

Revelation: Christian Epilogue to the Jewish Scriptures

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Abstract

This article advances the idea that one of John's motives for writing Revelation was to offer a closure for the Hebrew Scriptures, a Christian epilogue developed in light of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness. John provides in Revelation an integration of the Jewish Scriptures with the new revelation in Christ—Scriptures with many points left in suspension but brought to a finality through theological reflection on the life and work of Jesus.

I can think of no better way to begin a paper on Revelation than letting two quotes, quite at odds with one another, set the stage for the considerations to follow. At one end of the spectrum one finds Herder's accolade:

Where a book, through thousands of years, stirs up the hearts and awakens the soul, and leaves neither friend or foe indifferent, and scarcely has a lukewarm friend or enemy, in such a book there must be something substantial, whatever anyone may say.¹

At the other end, stands Luther's:

They are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. This is just the same as if we did not have the book at all.²

No pair of classical quotations about the book of Revelation—which are found in astonishing abundance—can more suitably capture the ambivalence experienced by the readers as they draw near to this unique

¹ Johann Gottfried Herder, quoted in Carl Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 535.

² Martin Luther, Preface to the Revelation of St. John, in *Luther's Works*, 35: 398-99.

yet unusual book. For this is the kind of book we have in John's Revelation, a writing in the biblical canon which remained among the few books untouched by Calvin in his series of biblical commentaries, while at the same time, it is also a writing that has been over-explored by Tim La Haye and Jerry Jenkins who authored the "Left Behind" series of theological fiction which sold millions of copies.³

My exposure to the book of Revelation has gone through the same extremes. For the first 15 years of New Testament studies, the book remained in the shadows, seen more as an exegetical plague from which I had to protect myself, rather than a fascinating text which summons me to deeper study. Moreover, the fact that after every major international event in recent times one would find a new round of commentaries and analyses, explanations and interpretations of world events in light of Revelation did not help much to correct my almost visceral reluctance to draw near to this book. Who would want, I asked myself, to become yet another voice to succumb to the temptation to "break the code" of Revelation once and for all? The more books in this category I read the more I realize that the source of error is not in the ideas of the Revelation itself, nor in the complexities of the contemporary events, but rather in the fact that more often than not Revelation ends up by being interpreted in the light of the current events and not the other way around, as, all would agree, the author intended.

Recently I saw an ad for the liquidation of books that had been difficult to sell; the book in question, which will have to remain unnamed, was selling like hot cakes during the first Iraq war in 1990 and now was being sold for less than two dollars for a dozen. This is the outcome waiting for any author who forgets that Revelation is not a tame lamb being led to slaughter but rather a roaring lion around whom it is wise to be careful.

Despite these reservations, I well remember the impact of a radio broadcast of Revelation when I was just 10 years old. The distinctive world of sounds and images in this book is still as vivid, albeit as unsettling, now as it was 30 years ago. A book whose first encounter leaves such a powerful mark on one's soul cannot be set aside or ignored indefinitely and for that reason I decided that the time had come to try and engage it first hand. I chose my preferred study method which consists of memorization of the biblical text, followed by a focused analysis of its message from the vantage point of the author and the

³ In case I might sound uncharitable about LaHaye and Jenkins, I only want to remind the reader that in their books the Antichrist, Nicolae, comes from Romania, my native country.

original audience.⁴ The resulting fascination was limitless. I found in Revelation a book of the Scriptures which is not easily befriended, but once that friendship is won, it remains a lifelong source of inspiration, encouragement, and faith.

My only regret for the format of this study is that the ink and paper have to replace my favorite way of presenting the book, which consists of a dramatic presentation of the book, a definitely more memorable and uplifting event than the reading of this article. In fact, I am ever more convinced that precisely this is the best method with which to engage Revelation, as the author himself affirms in the opening lines, “blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near” (Rev. 1:3, TNIV). Perhaps more than any other biblical book Revelation best lends itself to being read out loud before the church in order to create the maximum impact for its hearers, regardless of how familiar or not they might be with its message.

Before discussing the proposed topic, a minimum of hermeneutical considerations, which I found particularly necessary in the study of Revelation, is in order. I refer, of course, to the importance of the hermeneutical triad in exploring the book: its literary dimension—an apocalyptic-prophetic epistle, its historical dimension—a book addressing foremost the needs and concerns of its original readers, and its theological dimension—the theological beliefs and perspective of its author. I am convinced that no other book imposes on the exegete a more stringent need to follow the balancing act of the components of this triad than the book of Revelation. To read Revelation, taking in consideration in equal measure its literary dimension (a book written in an apocalyptic genre, a genre which knew unprecedented growth in the latter part of the Second Temple period), together with its historical dimension (which includes consideration for the concrete historical situation of the author and of his original audience) and, last but not least, its theological perspective that shaped the prophetic vision revealed to him, it is not only the desired goal but also the necessary route in case of Revelation. If an imbalance among these three dimensions leads to hermeneutical distortions in other canonical books, certainly when we explore Revelation this imbalance leads to disastrous results. Not without reason,

⁴ For a detailed presentation of my personal approach to Scripture memorization, see Radu Gheorghită, “*Ad Fontes Purissimi*: Is There a Place for Scripture Memorization in Biblical Studies?” *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 3.1 (2004): 69-95.

did G. B. Caird, one of my favorite commentators on the book, characterize Revelation as “the paradise of fanatics and sectarians.”⁵

What then is my conclusion about Revelation at this point in time? The thesis which I intend to present in this paper is relatively simple to state and even to understand but unfortunately extremely difficult to prove and for that reason perhaps not so easily convincing. In a nutshell the thesis advances the idea that one of John’s motives for writing Revelation was to offer a closure for the Hebrew Scriptures, a Christian epilogue developed in light of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the faithful and true witness.

Let me further clarify two aspects of the thesis. On the one hand the Jewish Scriptures include many ideas that unfolded in history but were not quite brought to finality: unfulfilled prophecies, promises yet awaiting their fulfillment, and a multitude of questions without final answers, which all awaited to be pondered and explored by future generations. For example the author of Hebrews is one such theologian, who explores in his epistle several passages in the OT that express an insufficiency and lack of finality, captured so well by Caird’s famous phrase “self-confessed inadequacy of the Old Order.”⁶ Speaking about the way the author of Hebrews explores Ps. 8, 95, 110, and Jer. 31, he comments:

by these four arguments the epistle seeks to establish its main thesis, that the Old Testament is not only an incomplete book but an *avowedly* incomplete book which taught and teaches men to live by faith in the good things that were to come.⁷

It is quite obvious to the careful reader of the New Testament that all its authors, behind whom arguably stands the towering figure of Jesus himself,⁸ seek to provide in their own way that closure. The Jewish Scripture, in the form in which it was handed down to them, closes with the promise of the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, of the temple and of the messianic era. But the people just returned from exile continued to find themselves for centuries on end in a series of most dreadful historical, religious and national crises. As N. T. Wright proposes, a return from exile to a country in which you continue to find yourself

⁵ George B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1984), 2.

⁶ George B. Caird, “The Exegetical Method of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 5 (1959): 47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49; emphasis mine.

⁸ Nowhere is this assertion argued more succinctly, yet profoundly than in the classical study of C. H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952).

under a foreign power is nothing but a virtual continuation of the exile.⁹ The last chapter of the Scripture, so to speak, had yet to be written.

On the other hand one finds another undeniable reality, the life of a Jewish young man who claims that He is the way, the truth, and the life, that no one can come or can know the Father except through Him. In his teaching and ministry lies the definitive fulfillment of the Scripture: the law, the prophets and the writings, all three components of the Hebrew canon. In and through this Jesus of Nazareth God commits himself to accomplishing an unrivaled work not only in his people the Jews but in all of humanity, a radical and definitive intersection of God with the history and destiny of mankind for which only the label “new creation” does sufficient justice.¹⁰

Here then are two realities which were offered to the first Christian theologians—realities which solicit and necessitate an integrated perspective. The thesis which I propose in this work is that John offers in Revelation a book that accomplishes precisely this integration of Jewish Scriptures with the new revelation in Christ—Scriptures with many points left in suspension but brought to a finality through John’s theological reflection on the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Certainly the first question raised when we probe this thesis is that of method, and how exactly one can investigate a proposal such as this. The methodological parameters must be clearly established in order to avoid a speculative gallop on one of the four horses riding through the book.

We must answer that which would most certainly be the first objection raised when tracing the authorial intent not only in this book but also in any other book of the Bible. The quest for that unique intent which led to the genesis of any particular writing is often a chimera, due, in part, to the fact that the process by which an author’s intent and motivation is to be discerned is a very complex process indeed.¹¹ These are difficult to determine even for those canonical books which explicitly mention them, such as John 20 and Rom. 15. However, anyone reading the gospel of John or the epistle to the Romans immediately realizes that

⁹ This, of course, is the overriding argument in many of N. T. Wright’s books; see, *inter alia*, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 2* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

¹⁰ See also the ample way in which N. T. Wright develops the theme of “new creation” in connection with the resurrection of Jesus, N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

¹¹ For example, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), or any textbook on hermeneutics that takes to task the author-centered school of interpretation of the Bible.

in parallel with the author's intent explicitly mentioned, there may well be other important reasons which emerge only after a careful reading of the book. I would not therefore wish to claim that the reason stated in my proposal would be the sole or even the most important motivation behind John's writing of Revelation; a careful evaluation of the textual observations, however, leads to the plausibility of the thesis.

There are complementary reasons which led to the genesis of the book, foremost among them being the act of revelation which John encountered, the experience of the prophetic vision. This is not the place to scrutinize the revelatory process, by questioning whether the revelation received by John was in fact a concrete experience or rather a literary device chosen by John to communicate a special message to the seven churches.¹² In light of the strong tradition of prophetic revelatory phenomena in the Jewish Scriptures, it seems wiser to take John's testimony at face value and not question the veracity of his other-worldly encounter. If that is the case, we must start from what seems to be a most straight-forward reason that explains why John wrote: when the risen Christ issues the command: "write what you see and send it to the seven churches," or "write these things which you have seen" the main reason for recording the vision cannot be clearer: it was done out of obedience to Christ's command.

Furthermore, one must also take into consideration the specific historical conditions of those to whom the message was written. On the pages of Revelation the reader encounters a group of seven representative churches strategically chosen by John, churches found in the midst of a very difficult period of their existence, times in which "give to Caesar that which is Caesar's" no longer had the same resonance as it had in the first half of the century. They found themselves in that period of the first century when the church came into direct conflict with the imperial powers as the principal representatives not of God, but of the principalities of darkness. The battle lines are much more clearly drawn now and the church must be warned and prepared to face this new reality.

These complementary reasons, both the objective foundation of the revelatory act as well as the immediate historical context, remain unaffected if a further motivation for the writing is proposed, a reason

¹² See the thorough discussion on genre and sources in any of the standard commentaries on Revelation, such as David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5; 6-16; 17-22* (3 vols.; Word Biblical Commentary 52A, 52B, 52C; Dallas: Word, 1997-2000), G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

perhaps more theological than circumstantial in nature. In essence then, John, alongside the prophetic message about the present and future conditions of the church and mankind, offers also his understanding of how these realities are to be anchored in the Jewish Scriptures and in the life and work of Christ.

Which therefore are the supporting arguments for this thesis? Perhaps the best departure point would be a simple cataloging of the points of intertextuality between the first chapters of the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation. If there were a writing pretending either to continue an already existing book or to bring it to a resolution it is legitimate to expect that common points between the two writings would be both noticeable and numerous. This is in fact one of the most evident aspects detected by the reader of Genesis and Revelation, especially between the first chapters of the former and the final chapters of the latter. The following list is far from exhaustive:

Revelation ESV	Genesis ESV
21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth	1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
21:3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.	3:8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day
21:5 And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."	1:26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness
21:7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.	5:1 This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. ² Male and female he created them . . . When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. ¹³

¹³ While Adam is not explicitly called "son" in the text, the implicit sonship was noticeable to the reader, as evidenced in Luke 3:38, who concludes the genealogy of Jesus with "the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God."

22:1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb	2:10 A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers.
22:2 through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.	3:22 Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever . . ."
22:5 They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.	1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.
22:14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.	1:28 And God blessed them.
22:5 and they will reign forever and ever.	1:28 . . . "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth

These examples emphasize elements of continuity between the passages. Just as important for appreciating the links between the two books are the elements stressing discontinuity.

Revelation ESV	Genesis ESV
21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.	1:9 And God said, "Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. ¹⁰ God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.
21:4 and death shall be no more,	2:17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the

	day that you eat of it you shall surely die."
21:4 . . . neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.	3:16 To the woman he said, . . . in pain you shall bring forth children. . . . ¹⁷ And to Adam he said, . . . in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life
22:3 No longer will there be anything accursed,	3:14 The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you . . ." ¹⁷ And to Adam he said, . . . cursed is the ground because of you.
22:5 And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.	1:5 God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.
21:4 for the former things have passed away."	1:31 And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.
22:14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.	3:24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.

It is well known that the book of Revelation uses scriptural material not only from the book of Genesis but also from a host of other prophetic books such as Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, as well as from the books of Exodus and Psalms. Furthermore, in his use of Scriptures, John does not limit himself to allusions to biblical passages, but also to broader elements of the Jewish religion and its fundamental elements and structures: the temple, the holy city, the nation, the king, and the people. However, when taking into consideration both the number of individual allusions to the first chapters of Genesis, as well as their cumulative effect, it becomes very plausible to conclude that the literary dependency of Revelation on the book of Genesis is not unintentional or inconsequential. Rather, it was done with the author's intent to offer a sequel in the form of an epilogue to most of the "seals" opened in the first chapters of Genesis.

For support of this thesis, secondly, one can consider not only the large number of intertextual connections with Genesis but also their

placement in the structure of the book of Revelation. Even a superficial statistic of these allusions reveals that most of the allusions from the first chapters of Genesis appear in the final chapters of Revelation. Certainly Revelation's final vision of the new heaven and earth with all the splendor of the city-temple and its physical dimensions form the theme of at least two major prophetic books, Isaiah and Ezekiel. Nevertheless, that which Isaiah and Ezekiel could not have offered as a fulfilled messianic perspective is now being offered by John. In fact, Revelation not only recycles the imagery and ideas from these prophetic books, as Austin Farrer correctly observed,¹⁴ it also formulates them in a way in which perhaps these prophets might have written them if they had lived and prophesied not before but after the Jesus event.

Both the number and the placement of the echoes from Genesis than are important arguments to support the thesis that John wrote with the intent of offering an inclusio-type closing not only for the history of humanity but also for the Jewish Scriptures. He offers to its opening literary masterpiece, Genesis, an intertextual theological correspondent.

If this proposal stands as a reasonable hypothesis for explaining the stark similarities between the first book of the Scriptures and the last chapters of Revelation, there are at least two implications that are worth highlighting.

First and foremost, at the level of intertextuality, the way Revelation makes use of Genesis offers its reader a privileged perspective for identifying the dominant theological themes running not only in these two books, but also in all the canonical books written in between. From Creation to Eschaton, from the Garden of Eden, through the tabernacle of the desert, the Jerusalem Temple, the embodied Temple and culminating with the city-temple structure in Revelation, one can clearly see that the primary desire of God with regard to his creation has been and will always be his presence among them, fellowshiping and cohabitating with the human beings he created. The very essence of that "walk in the coolness of the morning" to be with the human beings he created, is echoed in one of the last messages of the book of Revelation, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them" (Rev 21:3 TNIV). God's presence in the midst of his creation, the former one bestowing on them his blessing and the latter receiving it and responding in worship, clearly emerges as the dominant tenor of the theology of Revelation. This aspect has been brilliantly explored by G.

¹⁴ Austin M. Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre, 1949).

Beale in the presidential address for ETS 2004, and needs not be repeated here.¹⁵

It should be emphasized that the new creation is not simply a restoration of the old creation, such as one could see in the wake of the Genesis flood, or of the Exodus or the return from the Exile. The new creation, which has its origin in the Incarnate Temple and its culmination in the New Heaven and New Earth, has its own ontological identity. In this way the necessary context for worship has been recreated, rebuilt, as the frequent worship in the book of Revelation attests.

The second implication of reading the book of Revelation as an intended ending to the Jewish Scriptures would be to allow the phenomenon of intertextuality to work in both directions. That is to say, if an epilogue has finally been written, then one needs to read not only Revelation in light of the Jewish Scriptures but also the Jewish Scriptures in light of Revelation. This *reverse intertextuality* presents itself as a legitimate theological project that John himself would have sanctioned. In the book of Revelation John offers the reader a hermeneutical key to the Jewish Scriptures, and by extension to its dominant subject matter – the history of humankind and of its relationship with their Creator. To put it differently, not only are there echoes of Scripture in Revelation, but there are echoes of theological reflection provided by the book of Revelation for the reading of the chronologically antecedent Jewish Scriptures. And yes, not only of the Jewish Scriptures but also of the Gospels and of all the Christian writings that were very much in the process of becoming the Scriptures of the New Covenant.

Granted, this area is a work in progress for me, and more substantial proof will have to wait for another paper. But it would be hard to believe that, after giving us several bird's-eye views of creation's history, John would hesitate to read the accounts of Creation, Fall, Exodus, as well as Jesus' Incarnation and Exaltation from the perspective of the Revelation's visions. This phenomenon would indeed be an obvious facet of what I. Howard Marshall proposed almost two decades ago in advancing a master-slave paradigm for the proper understanding of the relationship between the Scriptures of the New and Old Covenants.¹⁶

This reverse intertextuality encompasses not only the Creation and the subsequent history of mankind, but also the main actors involved, including the person of God as the Creator and Redeemer. In fact it

¹⁵ G. K. Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 48, no. 1 (2005).

¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall, "An Assessment of Recent Developments," in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (eds. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

seems that in this particular aspect, John's innovative theology shines just as brightly as his literary creativity. The way in which John integrates the person and work of Jesus Christ in the personhood and plan of God is a piece of theological reflection at its best, matching even the most brilliant New Testament Christological passages, as R. Bauckham, among others, has amply demonstrated.¹⁷

Perhaps the best way to close these considerations would be to rephrase the original thesis in the form of a question. If a writer would have ventured to offer a literary closing for the story and history of humankind, beginning with the original creation, a creation profoundly destroyed by a malefic plan, yet anticipating and hoping for a new creation; if someone would have wanted to offer an epilogue to the Jewish Scriptures, what would that epilogue look like?

I propose that among the plausible options we should include the book of Revelation. The similarities and the points of intertextuality between John's Revelation and the book of Genesis in particular, offer an inverted parallelism that makes a lot of theological sense. It would not be too far-fetched to suggest that the very genesis of the book of Apocalypse led to an apocalypse-ending for the book of Genesis.

John, as other New Testament authors have done before him, undertook the daring mission to combine two essential sources for his theological reflection: the Jewish Scriptures and the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. For John, just as for all canonical Christian theologians, both dimensions are essential for a correct understanding both of the old and the new creation, as well as, of the path the humanity has trodden from the former to the latter. As readers of the book of Revelation, we have before us John's solution. In it we do not find a precise or detailed map of the future, even though it is not completely void of such interests; nor is it a thorough map of the past, even though at no point does it suspend its connection with the historical realities. By giving us an apocalyptic perspective on the history of creation and redemption, John offered a theological legacy with the intention as well as the desire to be read as a fitting, Christian closing to the Hebrew Scriptures. With hindsight, one can affirm, that the Church granted him even more than this desire, by placing the book of Revelation not as the epilogue of the Hebrew Scriptures but of the entire Christian biblical canon.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).