THE MEANING OF “HIDDEN MANNA” IN REV 2:17

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In Rev 2:17, Christ said to the church in Pergamum, “To him who overcomes, to him I will give of the hidden manna.”² Over the centuries, many scholars have questioned the meaning of the “hidden manna.” Most of the views fit into one of three categories, although several scholars combine the views. The purpose of this study is to show that the “hidden manna” in Rev 2:17 alludes to literal Old Testament (OT) manna, but ultimately refers to Christ as the agent of eschatological salvation.³ The study will begin with a survey of the three major views, followed by a review of the biblical literature related to manna. It will conclude by examining the context of Rev 2:17 and the ramifications of the previous surveys upon the understanding of the text.

I. SURVEY OF THE MAJOR VIEWS

There are three basic types of major views regarding the meaning of this symbol, although some scholars combine one or more interpretations or acknowledge that all of the interpretations are possible.⁴

1. Manna in the Ark. The majority of scholarship favors the view that the manna preserved in the Ark of the Covenant is in view in Rev 2:17. Those who hold this view differ as to whether the expectation is solely from the Bible or whether this is in conjunction with Jewish expectation.

a. From the Scriptures exclusively. Some scholars view Rev 2:17 as an allusion to the jar of manna that was kept for a memorial based solely on the OT.⁵ The jar was either kept in the temple or in the Ark of the Covenant.⁶ In this view, the manna is “hidden” because its location is no longer known to man. The return of the Ark in Rev 11:19 is when this symbol will be fulfilled according to this view.⁷

¹ http://ortizmin.wordpress.com/
² Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are the author’s own translation.
³ Eschatological salvation refers to salvation in the end times, i.e. the ultimate salvation in which the believer is converted completely from this life to eternal life.
⁴ E.g. Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 199: “The other three suggestions may be incorporated with this identification. The symbolism of future reward, an allusion to Christ as the true manna, and present satisfaction of believers with this spiritual bread as a foretaste of future fullness are all in the background of the hidden manna.” See also David Hocking, The Coming World Leader: Understanding the Book of Revelation (Portland: Multnomah, 1998) 65.
⁵ See Exod 16 below. Thomas, Revelation 1-7, 199.
⁶ See Heb 9:1-5 below.
⁷ Thomas, Revelation 1-7, 199.
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*b. From extra-biblical sources.* Many scholars also hold to the view that there is an element of Jewish expectation to be found in Rev 2:17. Those who hold this view primarily cite 2 Macc 2:4-8 and 3 Apoc. Bar. 6:7-9. These passages, combined with Heb 9:4, lead them to conclude that John is referring to the Jewish expectation that the Ark of the Covenant (and, by implication, the jar of manna) would return during the reign of the Messiah.

2. **Manna as a type of the Divine.** Those who hold that the manna is a type of the divine are split into two main views: the Jewish extra-biblical view, as depicted by Philo, and the view that the manna is a type of Christ Himself.

   a. **The Jewish view.** Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50AD) combined OT thought with Hellenistic philosophy to produce his allegories. When writing on the manna of the OT, he viewed it as a type of the divine *logos* (word). Since Philo comes from the Hellenistic philosophical viewpoint, this is a distinct view from the view that the manna refers to Christ.

   b. **Manna is Christ.** Those who hold that Christ is the referent of the hidden manna find their primary support in John 6. In this view, manna is the type and Christ is the antitype. The manna would then be hidden because Christ is not currently seen but will be seen.

3. **Manna as salvation.** Scholars who hold that the manna represents salvation occasionally differ as to whether there is a present view to this salvation or if it represents future salvation. Most hold the view that it represents both present and future salvation and differ only on what is being emphasized in the passage. Due to salvation being tied so

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10 I do not take the position that the Hellenistic concept of *logos* is primarily in view in John 1. See Andreas Köstenberger, *Encountering John: the Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 52.


13 E.g. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 70: “(F)or the true believer in the Lord Jesus there is the hidden Manna, that bread from heaven which the world does not know or see which is the present spiritual food of the saints as well as a part of their future heritage.” See also Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 82.
closely to Christ, those who hold this view can often be categorized as holding the view that
the manna is Christ.

4. Multiple views. Most of the scholarship blends one or more of the views. Commonly this mixture will take an OT allusion and an NT fulfillment. This is probably
the strongest of the views in that it takes the manna of the OT as a type of the NT manna and
sees Rev 2:17 as a reference to the type itself.

II. SURVEY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

In order to understand the meaning of the hidden manna in Rev 2:17, it is necessary
to examine the uses of manna in the OT, OT Apocrypha, and NT.

1. OT Usage. Manna appears in six OT passages, two of which are especially
significant for this study.

a. Exod 16:1-36. The first appearance of manna in Scripture is Exod 16. The word
itself appears in vv. 31, 33, and 35, but the entire chapter deals with the first appearance of
manna. The setting is the beginning of the wilderness wandering, when the Israelites began
to run out of food and to complain against Moses and God. God declared that He would “rain
bread from heaven for them” (v. 4 NKJ). The people were to go out to gather manna each
morning to a certain quota and the purpose of the gathering was “that I may test them,
whether they will walk in My law or not” (v. 4 NKJ). The Israelites failed this test (vv. 20,
27-30). In v. 15, the etymology of the word manna is given as the Israelites inquired, “What
is it?” In v. 31, the Israelites made this name official.

Of significance to this study are vv. 32-35 in which Moses instructed Aaron to “take
a pot and put an omer of manna in it, and lay it up before the LORD, to be kept for your
generations” (v. 32 NKJ). This is the jar of manna to which many scholars believe the hidden
manna in Rev 2:17 refers. If this is the referrent, the manna would be hidden because it was
kept out of view, possibly in the Ark of the Covenant. Alternatively, it is hidden because the
manna has been lost to man since the destruction of the first temple.

b. Deut 8:1-20. Although manna appears elsewhere in the Pentateuch, Deut 8 is
significant because Moses detailed the purpose of the manna as a sign: “That He might make
you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds

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14 Walvoord, Revelation, 70; Thomas, Revelation 1-3, 199.
15 E.g. Henry Alford, Hebrews-Revelation (The Greek Testament; Chicago: Moody, 1958) 4:571:
“(T)here is unmistakably an allusion to the proper and heavenly food of the children of Israel, as contrasted
with the unhallowed idol-offerings; but beyond that, there is an allusion again...to our Lord’s discourse in
John vi., where He describes Himself as the true bread from heaven.”
16 The other passages are Num 11:6-9, Josh 5:12, Neh 9:20, Ps 78:24 (LXX 77:24). These
passages refer back to the literal manna of Exod 16 in particular and do not add anything significant to the
study of the manna as a symbol.
17 The purpose of the gathering is different from the purpose of the manna. See the discussion
below on Deut 8.
from the mouth of the LORD” (v. 3 NKJ; italics original). The purpose of the manna was not merely to feed the Israelites but also to remind them that life does not derive from the food: it derives from God. In this sense, the manna can be considered a type of life, literal or spiritual.

2. Extra-biblical usage. Scholars favoring the view that the author of Revelation has in view here the Jewish expectation of the return of the manna along with the Ark of the Covenant glean primarily from 2 Macc 2:4-8 and 3 Apoc. Bar. 6:5-10.

a. 2 Macc 2:4-8. The passage from 2 Macc 2 is the primary support for the view that Jeremiah hid the Ark of the Covenant when Jerusalem was about to be destroyed.

It was also contained in the same writing, that the prophet, being warned of God, commanded the tabernacle and the ark to go with him, as he went forth into the mountain, where Moses climbed up, and saw the heritage of God. And when Jeremy came thither, he found an hollow cave, wherein he laid the tabernacle, and the ark, and the altar of incense, and so stopped the door. And some of those that followed him came to mark the way, but they could not find it. Which when Jeremy perceived, he blamed them, saying, As for that place, it shall be unknown until the time that God gather his people again together, and receive them unto mercy. Then shall the Lord shew them these things, and the glory of the Lord shall appear, and the cloud also, as it was shewed under Moses, and as when Solomon desired that the place might be honourably sanctified.

According to this passage, Jeremiah hid it in a place no one would be able to find it, traditionally Mt. Nebo. Manna is not mentioned in this passage. Manna only comes into the understanding of this passage because of Heb 9:4. Here the Ark will be hidden “until the time that God gather his people again together, and receive them unto mercy.” By implication, this is an eschatological event.

b. 3 Apoc. Bar. 6:5-10. The passage from 3 Apoc. Bar. depicts an angel hiding the Ark of the Covenant along with other temple fixtures:

And another angel began to descend from heaven, and said unto them: "Hold your lamps, and do not light them till I tell you. For I am first sent to speak a word to the earth, and to place in it what the Lord the Most High has commanded me." And I saw him descend into the Holy of Holies, and take from thence the veil, and the holy ephod, and the mercy-seat, and the two tables, and the holy raiment of the priests, and the altar of incense, and the forty-eight precious stones, wherewith the priest was adorned, and all the holy vessels of the tabernacle. And he spake to the earth with a loud voice: "Earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the mighty God, and receive what I commit to

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18 The word “word” does not appear in the Hebrew of this text; it does appear in LXX texts.
19 The word “manna” is also found in Bar 1:10, but this usage has no bearing on the study.
thee, and guard them until the last times, so that, when thou art ordered, thou mayst restore them, so that strangers may not get possession of them. For the time comes when Jerusalem also will be delivered up for a time, until it is said, that it is again restored for ever. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up.”

As with the reference from 2 Macc, this passage does not mention the manna, except perhaps in an understanding of “all the holy vessels of the tabernacle” or as an interpolation from “the mercy-seat, and the two tables” and Heb 9:4. This passage also indicated that the Ark will not be returned “until the last times.”

3. NT Usage. There are two NT passages outside of Rev 2:17 that use the word manna: John 6 and Heb 9:1-5.

a. John 6. John 6 is the most significant passage for those who hold the view that the “hidden manna” is Christ and is only slightly less significant for those who hold that salvation is exclusively in view. The word manna appears twice (vv. 31, 49) in this passage, but more significant is the presence of Christ’s “I am” statement (vv. 35, 48, 51) in which He stated twice that He is the “bread of life” (vv. 35, 48) and once that He is the “living bread, which has come down from heaven” (v. 51). With these statements, Christ identified Himself as the antitype of the OT manna, “the bread from heaven” which God “gave them to eat” (v. 31; see also Neh 9:15). In this regard, the passage strongly supports those who believe that Christ is in view, at least with regard to the manna.

However, to stop at Christ as the referrent is to comprehend only part of the meaning of this passage. As with each of the “I am” statements in the Fourth Gospel (see 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5), Jesus elaborates on what this means. As with Nicodemus (3:3, 5), He uses difficult sayings to explain the metaphor. In vv. 40, 44, and 54, Christ uses three parallel statements, each beginning differently but ending the same way, in order to explain the significance of Himself as the bread of life:

A1: “Everyone who sees the Son and believe in Him may have everlasting life;” (v. 40)
A2: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws him,” (v. 44)
A3: “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life,” (v. 54)
B: “And I will raise him up at the last day” (vv. 40, 44, 54)22

The significance of the metaphor is eschatological salvation: “I will raise him up at the last day.” All three verses make clear that the individual who will be raised up at the last day is a believer: v. 40 uses the verb “believes” and also states the individual will have eternal life; v. 44 indicates that the individual has been drawn by the Father, used elsewhere in John to refer to believers (see 12:32); and v. 54, using “hard sayings” (see v. 60), indicates again that this is an individual who has eternal life. In each verse, the final view is to the

22 There are minor differences in the Greek of the three B sections, although the English translation is still the same.
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“end” of salvation (as opposed to the beginning, regeneration; see 3:3, 5). In John 6, Christ as the manna is the agent of eschatological salvation. The manna is hidden today either because Christ has not been fully revealed yet (see Rev 1:1) or because the reference is to the end of salvation, which comes at the last day.

b. Heb 9:1-5. Hebrews 9 is a major support for the view that the hidden manna is the manna in the Ark and is the most important scriptural support for the Jewish expectation view (along with Rev 11:19). The word manna is used in v. 4. This is the only biblical indication that the jar of manna was in the Ark of the Covenant (see Deut 10:1-5, 8; 1 Kings 8:9; and 2 Chr 5:10). Taken together with Rev 11:9, in which the Ark of the Covenant returns, support can then be found for the view that Rev 2:17 refers to the Jewish expectation of the return of the Ark and the manna as in 2 Macc 2:7, 8. By itself it, at the very least, serves as an NT reference to the jar of manna from Exod 16.

III. EXEGESIS OF REV 2:17

In examining the passage and comparing the views, it is necessary to keep in mind three primary concerns: the context of the passage, the meaning of the word “hidden,” and the eschatological nature of the promises to the overcomer.23

1. Context. The context of Rev 2:17 is Christ’s message to the church at Pergamum.24 The church had allowed sinful errors into their assembly including the consuming of meat offered to idols and the practice of sexual immorality (v. 14). Christ advised the church to repent or to suffer the consequences of their sins, which include death. Christ promised to the believer the hidden manna and a white stone.25

   This context in mind, any interpretation of the promise to the overcomer should keep in mind that the promised reward appears to be in contrast to the meat offered to idols. Therefore, the expected allusion should be something that is superior to the meat that is sacrificed to idols.

   2. The meaning of “hidden.” While the OT and NT surveys give strong insight into possible meanings of the manna, the word “hidden” is not so easily defined. A survey of the uses reveals simply that it means “hidden.”26 The question that must be considered is what it means that the manna is hidden. Any view that attempts to define the hidden manna without addressing this concern must be found wanting.

   3. The eschatological nature of the promises to the overcomer. The promises to the overcomer are included at the end of each letter to the seven churches. The other six promises are very clearly eschatological promises: to eat from the tree of life (2:7), to be unhurt by the
second death (2:11), to have power over the nations and to receive the Morning Star (2:26-28), to be clothed in white garments and to have his name confessed by Christ before the Father and His angels (3:5), to be made a pillar in the temple of God (3:12), and to sit on the thrown with Christ (3:21). This context and the use of the future “will give” in 2:17 clearly indicate that the promises to the overcomer are all meant to be future eschatological rewards. Therefore, any view must also be eschatologically possible.

4. Evaluating the views. Each of the views has strong points. The only view that can truly be said to have a significant weakness is the view that this is a reference to Jewish expectation, because it relies so heavily on extra-biblical sources and because reference to the manna is not found in many of the support passages. However, even that cannot completely be ruled out as John would almost certainly have been aware of the Jewish expectations. The question is to what was Jesus referring.

In regards to the context, the allusion to the OT manna can certainly be considered to be superior to meat offered to idols. Whether the manna in the Ark or the manna that was eaten in the desert is in view, this fits the context. The manna can be hidden either in that it no longer appears in this world or in that it was “hidden” in a jar to be kept as a memorial or a combination of the two.” Either of these views can certainly fit eschatologically, whether in a literal or a figurative sense. For these reasons, it is quite reasonable to say that John has the OT manna in view. Nevertheless, because it is difficult to ascertain whether the manna in the Ark was in view or not, it is recommended that this reference be taken as an allusion to the OT manna in general rather than in specific.

Christ is certainly superior to the meat offered to idols and may be considered to be hidden in this time in that, even though the believer has a foretaste of Him, the full revelation of Christ is yet future. The NT indicates that Christ is the antitype of the OT manna, as seen in John 6. In the OT, manna represented life. In the NT, Christ is life (see John 14:6). The full revelation of Christ is certainly an eschatological reward to the believer also. Therefore, Christ fulfills the needs of the context, the reference to “hidden,” and the eschatological needs of the passage. Christ would also almost certainly be in view in John’s understanding.

Lastly, salvation is superior to the meat offered to idols. Those who continued in eating the meat offered to idols would be at war with Christ (v. 16), whereas those who are believers have peace with Christ (see Rom 5:1). Salvation may be understood to be hidden in that it is only positional in this life. The full revelation of salvation will be found at the last day (John 6:40, 44, 54), thus satisfying the eschatological fulfillment.

It is most likely that Jesus has in mind all three here. He refers to the OT manna simply by using the word. The manna was a type of life, which is found in Christ. Christ is ultimately the life and the One who will raise up the believer at the last day. This fits the context in that it is superior to the meat offered to idols and is certainly a gift that will be given to all believers. It also fits the meaning of the word “hidden” in that it represents ultimate eschatological salvation that will not be fully revealed until the last day.

27 The future verb is used in each of the promises as well as in 2:10 and 2:23.
28 Note especially the reference to Balaam in v. 14, providing a literal context of the OT manna as well.
IV. Conclusion

While it is impossible to eliminate any one view due to the nature of symbols in Revelation, the evidence most strongly supports the conclusion that the “hidden manna” of Rev 2:17, while alluding to literal OT manna, ultimately refers to Christ as the agent of eschatological salvation. A survey of the major views yielded that scholars are split as to the meaning of the symbol and quite often favor a combination of meanings. The study of the OT showed that God’s purpose in sending the manna was so that the Israelites would know that life ultimately came from Him. The study of NT usages showed that Jesus demonstrated Himself to be the antitype of the manna, being the One who gives life eschatologically. Finally, examining the context of Rev 2:17 showed that Christ as the antitype of the hidden manna fit the criteria for manna that is superior to the food offered to idols, that is hidden in that it is not fully revealed in this present age, and that is to be revealed as an eschatological reward for the overcomer. Only those who are drawn by the Father to come to Christ and who have seen the Son and believe in Him will be raised up at the last day. These, the believers, are those who overcome and who will receive the hidden manna that is Christ as the agent of salvation.