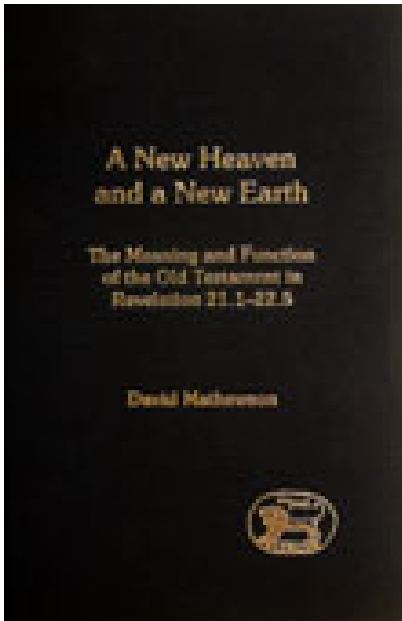


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**Mathewson, David**

*A New Heaven and a New Earth: The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation 21.1–22.5*

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The book of Revelation is a great challenge for the interpreter due to several factors, such as genre, motifs, language, metaphors, addressees, political and social circumstances, position in the New Testament canon, and the like. Biblical scholarship realizes more and more that “the meaning and function of the Old Testament” (see the subtitle of this book) is one of the most important issues for interpreting Revelation. Focusing on Rev 21:1–22:5, Mathewson has written a stimulating and well thought-out contribution to the matter of intertextual correlation of Old and New Testament.

The basic outline of the study is clear and effective. Chapter 1 offers an introduction, then chapters 2–7 correspond to six sections of Rev 21:1–22:5: (1) the new heavens and the new earth in 21:1–5a; (2) prophetic legitimization and exhortation in 21:5b–8, (3) the new Jerusalem and new temple in 21:9–17; (4) precious stones and divine presence in 21:18–21; (5) the inclusion of the nations and the holy city in 21:22–27; and (6) paradise restored and renewed in 22:1–5. Chapter 8 provides the summary/conclusion.

The introduction (ch. 1) points out the orientation to and need for the study, presents a survey of approaches to the use of the Old Testament in Rev 21:1–22:5, and explains the applied method. Mathewson is well aware of several previous studies that analyze the use

of the Old Testament in the New Testament and in Revelation in particular. However, he still misses “a satisfying and comprehensive analysis devoted to the use of the Old Testament in Rev. 21:1–22:5 and its significance for interpreting these chapters” (3). This void his study seeks to fill.

Mathewson draws heavily upon previous studies, and he explicitly summarizes the works of J. Comblin, M. Rissi, W. J. Dumbrell, J. Vogelgesang, C. Deutsch, J. Fekkes, S. Moyise, U. Sim, and G. K. Beale in the introduction. During the book Mathewson stands in permanent discussion with these approaches. In many paragraphs one or more of the names (and others) are mentioned in the main text. This makes reading at times tedious, but one gets the impression that Mathewson is familiar with the secondary literature. One may add the Austrian periodical *Protokolle zur Bibel*, since volume 8 (1999) is dedicated to Rev 21:1–22:5 and contains a contribution by J. Oesch about “Intertextuelle Untersuchungen zum Bezug von Offb 21,1–22,5 auf alttestamentliche Prätexte” (41–74).

On the other hand, Mathewson’s methodology makes reading at times exciting. He stresses explicitly that “more attention needs to be given to how allusions actually function within their context, and how uncovering a given allusion affects the exegesis of the text” (18). Thus, Mathewson adopts S. Moyise’s application of intertextuality. While J. Fekkes investigated the presence of Isaiah in Rev 21:1–22:5, as did J. Vogelgesang for Ezekiel, Mathewson wants to present “a comprehensive account of how the various Old Testament allusions converge and are reconfigured in the final vision” (20). The previous studies mainly saw their task to identify and validate allusions to and echoes of the Old Testament text. Mathewson takes a different position: “Rather the focus will be on how identifying the presence of a given allusion or echo actually affects the interpretation of the passage. How does the allusion or echo function within the text? What meanings are produced by John’s allusive appeal to the Old Testament?” (21).

For this goal, a clear commitment to a reader-oriented approach would be appropriate. Mathewson speaks much about the reader and reading Rev 21:1–22:5 in constant intertextual relationship with the Old Testament (see 23), and on page 24 he states: “Though I am interested in the role of the author and intentionality, this study is not limited to what can only be proven to be consciously intended by the author, or to those instances that can be labeled as Certain [Mathewson alludes to the categories in the work of J. Fekkes], but takes into account more subtle uses as well.” This methodological ambiguity between “author and intentionality” and “semantic import and interpretive significance” (in a reader-oriented sense) is problematic. In fact, Mathewson is in many cases very close to a reader-oriented (and text-centered) approach (see especially 24 n. 79) but still often formulates sentences with the name “John,” that is, what “John does (or

does not),” about “John’s use,” and the like. Most of Mathewson’s observations and important insights on the text can be formulated without reference to an authorial intention, and the results still keep their worth and are also valid without supposing that “John” *intended* it in this or the other way.

Mathewson in fact does not focus on the writer’s intention but on the reception of texts. He states: “examination of the use of the Old Testament in Rev. 21.1–22.5 should proceed both *diachronically* (considering the meaning of the allusion in its Old Testament context and in subsequent interpretive history) and *synchronically* (considering the meaning and function of the Old Testament allusion in its new context)” (25). This sentence is the ideal description of a program for analyzing the meaning and function of the Old Testament in the New Testament, and Mathewson is to be commended for this dense and appropriate formulation—and its exemplary execution on Rev 21:1–22:5. There is no need for an authorial intention. Mathewson refers at times to U. Eco (e.g., 31–32) and his Model Reader, and in the quotes U. Eco never speaks of an “author” but always about “indications encoded in the *text*,” “the text opts,” “the text presupposes,” and so forth. Mathewson would have done better to adopt this way of speaking rather than harking back to the “author” of Revelation. This critique refers just to the way of the presentation and does not diminish the immense worth of Mathewson’s observations and discoveries in the text. Actually, he did make his observations as a *reader* of the *text*—and to draw conclusions on the intention of the historical *writer* is a different (and very complicated and at times impossible) task.

Another critique needs to be added in reference to page 26: “This present study is generally unconcerned with the question of the text-type which underlies John’s allusive appeal to the Old Testament.” Mathewson does not pay attention to the question whether John used the Hebrew text, the Septuagint, or Aramaic sources. Although he states that he found out that it makes almost no difference which “Old Testament” John used, it might add more methodological clarity to point out before which “Bible” one reads.

However, these methodological details do not significantly cloud the important results of Mathewson’s investigation. From chapter 2 to chapter 7 he proceeds verse by verse analyzing the meaning and function of the allusions to Old Testament found in them. This way of proceeding is helpful, since many texts in Revelation unravel their meaning through a slow, close, and step-by-step reading. Unfortunately, he spends much effort on referring to the secondary literature about the validation of allusions and echoes. This is necessary as long as one works with an author-oriented approach: then it is important to weigh out if the allusion in question really was intended or not. If one switches to a reader-oriented approach, one can go beyond that problem and ask about the meaning and the function of the allusions and echoes a *reader* (fully acquainted with the whole Old

Testament (and perhaps other early Jewish literature!) can discover. The big achievement of Mathewson's study is that he deals with these exciting questions, though occasionally he does not dedicate enough room for them.

The chart in chapter 2 (33) with a structural outline of Rev 21:1–5a is very helpful. One misses such an overview for the other sections. At times Mathewson quotes texts from the Old Testament in English translation with some Hebrew words included (אשכנז on 53 should be written with final *nun*). This is a helpful feature, but it would have improved the clarity of the argument if he had related the Old Testament texts (typo-)graphically to Rev 21:1–22:5. But it is no use comparing English translations, and to display texts in detail raises the issue mentioned above: Which text-type do we work on? Do we compare the Masoretic or Hebrew text to the Greek text of Revelation, or do we use the Septuagint, which would make things easier, since one has only one language (Greek)? In most cases Mathewson's argument works well without going into such philological details.

A very helpful feature of Mathewson's book is the summary of each chapter. It is a little bit hidden under the heading "The Meaning and Function of the Old Testament in Revelation. . ." that occurs in variations at the end of each chapter. There one will find in a quite condensed way the major results of the study. One can see one of the achievements over previous studies that were limited to the comparison of single verses, for example, in Mathewson's statement about Rev 21:1–5a: "Given the distribution of Isaian influence throughout chs. 18–22, it is likely that the entire block of material and context of Isa. 40–66 (cf. the movement from Babylon to Zion) lies behind John's thought, not just a potpourri of isolated 'proof texts.' " (69). It is indeed important to see that the Old Testament is not used as a quarry to break bits and pieces from it but that "John" alludes to Scripture as a whole, or, as Mathewson puts it: "John recalls the whole context of Isa. 40–66 and evokes the whole story of Israel's eschatological expectations concerning the deliverance from exile in Babylon, and their subsequent restoration." (71). (Again, one may ask whether this was really intended by a historical writer. The observation still keeps its worth if one states that a *reader* can get an enormous semantic input if he or she reads Rev 21:1–5a on the basis of Isa 40–66.)

Another important result of Mathewson's study that comes directly out of the analysis of the role and function of Old Testament texts in Revelation concerns the concept of imagery: "it seems best to conclude that John's primary concern is not with a geographically consistent visualization, but with the meanings conveyed by the symbols. Difficult as it may be to conceptualize John's vision (a river running down a street [plaza] with a single tree growing on either side! [Rev 22:1–5]), it nevertheless effectively

conveys his primary intention: to integrate various facets of his Old Testament *Vorbilder* in order to present the eschatological restoration in terms of a restored paradise” (191).

In chapter 8 Mathewson presents his results in a systematic way. The meaning effects are summarized by the headings “new creation/new exodus,” “new Jerusalem,” “new covenant,” “the bride,” “new temple-priesthood,” “paradise restored and renewed,” “inclusion of the nations,” and “prophetic vision and legitimization.” John has taken up Old Testament traditions and transformed them. Following M. Fishbane, who shows that many later biblical texts reinterpret older promises, especially those that are unfulfilled, Mathewson states: “Older hopes are reinvigorated and reapplied in the face of potential invalidation. Therefore, by taking up and reinterpreting their traditions concerning restoration, especially those which lack closure, and reasserting and applying them for his own situation, John stands in the tradition of his prophetic predecessors” (222). How this reinterpretation works can be shown by the use of Ezek 40–48 in Rev 21:1–22:5: John draws heavily upon the language, motifs, and structure of Ezekiel in his vision of the heavenly Jerusalem; however, he leaves out the temple, which is the center of Ezekiel’s vision. This is not a deliberate contradiction, but it works the other way round. By using the temple language of Ezek 40–48, John gives his whole ideal heavenly city the notion of a temple:

The writer, in recalling Ezekiel’s temple, and with the assistance of the imagery of the holy of holies (1 Kgs 6.20), informs the reader that there is an actual temple, a place of God’s tabernacling presence and holiness, where continual worship is rendered to God by his people. Yet this is not centered around a physical structure (21.22). The worshipping community itself constitutes the locus of God’s eschatological presence. Thus, the descriptive power of Ezekiel’s vision of hope is brought to bear on John’s vision of a new Jerusalem as the place of divine presence and holiness. (124–25)

In sum, “the most significant way in which scriptural allusions and echoes function in 21.1–22.5 is in the construction of the author’s own vision which creates a symbolic world or conceptual framework” (224). With this symbolic world John communicates his own theological message and polemicizes against Jewish opponents and the Roman Empire. Finally, Mathewson uses three metaphors to describe the use of the Old Testament in Revelation (234–35): (1) “As a magician or performer endeavors to keep several plates spinning at one time, John is simultaneously engaging several prominent Old Testament texts.” (2) As in a musical performance, some texts carry the melody line, while others add rich harmonies. (3) As in a painting, some texts function as the broad strokes highlighting the broader contours of the painting, whereas other colors (i.e., texts) add various hues to the overall work of art. He concludes: “a similar analysis could still

be carried out on other areas of Revelation, even where the Old Testament background has already to some extent been uncovered” (235). Exactly this has been done, for example, in the study of Thomas Hieke and Tobias Nicklas, *Die Worte der Prophetie dieses Buches: Offenbarung 22,6–21 als Schlussstein der christlichen Bibel Alten und Neuen Testaments gelesen* (Biblich-Theologische Studien 62; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003). This book deals with the text that follows Mathewson’s pericope and can be read as the sequel to his work: only the inclusion of several Old Testament texts provides a proper understanding of the concluding section of Revelation (and the whole Bible).

Mathewson’s study on Rev 21:1–22:5 is intended not for the beginner but for the expert. Everyone interested in the topic “The Old Testament in the New” will profit from reading it; everyone who works with Revelation needs to know it. One can learn and see here how a careful look at the slightest allusions to and echoes of the Old Testament will provide a host of new meanings to a New Testament text. Perhaps these meanings do not always go back to the intention of the author, but one needs to think about the readers who will discover such new meanings. This process will never be finished. Mathewson has provided a substantial contribution to the effort of understanding the culminating vision of the Christian Bible.