

NAGY József¹:

“I Will Come Like a Thief” (Rev 3:3, 16:15)²

Abstract.

This paper examines the motif of the thief in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. These verses are analysed in the light of other New Testament occurrences and possible Old Testament parallels. With this in mind, the first part of the paper deals with the parable of the thief (Mt 24:43–44; Lk 12:39–40). Since there has been a growing interest in recent decades in the study of the relationship between Revelation and the Synoptic Gospels, we will briefly review the history of this research. In the light of this, the second half of the study takes up an exegetical problem in both Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. We argue that Revelation 3:3, like other instances of the motif in the New Testament, testifies to the return of Christ. In the case of Revelation 16:15, a careful examination of the thief motif makes it possible to maintain that the verse is an integral part of the unit. This is confirmed, among other things, by the fact that the thief motif and the Day of the Lord are found in the same context (Rev 16:14–15; cf. 1 Thess 5:2.4; 2 Pet 3:10).

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Introduction

The motif of the unexpected thief (thief motif)³ is found in the Gospels (Mt 24:43–44; Lk 12:39–40), in the Pauline and Petrine corpus (1 Thess 5:2.4; 2 Pt 3:10), and also in the Book of Revelation (Rev 3:3, 16:15). Although these verses mention the word ‘thief’ (κλέπτης) and refer to his unexpected coming, there are a number of differences. Some passages liken the appearance of the thief to the Day of the Lord (DOL; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pt 3:10), while the rest of the passages refer to the coming of the Son of Man (Mt 24:43–44; Lk 12:39–40; Rev 3:3, 16:15). Most of the accounts use the verb γρηγορέω after the thief motif to call for vigilance, although other solutions are not uncommon. Matthew 24:44 and Luke 12:40 use the word ἔτοιμος to stress the importance of being prepared, while 2 Peter 3:10 does not contain a similar exhortation. It is also a contrast that both ἦκω and ἔρχομαι can denote the coming of a thief.⁴ Finally, the versatility of the motif is shown by the fact that in the Synoptics there is a parable, while in the rest of the passages there is a simile. As the previous overview suggests, it would be beyond the scope of this study to discuss every single occurrence of the motif in the New Testament (NT) and beyond (e.g. Gos. Thom. 21; 103). This paper will primarily focus on a deeper understanding of Revelation 3:3 and 16:15.

Even with this limitation, it is useful to briefly look at the parables of Matthew and Luke. In the light of the Synoptic passages, the corresponding verses of Revelation take on a deeper meaning.⁵ This premise is confirmed by the increasing number of studies in recent decades that analyse the relationship between Revelation and Synoptics. This increasingly vibrant field of research requires an overview of the main directions. Only then will the thief motif in Revelation be discussed. As we shall see regarding Revelation 16:15, besides the NT locations of the thief motif, the possible Old Testament (OT) parallels may help the understanding of the relevant passages.

³ Since the NT refers to the unexpected thief in several genres, the “thief motif” is used as well.

⁴ 2 Pt 3:10; Rev 3:3 and Mt 24:43–44; Lk 12:39–40; 1 Thess 5:2; Rev 16:15.

⁵ ROLOFF, Jürgen (1993): *Revelation: A Continental Commentary*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press. 58.

This study may shed new light on the exegetical issues raised in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15 when examining them and other occurrences of the thief motif.

Overview of the Parable of the Thief

Mark, the earliest synoptic gospel, does not record the parable of the thief, but it is necessary to refer to Mark's eschatological discourse. In Mark 13:32–37, Jesus refers to the coming of the Son of Man. First of all, he reveals that the time of the Parousia is known solely to the Father (Mk 13:32). This sentence also clarifies why Jesus so firmly urges his disciples to be vigilant (Mk 13:33). Through a parable, Jesus also links the unknown time of the return and the call for vigilance. Thus, we read in Mark 13:34–36 that the slaves in the parable do not know the time of their master's return from a foreign land. Since the master may return at any time, it is vital that the servants be constantly alert. In the parable, Jesus uses the verb *γρηγορέω* to call his disciples to be vigilant.

In the case of Matthew, we also begin with the Mount of Olives speech. While Matthew 24:3–35 describes the signs that will mark the coming of the Son of Man, the sequel warns of the unknown time of the Parousia (Mt 24:36–25:13). The latter unit opens with the statement that the time of the coming is known only to the Father (Mt 24:36; cf. Mk 13:32). Jesus then goes on to say at length that the time is hidden from the disciples (Mt 24:42.44). The latter point is also demonstrated by the different words used in this passage. Jesus warns his disciples that they do not know (*οἶδα* Mt 24:36.42.43; 25:13), do not suspect (*δοκέω* Mt 24:44), and, again, do not know (*γινώσκω* Mt 24:39.43.50) the time. The wicked servant in the parable is ashamed because his master returns when he does not expect it (*προσδοκάω* Mt 24:50).

Matthew has additions in comparison with the Markan material. Each addition reflects the unexpectedness of the coming (Mt 24:37–39.40–41.43). The parable of the thief fits neatly into this sequence (Mt 24:43).⁶ In the parable of Mark 13:34–35, the

⁶ Luz says that Matthew 24:42, which reminds the unknown time of the Parousia, is also part of the parable. The verse anticipates the parable as well as the explanation that goes with it. LUZ, Ulrich (2005): *Matthew 21–28* (Hermeneia series). Minneapolis, Fortress Press. 216.

master of the house (*κύριος τῆς οἰκίας*) is identified with the Son of Man, while the servant is equated with the disciples. In Matthew and Luke, the master of the house (*οἰκοδεσπότης* Mt 24:43; Lk 12:39) appears as well. However, in these passages, the master of the house is applied to the disciples, not to Christ. In the parable of the thief, the thief and his unexpected arrival illustrates the coming of the Son of Man. The allegorical interpretation of the parable is given in the following verses: Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40. According to this interpretation, in the parable, the analogy between the image and the message is not indicated by the persons but by what happens: the event of the coming.⁷

In Luke, there are also some parables that focus on a negative character. In a parable, Luke presents the shrewdness of the dishonest manager as a model to follow (Lk 16:1–12), while the parable of Luke 18:1–8 draws a parallel between God and the false judge. Finally, the parable of the thief, which parallels the coming of the Son of Man with the sudden appearance of the thief, also confirms this (as already noted, this parable is also found in Matthew).⁸

According to Luke, Jesus told the disciples the parable of the thief on his way to Jerusalem. The words of Jesus in Luke 12 are addressed mainly to the disciples, but the narrator occasionally notes that some of Jesus's words are also addressed to the multitudes (Luke 12:13–21, 54–59). These comments explain why, after the parable of the thief, Peter asks if these words are addressed to the disciples or the crowd (Lk 12:41). Jesus replies with the parable of the wise and wicked servant (Lk 12:42–48). Jesus's words can be understood in two ways. According to Jeremias and Carroll, Luke 12:35–53 is addressed to the disciples,⁹ while Green's exegesis suggests that the passage is also addressed to the multitudes.¹⁰ The first option is more likely since the parable of the thief is preceded by the parable of the doorkeeper (Lk 12:35–38), which contains the same theme and is also addressed to the disciples (Lk 12:22).

⁷ KOZMA, Zsolt (2002): *Jézus Krisztus példázatai*. Cluj-Napoca, Iránytű Alapítvány. 472.

⁸ Several interpretations have tried to soften this explanation. Marcion identifies the parable of the thief with the demiurge (Tert. Adv. Marc. 4:29), and Tertullian identifies Satan with the thief (Tert. Adv. Marc. 4:29).

⁹ JEREMIAS, Joachim (1966): *Rediscovering the Parables*. New York, SCM Press. 37–39; CARROLL, John T. (2012): *Luke: A Commentary*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press. 272.

¹⁰ GREEN, Joel B. (1997): *The Gospel of Luke* (NICNT series). Grand Rapids, Eerdmans. 503.

The two synoptic accounts of the parable of the thief differ in some details. First, they are placed in different parts of the Gospels. Matthew 24 contains a number of warnings of disasters. The list includes wars (Mt 24:6), lightning (Mt 24:27), and the changing of the sun, moon, and stars (Mt 24:29), etc. Kozma argues that the reason why Luke does not insert the parable of the thief into the Olivet Discourse is that it does not illustrate a cosmic disaster.¹¹ Another feature of the Lukan context is that just before the parable of the thief we read of the heavenly treasure to which thieves have no access (Lk 12:33; cf. Mt 6:19–20).

The two Gospels differ not only in context but also in the way the parable is presented. While Matthew 24:43 tells us that the thief arrives at night, Luke 12:39 omits this part. Matthew 24:43 also adds the word (*φυλακή*) ‘watch’ to the reference to the coming by night. Luke, however, uses here the much less specific word ‘hour’ (*ώρα*). It is also a difference that in Matthew the master of the house ‘watches’ (*γρηγορέω*), whereas in Luke 12:39 this detail is omitted.¹² Despite these differences, it is noticeable that in Luke the verb ‘to watch’ (*γρηγορέω* Lk 12:37) and the word ‘watch’ (*φυλακή*) are used before the parable of the thief (Lk 12:38).

The presentation of the parable of the thief in Matthew and Luke shows many parallels in the key details. Although the parable is found in different sections of the Gospels, the separate contexts reveal a number of similarities. In both cases, Jesus addresses the parable to the disciples (Lk 12:22,35; Mt 24:1). Both parables are preceded by the call to watch (Mt 24:42; Lk 12:35–38).¹³ In addition to the preceding verses, the lines that follow the parables are also relevant. According to Jeremiah, both the parable

¹¹ KOZMA 2002, 471.

¹² This Lukan feature is repeated in the Gospel. Matthew 24:40–41 illustrates the unexpected coming of the DOL through the example of women working in the fields and the mill. While Luke 17:34–36 repeats the lines of Matthew, it adds that “on that night two will be in one bed, one will be taken up and the other left behind” (Lk 17:34). Luke 17:34–36 also expresses (and intensifies) the unexpectedness of the last day by referring to the day (Lk 17:35–36) and night (Lk 17:34) in connection with the time of the coming. This feature is also evident in the thief parable. Whereas Matthew 24:43 refers to the thief’s coming at night, Luke 12:39 does not.

¹³ WENHAM, David (1986): *The Rediscovery of Jesus’ Eschatological Discourse*. Sheffield, JSOT Press. 52, 54.

of the thief and its explanation are followed by the parable of the faithful servant, which helps the application (Mt 24:45–51; Lk 12:41–46).¹⁴

In addition, the key points of Matthew's and Luke's accounts are the same. In both cases, κλέπτης refers to the thief and οἰκοδεσπότης to the master of the house. As for the action, in both places, διορύσσω warns of the thief's possible entry. Furthermore, the parables in Matthew and Luke are explained in the same way. First, both accounts compare the unexpected appearance of the thief with the coming of the Son of Man. In both cases, Jesus draws the conclusion that readiness (ἔτοιμος) is necessary because it is not known when the Son of Man will come.¹⁵ This deserves special attention given that 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10 compare the sudden appearance of the thief with the "Day of the Lord".

The thief motif is also used as a parable in the Gospel of Thomas (Gos. Thom. 21; 103). In these places, the parable is followed by an explanation which differs from that of the Synoptics. According to Thomas, the thief is identified with the hostile world that wants to acquire secret knowledge. To prevent the world from taking possession of the knowledge, vigilance is necessary.

As the Gospel of Thomas shows, the thief motif is interpreted and applied in many ways. Some therefore suggest that the earliest version of the parable (Q) lacks the identification with the Son of Man.¹⁶ Wenham, noting that the context of Matthew and Luke shows many similarities, concludes that Matthew and Luke drew their material from a common source (Q).¹⁷ Remarkably, there exists also the view that the thief motif was not merely transmitted along the common Synoptic material. For Atkinson, 1 Thessalonians 5:2 was not based on the tradition of Jesus but on Joel 2:9 and its context.¹⁸ As will be seen in the following chapters, the influence of Joel on Revelation 16:15 deserves further consideration.

¹⁴ Jeremias includes the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30; Lk 19:12–27). JEREMIAS 1966, 54.

¹⁵ Cf. JEREMIAS 1966, 218.

¹⁶ AUNE, David (1998a): *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52a). Dallas, Word Books Publisher. 222; JEREMIAS 1966, 54.

¹⁷ WENHAM 1986, 52, 54.

¹⁸ Atkinson's starting point is that 1 Thessalonians 5:2 compares the unexpected coming of the thief to the DOL. Atkinson does not, however, elaborate on how the verses of Joel are brought

Revelation and the Synoptic Gospels

Before evaluating the parallels of the thief motif in the Synoptics and Revelation, let us review how various scholars have interpreted Jesus's words in Revelation. The first step is to work out which verses of Revelation are relevant. Vos, who has published a doctoral thesis on the subject, identifies eight key parallels.¹⁹ 1. Blessed is the one who hears and keeps (Rev 1:3a; Lk 11:28). 2. The lamentation of the tribes at the Parousia (Rev 1:7; Mt 24:30). 3. The one who has ears hears (e.g. Rev 2:7; Mt 11:15). 4. The Son of Man coming like a thief (Rev 3:3, 16:5; Mt 24:42–43; Lk 12:39–40). 5. The one who confesses Christ is also confessed by Christ before the Father (Rev 3:5; Mt 10:32; Lk 12:8). 6. The door and table fellowship (Rev 3:20; Mk 13:29; Mt 24:33). 7. Those who sit enthroned at Christ's side (Rev 3:21; Lk 22:28–30; Mt 19:28). 8. The one who takes the sword will be killed by the sword (Rev 13:10; Mt 26:52).

However, Vos also indicates that the list can be extended.²⁰ The verses listed above also reflect Fiorenza's observation that Revelation draws most of its material from the eschatological-apocalyptic passages of the Synoptics. Within this context, the so-called "Synoptic Apocalypse" (Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21), the common material of Matthew and Luke, and the eschatological parables are worth mentioning.²¹ We can also note that the parallels that Vos mentions are mainly grouped in Revelation 1–3.

Researchers do not only look for parallels. They are also trying to find out how the transmission took place. In this respect, it is even more striking that there are many competing ideas. These ideas fall into two main groups. Some scholars believe that Revelation used the written sources, while others believe that it had access to the oral tradition.

to life in 2 Peter 3:10, and its context. ATKINSON, Jordan (2020): Paul's Overlooked Allusion to Joel 2:9 in 1 Thessalonians 5:2. In: *Themelios*. 45, 1. 74–83.

¹⁹ VOS, Louis Arthur (1965): *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse*. Kampen, J. H. Kok. Cf. AUNE 1998a, cxxvi.

²⁰ This leads Vos to discover a total of 25 parallels, while Charles names 26 couplets. CHARLES, Robert H. (1920): *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*. Vol. 1. Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark. lxxxii–lxxxvi.

²¹ FIORENZA, Elisabeth Schüssler (1985): *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*. Philadelphia, Fortress Press. 103.

To begin with the first alternative, 1. Charles claims that Revelation draws from Matthew and Luke.²² 2. Swete suggests that there are similarities between Matthew and Revelation.²³ 3. Boismard argues that the Johannine writings (John and Revelation) draw from the common literary tradition of the Synoptics, especially from Luke. 4. Vanni, more strongly than Boismard, argues that Revelation used Luke.²⁴ Concerning the oral tradition, 1. Penley suggests that there is a connection between the logions used by both Matthew and Luke and Revelation.²⁵ 2. Vos makes a similar claim, assuming that Revelation uses a more detailed tradition than the Synoptics. 3. Bauckham considers that there is an unspecified tradition that circulated in the early churches.²⁶

However, there are also much more moderate positions. 1. Aune, following Vos, argues that the logions of Jesus are somehow derived from the Synoptic Gospels. According to Aune, some of the logions were inserted during the second editing phase of Revelation. Some additional logions are considered to be later insertions by an author-editor.²⁷ 2. Beale claims that it is not possible to determine whether Revelation used a written or an oral synoptic tradition. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the differences in the Synoptic vocabulary do not lead to the conclusion that Revelation was entirely dependent on oral tradition. According to Beale, the variations must be seen in the light of the interpretive tendency of Revelation.²⁸ Since Revelation avoids using exact quotations, we can also identify with this position. Suffice it to say that Revelation also makes use of the OT by alluding to the relevant passage instead of quoting it. It is

²² CHARLES 1920, lxxxii–lxxxvi.

²³ SWETE, Henry Barclay (1911): *The Apocalypse of St. John. The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices*. London, Macmillan. clvi–clvii.

²⁴ VANNI, Ugo (1993): The Apocalypse and the Gospel of Luke. In: O’Collins, G. – Marconi, G. (eds.): *Luke and Acts*. New York, Paulist Press. 9–25.

²⁵ PENLEY, Paul T. (2010): *The Common Tradition behind Synoptic Sayings of Judgment and John’s Apocalypse. An Oral Interpretive Tradition of Old Testament Prophetic Material*. London, T. & T. Clark. 16–17.

²⁶ BAUCKHAM, Richard (1977): Synoptic Parousia Parables and the Apocalypse. In: *New Testament Studies*. 23, 2. 162–176.

²⁷ Rev 1:7, 13:10, 16:15; AUNE 1998a, cxxvi.

²⁸ BEALE, Gregory K. (2013): Review of The Common Tradition behind Synoptic Sayings of Judgment and John’s Apocalypse: An Oral Interpretive Tradition of OT Prophetic Material. In: *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 75, 1. 169–170.

therefore an arduous – sometimes impossible – task to identify allusions in a work and to trace them back to a single source.

In spite of these difficulties, we can join those who say that Revelation echoes the words of Jesus found in the Synoptic Gospels in order to strengthen its own credibility and to show, through the words of Christ, that the Risen One still has a purpose for the communities.²⁹

Comparison of Revelation 3:3, 16:15 and the Synoptic Parable

As discussed in the previous chapter, Vos counts the thief motif as one of the key parallels. This chapter examines the similarities and differences between the verses of Revelation and the synoptic parables. The comparison is extended to the context of the passages.

Starting with the context, *γρηγορέω* is used in the exhortation before the thief motif (Mt 24:42 and Lk 12:35–38). This usage is also present in Revelation, where *γρηγορέω* occurs before the thief motif. Apart from the introduction of the thief motif, another similarity is that *γρηγορέω* also recurs in the verses under analysis. Revelation 3:3 and 16:15, like Matthew 24:43, urge vigilance through *γρηγορέω*. These similarities are reinforced by the fact that Revelation 3:2.3 and 16:5 are the only places where *γρηγορέω* is used. This also applies to *κλέπτῃς*, which is only used in connection with the thief motif (Rev 3:3, 16:5). The synoptic background and setting of the motif is also confirmed in Revelation 3:3b (“you do not know at what hour I will come to you”). This line is in accord with how the Synoptics apply the parable (e.g. Mt 24:44; Lk 12:40)³⁰ and how Jesus addresses his disciples before this parable (Mt 24:36). In Revelation 3:3, *ἦκω* is used twice. The verb is employed first in reference to the coming of the thief and then to the coming of the Son of Man.³¹ This usage may also remind us of the Synoptic passages where *ἦκω* also refers to the coming of Christ. Finally, another

²⁹ AUNE 1998a, 264–5.

³⁰ WENHAM 1986, 52–56.

³¹ 2 Peter 3:10 also speaks of the coming of the DOL through the verb *ἦκω*.

phrase in Revelation 3:1–5 can be traced back to the Synoptic texts. Revelation 3:5 says that Christ will confess the overcomers before the Father (cf. Mt 10:32), and also the angels (Lk 12:8).³²

Matthew and Luke equate the appearance of the thief with the coming of the Son of Man (unlike 1 Thessalonians 5:2.4 and 2 Peter 3:10, which point to the DOL). Although the pattern in Revelation is more complex, the same can be said here. First, the relevant verses of Revelation speak in the first person singular. But the speaker in Revelation 3:3 does not identify himself. This is balanced to some extent by Revelation 3:1, which introduces the speaker, albeit cryptically (“thus says the one who holds the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars”). These cryptic lines make sense in the light of Revelation 1:13–16. Here the Son-of-Man-like figure is described as holding seven stars in his hand. The flow of the work suggests that it is Christ speaking as the Son of Man in Revelation 3:1–5. This conclusion also applies to Revelation 16:15.

It is noticeable that Revelation 3:3 and 16:15 show a greater affinity with Luke’s parable. Both Revelation 3:3 and Luke 12:39 use the word *ὄρα* in contrast to *φουλακίη* in Matthew 24:43. In Revelation 16:15, as in Luke 12:37, there is a beatitude. As some have pointed out, the influence of Luke 12:35–40 is evident not only in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15 but also in Revelation 3:20.³³

Finally, there is a study by Bauckham which deals with the thief motif in the NT. Bauckham points out that the parables of Matthew 24:43–44 and Luke 12:35–40 culminate in the exhortation to prepare. He suggests that in the course of transmission, the thief motif and the subsequent exhortation have been conflated. This is also the case in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. The blending also changes the genre since Revelation does not contain a parable. Bauckham calls this phenomenon “deparabolization”. In deparabolization, the narrative form of the parable is partially or completely dissolved, as the parable is reduced to a metaphor or a simile. As a result, the emphasis shifts even

³² PAUL, Ian (2018): *Revelation. An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press. 103.

³³ E.g. GALLUSZ, László (2016): Synoptic Tradition in the Book of Revelation: The Influence of the Lukan Parables of the Watching Servant and the Thief (Luke 12:35–40). In: Shepherd, Thomas R. – Stefanović, Ranko (eds.): *Biblical Parables. Essays in Honor of Robert M. Johnston*. Berrien Springs, Andrews University. 140–154. 145–146.

more to the use of metaphor.³⁴ The process of deparabolization is also reflected in the fact that whereas in the Synoptics the parable (Mt 24:43; Lk 12:39) and the explanation are separated (Mt 24:44 and Lk 12:30), in Revelation the thief motif and the interpretation are united. In both cases, Revelation warns using Christ's words: "I will come like a thief" (Rev 3:3; Rev 16:15). Although there is a change of genre in the thief motif, the similarities between Revelation and the Synoptic Gospels are clear as seen above.

The Thief Motif in Revelation 3:3

After examining the main synoptic connotations of the thief motif, we turn to the verses of Revelation. It is clear that the Second Coming of Christ is a recurring theme in Revelation. It is regularly discussed in the seven letters to the churches (Rev 2:5.16.25, 3:3.11). The accounts make it clear that the Parousia will bring judgement to some (Rev 2:5, 16:3.3) and blessing to others (Rev 2:25, 3:11).³⁵

In each letter, Christ reviews the actual situation of the churches. In the case of the church of Sardis, the main voice is of concern and criticism. Revelation 3:1 sees the church's present situation in this way: "Your name is that you live, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1). In the following verses, the serious diagnosis is continued with exhortations and warnings. So, we read that Christ exhorts the church to be awake (*γίνου γρηγορῶν*) and to awaken those who are "dying" (Rev 3:2). These verses introduce the reference to the coming of Christ. After these verses, we read that if those who are sinking into spiritual death are not revived, they will be surprised by the sudden coming of Christ who appears like a thief (Rev 3:3). The words of Revelation 3:3 are understood as a warning, which intended to encourage the weary by hinting at a possible negative outcome.³⁶

As Roloff argues, the imagery is more striking than that in the synoptic parables because here watch and vigilance are linked to the "awakening" of the "dying" church.

³⁴ BAUCKHAM, Richard (1983): Synoptic Parousia Parables Again. In: *New Testament Studies*. 29, 1. 129–132.

³⁵ AUNE 1998a, 221.

³⁶ THOMAS, Robert L. (1996): The Comings of Christ in Revelation 2–3. In: *The Master's Seminary Journal*. 7, 2. 153–181. 164.

Moreover, the members of the church in Sardis are not only responsible for being awake but also for awakening their “sleepy” brothers and sisters.³⁷

Almost all commentators refer to two infamous incidents in the history of Sardis. Twice the city fell because the defenders miscalculated their position, relying on the advantageous location of the town. Everyone was convinced that it would be impossible to take the city that was built on a 400 meters high hill (Lucianus Merc. Cond. 13). The first to challenge this illusion was Cyrus, who triumphed in 549 BC by taking advantage of the defenders’ carelessness. According to Herodotus, Cyrus’s soldiers sneaked in through a breach at night and were stunned to find that not a single soldier was guarding Sardis (Herodotus 1.47–91). A few centuries later, it was Antiochus III who took advantage of the false sense of security to achieve victory (Thucydides, PW 1.115).³⁸

Interpreters take two positions on the warning of Revelation 3:3. The first view is that the verse does not refer to the Second Coming of Christ, but it rather warns that Christ is about to enter the stage of history to rebuke and judge those who have fallen asleep.³⁹ Others believe that the warning in Revelation 3:3 refers to the Parousia.⁴⁰ It is significant that the thief motif in Revelation 16:15 can be seen in this way.⁴¹ Moreover, the rest of the NT uses the thief motif in connection with the coming of the Son of Man and the DOL, i.e. in connection with the Parousia. As already noted, Revelation 3:3b contains two thoughts that echo the Synoptic passages on the Parousia. In the lens of the Synoptics, the exegetical emphasis of *καί* is assumed to bridge the two clauses of Revelation 3:3. Revelation 3:3b is thus translated as “I will come like a thief, that is, you will not know at what hour I will come to you.” In summary, both Revelation 3:3a and 3:3b focus on the Second Coming. Revelation 3:3 incorporates the same motifs found in the Synoptics, along with their emphasis, into his warning to the Sardinians.

³⁷ ROLOFF 1993, 58.

³⁸ Cf. GALLUSZ 2016, 140–154.

³⁹ E.g. BEALE, Gregory K. (1999): *The Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans. 275; PAUL 2018, 101–102.

⁴⁰ BAUCKHAM 1977, 170–173.

⁴¹ Beale also acknowledges the legitimacy of this argument: BEALE 1999, 275.

The Thief Motif in Revelation 16:15

Revelation 16:12–16 describes the outpouring of the sixth bowl and its effects. From Revelation 16:13 on, the preparations for the Battle of Armageddon begin to develop. However, the flow of events is interrupted at Revelation 16:15. After this break, Revelation 16:16 picks up the line of Revelation 16:14 to continue the description.

Revelation 16:15 repeatedly departs from the context of Revelation 16:12–16. First, the first person singular of Revelation 16:15 breaks with the descriptive character of the context. The discontinuity is softened slightly as Revelation 16 makes room for three additional sayings. In two cases, the narrator reveals the identity of the speaker. This is how the voice of the angel (16:5) and the voice of the altar (Rev 16:7) are heard. The third passage does not introduce the speaker, but it leads up to the speech (Rev 16:17). The uniqueness of Revelation 16:15 is also shown by the absence of an introduction to the speech or the speaker. However, despite the brevity of the text, the outline of the work, and especially Revelation 3:3, indicate that the voice of the Son of Man is heard here. According to Lohmeyer, this is also unusual because no other passage in Revelation 4:1–21:5 quotes or alludes to the words of Christ.⁴² Finally, Revelation 16:15 is also a narrative break. Although Revelation 16:12–14:16 describes the preparations of the hostile army, in Revelation 16:15 Christ addresses His own to call them to endurance and perseverance.

We can see exactly how Revelation 16:15 differs from the narrower and wider contexts. However, it is not clear to scholars how the verse came to occupy its actual place. Charles and Lohmeyer argue that Revelation 16:15 should be placed immediately before Revelation 3:3, which is part of the epistle to the church of Sardis.⁴³ We share Takács's criticism that the work is unlikely to try to say (...that it is unlikely that the work is trying to state...) the same thing twice in a row (nor is this the case elsewhere in Revelation).⁴⁴ According to Aune, the peculiarities of Revelation 16:15 result from the many stages of redaction that led to its present form. He believes that the text here was added during the second phase of editing.⁴⁵ Aune argues that it was primarily the framework that was

⁴² LOHMEYER, Ernst (1926): *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck. 133.

⁴³ CHARLES 1920, 80; LOHMEYER 1926, 133.

⁴⁴ TAKÁCS, Gyula (2000): *A Jelenések könyve*. Budapest, Paulus Hungarus – Kairos. 336.

⁴⁵ Rev 1:3–14, 2:1–3:22, 22:5–21.

composed during the second phase.⁴⁶ In his view, Revelation 16 did not originate during this editing phase, and so he offers an additional explanation. He suggests that Revelation 16:15 was influenced by Revelation 3:3 to reach its present position. This view, however, leads to another problem. Revelation 16:15 is a longer verse, of which the thief motif is only a small part. Although Aune also points out the link between Revelation 16:15b and 3:2–3, he is silent on Revelation 16:5c.⁴⁷ According to Rissi's suggestion, the inversion of Revelation 16:15 and 16:16 results in a more seamless text since the unit would culminate in Christ's words. However, this observation is weakened by the presence of sudden shifts elsewhere in Revelation (Rev 13:9–10, 14:12–13).⁴⁸ In summary, these various – and by no means exhaustive – readings also convince us that Revelation 16:15 is an integral part of Revelation 16:12–16.

Having considered the suggestions against the integrity of Revelation 16:15, we now turn to the reasons for arguing that the verse can be properly understood in its present context. The starting point is that the thief motif of Revelation 16:15 fits neatly into the eschatological tableau of Revelation 16:12–16. This claim is best confirmed by the similarity between the thief motif and the phrase *τῆς ἡμέρας τῆς μεγάλης τοῦ θεοῦ* (Rev 16:14).⁴⁹

To see this better, a brief outline of the latter motif is necessary. The syntagm of Revelation 16:14 is a product of the OT concept of DOL. In this case, the Minor Prophets deserve special attention, especially Joel.⁵⁰ First, because in Joel 2:11 (LXX) the similar phrase *μεγάλη ἡ ἡμέρα τοῦ κυρίου* is used, and in Zephaniah 1:14 (LXX) the phrase *ἡμέρα κυρίου ἡ μεγάλη* is employed.⁵¹

⁴⁶ AUNE, David (1998b): *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52b). Dallas, Word Books Publisher. 896.

⁴⁷ The *γρηγορέω* in Revelation 3:2–3 is also found in Revelation 16:15b. Nine times in the work, *τηρέω* is also found in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. Finally, *ἰμάτιον* is also found in Revelation 3:4.5 and 16:15.

⁴⁸ BEALE 1999, 836; TAKÁCS 2000, 336.

⁴⁹ In Revelation, *θεός* points to the Father.

⁵⁰ Cf. JAUHAINEN, Marko (2009): The Minor Prophets in Revelation. In: Menken, Maarten J. J. – Moyise, Steve (eds.): *Minor Prophets in the New Testament*. London, T & T Clark. 155–171.

⁵¹ BEALE 1999, 835. In Revelation 16:14, in contrast to the OT, *κύριος* is replaced by *θεός*. Revelation alludes to the relevant verses instead of giving the exact quotes.

Revelation 16:14 refers to the DOL by using a number of eschatological features. In fact, Revelation 16:12–16 is marked by elements associated with the DOL. Prominent among these is the recurring theme of the great gathering of armies (Rev 16:12–16). Notably, the DOL and the gathering of the nations against God are also tied together in the book of Joel (Joel 4:2.12.14). This textual clue may also help us understand why Revelation 16:12–16 links the DOL with the gathering of the nations.⁵²

The DOL and the thief motif in the book of Joel are also linked. Joel 2:1–11 compares the DOL to a plague of locusts. Joel 2:9 (LXX) describes the locusts as being like thieves (*ὡς κλέπται*) who climb the walls and enter through the windows, bringing misery. Certainly, despite the similar phraseology, the differences between Joel 2:9 and Revelation 16:14–15 are obvious. First, Joel 2:1–11 compares the DOL to a plague of locusts. According to Joel, it is impossible to protect oneself from this plague of locusts because the locusts will slip through the window like a thief. Revelation 16:14–15 describes how the ungodly powers are carefully preparing for the great battle, but in due time – with the suddenness of a thief – the figure like the Son of Man appears to fight against the evil powers (cf. Rev 19:11). By referring to the locusts as finding their way like the craftiness of the thief, Joel only adds to the agony of the DOL. Revelation 16:15 refers to the sudden coming of Christ in a way that exhorts the hearers. Despite the clear difference, the parallels with the book of Joel cannot be overlooked. Apart from the former one, Joel 2:1–11 can also be used as a reference because of its fundamental importance in Revelation 9:1–12.

The motif of the thief and the DOL are more closely related elsewhere in the NT. It has been noted that the NT twice compares the DOL with the coming of the thief (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Peter 3:10).⁵³ These verses do not refer to the Son of Man but to the DOL coming with the suddenness of the thief. Although Revelation 16:15 compares the coming of Christ – not the DOL – with the unexpected appearance of the thief, it is noteworthy that the immediate context refers to the DOL (Rev 16:14).

⁵² There is, however, some difference between the two phases. While in Joel 4 it is God who gathers the nations, Revelation 16:12–16 says that the kings of the earth will rise up themselves.

⁵³ Notably, *ρηγορέω* is also used in 1 Thessalonians 5:6.10.

On the basis of the above, two conclusions can certainly be drawn. First, Revelation 16:15 fits into the eschatological tableau of Revelation 16:12–16. Even though Revelation 16:15 differs from the context in a number of ways, this similarity is worth exploring among the differences. Second, the different emphasis of Revelation 16:15 is explained by the fact that Revelation 16:14 focuses on the DOL and God’s coming, whereas Revelation 16:15 focuses on the coming of Christ. This latter observation is supported in the light of Revelation 6:12–17, which also refers to the events of the last day, borrowing Joel’s imagery (e.g. Rev 6:12; Joel 3:4). While Joel 2:11 says that on the DOL no man can stand before God, Revelation 6:17 says that on the Day of Wrath no man can stand before God *and the Lamb*. It can therefore be seen that, along with Revelation 16:14–15, the latter verse also refers to the shared role of God and the Lamb.

Finally, there is a text-critical issue to consider. Some manuscripts of Revelation 16:15 speak of the thief-like coming of Christ in the third person singular (*ἔρχεται*; \aleph^* , pc, syph, Prim Be). Beale thinks that these variants may have been inspired by the passages in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10, which speak of the coming of the DOL in the third person.⁵⁴ This reading suggests that some of the manuscripts were intended to emphasize even more the connection between the DOL and the coming of Christ. Of course, the development of textual variants may also be caused by the descriptive nature of the texts in the immediate context of Revelation 16:15. It is possible that the variants (also) sought to bring the wording of Revelation 16:15 into line with the neighbouring verses.

Revelation 3:3 and 16:15

After the previous overview, we will now turn our attention to the similarities and differences between Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. The main similarities are: 1. The phrase *ὡς κλέπτης*. 2. The verb *γρηγορέω* (these two similarities are significant because these words are found only here in Revelation). 3. The coming of the thief is matched by the sudden appearance of the Son of Man. 4. Both contexts refer to the robe (*ἱμάτιον* Rev 3:4, 5, and 16:15). 5. In addition to *ὡς κλέπτης*, there are other

⁵⁴ BEALE 1999, 838.

synoptic allusions in both verses. Thus, one reads that the time of the coming cannot be known (Rev 3:3; cf. Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32–33; Lk 12:40). Revelation 16:15 has similarities with the beatitude in Luke 12:37.

This verse warns that unless the church awakens from its slumber, Christ's coming will come with the suddenness of a thief. Revelation 16:15 is an encouragement that while the satanic powers are gaining strength, Christ is assuring his people of his coming. There is also a difference in wording. In Revelation 3:3, ἤκω, in Revelation 16:15, ἔρχομαι marks the coming of Christ. This difference also confirms that Revelation 16:15 cannot be interpreted as an appendix to Revelation 3:3 but that the verse has its own *raison d'être*.

Summary

This paper examines the motif of the thief in Revelation 3:3 and 16:15. The verses are analysed in the light of other NT occurrences and possible OT parallels. With this in mind, the first part of the paper deals with the parable of the thief. The parable is found in Matthew 24:43–44 and Luke 12:39–40. While the main points of the parable are the same (e.g. οἰκοδοσπότης and κλέπτης, exhortation following the parable), some details are different (e.g. context).

In the case of Revelation, a closer examination of the thief motif has several advantages. First, it helps to resolve an exegetical problem in Revelation 3:3. Since the other occurrences of the thief motif refer to the coming of Christ or the DOL (Rev 16:14–15; cf. 1 Thess 5:2.4; 2 Pet 3:10), it is reasonable to assume that Revelation 3:3 also refers to end-time events. It is not claimed that every exegetical difficulty in Revelation can be answered on the basis of a motif, but seeing the case of the thief motif, this perspective cannot be neglected in further research.

Considering Revelation 16:15, an even stronger point is made. As indicated above, there are several competing theories about the composition of Revelation. A closer examination of the thief motif in Revelation 16:15 strengthens the fact that the passage was an integral part of the narrative. This argument places the burden of proof on those who suggest that the verse was inserted later. The claims made here are worthy

of consideration by those who study the composition of Revelation. In further research, it is also worth considering whether it is possible to make a similar argument for other verses, as we have done in the case of Revelation 16:15.

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