

The Language of the Apocalypse *

By C. G. OZANNE

IT IS A well-known fact that the language of the Apocalypse is full of ungrammatical and unlexical usages. These range from the misuse of certain words to a variety of peculiarities respecting case, gender, number and tense. Altogether nearly a hundred different kinds have been detected, and each new edition of the Greek Testament restores a few more to the printed text.

It was thought by some of the Church Fathers, Dionysius of Alexandria being one,¹ that the Apocalypse was linguistically barbaric and consequently unworthy of apostolic authorship. Unfortunately some moderns have vented the same opinion. One critic, for example, speaks of 'blunders, which are such that they would disgrace the exercise of an English fifth-form schoolboy'.² However, it is now generally admitted that the abnormalities of grammar and vocabulary cannot be attributed to ignorance of Greek.³ But to what cause they should be attributed is still a question which divides students of the Apocalypse.

C. C. Torrey, in a small book published posthumously, argues at length that the Apocalypse has been translated from Aramaic.⁴ Of this theory G. R. Driver writes, 'The boldness with which the Aramaic origin of the Apocalypse is proclaimed, indeed, is only rivalled by the weakness of the arguments used to support it.'⁵ Driver has shown that nearly all Torrey's supposed Aramaisms can be explained equally well, and sometimes better, as Hebraisms. Akin to Torrey's theory is that of R. B. Y. Scott that the Apocalypse has been translated from Hebrew.⁶ This idea has more to commend

* Biblical quotations if not otherwise marked are taken from the AV, except in the case of the Apocalypse where they are rendered directly from the Greek.

¹ See *Apud Eus. H. E.*, vii, xxv.

² E. C. Selwyn, *The Christian Prophets and the Prophetic Apocalypse* (Macmillan, 1900), p. 258.

³ Cf., e.g., I. T. Beckwith: 'The departures from correct grammatical usage are not due to ignorance; the writer shows a knowledge and command of Greek too accurate to make such a supposition tenable' (*The Apocalypse of John* (The Macmillan Co., 1922), p. 355).

⁴ *The Apocalypse of John* (Yale U.P., 1958).

⁵ In his review of Torrey's book, *JTS*, XI, 1960, p. 384.

⁶ *The Original Language of the Apocalypse* (Toronto U.P., 1928).

it than the last, but several considerations argue decisively against it. Not only does it fail to account for the deliberate character of so many of the peculiarities, but it does not explain why most of the grammatical rules violated are faithfully observed elsewhere in the book, and thus shown to be perfectly familiar to the author.

The most widespread explanation is that popularized by R. H. Charles in the *International Critical Commentary*. He states his oft-quoted opinion that 'while he (the author) writes in Greek, he thinks in Hebrew, and the thought has naturally affected the vehicle of expression. . . . But this is not all. He never mastered Greek idiomatically—even the Greek of his own period.'⁷ No doubt many of the linguistic peculiarities of the Apocalypse, taken in isolation, could be explained on the theory that the author was thinking in Hebrew and writing in Greek, but the cumulative evidence is decidedly opposed to this explanation. It breaks down in fact on the same points as that of translation from Hebrew. It does not account for the deliberate character of so many of the aberrations nor for the fact that the author was evidently familiar with the rules which he violated.

The explanation which the present writer believes to be correct is that the author deliberately modelled his grammar on the pattern of the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament. This solution was advanced many years ago by C. F. Burney who attributed the Hebraisms of the Apocalypse to 'first-hand imitation of Biblical Hebrew style'.⁸ Similarly F. J. A. Hort remarks on the 'fitness' of this style of writing, which 'helps us to understand that we are listening to the last of the Hebrew prophets'.⁹ The author, it seems, wished to identify himself with the writers of the Old Testament Scriptures, and to impress on his readers the character of his vision as the last of the prophetic books.

In order fully to substantiate this theory it would be necessary to examine the totality of Hebraisms in the Apocalypse, and to show how all of them can be explained from the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament. This in fact I have done, but in the present survey it will be only possible to consider a representative number.

An interesting example of a Greek word used with extended

⁷ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (T. & T. Clark, 1920), I, p. cxliii f.

⁸ *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Clarendon Press, 1922), p. 15 f.

⁹ *The Apocalypse of St. John I-III* (Macmillan, 1908), p. xxxviii. Cf. also A. M. Farrer: 'It is certainly not the dialect of the Asian ghetto, but an elaborate archaism. The suggestion that St. John wrote like this because he knew no better may be dismissed out of hand. He was writing a Christian Ezekiel or Zechariah in the phrase of the old' (*A Rebirth of Images* (Glasgow U.P., 1949), p. 24).

meaning occurs in Revelation 10: 1 where, in course of describing 'another mighty angel', it says: 'his legs (οἱ πόδες) were like pillars of fire.' The normal sense of *πούς* is 'foot', but this meaning is not appropriate in a text where οἱ πόδες are compared to pillars. Evidently our author had in mind the Hebrew word *reḡel*, which in addition to the sense of 'foot' had acquired the meaning of 'leg'. A clear example is provided by 1 Samuel 17: 6: 'And he had greaves of brass upon his legs (*'al raḡlāw*).'

Another instance of the same principle occurs in Revelation 2: 27: 'And He will shepherd (ποιμανεῖ) them with an iron staff, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces' (cf. 12: 5; 19: 15). The proper meaning of ποιμαίνω is 'tend, pasture, guide', but clearly this sense is inappropriate in the context of the Apocalypse. The explanation is that ποιμαίνω here corresponds to the Hebrew verb *rā'â*. This verb denotes not only the pastoral activity of the shepherd (= ποιμαίνω), but also his destructive activity towards wild beasts and robbers. A good example of this is Micah 5: 5(4)f: 'then shall we raise against him (*i.e.* the Assyrian) seven shepherds . . . And they shall waste (lit. 'shepherd', *wērā'û*) the land of Assyria with the sword.' The rulers of Israel are figuratively called shepherds, and accordingly their activity towards the invading Assyrian is one of shepherding, though in a destructive sense. In Psalm 2: 9, whence Revelation 2: 27 is drawn, the Masoretic pointing has *tir'ēm* 'thou shalt break them', but there is reason to believe that the Hebrew consonantal text should be pointed *tir'ēm* 'thou shalt shepherd them'. Not only is this how the Septuagint and Peshitta have taken it, but the 'rod' (*šēbet*) is an obvious reference to the shepherd's staff.

In Revelation 6: 8 four different kinds of plague are enumerated: 'with sword and with famine and with pestilence (θανάτω) and by the wild beasts of the earth' (cf. 2: 23). Θάνατος means 'death', but the rendering 'pestilence' is validated by Ezekiel 14: 21 to which our text alludes. There the same four plagues are mentioned, the fourth being *deḥer* 'pestilence' (LXX θάνατος). It is often supposed that the author in this instance quoted from the Septuagint, but septuagintal influence is practically nonexistent in the book of Revelation. It is far more probable that he had in mind the Hebrew word *māwet*. This is the regular word for 'death' in the Old Testament, but three times in Jeremiah (15: 2; 18: 21; 43: 11) it can only mean 'pestilence', as the RSV translator discerned. Three of the four types of plague enumerated in Jeremiah 15: 2 and 18: 21, and two of the three in 43: 11, are the same as in Revelation 6: 8.

Some of the most interesting Hebraisms in the book of Revelation come under the heading of prepositions, and to my mind the most

remarkable of all occurs in Revelation 18: 5. A literal translation of the relevant clause is as follows: 'for her (Babylon's) sins have cleaved up to (ἄχρι) heaven.' But this conveys no meaning. Either her sins *reached* up to heaven, or they cleaved *to* heaven; it cannot mean both at once. The explanation of this problem, as G. R. Driver has shown,¹⁰ is that our author has transliterated the Hebrew preposition 'ah^are^l, transferring its meaning to the Greek equivalent (ἄχρι). The Greek preposition corresponds letter for letter with the Hebrew. The Old Testament contains two verses which exhibit the required construction: Psalm 63: 8(9) 'my soul clings to thee' (RSV), and Jeremiah 42: 16. The latter part of this verse should be rendered, 'and the famine of which you are afraid will cleave to you there in Egypt, and there you will die'. Only in these two passages has 'ah^are^l the weakened force of 'to' (normally it means 'after' or 'behind'), and in both places it is combined with *dābaq* 'to cleave'.

Another case of influence from the same Hebrew preposition occurs in Revelation 13: 3, 'and the whole earth wondered after the beast.' The RSV correctly explains: 'and the whole earth followed the beast with wonder.' The construction is thoroughly hebraic. It occurs in 1 Samuel 7: 2, 'and all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord' (i.e. 'went after him mourning'); 1 Samuel 13: 7, 'and all the people followed him (Saul) trembling (lit. 'trembled after him'); 1 Kings 21: 21, 'and will take away thy posterity' (lit. 'and will burn after thee', i.e. 'will pursue thee with burning').

There is no preposition which exhibits hebraic influence to a greater extent than ἐκ. One of the most interesting cases occurs in Revelation 15: 2, where τοὺς νικῶντας, 'them that had overcome', is anomalously followed by ἐκ, instead of the simple accusative as elsewhere in the Apocalypse. Both Charles and Torrey suspected a Semitism, but neither was able to suggest a convincing solution. However, the construction can be explained satisfactorily from Hebrew usage with the verb *hāzaq*, for this verb when followed by *min* (= ἐκ) sometimes means 'to prevail over', this being the precise meaning required in the Apocalypse. The best example of this occurs in 1 Samuel 17: 50: 'So David prevailed over the Philistine . . .'

The largest group of grammatical anomalies in the Apocalypse involve the misuse of case or gender. Probably the best known example is that of Revelation 1: 4, where the preposition ἀπό, normally followed by the genitive, is followed by three words all in the nominative case: 'from Him who is and who was and who is to come.' R. C. Trench significantly comments: 'Doubtless the im-

¹⁰ *Art. cit.*, p. 386.

mutability of God, “the same yesterday, and to-day, and for ever” (Heb. 13: 8), is intended to be expressed in this immutability of the name of God, in this absolute resistance to change or even modification which that name here presents.’¹¹ It is instructive to notice that in Exodus 3: 14, to which our text alludes and on which it elaborates, the Hebrew verb *’ehyeh* ‘I AM’ is construed as an indeclinable appellative in subject relationship to *š’lāhani*, ‘hath sent me’. Though not strictly a Hebraism, this scruple in the Apocalypse against inflecting the divine name is typical of a Jewish writer, to whom the Tetragrammaton was too sacred to be uttered, let alone inflected.

A similar misuse of case occurs in the very next verse (Rev. 1: 5). Here ‘Jesus Christ’ is correctly placed in the genitive after *ἀπό*, but the three descriptive epithets which immediately follow, and which by rights ought also to be in the genitive, are once again all in the nominative. It is in fact our author’s habitual practice to allow such phrases, when they are preceded by the definite article, to remain in the nominative in apparent disregard of the genitive, dative or accusative with which they are in apposition. There are eight such cases in the Apocalypse (1: 5; 2: 13, 20; 3: 12; 8: 9; 9: 14; 14: 12; 20: 2). R. H. Charles explains: ‘This peculiar idiom is derived from the Hebrew, according to which the noun or phrase which stands in apposition to a noun in an oblique case remains unchanged.’¹²

Another instance of incorrect case after a preposition occurs in the phrase *ὅμοιον υἱὸν ἀνθρώπου* (Rev 1: 13; 14: 14), whereas elsewhere in the Apocalypse some nineteen times *ὁμοιος* is correctly followed by the dative. C. C. Torrey explains this unique example of the accusative case as an attempt on the part of the author to represent in Greek the Hebrew idiom known as the *kaḥ veritatis*.¹³ The classic example of this idiom arises in Nehemiah 7: 2, where a special duty is entrusted to Hananiah ‘for he was (as) a faithful man’. The force of the *kaḥ*, which the AV has failed to translate, is given in Gesenius-Kautzsch (§ 118 x) as ‘in every respect like’. In this construction the *kaḥ* loses its prepositional force and becomes simply a particle of emphasis. It is right therefore, if this is the construction reproduced in the Apocalypse, that *ὅμοιον* should exert no influence on the case of the following noun. It was all very well in the context of Daniel 7: 13, whence the phrase is drawn, to speak of ‘one like a son of man’ (RSV), but for a Christian apostle to speak so vaguely of the risen and glorified Christ would have been intolerable. For this reason the author reinterpreted the preposition *kaḥ* in Daniel in the light of the

¹¹ *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia* (Macmillan, 1861), p. 4.

¹² *Op. cit.*, I, p. cxlix.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 96.

kaḅ veritatis construction. Accordingly the phrase may be rendered 'the very Son of Man' or 'the Son of Man Himself'.

An example of the dative where the nominative *casus pendens* would be expected occurs in Revelation 21: 8: 'But as for the cowardly . . . (τοῖς δὲ δειλοῖς . . .),' This construction, which is otherwise unknown to Greek, corresponds to the Hebrew *lāmed* (normally 'to') when used to introduce a new subject. This usage occurs several times in the books of Chronicles, an example being 1 Chronicles 26: 1: 'As for the divisions (*l'mah!qôṭ*) of the gatekeepers' (RSV).

Another characteristic use of the Hebrew *lāmed* is reproduced in Revelation 8: 3, 4. Literally translated these verses say: 'And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given to him much incense that he should offer (it) to the prayers (ταῖς προσευχαῖς) of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and there went up the smoke of the incense to the prayers (ταῖς προσευχαῖς) of the saints from the hand of the angel before God.' The translation 'to the prayers' is clearly impossible, though according to Dean Alford this 'seems to be the only legitimate rendering of the dative'.¹⁴ The grammarians have variously explained the problem,¹⁵ but C. C. Torrey is undoubtedly right in identifying the dative with the *lāmed* of definition.¹⁶ This construction which occurs a number of times in Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles may be illustrated by Ezra 8: 24: 'Then I separated twelve of the chief of the priests, (namely) Sherebiah (*l'šerēbyā*) . . .' The *lāmed* has not been translated in the EVV, but its meaning is 'namely, even'. If this is the idiom intended in the Apocalypse, ταῖς προσευχαῖς should be rendered 'namely the prayers', and this is confirmed by Revelation 5: 8, where the incense has already been identified with the prayers of the saints.

These few examples constitute some of the more significant Hebraisms in the book of Revelation. Many of them could equally well be explained as Aramaisms or Septuagintisms, but at the same time many of them could not. The only source from which every one can be paralleled is the classical Hebrew of the Old Testament. Also evident from the above examples is their deliberate character. Notably the failure to inflect the divine titles in Revelation 1: 4, the *kaḅ veritatis* construction in 1: 13; 14: 14, and the transliteration of 'ah'arē in 18: 5 point irresistibly to this conclusion. This considera-

¹⁴ *The Greek Testament*, IV (Rivingtons, 1880), p. 633.

¹⁵ A. T. Roberston, following J. H. Moulton, explains it as an associative instrumental, viz. 'with (at the time of)'; but Blass-Debrunner prefers, with R. H. Charles, the *dativus commodi*.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 113 ff.

tion rules out the theory of slavish translation from a Semitic original, as that of all-too-frequent solecisms by an author who was writing in Greek but thinking in Hebrew. Accordingly we are forced to the position that all the grammatical abnormalities of the Apocalypse were deliberately devised by an author who wished to signify the solidarity of his writings with those of the Old Testament. Nor need there be any reluctance about this; quite the reverse, for this position is in perfect harmony with the general character of the Apocalypse.

In conclusion: how do these facts bear on the question of authorship? We are in the custom of being told that the differences in style between the Apocalypse and John's Gospel are such as to make identity of authorship impossible. But if the hebraic style of the Apocalypse is a deliberate device assumed for a particular purpose, there clearly can be no objection to the same author writing other works in a more natural mode of expression.¹⁷ Obviously the question of authorship cannot be decided on stylistic criteria. No one denies of course the many differences both in spirit and subject matter between the Apocalypse on the one hand and the Gospel and Epistles on the other, but not always so fully appreciated are their many similarities. These consist not only in the recurrence of certain themes such as the Lamb, the Logos, the Shepherd, living water, spiritual manna, life and light, but also in their sharing the same vocabulary. The following are some of the words and phrases which the Apocalypse has in common with the other Johannine writings, and which are more or less restricted to this literary group: *νικᾶν*, *τηρεῖν τὸν λόγον*, *τηρεῖν τὰς ἐντολάς*, *ὁδηγεῖν* (of spiritual guidance), *σκηνοῦν*, *ποιεῖν σημεῖον*, *μαρτυρία*, *ἀληθινός*, *Ἑβραϊστί*. So marked are these parallels that even those who deny community of authorship have been obliged to assume some connection between the respective writers. However, now that the stylistic problem can be disposed of, there no longer seems to be adequate reason for denying that the Apostle John was the sole author of Gospel, Epistles and Apocalypse.

¹⁷ Cf. A. M. Farrer: 'But since the style of the Apocalypse is completely artificial and antiquarian, to refuse to allow St. John ever to write in more ordinary speech is like refusing to recognise the authenticity of my everyday writings, because I once composed a collect in what I supposed to be the style of Archbishop Cranmer' (*op. cit.*, p. 22 f.).