Interpreters of John’s Apocalypse have long struggled to understand his three plague septets: the opening of seals (6–8), blowing of trumpets (8–11), and pouring out of bowls (16). Traditions derived from Daniel, Zechariah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah are among the most influential on these chapters. While there are no formal citations of scripture in the Apocalypse, the book forms a rich tapestry of allusions and creative adaptations of biblical traditions. And John is most certainly influenced by and familiar with much more than just the “Old Testament,” as commentators have shown distinctive parallels with, for example: Enochic literature, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *4 Ezra*, and *2 Baruch*.

The book of Exodus and traditions derived from it also shape John’s three plague septets. In contrast to allusions to Exodus, significant attention has been given to exploring resonances of these prophetic works in the Apocalypse. The purpose of this paper is to explore how traditions related to Exodus may have informed and shaped John’s theological world.

Interpreters of New Testament writings have increasingly identified and argued for the presence of exile motifs. More recently, Matthew Thiessen, suggested that the book of Hebrews “renarrates Israel’s history as an extended exodus which comes to an end as a result of Christ’s high priesthood.” In light of the growing recognition that the continuing exile of God’s people is formative in early Jewish and New Testament literature, the issue arises whether allusions to Exodus traditions in Revelation may evoke perceptions of exile and return.

---

1 I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the *Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung* for making this research possible.

I. New Exodus and the Three Septets

Exodus plague traditions exert significant influence on the three plague septets. Allusions to seven of the Exodus plagues appear in reference to: blood (8:8; 16:3–4), frogs (16:13), pestilence (6:8), boils/sores (16:2, 11), hail/fire (9:17–18; 16:8–9, 21), locusts (9:3–5), and darkness (8:12; 9:2; 16:10). Not only is there a clear precedent for the application of Egyptian plagues on new foes in the end-times (see esp. Apoc. Ab. 30.14–16), but there is also evidence in the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature that the ten Exodus plagues were shortened to seven. Psalms 78:44–51 and 105:28–36 each recount the plagues, however they are presented in various orders and list only seven. This abbreviation of the Exodus plagues from ten to seven also occurs in Artap. 3.27–33 (third to second centuries B.C.E.) and Wis 11–18. Furthermore, there are also several septets of plagues that are not related to Exodus (Amos 4:6–11; 3 Bar. 16:3; m. ʾAbot 5:8–9).

Allusions to Exodus in Rev 5:9–11 introduce the plague septets with imagery of a new exodus. The image of the Lamb being slain evokes memory of the Paschal Lamb and Israel’s exodus and liberation from Egypt. Schüssler Fiorenza comments that the death of Christ who is the Lamb depicts the liberation of Christians from universal enslavement. Thus, the “new song” in 5:9–10 is a depiction of redemption which uses political imagery in portraying an event analogous to the exodus. Allusion to the Church (= Israel) occurs when the Christian members are referred to as a kingdom of priests (5:10; cf. Exod 19:6). The original exodus resulted in Israel becoming a special nation of priests and so too in the Apocalypse Christian election leads to them becoming a new kingdom of priests. If the new Israel is victorious, they will exercise their kingship actively on earth in the eschatological future. In the new

---

1 Exodus plagues of lice, swarms and death of firstborn are absent. In regard to the latter, an allusion in Rev 1:5, where Christ is the “firstborn of the dead,” may be present.

2 David Aune, Revelation 6–16 (WBC 52; Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 2:498–517 is the most extensive discussion on the reception of Exodus plague traditions in early Judaism. A theme possibly related to exile that this article will not explore is that of the judgmental reversal of creation. That is, the shortening of the plagues from ten to seven may intend to depict return from exile as also a type of “new creation.”

3 Ps 78 omits lice, boils and darkness; whereas Ps 105 has lice, but omits pestilence and boils. Ps 78:44 begins with blood while 105:28 with darkness, etc.