

THE TRIBES OF REVELATION 7 AND THE LITERARY COMPETENCE OF JOHN THE SEER

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Richard Bauckham¹ has recently offered some criticisms of my analysis² of the 144,000 “sealed out of all the tribes of Israel” depicted in Rev 7:5–8. As others have by now begun to draw applications from my conclusions,³ I find it appropriate to reply briefly to some of the concerns Bauckham has raised. I believe it is important to continue this discussion not simply for the sake of the interpretation of these verses, although they are of crucial importance for an assessment of such systems as dispensational premillennialism, but also for the sake of an appreciation of the literary skill of the author of the last book in the canon. At stake in our discussion is whether he was in command of his craft, making purposeful creative use of traditional imagery and expectations to communicate a clear message, or, rather, plagued by carelessness and forgetfulness, unable ultimately to execute the grand design upon which he had embarked.

I should note, first of all, that Bauckham and I share an essentially similar interpretive approach to the book of Revelation. We both understand the technique of the author of the book (“John,” by his own description) to be the ironic transformation of conventional Jewish messianic expectations into Jewish-Christian images. We differ only on how this transformation is actually accomplished in Revelation 7.

Bauckham’s particular understanding, based on a parallel between this chapter and Revelation 5, is that an opening “hearing” section (7:4–8) announces a conventional Jewish messianic expectation, but then a “seeing” section (7:9–14) ironically transforms this expectation, giving it a Christian interpretation. An important corollary for him is that

we should not look, as Smith does, for a Christian interpretation of the list of twelve tribes within 7.4–8. This image as such is a traditional Jewish image

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¹ R. Bauckham, “The List of the Tribes in Revelation 7 Again,” *JSNT* 42 (1991) 99–115.

² C. R. Smith, “The Portrayal of the Church as the New Israel in the Names and Order of the Tribes in Revelation 7.5-8,” *JSNT* 39 (1990) 111–118. Since the publication of my article, M. Wojciechowski has been kind enough to furnish me with an English translation of his article, “Kosciol jako Izrael wedlug Apokalipsy,” *Studia Theologica Varsaviensia* 26 (1988) 221–234, in which a similar analysis of Revelation 7 is pursued. Wojciechowski argues that the “‘messianic’ order of the tribes . . . suggests a soteriological intention in the dressing of the list.” Judah is listed first, rather than Levi as in “later Judaism,” because it is the tribe of Jesus. The promotion of Manasseh ahead of his father Joseph may be “an allusion to the conversion of the Samaritans.”

³ E.g. S. C. Mott, “Multicultural Inclusiveness in Revelation,” *Christian Social Action* 6/6 (June 1993) 37.

of the people of God called to military service in the messianic war. The Christian interpretation comes in 7.9–14, which shows the same people celebrating their victory in heaven, but shows them to be an innumerable multitude of martyrs from all the nations.⁴

If it is indeed John's authorial intention to pair a recognizable Jewish image in 7:4–8 with a significantly distinct Christian reinterpretation in 7:9–14, however, I must object that he bungles the execution of this intention quite badly. The list of tribes in 7:5–8 simply does not conform to what Bauckham himself describes, based on a survey of contemporary Jewish texts, as a normative or conventional order. Bauckham suggests that we should perhaps "understand [John's] list as an attempt to list the tribes in an intelligible order which failed owing to faulty memory."⁵ But this explanation, in my view, only makes the problem worse. How can we consider John an author who expected his audience to recognize a traditional image of Jewish messianic expectation, in order to appreciate its Christian transformation, if he was at the same time a "writer who did not really care in what order he listed the tribes"⁶ and therefore presented them in a form that was not intelligible? Indeed, on what basis can it be shown that John was trying to do what Bauckham asserts if in fact he actually did something else? What textual evidence do we have that John ever really had the intention Bauckham claims he "failed" to achieve?

The only such evidence would have to be found in Revelation 5, a chapter that supposedly illustrates a compositional principle shared with Revelation 7.⁷ But does this chapter really establish a pattern of "hearing" a Jewish expectation and then "seeing" a Christian transformation? I think not. It is true that John "hears the victory that has been won by the Lion of the tribe of Judah," as Bauckham notes.⁸ But John himself does not write "I heard." He simply records the spoken statement. He does say twice, however, "I saw" (*kai eidon*): "I saw . . . a scroll" (5:1), "I saw a strong angel" (5:2). Thus while 5:1–5 does indeed present a characteristically Jewish expectation, on textual grounds we should really consider it a "seeing" rather than a "hearing" passage, if such distinctions are to be observed. Similarly it is true that when John gives this expectation a Christian transformation he writes "I saw [*kai eidon*] a Lamb" (5:6), but he continues to write, "I saw, and I heard [*kai eidon kai ekousa*] . . . the voice of many angels" (5:11), and "I heard [*ekousa*]⁹ every creature" (5:13). Revelation 5:6–14 is therefore not simply a "seeing" passage but rather, on textual grounds, both a "seeing" and a "hearing" passage.

⁴ Bauckham, "List" 106.

⁵ *Ibid.* 112.

⁶ *Ibid.* 113.

⁷ In the case of Revelation 5 and 7 the chapter divisions correspond conveniently with complete literary units. Revelation 5 may legitimately be studied as a discrete unit since all of it deals with the question, "Who is worthy to open the scroll?" Revelation 7 is similarly unified as an interlude between the sixth and seventh seals.

⁸ Bauckham, "List" 102.

⁹ The variant *kai ekousa* is attested in a few MSS.

We may note in the same way that in 7:4 John does write “I heard [*kai ēkousa*] the number of the sealed,” but the antecedent here is found in a statement made by an angel John has “seen”: “and I saw [*kai eidon*] another angel . . . saying, ‘Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees till we have sealed the servants of God’” (7:2–3). The sealing of the messianic army, I would argue, is therefore not just a “hearing” passage but both a “hearing” and a “seeing” passage. In 7:9–17, finally, while John does begin with “after this I saw [*eidon*],” much of what he “sees” he “hears,” since these verses contain the kind of dialogue and hymnic material that qualified 5:5 as a “hearing” passage in Bauckham’s analysis, even though a formal *ēkousa* was missing there while the expression *eidon* was present twice.

All of this simply illustrates how difficult it is to maintain a consistent distinction between “seeing” and “hearing” passages throughout the book of Revelation. This being the case, I would also suggest that the distinction between Jewish expectation and Christian transformation may not be so tightly maintained either. Rather, in the case of a passage like Revelation 7 the transformation may begin even as the expectation is being announced. John seems quite comfortable mixing the two elsewhere. The walls of the new Jerusalem, for example, bear the “names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel” on their gates but the “names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” on their foundations (21:12–14).

If we allow that Christian transformation may begin even as Jewish expectations are announced, then we are indeed justified in inquiring for purposeful intentions behind the changes to the list of tribes in Rev 7:5–8. It becomes unnecessary to appeal to fortuitous carelessness or forgetfulness on John’s part to account for details that do not fit an analysis from which Christian expressions must be excluded on the basis of a “seeing” versus “hearing” distinction. Beyond confirming my analysis of the passage, this has the much more satisfying result of reassuring us as to the literary competence of John the seer.

John’s consistent purposefulness may be defended at each stage of the transformation of the list of the tribes. I will now revisit my discussion of the specific changes I believe John makes to a conventional listing of the tribes, in order to answer the criticisms Bauckham has leveled against various points. Again, he and I begin with basically the same premise. We both understand the transformation in 7:5–8, whether intentional or accidental, to have been achieved in essentially the same way: John started with a conventional listing of the tribes in an order his audience would have considered normative, and then he rearranged them. Moreover we both agree that Judah is placed at the head of the list to represent an expectation that the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah.

Bauckham argues, however, that this need not necessarily be a Christian expectation. He advances some helpful evidence from Pseudo-Philo and Josephus to the effect that Levi would not automatically have been listed first if literal Israel were in view anywhere within first-century Judaism. I would still argue, however, that in apocalyptic Judaism the more likely expectation would be that Levi would head the list. One should consider, for ex-

ample, the prediction in *T. Judah* 25:1 of the order of the tribes' primacy in the resurrection: "Levi, the first, I [Judah] the second." A similar expectation is expressed slightly earlier in that same testament: "Love Levi so that you may endure. . . . To me [Judah] God has given the kingship and to him, the priesthood; and he has subjected the kingship to the priesthood" (21:1–2).¹⁰ In short, we need to ask not whom any and all first-century Jews would be expecting at the head of the list, but rather whom John's audience would be expecting, and I think we may justifiably assign more weight to works in the same apocalyptic tradition in which John was writing than to Pseudo-Philo or Josephus. I still believe, therefore, that John actually "promotes" Judah to the head of the list and that this is an explicitly Christian confession when considered within the apocalyptic literary tradition.

Bauckham and I both also agree that the essential change is achieved by starting with a normative list, organized on a matriological principle, and then "promoting" the Zilpah and Bilhah tribes en bloc ahead of all the other tribes except Judah and Reuben. This is true, as a matter of fact, whether we start with the order I consider normative or with the order Bauckham considers normative. (In my scheme, the handmaiden tribes are just promoted a little higher, since they start a little lower.)

We disagree, however, on why this change was made. Bauckham suggests that "such a change of position could be made if a list which was deliberately ordered were copied by a writer who did not really care in what order he listed the [blocks of] tribes."¹¹ He argues that such an appeal to capriciousness or carelessness is preferable to my explanation because "it is . . . hard to see how a revision of the order of precedence among the tribes of Israel could represent the inclusion of the Gentiles in the New Israel."¹²

But again, if we allow that John may be beginning a Christian transformation even as he presents a Jewish expectation, this possibility does not seem unreasonable. John elsewhere uses characters who are ostensibly "Jews" to represent those who are "Christians" (irrespective of their ethnicity). In Rev 12:17, for example, the "offspring" of the woman who wears a crown of twelve stars (obviously an image of Israel) are explained to be "those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." So it is not intrinsically improbable that some of the "tribes of Israel" in Revelation 7 might stand for Gentiles if the changes John makes in the list of tribes are a purposeful Christian expression.

I do accept Bauckham's helpful critique of the suggestion I cited approvingly from Swete and Hengstenberg—namely, that the Christian interpretation here has to do with those tribes whose Galilean territory was the initial focus of Christ's ministry.¹³ But I would still find the "promotion" of the handmaiden tribes purposeful rather than capricious, even on the basis

¹⁰ My quotations from the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* here and below are from *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Vol. 1: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Garden City: Doubleday, 1983).

¹¹ Bauckham, "List" 113.

¹² *Ibid.* 102.

¹³ Smith, "Portrayal" 114–115.

of Bauckham's normative order, whereby they would only be promoted over most of Leah's sons since they would already be listed ahead of Rachel's. If, as I argue, we should seek to explain the changes John makes to the list as a Christian transformation, what better explanation is there for the change he makes here than an attempt to depict the admission to privilege of those born low—unless it is indeed simple carelessness?

The final change in the normative list, whether we start with Bauckham's or mine, is the effective replacement of Dan by Manasseh. I argue that this is achieved by simple substitution, whereas Bauckham suggests that Joseph first is replaced by Manasseh and Ephraim, Dan is "omitted in order to keep the number to twelve,"¹⁴ and then Ephraim is renamed Joseph. An obvious objection here is that if Joseph is to be restored to the list in place of one of his sons, why should he ever be dropped from the normative list in the first place in favor of two of his sons?

Be that as it may, we may also legitimately ask why, if one tribe must be dropped to keep the list to twelve, Dan in particular is omitted. Bauckham dismisses as anachronistic my suggestion that this may be due to an expectation that antichrist would come from the tribe of Dan. But besides the OT background to this expectation, which Bauckham himself cites in a footnote,¹⁵ there is a clear prediction of the apostasy of this tribe in *T. Dan* 5:4. Addressing his children the patriarch warns: "I know that in the last days you will defect from the Lord, you will be offended at Levi, and revolt against Judah." Since the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* date from the second century BC and Bauckham himself considers them valuable evidence of what expectations John shared with his audience about a normative list of the tribes, I do not see how my suggestion is really all that anachronistic.

But Bauckham also adds that, in any case, for John antichrist was "the imperial power of Rome"¹⁶ and that therefore John personally would have had no interest in eliminating Dan from the list of the tribes of Israel even if his contemporaries had associated this tribe with antichrist. Here we should specify, for accuracy's sake, that the term "antichrist" never actually appears in Revelation. John speaks of the power of Rome as the "beast." If the term "antichrist" were used and were reserved for Rome, Bauckham's point would be demonstrated. But not only is the term not used; the concept behind it is applied to others besides Rome. The church in Smyrna, for example, is consoled in the face of opposition from "those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2:9). Thus apostasy and blasphemy leading to the persecution of the true people of God are neither limited to Rome nor ruled out from the people of Israel. The omission of Dan may indeed represent the danger of apostasy, given the urgent warning against this danger the book of Revelation was written to sound.

Given this, however, another tribe does need to be added to "keep the number to twelve." The obvious candidate is one of the sons of Joseph. In

¹⁴ Bauckham, "List" 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 100 n.1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 101.

terms of why Manasseh is chosen rather than Ephraim I will simply reiterate what I wrote earlier: The former is probably preferred because of the latter's "unsavory reputation in prophetic literature, particularly Hosea."¹⁷

In conclusion, I would continue to advocate an approach to Revelation 7 that seeks to understand its distinctive features as the purposeful innovations of a skilled writer who not only had a master plan of offering Jewish-Christian reinterpretations of conventional Jewish images but also executed the plan successfully. I believe this approach will prove more profitable over time, particularly in dealing with such widely contested questions as the identity of the 144,000, than one in which recalcitrant details are accounted for by appeal to fortuitous slips of the hand or lapses of memory.

¹⁷ Smith, "Portrayal" 115.