

AN OVERLOOKED OLD-TESTAMENT BACKGROUND TO REVELATION 11:1

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Rev 11:1 introduces a vision in which the prophet himself is given "a reed like a rod" and told to "measure the temple of God, and the altar, and those who worship in it." The next verse continues the instruction, stating that the prophet is to "throw out and not measure" (ἐκβαλε ἕζωθεν καὶ μὴ . . . μετρήσης) the court outside the temple, "because it was given to the Gentiles/nations [τοῖς ἔθνεσιν]." The passage continues in vs. 2b with what is evidently in apposition to the outer court's being given to the Gentiles: namely, that the Holy City would be trodden by them for forty-two months. In short, then, the temple, altar, and worshippers are to be measured; the outer court/Holy City is not to be measured.

Exegetes of the book of Revelation have naturally sought for the background to this "measuring" imagery. The two passages generally called to attention as furnishing such background are Zech 2:1-5 and Ezek 40-48. The fact that these two passages refer to a "measuring line" (Zech 2:1) or "measuring reed" (Ezek 40:3) provides a common element with Rev 11:1, and *in this particular respect* these OT passages do indeed serve as background to the vision in the Apocalypse. But the commonality goes relatively little beyond this, and there are also some striking contrasts, as we shall notice below.

1. *Two Fundamental Considerations*

Before we proceed to inquire further into the OT backgrounds to Rev 11:1, two fundamental considerations with regard to the Apocalypse's own use of symbolism should be noticed. The first, which may be called (for lack of a better term) the "universalized spiritual dimension," is an approach that is common to the NT. The second, a "blending" or "merging" of images, is a phenomenon that is more restricted to the book of Revelation itself,

though closely akin in nature and purpose to the "universalized spiritual dimension," as we shall see.

The "Universalized Spiritual Dimension"

In harmony with the NT perspective in general, Revelation universalizes in such a way that OT events of local or limited character become symbols of spiritual realities and developments on a cosmic scale. For instance, just as the NT "Israel" refers to the Christian church (in a universal sense, not localized to any specific geographical region),¹ so too the "Babylon" symbol of Revelation is used in a broader-than-local way to depict forces opposed to God and to his people. The principle involved in this sort of usage is, moreover, one that is of quite general application to other symbols used throughout the Apocalypse.

It must be added, however, that the drama portrayed in the book of Revelation is nonetheless played out in more than *simply* spiritual terms, for the spiritual panorama relates directly to, and embraces concretely, specific realities in the historical arena. That is to say, *real* people are very much involved in *real* struggles as they choose either loyalty to God and the Lamb or to the anti-divine forces.

The "Blending" or "Merging" of Images

Closely related in function to this "universalizing spiritual dimension" of the symbolisms used in Revelation is the second basic phenomenon, the "blending" or "merging" of images.² Frequently, if not generally, the symbols used in the book of Revelation are drawn from *multiple sources*, most of which are different OT passages. For instance, the trumpets septet and the vials septet both draw upon the plagues on ancient Egypt and the fall of Babylon for their background imagery, the first five items in each

¹See the excellent discussion in Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich., 1983), pp. 98-146.

²The term "rebirth of images" is also a somewhat useful one, but not really adequate to describe the dynamic involved in the symbols occurring in the book of Revelation. The term is one used by Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Gloucester, Mass., 1970); but despite its value as a concept, Farrer's own manner of utilizing the principle seems at times questionable.

series being patterned after the Egyptian plagues and the sixth item suddenly transferring the scene to the Euphrates (9:14 and 16:12), the river on which ancient Babylon was situated.³ Likewise, the "Battle-of-Armageddon" imagery of Rev 16:12-14 utilizes as background both Elijah's victory on Mt. Carmel and the "drying up of the Euphrates" connected with the fall of Babylon in 539 B.C.⁴ One further, and particularly intriguing, example of this sort of multiple background images may be mentioned here—Rev 11:8, wherein "the great city" (elsewhere in Revelation designated as "Babylon") is identified with three entities—Sodom, Egypt, and the Jerusalem that crucified Christ.⁵

This sort of "blending" or "merging" of images illustrates an ontological perspective that brings together elements that are "of a kind."⁶ This "blending" or "merging" provides a heightened "composite" image of the transcendental and universalized realities being depicted, thus functioning to bring to view in an augmented way the "universalized spiritual dimension" mentioned in the preceding paragraphs. Indeed, the very *multiplicity* of the background images suggests, too, that the new image *transcends* the background entities or events, both individually and collectively (though, of course, the new image is also of a character with those background images).

³For a diagram detailing more fully this "Exodus-from-Egypt"/"Fall-of-Babylon" motif, see Kenneth A. Strand, "The Two Witnesses of Rev 11:3-12," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 129.

⁴This fact has been set forth convincingly by William H. Shea, "The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16," *AUSS* 18 (1980): 157-162.

⁵Cf. the useful discussion in Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington, D.C., 1968), pp. 102-103. Minear suggests the possible addition also of Rome; but the text does not, of course, explicitly mention Rome.

⁶This has been referred to as a "trans-historical model" by Paul S. Minear, who further points out that it "is a comprehensive rather than a disjunctive mode of seeing and thinking. It apprehends events in terms of their inner structure as responses to God's action. . . . Behind this mode of viewing was a distinctive ontological stance, to which we should give more attention than we usually do." Minear, "Ontology and Ecclesiology in the Apocalypse," *NTS* 12 (1965/66): 96. The immediate context of Minear's statements here is another, earlier discussion of Rev 11:8 (cf. the citation in n. 5, above); and notice should be taken of his full treatment of this text in this article, beginning on p. 94.

2. *Analysis of the Passages in Zechariah and Ezekiel*

We now turn our attention briefly to the traditionally suggested OT backgrounds to Rev 11:1—namely, Zech 2:1-5 and Ezek 40-48. In our analysis, it will be important to keep in mind that in Revelation the items which John is instructed to measure are the *temple*, the *altar*, and the *worshippers*, and that he is further instructed *not to measure* the outer court (equated with the “Holy City”).

Zechariah 2:1-5

The passage in Zech 2:1-5 makes no mention whatever of the temple, altar, and worshippers. Instead, the vision refers to a man going forth with a measuring line to measure “Jerusalem” (vss. 1-2). This is, of course, in striking contrast to the instructions given in Rev 11:1-2.

But the contrast goes even further. In the vision of Zechariah, an angel is sent forth to tell the man with the measuring line that “Jerusalem will be a city without walls” and that God himself will be “a wall of fire surrounding her” and “her glory within” (vss. 3-5). Thus, there was to be *no measuring* after all (if there were no physical walls, how could measurement be taken to determine the width and length [vs. 2]?). Rather, the entire scene constitutes a dramatic way of portraying God’s care and protection.

Ezekiel 40-48

The passage embracing Ezek 40-48 furnishes a very detailed account of measuring and of measurements. It begins with measurement of the wall “around the outside of the temple area” (Ezek 40:5), and proceeds to the outer court, its gateway facing east, thirty chambers encircling the court, and then the north and south gates belonging to the outer court (40:6-27). Next come the south, east, and north gates of the inner court, with other appurtenances, including two chambers for the priests (40:28-49). Then the temple itself is measured (chaps. 41-42).

After an interruption in the narrative about the measuring process (in order to portray God’s glory entering the temple and to give a message from Yahweh, 43:1-12), that narrative continues with the giving of the dimensions of the altar of burnt offering

(43:13-17). And finally, in later chapters, there are other items measured; e.g., the river flowing eastward from the south side of the temple (different depths being noted at 1000-cubit intervals) and the environs and city outside the sacred precincts (47:1-5; 48:15-35).

Although the measuring in Ezekiel is *somewhat* parallel to the instruction in Rev 11:1 in that the temple and altar are mentioned in both passages, the Ezekiel vision gives dimensions for the outer court and for the city—this in striking contrast to Rev 11:1-2. Also, the very detail furnished in the Ezekiel account relative to these items and to various appurtenances stands in marked contrast to John's vision, as does the fact that elements untouched in the Revelation reference are noted in Ezekiel (e.g., the river). Finally, the Ezekiel passage says nothing about the measuring of worshippers—one of the three basic items to be measured in Rev 11:1.

In addition to these contrasts with respect to the *subject matter* of the two measuring processes, it should be noted that there is evidence of difference in *purpose*, as well. Ezekiel's vision provides a plan for *construction* of a temple complex and for the *physical laying out* of the city and of tribal territories. John's vision, on the other hand, entails some sort of measurement that embraces already-existing entities—and certainly not in a physical sense (as is evidenced, e.g., by the inclusion of worshippers and by the very nature of the entire interlude within which the verse occurs [10:1-11:13]).⁷ And thus, in sum total, Ezek 40-48 stands more in contrast to, than in parallel with, Rev 11:1.

Summary

The one and only common element to all three passages that we have been considering—in Zechariah, Ezekiel, and Revelation—is the “measuring line” or “measuring reed.” With the exception of this specific symbol, Zech 2:1-5 manifests an absolute contrast to Rev 11:1; and Ezek 40-48 is so overwhelmingly divergent from the latter text that it, too, can hardly be considered as a basic background to John's vision.

⁷The vision of Ezekiel has closer affinity to the giving of measurements and other details for building the sanctuary in the wilderness, as presented in Exod 25-40. Rev 11:1 would seem more akin, in basic thrust at least, to the “plumb-line” vision of Amos 7:7-8, wherein there is evaluation of people—in this case, on the analogy of “a wall that is out of line.”

3. *An Overlooked Old-Testament Background to Revelation 11:1*

Is there any other OT background to the symbolism of Rev 11:1—a passage which embraces some sort of “measuring” of, specifically, the *temple*, *altar*, and *worshippers*? Indeed there is such: *Leviticus 16*, which describes the ancient Israelite “Day of Atonement” that closed the cultic year.

In that chapter, there are four basic entities noted as having atonement made for them—the priests themselves, the sanctuary, the altar, and the congregation (see vss. 6, 11, 16-18). The priesthood would obviously be omitted in any NT parallel, for Christ as High Priest—“holy, blameless, unstained, set apart from sinners” (Heb 7:26)—would need no atonement for himself. It is striking, then, that the three other exact entities to be atoned for in *Leviticus 16* are *precisely those three elements* to be “measured” in Rev 11:1.

A commonality in the *order* or *sequence* of the three items is also noteworthy. In both cases, the movement is from sanctuary/temple to altar to worshippers.⁸

The ancient Day of Atonement was a sort of final day of “measuring” within the Israelite cultic year. It had an aura of final judgment about it, for on that day separation was to take place: The people were to “afflict” themselves, and “whoever is not afflicted on this same day shall be cut off from his people” (Lev 23:27-28, RSV).

The parallel in Rev 11:1 certainly embraces, too, a “measuring” in the spiritual, rather than physical, sense. This is obvious from the context, wherein the “temple” and “altar” refer to heavenly entities, not a physical temple in the city of Jerusalem (cf. the general use of temple imagery in Revelation, as e.g., in 4-5,

⁸The atonement process moved from the inner recesses of the sanctuary to the altar, with the effect ultimately for the congregation—and also with the final act itself (the “live-goat” or “scapegoat” ceremony) being performed for the congregation (Lev 16:17-22).

8:3-5, 11:19, etc.).⁹ And the “measuring” of worshippers is itself terminology that has spiritual, not physical, implications.¹⁰

4. Conclusion

In summary, the exegetes and commentators tend to look upon Zech 2:1-5 and Ezek 40-48 as *the* basic OT background sources for Rev 11:1. Indeed, there is a commonality in the “measuring-line” or “measuring-reef” symbolism used in the three passages. But aside from this, the text in the book of Revelation is more distanced

⁹At this juncture, it may be pertinent to point out that the question of which altar—altar of burnt offering or altar of incense—is intended in Rev 11:1 is not really important for us. The text itself does not make the distinction; but in the OT backgrounds, both altars were involved in the procedures on the Day of Atonement (compare Exod 30:10 with Leviticus 16). So also in the introductory setting for the Trumpets septet in the Apocalypse (within which Rev 11:1 falls as part of an “interlude”), both altars (in a heavenly setting) come to view (8:3-5). What is important to notice is that in literary dependence and conceptualization, the parallel between Rev 11:1 and Leviticus 16 is exact (given, of course, the logical omission of the priesthood in the Apocalypse reference). Whichever altar is intended in Rev 11:1, the parallel exists as to *terminology*.

So also, it is not necessary for our purposes to speculate concerning the precise meaning of “outer court” in Rev 11:1—whether the symbolism is based on the “Court of the Gentiles” of Herod’s Temple (a somewhat logical deduction in view of the statement in the following verse), the “outer court” in Ezekiel’s Temple Vision, or simply the “outer court” of the ancient sanctuary in the wilderness. In fact, it could well be that this symbol as used in Rev 11:1 represents a “blending” or “merging” of images—akin to what I have pointed out in the first section of this article as a common practice in the Apocalypse. The same is possibly true too, of course, with respect to the symbol of “altar.”

¹⁰It may be of interest to note that the same basic Greek word used for the measuring process in Rev 11:1 (here the imperative form, in the command μέτρησον τὸν ναὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, “measure the temple of God”) occurs also in 2 Cor 10:12, in a statement about certain Corinthian church members who were “measuring [or, evaluating] themselves by themselves” (ἐν ἑαυτοῖς ἑαυτοὺς μετροῦντες). In fact, there is somewhat of a play on the “measuring” concept in the following verses (cf. μέτρον τοῦ κανόνος and ὁ θεὸς μέτρου in vs. 13, and τὰ ἄμετρα in vss. 13 and 15).

A possible OT parallel for this general type of usage may be found in 2 Sam 8:2, where the Moabites who had been defeated by King David were “measured” into two groups—those to be put to death and those whose lives were to be spared. (The LXX reads that David διεμέτρησεν αὐτοὺς ἐν σχοινίοις κοιμίσας αὐτοὺς ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, καὶ ἐγένετο τὰ δύο σχοινίσματα τοῦ θανατῶσαι, καὶ τὰ δύο σχοινίσματα ἐξώγησεν.)

from, than near to, those suggested OT root sources. There is, however, another OT passage that stands in striking parallel with Rev 11:1—namely, *Leviticus 16*, the description of the ancient Israelite Day of Atonement. With the exception of the omission of the priesthood in Rev 11:1, the same three elements under review are common to both passages: temple, altar, and worshippers. The fact that that one particular omission is made is perfectly logical, for Christ as NT High Priest would need no atonement (or “measuring”) made for himself.

It has been frequently suggested that the “measuring” instruction given to John indicates “protection,” “preservation,” “making secure.”¹¹ The basis for the deduction is at fault, however, for the conclusion rests on the statement of Zech 2:5 that God will be to Jerusalem “a wall of fire surrounding her.” As we have noted above, the Zechariah passage is strikingly in contrast to Rev 11:1 with respect to that which was to be measured by the man with the measuring line, and also in that that man was *not* to do the measuring after all, inasmuch as God himself would be the “wall of fire.” The implication of this entire passage in Zech 2:1-5 is therefore, as R. H. Mounce has aptly pointed out, that Jerusalem “need not be measured in order to erect walls because of the adequate protection provided by God’s presence.”¹²

That the reference in Rev 11:1 entails, in some sense, “protection” is not, however, a totally irrelevant concept, for certainly

¹¹Commentators sometimes refer to “destruction” as another meaning of the “measuring-line” symbol, though usually recognizing the inapplicability of that concept to Rev 11:1. Such texts as 2 Kgs 21:13 and Lam 2:8 are cited in support of this meaning, but a careful analysis of those references suggests that it is not the destruction *per se* that is intended by the symbol, but rather a judgment that is to *result* in the destruction (and/or to delineate the dimensions or extent of the destruction). A pertinent OT reference that quite clearly embodies this same sort of concept is 2 Sam 8:2, wherein is depicted a “measuring” of King David’s Moabite captives—with a view to putting some to death and to sparing the lives of others (see the second paragraph of n. 10, above).

J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, AB 38 (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), p. 176, has noted several possible explanations of the “measuring” in Rev 11:1, mentioning “destruction” as one of these. She also includes “rebuilding or restoring,” and divides “preservation” into two kinds—from physical harm and from spiritual harm. She herself prefers the idea of “protection.”

¹²Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1977), p. 219, n. 3.

there is security for the true worshippers of God and the Lamb, as related passages in the book of Revelation itself make clear.¹³ But the implications of the imagery in Rev 11:1 do not stop there. It is necessary to look further—to the most explicitly related of the OT background passages, *Leviticus 16*, and to the significance of that passage—in order to obtain a more focused and comprehensive understanding of what is entailed in the “measuring” process specified in Rev 11:1.¹⁴

¹³There is a paralleling literary pattern that links together in certain important respects the so-called “interludes” in Rev 7, 10-11, and 14. This literary pattern has been outlined in Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed. (Naples, Florida, 1979), p. 48. The element of “securing” is, of course, in view in the “sealing” in Rev 7; but other motifs come also to view in Rev 14. I plan to give attention to these “interludes” in a future study.

¹⁴The vision in Rev 11 is within what may be called the “*historical series*” section of the book (cf. Strand, *Interpreting*, pp. 51, 52), but another “measuring” portrayal occurs in Rev 21:15-17, in relationship to the eschatological eternal New Jerusalem. It is of interest that in the former passage the measuring rod is like a reed and the prophet is instructed to do the measuring, whereas in the latter passage the measuring rod is of gold and the angel does the measuring. Also, it is the temple, altar, and worshippers that are to be measured in Rev 11:1, with no dimensions indicated; but it is the city and its walls that are measured in Rev 21:15-17, with the dimensions stated. The scope of the present article precludes a discussion here of the relationship between these two “measuring-rod” visions, but I hope in a later study to treat this matter, as well as to elaborate on the connections among the “interludes” mentioned in n. 13, above.