

Revelation 19.16's Inscribed Thigh: An Allusion to Gen 49.10b*

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The inscribed thigh of the rider on the white horse in Rev 19.16 is an allusion to an MT – like Gen 49.10b text. The phrase ‘inscribed on his thigh’ was a legitimate translation of the words found in Gen 49.10b at the time of the composition of Revelation.

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Revelation 19.11–16 presents John's vision of the rider on the white horse, an image of Christ coming in judgement, whose attributes are a compilation of several OT texts.¹ Of these attributes, the source of one detail has remained

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¹ Nearly all the elements of the description of the rider have been traced back to the Old Testament (Greek or Hebrew) or to previous passages within Revelation itself. For example, in Rev 19.11: Ezek 1.1 (see A. Vanhoye, ‘L'utilisation du livre d'Ézéchiël dans l'Apocalypse’, *Bib* 43 (1962) 450), Jer 42.5 MT/49.5 LXX (see W. H. Brownlee, ‘Messianic Motifs of Qumran and the New Testament’, *NTS* 3 (1956–57) 195–210), Isa 11.4 (see R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) 323; H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Übersetzt und erklärt* (Regensburger Neues Testament; Regensburg: Pustet, 1997) 421) and Zech 9.9 (see J. Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Zürcher Bibelkommentare NT 18; Zürich: Theologischer, 1984) 185); in Rev 19.12: Dan 7.9, 10.6 (see H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1911) 16–17), Rev 12.3, 13.1 (see G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1966] 241–2), Isa 62.2, 65.15b (see J. Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and Their Development* (JSNTSS 93; Sheffield: JSOT, 1994) 128); in Rev 19.13: Isa 63.1–6 (see Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 197. E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 6; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1953) 159; Caird, *Revelation of St. John*, 242), Rev 1.2, 9; 6.9; 20.4 (cf. D. Boyarin, ‘The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John’, *HTR* 94/3 (2001) 243–84); in Rev 19.15: Isa 11.4, 49.2 (see Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 121), Psa 2.9 (see B. Witherington III, *Revelation* (New Cambridge

more enigmatic: the 'inscribed thigh' in Rev 19.16 has no known precursor in the Hebrew or Greek Old Testament. As Beasley-Murray notes: '[T]hat Christ's name is inscribed on his robe and on his thigh has provided commentators with an exegetical puzzle.'² He suggests that the inscribed name 'was not unknown in ancient society' and relates it to statuary. This argument is taken up by Lupieri (among others), who suggests that 'the writing of a name on a robe or thigh evokes Hellenistic statuary' and that John has 'decided to pattern his Logos after statues of the gods' or perhaps after 'paleo-Christian portraiture'.³ But, as Prigent notes, '[O]ur rider is nothing like a statue!'⁴ The armies of heaven follow him, he *treads* the winepress of the wrath of the almighty God, and the rider's eyes *flame* fire. This is a living picture and it makes little sense for John to have patterned the image of the white horse rider on statuary.

Beale and McDonough offer a solution from the Old Testament. They note that, in the OT, the thigh was 'the symbolic place under which the hand was placed to swear oaths . . . [which signifies in Rev 19 the] fulfillment of God's promise to judge'.⁵ While their interpretation of 'inscribed on his thigh' fits the context of judgement, Rev 19 contains no oath-taking, the key element of the hand-under-thigh ceremony.

Charles notes that Wellhausen, 'recognizing the unintelligibility of the text, proposed ἵππον [horse] instead of ἱμάτιον [robe] and makes the αὐτοῦ [his] refer

Bible Commentary; Cambridge University Press, 2003) 244; Bauckham, *Climax*, 323), Isa 63.1–6 (see Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 197; E. Lohmeyer, *Offenbarung*, 159; Caird, *Revelation of St. John*, 242); in Rev 19.16: Dan 4.37 (LXX) (see G. K. Beale, 'The Origin of the Title "King of Kings and Lord of Lords" in Revelation 17.14', *NTS* 31 (1985) 618. By 'LXX' it appears Beale meant OG Daniel 4.34. Cf. J. Ziegler, *Susanna, Daniel, Bel Et Draco* xvi, 2 (Vetus Testamentum Graecum; Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis Editum 294; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999)).

2 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (New Century Bible; London: Oliphants, 1974) 281.

3 E. F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) 306–7. See also T. Holtz, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Übersetzt und erklärt* (Das Neue Testament Deutsch; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 126. Aune details: 'There are examples in Greco-Roman literature of inscriptions on the thighs of statues. Pausanias (5.27.12) refers to an elegiac couplet written on the thigh of a statue . . . For two other examples of inscriptions on the thighs of statues, see Cicero *Verrine Orations* 4.43 and Justin 15.4.5, 9' (D. E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Word Biblical Commentary 52C; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 1062). Further agreeing with Aune, see D. A. Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context* (Studies in Biblical Literature 118; New York: Peter Lang, 2008) 140.

4 "Mais notre cavalier n'a rien d'une statue!" (P. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (Commentaire du Nouveau Testament 14; Genève: Labor et Fides, 2000) 422).

5 G. K. Beale and S. M. McDonough, 'Revelation', in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 1144.

to the ἵππον [horse].⁶ In other words, the horse is tattooed, not the rider. As this solution only serves to shift the problem of the inscribed name and as there is no textual evidence for this proposal, I agree with Charles that ‘the idea of such an inscription on a horse cannot be entertained’.⁷

From this brief survey,⁸ the multitude of explanations for the phrase ‘inscribed on his thigh’ testifies to the enigma it has presented in the history of the interpretation of the rider. No suggestion has gained a consensus. Considering the compositional make-up of the rest of the pericope (see n. 1 above), it would not be unlikely that this phrase too stems from the OT. Here, I will argue that John⁹ derived the phrase ‘inscribed on his thigh’ in Rev 19.16 from Jacob’s blessing on Judah in Gen 49.10.

Gen 49.10 in the MT can be divided into four poetic lines:

‘a’ לא יסור שבט מיהודה	The scepter will not depart from Judah
‘b’ ומחקה מבין רגליו	Nor the commander’s staff from between his feet
‘c’ עד כי יבא שילה	Until Shiloh comes
‘d’ ולו יקהת עמים	And the obedience of the nations will be to him.

In my argument, ‘b’ , ומחקה מבין רגליו is my primary concern. Often this MT phrase is translated as ‘nor the commander’s [ruler’s, legislator’s] staff from between his feet’ (e.g. Skinner, Sarna, Speiser).¹⁰ The word מחקה is a denominative from חק

6 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* (International Critical Commentary 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920) 137.

7 Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, 137.

8 Beasley-Murray cites a few other options: ‘Attempts have been made to show . . . that the name was not on the thigh but on the place where the robe covers the thigh (Swete), or on a sword which normally is worn on the thigh (Grotius), or that the thigh stands for the sword (Caird) . . .’ (Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 281). Barker, positing that the book of Revelation was originally written in Aramaic, suggests that this passage originally contained the Aramaic word for ‘banner’ – דגל instead of thigh. Owing to the similarity between the dalet and ‘the resh’, upon translation דגל ‘banner’ was read as רגל ‘leg or foot’. Barker further explains that ‘the original [Aramaic version] probably described an embroidered robe and a standard with the motto King of Kings and Lord of Lords . . .’ (M. Barker, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Which God Gave to Him to Show to His Servants What Must Soon Take Place: Revelation 1.1* (London: T & T Clark, 2000) 306. Roloff suggests: ‘Möglicherweise steht Jes. 11,5 im Hintergrund [of the inscribed thigh], wo es vom Messias heißt: “Gerechtigkeit wird der Gürtel seiner Lenden und Treue der Gurt seiner Hüften sein”’ (Roloff, *Die Offenbarung*, 186). Smalley claims three of the above options all at once (statue, thigh-sword and thigh-oath) (S. S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005) 495).

9 By ‘John’ I am making no claim to authorship. I am simply using the name as shorthand for ‘author(s)’ of Revelation.

10 J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956) 518; N. M. Sarna, *Genesis בראשית: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary;

'statute, ordinance' construed as a participle: 'one who keeps statutes' – a type of commander – or, with the LXX, a ἡγούμενος 'leader'. The translation 'commander's staff' may also be legitimate, if מהקק is understood as a synonym for שבט (v. 10a).¹¹ But, by the time of John's writing, מהקק could have been read in another way. We see in later literature of the OT that הקק was also a verb in its own right, meaning 'to cut in, inscribe, decree'.¹² We also find הקק with this meaning in later rabbinic literature; Genesis Rabbah 68.12 says: את הוא שאיפיתגין שלך הקוקה: למעלה 'It is thou, whose features are engraved on high'.¹³ It is thus plausible that John, writing between the composition of the OT and rabbinic literature, chose to interpret the participle מהקק with the meaning 'inscribe' for his own literary purposes.

In the OT, where the MT has הקק and the LXX translators understood the word to mean 'inscribe', the translator usually used a form of γράφω (which also means 'to write, inscribe'). For example, in Isa 10.1 the LXX has οὐαὶ τοῖς γράφουσιν πονηρίαν 'Woe to the ones writing iniquity'.¹⁴ In Rev 19.16 we find γεγραμμένον, a perfect middle participle from the root γράφω. Thus, because γράφω is a legitimate translation of הקק, it is plausible that John was reading from an MT-like text.

The MT of Gen 49.10b also contains the noun plus pronoun רגליו 'his feet'. In the MT, while רגל normally refers to a foot, it can also occasionally be used to indicate a leg. 1 Samuel 17.6 is a clear example of רגל referring to a leg: ומצחת נחשת על-רגליו וכידון נחשת בין כתפיו 'He had bronze greaves on his legs, and a bronze javelin from his shoulders.' There are other cases where the referent of רגל, though ambiguous, could also be leg. In Num 22.25 the donkey scrapes Balaam's רגל against the wall; it seems likely that here too רגל should be understood as 'leg'. Mephibosheth's accident which caused him to be lame could as easily be in his legs as in his feet (see 2 Sam 4.4, 2 Sam 9.3, 13). It seems likely that John read רגל in this sense. Most importantly, Gen 49.10 LXX is one of two verses in the Greek Bible that translates רגל as μηρός (see also Deut 28.57): καὶ ἡγούμενος ἐκ τῶν μηρῶν αὐτοῦ (cf. (ומהקק מבין רגליו). This suggests that μηρός

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 336; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1964) 362, 365.

11 Grossfeld notes that 'the Targumim understood מהקק in the same sense as it is understood in Dt. 33.21, where all of them render this word by the term ספרא. Since מהקק is linguistically related to הק "statute", "law", they interpret it as "Lawgiver" or "instructor in the Law", i.e., "teacher"' (B. Grossfeld, *Targum Neofiti 1: An Exegetical Commentary to Genesis: Including Full Rabbinic Parallels* (ed. L. H. Schiffman; New York: Sepher-Hermon, 2000) 297.

12 See for example Ezek 4.1, Prov 8.29.

13 Translation by H. Freedman and M. Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices: Volume 1, Genesis* (New York: Soncino, 1977) 626. Italics mine.

14 See also Isa 22.16, 49.16; Ezek 4.1, 23.14; and Prov 8.15 for similar translations of הקק.

‘thigh/leg’ is a legitimate translation of רגל and it is entirely plausible that John translated רגל with μηρός, the noun we find in Rev 19.16.

From this evidence, it would appear that John was reading a text similar to the MT. The translation ‘inscribed on his thigh’ is a legitimate translation of the consonants we find represented in the MT.¹⁵ The LXX also offers a legitimate Greek equivalent of what we see in the MT, but its translators made alternative translation choices. Thus, as mentioned before, since the rest of the image of the rider is derived from pertinent portions of the OT, it is fitting that this phrase originates in Gen 49.10.

Significantly, 19.16 is not the first allusion to Gen 49.8–12 within the book of Revelation. Bauckham observed that Gen 49.8–12, along with Ps 2.9, Isa 11.4,10 and Num 24.17, all contain the word שבט. All are paired in different combinations throughout Revelation because of their mutual use of שבט. For example, Rev 2.26–8 alludes to Psa 2.9 and Num 24.17. Revelation 5.5 alludes to Gen 49.9–10 and Isa 11.10.¹⁶ Revelation 19 employs two of the four verses: Psa 2.9 and Isa 11.10.¹⁷ Because John uses Gen 49.8–12 elsewhere in conjunction with these verses, it is not surprising that he is referencing it again here. Beyond this pattern noted by

15 The opinions as to which text type(s) John used vary greatly and only recently has this question started to be fully explored. In the past, Parker and Swete argued that John used the LXX (H. Parker, ‘The Scripture of the Author of the Revelation of John’, *Illiff Review* 37/1 (1980) 35–51; Swete, *Apocalypse*, clv). Charles and Fekkes (more recently followed by Witherington) believe Revelation’s OT allusions stemmed from a Hebrew text (Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, lxxviii; Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 17; Witherington III, *Revelation*, 11), but recent research has realised that the question of text types used by the author of Revelation is much more complex. As Witetschek argued, ‘Johannes besaß wohl keine Textausgabe des Alten Testaments im heutigen Sinn, sondern die einzelnen alttestamentlichen Schriften jeweils auf eigenen Schriftrollen. Wenn seine Verwendung der Psalmen eine griechische Vorlage vermuten lässt, dann ist es durchaus vorstellbar, dass Johannes z.B. eine hebräische Ezechiel-Rolle und eine griechische Psalmen-Rolle zur Verfügung hatte’ (S. Witetschek, ‘Der Lieblingspsalm des Sehers: Die Verwendung von Ps 2 in der Johannesapokalypse’, in *Septuagint and Messianism* (ed. M. A. Knibb; Leuven: Leuven University, 2006) 490). Beale also argues that ‘[t]he likelihood is that John draws from both Semitic and Greek biblical sources . . .’ (G. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSS 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 62). Karrer researched this question with regard to the reception of Ezekiel in Revelation and concluded: ‘Der Apk-Autor kannte das Ezechielbuch auf griechisch und mutmaßlich zusätzlich hebräisch’ (M. Karrer, ‘Von der Apokalypse zu Ezechiel: Der Ezechieltext der Apokalypse’, in *Das Ezechielbuch in der Johannesoffenbarung: Mit Beiträgen von Michael Bachmann, Beate Ego, Thomas Hieke und Martin Karrer* (ed. D. Sängler; Biblisch-Theologische Studien 76; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004) 84–120, quotation from 118). If Karrer’s suggestion is correct, although it tells us nothing about which text type of Genesis John was using, it does affirm that the question of text type is complicated, and that John at least had the capability to read a Hebrew text.

16 Bauckham, *Climax*, 32–4.

17 See n. 1 above.

Bauckham, NA28 further lists Rev 7.14 as containing an allusion deriving from Gen 49.8–12.

Above, I have demonstrated the phrase 'inscribed on his thigh' was a legitimate translation of the consonantal Gen 49.10b MT. In light of John's overall compositional style in this pericope, as well as the use of Gen 49.8–12 elsewhere in the book of Revelation, it is very likely that the source of the phrase 'inscribed on his thigh' was an MT-like text of Gen 49.10b.