

The Deep Things of God
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Chapter Seven

**Reclaiming the Past:
Old Testament Allusions and Their Significance**

The year was 1984, a date made ominous by the novelist George Orwell. But for me the year was marked by several positive events, including moving into the home we still live in and being hired to teach at the Seminary, where I still remain. But perhaps the most unforgettable moment of that year occurred during one of the debates that led up to the election in which Ronald Reagan was returned to the office of the American presidency.

The race for the nomination of the Democratic Party was chiefly between Walter Mondale and Gary Hart. Gary Hart would later become infamous for his dalliances with women other than his wife. But at the time of this particular debate, he was actually the leading candidate for the nomination and his opponent was considering desperate measures to turn the tide. No one could have anticipated that the entire nomination process would turn on a simple phrase.

In the course of the debate Gary Hart talked about his vision for improving the country.

Walter Mondale was given a moment for rebuttal. He said that his opponent had a lot of things to say, but that the really decisive issue was, "Where's the beef?" At first blush it would seem that Mondale thought the agriculture vote would turn the tide in his favor. But actually his comment had nothing to do with beef.

You see, just before this debate a major hamburger chain began airing a charming TV ad that mocked the size of the portions at its major rival. A "little, old lady" sat at the table of the rival chain. A hamburger was placed in front of her. The bun was generous in its proportions, promising a sizeable meal. But when the little old lady lifted off the top half of the bun, all you could see was a tiny little piece of meat, not much wider than a quarter. Looking with stunned surprise she said with the quavering voice of the aged, "Where's the beef?" The campaign was a smash success. All over the country people were reciting the lines from the TV commercial. The little old lady became a star overnight at the age of 85.

What was the message of the commercial? It didn't matter what kind of claims the other chain made for its hamburger sandwich. What counted was the meal that one actually received. The viewer was challenged to compare the offerings of the rival chains and discover the benefits of changing one's eating destination. By invoking the phrase from the burger commercial, Mondale adroitly raised the question whether Hart's promises contained substance or mere words.

With this phrase Mondale communicated much more than a message about American agriculture. By a simple allusion to the TV commercial he called his opponent's credibility into question. Perceptions of his opponent changed overnight, even though Mondale himself had

delivered little “beef” to promote that change. With a simple phrase Mondale succeeded in turning his opponent into a national laughingstock, even before his marital indiscretions became public knowledge and his political career was forever ruined. Such is the power of a simple phrase. What may not be quite so obvious are the implications this story has for our study of the book of Revelation. That will become apparent in the next few pages.

The Importance of The Old Testament in Revelation

If you have ever read the Old Testament or even a collection of children’s stories based on the Old Testament, it won’t take you long to figure out the importance of the Old Testament for the message of Revelation. William Milligan, a leading commentator on the book of Revelation about 100 years ago, was so impressed with this point that he made the following statement:

“The book of Revelation is absolutely steeped in the memories, the incidents, the thought, and the language of the church’s past. To such an extent is this the case that ***it may be doubted whether it contains a single figure not drawn from the Old Testament***, or a single complete sentence not more or less built up of materials brought from the same source.”

So if you were to study the book of Revelation without reference to the Old Testament, the genuine meaning of Revelation would be largely a mystery to you. It could be argued, as Milligan does, that virtually every word, phrase, and idea finds its source somewhere in the Old Testament. And Milligan is not alone in his opinion. More recently a major commentator in the German language, Heinrich Kraft, said the following (translated from German):

“We can say, in a general way, that until we have succeeded in laying out the Old Testament source for an apocalyptic prophecy, we have not interpreted that

passage.”

So I think it's very clear that if we don't understand the Old Testament, we are not going to understand the book of Revelation either. The book contains about 2,000 references of one kind or another, to the Old Testament. This means that the study of Revelation ties us to the Old Testament in many, many ways. You could even say that the Old Testament is “the key to the code” in which the book of Revelation was written. By my estimation, eighty to eighty-five percent of the hundreds of symbols in the book of Revelation are best understood by reference to the Old Testament.

But there is a serious problem here. Most of these “references” to the Old Testament are simply a word, a phrase, often just the barest hint of a connection. This allusive use of the Old Testament leaves a lot of room for question and speculation. Without careful study and comparison, it is easy to misinterpret the Revelator's use of the Old Testament. So we need to chart a path toward understanding the deeper issues in the author's relationship to the Old Testament.

Types of Usage

In general there seem to be four basic ways that New Testament writers reflect on and utilize the Old Testament. These four ways can each be described with one word: citation, quotation, allusion and echo. Let's define these four briefly and then see how they apply to the book of Revelation.

Citation

The first type of usage is called “citation.” Citation takes place when a person quotes another piece of literature fairly extensively and then tells you where the quotation can be found. A good example of this in today’s world is the use of footnotes in scholarly literature. You quote something you have read and you give the reference so that everyone knows where you got it. Citation is the easiest way to spot references to earlier material because the author is clear about what is being quoted.

Quotation

A “quotation” is very similar to a citation in the sense that there is a significant body of material being quoted. The difference in this case is the lack of a “footnote.” The author doesn’t tell you where the quote came from, it is assumed that you will recognize it. There are enough words in a row that an educated reader or one who knows the author personally would have no question where it came from, even without a reference. For example: “Oh say, can you see, by the dawn’s early light? What so proudly we hailed, at the twilight’s last gleaming?” Nearly every American immediately recognizes the opening words of the national anthem of the United States. The mere reading of the words sets off a tune in my mind. With a quotation like this it is not difficult to determine the source, if you are at all familiar with it.

Allusion

The third way the Old Testament is used by New Testament writers is called “allusion.”

To allude to previous literature is much more mysterious than citation or quotation. An allusion is also a serious attempt to point readers to a commonly-recognized source, but the reference may be limited to just a word, a phrase, or an idea. With allusion the reader is left to fill in the blanks. Allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation are more challenging than citations or quotations because it is difficult to discover where the author is heading, particularly after 1900 years have gone by. Because the author intends the reader to pick up on the connection with the OT, some scholars prefer the term “direct allusion” to label that intention.

Echo

The fourth way that the Old Testament is used by New Testament writers is called “echo.” Echoes are similar to allusions in that they involve merely a word, a phrase or an idea from the Old Testament. But there is one major difference. As has been said, a direct allusion is a serious attempt to point readers to a commonly-recognized source, with an echo, there is no intention to point readers to a specific source, literary or otherwise. A writer can “echo” the language of previous literature without being aware of it. The language comes to the writer “in the air” of the world he or she lives in. The reader is expected to understand the meaning of the term, but not to tie it to any particular literary predecessor.

An Important Distinction

The frustrating thing about the book of Revelation is that it never cites or quotes the Old Testament. If it did cite or quote it, our task would be easier. But at no point in the book is

there such a lengthy use of the Old Testament that we could know without a shadow of a doubt exactly where that quotation came from. There *is* one place in the book of Revelation where there seems to be a citation of the Old Testament. In Revelation 15 the song of Moses by the sea is introduced, and scholars immediately recognize that as a reference to Exodus 15. But if you compare Revelation 15 with Exodus 15, you discover that the song of Moses is not being quoted. Instead, the words of the song in Revelation 15 are drawn from a collage of eight or nine Old Testament passages, none of which are from the book of Exodus. So the “song of Moses” in Revelation 15 is not a true citation of the OT. The book of Revelation never cites or quotes the Old Testament. The reader is expected to either recognized the references from previous experience or do enough background work to discover them.

Most of John's readers would probably have caught his allusions to the Old Testament immediately. They were familiar with John, his teaching, and the Old Testament. After years of relationship they would be ready to pick up on the hints that he dropped here and there. But today, these allusions can easily be missed, and in the process the message of the book becomes distorted. But missing messages is not the only possible problem. Sometimes over-eager interpreters find allusions that John or Jesus never intended! Sometimes John alludes to the Old Testament, hoping the reader will recognize the source and consider its meaning for what he is saying. At other times, John merely echoes the language of the Old Testament. No reference is intended. Distinguishing between the two is extremely important.

The Function of Allusions

The purpose of an allusion is to draw the reader to consider a specific passage of the Old Testament and apply its significance to the passage of Revelation in question. John intends the reader to recognize the allusion and be aware of its larger context. That context, in a sense, becomes an extended context for Revelation itself. A word, a phrase, a symbol can become a picture that replaces a thousand words. As you read Revelation you need to read it in the light of Old Testament passages that are alluded to in their context. Recognizing a direct allusion opens fresh windows into the author's meaning. Missing the allusion leaves the author's meaning in doubt.

This process is well illustrated by the Mondale story at the beginning of this chapter. In using the phrase, "Where's the beef?" Mondale was counting on the debate's audience to be aware, not only of the phrase, but of the whole context of the burger commercial. Many who missed the reference, for whatever reason, turned to their neighbor and said, "What's everybody laughing about?" For them explanation was needed. Whether or not the listener picked up on the larger background context, it was crucial to a correct understanding of Mondale's intention.

The Function of Echos

An echo, on the other hand, is not based on conscious intention. John may use the language of the Old Testament without being consciously aware of where that language came from. An echo is a usage that comes "in the air," people just pick it up from the environment in which they live. It would be particularly easy to echo the Old Testament if you grew up in a

Jewish synagogue where you constantly heard the Old Testament quoted and referred to in various ways. It would be natural for you to use language from the Old Testament but you would not always be aware that the Old Testament was the source of the expressions you were using.

How Echos Work

Let me give you an illustration of how echos work: What is a lemon? Well it certainly is a citrus fruit with a fairly sour taste. But the term has an extended meaning in American culture. A lemon is a new car that doesn't deliver on its promise. It may be brand new but it is dysfunctional, not reliably doing all the things it is supposed to do. It is a shiny new transport device that doesn't deliver the "beef" (sorry!). A lemon gives its owner far too many troubles and spends much too much time in the repair shop.

Now if you live in the United States you are familiar with this symbolic use of "lemon." In the context of automobiles, a lemon is a bad car. But you are probably not aware of the origin of the term. It actually has a long history in the English language going back to a book by Ralph Nader about thirty years ago. The cover of the book was white and had a picture on it of a lemon with four plastic wheels. The title of the book was "What to Do With Your Bad Car." Reading the title and then seeing the photo had immediate impact. "Lemon" as a symbol with automotive meaning was born.

But most Americans don't need to know that piece of history to understand the extended meaning of "lemon." You pick up that piece of information "in the air" of American

culture. And if you are writing or talking about lemons, your audience would automatically understand, whether or not they have ever heard of Ralph Nader. But let's suppose 2,000 years have gone by and American civilization has been forgotten. Suddenly someone discovers a book you wrote in a futuristic garbage pile, reads it and sees a symbolic usage of the word "lemon." What are they going to think? If they think "citrus fruit" they will totally miss your point. But if they then dig up Ralph Nader's book, they would understand your book better. They would realize that you are talking about a bad car, not a citrus fruit, or something else.

John often echoes the language of the Old Testament. He may not be aware at such times that he is using Old Testament language. He is not pointing the reader to a specific Old Testament text. But the meaning of the term is still found in the Old Testament and **we** need to go back and dig out the meaning of those echoes. We will understand the echo by studying the Old Testament, but we should not import the larger context of any Old Testament passage in which the "echo word" occurs. The OT context in which an echo is found does not affect the meaning of the text in Revelation.

Decoding Allusions

Here is the crucial issue. How do you know when John is intentionally alluding to the Old Testament, drawing a particular passage into his description of the vision he saw? What evidence do you look for? The process of detecting an allusion is about determining probabilities. The only way I could be absolutely sure exactly what Old Testament background John had in mind would be to ask him myself. But I don't have that option so all I have to go on

are the writings that he left behind. But while there are times we will be far from certain, with a little effort we can gain a reasonable sense of John's intention. All we have to do is gather the evidence in the text. Let me show you how. But before I do, I need to offer one caveat.

It is crucial that you not just read about this process, you need to try it out yourself in order to master it. You see, I have learned working with students that if I give the following method and do nothing more it doesn't have a long-term effect. So I ask them to do an assignment that requires them to dig deep into a passage of Revelation to determine where the allusions are. If they will examine the evidence of their passage for, say, twenty to forty hours, things fall into place in spectacular fashion. The day comes when they come to class with shining eyes and a smile saying, "I've got it! It really works! This is the first time in my life I learned directly from the Bible!"

You see most people, even ministers, tend to learn more from books about the Bible than from direct study of the Bible itself. The following method, while somewhat difficult at first, helps people interact with the Bible text in a way that opens its meaning in surprising ways. And after a certain amount of practice detecting allusions, you become more and more adept at recognize how the Old Testament is used in Revelation. After thirty or forty hours of practice, the book of Revelation seems full of waving arms saying, "I'm from Genesis! I'm from Exodus! I'm from Isaiah!" When this happens the book of Revelation becomes an entirely new book filled with meaning that it did not have before. Here's what you have to do.

Collecting Potential Parallels

The first step in the method is to collect potential parallels to the text in Revelation that you are studying. You can do this in several ways. One is to look at Bible margins. Many Bibles contain lists of parallel texts along the side or center margin, and sometimes at the bottom of the page. Another source of potential parallels can be found in commentaries on Revelation. Authors of commentaries will often suggest Old Testament texts that they think lie behind the passage in Revelation. Concordances, both print and computer variety, can be a means of collecting possible allusions to the Old Testament in Revelation. You can also find parallels with a computer using the search features of a Bible program. When it comes to margins or commentaries, you certainly don't want to take any of these sources as "gospel." You will want to examine each passage for evidence of John's intention or lack of it.

How do you do that? First of all, it is a good idea to make copies of the passage in Revelation that you are studying and the various texts of the Old Testament that may be parallel to it. That way you can underline, highlight, and make notes right on the pages. Lay the passage in Revelation side by side with each potential Old Testament allusion. Then look for verbal, thematic and structural parallels. These are described in the following.

Verbal Parallels

First of all, look for verbal parallels. You suspect, for example, that Rev 9:1-6 may be based on Genesis 19. So you make photocopies of both pages out of your Bible in as large a print as you can, and lay the two passages side by side. Read them both carefully and mark

every major word that is found in both. What do I mean by major words? Well, major words includes pretty much everything but “the,” “and,” and “but,” or similar words. Such common words have little significance for a parallel. But major words are distinctive enough that their use cries out for the interpreter’s attention. Verbal parallels occur wherever you have at least **two** major words in common between the two texts. Why two? For practical reasons. If you tried to follow up on all the single word parallels in the Bible you would never finish studying a single chapter of Revelation, much less the whole book. Limiting yourself to parallels of two or more words cuts down 95% of the effort without any significant loss of accuracy.

Let’s follow up on that example. In Genesis 19 Abraham was visited by three strangers. He eventually discovers that one of the strangers is the Lord Himself. The other two are angels sent to investigate Sodom, a neighboring city renowned for its debauchery and violence. Knowing that he has a nephew there, Abraham pleads with the Lord not to destroy the city, and even succeeds in extracting some concessions. But Sodom is destroyed anyway, and when Abraham gets up the next morning to see what has happened, he sees the smoke of Sodom rising up “like the smoke of a great furnace (Gen 19:29).” But that is not the last time in the Bible that you can see the same phrase: “When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it **like the smoke of a gigantic furnace.**” Rev 9:2.

Rev 9:2 contains a verbal parallel to Gen 19:29. There are three major words in common between the two texts: smoke, great, and furnace. Does that mean that John was definitely alluding to Genesis 19 in Revelation 9? Not necessarily. Verbal parallels are just part of the evidence you use to determine whether the author is making an intentional allusion or

not. Verbal parallels are, however, strong evidence. The more words you have in common between two texts, the more likely it is that one author is quoting another. In fact if your verbal parallel is extensive--15-20 words in a row--you should probably not speak of an allusion, but rather of a quotation. That level of certainty, however, rarely occurs in Revelation, if at all.

So in the process of comparing texts, you begin by noting all the verbal parallels between the texts. Using a pen or a highlighter mark all the major words that are in common between the two texts. Make note of all verbal parallels like "smoke of a great furnace," which is probably a very significant parallel. Verbal parallels form a major part of the evidence base for determining when John is alluding to a particular Old Testament text.

Detecting Verbal Parallels

- 1) Collect potential parallel texts
 - √ Bible margins
 - √ Commentaries
 - √ Concordances
 - √ Computer Bible programs
- 2) Copy the passage in Revelation and the potential parallels texts in large print
- 3) Using a colored pen or highlighter mark all significant parallel words

Thematic Parallels

A second piece of evidence to look for is thematic parallels. Thematic parallels can occur in connection with verbal parallels, but you can still have one without verbal parallels. You look for common themes, subjects, and ideas, whether or not the same words are in use. In themselves thematic parallels are very weak. When an author has an earlier text in mind, he will normally echo its language as well as its themes. But there are times when the allusion is

like a secret code, as if a nod or a wink were passing between author and reader. At such times a author and reader may both recognize a common theme even though only one word, or sometimes none at all, betray a common element between two texts.

Thematic parallels, therefore, can be difficult to detect. The interpreter comes to the potential parallel text from a knowledge of Revelation, the Old Testament, and a sense of the way John works with the Old Testament. As your experience grows, this difficult process becomes easier and easier. While thematic parallels are weak evidence by themselves, in combination with verbal and structural parallels, the presence of a thematic parallel increases the likelihood that one passage alludes to another.

Perhaps the best way to teach this process is through an example or two. In Ezek 9:1-7 there is a visionary description, one of the most terrifying in the whole Bible. Ezekiel sees six men of frightful bearing approaching Jerusalem with destroying weapons in their hands. Among them is a seventh man, with a writer's inkhorn at his side. As the seven men enter the temple of Jerusalem, the glory of God rises up from its place over the ark (in the Most Holy Place) and moves to the door of the temple. The Lord commands the man with the inkhorn to go from person to person throughout the city and place a mark on the forehead of all those who share God's attitude toward the "abominations" being done in the city and in the temple.

The man with the inkhorn moves from person to person, studies each face, and then either marks the forehead or doesn't. It is a terrifying picture of judgment. No doubt each person holds their breath as the seventh man approaches, because if he places no mark on the forehead, the six armed men behind him immediately strike that person dead. It is a massacre

of all those who don't receive the mark. The result is that the temple and the city are filled the slain and the prophet falls on his face in agony at the scene (Ezek 9:8). The prophet learns that the carnage is necessary because the land is full of violence, abuse, and perversion (Ezek 9:9). But there is mercy in the judgment. Those who "sigh and cry" over the wickedness in the land are spared the horrific judgment. So a major theme of the passage in Ezekiel 9 is a mark on peoples' foreheads that protects them from the judgments of God.

In Revelation 9:4 (same numerical reference as the mark in Ezekiel!) there is a seal that goes on the forehead of the people who are serving God. This seal protects them against the locusts and the scorpions in the fifth trumpet. Ezekiel and Revelation use different words for "mark." There is no verbal parallel between the texts (the only word in common is "forehead" and a single word is not a verbal parallel), but there is a thematic parallel. The idea of marking the forehead to protect people from the judgments of God makes an interesting and significant parallel. It is possible that the author of Revelation 9 had Ezekiel 9 in mind even if there is only one word in common. Normally, however, allusions are based on more than just a thematic parallel.

Another example of a thematic parallel can be found in Rev 14:6-7:

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the *eternal gospel* to proclaim to those who live on the earth-- to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, because *the hour of his judgment* has come. *Worship him who made* the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water."

You will notice three highlighted phrases in the passage, "eternal gospel," "the hour of his judgment," and "worship him who made." While there are no verbal parallels between these

phrases and the Ten Commandments, the highlighted phrases express the three motivations for obedience included in the first table of the commandments. The Ten Commandments open with the theme of salvation, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod 20:2). God’s saving action is the primary motivation for keeping all the commandments. The next motivation is the motivation of judgment in the second commandment, “visiting the iniquity” (Exod 20:5). The third motivation is the motivation of creation, “I made you, therefore keep the Sabbath day holy” (Exod 20:8-11). The triple motivations of salvation, judgment and creation are all found in the highlighted passages of Rev 14:6-7.

The process of finding thematic parallels is fairly similar to that for finding verbal parallels. You begin by collecting potential parallel texts from margins, commentaries and other sources. As the Old Testament texts are compared, side by side with the passage of Revelation you are studying, one needs to be very observant of the common themes. Since thematic parallels tend to involve large blocks of text, it is helpful to compare the larger context of the Revelation passage with the larger context of potential OT allusions to see if some thematic parallels are lurking under the surface of the bigger story. The better you know Revelation, and the better you know the Old Testament, the easier it is to detect genuine thematic parallels.

Structural Parallels

The third type of evidence for allusions is called a structural parallel. A structural

parallel to the Old Testament in Revelation occurs when you have a whole series of words and ideas in common. A structural parallel can be limited to a paragraph or two in Revelation, or it can cover large sections of the book. A good example of a structural parallel is that between the fifth trumpet (Rev 9:1-11) and Joel 2:1-11. Note the many parallel words and themes between the texts: a trumpet blast, darkness, locusts, vegetation, horses, chariots, anguish, and a leader. The author of Revelation seems to be following Joel 2:1-11 verse by verse and point by point.

There are a number of other significant structural parallels in the book of Revelation. For example, in Revelation 4 there is a strong structural parallel to Ezekiel 1. In a doctoral class I once gave the students the Greek of Ezekiel 1 (the Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew) and of Revelation 4. They discovered that nearly one-third of Revelation 4 was drawn from Ezekiel 1. It's a powerful relationship. Other examples of structural parallels include Daniel 7 as a structural parallel behind Revelation 13 and 17; Ezekiel 26 and 27 behind Revelation 18; and Ezekiel 40-48 behind the whole story of the new Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22. And you might suspect the biggest structural parallel already. The book of Revelation as a whole seems to track pretty closely to the book of Ezekiel as a whole.

Structural parallels, however, are not limited to references to specific Old Testament texts. They can also involve repeated references to an over-arching idea. The trumpets of Revelation, for example, seem clearly based on the Exodus. But the structural parallel is not simply to the book of Exodus, the trumpets allude repeated to the theme of the exodus which can be found also in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and throughout the Old Testament

as well, including the Psalms and the prophets. The plagues of the trumpets are parallel to the plagues of the Exodus: water turning to blood; hail and fire falling from heaven; darkness; people and animals dying; etc.

There are also many parallels to the creation theme in the trumpets. The Ten Commandments in principle seem to be a major background concept in Rev 12-14 (and this parallel is not limited to references to Exodus 20). Much of Rev 14-19 seems drawn on the fall of Babylon theme that is found in Isaiah 44-47, Jeremiah 50-51 and Daniel 5, among others. When looking for structural parallels one should not, therefore, limit the search to parallel texts with verbal and thematic parallels. Broader themes of the Old Testament also find repeated reference in Revelation.

So there are clearly many structural parallels to the Old Testament in Revelation, parallels both to texts and to major themes and events. Structural parallels are extremely strong evidence for Old Testament allusions in Revelation. For example, wherever you have a verbal parallel to the Exodus theme in the trumpets, the likelihood of a direct allusion is much higher than it would otherwise be.

Weighing the Evidence

All things considered, the more verbal, thematic and structural parallels you can find, the more likely it becomes that a particular Old Testament passage was in the author's mind as he wrote. Structural parallels are generally the most certain because of their clarity, but multiple word parallels are also extremely significant. If you have a verbal parallel of six, seven,

or eight words, there is probably a direct allusion there. More than eight words in the same order and you should probably be talking about a quotation rather than an allusion.

One problem you may encounter when assessing possible allusions is what to do when a particular phrase or idea is so widely exhibited in the Old Testament that it could point to ten or twelve different Old Testament texts. At times like that, it becomes particularly difficult to determine which text John had in mind. It is more likely in such circumstances that you are dealing with an echo rather than an allusion. The frequent repetition of the words or ideas placed them “in the air” of John’s consciousness. He probably did not have a particular Old Testament source in mind. On the other hand, if the theme or parallel is limited to just one place in the Old Testament text, the likelihood that the author of Revelation had it in mind is correspondingly increased.

I assess potential allusions to the Old Testament into five categories of probability: certain, probable, possible, uncertain, and non-allusions. Let’s say that a Bible margin suggests an allusion to Daniel 6 in Revelation 6. But when you compare the texts don’t find a single verbal, thematic, or structural parallel. That would be what I call a non-allusion. On the other hand, as with Revelation 4 and Ezekiel 1, if you find one verbal parallel after another, many thematic parallels, and a strong structural parallel or two, you have a certain--or at least a probable, allusion.

Remember, with allusions, it is imperative to go back and examine the Old Testament context carefully. If there are clear parallels, there is probably something in the context of that Old Testament text that the author of Revelation wants you to keep in mind. If it’s only a

possible allusion, on the other hand, there are some common words but you are not exactly sure what his intentions were, you can use those texts in interpretation, but only as supporting evidence for something that is already clear on more solid grounds. You should not use possible or uncertain allusions as primary evidence in support of any interpretation of the book of Revelation.

Weighing the Evidence

One of the chief tasks of the interpreter of any passage in Revelation is weighing the level of probability that the author of Revelation had particular Old Testament passages in mind. If the interpreter considers it certain or probable that John had an Old Testament text in mind, that text and its Old Testament context should be considered in the interpretation of the passage in Revelation. If the allusion is only possible, that text and its context can be used as supporting evidence for a conclusion about the text in Revelation, but should not be the primary basis of a conclusion. If the potential allusion is judged uncertain or a non-allusion, it should be ignored for the purposes of interpretation.

Definitions

Certain Allusion	Very strong verbal, thematic and structural parallels; or virtual quotations (8-12 verbal parallels)
Probable Allusion	Strong verbal, thematic and/or structural parallels; verbal parallels of 4-7 words without a structural parallel
Possible Allusion	Some verbal (2-3 words) and thematic parallels, but without structural support
Uncertain Allusion	Weak Verbal or thematic parallel, without structural support
Non-Allusion	No evidence of verbal or thematic parallels

What Difference Does It Make?

The things we have covered in this chapter may seem like an awful lot of work. No one is likely to invest that much effort in something unless there is a big payoff. And there is. Detecting allusions is more than just hard work. It is a lot of fun. Like computer games, the solving of difficult problems is not boring. Once you get into this method, you will discover a great deal of enjoyment in the process. And best of all, this method opens up windows of understand that no other approach to Revelation can.

The best way to learn how to detect allusions in Revelation is to do it. At first the task may seem overwhelmingly difficult, but after ten, twenty or thirty hours, it becomes easier and easier as you get a feel for the way John used the Old Testament. So when I teach ministers the book of Revelation I always ask them to take a passage in the book and follow through with this method for themselves. They often grumble and complain about the process at first (ministers are people too). But then, perhaps half way through the semester, I begin to see shining faces arrive for class. Students will come up to me and say, "It works! It really works! This is the first time I ever learned directly from the Bible!" And the reward is clearly greater than the effort expended.

Let me illustrate the value in this method by examining a passage or two of considerable interest to most students of Revelation. We'll start with Rev 14:7, which seems to be the key text of the central part of the book of Revelation. Let's compare it to Exod 20:11:

"For in six days ***the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea***, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Exod 20:11

“He said in a loud voice, ‘Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship **him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea** and the springs of water.’”

Rev 14:7

Notice the large number of verbal parallels between Rev 14:7 and the fourth commandment: God, made, heavens, earth, and sea. Since “the Lord” and “Him” are not exactly the same, we could call this four and a half words in common between the two passages. In both passages God is the One who was involved in creation and made the heavens, earth and sea. So you have a strong verbal parallel, enough to consider an allusion possible if not probable. There are also thematic parallels in the larger context of each passage, salvation, judgment and creation (mentioned in more detail above). So there is some strong evidence that the author of Revelation had the fourth commandment in mind when he wrote Revelation 14:7.

There’s one problem with that conclusion, however. Psalm 146:6 contains exactly the same words as Exod 20:11 and Rev 14:7. In fact, in the Greek language, the phrasing of Ps 146:6 is identical to that of Rev 14:7. Not only so, Ps 146 also contains the themes of salvation, judgment and creation, just as Exod 20 and Rev 14 do. Could the author of Revelation be alluding to Ps 146 instead of Exodus 20:11?

No. There is a major difference between Exodus 20 and Psalm 146 as far as Revelation is concerned. In Revelation 12-14 there is a major structural parallel to the commandments of God. The “saints” are those who keep the commandments of God (Rev 12:17; 14:12). By way of contrast, the sea beast commands worship for himself, contrary to the first commandment (Rev 13:4,8, cf. Exod 20:3). The land beast orders people to worship an image, contrary to the

second commandment (Rev 13:15, cf. Exod 20:4-6), and so on. This strong structural parallel tips the scales in favor of Exodus 20 as the decisive background of the first angel's message in Rev 14:7. It indicates a clear intention on the part of the author to bring the fourth commandment to view in the context of God's final call to obedience.

Psalm 146, by way of contrast, does not qualify as a certain or probable allusion because it lacks a structural parallel and because Exodus 20 is a far more likely source of the language. If Rev 14:7 did allude to Psalm 146 it would be the only place in that part of the book that does so. The larger picture of Psalm 146 is simply not crucial to understanding the book of Revelation. So when an ancient reader who knew the OT read Rev 14:7, that person would have recognized an allusion to the Sabbath command of Exodus 20, not the similar language of Psalm 146. This insight powerfully affects the interpretation of Revelation 13-14. (You might want to see my book, "What the Bible Says About the End Time.")

Let me share one more example of the difference direct allusions can make to the understanding of Revelation. What is the key theme of Revelation 4 and 5? If you go through the passage carefully you will notice that the word "throne" occurs 19 times in just two chapters. It is clearly the centerpoint. Everything that happens happens in relation to the throne. So the key them of Revelation 4 and 5 must have to do with power, authority and the right to rule. "Who is worthy" to open the scroll and sit on the throne with God? The Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:1-12).

A second look at Revelation 4 and 5 reveals a number of structural parallels in the passage. The vision of God's throne in Ezekiel 1. The Ancient of Days on the throne in Daniel 7.

Isaiah's vision of the heavenly sanctuary (Isaiah 6). Micaiah's vision of God's heavenly courtroom (1 Kings 22). The experience of Israel in the neighborhood of Mount Sinai (Exod 19). There are five major structural parallels to Rev 4 and 5.

When you look carefully at these five structural parallels in the passage, you discover that they include all the great throne passages of the Old Testament. Read each of the Old Testament passages in the light of Revelation 4-5, then ask the question, what do all these OT passages have in common with Revelation? The answer you come to is, "The throne of God." Reference to the throne of God (in Exod 19 that throne is Mount Sinai itself) is the common denominator that ties all these background texts together. So the main theme of Revelation 4 and 5 will be centered in the throne, the place where the Lamb joins the Father in receiving the adoration of the universe.

Recognizing echoes can have a big payoff as well. One echo in the book of Revelation is the concept of vegetation as a symbol of God's people (Rev 8:7; 9:4). Vegetation is mentioned repeatedly in Revelation but is not defined. John picks up the Old Testament concept of vegetation as a symbol of the people of God (Ps 1:3; 52:8; Jer 2:21; Isa 5:1-7).

Another echo of the Old Testament in Revelation is the trumpet. 134 times in the Old Testament trumpets are blown--in worship, in battle, at coronations, etc. Surprisingly, the primary use of trumpets in the Old Testament is not for battle, but in worship and prayer (Num 10:8-10). To understand the Trumpets of Revelation, it is critical to know how trumpets were used in ancient times. And as horrific as the images in the Trumpets are, worship is an integral part of the vision (Rev 8:2-6; 11:15-18).

Conclusion

In the next chapter, we turn to what is perhaps the most important key to interpreting Revelation. It helps to have a strong Old Testament background when you approach Revelation, but that alone doesn't answer the question of *how* Old Testament material is used in the book. John is a Christian writer: when he reads the Old Testament he sees Christ as the center and substance of it all. The gospel makes a huge difference in the way you read the book of Revelation. In the next chapter we will discover how to read both the Old Testament and the book of Revelation as a Christian.