

## How Relevant is Exegesis for Translation?

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### 1.0 Introduction

A Relevance-Theoretic approach to translation asserts that translation is communication and therefore that the criteria for effective communication, principally the requirement of relevance, are also the criteria for effective translation.<sup>1</sup> Equally, problems of translation are precisely problems of interpretation, either intra-lingual or, more often, inter-lingual. Unfortunately the debate as to how this converts into a methodology for the translation of the Bible has up to this point generated more heat than light.<sup>2</sup> Yet the RT stance is not only a logical development of the priority accorded to the maxim of relevance by linguistic pragmatists in general, but is also fundamentally consistent with other helpful approaches to translation (such as frame theory) being advanced in UBS circles.<sup>3</sup> This being the case, relevance must be seen as an essential criterion in the processes of exegesis and interpretation (both intra- and inter-lingual). In this paper I aim to avoid engaging in translation-theory debates and instead provide some practical examples of the usefulness of the criterion of relevance to some selected translation problems in the book of Revelation. A degree of theoretical background is, however, a necessary starting point.

Every act of translation begins with an act of understanding the text to be translated. But every act of understanding involves a process of interpretation. As a pragmatic theory with a strong focus on the context of communication, RT supports modern literary theory in dissolving (or at least blurring) the old dichotomy between exegesis and hermeneutics. But at the same time RT is not afraid to accord priority and privilege to the original communication situation and thus to validate historical-critical research in order to describe the cognitive environment of the first author and audience.<sup>4</sup> And yet every translator is faced with the problem of deciding just which insights into the grammar of the text, its intertextual connections or the situational context, from the enormous number on offer in the exegetical commentaries, are necessary to understand the meaning of a text, especially such elements of meaning which will influence the translation. We have all had the experience of returning to the text from our reading of a commentary, none the wiser or perhaps even more confused by the mass of information

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<sup>1</sup> See E.-A. Gutt, *Translation and Relevance: Cognition and Context* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991); E.-A. Gutt, *Relevance Theory: A Guide to Successful Communication in Translation* (Dallas: SIL, 1992); and the recent summary and evaluation in K. Smith, "Translation Theory as Secondary Communication. The Relevance Theory Perspective of Ernst-August Gutt" in J.A. Naudé and C.H.J. van der Merwe (eds.), *Contemporary Translation Studies and Bible Translation: A South African Perspective* (Acta Theologica 2000 Supplementum 2, Bloemfontain: University of the Free State, 2002), pp. 107-117. Also E.M. Almazán García, "Dwelling in Marble Halls: A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to Intertextuality in Translation", *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses* 14 (2001), pp. 7-19.

<sup>2</sup> The criticism of Gutt in, for example, E. Wendland, "On the Relevance of "Relevance Theory" for Bible Translation", *BT* 47 (1996), pp. 126-37, is a gentlemanly and honourable duel by comparison with some of the guerilla warfare that has taken place within SIL internet discussion lists!

<sup>3</sup> See T. Wilt, "Translation and Communication" in T. Wilt (ed.), *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2003), p. 44, n. 21: "I view our work as complementing, rather than competing against, Gutt's and that of others who are exploring applications of relevance theory to translation." More surprising is the total lack of any reference to RT in L.R. Ross, "Advances in Linguistic Theory and their Relevance to Translation" in Wilt (ed.), *Bible Translation*, pp. 113-151.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief relevance-based critique of one literary theorist see S.W. Pattemore, "Is There a Fish in This Cognitive Environment? Relevance Theory Looks at Stanley Fish's Iconic Anecdotes", Unpublished paper 2002 – available on request.

which has been put before us, complaining that much of this information is “irrelevant” to our work of translation. And it is just here that RT makes its first important contribution to the process. The search for optimal relevance can often cut like a scalpel through the tissue and sinews of exegetical facts and background and help us select more precisely what is necessary to the first audience’s optimally relevant interpretation. Biblical scholarship has for some time derived considerable benefit from Speech Act Theory and is slowly beginning to take account of RT and evaluate its importance for the understanding of biblical texts.<sup>5</sup> It would be ironic if Bible translation, a field which pioneered the introduction of RT to the study of the scriptures, was to ignore the importance of its insights because of the controversies that have arisen. In fact the relevance of relevance to “exegesis for translation” is if anything greater than for biblical studies in general, because it helps us determine which of the non-encoded assumptions (ie implicatures) are necessary to the act of communication.<sup>6</sup> The bulk of this paper consists of an examination of some problems in translation from the book of Revelation, using optimal relevance as a criterion for determining what needs to be communicated in translation. In the process we will see examples of just how relevant or irrelevant exegesis can be for translation.

But RT has a further contribution to make, on the other side of the “broad, deep, swift river.”<sup>7</sup> How can the explicatures and implicatures of the text be communicated in the target language? How can the translated text perform the same speech acts for the new readers and lead them to the appropriate semantic, rhetorical and motivational conclusions? Just here, of course, is where some of the most intense debate is centred, in the disagreements over the meaning and implications of “indirect” or “direct” translation. This paper will skirt these issues, but will nevertheless seek to make some comments on the implications for translation of the conclusions reached by a relevance-sensitive exegesis of the text.

## 2.0 Slaughtered Souls Under the Altar (Rev. 6:9)

### 2.1 The issues

The vision of the fifth seal, the first time a depiction of the people of God is actually seen by John, can be shown on relevance grounds to have special importance for the entire structure and direction of book.<sup>8</sup> Here, however, we will restrict our attention to a few issues of exegesis which have a direct impact on translation. These are, briefly, the significance of the anaphoric definite article used for an object which has not already been met, the identity of the altar, the nature of the “souls”, the

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<sup>5</sup> See especially T. Meadowcroft, “Relevance as a Mediating Category in the Reading of Biblical Texts: Venturing Beyond the Hermeneutical Circle”, *JETS* 45 (2002), pp. 611-27, who find relevance a useful category through which to hold together interests in the text (and the intentions of the author) and its readers. RT also features in several contributions to C. Bartholomew, C. Greene and K. Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language & Biblical Interpretation* (Scripture & Hermeneutics, 2; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), notably K. Vanhoozer, “From Speech Acts to Scripture Acts: The Covenant of Discourse and the Discourse of the Covenant”, pp. 1-49, and R.C. Van Leewen, “On Bible Translation and Hermeneutics”, pp. 284-311. Note also that two entire sessions of the up-coming SBL International Meetings in Cambridge, England, are dedicated to “The Impact of Relevance Theory on Biblical Studies”.

<sup>6</sup> This has pedagogical implications as well, as it allows us to refine rather than totally abandon the “Analysis-Transfer-Restructuring” model of translation. The process of analysis is no longer simply a grammatical exercise, but a compilation of textually and non-textually implicated assumptions which must be communicated in the target language.

<sup>7</sup> E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1969), p. 34. Apart from the practical implications for translation, there are also pedagogical implications for the “restructuring” phase of translation.

<sup>8</sup> See S.W. Pattemore, “The People of God in the Apocalypse: A Relevance-Theoretic Study”, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Dunedin: University of Otago, 2000), pp. 188-92; also S.W. Pattemore, *Souls under the Altar: Relevance Theory and the Discourse Structure of Revelation* (New York: UBS, forthcoming).

significance of their location “under the altar” and of their description as having been “slaughtered”, and the relationship of their witness to the “word of God”. The UBS Handbook deals with this verse in one page.<sup>9</sup> It identifies the altar as the bronze altar of burnt offering, and recommends the retention of the definite article if possible. It identifies the “souls” as “spirits” or “the immaterial part of a person that lives on after death” and suggests that their location could more easily be rendered as “at the base of the altar”. No particular comment is made on the perfect passive participle ἐσφαγμένων other than suggesting ways to avoid the passive, and offering “suffered death” or “killed” as models. The last “and” is treated as epexegetical and thus the witness and the word of God are equated. The model translation proposed is:

I saw at the base (foot) of the platform for offerings to God the spirits of some people. These were people who had been killed because they proclaimed God’s message faithfully (as good witnesses).

Let us now examine the verse in a little more detail, drawing on a wider range of exegetical work, but sensitive to the optimisation of relevance.

## 2.2 Relevant exegesis

The description of what John saw when the fifth seal was broken introduces some radically new items with little or no immediate precedent. The altar is the first such item, occurring here for the first time.<sup>10</sup> This is doubly intriguing because the deictic force of the definite article presumes the possibility of anaphoric reference. Either this is clumsy writing, or something about the previous descriptions has created the presumption that an altar is part of the scene. Charles argued that this “points to a current belief in the existence of an altar of burnt-offering in heaven”.<sup>11</sup> This may well be so but it is not a necessary implication, as the reason for the article can be found in a more immediate context, namely John’s description of the scene depicted in chs. 4-5. Both Farrer and Yarbrow Collins suggest that the throne-room vision has created the atmosphere of a temple, within which an altar is an expected item of furniture.<sup>12</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza suggests that heaven is portrayed in chs. 4-5 “not so much as a temple but as an oriental or Roman sovereign’s throne hall.”<sup>13</sup> But she does not go on to explain how the altar features in this scheme. Aune traces the origins of the scene further back to “the ancient conception of the

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<sup>9</sup> R.G. Bratcher and H.A. Hatton, *A Handbook on The Revelation to John* (UBS Handbook Series, New York: UBS, 1993), p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> It appears again at 8:3(twice), 5; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7.

<sup>11</sup> R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (2 vols.; ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), I, p. 172. See also pp. 226-30, where he argues that in apocalyptic literature only one altar stood in heaven. But with the exception of Isaiah 6:6 and a rather dubious reference in *Test. Lev.* 3:6, all of his data is later than Revelation and cannot be confidently used to construct a first century cognitive environment. Nor is it necessary to do so, as my discussion shows. Charles’ argument also implies that John is describing the scene as a set piece of well-known heavenly topography. It is not necessary to suppose this, nor even to suppose that the text must be taken as an ontological description of what exists. John describes “the visions he saw” as a means of communicating to his audience something other (or at least more) than the presuppositions “John saw these things in heaven” or “These things exist in heaven”. He communicates in order to motivate. Charles’ exegesis is a prime example of exegesis which fails the test of relevance.

<sup>12</sup> Thus, if we were describing a dining room, it would be entirely in order to refer to “the table” without having previously mentioned it, or without the audience’s knowledge of the existence of that particular table. See A. Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse* (NTM, 22; Wilminington, Del: Michael Glazier, 1979), p. 47; A. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 101: “So the Presence may be seen as a temple, and we may look to find throne and altar both there, and the cries from the altar in sequel to the voices from the throne.”

<sup>13</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 59.

divine council or assembly found in Mesopotamia, Ugarit and Phoenicia as well as in Israel.”<sup>14</sup> But he goes on to say “Most throne visions, for obvious reasons, are set in heaven, though in some the earthly temple and heavenly throne room merge (e.g., Isa. 6:1-13)”, and cites, with implicit approval, Oswalt’s argument that to try and decide between the heavenly and earthly temples as locations for Isa. 6 is to take the text too literally.<sup>15</sup> These are helpful observations in the present case, especially as the altar appears, similarly assumed to exist in the context, in Isa. 6:6.<sup>16</sup> The merging of a throne-room with a heavenly representation of the temple, already a familiar image from Isaiah’s visions, would seem to offer the best explanation for the sudden appearance of the altar.

The identification of the altar is a matter of some controversy, though, with the exception of Malina’s proposal of a constellation, the whole discussion takes place with the assumption that the only choices are the two altars which stood in the Israelite tabernacle and temple, the altar of burnt offering outside the holy place and the altar of incense inside.<sup>17</sup> Though the earlier reference to incense as the prayers of the saints (5:8) might lead to a presumption in favour of the altar of incense, the links between ψυχή and ἄλμα in 6:9-10, weigh in favour of the altar of burnt offering. But certain important implicatures are made accessible by the concept of an altar without regard to which altar it is.<sup>18</sup> These include the concepts of offering something to God (i.e. sacrifice), and of a cultically expressed relationship between humans and God. Musvosvi goes further and argues, firstly, that the altar represents the sacrifice itself, and, further, that this connects it to OT concepts of judgment and vindication.<sup>19</sup>

What John sees under the altar are souls. This raises two questions, namely which of the many senses of ψυχή is intended, and how can they be seen?<sup>20</sup> However the second is only a problem if the answer to the first involves disembodied spirits. In fact John does not appear too concerned to ensure that his audience can revisualize the visions he describes. His images work verbally without having to be precisely visualized.<sup>21</sup> So what is the verbal imagery doing here? It does not seem necessary to invoke an

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<sup>14</sup> D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC, 52a; Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 277.

<sup>15</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 277, following J.N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1-39* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> MT has the angel bring a coal מַעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, LXX: ἀπὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου

<sup>17</sup> See Exod. 27:1-8; 30:1-10; Heb. 9. In favour of the altar of incense note G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 391; Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 101. In favour of the altar of burnt offering are D.E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC, 52b; Dallas: Word, 1998), p. 405; J. Sweet, *Revelation* (SCM Pelican Commentaries, London: SCM, 1979), p. 142; G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A.& C.Black, 1966), p. 84. Although B.J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), pp.128-32, can find evidence to support the idea of the Altar as a constellation, his theory cannot account for John’s invariable term θυσιαστήριον. The textual references would appear to have an advantage here.

<sup>18</sup> Beale considers the distinction somewhat unimportant, and R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 157, agrees with Charles, *Revelation*, I, p. 172, that John’s altar blends the two together.

<sup>19</sup> J.N. Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse* (AUSDDS, 17; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> BAGD, pp. 901-902, distinguishes between literal uses of ψυχή (such as life, life principle, breath or souls as the centre of inner life or desire or emotions) and the use, by metonymy for a living creature, something which possesses a soul. See also the treatment in Musvosvi, *Vengeance*, pp. 196, 207-208; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 403-404; J.R. Michaels, *Revelation* (IVPNTC, Downer’s Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1997), p. 106; Beale, *Revelation*, p. 391; M.E. Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 125.

<sup>21</sup> Examples of such images include the lion which turns out to be a lamb, the lamb standing as if slain, the lamb taking the scroll and opening the seals, Death and Hades riding horses, and many more later in the book. It is

anthropology involving separable bodies and souls.<sup>22</sup> The souls are people, clearly here people who have died. They have strong associations with other representations of the people of God as actors in the vision (e.g. their prayer in v.10 gives substance to the “prayers of the saints” in 5:8), and as audience (e.g. they are given white robes to wear, echoing the promise to the conquerors in Sardis, 3:5). Michaels’ comment is a good summary:

These *souls* are not disembodied spirits. They are, after all, visible to John. Nor are they the “lives” or “selves” of slaughtered victims as a kind of abstraction, nor are they typical of what theologians like to call “the intermediate state” (the interval between a believer’s physical death and the final resurrection). Rather, at least within the horizons of John’s vision, these *souls* are people with voices and real bodies, like the “beheaded” souls of 20:4.<sup>23</sup>

Yet their location under the altar, and the textual location of τὰς ψυχὰς sandwiched between τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου and τῶν ἐσφαγμένων, gives weight to a strong evocation of the link between ψυχή and αἷμα as in Lev. 17:11.<sup>24</sup> This link is made explicit in their cry for vindication in the next verse. The souls, then, are people, but people who have been killed, and whose death represents in some sense a sacrifice to God.<sup>25</sup>

But what does John intend to communicate by locating the souls “under the altar”? Most commentators pay little attention to the force of the preposition or assume that it is equivalent to “at the base of” the altar.<sup>26</sup> Michaels challenges this assumption and his challenge is supported by relevance considerations.<sup>27</sup> ὑποκάτω is a strong preposition already used by John for the regions under the earth, where none is found worthy to take the scroll (5:3) and where the inhabitants join in praise of the Lamb (5:13). If John had intended merely “at the base of” the altar, he could have communicated it by a phrase which raised fewer problems.<sup>28</sup> The extra processing effort involved in its use demands that some extra cognitive effects are intended. Michaels suggests that the souls are located on the earth but directly under

not that they do not communicate strong visual images, but these images can often not be rationalized, nor does John attempt to enable his audience to do so.

<sup>22</sup> As does Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 404.

<sup>23</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 106 (italics his). This view is in keeping with the meaning of the Hebrew נִפְשֵׁי, generally understood as a living creature or person, or as “individuated life”. See H. Seebass, “נִפְשֵׁי” in *TDOT IX*, pp. 497-519. Attempts to deduce from Rev. 6:9 ideas about the “intermediate state”, either in John’s thinking or as objective reality, suffer from the same confusion of categories as was discussed in n. 31, p. 179-80 above, regarding the altar in heaven. They fail to take into account the symbolic (rather than ontological) nature of Revelation’s images.

<sup>24</sup> Lev 17:11, LXX, (with key words underlined): ἡ γὰρ ψυχὴ πάσης σαρκὸς αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἐστὶν καὶ ἐγὼ δέδωκα αὐτὸ ὑμῖν ἐπὶ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου ἐξιλάσκεσθαι περὶ τῶν ψυχῶν ὑμῶν τὸ γὰρ αἷμα αὐτοῦ ἀντὶ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐξιλάσεται.

<sup>25</sup> For the connection between the souls and the blood of sacrifice see Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 102; Caird, *Revelation*, p. 84; Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 142.

<sup>26</sup> The latter view is always associated with the soul-blood link being highlighted. See also Boring, *Revelation*, p. 125; Caird, *Revelation*, p. 84. Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 102, speaks of the blood flowing into hollows under the altar.

<sup>27</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 106.

<sup>28</sup> Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 106, suggests that if John had not wanted to follow Lev. 4:7 (παρὰ τὴν βᾶσιν τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου), he might have used ἐνώπιον, as at Rev. 4:5, 6.

the heavenly altar.<sup>29</sup> This would bring the action of the fifth seal into line with that of the other seals as taking place on earth. The whole seal sequence appears to take place on two stages. This verse suggests that the heavenly stage is vertically above the earthly, and that John's vision is a three-dimensional representation of the layered universe.<sup>30</sup> But why under *the altar* rather than, for example, the throne? The distinction may be a fine one. A number of writers point to Jewish beliefs which connected the altar with the throne of God.<sup>31</sup> But Beale goes too far in asserting "the virtual equation in both Revelation and Jewish writing of this altar with the throne of God".<sup>32</sup> At least within Revelation, there is association and yet distinction between these two important symbols, for example at 8:3-4; 9:13; 20:4-6. It is better to associate the altar with its cultic symbolism. The altar is the point of contact between earth and heaven. Sacrifices and incense offered on earthly altars have effect in heaven and draw a response from heaven.<sup>33</sup> This concept of the altar as nexus not only fits the three-dimensional imagery of the text, but it summarizes the many expressions that have been given to the altar imagery.<sup>34</sup> All of these express, in one way or another, that the sacrificial death of the martyrs links them closely with heaven and the throne of God.<sup>35</sup> And the following verses only serve to confirm this as the altar becomes the channel of communication both from and to the martyrs.<sup>36</sup>

The statement that the souls are of those who have been *slaughtered* (ἐσφαγμένων) immediately evokes two recent contexts – that of the second seal (6:4), and that of the slaughtered Lamb (5:6,9,12). Although the former is the more recent one, I suggest that it is less strongly evoked and that the predominant association is with the slaughtered Lamb. The opening of the second seal sees a rider on a red horse permitted to take peace from the earth καὶ ἵνα ἀλλήλους σφάξουσιν. Not only is the verb here future active indicative, as opposed to the perfect passive participle in 6:9, but its object is the reciprocal pronoun ἀλλήλους. Access to this context then raises the unanswerable question of whether the slaughtered souls, or even Christians in general, have themselves taken part in the slaughter of others.

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<sup>29</sup> It is "from the earth" that Abel's blood cries out to God, Gen. 4:10. See Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 102. Boring, *Revelation*, p. 126, while retaining the view that the souls are in heaven, nevertheless locates the action that this verse describes on earth.

<sup>30</sup> See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 402-403. Malina, *Genre and Message*, p. 129 (citing a reference which has unfortunately been omitted from his bibliography), claims that ὑποκάτω is a technical term used in astronomy. This would presumably mean that John's audience would have needed some technical skill in astronomy to access this meaning. In the absence of evidence for this I prefer the explanation suggested above.

<sup>31</sup> Charles, *Revelation*, I, p. 173; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 404-405; Beale, *Revelation*, p. 391 n 62.

<sup>32</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, p. 391.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Gen. 8:20-22; 22:9-11; Lev. 16:12-14; 17:5-6; 1 Kgs 18:30-39.

<sup>34</sup> So R.A. Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation* (Studies in Biblical Literature, New York: Peter Lang, 1999), p. 84, helpfully describes the altar in Revelation as "the symbolic two-way conduit by means of which the prayers of the saints are offered, received, and returned to them in God's affirmative answer and action."

<sup>35</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 157, says "That the souls of the martyrs were underneath the altar is a way of saying that their untimely deaths on earth are from God's perspective a sacrifice on the altar of heaven." Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 102 links the cry of the martyrs from below the altar to the sacrifice of the *Lamb* upon the altar. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 404, stresses the "nearness of these martyrs to God". Musvosvi, *Vengeance*, pp. 185-89, goes further and depicts the altar as the place of judgment and vindication. For somewhat different reasons Beale, *Revelation*, pp. 391-92, holds that "placing the saints under the altar emphasizes the divine protection that has held sway over their "soul" despite even their loss of physical life because of persecution."

<sup>36</sup> Note the comment of Michaels, *Revelation*, 106: "he wrote *under the altar*, probably because the vision centered on what he calls elsewhere "the prayers of the saints" (5:8; 8:3-4). Not the *souls* themselves but their prayers are the sacrifices that ascend like incense from earth to heaven – from "under the altar" to the altar itself." (Emphasis his.)

To attempt to answer this requires unnecessary processing effort and returns few results. On the other hand, the slaughtered Lamb stands over the whole of the seal-openings as the primary subject, and the perfect passive participle of σφάζω has twice been used of him (5:6, 12, and an aorist passive at 5:9). I conclude from this that, while the association of the death of the martyrs with the period of mutual slaughter may be weakly implied, the association of these people with the Lamb is much more strongly so. These are people whose story is, at least with regard to their death, like the story of the Lamb.<sup>37</sup>

This association is further reinforced by the following words, which give the reason for the death of those whose souls John sees, διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον. The suggestion that the conjunction is epexegetic is already much less likely considering the Greek repeats the preposition. But we must ask what is the function of this complex noun phrase. Feuillet's attempt to distinguish this from Christian witness will not stand.<sup>38</sup> John has twice used very similar words of his own ministry (1:2, 9). At 1:9 the words perform the same function as the phrase in 6:9, as they give the reason for John's exile on Patmos. Further they begin with an identical grammatical form (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ), the echo of which would leave the audience with the strong presupposition that the second half of the phrase in 6:9 is intended to mean the same as that of 1:9, καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ. Add to this the double reference to Jesus as witness (1:5; 3:14), and we may conclude that Christian martyrs are the primary reference.<sup>39</sup> Yet it may be that the change in wording (John will refer again to μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ in 12:17, 19:10 (twice) and 20:4) is deliberate and intended to broaden the reference to include pre-Christian martyrs, as we shall see that the cry for vindication strongly evokes the plight of such people.<sup>40</sup> It is not necessary to speculate on whether John has a particular group of martyrs in mind. All that is needed for this image to work is that the possibility of Christians meeting a violent death because of their faith must be within the audience's cognitive landscape. That this is the case is evidenced by the example of Antipas (2:13). And even at the end of the first century, memories of the Neronian persecutions would have been emotively powerful, especially when refreshed by recent examples, however rare or unusual.<sup>41</sup> The reference to the souls under the altar here harnesses this evocative memory in order to motivate the audience.<sup>42</sup>

This reason for the martyrs' death, then, forges strong links with their Lord, himself the faithful witness, and whose witness they have received and hold. But it also links them, the unknown martyrs in a vision, with real Christians known to the audience. There is firstly Antipas, also a faithful witness, who

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<sup>37</sup> The connection between the martyrs and the Lamb is noted by Beale, *Revelation*, p. 391.

<sup>38</sup> A. Feuillet, "Les martyrs de l'humanité et l'Agneau égorgé: Une interprétation nouvelle de la prière des égorgés en Ap 6, 9-11", *NRT* 99 (1977), pp. 189-207.

<sup>39</sup> Note, though, that the use of the English word "martyr" here is dependant on the whole noun phrase, not on the occurrence of the μαρτ-root. That the word family as used in Revelation, while denoting evangelistic witness, contains nuances of its later martyriological sense was argued by P. Vassiliadis, "The Translation of *Martyria Iesou* in Revelation", *BT* 36 (1985), pp. 129-34, and later opposed by F. Mazzaferri, "*Martyria Iēsou* Revisited", *BT* 39 (1988), pp. 114-22, who sees μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ as primarily the prophetic contents of the entire book. See also the editorial summary, P. Ellingworth, "The *marturia* Debate", *BT* 41 (1990), pp. 138-39.

<sup>40</sup> Most commentators find Christian martyrs here, usually those from the Neronian persecutions: Charles, *Revelation*, I, p. 174; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 405. Some allow that pre-Christian Jewish martyrs may be included but are not the primary focus: Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 142; Caird, *Revelation*, p. 84; Boring, *Revelation*, p. 124; Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 105.

<sup>41</sup> In our own day we can compare with this the evocative power of the Holocaust after 60 years.

<sup>42</sup> For the reasons outlined in this and the following paragraph, it is not necessary to assume that John has future martyrs in mind in painting the picture of the souls under the altar, as Boring, *Revelation*, p. 124, suggests. But his interest is in the future. He uses the concept of martyrdom to challenge the audience to be part of the number, as we shall see below.

was killed in Pergamum (2:13). But there is John too, whose witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus they are currently hearing (cf. 1:2), and who has himself suffered for this very reason (1:9). Although he is still very much alive, the combination of 1:9 with 6:9 would suggest that John sees himself as potentially a part of the “noble army” of martyrs. The testimonies of Jesus, of Antipas and of John already provide a paranaetic dimension to this vision, moving the audience in the direction of an ethical choice.<sup>43</sup> This movement will be more strongly focussed in 6:11. John’s carefully chosen phrase διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον forges links of relevance to earlier passages and earlier witnesses and is not simply a complicated way of saying just one thing.

### 2.3 Conclusions and implications for translation

We may now summarize the answers to the problems of Rev 6:9 suggested by exegesis which is sensitive to the relevance of the communication for the first audience:

- (1) The definite article locates the altar as an expected item in a context of a throne-room/temple scene already depicted in the opening part of the vision.
- (2) The identity of the altar (in terms of Jewish historical altars) is less important than its function as a conduit between earth and heaven.
- (3) The “souls” are martyrs, not disembodied spirits.
- (4) The location *under* the altar is deliberate and fits in to a three-dimensional layered picture of heaven and earth.
- (5) The description of the souls as “of those slaughtered” forges strong links to the Lamb.
- (6) The reason for their death deliberately evokes earlier descriptions of witnesses and martyrs.

These answers naturally have implications for translation, and at this stage the criterion of relevance to the new audience becomes crucial:

- (1) Retaining the definite article (or a similar marker of definiteness) is important but it is equally important that the readers recognize why it is there. This means they must be given some way of identifying the throne-room scene and linking it to a temple scene.
- (2) The term or phrase selected to translate “altar” need not (or, stronger, should not) attempt to specify whether it was a place for incense or animal sacrifice. However the translation should imply that the altar is a symbolic connector between earth and heaven.
- (3) No attempt need be made to speak of disembodied spirits and it is permissible to translate “I saw under the altar those who had been slaughtered...”
- (4) “Under the altar” should be carefully retained and if necessary an explanation provided of the layered picture which John is viewing.
- (5) The translation should carefully use the same word to describe the death of these martyrs as the of the Lamb in ch.5.
- (6) In describing the reason for the death of the martyrs, the translation should carefully echo the earlier references to John, Antipas and Jesus as witnesses.

It is probably impossible to fulfil all of these requirements with a “text-only” translation. RT pushes us towards a more strongly “supported text”, perhaps a Study Bible, though not necessarily of the conventional layout.

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<sup>43</sup> M.G. Reddish, “The Theme of Martyrdom in the Book of Revelation”, (Unpublished PhD thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, 1982), pp. 138-52, following Caird, *Revelation*, pp. 32-34, suggests that the “conquerors” in the letters are martyrs. This is largely a consequence of Rev. 12:11, but this is not a part of the cognitive environment in the early chapters.

### 3.0 The sealing of the 144,000 (Rev. 7:1-8)

#### 3.1 The issues

Two issues only will be dealt with in this section. Firstly, what is the significance, in the context of the *unsealing* of the *sealed* scroll, of the *sealing* of these 144,000 people with the *seal* of God? And secondly we will ask what is the significance of the list of those sealed, and in particular its precise format and shape?

On the first issue, the handbook points out that the “seal of God” is “not the same as the seals used to close up the scroll in chapters 5 and 6.”<sup>44</sup> A distinction is made between the seal (in ch.7) as an implement for making a mark of authentication, and a seal (in ch. 5-6) as a device to prevent a closed item being opened. While the distinction between the implement and its imprint is valid, there is a strong relationship between the purposes of authentication and closure of a scroll. The suggested translation base for the noun is “an instrument to mark people” and for the verb “mark with a seal” or “put a sign upon..”. On the second issue, the handbook does not discuss the form of the list except to suggest that in translation the form should reflect the receptor language style.<sup>45</sup> Thus the collapsed version given in TEV is appropriate in English. Once again, we will use relevance-sensitive exegesis to approach both these issues.

#### 3.2 Relevant exegesis - seals and sealing

The angel bears a “seal of the living God”, probably a signet ring or some similar device, which must mark him as a highly trusted representative of God.<sup>46</sup> His command secures a further but limited delay, for the purpose of “sealing” the servants of God, before the four angels are allowed to harm the earth. Such postponements of judgment are a familiar feature in apocalyptic texts. Apart from the biblical example of Ezekiel 9, they occur in *1 Enoch* 66:1-2 and *Ap. Bar.* 6:4-5.<sup>47</sup> The evocation of this theme brings with it connotations both of the imminence of divine judgment and of the grace of God in preserving his people. Two questions are relevant to our interest. First, what *background* does the audience need to access in order to make sense of the statements? And second, what is the significance of their sealing *in this context*?

The most immediate cognitive environment to which the mention of a seal and of sealing leads, before any cultural or inter-textual contexts are considered, is the inner-textual environment of Rev. 5:1-8:1, in which the scroll with seven seals is the overarching symbol.<sup>48</sup> There can be little doubt that the choice of identical terminology is not accidental and that there is a deliberate irony here, an irony which works in favour of the people of God. The seals that close the scroll which is first seen in the hand of the one seated on the throne (5:1) presumably bear the imprint of God’s own seal. The *opening* of the seven seals, which is almost complete, is revealing the wrath of God against disobedient humanity. But here there is a simultaneous sealing to take place. And just as the inexorable revelation of the judgment of God has been marked by a repetitive formula (Καὶ ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα...), so now the sealing of

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<sup>44</sup> Bratcher and Hatton, *Revelation*, p. 123.

<sup>45</sup> p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> For the signet ring see Aune, *Revelation* 6-16, pp. 452-54; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66; Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 167.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Beale, *Revelation*, p. 413; G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (NCB, London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), p. 143; P. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (CNT, 14; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2nd corrected edn, 1988), p. 118. Ezekiel 9 will be further discussed below.

<sup>48</sup> σφραγίς occurs, apart from ch.7; at 5:1,2,5,9; 6:1,3,5,7,9,12; 8:1; 9:4.

God's servants is emphasised by repetition.<sup>49</sup> Against the background of the unsealing of the scroll, with its attendant disasters, the people of God are secured by a process of sealing.

Beyond this immediate literary context, the concept of a seal or signet as a mark of ownership, with consequent implications of authenticity, security and protection, is one that would have been readily available to a first century audience.<sup>50</sup> So accessible is this general environment, and productive of such relevant implicatures that the burden of proof must lie with anyone who claims that a more specific (hence less easily accessed) environment would need to be opened to optimize relevance at this point. Nevertheless there are several such possibilities that we must examine, some of which are special cases of the more general implicatures available from the social context.

That the mark of a seal or signet was some representation of the name of the owner is a conclusion requiring little processing effort, and the further conclusion that the seal here is the name of God will be reinforced both retrospectively and recursively by Rev. 14:1 and 22:4.<sup>51</sup> But to argue further, as does Beale, that there is an allusion here to the names of the tribes engraved on the shoulder piece and breast-plate of the high priest (Exod. 28:11, 21), with support from the reference to the precious stones that form (or adorn) the foundations of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:19-20) is to go beyond the conditions for optimum relevance. The latter passage has yet to be heard by the audience, and when they do they will hear that the names of the apostles, not the tribes, are on the foundations. In any case what we must envisage in 7:1-3 is the name of God on the people from the tribes, not the names of the tribes brought before God. More to the point, perhaps, is Exod. 28:36-38, where the words "Holy to the LORD" are to be engraved on a rosette on the high-priest's turban.<sup>52</sup> But even this requires considerable effort to obtain significant cognitive effects.

As well as the more general connotation of protection, it is often suggested that there are a number of specific allusions at work in the mention of the sealing of the servants of God. The first of these is to the experience of the Israelites in Egypt at the original Passover (Exod. 12).<sup>53</sup> We may leave out of consideration for the moment subsequent passages which clearly evoke the Exodus theme, as not having immediate relevance.<sup>54</sup> There is nothing in this passage itself, either lexical or semantic, which requires or suggests the Exodus context, except perhaps for the fact that the sealed are to be from "every tribe of the people of Israel" (v.4). In Exodus 12 YHWH himself is to pass through the land and strike the first born, *except* for those whose houses are marked by the blood of the lamb. Here the angels are restrained from damaging the physical structure of the cosmos, *until* the servants of God are sealed on their

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<sup>49</sup> V. 2 σφραγίδα, v. 3 σφραγίσωμεν, v. 4 ἐσφραγισμένων, ἐσφραγισμένοι, v. 5 ἐσφραγισμένοι, v. 8 ἐσφραγισμένοι. W.J. Harrington, *Revelation* (SacP, 16; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 98, is one of the few commentators who gives some place to this effect, but even he treats it as word-play rather than deliberate irony.

<sup>50</sup> See the discussion of ownership of property, including the branding or tattooing of slaves, in Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 456-59; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66; Charles, *Revelation*, I, pp. 197-98; Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 167.

<sup>51</sup> See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66.

<sup>52</sup> Note here the LXX usage of σφραγίς in this chapter and in Exod. 36 (MT 39).

<sup>53</sup> For this suggestion see Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, p. 120 n.7; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66; Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 148; Caird, *Revelation*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>54</sup> For example, the specific plagues brought about by the trumpets (chs. 8-9) and the bowls (ch.16), the power of the two witnesses (11:6) or the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:2-4). On this see Caird, *Revelation*, pp. 96-97). The New Exodus themes, echoing Deutero-Isaiah, are also largely in the future *at this point*. J.S. Casey, "Exodus Typology in the Book of Revelation", (Unpublished PhD thesis, Louisville, Kentucky: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1981), pp. 176-77, is thus largely unconvincing in arguing for an Exodus 12 background to the sealing.

foreheads. The two incidents differ in almost every particular – agent (YHWH/angel), danger (death of firstborn/damage to earth etc.), mark (blood of lamb/ seal of God), location of mark (doorposts/foreheads), and nature of exception (selective exemption/ temporal delay). On the other hand, in a slightly wider context, we can note two motifs which do clearly evoke the Exodus experience. These are the description of the Lamb in 5:9, as having been slaughtered and whose blood has ransomed people to be a kingdom and priests for God, and the universal distress of great and small, slave and free in the face of the disasters of the sixth seal (6:15). Added to the later Exodus motifs mentioned above (and a possible allusion to the feast of Tabernacles later in ch.7), it seems quite possible that the preservation of the people of God here would take a place broadly similar to the Passover in the overall Exodus structure of the Apocalypse.<sup>55</sup> But this is a contribution to the cognitive effects of the whole book, not of this particular passage. The fact that John's lexicon here bears no relationship to that of Exod. 12 may be due to his use of an intermediary source, and means that his audience does not need to access Exodus to obtain optimum relevance in understanding the passage itself.<sup>56</sup>

The passage which is most often quoted as forming the background to Rev. 7:1-8 is Ezek. 9:1-11.<sup>57</sup> But while the general similarities are obvious (a select number of people are marked on their foreheads in order to be spared punishment by the agents of God's judgment) the details are sufficiently different to require more careful consideration of whether or how John is using the passage. Notable differences include the fact that, in Ezekiel, the whole covenant community is in danger because of its sin and those saved by the mark are a select few from within this community who grieve over that sin, whereas in Revelation the world is in danger and those marked are God's servants (apparently all of them, as we shall see below). The danger in Ezekiel is death by the swords of God's agents, but in Revelation the danger to people is "collateral damage", as the forces of destruction are to be loosed against the physical earth, and there is no promise that those sealed will escape death.<sup>58</sup> Where John's angel is about to seal the servants of God with a σφραγίς θεοῦ, the mark on the forehead in Ezekiel is a  $\aleph$ , translated by the LXX as σημεῖον, a term which John reserves for signs he sees in heaven or signs performed by the beast.<sup>59</sup> Finally there is no parallel in Revelation to Ezekiel's man with the writing case, nor to Ezekiel's response of prostration and intercession for those about to be killed. Given the general similarities and the presence of the sealing motif in the wider cognitive environment (such as *Pss. Sol.* 15 and *Bar. Syr.*) it is quite likely that John constructed his passage with an eye on Ezekiel. But either John or his source has made two most significant changes, namely the transfer of the divine wrath from the covenant people to the world in general (a movement already evident in ch.6), and the replacement of  $\aleph$  (= σημεῖον) with

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<sup>55</sup> There is, as we would expect from John, no strict adherence to order in such a structure. The bowl plagues which most clearly evoke the Exodus plagues, come after the images of Passover, Tabernacles and the crossing of the sea!

<sup>56</sup> On the question of sources used by John for ch.7 see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, pp. 438-39; Charles, *Revelation*, I, pp. 191-203; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> Beale *Revelation*, p. 413; Harrington, *Revelation*, p. 98; Boring, *Revelation*, p. 128 (who adds Isa. 44:5); Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66; Knight, *Revelation*, p. 71; Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 112; Sweet *Revelation*, p. 148; Roloff *Revelation*, p. 97; Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 167; Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 148; Caird, *Revelation*, p. 96-97. Reddish, "Theme of Martyrdom", p. 173, sees Exodus 14 as well as Ezekiel 9 behind this passage.

<sup>58</sup> Some commentators go beyond this and suggest that they are marked for martyrdom, as we shall see.

<sup>59</sup> So Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, p. 119-20; although he allows the possibility of an allusion, he holds that John has changed the significance by the choice of words. This also applies to the other passage sometimes quoted as background, *Pss. Sol.* 15. There the righteous have a σημεῖον on them as a sign of salvation. See Michaels, *Revelation*, p. 112.

σφραγίς and σφραγίζω to ironically echo the unsealings which have been taking place.<sup>60</sup> It would appear that, once again, it would require very significant processing effort, computing differences in general tenor, in circumstances and in detail, for the audience to extract positive cognitive effects from an appeal to Ezekiel 9, and it should not therefore be considered a necessary cognitive environment for the understanding of our present passage. On the other hand, hearers who were familiar with either Ezekiel or the wider tradition stemming from it would not fail to notice the broad similarities. For such people the most likely cognitive effect which access to the Ezekiel context would bring is the understanding (explicit in Ezekiel and only implicit in Revelation) that the danger to come is God's punishment of sin, and a sense of the security in the midst of danger for those who see things from God's perspective.

Prigent, noting the differences between Ezekiel 9 and Revelation 7, suggests that the choice of σφραγίζω may be due to its use in relation to baptism.<sup>61</sup> This is a further development of the general theme of protection, one that is proposed by a number of commentators.<sup>62</sup> The appeal is to such NT passages as 2 Cor. 1:22, Eph. 1:13, 4:30.<sup>63</sup> But there are a number of problems with this view.<sup>64</sup> First, the passages mentioned do not unambiguously refer to baptism. The seal in each case is the Spirit and the specific association with baptism is a second century development.<sup>65</sup> Second, if baptism is intended here it raises more problems than it solves. Have the servants of God not already been baptized? Why then is it a future event here? Why is it involved with a delay in letting loose the forces of destruction on the earth?<sup>66</sup> What have angels to do with baptism? The processing effort involved in these questions most probably outweighs any positive cognitive effects available. On the other hand, the use of σφραγίζω in the above verses is indicative of a background of thought in NT churches of believers being sealed as God's possession by the Spirit. Perhaps even more relevant is the use of σφραγίς in 2 Tim. 2:19, with its implicit appeal to Exod. 28:36-38 and Isa. 44:5. This is not to assume that any of these NT texts were actually available to John's audience as contexts for interpretation, but it does imply that the concept of God's people being sealed has a potential sounding board (or echo-chamber) in the common self-understanding of first century Christians.<sup>67</sup> But the interpretation of the seal as something which Christians might have understood themselves already to possess leads to some of the same questions as mentioned above in regard to baptism. Thus while the motif may have been present in the cognitive environment, the specific use here does not fit easily into that environment.

In summary, the sealing of the servants of God is an example of highly relevant information (in the technical sense). It has many connections to existing parts of the audience's cognitive environment but

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<sup>60</sup> See Pattemore, "People of God", pp. 176-78 above, for the way in which the covenant curses operate in Revelation no longer against the covenant community but against the world. For the proposal that σφραγίζω is chosen here to allude to baptism, see the discussion below.

<sup>61</sup> Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, p. 120.

<sup>62</sup> A reference to baptism is suggested by, for example, Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, p. 66; Farrer, *Revelation*, p. 105; Charles, *Revelation*, I, pp. 197-98; Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 147; Boring, *Revelation*, p. 129.

<sup>63</sup> And perhaps also to the description of circumcision as a seal in Rom 4:11.

<sup>64</sup> Among those who do not see a reference to baptism are Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 167; Caird, *Revelation*, p. 96; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> For evidence of this see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 459.

<sup>66</sup> 2 Pet. 3:1-10 might be suggested as a link – a delay in the final destruction of the world for "all to come to repentance". But we have no way of knowing that this was an accessible environment for the audience of Revelation. 1 Pet. 3:20-21 links Noah's ark, the subject of a "delay in punishment" story in 2 Bar. 6:4, with baptism. Again we cannot use this connection with any certainty in our present study.

<sup>67</sup> The use of σφραγ- root words is not confined to the Pauline corpus. See Jn 3:33; 6:26.

precisely because it is also different from those existing assumptions it is productive of new cognitive effects. The most relevant contexts have been found to be (1) the inner-textual context of the sealed scroll and its unsealing, placing the security of the people of God into dramatic contrast with the insecurity of the world in the face of God's judgment; (2) the common social environment within which a seal was a mark of ownership, with consequent implications of authentication and protection; and (3) the early Christian concept of being sealed by the Spirit as God's possession. The sealing marks out God's people as his inalienable possession in the face of whatever cosmic catastrophes may come. The context of the Passover yields positive cognitive effects only when this passage is seen in the broader sweep of the whole book, and while Ezekiel 9 may well have been alluded to, it too yields relatively few implicatures.

### 3.3 Relevant exegesis - the tribal census

The angel ascending with the seal is the last thing John states he saw in this vision. Now he only hears the number of those sealed. The people of God remain off-stage throughout the scene. What would the audience have understood by the number 144,000 itself? Bauckham is surely correct in arguing that the number is symbolic and yet not purely so, not simply a cipher.<sup>68</sup> Symbolically it would most likely have implied the completeness and perfection of the company of the people of God.<sup>69</sup> Yet there are further implications inherent in the make-up of this number. The number twelve as symbolic of the people of God must without doubt have been a part of the audience's understanding (12 apostles, 12 tribes, 24 elders). And the multiplier of a thousand, at the very least, indicates a very large number.<sup>70</sup> But Bauckham goes further than this and suggests that the 144,000, made up of 12,000 from each of 12 tribes, brings with it the connotations of a military census.<sup>71</sup> The context within which such a list makes most sense is that of the censuses in the wilderness of Israel's fighting men, and in particular the one recorded in Numbers 1 where the repeated formula ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς ... χιλιάδες (Num. 1:21-43) is remarkably similar to that in Revelation 7. There are numerous good cognitive effects obtainable by access to this context, not least of which is the reference to the leaders of the tribes as רָאשֵׁי אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (Num 1:16). This is illustrative of the use of אֲלֵפֵי as a military unit, and is translated in LXX as χιλίαρχοι Ἰσραηλ.<sup>72</sup> Further, Judah's first place in military precedence is confirmed in Num 2:3; 7:12; 10:14. And when John's list is seen as a military census, the troublesome ἐκ no longer raises the question of whether only some of God's people are sealed and if so which group or sub-set. This is simply part of the formal style of the census and has no further or independent implications.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>68</sup> R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), p. 218. Bauckham's entire treatment of these verses (pp. 210-37) is excellent and largely convincing. His view is supported by G.K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup, 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 25-26, 350-51.

<sup>69</sup> See Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 168.

<sup>70</sup> Perhaps even suggesting a "boundless immensity", cf. Boring, *Revelation*, p. 130.

<sup>71</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, pp. 217-18. So also Sweet, *Revelation*, p. 149; Boring, *Revelation*, p. 131.

<sup>72</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, p. 218, notes the use of אֲלֵפֵי for a military division in 1 Macc. 3:55, in Josephus (*J. W.* 2.20.7), and at Qumran (1QM 4:2, 6; 5:3). For similar usage see Exod. 18:21, 25; Num. 10:4. In Zech. 12:5,6 אֲלֵפֵי יְהוּדָה is translated "clans of Judah" by NRSV but οἱ χιλίαρχοι Ἰουδα by LXX. The image is, in any case, a military one where victory is promised to Judah and to the house of David over all the inhabitants of the earth.

<sup>73</sup> Although not yet part of the immediate context, and therefore less accessible, retrospective support for this tribal list being seen as a military census will be found later in Revelation. Rev. 14:1-5 tells us that the 144,000 are adult male virgins, probably evoking concepts of abstinence for military service. And more immediately, the next time John *hears* a number, is at 9:16, when on the sixth trumpet blast the overwhelmingly greater number, 200 million, of the demonic army appears following the release of four hitherto restrained angels (9:14-15).

Aune's objection that there is no specifically military language in 7:4-8 has been at least partly answered in the previous paragraph.<sup>74</sup> The language may not be explicitly military but access to the context of a military census provides a small avalanche of good cognitive effects. But Aune's positive point, that the tribal list reflects the expectation of an eschatological restoration of the twelve tribes, is also supported by relevance considerations. The combination of the familiar theme of the restoration of Israel from the OT, with the identification of the church as Israel noted above, leads easily to the interpretation of this list as giving the assurance that God will keep his promises and secure his people against the eschatological disasters. But it is difficult to see why, if this is the main implication, the details of each tribe with its number is necessary. Bauckham has convincingly shown that the two concepts (military census and restoration of the twelve tribes), far from being incompatible, are closely related.<sup>75</sup> He advances evidence for "the expectation that the ten tribes would return specifically in order to take part in the messianic war."<sup>76</sup> Among the texts referred to perhaps the most significant is Isa. 11:10-16, in a passage promising a second Exodus, which begins with a prophecy of the "root of Jesse" and his impact on the nations of the world (Isa. 11:10).<sup>77</sup> Here is another cluster of associations which strengthens the cognitive effects already obtained.

I suggest, therefore, that optimal relevance is obtained from John's list of the tribes in 7:4-8 by understanding it as a messianic army, headed by Judah (and therefore, as a weak implicature, associated with the Lion of Judah, the Root of David). The people of God, John's audience, already identified as the true Israel, fulfil the prophecies of the restoration of the tribes and at the same time are assured of the benefits of God's ownership of them, in particular of the security which this gives them in the face of cosmic and demonic disasters facing the world. The prominence of Judah emphasizes the messianic nature of the army but at the same time the omission of any reference to an individual messiah figure means that the Messiah is here totally identified with his people. So understood, the detail and repetition of the list contributes precisely what is needed to the picture. The detail is necessary to establish the nature of the list as a military census. The headship of Judah is highly significant. But beyond that, no further processing of the order or of the names is warranted

### 3.4 Implications for translation

With regard to the sealing of the servants of God, the Handbook's emphasis on the distinction between this sealing and the sealing of the scroll is overstated and potentially confusing. While a distinction in referential meaning is valid, the deliberate irony of the repeated use of the same term is completely missed. Translations should make lexical choices here that ensure the connection is made with the seals on the scroll which are being broken. Since authenticity, ownership and protection are important implicatures in both cases, this should be possible.

If the census of the tribes is indeed a military census, then the form the list takes in the target language should not be guided just by convenience or economy, or even appropriateness for *lists* in general. It should somehow convey by form, perhaps supplemented by section heading or footnote, that the 144,000 comprise an army. The collapsed TEV format certainly does not do this in English.

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<sup>74</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, p. 436.

<sup>75</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, pp. 219-20.

<sup>76</sup> Bauckham, *Climax*, p. 219.

<sup>77</sup> The promise of restoration of the tribes in the Servant Song of Isaiah 49:6 appears to lack any military associations, until one remembers that the servant's ministry has been described in 49:2 using metaphors of sword and arrow. This is a much weaker effect.

## 4.0 Conclusions

Many other examples could have been taken from the book of Revelation to illustrate the importance of considerations of relevance in reaching conclusions about the meaning of the text and its translation.<sup>78</sup> However, sufficient evidence has been provided to sustain several important conclusions. Firstly, while it may be a truism to say that exegesis is important for translation, the question in the title of this paper must still be addressed. Not all exegesis is relevant. Or more precisely, “exegesis for translation” must be such as to uncover the communication which is optimally relevant to the original audience. It may rightly be argued that, without recourse to the categories of Relevance Theory, this has always been the aim of classical historical-critical exegesis, and RT supports the attention to the detail of the original context exemplified by this approach. But RT provides a means of sifting the evidence more carefully and also of describing and delimiting textual effects which are not simply the result of grammatical analysis but take account of discourse structure, rhetorical intent and affective features. At the same time, by bracketing the questions of authorial intentionality and examining the text primarily from the audience’s perspective, it yet allows us a more confident view of the author’s optimally relevant communicative intent.<sup>79</sup> The fact that RT offers help in the reconstruction of the message for a secondary audience is a bonus which this paper has barely touched on.

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<sup>78</sup> Two further instances might illustrate: the implicatures of the use of πεπελεκισμένων (beheaded, as with an axe) to describe those who John saw on the thrones in Rev. 20:4 must require more of the translator than simply rendering “killed” or “lost their lives”; and the dimensions of the New Jerusalem in Rev. 21:16-17 must be of primarily symbolic rather than literal significance, calling into question the frequent practice of rendering these in modern units, even if supplemented by a footnote.

<sup>79</sup> For a more thorough treatment of RT and literary intent see Pattemore, “People of God”, pp. 29-46.

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