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Steven Thompson

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INTRODUCTION

The justification for this study is found in the fact that it puts forward a number of explanations for the peculiar language associated with the verb and with clauses in the Apc. which have for centuries been a source of perplexity and misunderstanding to students and especially to translators of the book.

At least since the time of Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (died A.D. 265), questions have been expressed about the un-Greek nature of the language of the Apc. Dionysius drew attention to the fact (see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7, 25, 7ff) that the Greek of the Apc. contained a number of unusual constructions which cannot be explained in terms of Greek grammar and syntax. This peculiar disregard has perplexed modern scholars as well. In the words of R.H. Charles, who studied the book for many years while preparing his commentary, the Apc. possesses a distinctive character of its own which makes it 'absolutely unique' linguistically.¹ More recently Matthew Black observed that 'there is one New Testament book, Revelation, whose crude Greek is particularly stained by "Semitisms"'.²

While one could not pretend at this stage to be able to explain all linguistic oddities in the book, yet this introductory survey demonstrates that the major part of the peculiarity attached to the un-Greek use of the verb in the Apc. can be ascribed to the influence of Semitic syntax, primarily biblical Hebrew (and Aramaic). Nigel Turner supports this view: 'some of the sources [of Revelation] may have been Aramaic originally. However, the Semitic influence in Revelation is mainly Hebrew.'³

In addition, this study cites evidence strongly supporting the argument that *biblical* Hebrew and Aramaic, not a later variety, is reflected in the Greek of the Apc. The presence of Hebrew infinitives absolute in Greek dress⁴ indicates biblical Hebrew was the model for the Seer, since the construction was absent from later Hebrew.⁵ G. Mussies, who argues that the language of the Apc. is patterned after later Hebrew and Aramaic, concedes that this is one of the points of difference between biblical and Mishnaic

Hebrew visible in translation.⁶ Other telling features of *biblical* Hebrew syntax influencing the Greek of the Apc. are the Hebrew *Waw*-consecutive;⁷ the resolving of a participle into a finite verb;⁸ and possibly the occurrence of the absolute object.⁹ Needless to say, any theory of the nature and purpose of the Apc. and of its relation to the OT cannot afford to ignore these direct links with the syntax of OT Hebrew.

Historical survey of linguistic observations

With the turn of the century as the starting point for a survey, we begin with the sixth edition of Meyer's *Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über die Offenbarung Johannis* (1906), by Wilhelm Bousset. Under section 7 of the introduction he begins a discussion, entitled 'Gebrauch des Verbums',¹⁰ by stating that verbs in the Apc. are characterised by haphazard shifts between present and future tense. Especially in chapter 11 is this evident. He also notes that the use of the imperfect is not frequent in the Apc., but in those places where it has been employed, it has been done deliberately. It is preferred, for instance, in descriptive, explanatory relative clauses such as those in 1:12, 2:14 and 6:9. Outside such special categories the imperfect is not in general use in the Apc.

Noteworthy also is the nearly exclusive use of aorist infinitives, with seemingly little sense for the distinction between aorist and present infinitive.

While he points to Hebrew parallels to the language of the Apc., Bousset does not go so far as to see behind the use of the verb traces of direct Semitic influence, although at certain places in the book he recognises the possibility of direct translation from Hebrew sources.

Another study touching on the use of the verb in the Apc. is that of T.C. Laughlin, *The Solecisms of the Apocalypse*.¹¹ The book (a published Ph.D. thesis) surveys briefly various peculiarities in the language of the Apc. traceable to Hebrew influence. Concerning the verb two points are noteworthy: first, the absolute use of the participle λέγων,¹² as found for example in Apc. 11:1. This is LXX usage, he says, based on Hebrew *lē'mōr*; the second point concerns the tenses: the mixing of present and future tense verbs in the same clause or sentence when, according to Greek usage, we should expect only future verbs.¹³ The observations of Laughlin, though brief, are valuable for the LXX parallels which are cited to illustrate the Hebraic nature of the usage he discusses.

A comprehensive survey of the grammar of the Apc. was provided by R.H. Charles in his commentary.¹⁴ His observations about the Semitic influence on the verb will be surveyed briefly.¹⁵ He notes the frequent

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wavering of the text of the Apc. between present and future tenses, but notes that in most cases the changes are not arbitrary.¹⁶ A careful study of context will show that, while in some places the future is rightly employed, there are other places where the present occurs when we would expect the future or participle. This may be due to the influence of Hebrew tense usage, since a Hebrew imperfect (and perfect) may be rendered as past, present, or future, according to context. Cases of confusion of this nature can be amply illustrated from the LXX. The possibility of a confusion of future tenses for pasts on the basis of Semitic idiom is suggested by Charles at Apc. 4:9–10.¹⁷ The past imperfect or historical present is frequently replaced in the Apc. by a participle. Note the following: 1:16 *ἐκπορευομένη*, 4:2 *καθήμενος*. He notes this use of the participle for a finite verb is frequent in late Hebrew, and the same use is even more frequent in both Aramaic and Syriac; thus its displacement of the past imperfect in our author is probably due largely to Hebraic influence.¹⁸ Regarding the use of the infinitives, Charles notes that they are at times used in the sense of finite verbs in conditional clauses, as well as in principal sentences, while the infinitive plus the article serves as a finite verb.

Charles maintains that the criteria of grammar and syntax in the Apc., including syntax of the verb, can be employed in separating portions of the book which originated with the Seer from sections which were based on sources.¹⁹ Concerning the nature of the language of the Apc., he expressed the opinion that while its author wrote in Greek, he remained in the thought world of the Hebrew Bible.²⁰ Furthermore, while related closely to Greek as found in the LXX and other Greek OT versions, and the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, the Apc. nevertheless possesses a distinct character of its own.²¹

The next significant work on the language of the Apc., drawing heavily on that of Charles, was by R.B.Y. Scott who, in 1928, published his Ph.D. thesis, *The Original Language of the Apocalypse*.²² Scott stated his premise at the outset: 'the Apocalypse as a whole is a translation from Hebrew or Aramaic'.²³ Though basing his conclusion ultimately on alleged mistranslations of the Semitic original, Scott also examined certain Hebrew idioms frequently encountered in the book. Regarding the verb, he follows Charles in referring to participles used as finite verbs. He also pointed to a number of cases in which the Greek of the Apc. employs the participial forms of *ἔχω* to represent possessive *lamedh* in Hebrew. The occurrence of a peculiar Hebrew construction is also noted: a finite verb is used with a noun that has the particle of comparison, where in Greek a participle would be used.²⁴

Since the majority of Hebrew verbs have causative stems, while in

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Greek separate verbs must be added to express causation, and since in Hebrew causative expressions are comparatively more frequent than in Greek, Scott finds it natural to expect that in the Apc. clumsy phrases with *ποιέω* or *δίδωμι* would be found to express the causative idea.²⁵ Cf. Apc. 13:13: *πῦρ ποιῆ . . . καταβαίνειν*. Scott also notes a number of cases where confusion of tense has occurred. He makes two observations on the matter: first, that the difficulty often arises from the various meanings of the Hebrew imperfect (i.e. time past, present and future) and, where that does not operate, a misunderstanding of a *Waw*-consecutive for simple *Waw* or *vice versa* may have occurred when the Seer rendered an unpointed Hebrew text into Greek. Scott also feels that present participles are found where aorist or perfect participles are expected in several places.

In his conclusion, Scott reaffirms his premise that the Apc. originated in Hebrew and was translated into Greek by an early Christian. By this he does not deny the possibility that the book is composite in origin, nor does he ignore the fact that distinctions in style and diction are apparent in the book. These differences he sees, though, in the Hebrew original, not in Greek.

In his commentary on the Apc., E.-B. Allo of the University of Fribourg notes that certain participles must be given the sense of finite verbs.²⁶ This he also ascribed to Hebrew influence, and especially to Aramaic. He noted the appearance of the impersonal plural verb, and asked if it could be due to Aramaic influence.

In his final work, published posthumously, C.C. Torrey sets forth his reasons for believing the Apc. was written originally in Aramaic and later translated into Greek.²⁷ His arguments touching the use of the verb include the use of the indefinite third person plural in place of the passive voice, in line with Aramaic usage. Torrey sees evidence in the Apc. of very frequent use of the Aramaic participle, which prompted the translator to employ a Greek corresponding participle where a finite verb would have sufficed. Similarly, where the Greek present tense occurs, Torrey felt an Aramaic participle could be taken for granted. This is cause for a number of places where the Greek has a present tense verb where one expects a future tense. Finally, he mentions the confusion of tenses which arises over the similarity between Aramaic peal participles and perfect tense verbs in unpointed texts.

Torrey has no time, however, to consider influence of the Hebrew tense system on the verbs of the Apc. - 'In short there is in Revelation no trace of Hebrew usage in the tenses employed. Whatever evidence there is of falsely or too literally rendered verbs points to Aramaic rather than to Hebrew.'²⁸

The first monograph devoted to a study of the verb in the Apc. is Angelo Lancellotti's *Sintassi Ebraica nel Greco Dell'Apocalisse*, I, 'Usò delle forme verbali'.²⁹ He attempts to show how the verb in the Apc. is employed along Semitic, and more specifically, Hebraic, lines by analysing certain verbs in the Apc. in the light of Hebrew grammar. His first chapter discusses the distinction between the Hebrew and Greek concept of verbal tenses; following chapters present descriptions of verbs in the Apc. which conform to the Hebrew qatal, yiqtol; the participle in its differing Hebrew and Greek roles, especially employed nominally and verbally; the infinitive in its nominal and independent employment is discussed last, followed by a final chapter of *recapitolazione* and a conclusion.

Regarding tense, Lancellotti notes that the aorist for the most part is employed along normal Greek lines, but in a few cases a Hebraic sense is displayed when the Greek aorists in the Apc. express the sense of Hebrew perfects. The perfect tense in the Apc. has little connection with Hebrew syntax, although a possible connection with Hebrew perfect is suggested. The present tense more than the others is used abnormally. Omitting the cases in which the present is found in indirect discourse, dependent on a past tense verb, Lancellotti asserts that the so-called 'quasi atemporal' use of the present in the Apc. is due to Semitic influence. Finally, the futuristic present is attached by him to the Hebrew imperfect referring to future events (but wrongly, as we shall see below). While the future in the Apc. is generally used along Greek lines, its substitution for the aorist subjunctive is unusual, and its use with the value of an imperfect³⁰ is based on Hebrew imperfect tense usage. Also, its modal use with the value of a Hebrew jussive and as cohortative is Hebraic.

Lancellotti discusses Semitic influence on attributive and circumstantial participles, bringing out several specific points at which, he says, Semitic influence is at work. The participial clause also is included in his discussion. Finally, he presents the case for Hebrew influence on the infinitive.

The study is wide-ranging and suggests many possibilities for further research. While specific criticisms of his findings are included at the appropriate places in this study, we could note here two general weaknesses of his monograph: (1) inadequate documentation; and (2) inadequate illustration from Hebrew and the LXX of the existence of the many syntactical equations which he suggests.

The significant study of the morphology of the Apc. by G. Mussies requires mention here since its concluding chapter is titled 'The Use of the Verb in the Apocalypse'.³¹ It gives a detailed discussion, plus statistics, of use of the voice (pp. 330ff), moods (pp. 321ff), participles (pp.

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324ff), and the durative, aoristic, futural and perfective categories (pp. 330ff). Again, specific criticisms of his chapter are to be found in the main portion of this work.

In a later expansion and update entitled 'The Greek of the Book of Revelation',³² Mussies surveys the language of the Apc., finding what he terms 'absence Semitisms', which are Greek constructions having no Hebrew/Aramaic counterpart. The genitive absolute is the most striking of these, being absent from the Apc., and from Hebrew/Aramaic. Another is the Greek accusative plus infinitive. When taking the opposite approach, looking for Hebrew/Aramaic constructions with no exact counterpart in Greek, he notes the occurrence in the Apc. of the infinitive absolute. The conjunctive form of the adverbial participle is singled out for special discussion,³³ but its peculiar usage by the Seer in the Apc. is attributed by Mussies to stylistic preference rather than to specific Hebrew influence.

At this point attention should be drawn to three recent monographs in the field of Hellenistic Greek syntax which are valuable to the student of the NT for the light they throw on the language of the NT. From Sweden comes L. Rydbeck, *Fachprosa, Vermeintliche Volkssprache und Neues Testament*, Studia Graeca Upsaliensia 5 (Uppsala, 1967); from Greece comes B. Mandilaras, *The Verb in the Greek Non-literary Papyri* (Athens, 1973), and from the Netherlands comes W.F. Bakker's *Pronomen Abundans and Pronomen Coniunctum* (Amsterdam and London, 1974). Discussions in relevant parts of this study have been enriched by the findings of these authors, and appreciation is expressed for the attention given by each to the influence of his research on the Greek of the NT as seen in its Hellenistic matrix.

The publication of the fourth volume on 'Style' (1976) by Nigel Turner in the Moulton-Howard-Turner *Grammar of New Testament Greek* makes available to grateful students of the language of the Apc. an entire chapter devoted to a discussion of its special linguistic features. Turner's wide-ranging contributions to the elucidation of the Semitic element in NT Greek are already well-known to users of his previous volume in the series, on 'Syntax'. No discussion of Semitisms in the Apc. can afford to overlook this his latest statement on the topic.

This introductory survey could not be concluded without reference to two classic studies devoted to the Semitic element in the language of the New Testament. First, a work which is so widely established and recognised that it hardly requires mention is Matthew Black's *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*.³⁴ It serves as the standard presentation of the Aramaic element in the Greek of the Gospels and Acts. The usefulness of this store of information has a wider application than that

implied by the title, and although its author excluded from his study Semitisms due exclusively to Hebrew (cf. p. 34), yet anyone acquainted with *An Aramaic Approach* will observe how this present study has, with certain modifications to allow for a difference in subject matter, patterned itself after Black's work.

In a more recent monograph Klaus Beyer has made his important contribution to the understanding of NT Greek. His *Semitische Syntax im Neuen Testament*,³⁵ of which Part I only has appeared, brings to bear a great deal of Semitic evidence which illuminates un-Greek usage of the clause. His study, rich in Hebrew and Aramaic examples, has been drawn upon in several places where it discussed constructions found in the Apc.

1

TEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The preparation of this present work has been greatly facilitated by the excellent textual studies of the Apc. published during this century, making it the most thoroughly studied NT book, from the viewpoint of text.

1. Survey of twentieth-century developments

The commentaries of Bousset and Allo are rich in textual references; both however were superseded by the commentary of R.H. Charles, who in vol. II included the Greek text of the Apc. with extensive critical apparatus. Latin sources, meanwhile, were carefully presented by H.J. Vogels.¹ These works, in their turn were superseded by the masterly apparatus prepared by H.C. Hoskier representing thirty years of labour collating and recording *in toto* the variants found in every Greek manuscript of the Apc. known in his day, plus a comprehensive treatment of the ancient versions.² While today some doubt is expressed about the accuracy of his citations of some versions, his careful work on the Greek text is definitive and irreplaceable.

The Greek material presented in Hoskier's apparatus has been studied and carefully analysed by J. Schmid of Munich, who has aimed at determining manuscript families and the allegiance of the Fathers. In his major work his task is sixfold:³ (1) accurately to define the two medieval forms of the text of the Apc. (*Koine*, and the text used for the Commentary of Andreas); (2) to note the relationship of these two forms to one another; (3) to demonstrate the twofold nature of the earlier tradition made possible by the discovery of Chester Beatty Papyrus p⁴⁷; (4) to consider the possibility of a 'neutral' text; (5) to note the relation of the *Koine* and Andreas texts to this earlier tradition; (6) to test the manuscript tradition by the criteria of the language and usage of the Apc.⁴ In addition to these main objectives Schmid notes that so far no trace of a Western text of the Apc. has been found.⁵

Since the publication of Hoskier's apparatus the early text of the Apc. has been further illuminated by discovery of p⁴⁷, a late third-century

manuscript containing chapters 9:10–17:2.⁶ Several manuscript discoveries of minor significance are described by J. Schmid.⁷ He concludes, after describing some thirty-one previously unknown or unnoticed manuscripts of the Apc., that these are not of any help in illuminating the early character of the text (they date mostly from the tenth to the seventeenth centuries).⁸

2. Current status of studies on the text of the Apocalypse

‘In the Book of Revelation the Textual scene and its history differ greatly from the rest of the New Testament.’ This statement, from the introduction to the twenty-sixth edition of Nestle–Aland,⁹ continues: ‘In brief, in the Apocalypse much (if not all) is different from elsewhere.’ The most significant of these differences, ably summarised by J. Delobel,¹⁰ are the following: (a) the relative paucity of early Greek witnesses; (b) the absence of the Apc. in codex B, and its inferior representation in *Aleph* considerably weakens testimony for the existence of a ‘Neutral’ text, thus accounting for Hort’s hesitation to distinguish, in the Apc., text types, and to reconstruct its history; (c) the inferior authority of the few existing papyri containing portions of the Apc.; (d) the exceptional position of the *Textus Receptus*, which for the Apc. merits much greater attention than it deserves elsewhere in the NT; (e) the doubt about the existence of a Western text for the Apc.

3. Use of linguistic criteria and textual eclecticism

Major advances in the task of the recovery of a more primitive NT text have been made in recent decades by the application of internal linguistic criteria, and of the eclectic textual method. General questions regarding the application of both of these to the text of the Apc. have been surveyed recently by Delobel,¹¹ who considered the views both of proponents and opponents. Regarding the textual theory adopted for this present study, the following statement should be sufficient: in the light of the major advances made in the study of the text of the Apc. during this century, it need not be stressed that in the work of analysing the nature of Semitic influence on syntax, the approach which is based on a single manuscript or printed NT text is inadequate, and can lead only to unsatisfactory results. Matthew Black demonstrated the weakness of a similar approach,¹² relying only on the Westcott and Hort text, for studying the Semitic element in the Gospels and Acts. His practice of granting a hearing to the more Semitised reading, regardless of its textual pedigree, should be

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applied to the Apc. No single manuscript or textual family preserves all the more Semitised and therefore more original readings in those portions of the NT with a Semitic background.

It is all the more surprising, then, to notice that the two most recent studies on the verb in the Apc., i.e. those of Lancellotti and Mussies, ignore in large measure the wealth of textual information readily available, limiting their studies to a single printed text of Merk in the case of Lancellotti, and a single uncial manuscript, Alexandrinus, in that of Mussies. In his monograph Mussies gives the reason for his choice of codex Alexandrinus as the basis for his study of the Apc.: 'Instead of describing the use of language of a text edition which is inevitably eclectic the linguist will have to choose the best ms. available and describe in the first place the idiom of that one alone.'¹³ This approach is justified *if* one were aiming to describe the use of language as influenced by the textual tradition responsible for producing the selected manuscript. In the case of the Apc. we have, in fact, the book at a stage of textual transmission which it reached in the hands of fifth-century Alexandrian textual scholars, represented by uncial A, along with its supporting minuscules.

To penetrate behind this stage of the text it is necessary to draw upon a wide range of witnesses for the evidence they contain of the earlier, less polished constructions, especially Semitisms, which were almost certainly removed by certain later copyists. By limiting his work to the basis provided by uncial A, Mussies imposes undue limitations on his findings, especially those in his final chapter on the verb.

The alternative to the single text method pursued by Lancellotti and Mussies is to employ a judicious eclecticism. This means, according to G.D. Kilpatrick,¹⁴ that 'No readings can be condemned categorically because they are characteristic of manuscripts or groups of manuscripts. We have to pursue a consistent eclecticism. Readings must be considered severally on their intrinsic character.' Elsewhere he notes that in principle any variant which occurs in a manuscript that is not a copy of another manuscript may prove to be original.¹⁵ It should not be dismissed because it does not occur in this or that textual type, nor because it has inadequate attestation.¹⁶

The other factor related to eclecticism in solving textual differences in the Apc. is of course an awareness of Semitic idiom in Greek dress. Metzger observes that 'a knowledge of Hebrew and especially Aramaic will occasionally throw light upon a variant reading in the Gospels'.¹⁷ The same point is made by Kilpatrick regarding the Apc. when he notes that here perhaps the most important consideration is language.¹⁸ Among the writers of the NT the Greek of the Apc. stands out, and would 'invite correction'.