THE POLYVALENT IMAGERY OF REV 3:20 IN THE LIGHT OF GRECO-EGYPTIAN DIVINATION TEXTS

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INTRODUCTION

The proclamation to the church of Laodicea (Rev 3:4–22), the last of seven proclamations to the churches of Roman Asia in Rev 2–3, contains a striking “I”-saying that is part of a longer first-person speech attributed to the risen Jesus (Rev 3:20):

Ἰδοὺ ἕστηκα ἐπὶ τὴν θύραν καὶ κρούω˙ ἐάν τις ἀκούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς μου καὶ ἀνοίξῃ τὴν θύραν, [καὶ] εἰσελεύσομαι πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ δειπνήσω μετ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ αὐτὸς μετ’ ἐμοῦ.

Behold, I stand before the door and I am knocking. If any one hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will come in to visit him and I will have supper with him and he with me.

This short passage rests somewhat uncomfortably in its present literary setting, an indication that it may have had an origin independent of its present context. One indication of this possibility is the fact that while the community at Laodicea is addressed in second-personal singular verb forms and pronouns throughout vv. 15–19, v. 20 suddenly switches to the third-person singular pronoun τις (“someone,” “anyone”), setting this concluding verse apart from the preceding context. There are a few other “I”-sayings of Jesus in Revelation (1:17–20; 16:15; 22:12–13, 16), and many more in the Gospels; some have proposed that many of these “I”-sayings originated as sayings of the risen Jesus uttered by Christian prophets, though the arguments are far from conclusive.

2 Akira Satake, Die Offenbarung des Johannes (KeK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 189.
4 James D.G. Dunn, “Prophetic I-Sayings and the Jesus Tradition: The Importance of Testing Prophetic Utterances within Early Christianity,” NTS, 24 (1978) 175–98; David E.
Rev 3:20 has proven to be a very difficult passage to interpret as reflected in the diversity of views among commentators, some of which will be reviewed in this essay. The brief narrative in Rev 3:20 is a scene that consists of three parts: (1) the “one like a son of man” (1:13), i.e., the exalted Lord, stands before a closed door and knocks for admittance; (2) there is mention of an unidentified person within who will likely open the door, so that (3) the exalted Lord and the indweller might dine together. While this brief scene is clearly allegorical, it is not at all obvious what meaning is to be given to the door, the act of knocking, the act of opening of the door, the identity of the individual (τις) within, and the act of commensality shared by the Lord with the indweller. The imagery in this passage is polyvalent, a feature suggested not simply through the unremarkable fact that commentators disagree on its interpretation, but rather because individual commentators frequently suggest two, three or more possible meanings side-by-side without insisting on the priority of any one reading.

In the present essay, after surveying the major ways in which Rev 3:20 has been interpreted by commentators ancient and modern, I will argue for the relevance of a series of Graeco-Egyptian divination texts for understanding the imagery of Rev 3:20.

**Major Interpretive Approaches to Rev 3:20**

*Biblical Allusions*

Many modern commentators argue that Rev 3:20 contains an allusion to, or echo of, one or more biblical texts. In proposing such allusions or echoes, however, the central issue (in addition to the question or whether or not the perceived allusions are actually present), is whether or not identifying them and exploring their original meaning actually sheds light on

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5 The protasis of the conditional clause consists of ἐάν plus the two subjunctive verbs ἀκούσῃ and ἀνοίξῃ, which constitutes a third class condition, i.e., a more probable future condition.

6 The mention of a door in Rev 3:8 (“Behold I have set before you an open door”) in the immediately preceding proclamation to Thyatira (3:7–13), is just as obviously metaphorical.