Hebrews 6 and OT Backgrounds

In talking about Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Old Testament background I also want to make it clear that I’m not interested at this point in solving the whole Calvinist/Arminian debate and how this text is approached though I think the Old Testament background can help provide some avenues for raising those questions and answering them in fresh ways but that’s not my main purpose. My main purpose is to demonstrate the possibilities of an Old Testament background for these phrases that we have read in verses 4-6 of Hebrews 6 and how that might make a difference in the way we read the text.

Now, when you read Hebrews chapter 6 two important points to begin with before exploring the Old Testament background is one that we have already mentioned and that is Hebrews 6 is simply one of a series of learning passages throughout the book of Hebrews where the author tries to convince in a very compelling way his readers not to turn their backs on Christ and the gospel, the new covenant of salvation that has been brought with Christ and to go back to Judaism but instead to press on and embrace Christ in faith no matter what consequences that might bring. In chapter 2:1-4 that is the first warning passage and there is another one in chapters 3 & 4 then chapter 6 and then a couple more later on.

But to the second observation number two is one facet of these warning passages at least the first two and the last two is that the author appears to compare his readers to the Old Testament people of Israel. This is especially true of the Old Testament people of Israel during the time where they were led out of Egypt and wandered through the wilderness and the desert to the promise land. If you remember the story goes when they get to the promised land the very land that
God promised them all the way back to Abraham. Now God’s fulfilling his promise they come up to the land and at Kadesh Barnea they send twelve spies in ten of them come back and give a bad report. Israel refuses and rebels. They don’t go into the land though God commanded them to and promised that he would give them the land. They refused to believe and they rebel and they don’t go in. That story, much of that story, lies behind all the warning passages in chapter two and also the one in chapter three and four. In chapter ten and twelve you find references to Israel’s story especially during that period of time as they trek through the wilderness to Sinai to receive the law and onto the promised land where they rebel and don’t go in. The question is whether the example or the warning passages in chapter 6 likewise use an Old Testament example. I would suggest that it does. In fact, I would suggest that this story of Israel leaving Egypt and making their trek to the promise land through the desert up to the promise land and their rebellion at Kadesh Barnea forms the background for all of these statements in Hebrews 6:4-6. All of these allude to the Old Testament, although they’re describing the modern day readers of Hebrews. He is alluding to and couching those terms and descriptions of the readers of Hebrews in terms of the descriptions of what the people of God experienced as they made their journey through the desert up to the promised land.

So, for example, the fact that they are described, we’ll take these in order, as enlightened for those who have once been enlightened elsewhere I think the author makes it clear this refers to receiving the truth receiving knowledge of the truth of the gospel. But this language of being enlightened probably reflects and again if you’ve had your ears opened to the Old Testament subtext this probably reflects the pillar of light that guided the Israelites that’s referred to several times. I’m appealing not only to the original Exodus story in the text from Exodus but subsequent descriptions and records in the Psalms and Jeremiah chapter 9 you often find rehearsals of how God has dealt with his people in a rehearsal of the history of Israel and how God had dealt with them. Many of them rehearse and
describe important events surrounding the original Exodus in leading the Israelites to the desert up to the promise land. So based on all these descriptions probably when the author refers to being enlightened it’s an allusion to the pillar of light that guided Israel in the desert. When he says, “they have also tasted the heavenly gift” I think that’s a little bit easier and probably reflects the giving of manna. Manna that falls from heaven is again in the Psalms and other texts that rehearse the history of Israel. In Exodus it is described as a gift from God and is described as something that comes from heaven. So tasting the heavenly gift corresponds to the Israelites tasting the manna that comes from heaven as a gift of God.

Now the next one might call this theory into question by the fact that they have shared the Holy Spirit but what is interesting is that you do have a couple of references to the Holy Spirit causing some of them to prophesy. One chapter that is an interesting passage is Isaiah chapter 63. Isaiah chapter 63:10 seems to be referring to or rehearsing God’s mighty acts on behalf of the people of Israel. In 63:10, it is very interesting. Let me back up and just read a couple of verses, “He said, surely they are my people [God is referring to Israel], “sons who will not be false to me and so he became their Savior. In their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them.” That is a reference to the Exodus. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old,” which probably refers to taking them through the desert. “Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit.” So apparently the Israelites rebellion and refusal to maintain their covenant relationship with God are depicted in Isaiah 63 as grieving Spirit that God had given them. So, even the reference to the Holy Spirit reflects their experience of the Israelites in the desert. Their experience with the Holy Spirit, the fact that they tasted of the Lord God reflects descriptions of Joshua the law giving the law on Sinai.

“The powers of the age to come” is interesting in that in the Old Testament text the miraculous side even what Moses did in front of Pharaoh and the magicians and later on parting the Red Sea and other miraculous provisions in the
desert are often called “signs” or are often called “powers and wonders.” So that once again the experience of the people that the author of Hebrews is addressing is now seen as an analogous experience of the Israelites who also experience various powers and miracles and wonders. Yet they have fallen away it says in Hebrews 6. Yet they fall away which probably would then reflect the rebellion or falling away at Kadesh Barnea when they refused to go into the land of promise that God had commanded them to take.

One very interesting text to note some of these correspondences is intriguingly I think to the book of Nehemiah and chapter 9 is a rehearsal and again there are other texts we can point to a couple in the Psalms. But in Nehemiah chapter 9 we find one of those rehearsals of God dealing with his people Israel and especially in verses 9 and 10. Actually he begins in the beginning he starts with God’s appearance to Abraham, but starting with verse 9 of Nehemiah again Nehemiah is rehearsing the might acts of God, “You saw the suffering of your forefathers in Egypt; you heard the cry at the Red Sea. You sent miraculous signs and wonders against Pharaoh, against all of his officials and all the people of his land, for you knew how arrogantly the Egyptians treated them. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. You divided the sea before them, so that they passed through it on dry ground, but you hurled the pursuers into the depths, like a stone into the mighty waters. By day you led them with a pillar of cloud and by night with a pillar of fire [to enlighten or] to give them light on the way they were to take.” So I’ll stop there. This is followed by the giving of the law et cetera.

So there are other accounts similar to this that use the language that you find in Hebrews 6:4-6. So that I would propose that what the author is doing is trying to explain the situation of his readers to highlight that in spite of the situation of the Old Testament, God was demonstrating the point is seems to be a textual relationship between the two. What the author wants to do is bring his readers not to do the same thing that their ancestors did. Their ancestors also
experienced all these things such as the heavenly gift, the provisions of God and enlightenment to guide their path. They tasted the good word of God. While they experienced all these powers and miracles they shared and participated in the Holy Spirit, yet they still rebelled and refused to believe and they suffered the consequences. The author of Hebrews is saying new covenant readers who now have been confronted with Jesus Christ they have also experienced all these things, enlightenment through the Gospel, the heavenly gift, all these miraculous powers and tasting the good word of God and participating in experiencing the Holy Spirit. Now they are likewise in danger of committing the same mistake as their ancestors once did. So the author is warning them don’t commit the same mistake, but instead, embrace Christ and follow him in obedience no matter what the cost.

So in my opinion Hebrews 6:4-6 I think it takes on and can be seen in a fresh light when one in the light of the Old Testament again this might not be completely compelling the fact that the author had utilized the Old Testament example in the passage. Second, the fact that the Israelites of the wilderness generation and those who left Egypt made the trek through the wilderness up to the promise land refused to go in play a crucial role in Hebrews suggesting to me the validity of reading chapters 6:4-6 in light of those events as well that again the author is drawing a comparison perhaps typologically between his New Testament readers and the Old Testament people of God warning them not to recapitulate their experience.

**Revelation 21-22 and the Old Testament**

The last text I want to consider is a series of passages or a couple of passages from the book of Revelation mainly looking at the last two chapters the final vision in Rev. 21 and 22:5 and a short warning at the very end of the book 20:18-19. Chapter 21- 22:5 is at a long extended vision as the climax of the book it actually forms a counterpart to chapter 17 and 18. The author sees another city which symbolizes a woman Babylon which probably stands for Rome. The
destruction the prostitute Babylon is removed in order to make room for the bride new Jerusalem for another city portrayed as a female so this is kind of the climatic vision of the whole book. This is the final reward the final salvation of God’s people in new Jerusalem in new creation in chapter 21:1-22:25.

Now interestingly this text provides a rather fruitful field of study for looking at the Old Testament in the New because it is so saturated with Old Testament texts. The author never quotes from an Old Testament passage yet there are a couple of texts that I think come close and can be seen as indirect quotations where the author follows word for word keeps the text intact even though he doesn’t introduce it with a quotation formula. This is so saturated with Old Testament texts that one scholar said interestingly and I think he’s virtually right: if all the Old Testament allusions 21 and 22 were removed you would have virtually nothing left maybe a verse or two left. We will see the author weaves together a number of texts from the Old Testament into his own climactic vision. We’ve already seen what you often find New Testament authors doing is taking a number of texts sometimes referring to the same event, the same concept, the same ideas and weaving them together rather than only following one text. So in Revelation 21 and 22 John gathers together a variety of Old Testament texts especially from prophetic literature but once in a while from narrative and weaves it together in this grand of climactic and prophetic vision of God’s intention to reward his people and bring about a new creation as the goal of his redemptive activity on behalf of his people.

What I want to do is just look at a few examples of it would take us hours and hours for us to go through all the New Testament or Old Testament texts that lie behind John’s vision. So I want to only mention a couple of them. Some of them are obvious and some of them are not so obvious. Sometimes demonstrating how Old Testament texts are brought up utilized and even transformed and changed. So we’ll just go through the text and highlight some of the main features sometimes referring just to one or two texts, at other times we’ll see how entire
sections of Old Testament texts are utilized as a model or basis for what John sees and what he writes.

Revelation 21:1 and the Old Testament

The first one which is rather an easy one and there is very little debate. It is the very first verse of Revelation chapter 21 where John says, “..and I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away and the sea was no more.” We’ll look at that phrase, “and the sea was no more,” as well but the first part of Revelation 21:1 seems to be a direct reference then to Isaiah chapter 65 and the reference to the new heaven and the new earth because the old passed away. John intends us to understand chapter 21 within the framework of Isaiah’s transformation of the establishment of the new creation. So what that suggests immediately is the entirety of chapters 21 and 22 had a physical earthly quality to it stripped of all the effects of sin and the things that plague this present earth at the same time 21 and 22 reminds us with this quote, this allusion to Isaiah 65 that the ultimate destiny of God’s people is not a heavenly one, but it is an earthly one which is exactly God’s intention for humanity going back to Genesis chapters one and two.

But what is more interesting is that cryptic phrase at the end of verse 1 “and the sea was no more.” So you have new heavens and new earth emerging in place of the old heavens and new earth but then he also adds on,” and the sea was no more.” Why was it important to say that “the sea was no more” in John’s vision his eschatological finale in chapters 21 and 22? The most common suggestion is that the sea was wrapped up with notions of chaos and notions in the ancient world even in the Old Testament and even in other literature the sea was the place of evil. It was the place of darkness. It’s chaos where you frequently find the sea monsters and beasts associated elsewhere in Revelation in chapter 13 the beasts which is a chaos monster of evil emblematic of evil chaos and hostility comes up out of the sea. So the sea is frequently seen in revelation in light of other texts to indicate this as symbolic of chaos and evil.
So what that means first of all is that we shouldn’t read this text as necessarily the literal removal of the sea. I’ve talked to some people that love the ocean. They read this text and get concerned that there is not going to be in the ocean in the new creation. I don’t know if there is or not, but I’m not going to use this text to justify it because the sea here is probably being used symbolically in reference to ideas of evil chaos of that to which is inimical and hostile to God, his people and the establishment of God’s kingdom. So it has to be removed so that God’s people can enjoy life and enjoy their reward and God can dwell in the midst of God’s rule God can reign supreme.

However, I think there is more to it than that. What is interesting going back to that observation that if you took the Old Testament texts there is virtually nothing left. When I read this I wonder, does this reference to the sea being no more also have an Old Testament background? And my answer to that question is I think that is does. One of the keys is a number of these texts in the first 8 verses of chapter 21 go back to the book of Isaiah. So when I first read this phrase I started looking through Isaiah because that is a common text that John seems to allude to in these first 8 verses and elsewhere as well in chapter 21 and 22. So I began to wonder is it possible that this sea was also has an Old Testament allusion perhaps in the book of Isaiah. What you begin to notice in Isaiah is that number one, one of the key features in Isaiah is that he draws on Exodus to model for how God will restore and save his people once again in the new Exodus. Part of the new Exodus is referenced to the disappearance of the sea over and over again you have references, not all of them are directly relevant to what one finds in Revelation, but over and over again you have references to the drying up of the sea, drying up of bodies of water that probably reflect the drying of the Red Sea. The removal of the sea was a barrier to Israel crossing over eventually into their land and the sea was a barrier to that hostile barrier and needed to be removed or separated so the people could cross over onto dry land.

A more specific reference is found in Isaiah chapter 51, 9 and 10. This is
one of the most compelling backgrounds for what one reads in Revelations. Again I am drawing on the notion that John seemed to appeal to Isaiah over and over again in verse 1 of chapter 21. Over and over again he keeps going back to passages in Isaiah. Is it possible that the sea should also be read in light of 21:9 and again when God returns in the future he returns to Zion and brings salvation. Rev. 21:9 “Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength.” Referring to Jerusalem the people of God, “O arm of the Lord; awake, as the days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces?” Rahab being one of the sea monsters, “who pierced that monster through? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the great depths of the sea, so the redeemed might cross over? The ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion singing everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away.” Interestingly, in this text Rahab is in reference to the Red Sea. “Was it not you who dried up the sea or parted the sea is associated with Rahab the sea monster. Even in the original Exodus the Red Sea was already associated with Isaiah 51 with chaos and evil. The notions of the deep, as the home of the sea monster to that which was inimical to God people that which was chaotic and caused trouble. So in my opinion now in Revelation 21 and 22 when John says, “the sea was no more” I think that’s part of this Exodus motif. What John is saying is new creation again in a new Exodus he will remove the sea of chaos and evil that opposes God’s people that is inimical to God’s people that is a barrier to God’s people passing over and enjoying their inheritance. God will remove that in the days of old as he did in the first Exodus where the sea was a barrier of hostility and chaos when God dried it up so the people could cross over and eventually enter the promise land. Now God is going to do that again in Revelation 21. He will remove the sea so that the people can cross over and enjoy their inheritance to which is now the new creation in Revelation 21 and 22.

In fact it is interesting that in Isaiah 51 we saw the result of crossing over
and being restored in Zion is rejoicing and singing sorrow and sighing flee away. Notice later on after this statement the sea is no more, notice that “he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, no more death no more mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things is passed away” that’s exactly what happens in Isaiah 51. So I wonder if John means the sea will be no more I wonder if he’s not reflecting this Exodus motif of the drying up of the Red Sea that indicates chaos and evil home of the sea monster that which is inimical and hostile to God and his people and as a barrier for them to enjoy their heritance removed and dried up so that God’s people can cross over and inherit the promise land which is now the new earth.

**Revelation 21:3 and the Old Testament**

To move on to a couple of other texts, chapter 21:3 interestingly quotes a covenant formula: “they will be my people and I will be their God.” This is probably an allusion to Ezekiel chapter 37:27 where you find the new covenant formula if you go back and read that you will find that the wording is very close to Revelation 21:3. But what is interesting is in Ezekiel 37 the new covenant formula is followed in chapters 41-48 by the measuring of the new temple so you have an angel taking Ezekiel on a tour measuring its gates and all the details of the new temple interestingly that’s exactly what you find in Revelation following the covenant formula in 21:3 where he quotes Ezekiel 37. After that starting in verse 9 John now sees a vision of the new Jerusalem and relying on Ezekiel 41-48 an angel takes John not to measure the temple but now he measures the new Jerusalem modeled after Ezekiel 40-48 in fact even though chapter 22:1-5 which says then the angel showed me the river of life the water of life clear as crystal coming from the land down the river a great stream on each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing 12 crops of fruit every month and the leaves of the tree are healing of the nations. This language comes out of Ezekiel 37:1-12 so virtually this entire section starting with the covenant formula in 21:3 on to most of the rest of verse 21 and 23 where John measures the temple where he describes the water
and the river of life from the throne of the tree of life giving leaves that are for healing, all of that reflection depends on Ezekiel 40-48. So Ezekiel 37, 40-48 seems to provide an important model for John’s own conception and understanding of eschatological salvation and the restoration. Again, it’s even in the same order, the covenant formula followed by a description of the temple in Ezekiel is reflected in Revelation where you have the covenant formula from Ezekiel 37 followed by the restoration in measuring not the temple but of the city.

Now again this brings us to the question that sometimes it’s important to ask how an Old Testament text has been transformed. It’s interesting that in distinction to Ezekiel as we’ve already said John doesn’t measure a temple he measures the new Jerusalem. In fact in chapter 21 John says in his vision in verse 22 that “I did not see a temple in the city.” So unlike Ezekiel that has a separate temple John doesn’t see a temple the reason becomes clear is that because now the old creation has been removed. The old creation which was hampered by sin and evil, now the very thing that made the temple necessary in the first place now has been removed. God can now dwell directly with his people apart from the need of a temple. Therefore John doesn’t need one the entire city the entire people of God are now one big temple that now God and the lamb dwell with them directly. So there is no need for a separate physical temple because of human sinfulness. How that there is a new creation, now that the sin has been removed now that evil has been removed now, that there is a brand new creation, God can now dwell directly with his people in fulfillment of Ezekiel 37 and 40-48. There is no longer a separate temple necessary so for that reason what Ezekiel says and does in the temple now John translates that into the new Jerusalem because the entire city the entire people of God are a dwelling place of God in a temple making an additional separate temple superfluous.

Description of the New Jerusalem: Gates and Foundations

In John’s final vision a further example in the same passage of the Old Testament which is not clear necessarily at first glance, as John begins to describe
in Jerusalem in chapter 21 and especially starting verse 9 he describes it as consisting of 12 gates and upon those gates are written the 12 tribes of Israel and then 12 foundations which have the names of the 12 apostles of the lamb. Though he doesn’t tell us which tribes or which apostles go with these foundations, he’s not interested in that. He just tells us that this new Jerusalem consists of 12 gates with the names of the 12 tribes the 12 foundations which have the names of the apostles. He also describes the gates consisting of 12 pearls and he also describes the city as consisting of streets of gold.

So one question to ask is: what is the background behind all this precious jewel or precious stone imagery in Revelation? First of all it appears that that is also one of the things you don’t find in Ezekiel 40-48, the mention of precious stones. So where does John get that? You do find reference to precious stones particularly in Isaiah chapter 54 a text that we have already looked at. Here Isaiah describes the restoration of Jerusalem in terms of future in precious stones. Its gates are identified with precious stone, its foundations are sapphire different parts of the city of Jerusalem as its restored is unequaled with the different stones. So John appears and notices that the gates and foundations both appear in Isaiah chapter 54. So John in addition to Ezekiel 40-48 while he brought Isaiah 54 in to bring this idea of the restoration in terms of these precious valuable stones. But it’s interesting as we’ve said John identifies the gates with the 12 tribes and the foundations with the apostles. What also John might be doing is something very similar to the texts we have already referred to the Dead Sea Scrolls in Isaiah Pesher where the Dead Sea Scrolls interpreted Isaiah 54 as a justification for their own community. They metaphorically identify the different parts of Isaiah 54 before. The gates and the foundations had been founding members of the community. Now John appears to be doing something similar by identifying some of the elements of the city foundations especially the gates as far as founding members of the new community. With the new Jerusalem again the mention of the gates of pearl all comes out of Isaiah chapter 54. So Isaiah’s chapter of the vision
of restoration has now been picked up by John. You see what he’s doing he’s taking all these Old Testament prophetic texts and their visions of restoration and weaving them together in one grand vision to demonstrate how God’s promises are anticipated in the old prophets now find their climactic fulfillment in God dwelling with his people in a new creation. Interestingly too, the author goes even further and identifies after mentioning that the foundations of Isaiah 54 actually the 12 apostles are the stones of the lamb. He goes on and further identifies them in the rest of this chapter with specific stones. Notice what he does the foundations of the city verse 19 of Revelation 21 the foundations of the city which he just said were the 12 apostles of the lamb. Interpreting Isaiah 54 now he goes on and identifies further the foundations that the city walls are decorated with every type of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, sapphire, then the fourth emerald, fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh crystalline, the eighth beryl, and the ninth topaz. I’ll stop right there just so I don’t stumble on the others. But you get the picture, he goes through the 12 foundations identifies them with specific stones. Where else in the Old Testament do you find 12 precious stones playing such an important role you find that on the ephod of the high priest. There are 12 stones on the breastplate of the high priest. You find that in Exodus 28.

You find that also in an intriguing reference in Ezekiel 28:13. You find a very intriguing reference to the precious stones on the breastplate of the high priest which interestingly are there in reference to the context of the garden of Eden. Now we’ll return to that in a moment but my point here is by further identifying these foundations with the apostles of the lamb which John takes from Isaiah 54 by further identifying those 12 foundations on the stones on the breastplate of the high priest from Exodus and texts like Ezekiel, the author is clearly suggesting that all of God’s people function as priests. All of them function as priests who worship God and perhaps also portraying the city of purity.

**Streets of Gold**

But to go back even to a couple of other comments, it’s interesting that one
of the precious metals play such an important role in Revelation is gold. The city is made of streets of gold. That’s made its way into a lot of our popular language and our songs walking on the streets of gold. Interestingly, there are probably important references in the New Testament to this. Number one in connection with the 12 stones the high priests breastplate would signify the priestly nature of the people of God is gold plated. Gold had an important role in construction of the Tabernacle in the temple. So having gold play a role in the new Jerusalem especially the streets of gold this is a way of showing the incredible beauty of the city. But it is further emphasizing this place is the dwelling place of God. This is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Temple. This entire city is now a temple where God dwells with his people, but to go back even further it’s interesting that one of the very first references that we find to gold comes back in the very beginning and I mean the very beginning of the Old Testament in Genesis chapter 2. Here the author begins to describe the garden of Eden that is planted. Adam and Eve were to take care of it. Notice in verse 10 a river entering the garden “from Eden and from there separated into four headwaters. The name of the first is the Pishon; it winds through the entire land of Havilah, where there is gold. (The gold of that land was good; aromatic resin and onyx are also there.” Interestingly, he emphasizes the presence of gold in the association with the garden of Eden so probably again by having gold featured in the old Jerusalem in especially chapter in 22 where the author clearly relying on Ezekiel 37.

Tree of Life

Notice also in chapter 22 the author mentions the tree of life. John mentions the tree of life not just trees like Ezekiel, but the tree of life. The author wants to make it clear that by referring to the tree of life by even mentioning gold associated with the garden of Eden. It’s as if the author wants to make clear that this is not just the old restoration of the temple, but this is Eden restored. What God had in store for those people in the garden is now finally restored and fulfilled God’s intention for humanity now reaches its climax by the restored people in the
new Jerusalem which is also portrayed as a temple. Furthermore, the fulfillment of
the garden of Eden to get a couple of other examples to bring us to the end of
22:4-25. In 22:4 the author describes the people as “They will see his face and his
name will be on his foreheads.” Again this is priestly language of being in the
presence of God. Seeing his face is the goal of the worshiper in the temple. But
also the idea of having his name written on their foreheads once again it refers to
the priest having the name of God on their foreheads as they enter the temple.
Again these are all kinds of Old Testament allusions going on to demonstrate
God’s intentions for humanity going all the way back to the garden of Eden. God’s
intention was to create a humanity in midst of which he will dwell in the covenant
relationship. Now it reaches its goal and its climax.

One other interesting thing as well is that part of the vision John has is the
new Jerusalem is an all-inclusive city unlike Old Testament texts where Israel was
the focus of attention. Now Gentiles participate in this reality as well. It’s
interesting when John wants to talk about Gentiles’ inclusion he draws on the Old
Testament prophetic texts that most clearly envision Gentiles being included in the
ultimate and final restoration of God’s people and that is the book of Isaiah. So,
for example, in chapter 21 he quotes a number of texts starting from verse 24 that
the nations will walk by the light of the new Jerusalem and kings of the new earth
will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut there will be
no more night there which is an allusion to Isaiah. In other texts the glory will be
brought into it yet nothing impure will enter into it. John wants to make clear that
not only is this the fulfillment of Old Testament prophetic texts, but an
anticipation of Old Testament texts such as Isaiah is also inclusive of Gentiles. So
John has brought together a whole host of Old Testament prophetic texts
sometimes colored with Old Testament narrative texts from the garden of Eden or
from the Exodus and from the temple narrative. Now combine them into one
vision of eschatological salvation.
Revelation 22:18-19 and Deuteronomy 4:2

God now provides for his people the final example I want to draw from in Revelation that comes from the very end of the book verses 18-19 chapter 22. We find this very interesting reference to the very end of the book after Revelation 22:5. In the end of the final vision you see a series of final instructions for how the book is to be received and how it is to be responded to. In verses 18 and 19 we read this: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of the prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city” which we just read about in chapters 21 and 22 described in this book.

Now usually these verses are taken as a reference to warning against tampering with the book of Revelation sometimes adding more books to the Old Testament canon or taking books away or with Revelation we shouldn’t take books out or add sections. Usually when we think of verses 18 and 19 of Revelation 22 we often apply this to other cults, false religions that add to the Bible and they are guilty of adding to and that is doing violence to the completed canon of Scripture. So that is often how verses 18 and 19 are taken. Seldom do we ever give a second thought to whether this text applies to Christians or not. It is taken as applying to outsiders who are in danger of tampering with adding to or subtracting to the book of Revelation or the finished canon of Scripture.

However true all of that may be and however much John may have utilized this to some extent is actually tampering with the book by adding and subtracting to it, I think that we need to read this again in light of the New Testament background that is John is not the first one to talk about adding to and subtracting from the word of God from his book. In fact, I’m convinced he is drawing from language that comes right out of the Old Testament background book of Deuteronomy in reference to the Old Testament Law. For example, Deuteronomy chapter 4:2 and I’ll read verse 1 as well Deuteronomy chapter 4 “Hear O Israel the
decrees and the laws that I’m about to teach you. Follow them so that you will live and may go in a take possession of the land the Lord your God of your fathers is giving you.” Here’s verse 2: “Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you.” Furthermore, Deuteronomy chapter 12 in verse 32 we find something very similar. Deuteronomy chapter 12 in verse 32 reads again in the context of the Mosaic covenant keeping the law. To back up, 29 and 30 was warning them that “The Lord your God will cut off before you the nations you are about to invade and dispossess. But when you have driven them out and settled in their land, and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by going after their gods, saying ‘How do these nations serve their gods’ We will do the same.’ You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in fire sacrifices to their gods.” Verse 32, “See that you do all that I command you; do not add to it do not subtract from it.” In my opinion John gets this language of adding to and subtracting from the word of God. His book, his prophecy in Revelation 21 and 22 from the text of Deuteronomy which is in the context of obeying Mosaic law.

So what is interesting is that in both places when they are told to add and subtract that is the opposite of keeping it. In other words, the Israelites don’t add or subtract to the law, but be careful to keep it. In other words, I think that adding and subtracting are not so much concerned with just adding words or taking words away literally with an eraser. Erasing some of the words or writing extra laws, but instead the adding to and subtracting have to do with failure to obey the word of God. Whether one adds something else in addition or as additional requirements or takes away from it, by refusing to keep it to add to and subtract from the law according to Deuteronomy somehow is bound up with the Israelites actually obeying it. So when we get to Revelation 22 verses 18 and 19 when he warns them against adding to and subtracting from it I think he is using it in the same was as
Deuteronomy is. Don’t add or subtract to the book that is do not substitute something else especially idolatry it’s interesting that in chapter 12 of Deuteronomy it was in the context of not going after idols. So to add to the book might be to pursue idolatrous practices to take away from the book would be to neglect it and ignore it refuse to do it. So in either case when John then says, “I warn everyone and these are the words of his prophesy do not add to them and do not take away,” I take it that it is primarily referring to obedience to the book not adding to and subtracting is sort of a metaphorical way of saying don’t pursue idolatry especially, perhaps, for the context for the readers of Revelation the worship of pagan gods and emperor worship would be adding to the book. Don’t subtract from it by refusing to obey it and ignore it and shrinking away from it if someone is prone to do.

It is interesting too what I think adds to this is in verse 19 and verse 18, “I warn everyone who hears the words of this book,” who would have heard the word of the book? It would have been Christians. This is addressed to God’s people not the outsiders not to pagan observers or pagan worshipers or false teachers, false religious cults, this is addressed to God’s people they are the ones in danger of adding to and subtracting from the word of God.

In fact, these verses 18 and 19, I think provide a book end with chapter 1 and verse 3 of Revelation to help make more sense chapter 1 in verse 3. John says, “blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy” which would have been the person who actually read it to the congregation. Most New Testament books would not have been passed around and everyone read them. It would have been read by someone and the gathered congregation would have listened to it.

Notice verse 3 again, “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear it and keep it. Keep the things written in it because the time is near.” So chapter 1 begins with a blessing for the one who hears the word of God and keeps it and does what it says. Yet now the book ends with a warning and a curse for those same persons who hear the words of this
book yet they fail to keep it. Those who do so are guilty of adding to and subtracting from the word of God. That is, those who hear the word read who refuse to put it into practice, to refuse to obey it and perhaps shrink back from it because of pressure from the Roman government or those who would instead substitute idolatrous practices by worshiping pagan gods and even the Roman emperor, they are the ones who are guilty to adding to and subtracting from the word of God at the very end of the book Revelation.

So actually this text again Christians should see in this text not a commendation of false teachers cults and other religions, but this is addressed to God’s people. It reminds us of the danger of failing to keep the word of God. Instead, the necessity of not only hearing it, listening to it, doing what it says and conforming our lives to it.

**Conclusion**

So those are a number of examples of the New Testament ending with the book of Revelation. A number of examples where there is not only a challenge in identifying the Old Testament from the texts and the necessity of identifying the Old Testament texts that lie behind the New Testament, but the need to go further and ask, how does that effect the way I interpret the Old Testament texts? What difference would it make if I were to read Revelations 21 and 22 without all of those Old Testament texts in mind or lurking in the background. So one must move beyond simply identifying Old Testament passages and validating whether the author intended the allusion or not and justifying finding an allusion and wondering whether it is certain known problem. One needs to move beyond that and ask as well what might be the interpretive implication of this? What difference does it make to find an Old Testament allusion in the text as opposed to if I did not see one? What is the theological and what is the hermeneutical import of the Old Testament allusion?

So that brings us to an end our discussion of the Old Testament in the New and again an important facet of the interpretive process that again has the potential
yielding important interpretive insights. In the next session then we’ll move on to consider a couple of other features related to aspects of the interpretive process one of those being theological interpretations of the texts not just historically critically but also interpreting the texts theologically as the scriptures of the people of God and also asking questions about contextualization and application along with that. Then I intend to draw our discussion to a conclusion by doing two things by perhaps pulling together methodology. What would an interpretive method look like implementing all these principles? Then I will actually initiate that by working through a couple of biblical New Testament texts to show how these principles work.

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