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# An Investigation into the Use of ‘Star’ Language in the Book of Revelation.

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(M.Th)

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# Introduction:

Of the entire corpus of New Testament writings, 14/24 references to ‘stars’ are found in the Revelation to John.<sup>1</sup> The following study will seek to investigate such language in the Apocalypse by delineating the various ways John employs ‘star’ language, establishing the literary background for Revelation’s astral references, and determining how each ‘star’ reference in Revelation should be interpreted within its specific context. The *rationale* for this examination stems from the initial observation noted above regarding astral language in the NT. While this does not provide complete justification for undertaking such a study, it does prompt the question as to why this is the case. Moreover, as will be seen, there are comparatively similar expressions in Old Testament, Second Temple, and early Christian texts. These parallel expressions may have import for how such phrases should be understood in Revelation since, in terms of style and expression, the work stands in the tradition of ‘apocalyptic’.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, there do not appear to have been focused investigations of similar nature. While some scholars have discussed Revelation’s references to ‘stars’ during their efforts to comment on the entire work, none it seems have devoted a study to this language specifically. Thus, a detailed examination of Revelation’s ‘star’ language is warranted. This investigation will reveal *four* categories of astral language which highlight

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<sup>1</sup> See H. J. Ritz, “ἀστήρ” in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)*, 3 Vols, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 1:174; Silva, Moises Silva, ed., *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDNTTE)*, 5 Vols, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 1:429-431.

<sup>2</sup> It is admittedly problematic to speak of “apocalyptic” as a genre and scholarly discussions in recent decades have attempted to define this literary phenomenon more accurately. For a helpful overview, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 1-52; Larry R. Helyer, *Exploring the Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period: A Guide for New Students*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 112-147; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 7-72.

specific features of each reference and clarify how John utilises ‘star’ language throughout his work.

Having considered this, attention can be focused briefly on how these *four* categories are grouped. The *first* category comprises those references in which ‘stars’ are explicitly identified as ‘angels’ (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1). These come during John’s Vision of the glorified Son of Man (1:13) and the subsequent addresses to the seven angels of the seven Churches (Rev. 2-3).<sup>3</sup> The *second* category encompasses those references to the difficult phrase: the ‘morning star’ (2:28; 22:16). Commentators have written much regarding this phrase and multiple interpretations have already been offered.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it seems natural to place both references to the ‘morning star’ in their own category. The *third* category constitutes those references to ‘stars’ which combine with the addition elements of ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ to compose a literary formula broadly descriptive of the established sources of light in the day and night skies (6:13; 8:12; 12:1).<sup>5</sup> Two of these references also appear as part of the language of cosmic catastrophe, a topic which has been surveyed extensively in scholarly literature. Consequently, this examination will not attempt to revisit well-trodden ground but will rather seek primarily to understand how these two formulae (6:13; 8:12) function in their respective cosmic catastrophe contexts *within* the Apocalypse. The final reference (12:1) does not entail cosmic catastrophe language but nevertheless employs a SMS formula in reference to heavenly luminaries. Revelation’s *final* category comprises those passages which describe

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<sup>3</sup> There are other references which might be grouped under this heading. For example, Rev. 9:1 appears by implication to identify a ‘star’ fallen from heaven with an angelic figure. Moreover, a mention of ‘stars’ swept from heaven by the Dragon’s tail (Rev. 12:4) appears to be in reference to the angelic representatives of earthly communities. However, these have been excluded from this category for two reasons. *First*, there is no *explicit* identification in these references to ‘stars’ as ‘angels’. *Second*, the opening chapters of Revelation (particularly Rev. 2-3) are naturally distinct in terms of literary style from the rest of the work. Thus, the *first* category of astral language in the Apocalypse has been concluded to contain these four references: 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1.

<sup>4</sup> These will be discussed in “Literature Survey” and “Chapter 2 – ‘Morning Star’ References”.

<sup>5</sup> These will be referred to later as ‘sun-moon-star’ formulae or SMS formulae.

stars “falling” from heaven (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4).<sup>6</sup> These are not uniform in expression or meaning. The first three instances (8:10-11; 9:1) appear to reference celestial agents of divine judgement, whereas the final reference (12:4) describes the downfall of angelic representatives of earthly communities.

Shortly, the investigation will proceed to survey briefly the extensive literature addressing astral language in the Apocalypse. The chapters following this survey will then examine each category of ‘star’ references in turn. These discussions will initially attempt to *identify* the ‘stars’ in question. This must be attempted first since it is necessary to establish what the ‘stars’ are before looking for potential literary sources/parallels.<sup>7</sup> Having established the identity of the ‘stars’, each chapter will then search for possible OT texts which may have provided source material for the Apocalypse’s expressions. Once this literature has been examined, attention will be focused on potential parallels in literature roughly contemporary to Revelation. These may provide insight as to what concepts/statements were present in the literary atmosphere of John’s Day. Next, the chapter will investigate NT and early Christian literature to see if these texts provide potential insight for how such expressions were understood in the early Christian movement. Finally, the chapter will discuss how each reference is used within the Apocalypse. Each chapter will follow this pattern as each category is examined. Finally, the conclusions drawn from these individual examinations will be briefly summarised. Efforts will not be made to comment on issues of Revelation’s authorship, date, or genre. This is not to circumvent necessary scholarly discussion but simply to recognise the limits of space in such a short survey. Having considered these issues,

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<sup>6</sup> There are other references to ‘falling’ stars which might be included in this category. For example, Rev. 6:13 and 8:12 refer to ‘stars’ falling from heaven to earth as part of the cosmic catastrophe language traditionally associated with divine judgement in apocalyptic literature. Additionally, as will be seen, some scholars view this language to have theological connotations in so far as ‘stars’ were commonly worshipped in the ancient world. Thus, divine judgement involving the demise of the ‘stars’ might be a way of the author describing not only judgement on the world of men but also on those spiritual forces in opposition to God. Nevertheless, since the references to ‘stars’ in 6:13; 8:12 are utilised within SMS formulae, they naturally fall into a separate category.

<sup>7</sup> This is also necessary due to space restraints since not every potential literary/source can be surveyed.

attention will now be directed towards the scholarly literature addressing astral language in John's Apocalypse.

# Literature Survey

From early Patristic commentaries onwards, scholars have waded through the mass of symbols contained in John's Apocalypse. As part of that symbolism, 'star' language has received passing attention, though not it seems, a focused study. This is largely due to the sheer density of symbols crammed into Revelation's pages and scholarly efforts to unpack such imagery understandably must be selective. Nevertheless, the minor attention astral language has received invites further investigation. Before this investigation can be conducted however, it is necessary to survey scholarly literature regarding Revelation's astral references to determine current theories concerning their identity, literary background, and function within the Apocalypse. As noted above, the language of 'stars' in Revelation can be divided reasonably into *four* categories: angelic associations (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1), 'morning star' references (2:28; 22:16), 'sun-moon-star' formulae (6:13; 8:12; 12:1), and 'falling' star passages (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4). Thus, the following survey will explore scholarly discussion of the relevant passages as grouped by these four categories.

## ***First Category: angelic associations (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1)***

The *first* category of 'star' references belongs to the book's opening chapters (Rev. 1-3). Here 'stars' are explicitly identified with angels.<sup>8</sup> Scholarly discussion surrounding these passages has tended to focus on the identity/nature of these beings. The 3<sup>rd</sup> century Latin commentator, Victorinus of Petovium, saw the reference to seven stars as symbolic of the

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<sup>8</sup> As noted above, angelic associations are not limited entirely to this first category and there is some overlap with other references.



Holy Spirit.<sup>9</sup> Other western Patristic opinions included overcoming saints,<sup>10</sup> the spiritual church,<sup>11</sup> and human “rulers” over the church.<sup>12</sup> Greek Patristic opinion tended toward homogeneity, following Gregory of Nazianzus that each church had its own patron angel.<sup>13</sup> In more recent discussion, scholarship has been no less divided. David E. Aune helpfully lists three major categories of interpretation: 1) supernatural beings, 2) human beings, 3) heavenly bodies.<sup>14</sup> Examples of scholars who fall under the *first* category of interpretation include Craig R. Koester, who argues the angels in Revelation 1-3 must refer to angelic patrons/guardians due to the consistent use of ἄγγελος in reference to supernatural beings elsewhere in the Apocalypse.<sup>15</sup> Robert H. Mounce, along similar though differing lines, argues the stars/angels are a way of “personifying” the prevailing spirit of the churches.<sup>16</sup> This is justified on the basis the letters are clearly addressed to congregations as a whole rather than to individuals. Other interpreters, such as G.R. Beasley-Murray, seeing parallels

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<sup>9</sup> William C. Weinrich, ed., *Latin Commentaries on Revelation: Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, Caesarius of Arles and Bede the Venerable*, Ancient Christian Texts, (Madison: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 2-3. For a modern advocate of this position, see Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 72.

<sup>10</sup> Apringius of Beja in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Caesarius of Arles in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> The Venerable Bede in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 117-118.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Greek Commentaries on Revelation: Oecumenius and Andrew of Caesarea*, Ancient Christian Texts, Trans. William C. Weinrich, (Madison: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 8, 119.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary, 3 Vols, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1997), 1:108-112. His first two categories contain three subdivisions. He is, however, loath to offer any firm suggestion himself. See also, Everett Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1–3: Status Quaestionis and Another Proposal,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 21:3 (2011): 371-386.

<sup>15</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, Vol. 38a, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 248-249; Similarly, G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 217; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 99-100; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 99; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 82; Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 57; Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Nashville: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 107. Aune has cautioned against this approach, however, saying the argument is a form of *petitio principii*, i.e. “assuming in the premise of an argument the conclusion that is still to be proved”. See Aune, *Revelation*, 1:108.

<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, Rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 63; Mounce here follows W.M. Ramsay, see W.M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 69-70.

to the Persian *fravashis*, argue the stars/angels are “heavenly counterparts of the earthly congregations”.<sup>17</sup> The congregations, being united to Jesus, exist in the heavenly realm though physically present upon earth. The author writes to their ‘angels’ to remind them of this reality.<sup>18</sup> Stephen S. Smalley likewise argues the stars/angels are “reminders of the spiritual character of God’s church”.<sup>19</sup>

The *second* interpretation likewise contains a diversity of opinion. William Hendriksen, following Reformation figures such as Heinrich Bullinger,<sup>20</sup> argued these references described pastor/bishops who were responsible for the churches and the immediate recipients of the Seer’s seven letters.<sup>21</sup> Others contend the ‘angels’ are those human bearers of the letters sent from Patmos to the churches.<sup>22</sup> Everett Ferguson, following Rabbinic usage, asserts the stars/angels are those individuals who would read the letters to the congregations.<sup>23</sup>

Advocates of the far less popular *third* interpretation include Michal Wojciechowski who argues the seven stars are to be understood as the sun, moon, and five planets.<sup>24</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation: Based on the Revised Standard Version*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1981), 69-70; James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 116; Beasley-Murray follows Henry Barclay Swete, see Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indices*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1922), 21-22. For ‘astral sky servant’ interpretation, see Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), Kindle, Loc. 670.

<sup>18</sup> A similar position is offered by Ian Paul in Ian Paul, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol.20, (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2018), 74.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 58.

<sup>20</sup> See Mangina, *Revelation*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> William Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1967), 68; Hendriksen here follows R.C. Trench, see R.C. Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia: Revelation II, III*, (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), <http://www.ntslibrary.com/PDF%20Books/Commentary%20on%20the%20Epistles%20to%20the%20Seven%20Churches%20in%20Asia%20-%20Trench.pdf>; similarly, Herman Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, Ed. Homer C. Hoeksema, (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1969), 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 2 Vols, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993), Scribd, 1:301.

<sup>23</sup> Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1–3”, 384-386.

<sup>24</sup> Michal Wojciechowski, “Seven Churches and Seven Celestial Bodies”, *Biblische Notizen* 45 (1988), 48-50; Ferguson notes Edmondo F. Lupieri as a recent advocate (2006) of a nuanced version of this position, see Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1–3,” 372; Edmondo F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the*

interpretation, however, has been met with marked scholarly disinterest. Some scholars, however, such as Francis J. Moloney, while noting the summarising work of others, appear loath to offer any decisive conclusion themselves.<sup>25</sup> Richard Bauckham concludes there is “a hint of some kind of correspondence of the seven Spirits to the seven churches”, though he declines to clarify exactly what this correspondence is.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Second Category: ‘morning star’ references (2:28; 22:16)***

The *second* category consists of references to the “morning star”. These occur twice in the Apocalypse, once describing a promise to the ‘Overcomer’ (2:28) and again in direct association with Jesus (22:16). Due to the explicit identification of the ‘morning star’ with Jesus in 22:16, scholarship is largely undivided as to its meaning.<sup>27</sup> The following review then focuses on the prior reference (2:28) for which, says Mounce, “no completely satisfactory answer...has yet been offered”.<sup>28</sup>

It is due to the difficulty of discerning the meaning of this phrase Colin J. Hemer goes so far as to say “the precise point of this promise is lost and any attempt to assign it a firm *Sitz im Leben* is necessarily speculative.”<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Mounce and Osborne list at least six possible explanations.<sup>30</sup> There are four main lines of interpretation, however, which will be

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*Apocalypse of John*, Italian Texts and Studies on Religion and Society, Trans. Maria Poggi Johnson and Adam Kamesar, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), Kindle, Loc. 731-741.

<sup>25</sup> Francis J. Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 57-61.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 113.

<sup>27</sup> Mounce suggests it signals the dark night of tribulation is over. See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 409.

Similarly, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1147; Aune, *Revelation*, 3:1226-1227. Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 720; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 577; Koester, *Revelation*, 309.

<sup>28</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 90; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79; Osborne, *Revelation*, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, The Biblical Resource Series, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 90; Osborne, *Revelation*, 168.

discussed here.<sup>31</sup> *One* takes the rather unambiguous identification of the ‘morning star’ in 22:16 with Jesus and suggests 2:28 also refers to Jesus who is the believer’s everlasting possession.<sup>32</sup> A *second* closely-related understanding posits 2:27-28 as a reference to Num. 24:17 and Ps.2:9, with the symbols of ‘rod’ and ‘star’ as emblems of Messianic authority.<sup>33</sup> Thus, in 2:28 believers are promised they will reign with the ‘Son of God’ (2:18) sharing his royal messianic status.<sup>34</sup> *Thirdly*, other commentators argue 2:28 is an allusion to the planet Venus, a symbol of victory and sovereignty since Babylonian times and one to whom Roman generals would owe their victories.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when Jesus offers the Overcomer ‘the morning star’, he is stating “the only final sovereignty and power lay with himself and his victorious followers”.<sup>36</sup> A *final*, though less popular, interpretation sees the ‘morning star’ as a reference to Dan. 12:3 and the resurrection of the righteous.<sup>37</sup> Other interpretations include a reference to the fall of Satan in Is. 14:12,<sup>38</sup> Christian witness signalling the dawn of new creation,<sup>39</sup> and a strong astral sky servant,<sup>40</sup> though these seem less popular than the four listed above.

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<sup>31</sup> This division of interpretations is largely indebted to Hemer, *Local Setting*, 126-127. Though, it should be acknowledged there is overlap between interpretations.

<sup>32</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79; Keener, *Revelation*, 136; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 85; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 87; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 47-48; R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John with Introduction, Notes, and Indices also the Greek Text and English Translation*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 77. This interpretation can be traced to Patristic times, see Apringius of Beja and The Venerable Bede in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 36, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 302; Osborne, *Revelation*, 167-169; Matthijs den Dulk, “The Promises to the Conquerors in the Book of Revelation,” *Biblica* 87 (2006): 516-522, 519. This understanding often overlaps with the first, see Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 268; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 74; Fanning, *Revelation*, 157; Aune, *Revelation*, 1:212; William Still, *A Vision of Glory: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, (Glasgow: Nicholas Gray Publishing, 1987), 39. Resseguie takes a view encompassing both the first and second interpretation. See Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 137.

<sup>35</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 105; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 93-94; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79. There is also a contention the ‘morning star’ is a deliberate contrast with the claims of the Roman Emperors to deification, see Koester, *Revelation*, 302.

<sup>36</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 168; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 94.

<sup>37</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 1:549; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 109. This interpretation, linking the ‘morning star’ with ‘resurrection’, has precedent in the Latin Fathers, see Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, and Caesarius of Arles in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 5, 36, 66.

<sup>38</sup> Greek commentators seem to have been fond of this interpretation, see Oecumenius and Andrew of Caesarea in Oden, *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, 14, 123.

<sup>39</sup> Tom Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011), 27.

<sup>40</sup> Malina and Pilch, *Book of Revelation*, Loc. 983. For an astrological interpretation of ‘brilliant morning star’, see Bruce J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys*, (Ada: Baker Academic, 1993), 249-251.

### ***Third Category: sun-moon-star formulae (6:13; 8:12; 12:1)***

The *third* category encompasses three references in which ‘stars’ combine with ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ to constitute a literary pattern termed here ‘sun-moon-star’ formula. Two of these references additionally comprise part of the language of ‘cosmic catastrophe’, of which too much has been written to be adequately addressed here. Nevertheless, two major approaches to this language have been propounded recently which are relevant to this study. The former, championed by scholars such as G.B. Caird and later N.T. Wright and R.T. France, posits passages such as Is.13:10; Joel.2:10, 31; Matt.24:29; Mk.13:24-25; Acts.2:20 as “the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major sociopolitical events and bring out their full significance”.<sup>41</sup> In this interpretation, the language of ‘cosmic catastrophe’ (i.e. sun, moon, and stars darkening/falling apart) would constitute strong metaphorical rhetoric emphasising the severity of the socio-political upheaval the forthcoming events would bring. Edward Adams, however, has contested this hypothesis.<sup>42</sup> He argues these claims are without basis in extant Jewish literature. He writes:

In the key New Testament passages employing this language, a catastrophe of cosmic dimensions (within an ancient cosmological framework) is *genuinely in view*. This is

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<sup>41</sup> N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Vol.2, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1996), 361. Also, G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1988), 243-271; R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 919-923; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 533.

<sup>42</sup> Edward Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World*, The Library of New Testament Studies, 347, (London: T&T Clark International, 2007).

not only suggested by the parallel data but is evident from a close reading of the texts themselves in their literary contexts.<sup>43</sup>

Scholarly discussion regarding the two explicit uses of stars in a ‘cosmic catastrophe’ setting (6:13; 8:12) has debated, amongst other things, whether the author intended the language of stars falling from heaven/becoming darkened to be taken literalistically or metaphorically.<sup>44</sup> That is, whether John envisaged gigantic celestial bodies literally raining down on the wicked world of those who resist the Lamb and persecute His church or whether they are to be taken as symbolic of traumatic realities associated with God’s judgement. On the more literalistic side, Hoeksema argued for a future colossal meteorite shower.<sup>45</sup> Mounce, however, contends the cataclysmic events should not be taken in a “completely literal sense”, though perhaps more than simple “social and political upheavals”.<sup>46</sup> Smalley and G.K. Beale, however, assert the cosmic catastrophe language is much more likely figurative; a “metaphor of God’s judgement on the power of darkness...and on the individuals who support those systems.”<sup>47</sup>

The language of ‘cosmic catastrophe’ is not the only way in which ‘sun-moon-star’ formulae are utilised. In the final reference (12:1), sun-moon-stars are descriptive of the clothing of Messiah’s ‘mother’. As it relates specifically to astral language, the woman is described as having “on her head a crown of twelve stars”. Scholarly discussion here has focused upon the symbolism behind what is seemingly universally accepted as metaphorical/symbolic imagery.<sup>48</sup> Commentators such as Beale have argued the crown of

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<sup>43</sup> Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven*, 253 (Emphasis added).

<sup>44</sup> Whilst scholarship does not fit itself neatly into two categories, these are the broad categories of opinion into which scholarship may be drawn. Also, it is recognised there is also major discussion surrounding the issue of *when* the Seer believed these events to take place. Unfortunately, due to confines of space discussion cannot continue further.

<sup>45</sup> Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 238-239.

<sup>46</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 168; similarly, Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 397; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 121; Keener, *Revelation*, 225.

<sup>48</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315.

twelve stars signifies the twelve tribes of the OT covenant community.<sup>49</sup> Others, like Mounce, tentatively suggests an allusion to both the twelve tribes of Israel *and* the twelve Apostles of the New covenant community.<sup>50</sup> On the basis the seven stars in Rev. 1-3 signify the angels of the churches, Osborne posits the crown of twelve stars are ultimately representative of the entire people of God from both the Old and New covenants.<sup>51</sup> Others still, on a more astrological line, have argued the twelve stars refer to the twelve signs of the Zodiac.<sup>52</sup> Craig R. Koester, on the other hand, sees the imagery of a “crown of twelve stars” in conjunction with the sun and moon as broadly conveying a sense of majesty without being confined to a particular background or containing any specific meaning.<sup>53</sup>

#### ***Fourth Category: ‘falling’ star references (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4)***

The *final* category comprises those passages which describe stars ‘falling’ from heaven. This grouping consists of four references; two in 8:10-11, one in 9:1, and another in 12:4.<sup>54</sup> Scholars have tended to focus on the identity/nature of these stars. For example, Latin Fathers, with what might be termed an ‘ecclesiastical focus’, tended to interpret the stars falling from heaven (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4) as references to “haughty and impious persons who fall from the church.”<sup>55</sup> Some Greek commentators, such as Oecumenius, seeing in 8:10-11

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<sup>49</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 627; similarly, Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315, though he allows the potentiality for an allusion to the twelve apostles. Also, Keener, *Revelation*, 314.

<sup>50</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232; also, Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 147. The interpretation of the twelve stars as the twelve apostles can be traced to the time of Bede. See, Koester, *Revelation*, 544; for Bede’s view see Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 149.

<sup>51</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 457.

<sup>52</sup> Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 197; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:681; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, 300; Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation*, 158; Similarly, Witherington, *Revelation*, 167.

<sup>53</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 543-544.

<sup>54</sup> As noted previously, there is some overlap with other references such as 6:13 and 8:12. Nevertheless, for reasons substantiated above, 8:10-11, 9:1, and 12:4 belong to the following category.

<sup>55</sup> Particularly, Caesarius of Arles and the Venerable Bede, see Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 76, 139-40; 150.

an allusion to Ruth 1:20, interpreted the falling star as the “wrath of God that makes the waters (sinners) bitter.”<sup>56</sup>

Others have interpreted these falling star references as possessing demonic, if not Satanic, overtones.<sup>57</sup> The Greek writer, Andrew of Caesarea, saw the star of 8:10-11 as a reference to Is.14:12 and thus saw an allusion to Satan inflicting misery upon mankind as a result of his downfall.<sup>58</sup> In a similar vein, recent commentators such as Beale argue the star in 8:10-11, alluding to Is.14:12, represents a sinful community’s downfall as represented in their demonic patron angel.<sup>59</sup> Smalley similarly argues the star is an “aspect of Satan” which represents “the unjust and wrongdoers” and the judgement they receive both now and until the “brink of eternity”.<sup>60</sup> Others have taken the Dragon’s sweeping down a third of the stars in 12:4 as a reference to the antediluvian corruption of angelic beings by Satan.<sup>61</sup>

Other scholars, however, have argued for non-angelic interpretations of these references.<sup>62</sup> Commenting on 8:10-11, Osborne contends the passage better suits the idea of a *natural* rather than *angelic* judgement.<sup>63</sup> The Seer has in view a giant divinely-appointed meteorite crashing into the natural world and inflicting untold disaster upon sinful

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<sup>56</sup> Oden, *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Scholars do not always consistently apply this idea to every reference. For example, Beale, whilst arguing for demonic figures in 8:10-11 and 9:1, states that 12:4 should *not* be identified with supernatural beings corrupted by Satan. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 636.

<sup>58</sup> Oden, *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, 144.

<sup>59</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 478-479. He takes a similar approach to 9:1. Sigve K. Tonstad, identifying 8:10-11 with Is.14:12, similarly attributes “demonic identity” to Wormwood. See, Tonstad, *Revelation*, 147-150; Still, *A Vision of Glory*, 70.

<sup>60</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222.

<sup>61</sup> Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 153; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 417; Still, *A Vision of Glory*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> It should be acknowledged 9:1 seems to be universally accepted as an angelic reference. The debate here centres on whether the figure is an agent of good or evil.

For those who take the former position, see Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 185; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 227; Osborne, *Revelation*, 362; Witherington III, *Revelation*, 150; Koester, *Revelation*, 455.

For those arguing the latter, see Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 114; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 134-135; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 311-312; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491.

<sup>63</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 354.



humanity.<sup>64</sup> Commenting on the same passage, Swete argued the giant falling star is “merely a symbol of divine visitation”.<sup>65</sup> Wright, commenting on 12:4, likewise asserts the stars swept down by the dragon represent the varied attacks upon the saints of God prior to the Messiah’s birth, rather than a prehistoric moral fall of Satan’s angelic supporters.<sup>66</sup>

## ***Conclusion:***

Following this brief survey, it can be concluded scholarship is largely divided over the astral language that punctuates the Apocalypse. The first category of ‘star’ language primarily divides scholars over whether the star/angels of Rev. 1-3 are heavenly/human beings or metaphoric for spiritual realities. The ‘morning star’ baffles and splits academics over its precise meaning. The ‘sun-moon-star’ formulae of 6:13, 8:12, and 12:1, lead to multiple discussions ranging from the interpretation of cosmic catastrophe language to the meaning behind the radiant raiment of the Messiah’s ‘mother’. The ‘falling’ star references separate commentators largely over the question of whether these represent angelic or human beings. Considering these interpretive difficulties, a further and more focused study of Revelation’s ‘star’ language is necessary. The following chapters then will investigate such language by 1) delineating the various ways John employs ‘star’ imagery, 2) attempting to establish the literary background for these references, and 3) determining how each ‘star’ reference should be interpreted within its specific context. Following this, several short

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<sup>64</sup> Koester likewise argues the original reader would have understood the falling star as a meteor, which were often viewed as “inauspicious” and “tokens of impending doom”. See, Koester, *Revelation*, 449. Similarly, Keener, *Revelation*, 257; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286.

<sup>65</sup> Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 112; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 180; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 221-222.

<sup>66</sup> Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 108; similarly, Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318. Some even see the reference to ‘stars’ in 12:4 as a description of the future subjection of the world to an Antichrist figure. See John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 189.

conclusions will be offered concerning how understanding Revelation's astral language contributes towards on-going discussions of the Apocalypse.

# Chapter 1: Angelic Associations.

Revelation's *first* category of 'star' language is comprised of those references explicitly identifying 'stars' with 'angels'. There are four references in this grouping: 1:16, 20; 2:1 and 3:1. Each occurrence comes in the book's opening chapters which detail John's striking vision of the glorified Son of Man (1:13) and address the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 1-3). It has been noted, by scholars such as Beale, these opening chapters are distinguishable literarily from the rest of Revelation, functioning potentially as an introduction to the work.<sup>67</sup> Thus, it is interesting these 'star' references find themselves in a unique category. The latter two of these references (2:1; 3:1) are anaphoric, in that they refer the reader back to the Vision and Interpretation of 1:16 and 1:20. Thus, the following discussion will deal primarily with John's initial sight of (1:16) and explanation of (1:20) the seven 'stars' in Jesus' right hand. However, it is necessary first to identify these astral figures and trace potential influences behind them before engaging with the references directly.

## ***Discerning 'star/angel' identity:***

Before discussing the influences behind this category and the references themselves, it is necessary to establish the identity of these stars/angels. Determining whether John refers to angelic guardians or human envoys will have a significant impact upon which potentially influential texts the exegete will turn to. As noted previously, there are three broad interpretative categories scholars can be divided into: 1) 'stars/angels' as supernatural beings

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<sup>67</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 37-42; Osborne, *Revelation*, 12; See also D.E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)", *New Testament Studies* 36 (1990): 182-204; Robert L. Muse, "Revelation 2-3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages," *Journal of the Evangelical Theology Society* 29:2 (1986): 147-161.

2) ‘stars/angels’ as human beings 3) ‘stars/angels’ as celestial bodies in ancient astrology.<sup>68</sup>

As noted above, the last category, as advocated variously by Wojciechowski, Malina, and more recently by Edmondo F. Lupieri, has been met with marked scholarly disinterest.<sup>69</sup> This is largely due to advocates’ failure to appreciate Revelation’s literary background. For example, Wojciechowski argues the seven stars in Jesus’ hand “are to be identified with the sun, the moon and the five planets” in the astronomy of Antiquity.<sup>70</sup> However, he assumes this without examining *any* OT texts and without seriously engaging with apocalyptic literature, both of which undoubtedly are highly influential for John’s Apocalypse. Once this literary background is properly appreciated, Wojciechowski’s assertion becomes untenable. Consequently, scholars have been less inclined to treat such interpretations favourably. The *second* interpretation, that the ‘stars/angels’ are human agents, has in its favour the fact both the LXX and NT utilise ἄγγελος for human messengers or prophets (Gen. 32:4, 7; Mal. 3:1; Lk. 9:52; Jam. 2:25 etc).<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, Rabbinic usage, in conjunction with texts like Hag. 1:13 and Mal. 2:7, might suggest this was simply a regular way of referring to community leaders/representatives.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, those who would promote the idea the stars/angels are *readers* of the letters to the synagogue/church might have warrant in texts such as Rev. 1:3, where a blessing is pronounced upon “the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy”. Everett Ferguson sees this as a reference to the congregant elected to read the letter aloud to the congregations.<sup>73</sup> However, while ἄγγελος can connote human messengers, it consistently

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<sup>68</sup> As noted previously, these are very diverse categories.

<sup>69</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 59; G.K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, The Library of New Testament Studies, 166, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 108; Koester, *Revelation*, 246. For advocates see, Wojciechowski, “Seven Churches and Seven Celestial Bodies,” 48-50; Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation*, 70; for a nuanced version, see Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 1837-1857.

<sup>70</sup> Wojciechowski, “Seven Churches and Seven Celestial Bodies,” 48.

<sup>71</sup> Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)*, 10 Vols, Trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), 1:74-87; *NIDNTTE*, 1:120-124.

<sup>72</sup> See Ferguson’s helpful summarising of Paul Billerbeck’s arguments in Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3,” 379-381.

<sup>73</sup> Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3,” 383-385.

refers to heavenly beings elsewhere in Revelation.<sup>74</sup> For example, there is little question, even from advocates of human-orientated interpretations, the “angel” of 1:1 and 22:6, who reveals the message to John to deliver it to God’s “servants”, is anything other than a supernatural “angelic intermediary” or “interpreting angel”.<sup>75</sup> While observations such as this do not conclusively settle the issue, as noted rightly by Aune, they do lend a certain level of probability in favour of a supernatural-being interpretation as well as placing the burden of proof upon those who would argue the contrary.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the criticism, levelled by advocates of this position against a supernatural-being interpretation (that there is a distinct lack of *exact* parallels in OT literature),<sup>77</sup> can just as easily be applied to the human-being interpretation, since there is likewise a similar lack of *precise* examples of ecclesiastical leaders being referred to as “angels”. Finally, the use of ‘stars’ in conjunction with ‘angels’ has far more precedent, in OT and non-canonical sources, and indeed within Revelation itself, with passages referring to supernatural beings as opposed to humans (e.g., Job. 38:7; 1 En. 21:3, 86, 90:20-21; c.f. Rev. 9:1 etc.). Thus, the supernatural-being interpretation possesses the greater weight of probability as well as having precedent in earlier Jewish literature.

This, however, still leaves the diversity of ideas which constitutes the *first* category. Two of the more popular interpretations within this grouping state the stars/angels are either 1) supernatural guardians/patrons of the churches or 2) heavenly counterparts/personified spirits of the churches. The former posits the stars/angels to be supernatural guardians or patrons presiding over the spiritual affairs of the congregations whilst being present with them on earth.<sup>78</sup> The latter asserts the stars/angels to be supernatural figures, either literal or

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<sup>74</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 98-99; Koester, *Revelation*, 249.

<sup>75</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 403; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 567; Osborne, *Revelation*, 780. Koester, *Revelation*, 838.

<sup>76</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 1:108.

<sup>77</sup> Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3,” 373.

<sup>78</sup> General advocates of this position include Koester, *Revelation*, 248-249; Beale, *Revelation*, 217; Keener, *Revelation*, 99-100; Osborne, *Revelation*, 99; Witherington, *Revelation*, 82; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 57; Fanning, *Revelation*, 107.

metaphorical, who, from their position in the heavenly realm, act on behalf of the congregations.<sup>79</sup> The metaphorical “personified-spirit” option is problematic as it dilutes the distinction between ‘angel’ and ‘church’ that John clearly delineates in his opening chapters.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, it unnecessarily complicates the simple and explicit identification of star = angel in 1:20 into star = angel = representative spirit. The “heavenly-counterpart” interpretation, however, while correctly presenting stars/angels as actual beings, wrongly posits them as having a heavenly locale. The text, instead, appears to present the stars/angels with their terrestrial congregations as John is commanded to present a message *from* heaven to the churches *on* earth. Moreover, there is little, if any, appeal by advocates of these positions to OT sources. Rather, the angelic guardian/patron interpretation is preferable due to *probability, precedent* (cf. Deut. 32:8-9; Dan. 10:13, 12:1; Sir. 17:17 etc.), and what will be later discussed as the NT awareness of angelic *proximity* in ecclesiastical settings (cf. 1 Cor. 4:9, 11:10; 1 Tim. 5:21). There is, moreover, an argument from Patristic sources, as many early ecclesiastical giants, such as Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and Origen held this position.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, this is not to claim the angelic guardian interpretation to be without difficulty. It is certainly perplexing to the reader as to why John is instructed to address “angels” and why they are charged with human wrongdoing.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, the difficulty of understanding why a human is tasked with addressing and charging angels is not without parallel in extant Jewish and Christian literature (cf. 4Q531 frag.8 col.2; 1 Cor. 6:3).<sup>83</sup> For example, Loren Stuckenbruck, building on the arguments of scholars such as Martin Karrer, has argued one Qumran fragment from the Aramaic *Book of Giants*

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<sup>79</sup> General advocates include Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 63; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 69-70; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 21-22; Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 69-70; Hemer, *Local Setting*, 33; Resseguie, *The Revelation of John*, 116.

<sup>80</sup> In John’s mind, the seven stars are the seven angels of the churches, whereas the seven lampstands are the churches themselves (c.f. Rev.1:20). See Aune, *Revelation*, 1:109.

<sup>81</sup> For references see, Ferguson, “Angels of the Churches in Revelation 1-3,” 372.

<sup>82</sup> Hemer, *Local Setting*, 33.

<sup>83</sup> Keener, *Revelation*, 99; Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, & Wives: Marriage and Women’s Ministry in the Letters of Paul*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1992), Kindle, Loc. 1401-1410.

(4QEnGiants<sup>a</sup> fr.8), a work purportedly written by the antediluvian figure Enoch, offers a parallel to John's angelic addresses.<sup>84</sup> This features a 'formula of address' ("to Semihazah and to all [his] com[panions...]" II.4-5), a 'decree formula' ("Let it be known to you that..."; II.6), a recounting of wrongdoings (II.7-11), a warning of judgement (II.12-13), and summons to repentance ("And now, loosen your bonds which tie [you] up [. . .] and begin to pray."; II.13-15).<sup>85</sup> Admittedly, dissimilarities exist. The figure of Enoch, though human in the *Book of Giants*, is undoubtedly otherworldly. Moreover, the angels addressed in this source are fallen and their destruction inevitable.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, this fragment does suggest parallels to John's angel addresses existed in first century Jewish literature. Moreover, the idea certain celestial beings were accountable for terrestrial events, as will be observed later, was prevalent in the Jewish world of John's time. Thus, this observation (angels are responsible concerning terrestrial events) may in reality be an argument in favour of a supernatural guardian interpretation. In light of these considerations, the plain reading of the text (i.e. star = angel), in conjunction with the Jewish literary tradition of guardian angels to be discussed below, must be allowed to take precedence in interpretation over speculation into potential double meanings behind John's explicit identification.

### ***Old Testament Influences:***

John's identification of 'stars' with guardian angels adapts a wider Jewish tradition regarding angelic national guardians prevalent in the Jewish world of his time. This tradition appears in the early sources of Jewish antiquity. One well-known text of this type is Deut.

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<sup>84</sup> Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995), 234-238.

<sup>85</sup> See J.T. Milik, *The Books of Enoch: Aramaic Fragments of Qumran Cave 4*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 314-316.

<sup>86</sup> Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology*, 236.

32:8-9.<sup>87</sup> This pericope stands as part of the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43), a liturgical hymn extolling YHWH's greatness and containing elements of a covenant lawsuit.<sup>88</sup> After praising YHWH and indicting unfaithful Israel (Deut. 32:1-7), attention turns YHWH's great acts of the past, beginning with His establishment of the nations recorded in Gen. 11:1-9. According to the Masoretic text: *בְּהַפְרִיזוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יָצַב גְּבֻלֹת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל* ("...when [God] divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel."). This would seem, albeit confusingly and anachronistically, to indicate God divided humanity according to number of Israelites, traditionally thought to be seventy in number.<sup>89</sup> However, the Old Greek LXX has *κατὰ ἀριθμὸν υἱῶν θεοῦ* ("according to the number of the sons of God") or in later more-interpretative recensions *κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ* ("according to the number of the angels of God").<sup>90</sup> This discrepancy leads textual critics to doubt the veracity of the MT, especially since one Dead Sea Scroll (4QDeut<sup>l</sup>) unambiguously contradicts it with: *לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים* ("according to the number of the sons of God").<sup>91</sup> Consequently, Darrell D. Hannah posits the non-MT rendering as evidence of "heavenly guardians of the nations" in early Judaism.<sup>92</sup> God divided the world's ethnic groups according

<sup>87</sup> The following sections regarding literary sources/parallels are not exhaustive of but merely representative of a variety of texts within this angelic guardian tradition.

<sup>88</sup> For further discussion on the nature of this 'Song', see Matthew Thiessen, "The Form and Function of the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 123:3 (2004): 401-424; Daniel I. Block, *How I Love Your Torah, O Lord! Studies in the Book of Deuteronomy*, (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 162-188.

<sup>89</sup> Appeal traditionally was made, by Rabbinical commentators such as Rashi, to texts such as Gen. 46:27, Ex. 1:5, and Deut. 10:22. See Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (2001): 52-74, 53-54; Jan Joosten, "A Note on the Text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8," *Vetus Testamentum* 57:4 (2007): 548-555. 550.

<sup>90</sup> The rendering *κατὰ ἀριθμὸν ἀγγέλων θεοῦ* is found in Gregory R. Lanier and William A. Ross, eds., *Septuaginta: A Reader's Edition*, 2 Vols, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2018), 1:545; Also, Emmanuel Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns Inc., 2015), 146; Joosten, "A Note on the Text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8," 549; For full discussion of problems related to the Greek Texts of Deut. 32:8-9 see, John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Deuteronomy*, Society of Biblical Literature Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series, 39, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

<sup>91</sup> For 4QDeut<sup>l</sup> see <https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/manuscript/4Q37-1> (Accessed 07/01/2021). The other DSS (4QDeut<sup>q</sup>) of Deut. 32:8-9 unfortunately breaks off at the crucial point, though it does contain space for consonants after the *ל* of *לְמִסְפַּר* *בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים*. See Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," 53.

<sup>92</sup> Darrell D. Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons in Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity," *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook* 2007, no. 2007 (2007): 413-436,



to the number of angelic guardians. Given the traditional OT association of “sons of God” with angelic figures (c.f. Gen. 6:2,4 etc.) and the similar allusions to angelic figures elsewhere in Deuteronomy (c.f. Deut. 4:19-20; 29:25-26; 32:43), Hannah’s contention appears highly probable.<sup>93</sup> Hannah thus hypothesises the LXX translator had before him למספר בני אל (“according to the number of the sons of God”) or perhaps בני אלים (“according to the number of the sons of the gods”).<sup>94</sup> A later scribe then altered this seemingly polytheistic language to למספר בני ישראל (“according to the number of the sons of Israel”). Jan Joosten, however, goes further, asserting the Masoretic corruption can only be explained if the translator had before him למספר בני שר אל (“according to the number of the sons of Bull El”).<sup>95</sup> He contends the original text presented YHWH as “an outsider in the world of the gods, but he ends up robbing all the others of their *raison d'être*”.<sup>96</sup> Other divine beings, including “Bull El”, proportioned and inherited the nations, but YHWH, a rogue god, found Israel and adopted them as his own, later triumphing over the other gods to achieve supreme status. He then similarly asserts a later scribe, steeped in monotheism, altered this text to avoid polytheism. Engaging as this hypothesis is, it has against it the sheer silence of textual evidence, since no MSS contain this reading. Furthermore, while it claims to account for the additional letters שר, it still fails to explain the addition of an extra י in בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. Thus, Joosten’s hypothesis is not entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, it is still clear Deut. 32:8-9 indicates an early Jewish belief that each nation, except Israel, possessed its own angelic guardian appointed to it by God at the division of the nations (Gen. 11:1-9).

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110192957.5.413>. 416-417; also, James Kugel, “4Q369 ‘Prayer of Enosh’ and Ancient Biblical Interpretation,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5:2 (1998): 119-148, 132.

<sup>93</sup> These guardians are not necessarily to be understood as protective or helpful figures. Rather, as later Jewish works record, each patron was sent to its respective nation to lead that people astray, hence why Israel possessed no guardian (cf. Jub. 15:30b-32).

<sup>94</sup> Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 417.

<sup>95</sup> Joosten, “A Note on the Text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8,” 548-555.

<sup>96</sup> Joosten, “A Note on the Text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8,” 554.

This tradition of angelic national patrons continued to develop and gain influence as biblical history progressed. One document reflecting such development is the book of Daniel.<sup>97</sup> In this work, there are three texts which reflect the tradition of guardian angels, with one important development (10:13, 21; 12:1). In chapter 10, Daniel is met with a terrifying vision of a “man”, who in context is clearly an angelic figure. This angel had been sent with a message to Daniel (10:11). However, according to the text he was delayed 21 days by the *שַׂר מַלְכוּת פָּרְס* (“prince of the Kingdom of Persia”; 10:13). The new military term *שַׂר* (“prince, ruler”) employed here and elsewhere in Daniel refers to a heavenly guardian rather than a terrestrial individual.<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, it has been argued, by scholars such as Ida Fröhlich, this new term might even possess a connection to celestial bodies such as stars or planets, an idea purportedly prevalent in later Enochic literature and other Second Temple Texts (cf. 1 En. 8.12-16; 21:6; 72:3; 80:2-3; Also, 4Q552-553; *Testament of Reuben* 2:1-3:7).<sup>99</sup> The crucial development, in Daniel, however, is that, whereas Israel previously possessed no guardian except YHWH, God’s people are now described as having a “prince” of their own: Michael

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<sup>97</sup> Comment will not be made here on the date of Daniel, which many scholars posit as a post-Maccabean work. The grouping of this work into the category of OT is simply based on its accepted position as a canonical work in both traditional Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>98</sup> Ida Fröhlich, “Stars and Spirits: Heavenly Bodies in Ancient Jewish Aramaic Tradition”, *Aramaic Studies* 13 (2015): 111-127. 125; Gillian Bampfylde, “The Prince of the Host in the Book of Daniel and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Journal for the study of Judaism* 14:2 (1983): 129-134, 131.

<sup>99</sup> For example, Fröhlich argues “the image of the tutelary angel of Persia and that of Yawan in Dan.10...reflects an oriental concept of astral science”. See Fröhlich, “Stars and Spirits”. 126; whilst Alexander Toepel asserts the “possibility that the tutelary angels of Persia and Greece are in fact planetary demons” in Dan.10:13, 20, 21. See Toepel, “Planetary Demons in Early Jewish Literature”, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 14:3 (2005): 237. Regardless of whether one wholly accepts the conclusion regarding the influence of oriental astrology upon Dan.10, there still appears to be a strong possibility of a conceptual link between the angel-princes of Dan.10-12 and celestial bodies. For example, Heiser argues the use of *שַׂר* in Ps.82:7 (*הַשָּׂרִים*) could be a substantive use of the Akkadian cognate adjective *saruru* (“shining”). Thus, one translation of *שַׂר* could be “Shining One”, which would further establish a connection between angels and stars. Further evidence could include the fact the Sumerian cuneiform sign for “god”, later adopted into the Akkadian writing system, was originally a pictograph of a star. Lines of evidence such as these, while fragmentary, make the connection between the celestial and the angelic/divine in the mind of Ancient Near East, and by association in early Judaism, a strong possibility. Whilst this is not conclusive evidence the angel-princes of Dan.10-12 are to be associated with stars, there might still be warrant for at least suggesting a link in the mind of the author of Daniel between angelic “Shining Ones” and astral bodies. See Heiser, “Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God”, 62; Also, Hugh. R. Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion: A Study of its Reflexes in Ugaritic & Biblical Literature*, (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996), 97-98; Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, The NIV Application Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), Scribd, 1102.

(10:21; 12:1). These “princes” are described as battling one another (10:20-21), subject to failure if left unaided (Dan. 10:13), possessing superior officers (10:13), and being directly responsible for the course of human history (10:20; 12:1).<sup>100</sup> On the whole, these national angelic patrons can be forces for both good and evil. Those of foreign nations are generally considered malicious, while Israel’s “prince” positively aids their struggle against the forces of darkness. These observations lead to the conclusion the angelic guardian tradition extends far back into Jewish antiquity and continues into the period leading up to the restoration of the Second Temple.

### ***Non-Canonical Parallels:***

The precedent for belief in angelic guardians/patrons is likewise prevalent in various non-canonical writings of the Second Temple period. One such text, frequently noted by scholars, comes in the Wisdom of Ben Sirach 17:17.<sup>101</sup> In a section primarily preoccupied with anthropology, the author observes: “[*For in the division of the nations of the entire earth,*] for each nation he appointed a leader, and the Lord’s portion is Israel.”<sup>102</sup> Although the first half of the verse (in brackets in NETS) is the work of later recensions (minuscules 70 and 248), the latter portion clearly reiterates Deut. 32:8-9.<sup>103</sup> At Babel YHWH appointed a ruler, or angelic patron, for every nation except Israel, who alone were YHWH’s portion.

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<sup>100</sup> The angel’s statement he will leave Daniel to battle the Prince of Persia and then the Prince of Greece directly mirrors the events of history (Dan.10:20). This is unsurprising since it is a frequent assumption in apocalyptic that “earthly realities reflect and mirror heavenly ones”. See Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons”, 420; Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, The New American Commentary, Vol.18, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 294.

<sup>101</sup> See Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 418; Joosten, “A Note on the Text of Deuteronomy xxxii 8,” 549; Kugel, “4Q369 ‘Prayer of Enosh’ and Ancient Biblical Interpretation,” 132.

<sup>102</sup> Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included under That Title (NETS)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 732.

<sup>103</sup> Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 418. Compare OG Sir.17:17 in *Septuaginta*, 2:614 with LXX of Deut.32:8-9 in *Septuaginta*, 1:545.

Thus, the original tradition of national patrons solely for the Gentiles continued simultaneously to the developments of Daniel.<sup>104</sup>

This tradition, that every nation *except Israel* received an angelic guardian, appears to be founded on the belief these national angels were forces for evil not good. Two passages from the book of Jubilees based upon the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) reflect this idea. The *first* is Jubilees 10:22-23 which retells the story from Genesis. In this account, God gathers the angels with him as he descends to the Tower, indicating angelic forces were directly involved in the tumultuous events that followed. No indication is given, however, of their number or precisely what role they played. The *second* pericope (Jub. 15:30b-32), situated in a passage concerning the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Jub.15:11-34), says:

But he [YHWH] chose Israel to be his people.<sup>31</sup> He sanctified them and gathered (them) from all humanity. For there are many nations and many peoples and all belong to him. He made spirits rule over all *in order to lead them astray from following him.*<sup>32</sup> But over Israel he made no angel or spirit rule because he alone is their ruler. He will guard them and require them for himself from his angels, his spirits, and everyone, and all his powers so that he may guard them and bless them and so that they may be his and he theirs from now and forever.<sup>105</sup>

The point of this exegesis of Gen. 11:1-9, is to underscore Israel as “a unique people whom God possesses...”.<sup>106</sup> This is done by drawing a contrast between the way YHWH governs the nations vs Israel. To the nations He gives “spirits” (synonymous here with “angels”) to

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<sup>104</sup> See the first line of 4Q369 col.2, which also appears to allude to this tradition: “your name. You apportioned his inheritance to cause your name to dwell there...”. Kugel, “4Q369 ‘Prayer of Enosh’ and Ancient Biblical Interpretation,” 131.

<sup>105</sup> James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: The Hermeneia Translation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020), 61. Emphasis added.

<sup>106</sup> James C. VanderKam, *Book of Jubilees*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 125.

lead them away from the truth. To Israel, however, He gives Himself as its ruler and guardian. In this conception of guardian angels, the patrons are God's agents in leading the nations astray as punishment for Babel. Hence, a guardian for Israel would be unnecessary, even problematic, in Jubilees.<sup>107</sup> This concept is reiterated in works such as the *Animal Apocalypse* of 1 Enoch (1 En. 85-91), a "complex allegory" in which the human "figures of biblical history are represented by animals" and supernatural beings as humans.<sup>108</sup> This text asserts, in the period from the Babylonian captivity until the Maccabean victory (1 En. 89:55-90:19), Israel is handed over to 70 "Shepherds". These Overlords are to watch over the "sheep" and even destroy some of them, while "another" takes stock of their actions.<sup>109</sup> Discerning the identity of these shepherds has been referred to as "the most vexed question in Enoch".<sup>110</sup> While several proposals have been suggested, such as "the seventy elders or priesthood of Israel" (Ex. 24:1; Ezek. 8:11; 1 En. 34:1-31),<sup>111</sup> these 70 "Shepherds" are most likely the guardian angels of the nations to whom Israel was turned over, since this idea bears remarkable similarity to a later Medieval Jewish legend in which at the Tower of Babel God assigned 70 angelic patrons over the 70 nations.<sup>112</sup> This idea also recalls the national division of Deut. 32:8-9. These "Shepherds" are directly responsible for the condition of the Sheep and will be charged if they exceed their allotted punishment of Israel given by God (1 En. 89:61-65). Thus, once more and in contrast to Daniel, the image of guardian angels in Second Temple Judaism is a pointedly negative one. Nevertheless, while many texts from this period reflect an "either or" approach to the subject of guardian angels, some took a more mediating

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<sup>107</sup> For further discussion on Angelology in Jubilees see Todd Russell Hanneken, "Angels and Demons in the Book of Jubilees and Contemporary Apocalypses," *Henoch* 28:2 (2006): 11-25.

<sup>108</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 86.

<sup>109</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 87.

<sup>110</sup> R.H. Charles quoted in Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 87.

<sup>111</sup> Phillip J. Long, "The Animal Apocalypse, Part 1 – 1 Enoch 85-90," <https://readingacts.com/2016/06/22/the-animal-apocalypse-part-1-1-enoach-85-90/>

<sup>112</sup> C.f. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan at Gen.11:7-8 and Deut.32:8-9; *Testament of Naphtali* 8:4-10:2; *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 24; See Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 418-419, 421.

attitude. In light of texts speaking favourably of Michael as Israel's guardian, one text (1QM [War Scroll] 13:9-10) attempts a synthesis, saying:

You [cre]ated [us] for yourself, an eternal people, and you have granted us the lot of light, in keeping with your faithfulness. [But] from of old you appointed the Prince of Light to help us, and in [...] and all the spirits [that is, angels] of truth are under his rule.<sup>113</sup>

In other words, Israel was still a unique people singled out from the nations by God to dwell in His light. In that sense it had no guiding angel. Nevertheless, to help them, God had appointed a supreme angel to assist Israel in times of need. Thus, the crisis of views was adverted in that Israel was still uniquely chosen of God and yet possessed a positive angelic guardian to assist them in spiritual conflict. Having considered these examples, it is easily observable there was a strong tradition of guardian angels within the Second Temple Judaism contemporary to John.

### ***NT & Early Christian Writings:***

Early Christian sources appear to continue this belief in guardian angels with some further developments. One example of this comes as a passing statement of Jesus in Matt. 18:10.<sup>114</sup> In a passage concerned chiefly with the reversed nature of the Kingdom of Heaven, in which infants are counted amongst the greatest, Jesus tells his hearers, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." The "little ones" (ἐνὸς τῶν μικρῶν τούτων) in this context

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<sup>113</sup> Kugel, "4Q369 'Prayer of Enosh' and Ancient Biblical Interpretation", 134.

<sup>114</sup> For further discussion of angels and apocalypticism in Matthew, see Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 85-136.

clearly include, not only children, but any disciple of Jesus.<sup>115</sup> It is this group to whom Jesus attributes ἄγγελοι, who, he says, “always see the face of my Father who is in heaven”. This expression, notes France, “reflects courtly language for personal access to the king” (c.f. 2 Sam. 14:24, 32; Est. 1:14) and potentially suggests the angels of the “little ones” are of the most superior kind, since they are the only ones permitted to see the face of God (c.f. Jub. 2:2, 18; 1QH 6:13, 1QSb 4:26 etc).<sup>116</sup> This, again potentially, reflects a developing idea that *individuals* were assigned angels to guard and sponsor them.<sup>117</sup> It should be noted, however, there is difficulty with this interpretation, since these angels are explicitly stated as being “in heaven” and not on earth watching over the “little ones”. Nevertheless, the fact these angels are “in heaven” in a representative capacity does not preclude the possibility that they could be sent to earth to defend and support the “little ones” in times of need.<sup>118</sup> This notion is paralleled in Hellenistic literature such as that of the translator and Platonist, Philo of Alexandria, who asserted at birth individuals received two guardians, one good and one evil (*Questions and Answers on Exodus* I.23).<sup>119</sup> Despite the derivative origins of much of Philo’s thought in Platonic demonology, the belief in two guardians per individual is nevertheless reiterated in Christian and Rabbinic literature (*Shepherd of Hermas*, *Mandate* VI.2; *b.Shabb.* 119b) and thus cannot be attributed entirely to influences external to Second Temple Judaism/early Christianity.<sup>120</sup> A potential NT parallel to Matt. 18:10 is often noted as Acts 12:15. Here a somewhat overexcited servant girl, in a humorous turn, leaves the Apostle Peter, recently sprung from jail by an angel, knocking at the door to proclaim the good news to those inside. They, however, in disbelief conclude, “it is his angel”

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<sup>115</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 685; Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 430.

<sup>116</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 686.

<sup>117</sup> See Tob.12:15, where the archangel Raphael guards and accompanies Tobias on his journey. Also, Jub.35:17, where Esau and Jacob are said to possess individual “protectors”.

<sup>118</sup> C.f. Jud.6:11-12; Lk.2:9 etc. where angels come presumably from heaven to earth to aid/reveal the divine will to human beings.

<sup>119</sup> Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 425.

<sup>120</sup> References in Hannah, “Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons,” 425.

(Ὁ ἄγγελός ἐστιν αὐτοῦ). An interpretation which views this as evidence for early Christian belief in individual angelic guardians could have justification in later Rabbinic sources which appear to assert Esau's guardian who wrestled with Jacob (Gen. 32:24-33) looked like Esau (Gen. 33:10).<sup>121</sup> Thus, the disciples of Acts 12 presumed the servant girl had seen Peter's guardian angel who was his spitting image. However, this interpretation of Acts 12:15 is difficult to maintain due to "the frequent comparison [in Jewish and Christian literature] of post-mortem existence with angelic existence" (c.f. 1 En. 39:5; 45:4-5; 51:4; 54:1-2; 104:4; 2 Bar. 51:1-12; Mk. 12:25 etc.).<sup>122</sup> Likewise, Craig S. Keener observes it would be unlikely for those in the house to expect Peter's angelic guardian to have abandoned him unless of course they believed him dead (in which case Peter as a posthumous spirit would be more likely).<sup>123</sup> Thus, the disciples in Acts 12:15 are more likely referring to Peter's post-mortem spirit than his guardian angel. Nevertheless, given Acts 12:15 does not elaborate its reference to "his angel" further, it is difficult to settle the issue here conclusively.

In addition to a possible individualistic angel-guardian tradition, the NT not infrequently bears witness to a distinct awareness of close angelic proximity to congregations. While detailed attention cannot be given to these references due to spatial limitations, one example, found in 1 Cor. 11:10, can be briefly considered.<sup>124</sup> Here the Apostle Paul puzzlingly states a "wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head διὰ τοὺς ἄγγέλους (because of the angels)". Kevin P. Sullivan notes the work of both J. Fitzmyer and M. Hooker who, despite differing exegeses, similarly conclude the need for women to wear veils arises from the fact "angels are present in the community".<sup>125</sup> Paul's

<sup>121</sup> See Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 431.

<sup>122</sup> Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 431.

<sup>123</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Vol.2, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), Scribd, 1428.

<sup>124</sup> Other examples of close angelic proximity in the NT include 1 Tim.5:21; Heb.1:14, 13:2. C.f.1 Cor.4:9, 6:3.

<sup>125</sup> Kevin P. Sullivan, "Wrestling with Angels: A Study of the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Late Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity," (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2002), 166-171, <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:9d295b26-9dcf-454a-9862-d00b41594573>



concern, it has been noted, bears remarkable similarity to several other Second Temple texts which attest to the need for purity among their respective communities in order for angelic figures to dwell with them (1QM 7:4-6; 1QSa 2:5-9).<sup>126</sup> Whilst Keener cautions against overinterpreting a passing statement, he does nevertheless conclude Paul is most likely referencing a present, rather than future, reality.<sup>127</sup> While there is perhaps insufficient evidence to claim Paul is referencing guardian angels in 1 Cor. 11:10, his comments nevertheless bear witness to an awareness of close angelic proximity to the ecclesia. What might be concluded from these observations then is the NT bears witness to at least one example of individually assigned guardians, potentially a second, and a strong awareness of angelic presence within the new covenant community.<sup>128</sup>

As Christian theology developed, prominent ecclesiastical figures appear to have happily adopted the belief in guardian angels of individuals. This is attested in works such as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Vis.V,1-4; Man.VI,2), Clement of Alexandria's *Stromata* (VI,17.157.5 [GCS 2,513], Origen's *De Principiis* (I,8.1), Jerome's *Commentarii in Matthaeum* (XVIII), Basil the Great's *Homiliae de Psalmis* (XXXIII,5), and John Chrysostom's *Homiliae de Colossenses* 3.<sup>129</sup> The guardian angel tradition in early Christianity was not limited to individuals, however. For example, the church father Hippolytus, in his *Contra Gaius*, interestingly defends the canonicity of Revelation by

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<sup>126</sup> Sullivan, "Wrestling with Angels," 157, 163.

<sup>127</sup> Keener, *Paul, Women, & Wives*, Loc. 1423.

<sup>128</sup> For further discussion see Keener, *Paul, Women, & Wives*, Loc. 1363-1423. Another intriguing line of evidence comes in Greek epigraphic testimonia from several Pagan, Jewish, and Christian inscriptions from Asia Minor regarding ἄγγελοι during the Roman imperial period. Several of these epitaphs detail requests to ἄγγελοι to guard locations such as cities or burial grounds, 'angel of x' formulae, and appeals for divine justice at the hands of ἄγγελοι. These observations evidence belief in angelic guardians, of some kind, was at least a feature of life in Asia Minor in the 1<sup>st</sup> century and thus potentially would be familiar to audiences in such a setting. For further discussion see G.H.R. Horsley and Jean M. Luxford, "Pagan angels in Roman Asia Minor: revisiting the epigraphic evidence," *Anatolian Studies* 66 (2016): 141-183.

<sup>129</sup> Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 432.

appealing to Deut. 32:8.<sup>130</sup> Gaius had supposedly argued John's Apocalypse to be in contradiction with the Gospels and Paul's Epistles, on the point Jesus had predicted nations to fight against each other, rather than angels against nations as Rev. 9:14-15 seemed to suggest. Hippolytus countered this by asserting the four angels of Rev. 9:14-15 are in fact guardian angels of the nations who guided and drove the nations' actions.<sup>131</sup> If Hippolytus is correct, then the Jewish tradition of angelic nation patrons/guardians, continuing in early Christianity, is attested in works from as early as the end of the first century.<sup>132</sup> Another interesting example of the tradition of guardian angels is found in Christian Apocalyptic texts. One example is found in the so-called *Apocalypse of Paul*; an apocryphal 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century work which purports to record Paul's account of his journey to the "third heaven" (2 Cor. 12:2ff.).<sup>133</sup> After a passage outlining men's grievances before God, the text admonishes them to "bless the Lord God unceasingly, every hour and every day, but more especially when the sun has set..." This is because at this time the guardian angels, both of peoples and individuals, ascend to God to report on the activities of every man (cf. 3 Bar. 11-16).<sup>134</sup> Consequently, it appears early Christianity adopted, with little hesitancy, the Jewish notions regarding individualistic and corporate angelic guardians.<sup>135</sup> Thus, with such strong literary precedence, it is understandable why early Christian interpreters of the first category of "star" language in Revelation would opt for a guardian angel interpretation.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, it is not

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<sup>130</sup> This work is only preserved in portions cited by the 12<sup>th</sup> century commentator Dionysius Bar Salibi. For Dionysius's exact citations see:

[https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/dionysius\\_syrus\\_revelation\\_01.htm#C4](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/dionysius_syrus_revelation_01.htm#C4)

Referenced in Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 428.

<sup>131</sup> See Dionysius' comments and conclusions:

[https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/dionysius\\_syrus\\_revelation\\_01.htm#C4](https://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/dionysius_syrus_revelation_01.htm#C4)

Also, Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 428.

<sup>132</sup> Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 429.

<sup>133</sup> See J.K. Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), First Published 1993 by Oxford University Press, 616-644.

<sup>134</sup> See *Apocalypse of Paul* 7-10 in Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 621.

<sup>135</sup> For further examples of "guardian angels" in early Christian tradition, see Hannah, "Guardian Angels and Angelic National Patrons," 428-432.

<sup>136</sup> Examples include Hippolytus, *Antichristus* LIX; Origin, *De Principiis* I,8.1, *In Lucam homiliae* XXIII,7; Basil, *Commentarii in Isaiam* I,46 etc.

inconceivable the Seer would utilise and adapt such a concept, especially within apocalyptic literary style so conducive to such language and imagery.

### ***‘Star/Angels’ in Revelation:***

Having considered these texts, attention can now turn to ‘star’ language as it appears in Revelation 1-3. As iterated above, this exploration will deal primarily with the first two ‘star’ references (1:16, 20), due to the constraints of space and the anaphoric nature of the latter (2:1, 3:1). The former references (1:16, 20) come in a pericope (1:9-20) inundated with OT symbolism; describing the Seer’s apocalyptic vision of the glorified Son of Man (1:13) and introducing the reader to Revelation’s overall content and purpose.<sup>137</sup>

The *first* reference to ‘star’ language in the Apocalypse comes in 1:16. After recounting the setting and beginning of the Vision (1:9-11), the Seer details the appearance of the One who commanded him to write to the Seven Churches (1:12-16). One of these vivid descriptors (1:16) asserts καὶ ἔχων ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρας (‘‘and having in his right hand seven stars’’). This participial phrase continues the construction of 1:13.<sup>138</sup> For Jesus to ‘‘have’’ (ἔχων) the stars in his right hand speaks less of possessing the stars than of firmly holding onto these celestial beings. In other words, they are secure in his grip, firmly under his sovereign control yet protected from external harassment (c.f. Jhn. 10:28-29).<sup>139</sup> The ‘‘right hand’’ (τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ) throughout biblical literature is symbolic of authority, power, and control (Ps. 110:1; Is. 41:10; Matt. 26:64; 1 Pet. 3:22 etc.).<sup>140</sup> Thus, the phrase ἔχων ἐν τῇ δεξιᾷ χειρὶ (‘‘having/holding in his right hand’’) connotes the power, authority, and

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<sup>137</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 100.

<sup>138</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 59.

<sup>139</sup> Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (BDAG)*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 420-421[3].

<sup>140</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 91; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 55.

protection Jesus exercises over the stars. The object of Jesus' 'holding' is obviously the "seven stars" (ἀστέρων ἑπτὰ). For the moment, the author simply assumes the symbol without further explication, though he is certainly conscious the symbol will not be readily accessible to all, hence his explanation four verses later. The septenary nature of the stars indicates they are to be associated with "fullness and completion".<sup>141</sup> Furthermore, there is a potential polemic against the Roman myth of the deification of the Emperor's dead son. A coin from the time depicts the deified boy as a "young Jupiter" astride a subjected world with his hands reaching to seven stars.<sup>142</sup> If this image functions as a background to 1:16, then the Seer contrasts this imperial image with that of the glorified Son of Man (1:13) grasping the seven stars in his right hand. In other words, Jesus is the "ruler of kings on earth" (1:5) not Caesar. Additionally, there seems to have been a belief, common in the Hellenistic world, that astral entities controlled an individual's destiny.<sup>143</sup> John, again potentially, counters this idea by presenting the fate-controlling stars in the palm of Jesus' right hand, thus further accentuating His universal authority. While these are certainly fascinating insights that add layers of detail to John's image of an exalted Jesus, the primary purpose of 1:16 is, nevertheless, to present the glorified Son of Man as supreme over the church's "stars"; the explanation of which will be expounded four verses later.

The *second* reference comes with the glorified Son of Man's explanation of two aspects of the Seer's Vision (1:20). Jesus tells John:

τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων οὓς εἶδες ἐπὶ τῆς δεξιᾶς μου,  
καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς·  
οἱ ἑπτὰ ἀστέρες ἄγγελοι τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν εἰσίν,

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<sup>141</sup> Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 57.

<sup>142</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 253.

<sup>143</sup> David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2012), Kindle, Loc. 1415; Koester, *Revelation*, 246.

καὶ αἱ λυχνῖαι αἱ ἑπτὰ ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησίαι εἰσὶν.

This explanation identifies the seven stars with “the angels of the seven churches”. The article accompanying ἀστέρες anaphorically refers to 1:16, following the conventional pattern of Greek grammar where the non-articular first reference is followed by an articular reiteration.<sup>144</sup> The genitive utilised in the phrase τῶν ἑπτὰ ἐκκλησιῶν is most likely a possessive genitive or genitive of relationship.<sup>145</sup> Beale argues the two explicated symbols reflect John’s tendency of “universalizing what the Old Testament restricted for the nation Israel”.<sup>146</sup> He asserts the image of the seven lampstands, and potentially the seven stars, is primarily drawn from Zech. 4:2,10, where the vision of the lampstand with seven lamps functions as “a figurative synecdoche by which part of the temple furniture stands for the whole temple”.<sup>147</sup> The Temple in this image represents true Israel who must live “not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6).<sup>148</sup> John’s development of this symbol (from one lampstand to seven) emphasises both the universal scope of the letter’s intended reach (to all churches) and reiterates the NT emphasis that true Israel is constituted of all ethnicities (cf. Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 2:25-29; Gal. 3:14 etc.).<sup>149</sup> The “seven stars” in this equation constitute an adaption of Dan. 12:3 in conjunction with Zech. 4:2 with the intention of positing the churches to have a position of cosmic dimensions, reflecting the Jewish, and indeed Apocalyptic, belief the earthly Temple, now constituted in the Church (1 Pet. 2:5), is a reflective “microcosmic copy of the archetypal heavenly temple-house of God” (cf. Heb. 8:5; Rev. 11:19).<sup>150</sup> A Danielic background for 1:20 is certainly possible, especially since phrases such as τὸ μυστήριον (“the mystery”) only occur

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<sup>144</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 217-220; Fanning, *Revelation*, 109.

<sup>145</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (BDF)*, Trans. Robert W. Funk, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), §162.

<sup>146</sup> Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 105.

<sup>147</sup> Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 105.

<sup>148</sup> Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 105.

<sup>149</sup> Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 107.

<sup>150</sup> Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, 109; Aune, *Revelation*, 1:71.

in eschatological contexts in Danielic literature outside of Revelation.<sup>151</sup> Even so, it is still not clear whether the Seer had Dan. 12:3 specifically in mind or simply the traditional Jewish identification of celestial bodies with angelic figures, although lack of specific evidence that Dan. 12:3 constitutes a direct parallel with Rev. 1:20 would probably tip the weight of probability back to the latter over the former. A more likely observation is that the Seer is adapting the conventional Jewish imagery surrounding guardian angels along with their connection to celestial bodies and modifying it for his own purposes. He presents Jesus as addressing, reproving, and exhorting the angels of the Churches who are accountable for the spiritual and moral condition of each congregation. This presentation does not abrogate human responsibility, however. Rather, utilising an apocalyptic genre so conducive to such imagery, it accentuates the gravity of each address and heightens the exigency to heed Jesus' warnings; thus, making each congregant's urgent sense of need for action even more apparent. This conclusion is bolstered when it is observed that the majority of pronouns/verbs addressing the Churches appear in the singular form with some Letters not utilising the plural once.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, since this understanding posits angelic responsibility regarding human action as part of John's rhetorical strategy, it successfully counters the criticism that angelic accountability is somehow problematic to an angelic guardian interpretation.

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<sup>151</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 217.

<sup>152</sup> The most common interpretation of this is to see the Seer's use of the singular as addressing the congregations as a whole. However, phrases such as "I know your (sg.) works" (cf. Rev.2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15), in light of apocalyptic assumption of angelic accountability for historic events, are better regarded as John is addressing the congregations via their angelic guardians who are responsible for their spiritual condition. This, in turn, makes better sense of why each letter commences with formula: "To the angel of ... write..."

## ***Conclusion:***

These observations lead to the conclusion Revelation's *first* category of 'star' language functions on several levels.<sup>153</sup> On the one hand, the image of the son of God firmly holding seven stars in his right hand directly contradicts the imperial notion of Caesar's son grasping astral powers. On another, the picture of Jesus' control of the stars serves as an assurance the destiny of Christ's church rests securely in His hands. However, the symbol of seven stars, explicated as seven angels, primarily adapts a tradition of guardian angels prevalent in John's time and extending far back into Jewish antiquity. Given the widespread acceptance of this concept in Second Temple Judaism and the connection of such angelic figures to astral language, it is not difficult to see how John adapted this tradition for his own rhetorical strategy. As each nation (Deut. 32:8-9), Israel (Dan. 10:20; 12:1), and later individuals (Matt. 18:10), possessed their own angelic patrons, so each church possessed an angelic guardian who presided over the affairs of that congregation and answered to God for its spiritual and moral condition. The scathing remarks Jesus makes to the congregation's angel heightens each congregant's sense of urgency for action, whilst the encouragements bolster their resolve towards endurance in the face of opposition. While there is no direct parallel for angelic guardians watching over *individual congregations*, the above observations make these conclusions regarding John's adaption of this Jewish tradition highly probable. This rhetorical strategy, based upon the conventions of Jewish apocalyptic, serves to underline John's overarching goal to emphasise the absolute sovereignty of the glorified Son of Man over His Church.

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<sup>153</sup> Barr, *Tales of the End*, Loc. 1407.

## Chapter 2: Morning Star references.

Revelation's *second* category of star language is comprised of two references to the 'morning star' which bracket the book (2:28; 22:16).<sup>154</sup> The ambiguity of this phrase in conjunction with a seeming lack of precise parallels in extant Jewish and Christian literature renders exegesis a very difficult task. Consequently, some scholars, pessimistically assert "the precise point of this promise is lost and any attempt to assign [the morning star] a firm *Sitz im Leben* is necessarily speculative."<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, despite the exegetical difficulties, it is believed several conclusions can be reached regarding Revelation's 'morning star'. Before tentatively searching for potential influences behind these references, it is necessary to examine current theories surrounding the identity of 'morning star'.

### ***Discerning 'Morning Star' Identity:***

Despite the abundance of interpretations regarding Revelation's 'morning star', there does not appear to be a single understanding which satisfactorily accounts for both references.<sup>156</sup> Four of the more popular interpretations, as noted above and helpfully outlined by Hemer, shall be considered briefly here.<sup>157</sup> The *first* of these, that both passages refer to Jesus, has in its favour the explicit identification of Jesus with the 'morning star' (22:16).<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> The observation these references occur at the beginning and end of the work might add further credence to the argument for literary unity in Revelation. See David A. DeSilva, *Discovering Revelation: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 4.

<sup>155</sup> Hemer, *Local Setting*, 126.

<sup>156</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 90; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79; Osborne, *Revelation*, 167.

<sup>157</sup> See Hemer's helpful though inconclusive discussion in Hemer, *Local Setting*, 125-126.

<sup>158</sup> Advocates include Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79; Keener, *Revelation*, 136; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 85; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 87; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 47-48; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, 77; Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 2015-2026. This interpretation can be traced to Patristic times, see Apringius of Beja and The Venerable Bede in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 36, 121.



However, despite this the question remains: what does it mean when Jesus calls Himself the ‘morning star’? The simple identification, by itself, does not explain the reference.

Furthermore, while Jesus is identified with the ‘morning star’ in 22:16, this does not guarantee he is the intended referent of 2:28. In fact, as Robert L. Thomas observes, the promise of 2:28 creates a natural separation between Jesus (the Giver) and the ‘morning star’ (the gift).<sup>159</sup> Thus, while Jesus is certainly the ‘morning star’ of 22:16, further explanation is required beyond this simple observation.

A *second* interpretation sees the ‘morning star’ as a symbol for messianic authority.<sup>160</sup> In this understanding, the promise of 2:28, taken with 2:26-27, iterates the believer will accompany Jesus in his messianic rule. On the other hand, 22:16 identifies Jesus himself as the Messiah-King. This understanding has in its favour strong thematic links between symbols such as the ‘rod’ and ‘star’ of 2:27-28 with passages such as Num. 24:17 and Ps. 2:9 that were understood messianically by some in the Second Temple period.<sup>161</sup> Nevertheless, this interpretation is not without difficulty since it is a demanding task to establish a conclusive link between the ‘*morning star*’ of Revelation and the messianism surrounding the ‘star’ of Jacob in Num. 24:17. Nevertheless, this interpretation is attractive due the widespread attestation of messianic interpretations of Num. 24:17 in the Second Temple period.<sup>162</sup> This is demonstrable in messianic movements such as the failed Bar Kokhba revolt, with its leader assuming the title ‘Son of the Star’.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 1:549.

<sup>160</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 268; Koester, *Revelation*, 302; Osborne, *Revelation*, 167-169; den Dulk, “The Promises to the Conquerors in the Book of Revelation,” 519; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 74; Aune, *Revelation*, 1:212; Still, *A Vision of Glory*, 39. This understanding often overlaps with the first. See Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 85.

<sup>161</sup> For further discussion regarding Messianism in Second Temple literature see John J. Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 52-108.

<sup>162</sup> For discussion of specific texts, such as CD 7:19, see Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 52-78.

<sup>163</sup> The terms ‘messianic’, ‘messianism’, ‘messiah’ and so forth are utilised cautiously here to refer broadly to eschatological saviour figures in Second Temple Jewish conception. See Collins’ caution in Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 16-20. For further discussion on the connection between stars and messianic expectation see Hillel

The *third* interpretation sees the ‘morning star’ as a reference to the planet Venus in ancient cosmology.<sup>164</sup> This understanding has in its favour wide historic precedence, since cultures, from the ANE to ancient Mesoamerica, have identified this planet as a ‘morning star’ and adapted it to play a prominent role in their respective cosmologies.<sup>165</sup> Furthermore, it has been argued, Roman generals would owe their victories to this celestial body, rendering it a symbol of imperial victory and prestige, one the Seer could have potentially polemicised against.<sup>166</sup> It is difficult, however, to see this as the *primary* purpose of the author of Revelation. This conclusion is largely due to the shift in scholarship away from the idea the socio-political situation of Revelation was one of extreme persecution; a shift that would render anti-imperial polemic less paramount for interpretation.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, given scholarly attestation to anti-imperial sentiment within the Apocalypse, this must remain a likely, though perhaps secondary, possibility.<sup>168</sup>

A *fourth* interpretation links Revelation’s ‘morning star’, especially in 22:28, with the promise of Dan. 12:3 that the righteous would shine like stars forever (cf. Matt. 13:43).<sup>169</sup>

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I. Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” in Menahem Kister, Hillel I. Newman, Michael Segal, and Ruth A. Clements, eds., *Tradition, Transmission, and Transformation from Second Temple Literature through Judaism and Christianity in Late Antiquity: Proceedings of the Thirteenth International Symposium of the Orion Centre for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011): 272-303.

<sup>164</sup> Advocates include Witherington, *Revelation*, 105; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 93-94; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79. This interpretation often overlaps with the second. See Aune, *Revelation*, 1:212.

<sup>165</sup> For examples of recent studies into the role of the ‘morning star’ in ancient oral traditions see Marinus Anthony van der Sluijs, “Multiple Morning Stars in Oral Cosmological Traditions,” *Numen* 56:4 (2009): 459-476; Gabrielle Vail, “Venus Lore in the Postclassic Maya Codices: Deity Manifestations of the Morning and Evening Star,” *Ancient Mesoamerica* 28 (2017): 475-488.

<sup>166</sup> Witherington, *Revelation*, 105; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 93-94; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79. There is also a contention that the reference to ‘morning star’ is a deliberate contrast with the claims of the Roman Emperors to deification, see Koester, *Revelation*, 302.

<sup>167</sup> See discussions in Alan Bandy, “Persecution and the Purpose of Revelation with Reference to Roman Jurisprudence,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23:3 (2013): 377-398; Pieter G.R. de Villiers, “Persecution in the Book of Revelation,” *Acta Theologica* 22:2 (2003): 47-70; Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 48-49; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 15-19.

<sup>168</sup> On anti-Roman polemic in the Apocalypse see Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 34-39; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 4; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 3-4.

<sup>169</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 1:549; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 109. This interpretation, linking the ‘morning star’ with ‘resurrection’, has precedent in the Latin Fathers, see Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, and Caesarius of Arles in Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, 5, 36, 66.

While there is a faint link in terms of astral language (i.e. both speak about stars) and Daniel is certainly influential for John's Apocalypse,<sup>170</sup> there is no real evidence, linguistic or thematic, to indicate John is alluding to Dan. 12:3 in either 2:28 or 22:16.<sup>171</sup> Thus, this interpretation seems highly unlikely.

In light of these considerations, it seems none of the popular views fully account for Revelation's references to the 'morning star'. The *first* interpretation, on its own, fails to explain what the 'morning star' is. The *second* offers the strongest argument but nevertheless fails to account for the 'morning' aspect of the star. The *third* posits a likewise attractive alternative, though one most likely of secondary, rather than primary, importance. The *fourth* fails entirely. There is a strong possibility here, as with many symbols in the Apocalypse, of "polyvalence", in which one symbol can possess multiple meanings.<sup>172</sup> Consequently, it is entirely plausible to an eclectic approach to the interpretations of 'morning star'. Leaving aside (4) entirely, interpretations (1), (2), and (3) can be taken together.<sup>173</sup> Jesus is obviously identified as the 'morning star' in 22:16 and it is he who offers this aspect concerning himself to believers in 2:28. The 'morning star', as noted above, likewise possesses a strong connection to the messianic expectation of the Second Temple period, thus linking together (1) and (2). Furthermore, this assertion, by extension, would set Jesus, the messianic 'morning star', against any regal figure of that period, the most obvious of which being the emperor in Rome. Thus, some combination of the first three interpretations is attractive. However, something often overlooked in these discussions is the 'morning' aspect of the

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<sup>170</sup> G.K. Beale, "The Influence Of Daniel Upon The Structure And Theology Of John's Apocalypse," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27:4 (1984): 413-423; G.K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1984).

<sup>171</sup> Scholars largely posit this understanding as unlikely. See Osborne, *Revelation*, 168.

<sup>172</sup> Alan Bandy, "The Hermeneutics Of Symbolism: How To Interpret The Symbols Of John's Apocalypse," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14:1 (2010): 46-55, 49; Norman Perrin, "Eschatology and Hermeneutics: Reflections on Method in the Interpretation of the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93:1 (1974): 3-14, 10-11.

<sup>173</sup> An example of such a mediating position is seen in Fanning, *Revelation*, 156-157; Osborne, *Revelation*, 168; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 79.

‘morning star’. Whilst many rightly posit a connection to Num. 24:17 and the messianic associations that come with it, there is often little discussion regarding what the connection of this celestial body to the ‘morning’ should contribute towards interpretation. Thus, as potential influential passages are examined, this aspect will be kept closely in mind.

### ***Old Testament Influences:***

When looking for potential OT influences behind Revelation’s ‘morning star’ references, the prospective investigator might be discouraged by the seeming sparsity of passages. From the entire OT corpus, it seems only a handful of texts are significant for Revelation’s ‘morning star’. The *first* and foremost of these is Num. 24:17. This text comes as part of the final of four Oracles attributed to the prophet Balaam (Num. 24:14-19), who is hired by the Moabite King Balak to curse the Exodus generation (Num. 22-23). In his final discourse, Balaam prophesies regarding Moab’s future relationship to Israel, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth.” There is debate concerning the identity of “him” and scholars are divided over whether the oracle refers to a royal figure symbolised by the parallel emblems of a ‘star’ and ‘sceptre’ or to Israel corporately.<sup>174</sup> The former seems more likely given Num. 24:17 comprises “one of the most important messianic proof texts” for the Second Temple period.<sup>175</sup> Nevertheless, this

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<sup>174</sup> Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 500.

For the former see R.K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 323-324; A. Noordtjij, *Numbers*, Bible Student’s Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 230-231; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 178-179.

For the latter see George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1986), 369. For further discussion see R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary, Vol.3b, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000), 426-427.

<sup>175</sup> Stefan Beyerle, “‘A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob’: A Critical Evaluation Of The Balaam Oracle In The Context Of Jewish Revolts In Roman Times,” in George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten, *The Prestige of*

figure must embody Israel in some representative capacity as the stated purpose of Balaam's final oracle is to show "what this people (Israel) will do to your people (Moab) in the latter days" (Num. 24:14). The result of the future appearance of this royal figure is that he will lead Israel to "crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth". Thus, despite Moab's efforts to thwart God's purposes with Israel (cf. Num. 22:5-6), the chosen people will eventually defeat them. As noted above, it is clear Num. 24:17 was later understood messianically.<sup>176</sup> It would be anachronistic, however, to assert the oracle was *initially* understood with all the connotations of Second Temple messianic expectation. Nevertheless, the content of the prophecy articulates the coming of a future Saviour figure. Furthermore, the openness of the oracle certainly lends itself to messianic interpretation by future generations.

Another OT text which mentions the 'morning star' (this time, however, in the plural) comes in the book of Job. In Job 38:7, Yahweh is beginning his first set of responses to Job's pleas for an answer to his suffering. The responses themselves are not intended to chide Job but simply to provide him with a divine perspective.<sup>177</sup> In the first set of responses (Job 38:4-7) God asks several rhetorical questions of Job concerning the creation of the world.<sup>178</sup> One of these questions comes in 38:7, where God asks Job where he was, "when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?". The LXX simply translates, "When

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*the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, Themes in Biblical Narrative Jewish and Christian Traditions, Vol.11, (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 163-188. 163; Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 52-78. Collins observes the Qumran community even viewed the dual symbols of 'star' and 'sceptre' from Num. 24:17 as referring to two messiahs (cf. CD 7:18-20). From this, Timothy R. Ashley even hypothesises the events surrounding the Magi and Star of Bethlehem (cf. Matt. 2:2-10) might have arisen from an expectation the 'star' would point the way to the 'sceptre' or Messiah-King. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 503.

<sup>176</sup> This is further evidenced by the LXX which interpretatively translates, "a star shall dawn out of Iakob, and a person shall rise up out of Israel". *NETS*, 131. (Emphasis added). Likewise, the Aramaic targums translate the 'star' rising from Jacob as 'the King' and the 'sceptre' ascending from Israel as 'the anointed One'. See Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 503. However, a messianic reading of the LXX is not necessarily self-evident. See Stefan Beyerle, "'A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob'", 183.

<sup>177</sup> Lindsay Wilson, *Job*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 296.

<sup>178</sup> Markus Witte, "Cosmos and Creation in Job 38 (Septuagint)," *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook*, 2019, no. 2019 (2019): 55-76, 59-60 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110677041-007>

the stars were born, all my angels praised me with a loud voice”.<sup>179</sup> A noticeable feature of this translation is the interpretative rendering in the second clause of בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים (‘sons of god’) as ἄγγελοί μου (‘angels’).<sup>180</sup> The Aramaic Targums similarly render the בְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים as ‘angels’.<sup>181</sup> Thus, it seems likely this phrase designates heavenly members of the divine counsel previously mentioned in the work (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1).<sup>182</sup> The designation of the first clause, however, is more difficult. If it is to be taken in parallel to the latter designation, then the כְּזָכְרִי בִּקְרָא (lit. ‘stars of the morning’) should probably be taken as a metaphorical presentation of the members of the divine counsel following similar presentations in ancient Canaanite lore.<sup>183</sup> However, another understanding posits the ‘morning stars’, independent of the second clause, as a reference to the planet Venus, a visible herald of a new day and by extension new creation.<sup>184</sup> While the former understanding is more likely given the common utilisation of parallelism in Hebrew poetry, the latter interpretation should not be jettisoned entirely since the context of God’s questions is certainly the beginning of creation (Job 38:4-7).<sup>185</sup> Further credence to this idea is seen earlier in Job, where the protagonist laments the day of his birth (Job 3). As part of this lament, Job states, “Let the stars of its dawn be dark;

<sup>179</sup> Witte hypothesises philologically this rendering could be based on the reading בְּרָא / בְּהִבְרָא instead of בָּרַן יָחַד. Witte, “Cosmos and Creation in Job 38 (Septuagint),” 59.

<sup>180</sup> *Septuaginta*, 2:492; Also, John G. Gammie, “The Angelology and Demonology in the Septuagint of the Book of Job,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 56 (1985): 1-19, 6-7.

<sup>181</sup> Leonard S. Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, *The Book of Job: A Modern Translation and Commentary*, (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017), 450. A Targum of Job found in Qumran has: “when the morning stars were shining together and all the angels of God exclaimed together?” See Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, Rev. ed., (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2011), 466.

<sup>182</sup> Most scholars follow this view. See Tremper Longman III, *Job*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 616; John H. Walton, *Job*, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 609; Christopher Ash, *Job: The Wisdom of the Cross*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 529; Robert L. Alden, *Job*, The New American Commentary, Vol.11, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 575-576; John E. Hartley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 495; Francis I. Andersen, *Job*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol.14, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1974), 344-345.

<sup>183</sup> Longman, *Job*, 616; Walton, *Job*, 610; Ash, *Job*, 529; Andersen, *Job*, 344-345. This would also provide further evidence of the link between ‘stars’ and angels in ancient Jewish cosmology.

<sup>184</sup> Alden, *Job*, 575.

<sup>185</sup> For parallelism in Hebrew poetry see Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 95-110; Also, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 1-28.

let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning...” (Job 3:9). The כוכבי נֶשֶׁף (‘stars of its dawn’) in this context refer to those celestial bodies visible at twilight which gradually fade as the sun rises. Job wishes these never shone to herald the start of his birthday.<sup>186</sup> Thus, the ‘morning stars’ in Job 38:7 on the one hand refer metaphorically to members of the divine counsel seen elsewhere in the work and on the other to ‘morning stars’ as heralds of new creation since the reference is posited in a series of questions concerning the creation of the cosmos.

One final text from the Old Testament that should be considered briefly is Is. 14:12. This text has occasionally been referenced by scholars as forming the background to Rev. 2:28.<sup>187</sup> Situated within an Oracle against Babylon (13:1-14:23), Is. 14:12 forms part of a parody of a funerary lament, mocking the ignoble fall of a tyrant king.<sup>188</sup> To accomplish this, some have argued the author situates part of his ridicule against the background of an earlier myth regarding the revolt and fall of an ancient astral antagonist, who, despite his efforts to displace the chief deity, is cast down to the underworld.<sup>189</sup> The prophet mocks, “How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!”<sup>190</sup> The precise referent of הַיֵּלֶל בֶּן־עֶשְׂתָּהר (LXX: ἑωσφόρος, “light-bringer/morning star”) has attracted considerable attention that is beyond the scope of this investigation.<sup>191</sup> Whilst this reference potentially influenced later Apocalyptic literature such

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<sup>186</sup> The day may also refer to the day after the night Job was conceived. See Katherine J. Dell, *Job*, Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 65; Kravitz and Olitzky, *The Book of Job*, 45.

<sup>187</sup> Oecumenius held this position, see Oden, *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, 14; Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers*, (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Co., 1868), 964.

<sup>188</sup> For further discussion see Stephen L. Cook, “Isaiah 14: The Birth of a Zombie Apocalypse?” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 73:2 (2019): 130-142; Gale A. Yee, “The Anatomy of Biblical Parody: The Dirge Form in 2 Samuel 1 and Isaiah 14,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50:4 (1988): 565-586.

<sup>189</sup> Page, *The Myth of Cosmic Rebellion*, 120-139; John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 318-319.

<sup>190</sup> Some translators (NIV, GNT) render the ‘Day star’ as ‘morning star’.

<sup>191</sup> For further discussion see Nissim Amzallag and Mikhal Avriel, “The Cryptic Meaning of Isaiah Māšāl,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131:4 (2012): 643-662; John C. Poirier, “An Illuminating Parallel to Isaiah XIV 12,” *Vetus Testamentum* 49:3 (1999): 371-389; Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, “Isa 14:12, ḥôlēš al gwym and

as 4 Ezra 4:29,<sup>192</sup> there appears to be no solid evidence to suggest it forms the background to Revelation's 'morning star'. This is made even more clear when it is considered the symbol of the 'morning star' in Isaiah 14 is markedly negative whereas in the Apocalypse in both cases it is overwhelmingly positive. Consequently, it is difficult to see the 'morning star' of Is. 14:12 as possessing any real connection to the astral language of Revelation. Thus, in terms of OT precedence it seems only Num. 24:17 and Job. 38:7 constitute a background for the references to the 'morning star' in Revelation, the former possessing messianic connotations and the latter associations with new creation.

### ***Non-Canonical Parallels:***

As noted above, as Judaism progressed the influence of Num. 24:17 upon messianic eschatological expectation proliferated. The famous Community Rule or Manual of Discipline (1QS) contains a portion of text summarising messianic expectations within the Qumran community.<sup>193</sup> One proof text the document turns to in support of its messianic expectation is Num. 24:17. Here, the 'star rising from Jacob' is equated with the "Interpreter of the Torah" (דורש התורה) and the 'sceptre' with the "prince of the whole congregation" (נשיא כל העדה) (CD 7:18-20; cf. 4Q266 3 iii 19-22 and 4Q269 5).<sup>194</sup> This interpretive allusion to Num. 24:17 leads scholars, such as Collins, to conclude the Qumran community held to a 'bi-messianism', in which two eschatological saviour figures were in view.<sup>195</sup> This text, without any bi-messianic lens, is also cited in 4Q175 12-13 and 1QM 11:5-6. There does not

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Gilgamesh XI, 6," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99:2 (1980): 173-184; J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 297.

<sup>192</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 1:212.

<sup>193</sup> Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 79.

<sup>194</sup> Newman, "Stars of the Messiah," 274; Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 71-73.

<sup>195</sup> Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 85, 108. For more on 'bi-messianism' in the Qumran community see Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 79-85.



appear to be much, if any, reference to Job 38:7 in Qumran apart from one Targum (11Q10, 4Q157) which simply cites the text without further elaboration.<sup>196</sup>

A second text is seen in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, a series of texts purported to record the final utterances of Jacob's twelve sons.<sup>197</sup> The most complete manuscripts of this work in Greek were preserved by Christian scribes. This sheds much doubt concerning the veracity of these works in preserving the original text accurately.<sup>198</sup> It is widely accepted these texts contain both original Jewish and later Christian material.<sup>199</sup> Nevertheless, these later Christian interpolations do not render the text entirely useless in regard to understanding Jewish messianic beliefs in the Second Temple period.<sup>200</sup> The *Testament of Levi* records after the Lord destroys a false priesthood, he will raise up a new priest who will know God's words. The text goes on to say, "And his star shall rise in heaven like a king; kindling the light of knowledge as day is illumined by the sun" (*T. Levi* 18:3).<sup>201</sup> The subsequent *Testament of Judah* similarly states, "And after this there shall arise for you a Star from Jacob in peace: And a man shall arise from my posterity like the Sun of righteousness, walking with the sons of men in gentleness and righteousness, and in him will be found no sin" (*T. Judah* 24:1).<sup>202</sup> Whilst the latter portion regarding the sinlessness of this eschatological saviour figure is likely a later Christian interpolation, it is not inconceivable

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<sup>196</sup> Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 466. This does not, however, necessarily imply Job 38:7 does not form part of the literary background for Revelation's "morning star". Nevertheless, it may suggest it performs a role secondary to Num. 24:17.

<sup>197</sup> James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 Vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 1:775.

<sup>198</sup> Beyerle, "'A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob'", 185.

<sup>199</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:775-777; Newman, "Stars of the Messiah," 274; Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 101.

<sup>200</sup> For further discussion on the *Testament of the Patriarchs* and the influence of later Christian scribes see Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:775-781; Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 96-106; Mark D. Matthews, "The Epistle of Enoch and Revelation 2:1-3:22: Poverty and Riches in the Present Age," in Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, and Jason Maston, eds., *Reading Revelation in Context: John's Apocalypse and Second Temple Judaism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019): 67-76. Especially p.79-80.

<sup>201</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:794.

<sup>202</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:801.

this text originally contained material connecting Num. 24:17 with the expected messiah.<sup>203</sup> If this is correct, the Testaments add credence to the idea Num. 24:17 was influential in the Second Temple period in so far as it aided the connection in the Jewish psyche between a prominent ‘star’ and the coming of the messiah.

Another text, potentially datable between the Judeans revolts of A.D. 70 and A.D. 132-136, comes in the Sibylline Oracles.<sup>204</sup> In the fifth Oracle, the text states:

But when after the fourth year a great star shines which alone will destroy the whole earth, because of the honour which they gave to Poseidon of the sea, a great star will come from heaven to the wondrous sea and will burn the deep sea and Babylon itself and the land of Italy, because of which many holy faithful Hebrews and a true people perished. (*Sib. Or.* 5:155-161)

Scholarship likewise largely understands the references to the ‘great star’ as an allusion to Num. 24:17 with its “messianic semantics of astrological phenomena in ancient Judaism”,<sup>205</sup> though there does appear to be some disagreement over whether the ‘great star’ in 5:155-161 has in view either a future human messiah or a ‘destroying angel’ (cf. *Sib. Or.* 5:256-259, 5:414-428).<sup>206</sup> It seems likely the former is intended given the already attested association of Num. 24:17 with human eschatological saviour figures.<sup>207</sup> The reference to Babylon here, as in the Apocalypse, is utilised concerning imperial Rome which in the mind of the author will be destroyed by this future messiah.<sup>208</sup> In line with this, the ill-fated Bar

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<sup>203</sup> Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 275.

<sup>204</sup> Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 294; Beyerle, “‘A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob’”, 185.

<sup>205</sup> Beyerle, “‘A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob’”, 183; Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:392.

<sup>206</sup> For the former see Beyerle, “‘A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob’”, 183. For the latter see Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:397.

<sup>207</sup> Beyerle, “‘A Star Shall Come Out Of Jacob’”, 187; Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:392.

<sup>208</sup> Newman, “Stars of the Messiah”, 294; Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:397.

Kokhba revolt of A.D. 132 attributed to its leader the title “son of the star”,<sup>209</sup> minted silver coins bearing the symbol of a star above the Jerusalem temple,<sup>210</sup> and interpreted the appearance of a star or comet over Jerusalem as a sign of divine favour in their struggle.<sup>211</sup> Indeed, due to the proliferation of stellar imagery in association with the revolt, Newman asserts, “no messianic claimant was identified more consistently with a messianic star than Shim’on b. Kosba”.<sup>212</sup> These observations lend probability to the idea Jewish association of astral imagery as precipitating the appearance of an eschatological saviour figure was a prominent idea in the messianism of the Seer’s historical context. Parallels to this are also found in later Jewish apocalyptic literature, clearly reflecting the connection between a ‘star’ rising, often from the East, and an eschatological Messianic figure.<sup>213</sup> Moreover, Koester cites Horace, Valerius Maximus, and Statius as evidence of Roman attribution of a “star” to Caesar, signifying Rome’s right to rule.<sup>214</sup> Thus, it is possible the Apocalypse polemicises against this imperial symbol of power by presenting Jesus as the true ‘star’. However, whether the Seer had this specific imperial assertion in mind as he penned his work is difficult to prove. It seems more likely John had in view the Jewish association of ‘stars’ with eschatological saviour figures and that any connection to imperial assertions of authority is either a secondary intention or simple coincidence.

### ***NT & Early Christian Writings:***

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<sup>209</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:392.

<sup>210</sup> There is some disagreement over the symbols on these silver tetrachms. Some scholars posit the ‘stars’ as ‘rosettes’. However, Newman convincingly argues in favour of an astral interpretation. See Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 286-293.

<sup>211</sup> This is recounted in Josephus, *B.J.* 6.5.3 §§288-291. See Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 277-27.

<sup>212</sup> Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 284.

<sup>213</sup> Examples of such works include the *Secrets of Rabbi Shim’on b. Yohai*, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Jewish apocalypse which claims, “a certain star will rise from the East with a staff at its head, and that is the star of Israel...if it lingers...then the Messiah Son of David will arise”. See Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 296. Other works reiterating this idea include the *Prayers of Rabbi Shim’on b. Yohai*, *Aggadat Hamashiah*, and *Midrash Haggadol* on Num.24:19. See Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 296-300.

<sup>214</sup> See Koester, *Revelation*, 302.

Evidence for the enduring influence of Num. 24:17 in messianic expectation continues in early Christian sources. One of these is the already mentioned nativity account of Matt. 2:1-12. Situated in a work steeped in OT imagery and citations, there is a strong likelihood the Gospel writer alluded to the Balaam story (Num. 22-24) in his nativity account. For example, the same words for ‘star’ and ‘rising’ in the LXX of Num. 24:17 occur also in Matt. 2:1-12, both Balaam and the Wise Men (Magi) come “from the east” (Num. 23:7; cf. 22:5), both depart for their country afterwards (Num. 24:25), early witnesses cite Balaam as a ‘magician’ (Philo. *De vita Moses* 1:276-277), and both accounts feature a tyrannical king (Balak or Herod) attempting to thwart God’s redemptive purposes.<sup>215</sup> It should be noted, however, this thesis is not uncontested. Difficulty lies in the openness of the Matthean text and thus other theories have been suggested with equal plausibility such as a parallel to the life of Moses.<sup>216</sup> Moreover, dissimilarities exist between the two accounts such as the positive reception of the Magi in early Christian interpretation versus the largely negative portrayal of Balaam in later Judaism.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, while the Matthean nativity story might not be *exclusively* based upon the Balaam narrative (Num. 22-24), it is difficult to unsee the parallels once they have been established. Moreover, the connection may even be made clearer when both parts of Balaam’s parallelism in Num. 24:17 are taken to be understood as two distinguishable though inter-related events (i.e. ‘when the star rises, the sceptre/messiah will be revealed’), an interpretation with precedence in extraneous Second Temple Jewish literature.<sup>218</sup> This would also make sense of King Herod’s reaction to the Magi’s announcement of the ‘star’, who in a panic asks where the *messiah* (not simply a ‘king’)

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<sup>215</sup> Tobias Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, 238; Tim Hegeudus, “The Magi and the Star in the Gospel of Matthew and Early Christian Tradition,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 59:1 (2003): 81-95, 86.

<sup>216</sup> Newman notes these discussions in Newman, “Stars of the Messiah,” 276.

<sup>217</sup> For references see Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” 240.

<sup>218</sup> Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” 240.

would be born (Matt. 2:4).<sup>219</sup> Moreover, Patristic interpretations of this passage posited links between the nativity accounts and Num. 24:17.<sup>220</sup> On this basis then, it is entirely plausible to suggest the influence of Num. 24:17 upon the Matthean nativity account.

Another passage concerning the ‘morning star’ in early Christian sources is found in 2 Pet. 1:19. This passage situated in the wider context of a defence of the prophecy of Christ’s second coming (2 Pet. 1:16-3:13).<sup>221</sup> In 2 Pet. 1:19-21, the author provides his audience with assurance of the authenticity of the ‘prophetic word’ which they have concerning the Lord Jesus Christ’s Parousia. In this, he encourages them to attend to it as they would a “lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet. 1:19 ESV). The reiteration of a ‘star’ rising (ἀνατεῖλη) might immediately conjure up images of Num. 24:17. There are several difficulties in this passage, however, which complicate attempts to identify 2 Pet. 1:19 with Num. 24:17. Firstly, the hapax legomenon φωσφόρος (‘light-bearer/morning star’) creates a linguistic problem in establishing ties to Num. 24:17 since the latter text utilises the more common ἄστρον. Additionally, the difficulty of this text is enhanced by the seemingly individualising/spiritualising of the ‘morning star’ in the phrase ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις ὑμῶν. On this, Terrance Callan has argued this prepositional phrase is best understood as modifying the participle γινώσκοντες at the beginning of 1:20 since it makes little sense in the context of 2 Peter, and indeed of early Christianity, to spiritualise the Parousia.<sup>222</sup> In this reading the text would say, “...until the day dawns and the morning star rises. In your hearts knowing this...”. The solving of this problem would make a link to Num.

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<sup>219</sup> Nicklas, “Balaam and the Star of the Magi,” 240.

<sup>220</sup> For further discussion see J. Leemans, “‘To Bless with a Mouth Bent on Cursing’: Patristic Interpretations of Balaam (Num 24:17),” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, 287-299.

<sup>221</sup> For further discussion see Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 178-185; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary, Vol.37, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 281.

<sup>222</sup> Callan notes that in “no other place in 2 Peter does the author refer to the παρουσία as an inner event”. See Terrance Callan, “A Note on 2 Peter 1:19-20,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125:1 (2006): 143-150, 145.

24:17 more likely. However, there is still the issue of the φωσφόρος of 2 Pet. 1:19 as opposed to ὄστρον in Num. 24:17. Jerome H. Neyrey argues this usage is “decidedly Greek” and works against any messianic reading.<sup>223</sup> However, it seems unlikely the use of φωσφόρος entirely eliminates any connection to Num. 24:17, especially given Callan’s reading of 2 Pet. 1:19 above. Elsewhere, the noun φωσφόρος typically refers to Venus, the ‘morning star’ that anticipates dawn.<sup>224</sup> Considering this, it appears φωσφόρος in 2 Pet. 1:19, in addition to alluding to Num. 24:17, also acts as a metaphor from the natural world for the dawn of a new eschatological era. As Venus, the ‘morning star’, rises in the night sky, one can expect day to follow shortly. In the same way, the recipients of the author’s letter are to hold fast to the prophecy like a candle in the dark, until the promise comes to fruition.<sup>225</sup> This proposition is attractive since, as has already been seen, ‘morning stars’ were associated with the natural world and new beginnings in Job 38:7.<sup>226</sup> Moreover, this idea has parallels in Greco-Roman literature. The Roman poet Martial (38/41AD -102/104AD), in his *Epigrams*, implores the ‘morning star’ (phosphorus) to “bring back the day” and with it their joys (*Epigrams* 8.21). Interestingly this pleaded-for joy-bringing dawn coincides with the return of Caesar, a connection which might add further weight to the argument John used this symbol to polemicise against the Roman emperors. Thus, the ‘morning star’ of 2 Pet. 1:19 possesses connotations of both messianism and new creation.

Other references to the ‘morning star’ are found in early Christian apocalyptic literature. For example, in the *Apocalypse of Peter* 17, the angels are described amongst other things as having eyes that “shine like the morning star”.<sup>227</sup> Similarly, in the later *Apocalypse of Paul* 11, justice-administering angels are described as having eyes that “shone like the

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<sup>223</sup> Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 184.

<sup>224</sup> For example, see Sib. Or. 5:516 and Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 2:20; BDAG. 1073; Callan, “A Note on 2 Peter 1:19-20,” 145.

<sup>225</sup> Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 184; Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 322.

<sup>226</sup> See section on “Old Testament Influences” above.

<sup>227</sup> Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 612.

morning star of the east”.<sup>228</sup> However, how much can be discerned regarding the ‘morning star’ in this context is difficult to determine, since these works are likely influenced by the Apocalypse’s use of the term.

The evidence for sources of Revelation’s ‘morning star’ is scanty and there is difficulty in asserting one source or another to be in the Seer’s mind as he penned the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, the evidence from these works establishes two things clearly: 1) there was a connection, in Jewish messianic expectation of the time, between the rising of a particular ‘star’ and the coming of an eschatological saviour figure, and 2) the ‘morning star’ possessed connections to the idea of new creation. Having considered this, attention can now be turned to the references as they are found in the Apocalypse.

### ***Morning Star References in Revelation:***

As noted previously, there are two passages in John’s Apocalypse which reference the ‘morning star’. The *first* of these is 2:28. This is perhaps the most difficult reference for would-be-interpreters since the text simply mentions the star without further explication. The obscurity of this verse, as Hemer notes, probably hails from the lack of amplification the audience required.<sup>229</sup> Despite this, it is possible to establish several conclusions regarding the reference. The verse itself forms part of John’s letter to Thyatira (2:18-29). This epistle follows the same pattern as the six other letters in Rev. 2-3, with a victory promise ending each address.<sup>230</sup> The victory promise to the Thyatiran church consists of two parts. The *first*

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<sup>228</sup> Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 623.

<sup>229</sup> Hemer, *Local Setting*, 126.

<sup>230</sup> Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3),” 182-204; Muse, “Revelation 2-3: A Critical Analysis of Seven Prophetic Messages,” 147-161.

(2:26-27) features Jesus' vow the Overcomer will share in his messianic authority.<sup>231</sup> This is demonstrable in the replete allusions to Psalm 2 throughout 2:26-27.<sup>232</sup> For example, the phrase δώσω αὐτῷ ἐξουσίαν ἐπὶ τῶν ἐθνῶν ("I will give to him authority over the nations", 2:26) forms a clear paraphrase of God's promise to his Anointed/Messiah (ἡ ψῆ) in Ps. 2:8 (δώσω σοι ἔθνη τὴν κληρονομίαν σου, "I will give you nations as your heritage").<sup>233</sup> Moreover, the following section ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ ("He will rule them with a rod of iron", 2:27) comprises an obvious linguistic parallel to ποιμανεῖς αὐτοὺς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ in Ps. 2:9 (cf. Rev. 12:5; 19:15).<sup>234</sup> Furthermore, the reference to a "rod of iron" (ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ) in 2:27 interestingly mirrors both the "rod of iron" (ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ) in Ps. 2:9 and the "rod" (ῥαβ) rising from Israel in Num. 24:17. This would make a reference to a messianic 'star', with its connotations of Num. 24:17, very natural. In addition to the immediate context of the Thyatiran letter, the wider context of Rev. 2-3 also references the teaching of the 'Nicolaitans' (2:6,15), a group commonly associated with the prophet Balaam.<sup>235</sup> Thus, before the reader even reaches the reference in 2:28, messianism is naturally in view. In the *second* part of the victory promise (2:28), the Overcomer is simply given τὸν ἀστέρα τὸν πρωῒνον ("the morning star"). As noted previously, the star (ἀστέρα [ἄστρον in Num. 24:17]) was already associated with messianic expectation by certain Jewish sects of the time.<sup>236</sup> Due to the association of the 'star' with the messiah and the immediate messianic context of the letter, the promise Jesus will give this

<sup>231</sup> Advocates of this position include Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 268; Koester, *Revelation*, 302; Osborne, *Revelation*, 167-169; den Dulk, "The Promises to the Conquerors in the Book of Revelation," 519; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 74; Aune, *Revelation*, 1:212; Still, *A Vision of Glory*, 39.

<sup>232</sup> See Tze-Ming Quek, "'I will give Authority over the Nations': Psalm 2.8-9 in Revelation 2.26-27," in Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zacharias, *Exegetical Studies*, Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality, Vol.2, (London: T&T Clark, 2009): 175-187.

<sup>233</sup> *NETS*, 548. In Rev.2:28, however, this promise is extended to all God's children (cf. Rev.21:7). See Koester, *Revelation*, 301; Quek, "'I will give Authority over the Nations'", 186-187.

<sup>234</sup> Quek, "'I will give Authority over the Nations'", 176. In all these linguistic paraphrases of Ps.2, Revelation appears to mirror the LXX rather than the Hebrew. See Koester, *Revelation*, 301-302.

<sup>235</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 1:188. Fanning, *Revelation*, 138-139; Koester, *Revelation*, 263-264.

<sup>236</sup> Collins, *The Sceptre and the Star*, 52-108; Ritz, "ἄστρον, οὐ, τό", *EDNT*, 1:175.



‘star’ to the believer indicates the faithful can expect to share that messianic authority, an expectation which appears to have been common in the fledgling Christian movement (cf. Matt. 20:21; 1 Cor. 6:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:12). Nevertheless, while it is correct to identify 2:28 messianically, attention must also be given to the ‘morning’ aspect of the star. As noted previously, the ‘morning star’ elsewhere in the ANE and Greco-Roman world often denoted those ‘stars’ visible at dawn (Job 3:9, 38:7; 2 Pet. 1:19; Martial *Epigrams* 8.21).<sup>237</sup> The attributive adjective τὸν πρωϊνόν denotes that which “pertains to early morning”.<sup>238</sup> In Jewish antiquity, the ‘morning’ appears to have possessed positive connotations including new life (Job 3:8), joy (Ps. 30:5), and renewed favour (Lam. 3:22-23). In Ps.130:6, the Psalmist, like a watchman, eagerly awaits the dawn when Yahweh will relieve his sorrows. A liturgical prayer from Qumran (4Q408) likewise references the ‘morning as a sign to reveal the dominion of the light as the boundary of the daytime’.<sup>239</sup> In addition to this, it appears the idea of ‘morning’ or dawn possessed connections to the messianism of the Second Temple period. For example, the Davidic king who ruled well was likened to ‘the light of morning’ (2 Sam. 23:4). In Isaiah 9, overwhelmingly messianic text, the coming of the messiah is likened to a ‘great light’ shining upon the people in darkness (cf. Is.60:1-3; Matt. 4:16). Likewise, the rising of the sun is associated with the coming messiah in Zechariah’s prophecy concerning the arrival of Jesus in Lk. 1:68-79. Moreover, the Redeemed in Revelation are promised to reign forever in the Lamb’s awesome light which will come once the New Jerusalem comes on earth (Rev. 21:23; 22:5).<sup>240</sup> These ideas, combined with the prominent NT motif of new creation (Gal. 6:12-16; 2 Cor. 5:14-19; Eph. 2:11-22, 4:17-24; Col. 3:11), in view particularly in Rev. 21-22, appear to lend scope for suggesting the promise of the ‘*morning star*’ in 2:28,

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<sup>237</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 309.

<sup>238</sup> BDAG, 892.

<sup>239</sup> Vermes, *Dead Sea Scrolls*, 579. In Qumran, the ‘dominion of light’ possessed positive connotations and was often set in strong contrast to the ‘darkness’ in texts such as *The Community Rule* (1QS). See Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 173, 183-184, 190-194, 206-212.

<sup>240</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 309.

in addition to its messianic connotations, may also be indicative of the new creation God is forming. The faithful believer will be given, according to Jesus, to be at the forefront of God's recreative purposes in the world which reach their climax in him (cf. Rev. 3:14; Col. 1:15).

The *second* text (22:16) comes towards the book's conclusion. Here the angel who has taken the Seer on his heavenly tour has his message authenticated by Jesus himself. In doing so, Jesus makes several identifications concerning himself, utilising an ἐγώ εἰμι formula seen elsewhere in the work (cf. Rev. 1:8, 17).<sup>241</sup> The *first* identification reiterates material previously seen in Revelation (cf. Rev. 5:5). Jesus states he is:

ἡ ῥίζα καὶ τὸ γένος Δαβὶδ. Thomas argues ἡ ῥίζα indicates origin whereas τὸ γένος denotes progeny. This would indicate Jesus' pre-existence.<sup>242</sup> However, Beale counters

ἡ ῥίζα designates not so much origin as derivation.<sup>243</sup> Regardless, of these differences, the double reference to ἡ ῥίζα καὶ τὸ γένος Δαβὶδ likely alludes to other messianic texts such as Is. 11:1, 10, acting as a "military metaphor" for the expectation the Messiah would come to destroy the wicked and establish Israel.<sup>244</sup> Thus, a messianic interpretation of the next

identification is entirely natural. The *second* identification is ὁ ἀστὴρ ὁ λαμπρὸς, ὁ πρωῒνός.

The reference to ὁ ἀστὴρ...ὁ πρωῒνός immediately recalls 2:28 with its messianic

connections to Num. 24:17 and the metaphorical associations with new life/creation.<sup>245</sup> Thus,

the identification immediately conjures up the dual images of Jesus as the long-awaited

Messiah who heralds the beginning of the messianic age and as the centre of God's recreative

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<sup>241</sup> In the Apocalypse, Jesus is closely identified with God. In 1:1 God gives the Vision. In 22:16, however, it is Jesus. See Osborne, *Revelation*, 791-792.

<sup>242</sup> Thomas, *Revelation*, 2:2883; Koester sees ἡ ῥίζα as a reference to Is.11:1, 10, while τὸ γένος alludes to God's promise to establish David's offspring in 2 Sam.7:12 (cf. 4Q174 1 I, 10; Jhn.7:42; Rom.1:3). Due to space constraints, these texts could not be considered earlier. See Koester, *Revelation*, 843.

<sup>243</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1146.

<sup>244</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 792; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 577; Koester, *Revelation*, 843.

<sup>245</sup> See above on 2:28. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 577; Osborne, *Revelation*, 793; Koester, *Revelation*, 843; Mounce, *Revelation*, 409; Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 67.

purposes in the world (Rev. 3:14; cf. Col. 1:15). The addition of the attributive adjective ὁ λαμπρός (“the bright/shining one”) further confirms this with an allusion to Is. 60:1-3 which states:

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness (λαμπρότητι) of your rising.<sup>246</sup>

Koester adds the observation a comet/star was said to signify the deification of Julius Caesar after his assassination.<sup>247</sup> Thus, it is again possible the image of Jesus as the messianic ‘morning star’ would have served as a strong polemic against imperial claims to absolute authority. Interestingly, Kim Papaioannou and Edward Moyo assert a connection between the ‘morning star’ of 22:16 and the ‘water of life’ in 22:17. However, without any further substantiation and in the apparent absence of evidence, it is difficult to regard it as anything other than speculative.<sup>248</sup>

## ***Conclusion:***

Despite the relative paucity of sources and apparent insufficiency of a single interpretation to be able to account comprehensively for Revelation’s references to the ‘morning star’, there are several conclusions that can be reached. *Firstly*, the ‘morning star’ motif can be connected clearly to the messianism of Second Temple Judaism. Evidence of a messianic reading Num. 24:17, reiterated throughout Second Temple texts, in conjunction

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<sup>246</sup> Smalley lists this as a possible inference. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 577.

<sup>247</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 844.

<sup>248</sup> See Kim Papaioannou and Edward Moyo, “Judgement Motifs in the Messages to the Seven Churches,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 25:2 (2014): 43-64, 62.

with the allusions in Rev. 2:28 and 22:16 to other widely understood messianic symbols, makes a messianic interpretation of Revelation's 'morning star' entirely natural. *Secondly*, the 'morning' aspect of this 'star' connects the symbol to the concept of new creation (cf. Job 38:7; 4Q408), a crucial concept in the Apocalypse (Rev. 21-22). On this Mounce asserts, "The morning star is a promise that the long night of tribulation is all but over and that the new eschatological day is about to dawn."<sup>249</sup> *Thirdly*, the identification of the 'morning star' with Jesus (22:16) places Jesus at centre of the new creation, something the author does elsewhere in the Apocalypse (Rev. 3:14, cf. Col. 1:15). *Finally*, the promise of the 'morning star' to the believer (2:28), with the already seen connections to new creation, provides hope the faithful believer is on the cusp of, and will shortly enter, God's new world. While it is problematic to hold to any position on this notoriously difficult symbol with absolute certainty, the conclusions reached here do indicate Revelation's 'morning star' signals the long night of tyranny is over and the new eschaton of messianic hope and freedom is dawning. This symbol, since its appearance in the Apocalypse, appears to have been an immeasurable symbol of comfort as is reflected in an extended poetic passage in Ignatius' *Letter to the Ephesians*, which states:

How then was he [Christ] revealed to the aeons?

A star shone in heaven,

Brighter than all the stars,

And its light was ineffable,

And its novelty caused astonishment;

All the other stars

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<sup>249</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 409.

Together with the sun and moon  
Became a chorus for the star,  
And it outshone them all with its light;  
And there was perplexity [as to] whence [came] this novelty so unlike them.  
Thence was destroyed all magic,  
And every bond vanished;  
Evil's ignorance was abolished,  
The old kingdom perished,  
God being revealed as human  
To bring newness of eternal,  
And what had been prepared by God had its beginning;  
Hence all things were disturbed  
Because the destruction of death was being worked out.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Cited in Hegedus, "The Magi and the Star in the Gospel of Matthew and Early Christian Tradition," 89.

## Chapter 3: ‘Sun-moon-star’ formulae.

The Apocalypse’s third category of astral references comprises those passages in which ‘stars’ combine with ‘sun’ and ‘moon’ to form a literary pattern, observable throughout Jewish literature. These formulae are broadly descriptive of the observable sources of light in the day and night skies.<sup>251</sup> There are three texts in the Apocalypse which fall into this category (6:13; 8:12; 12:1).<sup>252</sup> Of these, the first two are situated in passages concerning cosmic catastrophe (6:13; 8:12).<sup>253</sup> Due to the recent extensive debates concerning cosmic catastrophe in the NT, discussion here will attempt to focus on the use of SMS formulae primarily within Revelation. The final reference (12:1) symbolically describes the radiant cosmic clothing of the Messiah’s ‘mother’. It seems this reference has not previously been connected to the others by way of SMS formulae.<sup>254</sup>

### *Defining SMS formulae:*

Before attempting to discern how SMS formulae are utilised in Revelation, it is necessary to define them. Discerning the form, function, and significance of SMS formulae in Jewish and Christian literature is a difficult task largely due to the irregular nature of the expressions, occasional omission of one or more elements of formulae, and adaption of

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<sup>251</sup> For the sake of time, ‘sun-moon-star formulae’ will be abbreviated to ‘SMS formulae’.

<sup>252</sup> There is overlap between this category and others, especially the last. For example, the language of stars falling from heaven like winter figs (6:13) is very close to other passages in Revelation which speak of falling stars (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4). However, due to the presence of SMS formulae in 6:13, 8:12, and 12:1, the references have been deemed worthy of their own category. Nevertheless, it is recognised these references could be grouped utilising different, equally valid, methods.

<sup>253</sup> Andrew Chester also draws a connection between these two passages. See Andrew Chester, “Chaos and New Creation, in John F. Ashton,” *Revealed Wisdom: Studies in Apocalyptic in honour of Christopher Rowland*, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, Vol.88, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 340; also, Aune, *Revelation*, 2:522-523; Osborne, *Revelation*, 357; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 224.

<sup>254</sup> Chester cites all three references. However, he does not draw these references together by way of SMS formulae. See Chester, “Chaos and New Creation”.

formulae to various contexts.<sup>255</sup> Nevertheless, a literary pattern is observable. The foundation of SMS formulae is laid in Genesis 1. Following the creation of light (Gen. 1:3), on the fourth day God creates “lights in the expanse of the heavens” (Gen. 1:14). The purpose of these lights is to separate night from day, provide calendrical markers, and to give light to those on earth (Gen. 1:14-15).<sup>256</sup> Thus, God makes the sun (or “greater light”), moon (or “lesser light”), and “the stars” (Gen. 1:16).<sup>257</sup> As will be seen, this pattern of ‘sun’ followed by ‘moon’ and ‘stars’ appears to have become one standard way of referring to the observable sources of light in the day and night skies in later Jewish literature.<sup>258</sup> Additionally, this formula appears to have been utilised in multiple ways, sometimes as a mere descriptor of cosmological order (Ps. 8:3, 72:5; Jer. 31:35-36; cf. Jer. 33:20-21) and other times of the disruption of that order (Is.13:10; 34:4; Joel 2:31 etc).<sup>259</sup> The adaption of SMS formulae to these differing contexts has led to their variation in appearance throughout Jewish and Christian literature. The author of Revelation appears to utilise this literary pattern in two ways. *First*, the Seer employs SMS formulae in descriptions of cosmic destruction associated with the anticipated ‘day of the Lord’ (cf. Is.13:9-10; Joel 2:31, Amos 5:18 etc.).<sup>260</sup> The nature of this cosmic catastrophe language, particularly as it appears in the NT, has been debated hotly in recent decades with figures such as Caird, Wright, and Adams forming some

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<sup>255</sup> It is perhaps for this reason SMS formula have seemingly never been discussed.

<sup>256</sup> Chester observes the literary correspondence of days 1-3 and 4-6 in the Genesis narrative, an observation that would lend “supreme importance” to ‘light’ in the work of Creation. See Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 334; also, Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 62-63; Meredith G. Kline, *Genesis: A New Commentary*, (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Marketing, 2017), 12. If this is true, it appears SMS formulae possess immediate significance in being one way of referring to this first and essential act of creation.

<sup>257</sup> Victor P. Hamilton writes the order of sun-moon-stars in Gen. 1:16 is significant since it directly contrasts with *Enuma elish* and the priority given to the ‘stars’ in the Babylonian creation myth. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 127-128.

<sup>258</sup> The order of sun-moon-stars (or sometimes stars-sun-moon) is not the only way celestial bodies are referred to in Old and New Testaments (cf. Ps. 33:6; Neh. 9:6; Is. 34:4 etc). Thus, caution must be exercised against over-stating this as the *only* way in which Scriptural authors refer to the created order outside earth.

<sup>259</sup> SMS formulae occasionally omit one or more elements of the formula such as in the case of Ps. 8:3.

<sup>260</sup> Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 337; Richard D. Patterson, “Wonders In The Heavens And On The Earth: Apocalyptic Imagery In The Old Testament,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:3 (2000): 395-403, 388; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:413-415.

of the major voices.<sup>261</sup> The debate, which is often centred around Mk. 13:24-25 and its synoptic parallels, tends to focus on whether the language of cosmic catastrophe is meant symbolically to describe socio-political upheaval or seriously envisage a material collapse of the space-time universe.<sup>262</sup> Wright has rather strongly argued:

It is crass literalism, in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major sociopolitical events and bring out their full significance.<sup>263</sup>

In Wright's view, the context of the OT passages in which cosmic catastrophe language occurs (cf. Is.13:10; Ezek.32:7-8; Joel 2:10; 3:15) is socio-political disturbance. Thus, Wright argues, it would be markedly "strange", "unJewish", and "difficult" for Jesus to employ such language to refer to the collapse of the physical universe in communicating to disciples unable to grasp even the most basic redefining of elementary Jewish concepts.<sup>264</sup> Adams, nevertheless, has contested this hypothesis, saying biblical authors had in mind the actual destruction and later recreation of the material universe (cf. Heb. 12:25-29; 2 Pet. 3:5-13).<sup>265</sup> It seems Adams' criticisms of some of Wright's assertions are justified in that it was certainly conceivable to some 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews that the material universe, as they understood it, would

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<sup>261</sup> Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 243-271; G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, (San Francisco: Harper, 1966); Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*; Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven*.

<sup>262</sup> For a helpful discussion of Mk. 13:24-25 see Bas van Iersel, "The Sun, Moon, and Stars of Mark 13,24-25 in a Greco-Roman Reading," *Biblica* 77:1 (1996): 84-92; also, France, *Mark*, 533; Mark L. Strauss, *Mark*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 589-591.

<sup>263</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 361.

<sup>264</sup> Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 345.

<sup>265</sup> In conclusion, Adams claims, "In the light of the comparative evidence, language of cosmic catastrophe such as we find in the New Testament simply cannot be regarded as conventional, first-century language for referring symbolically to socio-political change. In the key New Testament passages employing this language, a catastrophe of cosmic dimensions (within an ancient cosmological framework) is genuinely in view. This is not only suggested by the parallel data but is evident from a close reading of the texts themselves in their literary contexts." See Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven*, 253.



be destroyed and recreated at the end of time (cf. Heb. 12:25-29; 2 Pet. 3:5-13; 4 Ezra 7:26-44 etc).<sup>266</sup> In this sense, NT authors must be permitted to utilise catastrophic language within their own astronomical framework rather than anachronistically inserting modern standards of cosmology upon ancient texts and insisting, for example, that because ‘stars’ cannot physically fall upon the earth the author must have meant something different.<sup>267</sup>

Nevertheless, Adams appears largely to neglect the fact that the texts from which the NT authors draw their vivid language are directed towards specific nations *within* human history and are concerned with local judgement on these nations rather than decisive final judgement (despite Adams’ protestations to the contrary, cf. Is.13; Ezek. 32).<sup>268</sup> Moreover, the only OT text appearing to have an eschatological focus (Joel 2:28-32),<sup>269</sup> is applied by the Apostle Peter (cf. Acts 2:16-21) to the events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion and leading up to Pentecost, events occurring definitively *within* human history. Thus, when cosmic catastrophe is examined in Revelation (with emphasis on SMS formulae), interpreters should acknowledge this language probably describes more than mere socio-political upheaval but nevertheless cannot be taken with crass literalism. Additionally, as will be seen, the use of SMS formulae mitigates attempts to take the descriptors as isolated units. Rather, together they articulate a complete picture. Furthermore, exegetes must allow the 1<sup>st</sup> century author of Revelation to articulate his point within the framework of his own cosmology, rather than subjecting him to modern astronomical standards.

The *second* use of SMS formulae is seen in the cosmic clothing attributed to the woman of Rev. 12. This language is even more difficult to interpret since it appears the

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<sup>266</sup> For a comprehensive list of such texts see Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven*, 96-99.

<sup>267</sup> For further discussion see Daniel C. Button, “Toward a New Heaven and New Earth: A Scientific, Biblical and Theological Exploration of Continuity and Discontinuity,” (PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2020), 153-185.

<sup>268</sup> For a helpful though brief criticism of Adams’ position, see G. J. C. Jordaan, “Cosmology in the Book of Revelation,” *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi* 42:2 (2013): 1-8, 7.

<sup>269</sup> This applies also to other cosmic catastrophe texts in Joel such as 2:10 and 3:15.

description is largely original to the Apocalypse and does not draw upon any specific OT or non-canonical texts. Scholarship regarding Rev. 12:1 typically takes the individual components of the SMS formula and interprets them as signifying separate though related realities. Leaving aside the various interpretations of the ‘sun’ and ‘moon’, the “crown of twelve stars” is variously interpreted as the twelve tribes of Israel,<sup>270</sup> the twelve Apostles,<sup>271</sup> or even the twelve stars of the Zodiac.<sup>272</sup> The problem inherent in these approaches is that they over-emphasise the significance of the individual components of the formula. Rather, it seems more likely, as will be seen shortly, the reference to ‘sun-moon-stars’ in 12:1 is intended to be broadly descriptive of a single idea: glory/majesty.<sup>273</sup> At this point appeals might be made to Joseph’s dream of the sun, moon and stars bowing down to him in Gen. 37:9-10.<sup>274</sup> In this text, the sun represents Jacob, the moon Rachel, and the eleven stars Joseph’s eleven brothers. On face value, Gen. 37:9-10 appears to support the ‘individualising’ method of interpretation.<sup>275</sup> However, when the second dream (Gen. 37:9-10) is taken in conjunction with the first (Gen. 37:5-8) it is clear the image is intended broadly to convey the later subjection of Jacob’s entire family to him in Egypt. Joseph’s brothers, including the later-born Benjamin, bow before him (Gen. 42:6; 50:18). However, readers will realise immediately Rachel dies before this can take place (Gen. 35:16-18) and Jacob never once bows to his son.<sup>276</sup> Thus, there is some difficulty in assigning symbolic

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<sup>270</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 627; similarly, Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315, though he allows the potentiality for an allusion to the twelve apostles. Also, Keener, *Revelation*, 314.

<sup>271</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232; also, Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 147; Koester, *Revelation*, 544.

<sup>272</sup> Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 197; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:681; Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Revelation of St. John*, 300; Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation*, 158; Similarly, Witherington, *Revelation*, 167.

<sup>273</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 543-544.

<sup>274</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315; G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson eds., *Commentary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1122.

<sup>275</sup> Certainly, some Jewish traditions interpreted Gen. 37:9-10 in this way (*T. Ab.* 7:1-7; *T. Naph.* 5:2-4). See Koester, *Revelation*, 544; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315.

<sup>276</sup> Rabbinical scholars noted this problem and presented multiple proposals. One example includes the suggestion of R. Chama in *Genesis Rabbah* who suggests, in response to Jacob’s rebuke of Joseph’s dream, “But our father [Jacob] did not know that the reference was to Bilhah, Rachel’s handmaiden, who brought him up like a mother.” For further discussion see, Dr. Mordecai David Rosen, “Joseph Dreams that the Sun, Moon

significance to each component of the prophetic dream and holding onto these tightly.

Likewise, when exegetes approach Rev. 12:1, care must be exercised to avoid understanding the individual components of the formula with strict wooden literalness.

Having broadly considered SMS formulae in Jewish and Christian literature, several conclusions can be reached. *Firstly*, SMS formulae are not utilised homogeneously. There are distinctions to be made between usage in cosmic catastrophe contexts (Joel 2:10; Mk. 13:24-25 etc), simple statements of cosmic order (Gen.1:16; Ps.8:3; 1 Cor. 15:41 etc), and descriptions of glory/majesty (1 Cor.15:41; Rev.12:1 etc). In their most basic sense, they refer to those visible sources of light in the heavens. They are utilised, however, in other contexts and this should be considered when discerning their form and function. *Second*, the literary order and form of SMS formulae should not be viewed too rigidly. Sometimes one or more elements of the formula can be missing (such as ‘sun’ in Ps. 8:3 or ‘stars’ in Joel 2:31) whilst other elements are utilised in conjunction with the formula in certain contexts.<sup>277</sup> Thus, caution must be exercised when discussing this literary pattern, since it does not appear to possess particularly strict rules regarding its expression. Nevertheless, the pattern remains observable even in contexts that do not include all elements of the formula. *Finally*, SMS formulae should be taken as broadly descriptive of a single idea, especially when all three components occur together in the same passage. Caution should be exercised against interpretations seeking to assign too much significance to individual components of SMS formulae.

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and Stars Bow to Him – Does It Come True?” <https://www.thetorah.com/article/joseph-dreams-that-the-sun-moon-and-stars-bow-to-him-does-it-come-true>

<sup>277</sup> This is especially true in cosmic catastrophe contexts (cf. Joel 2:30-31; Acts 2:20 etc).

## ***Old Testament Influences:***

Before discussing how the Seer employs this third category of astral language, it is necessary to understand how SMS formulae are utilised elsewhere in Jewish and Christian literature. As noted previously, the literary pattern of ‘sun-moon-stars’ is first seen in Gen. 1:16. Here this formula refers to those fixed visible sources of light in both the day and night skies (cf. Jer. 33:20, 25).<sup>278</sup> However, as later Jewish prophetic texts would iterate, this fixed order could be subject to dissolution if/when God enacted divine justice on wrongdoers (cf. Is.13:10; Joel 2:10; Ezek. 32:7-8 etc.). As Beale observes, these texts form the “quarry” of OT material from which the “mosaic of OT passages” that constitute Revelation’s disastrous scenes are drawn.<sup>279</sup> One noteworthy feature of these texts (which utilise SMS formula) is their chief concern with the *darkening* of the celestial light sources in view of Yahweh’s judgement (Joel 2:10, 3:15; Ezek. 32:7-8; Is. 13:10; cf. Amos 5:18-20, 8:9-10; Zeph. 1:14-15 etc.).<sup>280</sup> This undoing of creation’s most essential element (‘light’) appears to have become a powerful symbol, one which naturally instilled fear in ancient hearers (cf. Amos 5:18-20). Due to time constraints, attention will be limited to several references from Joel (Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15) and one from Isaiah (Is. 34:4), which it seems have the closest bearing upon Rev. 6:13 and 8:12.<sup>281</sup> The context of the utterances in Joel (2:10, 31; 3:15) is a disastrous locust swarm (Joel 1:4).<sup>282</sup> The prophet views this calamity as foreshadowing the dreaded ‘day of

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<sup>278</sup> See “Defining SMS formula” section above.

<sup>279</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 395.

<sup>280</sup> Considering ‘light’ is positioned on both day 1 and 4 of the Creation Narrative (Gen. 1-2), this darkening of these fixed sources of light effectively describes the undoing of creation’s most basic element. Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 336-339; Fanning, *Revelation*, 249. Koester notes in the Greco-Roman world, the dimming of celestial light was viewed as a sign of divine wrath. Koester, *Revelation*, 402, 411.

<sup>281</sup> Other passages, however, such as Is. 13:10 and Ezek. 32:7-8, may also form the background for Rev. 6:13/8:12.

<sup>282</sup> For further discussion see Christopher R. Seitz, *Joel*, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments, (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 120-128.

the LORD' (Joel 2:1) and the catastrophic events preceding it.<sup>283</sup> At the beginning of the second chapter, the prophet announces, "the day of the Lord is coming; it is near, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness!" (Joel 2:1-2; cf. Amos 5:18-20). Immediately, the connection between severe cosmic darkness and divine judgement is observable.<sup>284</sup> As Yahweh's judgement-dispensing army approaches, "The earth quakes before them; the heavens tremble. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining" (Joel 2:10).<sup>285</sup> As Joel further describes the coming upheaval, he states, "The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes" (Joel 2:31). The language of the 'sun' (שֶׁמֶשׁ; LXX: ὁ ἥλιος) turning to darkness and the 'moon' (יָרֵחַ; LXX: ἡ σελήνη) to blood is linguistically very similar to Rev. 6:12 (ὁ ἥλιος...ἡ σελήνη) and continues the theme of cosmic darkness in association with divine judgement.<sup>286</sup> One detail missing from Joel 2:31, however, is the darkening/dissolution of the 'stars'. While they "withdraw their shining" in 2:10 and 3:15, there is no mention of them falling from heaven in 2:31 as in Rev. 6:13. The precedent for this analogy as seen in Rev. 6:13 appears to be Is. 34:4, which states:

"All the host of heaven shall rot away,

and the skies roll up like a scroll.

*All their host shall fall,*

*as leaves fall from the vine,*

*like leaves falling from the fig tree."*

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<sup>283</sup> Seitz, *Joel*, 71-72; David A. Hubbard, *Joel and Amos*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol.25, (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 53. For further discussion see Joel Barker, *Joel*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 75-133.

<sup>284</sup> Joel 2:10, 31 and 3:15 similarly iterate this idea.

<sup>285</sup> The latter half of this verse is cited virtually verbatim in Joel 3:15. Both Joel 2:10 and 3:15 are cited as forming the literary background for Rev. 8:12. See Fanning, *Revelation*, 287.

<sup>286</sup> The sun turning to 'darkness' and the moon to 'blood' closely resemble the natural phenomena of solar and lunar eclipses. Chester, "Chaos and New Creation," 341-345.

Interestingly, in the Masoretic text, the “stars” (כוכב) are not expressly mentioned, though this probably is the most readily identifiable referent of צָבָא הַשָּׁמַיִם (“Host of Heaven”).<sup>287</sup> This phrase may also possess “theological significance” given the already established association of celestial entities with spiritual forces in opposition to God (cf. Is. 24:21; 27:1).<sup>288</sup> However, the LXX has πάντα τὰ ἄστρα (“all the stars”) which probably forms the background for John’s use in the Apocalypse.<sup>289</sup>

Regarding the SMS formula in Rev. 12:1, there do not appear to be any specific passages which form its literary background. However, the concept of ‘cosmic clothing’ certainly occurs in the OT. One example is Ps.104:2, a psalm extolling Yahweh’s greatness and possessing significant points of contact with Gen. 1-3.<sup>290</sup> In 104:1 the Psalmist states Yahweh is “clothed with splendour and majesty”. The text goes on to explicate this, saying God covers (כָּסָה) himself with “light” (אור, LXX: φῶς) as with a garment. This participial phrase is set in parallel with the next: נֹטֶה שָׁמַיִם כִּי רֵיעָה (“stretching out the heavens like a tent”). This parallelism underscores Yahweh’s splendour and greatness. If these immeasurably impressive natural phenomena, essential to the very existence of the cosmos,<sup>291</sup> constitute merely a part of God’s cosmic wardrobe, how much more resplendent must he be? The idea of cosmic clothing in Rev. 12:1, however, is clearly in reference to a ‘woman’, not the Creator. Interestingly, there does not appear to be any direct OT reference to a ‘woman’ being clothed in the manner expressed in the Apocalypse.<sup>292</sup> Nevertheless, the

<sup>287</sup> Cf. Deut. 17:3 where, in one SMS formula, ‘host of heaven’ is substituted for ‘stars’. For כוכב see Willem A. VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, 5 Vols, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), 2:609-614.

<sup>288</sup> Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 580; Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 535; Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 339; *TDNT*, 1:503. Furthermore, both Deut. 4:19 and 2 Kgs. 23:5 utilise SMS formulae in the context of idolatry (cf. Is. 47:13).

<sup>289</sup> *Septuaginta*, 2:994.

<sup>290</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 Vols, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 3:182. Mounce notes this text as possessing some similarity to Rev. 12:1 though he does not develop this observation further. See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232. Is.66:1 also contains a similar image.

<sup>291</sup> Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 336-339; Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:184.

<sup>292</sup> This may indicate the image of the radiant ‘woman’ of Rev. 12:1 is original to the Apocalypse.

idea of the covenant community, represented by a ‘woman’, being clothed with fine apparel does appear in Ezek.16:10-14. This text is situated in an oracle of judgement upon Jerusalem for its infidelity to Yahweh (Ezek.16:1-63).<sup>293</sup> The prophet Ezekiel is to “make known to Jerusalem her abominations” (Ezek. 16:2). What follows is an extended metaphor of the covenant community as an adulterous wife, who, despite all the benefits she has received, still prostitutes herself.<sup>294</sup> These benefits include clothing such as “embroidered cloth” (רִקְמָה; 16:10), “fine leather” (שֶׁמֶט), various items of jewellery (16:11-12), and a “beautiful crown” (וַעֲטָרָה; LXX: στέφανον; 16:12).<sup>295</sup> The passage goes on to describe how Israel threw off her beauty to ‘play the whore’, ending with a summons to repentance and promise of mercy.<sup>296</sup> What is clear from Ezek. 16 is that the analogy of Israel as a ‘woman’ in radiant attire was established in Jewish prophetic literature prior to the Apocalypse.

### ***Non-Canonical Parallels:***

As Jewish literature developed, it appears the literary formula of ‘sun-moon-stars’ continued to be utilised and adapted in various contexts. One frequent setting for SMS formulae was the cosmic catastrophe language derived from the OT prophets. An example of this adaptation is found in the *Testament of Moses*, a 1st century A.D. text purporting to record the final words of Israel’s exodus leader.<sup>297</sup> In a passage recounting the judgement of the “Heavenly One”, the text states:

<sup>293</sup> William H. Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol.28, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 239-241; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1-24*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 459-467; Horace D. Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20*, Concordia Commentary, (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005), 460-463.

<sup>294</sup> Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 239-241; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 459-467; Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 460-463.

<sup>295</sup> The noun στέφανος (“crown”) is also utilised in Rev. 12:1.

<sup>296</sup> Brownlee, *Ezekiel 1-19*, 239-241; Block, *The Book of Ezekiel*, 459-467; Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 460-463.

<sup>297</sup> See Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:920-921.

<sup>4</sup>And the earth will tremble, even to its ends shall it be shaken. And the high mountains will be made low. Yea, they will be shaken, as enclosed valleys will they fall. <sup>5</sup>*The sun will not give light. And in darkness the horns of the moon will flee. Yea, they will be broken in pieces. It will be turned wholly into blood. Yea, even the circle of the stars will be thrown into disarray* (*Test. Mos.* 10:4-5).<sup>298</sup>

The text goes on to foretell the disasters awaiting the seas and idols of God's enemies (10:6). Nevertheless, Israel will be safe from harm and dwell among the stars (10:7-10). There are several noteworthy features of this use of SMS formula. *First*, the SMS formula of 10:5, as observed above, is utilised in conjunction with the levelling of mountains, raising of valleys, and disruption of the seas. *Secondly*, there is extended focus in 10:5 on the fate of the 'moon' under God's judgement.<sup>299</sup> A *third* observable feature is that the theme of cosmic darkness, seen earlier, continues for both the sun and moon (cf. *Sib. Or.* 5:346-351). However, in this text the stars are simply thrown into disarray, though by implication this may also lead to cosmic darkness.<sup>300</sup> Another example of the adaption of SMS formula comes in the fifth book of the *Sibylline Oracles*. In a passage detailing a divinely appointed war amongst celestial bodies, the author states:

I saw the threat of the burning sun among the stars and the terrible wrath of the moon among the lightning flashes. The stars travailed in battle; God bade them fight (*Sib. Or.* 5:512-514).<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:932. (Emphasis added).

<sup>299</sup> The fact this will happen to the 'whole' moon makes a connection with Rev. 6:13 even more probable since these appear to be the only cosmic catastrophe texts to share this feature. See, Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 167. This does not, however, necessitate the literary dependence of Rev. 6:13 on the *Test. of Mos.* 10:5 since there are other points at which the texts differ significantly. Nevertheless, a parallel is observable and may reflect Johannine familiarity with this tradition.

<sup>300</sup> In some catastrophe texts the sun and moon shine more intensely and even reverse roles (see 4 Ezra 5:4-8; 1 En. 80:2-8).

<sup>301</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:405.



The text goes on to describe the ensuing battle and the fate of individual constellations in the wake of the cosmic carnage (5:515-531). Here again a pattern of ‘sun’ followed by ‘moon’ and finally ‘stars’ is observable. The purpose once again is to describe celestial light sources and, in this context, their dissolution.<sup>302</sup> However, this differs from *Test. Mos.* 10:4-5 in that this SMS formula describes conflict between celestial bodies rather than cosmic darkness in association with divine judgement. In terms of adaptation in Greco-Roman sources, Koester remarks authors saw dimming of sun and moon as portents of coming disaster.<sup>303</sup> Nevertheless, there do not appear to be very strong examples of SMS formula in cosmic catastrophe texts in wider Greco-Roman literature.<sup>304</sup>

Regarding the SMS formula of Rev. 12:1, the picture of God the Creator clothed in celestial garments continues in the *Sibylline Oracles*. In 1:137-140, God states:

I am the one who is, but you consider in your heart: I am robed with heaven, draped around with sea, the earth is the support of my feet, around my body is poured the air, the entire chorus of stars revolves around me.<sup>305</sup>

At once, there are obvious developments from the imagery in Ps. 104:2. In the Psalm, God is wrapped in “light” (אור, LXX: φῶς), whereas in the Oracle he is robed with “heaven”.

Additionally, the sea and air form part of his celestial draping (1:138, 140). Interestingly, combined with these descriptors of cosmic clothing is a reference to the “earth” constituting “the support of my feet”, reflecting Is.66:1 and offering an interesting parallel to the image in Rev. 12:1. Finally, he is surrounded by “the entire chorus of stars” (1:140). While there are

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<sup>302</sup> Pseudo-Philo’s *Biblical Antiquities (Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum)* similarly states at the end of the world, “the stars will hasten and the light of the sun will hurry to fall and the light of the moon will not remain” (LAB 19:13). See Adams, *The Stars will fall from Heaven*, 76-77.

<sup>303</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 402, 450; Paul, *Revelation*, 151. France describes the utilising of the sun and moon as symbols of power by the Roman emperors. France, *Matthew*, 922.

<sup>304</sup> Qumranic literature contains barely any uses of SMS formulae, though there are two references in *The Genesis Apocryphon (1Q20) VII & XIII*. See DSS, 482-483.

<sup>305</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:338; Koester, *Revelation*, 543-544.

significant dissimilarities between *Sib. Or.* 1:137-140 and Rev. 12:1 that would rule out any assertion of influence, the similar descriptors employed might warrant the conclusion the concept of cosmic clothing was present in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. The Seer then may have drawn partially upon this broader idea as he composed Rev. 12. However, this conclusion should be tempered with the observation there are no texts from this period describing the covenant community as a ‘woman’ clothed by Yahweh in cosmic attire.

### ***NT & Early Christian Writings:***

SMS formulae continue to be utilised in early Christian literature, particularly in cosmic catastrophe contexts. Since those cosmic catastrophe passages in the Synoptic gospels which utilise SMS formulae (Mk.13:24-25; Matt.24:29; Lk.21:25) have been briefly surveyed, attention will be focused on the next example in Acts 2:20.<sup>306</sup> During Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-41), the inspired Apostle appeals to “what was uttered through the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16) as an explanation of what his hearers were witnessing in the newly spirit-filled disciples (Acts 2:2-13). In Acts 2:19-20, Peter is quoting Joel 2:28-32,<sup>307</sup> stating, “*And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day.*”<sup>308</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> See “Defining SMS formula” section above. Whilst this text does not explicitly mention ‘stars’, it is an example of a SMS formula in early Christian literature which is significant for understanding such language in Revelation.

<sup>307</sup> It should be noted Peter’s ‘quotation’ of Joel 2:28-32 is interpretive. For example, the inspired Apostle changes the LXX reading of καὶ ἔσται μετὰ ταῦτα (“and it shall be after these things”, *NETS*) to Καὶ ἔσται ἐν ταῖς ἐσχάταις ἡμέραις (“and in the last days it shall be”, *ESV*). See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), “Explanation of the Text”, Perlego; Darrel L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 112.

<sup>308</sup> Emphasis added. For comparison see *NETS* translation of the LXX of Joel 2:28-32 in *NETS*, 802.

The context of Joel 2:28-32, as noted previously, centres on a devastating invasion of locusts which the prophet views as a summons for Israel's repentance and a warning of future judgement.<sup>309</sup> Peter's reference to σημεῖα ("signs") on the earth in addition to the original τέρατα ("wonders", cf. Joel 2:30) in heaven expand upon the previous prophetic material and the combined terms in Acts consistently refer to God's miraculous activity within creation (cf. Acts 2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12).<sup>310</sup> The presence of SMS formula should immediately lead the reader to take this as descriptive of a single idea rather than individual components with corresponding events.<sup>311</sup> Thus, 2:20 (in addition to the blood, fire, and vapour of smoke), should be taken as descriptor of cosmic darkness, a feature which in the NT sometimes takes on a demonic dimension.<sup>312</sup> Peter applies these miraculous events to his immediate situation. It seems the inspired Apostle viewed the darkening of the sun-moon-stars ahead of the 'day of the LORD' as predictive of the momentous events of the 'Christ Event' taking place in his own day.<sup>313</sup> An interesting parallel to this is seen in the *Anaphora Pilati*, one of the "Pilate Cycle" of apocryphal texts which serve to amplify the details surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. During Christ's Passion, the author states, "there was darkness over all the world, the sun was darkened at midday, and the stars appeared but there appeared no lustre in them; and the moon, as if turned into blood, failed in her light."<sup>314</sup> Here the formula of 'sun-moon-stars'

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<sup>309</sup> Seitz, *Joel*, 120-128; Schnabel, *Acts*, "Explanation of the Text". Interestingly, of all the OT cosmic catastrophe texts, this is the only one which does not appear to be in context of local judgement; a feature rendering it an ideal candidate for later reinterpretation/application.

<sup>310</sup> Bock, *Acts*, 115; Schnabel, *Acts*, "Explanation of the Text".

<sup>311</sup> This SMS formula as noted previously is missing the 'stars' component, though the idea of cosmic darkness is certainly present.

<sup>312</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 181-182.

<sup>313</sup> Schnabel, *Acts*, "Explanation of the Text". Paul helpfully notes the catastrophic language of Revelation had already been utilised by the Synoptic writers in connection to the turning of the ages in the death and ascension of Jesus (cf. Matt. 27:45, 51-54; Mk. 15:33-39; Lk. 23:44-45). See Paul, *Revelation*, 151; Maloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 116; Francis J. Moloney, "Matthew 5:17-18 and the Matthean Use of ΔΙΚΑΙΟΣΥΝΗ," in Christopher W. Skinner and Kelley R. Iverson, eds., *Unity and Diversity in the Gospels and Paul: Essays in Honor Frank J. Matera*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 33-54.

<sup>314</sup> Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 212.

is adapted to ‘sun-stars-moon’, nevertheless the purpose is the same. The seemingly world-ending events are attributed to the tumultuous events of the Passion with all their eschatological ramifications. In that sense, they were not understood by the author in a woodenly literalistic or futuristic manner but were applied to the chaos of Jesus’ crucifixion.<sup>315</sup>

In addition to SMS formulae in cosmic catastrophe texts, the NT also bears witness to other uses of this literary pattern. In 1 Cor.15:41, in an extended discussion concerning the nature of resurrected bodies, the Apostle Paul states, “there is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.” Here, the SMS formula is descriptive of the relative glory of celestial bodies to one another and is utilised by Paul to describe how believer’s perishable bodies must be transformed to inherit the imperishable new creation.<sup>316</sup> Thus, cosmic catastrophe is not the only way NT authors employ SMS formulae. Once again, there do not appear to be any instances of SMS formulae in the context of cosmic clothing in early Christian literature.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Nevertheless, NT authors demonstrate at least some belief in the final destruction of the material universe (cf. Heb.12:25-29; 2 Pet.3:5-13). Moreover, the *Apocalypse of Thomas*, utilises SMS formulae of future events and states when the Antichrist comes “the stars shall fall upon the earth, the sun shall be cut in half like the moon, and the moon shall not give her light.” Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 646-648. The Church Father Lactantius appears to express a similar idea. See Lactantius, *Epitome of the Divine Institutes*, 71. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0702.htm>

<sup>316</sup> For further discussion see David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 729-732; Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 782-784.

<sup>317</sup> This absence may indicate this image is original to the Apocalypse. Some do, however, cite descriptors of feminine deities in pagan literature such as ‘Isis’ and ‘Virgo’ as a foil the Seer polemicised against. For summary of arguments as well as relevant texts see Aune, *Revelation*, 2:680-681. Also, Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 343; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232.

## *SMS formulae in Revelation*

In the Apocalypse, there are three occurrences of SMS formulae. Two of these (6:13, 8:12) are found in cosmic catastrophe contexts. The *first* (6:13) forms part of the judgement of the Sixth Seal (Rev. 6:12-17). When the Lamb opens the seal, the Seer sees a σεισμός μέγας (“great earthquake”), an image often found in ‘day of the LORD’ passages (cf. (Is. 13:13, 24:14-23, 29:6; Joel 2:10, 3:14-16; Nah. 1:5-6; Zech. 14:4-5, 8-10; cf. Ps. 18:6-15) and associated with divine judgement elsewhere in the Apocalypse (cf. Rev. 11:13, 19; 16:18).<sup>318</sup> From this the Seers eyes shift heavenward to witness the sun become black as sackcloth, the moon as blood, and the stars fall from heaven like winter fruit from a fig tree (Rev. 6:12b-13).<sup>319</sup> The picture of the sun becoming μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος (“black as a sackcloth of goat’s hair”)<sup>320</sup> and the moon like αἷμα (“blood”)<sup>321</sup> closely resembles descriptions of natural phenomena of solar and lunar eclipses, a point that further draws together cosmic darkness and divine judgement (cf. Joel 2:31).<sup>322</sup> Much of this imagery, as it specifically relates to ‘stars’, is unmistakably drawn from Is. 34:4. However, there are several aspects of the image in Revelation that differ from the prophet. *Firstly*, Isaiah records τὰ ἄστρα (“the stars”, from ἄστρον) falling from heaven, whereas John utilises the more

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<sup>318</sup> See Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 336-341. Fanning notes this σεισμός μέγας is “a feature of God’s theophany at Sinai (Exod 19: 16– 19) that became an important part of a judgment typology related to the complex of events associated with Israel’s deliverance from Egypt...” The shaking of earth is also associated with Jesus’ own predictions of his second coming (Matt. 24:7; Mk. 13:8; Lk. 21:11). See Fanning, *Revelation*, 249; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 166; Koester, *Revelation*, 401-402; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:413.

<sup>319</sup> The *Apocalypse of Peter* similarly mentions stars falling like figs from fig tree, though it is more than probable this later Christian apocalypse adapted its image from Revelation. See Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 599. Likewise in the *Epistle of the Apostles*, the stars fall like fire. See Elliot, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 578. Also, in *Sib. Or.* 2:200-202 the stars fall “from heaven on the sea”. See Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:350.

<sup>320</sup> Translation from Osborne, *Revelation*, 292. This “sackcloth”, made from coarse goat’s hair, would normally be worn in mourning (Is. 15:3; Joel 1:8; Rev. 11:3). This imagery would fit the context as the world mourns the end of its reign (Rev. 6:15-17). See Osborne, *Revelation*, 292; Koester, *Revelation*, 402; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 167.

<sup>321</sup> Koester suggests the turning of the moon to “blood” signals violence (Rev. 6:10, 14:20, 18:24). Koester, *Revelation*, 402.

<sup>322</sup> See Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 341-345; Fanning, *Revelation*, 249.

common οἱ ἀστέρες (from ἀστήρ) with the genitive τοῦ οὐρανοῦ.<sup>323</sup> *Second*, John specifies the stars falling εἰς τὴν γῆν (“to the earth”), whereas Is. 34:4 only recounts the act of falling.<sup>324</sup> *Thirdly*, John records this event in the aorist (ἔπεσαν), whereas in the LXX of Isaiah, it is future (πείσεται). *Finally*, in Isaiah φύλλα (“leaves”) fall from the tree, whereas in the Apocalypse it is ὀλύνθους (“late/winter figs”).<sup>325</sup> The withering of a συκῆ (“fig tree”) is often associated with divine judgement in the OT (Gen. 3:7; Ps. 105:33; Is. 34:4; Hos. 2:12; Nah. 3:12) or more generally evil (Num. 20:5; Joel 1:12; Hab. 3:17). The flourishing of this tree, however, is linked with fecundity (Deut. 8:8; Prov. 27:18; Song. 2:13), peace (2 Kgs. 18:31; Is. 36:16; Mic. 4:4; Zech. 3:10), and occasionally divine blessing (Mic. 4:4). Moreover, the sight of a fruitless fig tree causes Jesus to curse it, a metaphor for the faithless covenant community of his day (Matt. 21:19-21; Mk. 11:13-21; Lk. 13:6-9 cf. Jer. 8:13; Hos. 9:10).<sup>326</sup> The image of a fig tree putting out its first leaves as a portent of the end likewise is recorded in all Synoptics (Matt. 24:32; Mk. 13:28; Lk. 21:29-33). Interestingly, the image of first fruits easily shaken off a fig tree is also found in Nahum, a passage regarding divine judgement on Nineveh (Nah. 3:12).<sup>327</sup> In addition to these disasters, the Seer states, in reverse order from Is. 34:4, the sky was rolled up like a scroll and every mountain and island “removed from its place” (Rev. 6:14). The result is that people of all social classes, who stand in opposition to the reign of God and the Lamb, hide themselves in caves and mountains begging them to provide shelter from their wrath (Rev. 6:16-17).<sup>328</sup> The point of disturbing

<sup>323</sup> *TDNT* notes ἀστήρ is “almost always” utilised of a single star, whereas ἄστρον can be employed for constellations. See *TDNT*, 1:503.

<sup>324</sup> According to *BDAG*, the falling of stars “to” a terrestrial location could often be understood in the Greco-Roman world as signalling ill portents. For example, at the death of Alexander the Great the stars were said to be falling “to the Sea”. See *BDAG*, 145.

<sup>325</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 167. The hapax legomenon ‘ὀλύνθους’ has been variously translated as ‘late/summer figs’ or ‘winter/unripe figs’. See Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 167; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 151; Osborne, *Revelation*, 292. Regardless of precise referent, the image is of easily detachable fruit falling from a shaken tree.

<sup>326</sup> *BDAG*, 955.

<sup>327</sup> Interestingly this text cites ‘locusts’ in association with divine judgement (Nah. 3:15-17)

<sup>328</sup> For the significance of the adaptation of the idea of ‘wrath of God to ‘wrath of God and Lamb’. See Koester, *Revelation*, 413.

scenes is to underscore the severe and unmistakable nature of final divine judgement on the world of the ungodly. There will be no returning to the way things were after this and nor will there be any security for the rebellious when it arrives. The SMS formula contributes to this image by presenting a terrifying picture of cosmic darkness, the complete “undoing of God’s first and fundamental act of creation”.<sup>329</sup>

A similar scenario is envisioned two chapters later in the *second* occurrence of SMS formula (Rev. 8:12). This usage occurs during the Fourth of the Seven Trumpets (Rev. 8:12-13). The imagery here, however, is less sophisticated. The Seer simply states a third of sun, moon, and stars are struck (ἐπλήγη). This aorist passive is intensive (meaning ‘to strike with force’, cf. Ex. 9:31-32; Ps. 101:5).<sup>330</sup> The passive form probably indicates this is a divine passive (i.e. God strikes the celestial light sources).<sup>331</sup> Some note a potential allusion to the Ninth Plague (Darkness) of the Exodus narrative (Ex. 10:21-23).<sup>332</sup> The result of this is that a third of the “light” visible in the day and night is darkened. Once again, the SMS formula contributes to this overall picture by detailing the total darkening of celestial light sources in association with divine judgement.<sup>333</sup> Furthermore, the presence of this formula, perhaps more obviously in this case, cautions against attempts to assign significance to the individual components.

The final use of SMS formula in John’s Apocalypse is found in 12:1. This occurrence appears to be original to the work since, as previously observed, nothing quite like it exists in extant Jewish or Christian literature. The context of this reference is the famous image of the Woman and the Dragon (Rev. 12:1-17). At the chapter’s opening, John sees a σημεῖον μέγα

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<sup>329</sup> Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 340.

<sup>330</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 223; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 181; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 137; *BDAG*, 830.

<sup>331</sup> Nevertheless, the source of striking is not disclosed and ultimately not seen as essential in the author’s mind. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 223.

<sup>332</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 287; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 481.

<sup>333</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 224; Chester, “Chaos and New Creation,” 340.

(“great sign”). The location of this entire scene is ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (“in heaven”).<sup>334</sup> This “sign” is described as a γυνή (“woman”). The feminine figure has been variously interpreted as the Virgin Mary, the Christian church, the Jewish nation, and the faithful covenant community of all ages.<sup>335</sup> Due to previous personifications of the covenant community as a woman (cf. Ezek.16), it seems natural this female symbolically represents the faithful covenant community into which the Messiah Jesus was born.<sup>336</sup> This woman is described as περιβεβλημένη τὸν ἥλιον, καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτῆς στέφανος ἀστέρων δώδεκα (“clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars”). As noted elsewhere, the use of SMS formula should caution against attempts to discern the individual significance of each component of the formula.<sup>337</sup> Rather the image broadly conveys majesty.<sup>338</sup> Nevertheless some subtle theological suggestions might be intended by the author. For one the woman being “clothed with the sun” aligns with the previously seen idea of celestial entities as constituting Yahweh’s cosmic wardrobe (Ps.104:2), an image that certainly conveys glory and in Ps. 104 suggests Yahweh’s sovereign reign over creation. The idea of the “moon under her feet” may suggest dominion as it echoes imagery applied in the OT to the coming Messiah’s reign (Ps. 8:6; 110:1; cf. Matt. 22:44; Eph. 1:22).<sup>339</sup> This idea is likewise found in the Apocalypse itself (Rev. 3:9; 10:2; 22:8).<sup>340</sup> Elsewhere in Revelation a στέφανος (“crown”) is promised the faithful followers of Jesus who overcome (Rev. 2:10; 3:11) as well as being possessed by the

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<sup>334</sup> This should not be considered as God’s abode since the woman’s child is later snatched up there (Rev. 12:5). Rather, the heavenward focus is indicative of its spiritual significance. See Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 314.

<sup>335</sup> Catholic commentators have traditionally identified this ‘Woman’ with the Virgin Mary. See Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 344-345. For helpful summary of views see Aune, *Revelation*, 2:680-1; Koester, *Revelation*, 542-543.

<sup>336</sup> Similarly, Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 231. This woman also represents the faithful covenant community after Jesus’ birth.

<sup>337</sup> See “Defining SMS formula” section above.

<sup>338</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 543-544.

<sup>339</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 232; Koester, *Revelation*, 544.

<sup>340</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 544.



twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:4, 10).<sup>341</sup> Thus, the “crown” of 12:1 may similarly imply victory,<sup>342</sup> though this should be tempered by the tumultuous events immediately following.<sup>343</sup> The number of ‘twelve’ stars may make the image more readily identifiable with the ‘twelve’ tribes of OT Israel or the ‘twelve’ Apostles.<sup>344</sup> However, caution must once again be exercised against attempting to identify specific backgrounds. At most these allusions are suggestive rather than directly symbolic.<sup>345</sup> The SMS formula presents, despite earthly appearances, the faithful covenant community as she truly is, radiant and glorious.

## ***Conclusion:***

Despite the difficulties surrounding SMS formula and the irregularity of such expressions throughout Jewish and early Christian literature, several conclusions can be reached regarding their expression in the Apocalypse. *Firstly*, the SMS formulae of Revelation (6:13; 8:12; 12:1) are not utilised homogeneously, an observation concurrent with extraneous examples from Biblical literature (cf. Jer. 31:35; Joel 2:10; 1 Cor. 15:41 etc). However, Revelation’s examples tend to be stricter in form and appearance (i.e. all elements are present and follow the pattern of ‘sun-moon-stars’). *Second*, the Apocalypse’s SMS formulae, despite being adapted to various contexts, are broadly descriptive of those observable sources of light in the day and night skies. *Third*, those references in the Apocalypse which are found in cosmic catastrophe contexts (6:13; 8:12) are employed to describe, with terrifying impact, the darkening of those sources of light in the ‘day of the

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<sup>341</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 627.

<sup>342</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 457.

<sup>343</sup> There is also a suggestion by some such as Smalley the women’s garments reflect the vestments of the OT priests. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315-316; Adela Yarbro Collins suggests the heavenly attributes iterate ‘cosmic order’. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Apocalyptic Themes in Biblical Literature,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 53:2 (1999): 117-130.

<sup>344</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 315; Osborne, *Revelation*, 456-457.

<sup>345</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 544.

Lord'. This usage accords with the association of darkness with divine judgement in earlier Jewish literature (Is. 13:9-11; Joel 2:10, 31; 3:15; Amos 5:18-20 etc). *Finally*, Revelation's final SMS formula, whilst having some semblance of precedent in OT literature (Ps. 104:2; Ezek.16:10-14), does not appear to have any direct parallel in earlier Jewish/Christian literature. This fact might warrant the conclusion the reference is original to the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, in 12:1, the formula is broadly descriptive of the radiance of the faithful covenant community.

## Chapter 4: ‘Falling’ Star references.

The Apocalypse’s fourth and final category of astral references comprises those passages in which ‘stars’ are purported to ‘fall’ from heaven.<sup>346</sup> There are four examples in this category; two in 8:10-11, one in 9:1, and a final reference in 12:4. The first three (8:10-11; 9:1) concern a single ‘star’ falling from heaven to earth as an agent of divine judgement. The final reference (12:4) describes the Dragon’s tearing down of a third of the stars from heaven and casting them to the earth. The ‘stars’ in this context appear to represent the angelic guardian/patrons of persecuted saints.

### *Discerning ‘Falling’ Star Identity:*

Scholarship is largely divided over the examples in this final category of astral language. Additionally, there is a decided lack of parallels in extant Jewish and Christian literature of stars ‘falling’ from heaven in the sense used in the Apocalypse. Consequently, discussion in this chapter will focus more upon the *identity* of these fallen stars in Revelation than on parallels in extant literature as done in previous chapters. Nevertheless, several important texts will also be examined.

Regarding the *first* two references (8:10-11), scholarship is largely divided over whether the ἀστὴρ μέγας (“great star”) is intended to represent an angelic/demonic figure or simply a natural agent of divine judgement.<sup>347</sup> One early tradition sees the star of 8:10-11 as a

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<sup>346</sup> As noted above, this category possesses significant overlap with those previously discussed.

<sup>347</sup> For the former see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 478-479; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 147-150; Still, *A Vision of Glory*, 70; Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1971), 218-219. For the latter see Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Thomas, *Revelation*, 2:1340; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 155. Similarly, Koester, *Revelation*, 449; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Keener, *Revelation*, 257-258; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:520.

reference to Is. 14:12 and the fall of Satan (cf. Lk. 10:18).<sup>348</sup> One particularly strong proponent of a nuanced version of this argument is Beale who asserts the great star is “an angelic representative of an evil kingdom undergoing judgment”.<sup>349</sup> He bases this conclusion on the similar metaphors employed in both Rev. 8:8 and Jer. 51 of a burning mountain representative of Babylon under divine judgement.<sup>350</sup> He concludes from this, if the context of 8:8 is divine judgement on Babylon, then 8:10 must be allusory to Is. 14:12 in which Babylon under judgement is represented by a fallen ‘star’.<sup>351</sup> There are, however, several problems with this interpretation. *Firstly*, Beale appears to be making too much of the metaphors employed in Rev. 8 and Jer. 51. Whilst divine judgement upon ‘Babylon’ is certainly in view later in Revelation (14:8; 18:2), there is nothing explicitly stated anywhere in Rev. 8 to indicate a Babylonian focus.<sup>352</sup> *Second*, while the *object* of divine wrath in Is. 14:12 is the ‘fallen’ star, it is the *agent* of divine judgement in Rev. 8:10. *Third*, the name associated with the ‘star’ (“Wormwood”; 8:11) is not necessarily indicative of angelic or personal status since it is simply named for the effect it has upon the natural world.<sup>353</sup> *Finally*, the context of the Trumpets in Rev. 8 is judgement upon the natural world.<sup>354</sup> The first Trumpet details fire and hail raining down upon earth (8:7), the second a burning mountain being cast into the sea (8:8-9), and the fourth the darkening of the lights in the sky (8:12). It seems natural then in this context to read the third Trumpet (8:10-11) similarly. Thus, there is nothing in 8:10-11 to suggest demonic downfall, although this idea does appear occasionally

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<sup>348</sup> Andrew of Caesarea was one of the earliest commentators to articulate this idea. See Oden, *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, 144.

<sup>349</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 479, Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 136. Similarly, Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 2595.

<sup>350</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 475.

<sup>351</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 479.

<sup>352</sup> This is not to state there is absolutely no connection between Jer. 51 and Rev. 8. For example, Rev. 8:8 is faintly reminiscent of Jer. 51:25. However, even here there is a difference in that Jer. 51:25 refers to Babylon as a ‘destroying’ and later ‘burnt mountain’, whereas Rev. 8:8 simply describes ‘something like a great mountain, burning with fire’. Thus, if the Seer desired his audience to draw a connection to Jer. 51 and then to the judgement of Babylon, he certainly makes little of it.

<sup>353</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 2:520.

<sup>354</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 354.

in the NT literature (cf. 1 Pet. 3:19-22; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6, 13 etc.).<sup>355</sup> Rather it is preferable to suggest the “great star” of 8:10-11 is simply a natural agent of divine judgement, named for the terrible effect it has upon the world.

The next reference comes during the fifth Trumpet (9:1). Here the Seer sees a fallen “star” *who* is given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. As opposed to 8:10-11, this ‘star’ is expressly personified and thus is probably angelic in nature.<sup>356</sup> Scholars are similarly divided over this symbol. Some argue 9:1 refers to the casting down of a morally corrupt angel or even Satan himself.<sup>357</sup> Others, however, take this to be a more neutral/good figure simply enacting the divine will.<sup>358</sup> Beale, a particularly strong advocate of the former position, concludes “this angel, then, represents sinful humanity, and his role is to inflict woe on humanity because Christ has begun to judge him.”<sup>359</sup> He draws this conclusion primarily by, once again, positing a connection between Is. 14:12 and the downfall of the “Day Star” of Babylon.<sup>360</sup> However, he also includes 1 En. 88:1-3 in which Enoch describes the imprisonment of “star that had fallen from heaven...into an abyss”.<sup>361</sup> He further cites Jesus’ statement in Lk. 10:18, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven”.<sup>362</sup> This, however, is a problematic conclusion for several reasons. *First*, in the texts cited by Beale the star/angel is the *object* of divine judgement who is being cast down by God from heaven. In 9:1, however,

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<sup>355</sup> For a helpful discussion of such texts see J. Daryl Charles, “The Angels under Reserve in 2 Peter and Jude,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 15:1 (2005): 39-48.

<sup>356</sup> That this ‘star’, unlike the previous one, is an angel is perhaps also suggested by similar use elsewhere in Revelation (cf. Rev. 1:16, 20, 2:1; 3:1) and the frequent association of ‘stars’ with ‘angels’ in extant Jewish/Christian literature. See “Chapter 1: Angelic Associations” for examples. Nevertheless, some such as Barnhouse see 8:10-11 and 9:1 as descriptive of the same Satanic star. See Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 168.

<sup>357</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491; Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 2631; Thomas, *Revelation*, 2:1360; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 134-135; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 311-312; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 114. Similarly, Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 140; Barr, *Tales of the End*, Loc. 2907; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 158-159; Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 168.

<sup>358</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 294; Paul, *Revelation*, 175; Koester, *Revelation*, 456; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 225; Osborne, *Revelation*, 362; Witherington, *Revelation*, 150; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:525; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 185.

<sup>359</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 493.

<sup>360</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491.

<sup>361</sup> George W.E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 121; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491.

<sup>362</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 492.

the star/angel is given divine power as an *agent* of divine judgement. *Secondly*, this star/angel cannot be connected to the ‘king’ of the locusts in 9:11, as Beale attempts to do, since the king is inside the pit with his army when it is opened by the angel of 9:1.<sup>363</sup> If anything, the very similar language employed of an angel who descends “holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit...” (Rev. 20:1) could imply 9:1 and 20:1 refer to the same angel. *Third*, this would be the only place in Revelation in which an evil angel is spoken of as an agent of the divine will.<sup>364</sup> *Fourth*, the image of ‘falling’ stars does not *always* connote divine judgement against angels. This is a difficult point of critique since Beale correctly observes the verb πίπτω (“to fall/collapse”), while a generally neutral term, in connection to ‘stars/angels’ is *almost* always connotative of moral failure.<sup>365</sup> Scholarly attempts to connect the language of ‘falling’ angels to the more neutral ‘descending’ angels in Revelation (10:1; 18:1; 20:1)<sup>366</sup> typically fail to provide examples of ‘good’ angels ‘falling’ in extant Jewish/Christian literature.<sup>367</sup> Furthermore, there are examples of evil spiritual beings being permitted by God to inflict misery upon human beings (Job. 1:6-12; 2:1-7). Nevertheless, Koester correctly observes the language of ‘falling’ stars in Rev. 6:13 and 8:10-11 does not imply divine judgement on the *stars* but on *earth*.<sup>368</sup> In view of this, it seems better to conclude the text describes a neutral figure who is merely one of many spiritual beings enacting the divine will.<sup>369</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 456.

<sup>364</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 362.

<sup>365</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 493. Also, *BDAG*, 815-816; Fanning, *Revelation*, 295.

<sup>366</sup> Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 185; Keener, *Revelation*, 266.

<sup>367</sup> On this Beale references the *Testament of Solomon 20:14-17*, a 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish work, which states that ‘good’ angels do not drop from heaven like stars since they “have their foundations laid in the firmament”. However, demonic figures are like “stars ... falling from heaven ... dropped like flashes of lightning to the earth”. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 492. While this text provides evidence ‘good’ angels did not ‘fall’ in the minds of some in the Second Temple period, it is difficult to prove this idea was influential upon John or whether he was even aware of this text.

<sup>368</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 456.

<sup>369</sup> Paul, *Revelation*, 175; Koester, *Revelation*, 456.

Regarding the final reference (12:4), discussion has tended to focus once again on the nature of the ‘stars’ swept down from heaven to earth. Scholarship here divides itself into two broad categories.<sup>370</sup> The *first* typically takes Dragon’s attack on the ‘stars’ as descriptive of a prehistoric rebellion of a third of heaven’s angels against God.<sup>371</sup> The strength of this argument lies in the consistent links between ‘stars’ and ‘angels’ elsewhere in the Apocalypse. (Rev. 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1; 9:1). Furthermore, extant Jewish and Christian literature, starting with Gen. 6:1-4, testifies to the belief in an anti-diluvian fall of angelic beings sometimes referred to as ‘stars’ (1 Pet. 3:19-22; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6, 13; 1 En. 1-36 etc.).<sup>372</sup> However, two major problems exist in this interpretation. *First*, the verb σύρω (“I drag”) pictures the dragging down or sweeping away of individuals (sometimes fish) always to a *negative* conclusion (cf. John 21:8; Acts 8:3).<sup>373</sup> Thus, the action of the Dragon is to drag the ‘stars’ to a destructive end. *Secondly*, in the passage, the language of σύρει (“he swept down”) combined with ἔβαλεν (“he threw”) strongly suggests the Dragon is *attacking* the stars, rather than attempting to convince them to join forces with him. Considering these failings, the *second* view correctly understands both angelic and human figures to be in view.<sup>374</sup> This is largely based on the already established link between ‘angels’ and human communities in Second Temple Judaism.<sup>375</sup> Furthermore, the undeniable parallels to Rev. 12:4 in Dan. 8:10 (cf. Dan. 11:29-39) and 1 En. 43:1-4, strengthen the probability of a

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<sup>370</sup> Not all scholars fall into these two categories. For example, Walvoord argues the attack on the ‘stars’ in 12:4 symbolises the future suppression of the Antichrist’s opponents. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 189. Koester, whilst noting the two interpretive categories, declines to make a firm conclusion. Koester, *Revelation*, 546.

<sup>371</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 461; Keener, *Revelation*, 317. Similarly, Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 233; Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 218-219.

<sup>372</sup> For further discussion see Jan Dochhorn, “The Motif of the Angels’ Fall in Early Judaism,” *Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook*, 2007 (2007): 477-495, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110192957.5.413>; Michael Stone, “Enoch and The Fall of the Angels: Teaching and Status,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 22 (2015): 342-357; Richard Bauckham, “The Fall of the Angels as the Source of Philosophy in Hermias and Clement of Alexandria,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 39 (1985): 313-330.

<sup>373</sup> BDAG, 977-978; Osborne, *Revelation*, 460.

<sup>374</sup> Advocates of this position include Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 636; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318.

<sup>375</sup> See “Chapter 1 – Angelic Associations”.

connection between the “stars of heaven” (angelic beings) and the “holy ones who dwell on earth” (1 En. 43:1-4).<sup>376</sup> Thus, the ‘stars’ of Rev. 12:4 appear to be descriptive of angelic representatives of persecuted saints.

### ***Old Testament Sources:***

There is difficulty in searching for parallels for Rev. 8:10-11 and 9:1 in OT literature. While there are texts such as Ps. 147:4, which describes ‘stars’ with divinely bestowed names (cf. Rev. 8:11), there are seemingly no texts describing a falling ‘star’ as an agent of divine wrath.<sup>377</sup> However, there is a clear OT parallel to Rev. 12:4 in the prophetic vision of Dan. 8:10. This utterance is situated in the *Second* of Four Apocalyptic Visions in latter half of Daniel (Dan. 7:1-28; 8:1-27; 9:1-27; 10:1-12:13).<sup>378</sup> In this Second Vision, the prophet witnesses the rise and fall of four future kingdoms represented by ferocious beasts, who symbolise “the primordial force of chaos”.<sup>379</sup> Having described the ascent and fall of the “male goat” (often taken as symbolic of Alexander the Great) and the division of his empire into four kingdoms,<sup>380</sup> the text continues to record the ascent of a “little horn” from one of

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<sup>376</sup> 1 Enoch: *The Hermeneia Translation*, 57; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 635-636.

<sup>377</sup> Texts such as Is. 14:12 cannot be cited here since, as has already been argued, 8:10-11 and 9:1 do not describe the moral fall of or divine judgement upon an angelic figure. Likewise, Is. 13:10 and Joel 2:10 appear to be effectively irrelevant for this category due to their situation in cosmic catastrophe contexts. There is potentially a hint of Judg. 5:20 in which ‘stars’ fight against Israel’s enemies. However, if there is some semblance of this idea in Rev. 12:4, it is very remote.

<sup>378</sup> Ronald W. Pierce, *Daniel*, Teach the Text Commentary Series, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2015), 134; Ernest C. Lucas, *Daniel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, Vol. 20, (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 208-212; John Goldingay, *Daniel*, Rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 30, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), “VIII: Gabriel Explains Daniel’s Vision of the Breaking of the Greek Empire (8:1-27)”, Perlego; Miller, *Daniel*, 225.

<sup>379</sup> Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 125. This style of characterising human institutions/nations as animals is reiterated throughout Jewish Apocalyptic literature (cf. 1 En. 85-90). For some examples of further discussion, see Jason A. Staples, “‘Rise, Kill, and Eat’: Animals as Nations in Early Jewish Visionary Literature and Acts 10,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42:1 (2019): 3-17; Lydia Gore-Jones, “Animals, Humans, Angels and God: Animal Symbolism in the Historiography of the ‘Animal Apocalypse’ of 1 Enoch,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 24:4 (2015): 268-87; also see Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 122-142.

<sup>380</sup> Pierce, *Daniel*, 136; Lucas, *Daniel*, 214; Goldingay, *Daniel*, “VIII: Gabriel Explains Daniel’s Vision of the Breaking of the Greek Empire (8:1-27)”; Miller, *Revelation*, 227-229.



these kingdoms. The prophet continues, “It grew great, even to the host of heaven. And some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them.” (Dan. 8:10).<sup>381</sup> The “little horn” (קַרְנֹתַיִם מְצֻעֵי יָרֵךְ; LXX κέρας ἐν ἰσχυρὸν) is probably representative of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, the Seleucid ruler who, rising from relative obscurity, is known to have persecuted the Jewish nation with peculiar zeal around 168/7 BC.<sup>382</sup> This attack on Judaism found particular expression in the forced cessation of Temple sacrifices and the profanation of the altar with the offering of swine to Zeus.<sup>383</sup> However, as Tremper Longman notes, “such actions against the formal worship of God’s people was far more than an affront against the people; it was an attack against heaven itself.”<sup>384</sup> Such an understanding is due largely to the idea, common in Second Temple Judaism, the earthly Temple was a ‘shadow’ or ‘copy’ of the one in heaven (cf. *Test. Levi* 5:1-2; Heb. 8:5 etc).<sup>385</sup> Any attack on the physical Temple, therefore, had ramifications for the spiritual. Combine this with the already-established notion of angelic guardians/representatives of covenant communities in Second Temple Judaism and the overthrow of the earthly Temple could rightly be couched in the language of an attack on the ‘stars’. There are several features of this text which make an influence on Rev. 12:4 highly likely. *First*, the text, similarly to Rev. 12:4, describes the attack of a ferocious *beast*, a δράκων μέγας πυρρός (“a great red dragon”). *Second*, this animal attacks the “host/stars of heaven” who appear to be angelic representatives of the

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<sup>381</sup> The OG LXX interestingly translates the קַרְנֹתַיִם מְצֻעֵי יָרֵךְ as a κέρας ἐν ἰσχυρὸν (“one strong horn”). Moreover, it states, contrary to the Hebrew, the “strong horn” was “trodden upon” by the stars. Theodotion’s recension however, whilst maintaining the translation of “one strong horn”, corrects the text to make the “strong horn” the one who tramples the ‘stars’. See *NETS*, 1014; *Septuaginta*, 2:1510-1511.

<sup>382</sup> Pierce, *Daniel*, 136; Lucas, *Daniel*, 214-215; Goldingay, *Daniel*, “VIII: Gabriel Explains Daniel’s Vision of the Breaking of the Greek Empire (8:1-27)”; Miller, *Revelation*, 229-230. It should be noted some Rabbinical scholars such as Rashi took the ‘little horn’ as representative of Titus and the destruction of the Second Temple. Some Christian scholars have since followed suit or even interpreted the ‘little horn’ as symbolic of a future Antichrist figure. See Goldingay, *Daniel*, “VIII: Gabriel Explains Daniel’s Vision of the Breaking of the Greek Empire (8:1-27)”.

<sup>383</sup> Josephus, *A.J.* 10.11.7 §§275-276. Miller, *Daniel*, 230.

<sup>384</sup> Tremper Longman III, *Daniel*, The NIV Application Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), “The Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1-14)”, Perlego.

<sup>385</sup> For further discussion see Gert J. Steyn, “‘On Earth as it is in Heaven ...’ The heavenly sanctuary motif in Hebrews 8:5 and its textual connection with the ‘shadowy copy’ [ὁποδείγματι καὶ σκιᾷ] of LXX Exodus 25:40: original research,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 67:1 (2011): 1-6.

covenant community.<sup>386</sup> *Third*, the aggressive terms employed (וַתִּפֹּל, “it caused them to fall” and וַתִּדְמָס, “it trampled”) are semantically very similar to the violent language utilised in Rev. 12:4.<sup>387</sup> Consequently, it seems the Seer draws heavily on Dan. 8:10 in his description of the Dragon’s actions towards the ‘stars’. This conclusion should be tempered, however, with the observation John appears to be adapting the image for his own purposes.<sup>388</sup>

### ***Non-Canonical Parallels:***

In terms of non-canonical sources, there is a clear parallel to Rev. 8:10-11 and potentially 9:1 in the Sibylline Oracles. In *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161, a passage chiefly concerned with divine judgement on Rome (equated here with Babylon), the text states:

But when after the fourth year a great star shines which alone will destroy the whole earth, because of the honor which they first gave to Poseidon of the sea, a great star will come from heaven to the wondrous sea and will burn the deep sea and Babylon itself and the land of Italy, because of which many holy faithful Hebrews and a true people perished.<sup>389</sup>

Here the parallel to Rev. 8:10-11 is overt. In both texts, an ἀστήρ μέγας (“great star”) descends from heaven as an agent of divine judgement.<sup>390</sup> Aune, however, argues there are two main differences between these texts. *First*, in Rev. 8:10-11 the star *poisons* the waters, in *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 it *destroys* them. *Second*, in Rev. 8:10-11 the “great star” is a physical

<sup>386</sup> Longman, *Daniel*, “The Vision of a Ram and a Goat (8:1-14)”.

<sup>387</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 635. The causative Hif’il verb וַתִּפֹּל (“it caused them to fall”) indicates the ‘little horn’ is active in the stars’ fall. It is difficult to link the LXX of Dan. 8:10 grammatically to Rev. 12:4 since the terms employed in OG (κατεπατήθη) and Theodotion (συνεπάτησεν) differ from one another and from the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, there is a semantic connection with the violent language of “trampling”.

<sup>388</sup> See “‘Falling’ Stars in Revelation” Section below.

<sup>389</sup> Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:397.

<sup>390</sup> For the Greek text of *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 see “Sibylline Oracles”, The Online Critical Pseudepigrapha, (Accessed 08/07/2021), <https://pseudepigrapha.org/docs/text/SibOr>  
In both *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 and Rev. 8:10-11 the ἀστήρ μέγας is never overtly equated with an angelic figure.

element whereas in *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 it is a “saviour figure”.<sup>391</sup> Aune’s second observation is less convincing than his first since the text of *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 does not explicitly identify the ἀστὴρ μέγας as a soteriological figure. Regarding *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 and Rev. 9:1, it is difficult to posit a firm connection, since the Seer is clearly describing the action of an *angelic* figure, unlike the Sibyl. Nevertheless, both texts broadly describe a ‘star’ descending as an agent of divine judgement, though these expressions differ significantly.<sup>392</sup>

In addition to this, there are parallels to Rev. 12:4 in several non-canonical Second Temple texts. Due to space limits not all of these can be considered. Thus, attention will be focused on two texts which have the closest bearing on the Dragon’s attack on the stars. The *first* comes in the Book of Parables (1 En. 37-71), in which Enoch sees “other lightnings and stars of heaven” (1 En. 43:1). Upon asking the angel with him what these are, the angel responds, “these are the names of the holy ones who dwell on the earth and believe in the name of the Lord of Spirits forever and ever.”<sup>393</sup> Here, as Beale observes, there is an overt correspondence between the ‘stars of heaven’ and those ‘who dwell on earth’, similar to Dan. 8:10.<sup>394</sup> The *second* text is 2 Macc. 9:10, which recounts the downfall of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Having described the ignoble and gruesome death of the Seleucid ruler, the text states, “Because of the unbearable oppressiveness of the stench no one was able to carry the man [Antiochus] who a little while before had thought that he could touch the stars of heaven”.<sup>395</sup> One again there is a semantic allusion to Dan. 8:10 in the king’s attempt “to touch” (ἄπτεσθαι) the “stars of heaven”.<sup>396</sup> These allusions to Dan. 8:10 in Second Temple

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<sup>391</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 2:520.

<sup>392</sup> There is another potential parallel for the figure of Rev. 9:1 in 1 En. 20:2 which describes the angel “Uriel...who is in charge of the world and Tartarus.” See *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation*, 40. Aune also notes 4 Ezra 5:9 in which fresh water is transformed to salt water at the eschaton. Aune, *Revelation*, 2:521.

<sup>393</sup> *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation*, 58.

<sup>394</sup> Beale also observes 1 En. 46:7-8 alludes to Dan. 8:10, in which evil earthly kings “judge the stars of heaven”. See Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 636.

<sup>395</sup> *NETS*, 514.

<sup>396</sup> To “touch” someone in this context would appear to suggest harm (cf. 1 Jhn. 5:18).

texts appear to suggest the idea of evil earthly rulers negatively affecting positive spiritual forces by persecuting their earthly communities was present in John's day and consequently could form part of the Apocalypse's literary background. In addition to these texts which connect star/angels with saints on earth, the Second Temple period also bears witness to texts directly likening saints with stars themselves (cf. 1 En. 104:2 "you will shine like the luminaries of heaven"; 4 Macc. 17:5 "star-like...sons"; 2 Bar. 51:10 "they will be deemed equal to the stars"; LAB 33:5 "you will be like the stars of heaven").<sup>397</sup> Unfortunately, due to space limits, these texts cannot be explored other than to say persecuted saints were likened to shining stars in Second Temple Jewish literature.

### ***NT & Early Christian Writings:***

In NT and early Christian literature, there is similar difficulty in finding parallels to Revelation's *fourth* category of astral language. While some scholars might make appeals to 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6, 13 (cf. 1 Pet. 3:19-22) as noted above, these texts cannot be cited in connection with Rev. 8:10-11, 9:1, and 12:4 since none of the texts in Revelation describe the moral fall of angelic beings.<sup>398</sup> There is a possible parallel for Rev. 12:4 in Phil. 2:15 which, in keeping with some Second Temple texts note above (cf. 1 En. 104:2; 4 Macc. 17:5; 2 Bar. 51:10; LAB 33:5), states NT believers "shine as lights" amid the evil of their day. However, it is difficult to cite this as a definitive parallel since Rev. 12:4 appears to be referencing the

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<sup>397</sup> For one translation of 1 En. 104:2 see *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation*, 160; for 4 Macc. 17:5 see *NETS*, 514; for 2 Bar. 51:10 see Michael E. Stone and Matthias Henze, *4 Ezra and 2 Baruch: Translations, Introductions, and Notes*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 117; for LAB 33:5 see Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:348.

<sup>398</sup> Furthermore, it is questionable whether some of these texts, such as Jude 13, even have an angelic focus. Context, in some cases (Jude 10), would suggest human referents. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude*, 71-75; Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 467-468.

angelic representatives of earthly persecuted communities rather than directly referring to the communities themselves.

### ***‘Falling’ Stars in Revelation:***

In John’s Apocalypse, there are *four* references to ‘falling’ stars (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4).<sup>399</sup> The *first two* come in Rev. 8:10-11 during the Third Trumpet. Once the angel blows his trumpet, the Seer records seeing an ἀστήρ μέγας (“great star”) which fell (ἔπεσεν) from heaven. This term is also utilised in *Sib. Or.* 5:155-161 of an ἀστήρ μέγας which in that context is an agent of divine judgement against Rome (equated with Babylon). This ἀστήρ μέγας is described as καίόμενος ὡς λαμπάς (“burning like a torch”). Beale argues in the first two Trumpets, ‘fire’ is a symbol for famine.<sup>400</sup> On this basis, he argues this could be the meaning behind the description here.<sup>401</sup> However, the Seer simply might have had in mind the natural phenomenon of a meteorite, burning in the night sky.<sup>402</sup> Regardless, the falling star is certainly a natural agent of judgement and symbol of divine visitation.<sup>403</sup> The result of the star’s descent is that it falls upon one third of the “rivers” (τῶν ποταμῶν) and “springs of water” (τὰς πηγὰς τῶν ὑδάτων).<sup>404</sup> Here Smalley argues final judgement is delayed for repentance since only a “third” of the waters are affected.<sup>405</sup> The waters described are iterative of inland sources of water, upon which human populations would be

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<sup>399</sup> As has been stated already, there is overlap here with other categories of astral references.

<sup>400</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 473-475.

<sup>401</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 478.

<sup>402</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 221; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 180; Koester notes in the Greco-Roman world meteorites and comets were sometimes referred to as “torches” and even “tokens of impending doom”. Moreover, he cites Artemidorus who describes how stars falling prophesy the death of many men, the greater the star the greater the calamity. For specific Greco-Roman sources see Koester, *Revelation*, 449; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:520.

<sup>403</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 180.

<sup>404</sup> The preposition ἐπὶ occurs twice here and most likely signifies each named source of water received the same proportion of embittering. Fanning, *Revelation*, 286.

<sup>405</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222; Similarly, Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 181.

dependent.<sup>406</sup> The picture of contaminated waters continues the allusions to the Exodus Plagues, with the bloodening of the Nile (Ex. 7:14-25) particularly in view.<sup>407</sup> This star is named Wormwood (ὁ Ἄψινθος), a bitter-tasting plant traditionally utilised to kill intestinal worms.<sup>408</sup> Once Wormwood falls on the waters, turns them to “wormwood” (ἄψινθον) resulting in the death of many people. Scholars appear to differ slightly over whether water, embittered by Wormwood, kills the people or whether its connection to sorrow and judgement makes it a natural symbol for death.<sup>409</sup> While the thematic connection to sadness is certainly in view here, the genitive phrase ἐκ τῶν ὑδάτων (“from the water”) appears to carry a causative sense.<sup>410</sup> Thus, in 8:10-11 the embittering of the waters has real fatal consequences.

The next reference is found during the Fifth Trumpet of Rev. 9:1. Here the Seer sees a “star” (ἀστήρ) that had just fallen from heaven.<sup>411</sup> That this “star” is a personal, and probably angelic, figure is clear from the statement “he (αὐτοῦ, Masc. Sg.) was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit”.<sup>412</sup> However, as noted above, it is less clear whether the verb

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<sup>406</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 221; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Koester, *Revelation*, 450. These water sources may even possess demonic connotations since pagan cultures often associated springs and rivers with supernatural spirits. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 180-181.

<sup>407</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 221; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 180. Some even see an allusion to waters of Marah (Ex. 15:23). Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222-223; Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 2595; Keener, *Revelation*, 257; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 181.

<sup>408</sup> BDAG, 161. The star is named for its effect on the world rather than being a proper name. For a detailed discussion of “Wormwood” see Aune, *Revelation*, 2:521-522; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 222; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 181.

<sup>409</sup> Beale states waters embittered by wormwood can cause death if consumed over extended periods. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 479; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286. Koester, however, argues its lethality lies in the biblical comparison of the herb to poison (cf. Jer. 9:15; 23:15). Koester, *Revelation*, 450; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:522. Mounce also notes a link to “sorrow” in the OT (cf. Prov. 5:3-4; Lam. 3:19). Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 181; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Osborne, *Revelation*, 355; Keener, *Revelation*, 258.

<sup>410</sup> BDAG, 297; Fanning, *Revelation*, 286; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 480.

<sup>411</sup> The participle πεπτωκότα (“fallen”) is perfect, indicating John did not see the “star” fall but witnesses the aftereffects of its fall. Osborne, *Revelation*, 362; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 225-226; Fanning, *Revelation*, 294, 307.

<sup>412</sup> This is also probably an angelic figure due to the already established association between “star” and “angels” in the Apocalypse and other Second Temple Jewish literature. See “Chapter 1 – Angelic Associations”. Elsewhere in the Apocalypse “keys” are a symbol of divine authority (cf. Rev. 1:18; 3:7; 20:1-3). Moreover, the occurrence of the passive ἐδόθη (“he was given”), utilised frequently in the Apocalypse (cf. 6:2, 4, 8; 7:2; 8:2, 3), most likely indicates divine initiative. See Osborne, *Revelation*, p.362.

πεπτωκότα describes divine judgement upon the star, moral failure by the angel, or simply descent to earth.<sup>413</sup> Nevertheless, Fanning is noteworthy when he states to portray the angelic figure as a star fallen from heaven to earth “underscores the cosmic significance of his earthly mission.”<sup>414</sup> The result of the giving of the key is that the “star” opens the shaft of the bottomless pit and powerful scorpion-like locusts ascend from it to torment the world of the ungodly.<sup>415</sup> Because of this, some scholars, such as Beale, have interpreted the “star” as a demonic figure, Satan, or even the king of the locusts mentioned in 9:11.<sup>416</sup> However, as noted above, this is a problematic conclusion. It is more likely, given the text does not comment on the star’s *nature*, the Seer is referring to a neutral figure, one of many spiritual beings/angelic figures enacting the divine will.<sup>417</sup>

The *final* reference in this category comes in 12:4. Having described the appearance and birth pangs of the radiant Woman, the Seer’s eye moves to see the second sign: a Great Dragon (12:3).<sup>418</sup> This Dragon is described as having “seven heads and ten horns, and on his heads seven diadems”.<sup>419</sup> There is some debate over whether this σημεῖον (“sign”) describes the afflictions of an end-times Antichrist figure or the persecutions of saints preceding and

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<sup>413</sup> See discussion in “Discerning ‘Falling’ Star Identity”.

<sup>414</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 294.

<sup>415</sup> Smalley and Aune note the double use of the definite article (“τοῦ φρέατος τῆς ἄβυσσος”) indicates the concept was well known to the Seer’s audience. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 226; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:525. For further discussion of ἄβυσσος see Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 226; Fanning, *Revelation*, 295; Koester, *Revelation*, 456-457; Osborne, *Revelation*, 363; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 493; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:525-526.

<sup>416</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491; Barr, *Tales of the End*, Loc. 2906; Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 2631; Thomas, *Revelation*, 2:1360; Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 134-135; Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh*, 311-312; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 114. Similarly, Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 140; Barr, *Tales of the End*, Loc. 2907; Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 158-159; Barnhouse, *Revelation*, 168.

<sup>417</sup> Scholars who also hold this position or similar include Fanning, *Revelation*, 294; Paul, *Revelation*, 175; Koester, *Revelation*, 455; Osborne, *Revelation*, 362; Keener, *Revelation*, 266; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:525; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 185.

<sup>418</sup> For further discussion on the literary background and identity of the Dragon see Koester, *Revelation*, 544-545; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 316-317; Osborne, *Revelation*, 458-460; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:682-683.

<sup>419</sup> For further discussion of these descriptors see Koester, *Revelation*, 545; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 317-318; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:683-685; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 233.

encompassing the Christ Event.<sup>420</sup> Regardless, he is certainly the archenemy of God’s people, intent upon destroying them.<sup>421</sup> This Satanic figure sweeps down a third of the stars of heaven with his tail and casts them to earth (12:4).<sup>422</sup> The noun οὐρά (“tail”) is utilised in the LXX of Job in God’s descriptions of the powerful beasts Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40:17, 31), upon whom the descriptions of the δράκων μέγας might be drawn.<sup>423</sup> Moreover, “tails” elsewhere in Revelation are always powerful and dangerous (Rev. 9:10, 19).<sup>424</sup> As noted above, the verbs σύρει (“he dragged/swept down”) and ἔβαλεν (“he threw/cast”) indicate the Dragon is taking violent action against these “stars”.<sup>425</sup> This violent language, as seen above, clearly echoes Dan. 8:10, with its description of the “little horn” who threw some of the “stars of heaven” to the ground and trampled on them.<sup>426</sup> In this context, the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes of the earthly saints and their Temple had a negative impact on the spiritual realm even reaching the angelic guardians/patrons of Israel. Consequently, in Rev. 12:4, it appears the Seer is utilising similar language to refer to “star/angels” who are the guardians/patrons of the earthly saints (cf. Rev. 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1).<sup>427</sup> Although, as noted previously, John is adapting the image here for his own purposes.

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<sup>420</sup> For the former see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 635. For the latter see Wright, *Revelation for Everyone*, 108.

<sup>421</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 350; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232-233.

<sup>422</sup> That the Dragon sweeps down a *third* of the stars corresponds to the third-part destruction of various cosmic elements (cf. Rev. 8:7-9:19). Here it simply indicates a large number. See Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:685; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 233.

<sup>423</sup> *Septuaginta*, 2:500-501, Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 232.

<sup>424</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318.

<sup>425</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 460.

<sup>426</sup> Fanning, *Revelation*, 350; Paul, *Revelation*, 217; Koester, *Revelation*, 545; Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, Loc. 3203; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318; Osborne, *Revelation*, 460-461; Aune, *Revelation*, 2:685; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 233.

<sup>427</sup> Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 318. Similarly Fanning, *Revelation*, 350.



## ***Conclusion:***

Despite the lack of literary parallels for Revelation's *final* category of astral language, there are several conclusions which can be reached. *First*, the three astral references in 8:10-11 and 9:1 are broadly descriptive of agents of divine judgement. The first two references (8:10-11) describe a divinely initiated natural disaster upon the world of the wicked. The reference in 9:1, however, in line with usage seen in Chapter 1, describes a star/angel who descends dramatically to earth to carry out the divine will. In this usage, comment is not made regarding the moral character of this spiritual being. Rather, the Seer describes a neutral figure. *Secondly*, the final reference in Rev. 12:4, in conjunction with the usage seen in Chapter 1, details an attack upon the angelic guardians of persecuted saints who suffer with their earthly communities as the Dragon/Satan assaults. *Finally*, none of these references refer to an antediluvian corruption of angelic beings and their influence upon the world of men. This should be balanced, however, with the observation that such an idea was certainly present in Second Temple Judaism.

## Conclusions:

The *purpose* of this discussion was to investigate John's use of 'star' language in the book of Revelation, with consideration given to the identity, literary background, and function of 'stars' within their context. To accomplish this, the discussion *aimed* at 1) delineating the various ways John employs 'star' language, 2) establishing the literary background for the imagery, and 3) determining how each 'star' reference should be interpreted within its specific context. The *rationale* for this examination initially resulted from the observation that, out of the entire corpus of NT writings, the greater preponderance of references to 'stars' are found in Revelation (14/24 uses). However, as wider Jewish/Christian literature was surveyed, it was also discovered similar language exists in OT, Second Temple, and early Christian texts which has import for how such language should be understood in John's Apocalypse. Additionally, it was found there have been seemingly no investigations of similar nature. Thus, a detailed examination was required. As the investigation progressed, it became clear there are *four* categories of astral language in the Apocalypse which adapt various literary and theological traditions.

The *first* category comprises those references to 'stars' in which astral bodies symbolise the guardian angels of ecclesiastical communities. These references are found in Rev. 1-3 (1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1). It was concluded this category functions on several levels. *First*, the symbol of seven star/angels primarily adapts a Second Temple tradition concerning guardian angels. Revelation's adaptation is original, however, in that the star/angels are presented as the guardians of congregations, rather than individuals or nations. This serves to heighten the importance and urgency of Jesus' addresses to the Churches. *Second*, the picture assures the church her destiny rests securely in Jesus' hands. *Finally*, the image potentially offers a polemic against Roman imperialistic claims to sovereignty.

The *second* category comprises those references to the difficult expression: the “morning star”. Despite the lack of source material and insufficiency of existing interpretations to account for the references comprehensively, several conclusions were reached. *First*, the ‘morning star’ motif clearly adapts and employs traditional messianic language of the Second Temple period. *Second*, the ‘morning’ aspect of this ‘star’ connects this symbol to the concept of new creation, a key motif in the Apocalypse. *Third*, the identification of the ‘morning star’ with Jesus (22:16) places Jesus at the centre of the new creation. *Finally*, the promise of the ‘morning star’ to the believer (2:28) provides hope the faithful believer is on the cusp of God’s new world, thus incentivising perseverance.

The *third* category of astral references adapts a literary formula utilised broadly in Jewish writings of creation’s most essential element: ‘light’. Whilst much of this language, as it relates to the concept of cosmic catastrophe, has been extensively discussed, several conclusions were reached. *First*, the SMS formulae of Revelation (6:13; 8:12; 12:1) are not utilised homogenously, though they do tend to be stricter in form and appearance than elsewhere in Jewish/Christian literature. *Second*, the Apocalypse’s SMS formulae are broadly descriptive of those observable sources of light in the day and night skies. *Third*, those references which describe the darkening of these luminaries (Rev. 6:13; 8:12) add terrifying rhetorical impact to the depictions of divine judgement. *Finally*, Revelation’s final SMS formula (Rev. 12:1) does not appear to have any direct parallel in earlier Jewish/Christian literature, an observation that may infer this use is original to the Apocalypse.

Revelation’s *final* category describes stars “falling” from heaven. Despite a lack of literary parallels, several conclusions were reached concerning these descriptions. *First*, the first three astral references (8:10-11; 9:1) are broadly descriptive of agents of divine judgement. *Secondly*, the final reference (12:4), adapting imagery from Dan. 8:10, describes an attack upon the saints and their respective angelic representatives. *Finally*, none of these

references refer to an antediluvian corruption of angelic beings and their influence upon the world of men, though this idea was certainly present in John's time.

Whilst any thesis exploring the symbolism of Revelation inevitably encounters a wealth of literature, there are *three* principal ways in which this examination contributes towards on-going discussions of the Apocalypse. *First*, this examination has demonstrated Revelation's astral references can be helpfully grouped into *four* categories based on shared linguistic features and literary backgrounds. As stated previously, there is overlap between these categories and they are not intended to be taken in strictly rigid fashion. Moreover, it is recognised the references could be grouped in varying and equally valid ways.<sup>428</sup> Nevertheless, it has been reasonably demonstrated the references can be grouped in these *four* ways. *Second*, this classification highlights the unique literary features of each group and serves to give a clearer sense of how John employs 'star' language throughout his work. The examination of each category of 'star' language against its respective literary background reveals the Seer is adapting various literary and theological traditions to produce evocative images which add rhetorical force to his message.<sup>429</sup> *Third*, this investigation has emphasised the importance of the 'apocalyptic' tradition for the interpretation of Revelation's astral language, challenging previous interpretive attempts which have overlooked this literary phenomenon. Revelation's 'apocalyptic' worldview may even form the reason why most NT 'star' references occur in the work. An increased number of references to celestial bodies such as 'stars' would only be natural in a literary tradition in which heavenly visions comprise a primary mode by which 'apocalyptic' authors communicate their messages.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> For example, the description of a 'star/angel' in 9:1 could just as easily be linked with the earlier symbols in 1:16, 20; 2:1; 3:1. Likewise, the depictions of "falling" stars (8:10-11; 9:1; 12:4) could be grouped with 6:13; 8:12.

<sup>429</sup> This should be relatively unsurprising since 'apocalyptic' works often employ evocative imagery to emphasise their messages.

<sup>430</sup> For further discussion, see Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 3-14; Helyer, *Exploring the Jewish Literature of the Second Temple Period*, 117-119; Rowland, *The Open Heaven*, 7-72.

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