

SEMITIC INFLUENCE IN REVELATION: SOME FURTHER EVIDENCE

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In a previous article I suggested that the use of *ek* in the book of Revelation was under significant Semitic influence.¹ This significance extended beyond the simple fact that recourse to Hebrew and Aramaic grammar seemed able to explain the otherwise surprisingly high incidence of this preposition in the book, for in certain cases allowance for Hebrew/Aramaic idiom also had important consequences for the translation of the verse involved.

The present study extends my earlier discussion. Here, however, I survey several different prepositional phrases, rather than focusing upon one particular preposition. Thus, while in the first article I endeavored to show that the extent of Semitic influence upon prepositions in Revelation is more than surface deep, the present study suggests that it is ubiquitous.

1. *Poiēsai Polemon Meta*

There can be little doubt that the phrases *polemein meta* and *poiein polemon meta* (meaning "to war against") are Semitisms, for although such constructions appear in some eight verses in Revelation (2:16; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:4, 7; 17:14; 19:19) and are evident in the LXX (e.g., 1 Kgs 17:33, 4 Kgs 19:9) they are nowhere found in Classical Greek.² The papyri give a few examples of the construction, as R. H. Charles has noted,³ but the fact remains that in Revelation *meta* is used to indicate the enemy "with" whom one is

¹K. G. C. Newport, "The Use of *Ek* in Revelation: Evidence of Semitic Influence," *AUSS* 24 (1986):223-230.

²A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (New York, 1914), p. 610.

³R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1920), 1:CXXXiii.

fighting, to the exclusion of the normal Classical and Hellenistic usage of *epi* or simple accusative of direct object. In Rev 11:7b, for example, we read: *to thērion to anabainon ek tēs abussou poiēsei met' autōn polemon kai nikēsei autous kai apoktenei autous* ("the beast that ascends out of the pit will make war against them and overcome them and kill them"). Here the clause *poiēsei met' autōn polemon* clearly means "to make war against," whereas this construction in Classical Greek would mean "to make war in company with" (i.e., "as an ally to").⁴ The explanation for the usage in Revelation lies in the Hebrew/Aramaic construction which underlies the Greek. In investigating this construction, Charles has drawn attention to the LXX of Dan 7:21, where the Aramaic phrase *ʿābdā qerāb ʿim qaddišîn w^eyāklā l'hōn* is rendered as *poiēsei met' autōn polemon kai nikēsei autous*.⁵ Similarly, Theodotion has rendered this verse as *epoiei polemon meta tōn hagiōn kai ischusen pros autous*.

Other examples of the use of *meta* to translate *ʿim* or *ʿet* where the prepositions have a hostile meaning can be found in the LXX. In addition to those given above we might note Gen 14:2. Here *epoiēsan polemon meta Balla* is the rendering for *ʿāsū milhāmā ʿet-bera^c* ("they made war against Bera"). Such a meaning is possible for the Hebrew prepositions,⁶ but for *meta* this usage is foreign.

In the light of these OT examples the construction in Revelation can be understood. The author has in mind a Hebrew or Aramaic construction which he translates into literal Greek. This has not led to misunderstanding in English translations, since the English "with" (which properly translates *meta*) may be used in a hostile sense in conjunction with the verb "to war" or "to make war." The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is thus justified in its strict rendering of *meta* as "with" in all the verses of Revelation noted above as using this sort of construction. The NIV is likewise correct when it translates "against" (in six of the verses) and "attack them" (in Rev 11:7, for *poiēsei met' autōn polemon*). The RSV makes the meaning clear by translating *meta* as "on" or "against"—translations which, however, are certainly not explained by regular Greek grammar.

⁴As, e.g., in Homer, *Iliad* 13:700 and Thucydides 8:24.

⁵Charles, 1:286.

⁶Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907), pp. 86, 767 (hereinafter BDB).

2. *Skēnōsei Ep' Autous*

The construction *skēnōsei ep' autous* found in Rev 7:15b does not appear to be "good Greek," for how is the phrase to be translated? "Dwell upon" does not make sense. Neither would one expect the translation "dwell at," "by," "over," "before," or "to"—all of which are English equivalents for the Greek *epi*. But an explanation is possible.

In Judg 5:17 (LXX) we read: *Asēr ekathisen paralian thalassōn kai epī dieksodois autou skēnōsei*. The Hebrew for this verse is *ʾāšēr yāšab l'ḥôp yammîm w^eal miprāšāyw yiškôn*. It is apparent, therefore, that the translators of the LXX have employed *skēnōsei epī* to render *yiškôn ʿal*. The NEB translates this verse as "Asher lingered by the sea-shore, and by its creeks he stayed." This translation is justified, since *šākan ʿal* certainly has the meaning of "to stay by";⁷ but the Hebrew may also mean "to dwell among" or "by," as a substitute for *šākan b^e*.⁸ In this light, Judg 5:17 may be translated, "Asher lingered by the sea shore, and he dwelt by (= among) its creeks." Likewise, Rev 7:15 could be rendered, "And the one who sits upon the throne will dwell by (= among) them."

Translators of the English Bibles have had difficulties with Rev 7:15. The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures and the NIV have erred on the side of being too literal: "The one seated on the throne will spread his tent over them." The RSV has gone to the other extreme, being too free in translating the verse, "and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence." The NEB and KJV agree that *skēnoō epī* means "dwell among" ("with," NEB), and are likely to be correct.

3. *En* = "At the Price of"

According to Charles and F. Blass and A. Debrunner, the preposition *en* as used in Rev 1:5 and 5:9 is a Hebraism translating *b^e* in the sense of "at the price of" or "in exchange for."⁹ This could well be the case, for *b^e* certainly has this meaning.¹⁰ In Isa

⁷BDB, p. 1015.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Charles, 1:147; and F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (London, Eng., 1961), p. 117.

¹⁰BDB, p. 90.

7:23, for example, we have $\text{ᾶelep gepen b}^{\text{e}}\text{ᾶelep kāseḗ}$ (“a thousand vines at the price of [or worth] a thousand pieces of silver”; LXX, *chiliai ampeloi chiliōn siklōn*), and in Lam 1:11 we find $\text{nātnū mah}^{\text{a}}\text{mawdêhem b}^{\text{e}}\text{ᾶōkel}$ (“they gave their desirable things in exchange for food”; LXX, *edōkan ta epithumēmata autēs en brōsei*). For further examples, see also Eccl 4:9 and 2 Kgs (= 2 Sam) 24:24.

This sort of usage of *en* has no parallel in classical literature, where the price for which an object is bought is regularly denoted by the genitive case.¹¹ C. F. D. Moule, however, has rejected the view that *en* here reflects the concept “at the price of,” arguing that it is simply an extension of the instrumental usage.¹² But Moule’s argument is not convincing. He apparently is unable to produce evidence that Hellenistic Greek authors who were not under Semitic influence made such an extension of the instrumental. Therefore, the explanation of Charles and Blass-Debrunner is more probably the correct one.

4. Instrumental *En*

Charles has commented at some length upon the instrumental use of *en* in the Apocalypse:

The most noteworthy use of *ἐν* in our author is its instrumental use. Thus it occurs 33 times, whereas it does not occur at all in J [Gospel of John] (save in quasi-instrumental sense in the phrase *ἐν τούτῳ*: see Abbot, *Gr.* 256), nor yet in the Pauline or Catholic Epp. save once in 2 Pet. It is found 34 times in the Synoptics (according to Moulton and Geden), 3 times in Acts, and 3 in Hebrews. Moulton (*Gr.*, pp. 12, 61, 104) thinks that the publication of the Tebtunis Papyri (1902) has “rescued the instrumental *ἐν* from the class of Hebraisms” in the case of *ἐν μαχαίρῃ*, Lk 22⁴⁹, and *ἐν ῥάβδῳ*, 1 Cor 4²¹. To this claim Abbott (*Gr.* 256n.) rejoins effectively. But even though the instrumental *ἐν* does occur in the papyri sporadically (where the influence of Jewish traders may have been at work), this fact cannot account in any case for the preponderating use of *ἐν* in our author. No adequate explanation can be found save in its origination in a

¹¹H. W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), sec. 1336.

¹²C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, Eng., 1959), p. 77.

mind steeped in Semitic. Even Moulton (p. 61n.) concedes that this *ἐν* "came to be used rather excessively . . . by men whose mother tongue was Aramaic."¹³

Since the instrumental use of *en* in classical Greek and in the papyri is not in dispute, the construction cannot, strictly speaking, be called a Semitism. But the frequency of its use in the NT and especially in Revelation argues for Semitic influence.

We have already noted that Charles describes the instrumental use of *en* in the papyri as "sporadic."¹⁴ Nor are occurrences of instrumental *en* common in classical literature, a fact attested to by the difficulty with which Moulton and Milligan document their case that instrumental *en* is not a Hebraism.¹⁵ They are, it seems, unable to find early occurrences, but rather put forward examples drawn from literature that are not of significantly great chronological distance from the NT.

On the other hand, examples of this instrumental use of *en* are indeed numerous in the book of Revelation. We may consider, for example, Rev 2:27, 12:5, and 19:15, all of which have the phrase *en rābdō sidēraq*. In these verses *en* clearly has instrumental force and cannot be reduced to a more original meaning. Moreover, an exact parallel to the usage in these verses is found in Ps 2:9, which reads, *t'ērōcēm b'ešēbet barzel* (translated in the LXX as *poimaneis autous en rābdō sidēraq*; see also Exod 21:20 and Mic 5:1, LXX).

Similar to *en rābdō sidēraq* is *en romphia* found in Rev 2:16, and *en machairē* in Rev 13:10. An OT equivalent to this last verse is found in Josh 10:11, which is *behāreb* (LXX, *machairā*).

Possibly also instrumental is the phrase *en phonē megalē* found in Rev 5:2; 14:7, 9, 15; 19:17. These verses are to be compared with the instrumental case without the preposition in seven other places: 5:12; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 10:3; 14:18. Both of these Greek expressions are found in the LXX as translating *b'eqōl gadōl* (see Gen 39:14; 1 Kgs [= 1 Sam] 28:12; 3 Kgs [1 Kgs] 18:27; 2 Chron 20:19). The author of Revelation, aware of both idioms for expressing the instrument, uses them without any obvious distinction in meaning.

¹³Charles, I:CXXX.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London, 1952), p. 210.

Other examples of instrumental *en* are found in Rev 2:23, 9:20, 16:8, and 18:8. These, in addition to those examples given above, show that this usage of *en* is common in Revelation, a fact best explained by the imitation of Hebrew/Aramaic idiom.

5. *Apo* Expressing Agent

A feature which is uncommon in classical literature, yet present in the book of Revelation, is the use of *apo* to express agent. We find such a use, for example, in Rev 9:18: *apo tōn triōn plegōn toutōn apektanthēsan to tritōn tōn anthrōpōn* ("and a third of mankind was killed by the three plagues"). Here *apo* has replaced the more classical *hupo*, a phenomenon which, according to Charles, is "rare" in the NT.¹⁶ The idiom is found once again in Rev 12:6: *topon hētoimasmenon apo tou theou* ("a place prepared by God"). Such usage may be based upon Semitic syntax, for the Hebrew/Aramaic *min* regularly denotes the agent by which an action is done, and the Semitic preposition is sometimes translated using *apo* in the LXX (see, e.g., Jer 4:26).

6. *Apo Stadiōn Chiliōn*

The Greek of Rev 14:20 may also be under significant Semitic influence. The verse reads, *kai eksēlthen haima ek tēs lēnou achri tōn chalinōn tōn hippōn apo stadiōn chiliōn heksakosiōn* ("and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia," NIV). Charles notes that this expression occurs also in John 11:18 and 21:8 but nowhere else in the NT.¹⁷ He rejects the thesis that it is a Latinism, as do Moulton,¹⁸ Blass and Debrunner,¹⁹ and A. T. Robertson.²⁰ Robertson, in fact, considers any resemblance of the construction to *a milibus passuum duobus* (Caesar, *De Bello Gallico* 2.7.3) as purely coincidental, and he points out that the construction has a good, if late, Greek background, appearing in Strabo, Diodorus, and Plutarch.

¹⁶Charles, 1:321.

¹⁷Ibid., 1:CXXViii.

¹⁸James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh, 1908), 1:101-102.

¹⁹Blass and Debrunner, p. 88.

²⁰Robertson, p. 575.

But there is also an Hebraic explanation for the construction, though Charles seems not to have noticed it. Isa 22:3 reads, *kol-qešînayik nādēdû yahad miqqešet ʿussārû kol-nimšāʿayik ʿussērû yahdāw mērāhōq bārāhû*. The RSV translates this verse, "All of you who were found were captured, though they had fled far away." The last part of this verse might be rendered literally as "they fled 'to a distance of' afar" (LXX, *porrō pepheugasin*). Here, then, the preposition *min* in *mērāhōq*, means "to a distance of," as does the *apo* of Rev 14:20.

This Semitic explanation of the otherwise confusing Greek syntax of Rev 14:20 is reinforced when Isa 57:9b is noted, for in this verse we read, *wattēšallēhî širayik ʿad mērāhōq . . .*, which the LXX renders as *kai apesteilas presbeis huper ta horia sou*. Once again *mērāhōq* seems to mean "to a distance of" afar.

Similar Semitic influence may explain the phrase *apo makrōthen* in Rev 18:10, 15, 17. This construction, whilst being acceptable Greek, may also reflect good Hebrew. In Gen 22:4, for example, we have *wayyar ʿet-hammāqôm mērāhōq* ("and he saw the place 'from a distance'"; LXX, *eiden ton topon makrothen*). Similar is Neh 12:43, *wattiššāma ʿsimḥat yerûšālain mērāhōq* ("and the joy of Jerusalem was heard unto a great distance"; LXX, *kai ekousthē . . . apo makrothen*). The parallels with Rev 18:10, 15, 17 are clear.

7. *Egeneto Eis*

Two examples of the construction *egeneto eis* are found in Revelation: 8:11 and 16:19. There can be little doubt that in both these cases a Semitism is involved, the Greek phrase being used in imitation of the common *hāyâ lē* in Hebrew. The replacement of the more usual predicative nominative with *eis* and the accusative case after the verb *egeneto* is frequently found in NT Greek where Semitic influence is likely (e.g., Matt 21:42; Luke 13:19; John 16:20; Judg 17:12; 1 Kgs 18:17 LXX).

8. *Conclusion*

The prepositional phrases surveyed above clearly indicate Semitic influence in the book of Revelation. The list could easily have been expanded: For example, *kopsontai epi* in Rev 1:7 probably reflects *sāpad ʿal*, meaning "to mourn because of," as in Zech 12:10 (see also Aquila 2 Sam 11:26); and *chairō epi* in Rev 11:10

may well correspond to the Hebrew *šāmah ʿal* (see Isa 39:2). Similarly, the phrase *lalei met' emou* (Rev 1:12; 4:1; 10:8; 17:1; 21:9, 15), which is unusual Greek, doubtless depends upon the common Hebrew expression *dibber ʿim* (see Num 11:17 LXX). And again, *basileuein epi* (Rev 5:10; cf. Judg 9:8, 10, 12 LXX), *echōn eksousian epi* (Rev 2:26 et passim; cf. Neh 5:15 [=2 Ezra 15:5 LXX]), and *ōmosen en* (Rev 10:6; cf. Judg 21:1) all seem dependent upon Semitic syntax.

Thus, the evidence for Semitic influence upon prepositions and prepositional phrases in the book of Revelation is substantial and clear. The exegetes have a duty, therefore, to take seriously the possibility of Semitic influence as they seek to explain the Greek text of this intriguing NT book.