebrew meanings," but this amounts to only just over five pages.⁴

Similarly, Matthew Black's essay, "Some Greek Words with 'Hebrew' Meanings in the Epistles and Apocalypse" (1976),⁵ is of great value, though it naturally enough leaves many stones unturned. Other more general works, such as Nigel Turner's *Christian Words*⁶ and David Hill's *Greek Words with Hebrew Meanings*,⁷ while being of good general use, have little to offer specifically on the vocabulary of Revelation.⁸

l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, vol. 53 (Louvain, 1980), pp. 167-177.

⁴Thompson draws attention to the following: (1) the use of *thaumadzein* to mean "to be appalled" at Rev 17:6, 7, and "be desolated" at Rev 13:3 and 17:8; (2) the use of *didonai* to reflect the Hebrew *nāḥan*, which results in the Greek verb taking on a far wider semantic range than is normal (see, e.g., Rev 2:23; 3:8, 9; 6:8; 7:2; 9:5; 17:7); (3) the use of *klēronomein* meaning "take possession" in Rev 21:1; (4) the use of *poimainein* to mean "push aside" or "shepherd away" at Rev 2:27 and 19:5; (5) *heuriskein* meaning "to be" rather than "to be found" at Rev 12:8 and 20:11; and (6) the use of *poiein* meaning "to yield" at Rev 22:2. In each of the above, Thompson demonstrates his case from the LXX.

⁵Matthew Black, "Some Greek Words with 'Hebrew' Meanings in the Epistles and Apocalypse," in J. R. McKay and J. F. Miller, eds., *Biblical Studies: Essays in Honour of William Barclay* (London, Eng., 1976), pp. 135-146. In addition to those pointed out also by Thompson, Black notes the following: (1) the use of *thanatos* meaning "lethal disease" at Rev 2:23, 6:8, and 18:8; (2) *prōtotokos* at Rev 1:5 possibly meaning "chief" or "sovereign"; (3) the use of *adikein* meaning "to withhold (fraudulently)" at Rev 6:6, and "to smite" at Rev 7:2, 3, and at 9:4, 10; and (4) the use of the expression *miq hōrā* meaning "in a flash," found, e.g., at Rev 18:10, 17. Like Thompson, Black cites the LXX in support of his cases.

⁶Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* (Edinburgh, 1980).

⁷David Hill, *Greek Words with Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge, Eng., 1967)—a study specifically of soteriological terms, as the subtitle suggests. Hill refers to Revelation only twice, and both occurrences are in footnotes.

⁸Other studies relating to the grammar in Revelation, though not specifically to the book's vocabulary, include G. C. Ozanne, "The Language of the Apocalypse," *Tyndale House Bulletin* 16 (1965):3-9 (also his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, "The Influence of the Text and Language of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation," Manchester University, 1964); and A. Lancellotti, *Sintassi Ebraica nel Greco dell' Apocalisse* (Assisi, 1964). Nigel Turner's *Grammatical Insights into the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1965), is also to be checked on individual words, as is R. H. Charles's old, but still very useful, commentary, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1920).

2. *Some Examples of Greek Words That Appear to Mask Semitic Concepts*

The present study seeks to build upon the earlier work surveyed above, either by giving further examples of Greek words found in the book of Revelation which appear to mask Semitic concepts or by calling attention to additional occurrences in Revelation of such words already noticed by the previous investigators.

Poiein

Thompson has noted the use of *poiein* meaning "to yield" in Rev 22:2, and in support of his case cites 4 Kgs 19:30 LXX, where the Greek verb certainly has this meaning.⁹ The idiom *poiein karpon* is found, as well, in the Gospel of Matthew, where similar Semitic influence seems likely.¹⁰

However, Semitic influence may also be responsible for the use of *poiein* meaning "to appoint" at Rev 1:6, 3:12, and 5:10. In these instances the Greek again seems dependent upon the Hebrew *ʿāsâ*, which has this meaning.¹¹ We might note, for example, 1 Kgs 12:31, which reads in the RSV, "He also made houses on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites." The LXX employs *poiein* here, as it does for 1 Kgs 12:6, where the meaning is similarly "appoint."

This meaning for *poiein* is not common in Classical Greek, however, as is perhaps reflected in the fact that Liddell and Scott give only 1 Kgs 12:6 LXX and Mark 3:14 as examples.¹² In the light of this probable Semitic influence in Revelation, the verb *poiein* in Rev 1:6, 3:12, and 5:10 may have a slightly more technical sense than translators have generally allowed.

A further example of Semitic encroachment upon the Greek verb *poiein* is found in Rev 13:5. The RSV translates this verse, "And the beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for

⁹Thompson, p. 17.

¹⁰On such usage of the verb *ʿāsâ*, see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907), p. 794 (hereinafter BDB).

¹¹Ibid.; and see also William Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (London, Eng., 1881), pp. DCLII-III.

¹²H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1861), p. 1428.

forty-two months." But this translation masks a difficulty, for the Greek reads, "... *kai edothē autō eksousia poiēsai mēnas tessera-konta [kai] duo*." The translators of the RSV have taken *eksousia* as the direct object of *poiēsai* rather than of *edothē*.

This, however, is hardly the most obvious way of reading the verse, which might perhaps be literally rendered as "And was given to him . . . authority 'to do' forty-two months." But once again, recourse to the Semitic languages seems to provide a solution: The Hebrew *ʿāsâ*, of which *poiein* is the obvious Greek equivalent, can mean "to spend time," as in Ruth 2:19 and Eccl 6:12 (the latter of which reads, "For who knows what is good for a man 'while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow' [Hebrew, "... *wēyaʿśēm kaššēl*"; LXX, "*epoiēsen autas*"]). Further evidence is found in 1 Kgs 20:40 LXX, Job 23:9 LXX, and Acts 15:33.¹³

Onoma

Another example of Semitic influence upon the vocabulary of Revelation is found in the use of *onoma*. In Rev 3:4, for example, the Greek word clearly means "individuals," but this is hardly explicable on the basis of normal Greek usage. Indeed, Liddell and Scott point out specifically that "*onoma*" means "a name and nothing else"—that is, in opposition "to the real person or thing."¹⁴

The Hebrew/Aramaic word *šēm*, however, does have the meaning of "individual." Hans Bietenhard thinks this meaning is still "contested,"¹⁵ but Num 26:53 seems to provide reasonably clear evidence. That verse reads, "To these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names (Heb., *bēmispar šēmôt*; LXX, *eks arithmou onomatōn*)." To this example we might add Num 1:2, 17, 20; 26:55; 1 Chr 23:24; and Acts 1:5. Thus, the use of *onoma* in Rev 3:4 seems explicable in terms of Semitic usage of *šēm*.

One further use needs to be noted. In Rev 11:13 we read, "And at that hour there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people [*onomata anthrōpōn*] were killed in the

¹³See further BDB, p. 795; Gesenius, p. DCLVII.

¹⁴Liddell and Scott, p. 1232.

¹⁵Hans Bietenhard, "*Onoma*," *TDNT* 5:252.

earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to God." Once again it seems that *onoma* has been used in the sense of individuals.

Onoma is also used in Rev 3:1 in the sense of "fame" or "reputation." Such usage is found in classical literature,¹⁶ and we cannot therefore pin down the idiom as an undisputed Semitism; but the fact that this usage is also common for the Hebrew *šēm* (e.g., Gen 6:5; 12:4 2 Sam 8:13) makes it quite probable that its use in Revelation is dependent upon Hebrew rather than upon Classical-Greek idiom.¹⁷

Skēnē

In Rev 21:3 we read, "And I heard a great voice from the throne saying, 'Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will dwell with them'" (RSV). The word "dwelling" here translates the Greek *skēnē*, the literal translation of which would be "tent."

Skēnē, however, appears in the LXX with a somewhat more specialized meaning, for it is frequently used to translate the Hebrew word *miškān*, an expression used almost exclusively for the dwelling place of God (for examples, see Exod 25:8 [9]; 26:6, 7, 12; Num 1:1, 50; 1 Chr 6:48). The Hebrew word is built upon the root *škn*, of which there are many derivatives, including *š'kinā*, that is, "the presence of God." It is perhaps not purely coincidental that the Greek word *skēnē* used in the LXX and also here in Revelation has the same three consonants.

The possibility arises, therefore, that the use of *skēnē* in Rev 21:3 may be under the influence of the Hebrew concept of the *miškān* of God. R. H. Charles thinks that this is the case, though he denies absolutely that *skēnē* refers to the literal dwelling place of God.¹⁸ Rather, Charles suggests that the *skēnē* here refers to the presence of God, that is, his *shekinah*.¹⁹

Charles's suggestion is certainly not without foundation. As pointed out above, *skēnē* and the Hebrew root *škn* have clear links

¹⁶Liddell and Scott, p. 1232.

¹⁷See further BDB, pp. 1027-1028; Gesenius, p. DCCCXXXII.

¹⁸Charles, 2:206.

¹⁹Ibid.

in the LXX; and Charles notes also Targum Jonathan on Lev 26:11, where such an extension of the word *miškān* is evident.²⁰ The Aramaic here has *šekināt*, which is to be translated "presence" rather than "tabernacle," and this seems to be the meaning of the word in Rev 21:3 also. That the verse should not be understood as referring to a literal "tabernacle" in which God will dwell is strongly suggested by Rev 21:22, where it is specifically stated that there will be no temple (*naos*) in the city. It is more probable, then, that *skēnē* in Rev 21:3 means "presence."

Almost all translations have overlooked this probability. The NIV has "... the dwelling of God is with men," and the NEB translates *skēnē autou* as "his dwelling." Other translations do much the same, with the exception of the NJB, which comes closest to the most probable meaning of the verse with "... here God lives among human beings" (*Bible de Jerusalem*: "Il aura sa demeure avec eux"). Similarly, many commentators, while hinting at the *šekinâ/miškān/skēnē* overlap, fall short in their comments by not giving details from the Hebrew OT and the LXX.

Pempein, Plēgē, Kruptein

Further Semitic evidence is detectable also at Rev 14:15. Here the RSV translates, "And another angel came out of the temple, calling . . . 'put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come. . . .'" The imperative "put" here translates the Greek verb *pempson*, which is normally rendered "send." In Hebrew, however, the verb *šālah*, which also means "send," can appear with an extended meaning together with the noun "sickle," as in Joel 3 (4):13 (LXX, *eksaposteilate drepana*); and, more generally, it often has the meaning of "to stretch out."²¹ This is most probably the explanation of the otherwise unusual Greek of Rev 14:15.

So, too, we might note the use of *plēgē* at Rev 13:14. The sense here clearly requires the word to be translated as "wound," which comes close to the classical meaning of "blow" or "strike."²² A more precise parallel, however, is found in Hebrew, where the word *makkâ* regularly means "wound,"²³ a meaning which has

²⁰Ibid.

²¹BDB, pp. 1018-1019.

²²Liddell and Scott, p. 1417.

²³BDB, pp. 646-647.

been carried over into the LXX with the word *plēgē* (LXX, 3 (Eng. 1) Kgs 22:35; 4 (Eng. 2) Kgs 8:29 and 9:15).

Finally, we might notice Rev 2:17, which speaks of "hidden" manna. "To hide" is the normal translation of the Greek verb *kruptein*, and the translators of the NEB, RSV, NIV, and KJV are therefore justified in their translation. But, as we have shown, the Greek of Revelation cannot be classed as "normal." In the context of the passage and in the light of the possible Semitic influence, the verb might better be translated "stored up." To support this view we may note that the Hebrew verb *šāpan* ("to treasure" or "to store up"),²⁴ is several times translated using *kruptein* in the LXX (Prov 1:11, 2:1, 7:1, 10:14; Job 23:12).

3. Conclusion

The several examples of "Greek words with Hebrew meanings" given above, together with those noted already by Thompson and Black, provide a fairly clear indication that the author was influenced by Semitic vocabulary in his selection of certain Greek words. Like the usage in the case of prepositions and prepositional phrases dealt with in my earlier articles, this further evidence should impress upon the exegete and translator alike a need for caution. Indeed, NT scholars may find Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons of great value as they work with the Greek text of the Apocalypse.

²⁴BDB, p. 860.