



On the Verge of the Millennium: A History of the Interpretation of Revelation

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THE POWER OF A BOOK CAN BE SEEN IN ITS EFFECTS, AND FEW BOOKS HAVE HAD more dramatic effects than Revelation. In positive terms, Revelation has inspired countless sermons and theological treatises, artistic works, and musical compositions ranging from the triumphant "Hallelujah Chorus" to the gentle strains of "Jerusalem My Happy Home."¹ In negative terms, it has fed social upheaval and sectarian religious movements that have often foundered on misguided attempts to discern the date of Christ's return. Attempts to control the effects of the book by ignoring it or dismissing it have not been successful; Revelation's secrets are too alluring. We do better to consider the effects the book has had on Christians over the centuries and to let this history of influence help shape a way to read the book that is both faithful and compelling.

I. FUTURISTIC AND TIMELESS INTERPRETATIONS

Interpretation of the book of Revelation in antiquity revolved around two positions. Some understood Revelation to be primarily a message about the future

¹See my article "The Distant Triumph Song: Music and the Book of Revelation," *Word & World* 12/3 (1992) 243-249.

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of the world whereas others took it to be a timeless message about God's relationship to human beings. The interplay between the futuristic and timeless elements of the book engages interpreters down to the present.

Futuristic readings of Revelation were especially popular in the western part of the Roman empire. Justin Martyr (died ca. 165), whose extant writings were composed in Rome, and Irenaeus (died ca. 200), bishop of Lyons in southern France, expected the saints to be gathered together in a restored Jerusalem on earth where they would live with Christ for a thousand years (Rev 20:4-6). In this kingdom the biblical promises of an earthly paradise would come to their fulfillment. God had promised a time when life-expectancy would be increased and people would "build houses and inhabit them"; they would "plant vineyards and eat their fruit," able to enjoy the work of their hands without fear of loss. In that day the "wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox" (Isa 65:20-25). Only after these promises concerning an earthly paradise were fulfilled would the last judgment take place and the faithful enter into life everlasting.²

During the reign of Diocletian, the instigator of the last great persecution of the church before Constantine, Victorinus of Pettau (martyred ca. 304) composed what has become the oldest extant commentary on Revelation. Intensely futuristic in his outlook, Victorinus saw in Revelation a reflection of the embattled church of his own time, and he awaited the inauguration of Christ's thousand-year reign on earth. The biblical scholar Jerome (died 420) rejected Victorinus's literalistic view of the millennium, insisting that the saints "will in no wise have an earthly kingdom, but only a celestial one; thus must cease the fable of one thousand years."³ Jerome himself spiritualized the millennial passage in Revelation, arguing that it had multiple levels of meaning. At the same time he valued much of Victorinus's commentary and reissued it after making editorial changes. The commentary's most enduring contribution was *the theory of recapitulation*. According to this view, Revelation did not depict the events of the end times in a straightforward linear way, beginning with the tribulations in chapter 6 and ending with the New Jerusalem in chapter 21. Instead the book's kaleidoscopic cycles of visions – seven seals, seven trumpets, seven plagues – presented readers with a recurring series of typological events. This insight has profoundly influenced contemporary interpretation of Revelation.⁴

In contrast to these futuristic interpretations, Christians in the east, especially

²See Justin's *Dialogue With Trypho* 80-81 and Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* 5.35.1-2. In response we should note that Revelation clearly affirms that God will be faithful to his promises, but indicates that the peaceable vision of Isa 65:17-25 should be located in the new Jerusalem beyond the millennium and last judgment (Rev 21:1-5).

³Quoted by Robert E. Lerner, "The Medieval Return to the Thousand-Year Sabbath," in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1992) 51.

⁴See Günther Bornkamm, "Die Komposition der apokalyptischen Visionen in der Offenbarung Johannis," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 36 (1937) 132-149; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976) 5-55.

in Alexandria, interpreted Revelation as a presentation of timeless truths. Their premier biblical scholar was Origen (died ca. 254), who sought to uncover the spiritual meaning of scripture, arguing that its many apparent incongruities pointed to higher truths and that its prophecies could not be taken in a strictly literal sense. Origen had no interest in identifying the time or the place of the battle of Armageddon (Rev 19:11-21), since he understood that the text dealt with the triumph of God over sin and vice. He pointed out that the text identifies the warrior Christ with "the word of God" (19:13). Therefore, "heaven is opened" (19:11) when the divine word gives people the light of truth, and victory is won when the knowledge of truth destroys all that is irrational and wicked in the soul.⁵ Following this line of interpretation, Origen's student Dionysius of Alexandria (died ca. 264) vigorously attacked the idea that Christ would establish a thousand-year kingdom on earth "devoted to bodily indulgence" such as "the full satisfaction of the belly and lower lusts," urging that "some deeper meaning underlies the words."⁶

The fourth century witnessed a kind of rapprochement between the futuristic and the timeless interpretations. If Jerome's editing allowed Victorinus's eschatological commentary to be read in a more timeless way, the Donatist writer Tyconius (died ca. 400) gave allegorical exegesis a greater sense of historical realism. Tyconius acknowledged that Revelation predicted actual persecutions like those experienced by the Donatists at the hands of Rome, but he insisted that these events in no way allowed people to declare that the end had arrived. God's timetable remained hidden. He did argue, however, that the church had already entered the millennium. Rev 20:2 said that the millennium would begin when Satan was "bound" and Matt 12:29 said that Christ's exorcisms proved that he had already come to "bind" Satan and bring in the kingdom. By placing these texts together Tyconius concluded that the thousand-year kingdom began with the first advent of Christ. People entered this millennial kingdom through the "first resurrection" (Rev 20:4-6), which he identified with baptism; the second resurrection (20:11-13) would be the bodily resurrection at the end of time. The conversion of Constantine and the spread of Christianity gave evidence that the rule of the saints had begun. The righteous and the unrighteous would exist side by side in the church even during this millennial period. Satan had been "bound" but would not be annihilated until the end.

Augustine (died 430) included this reading of Revelation in his *City of God* (book 20), thereby establishing its influence upon Christians for centuries. In his later years he vigorously opposed speculations about a future millennial period and proposed that the thousand years did not define an exact period of time but was a way of speaking about time as a totality (*City of God* 18.53; 20.7). Augustine adopted much of Tyconius's approach because he found it to be a way of reading Revelation that was both universal in scope and applicable to the interior life of the

⁵Origen, *Commentary on John 2.4* (*Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10:325-327).

⁶Quotations of Dionysius are from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.24.1 and 7.25.3-4.

Christian. Revelation disclosed “the dynamics of salvation, the interplay of grace, free will, and divine foreknowledge,” which are “constant across nations, times, and individuals: whether for Jacob or for the generation of the Babylonian captivity, for Paul or for the contemporary believer they remain the same.”⁷

II. REVELATION AND CHURCH RENEWAL

Augustine and Tyconius argued against attempts to calculate the time of the end, but ironically their interpretation of Revelation contributed to the sense of crisis that swept across Christendom in the tenth century. Many concluded that if Satan was bound and the millennium began with Christ’s first advent, then Satan was due to be released in the year 1000. Growing perceptions of the greed and immorality practiced by Christian priests and princes reinforced the idea that the time for God’s judgment had come. People disagreed about the precise date of the end. Some thought that “the children of light would join in battle with Gog’s army of hellish fiends” beginning on the eve of the nativity; others expected it to happen on New Year’s Eve at the stroke of midnight. Throngs of worshipers made their way to Jerusalem for the event while others sold their possessions and travelled to Rome to await the “nightfall of the universe” dressed in sackcloth and ashes.⁸ The moment passed, the end did not come; and in subsequent generations Christians would have to understand Revelation in another way.

A new approach was developed by the mystic and monastic leader Joachim of Fiore (died 1202) who was concerned to find meaningful patterns within history. He discerned parallel sequences of persecutions in the Old and New Testaments that could be correlated with the visions in Revelation. For example, he identified the tribulations of the “sixth seal” (Rev 6:12-17) with the persecutions recounted in Judith and Esther, which occurred late in Israel’s history; he also connected the “sixth seal” with Saladin, the principal Muslim opponent of the crusaders. Retaining the idea of recapitulation, he allowed that Saladin was represented by other visions in Revelation.⁹ Joachim expected the final age to be a spiritual one, which would evolve out of the present instead of coming by God’s radical inbreaking. The goal of this process was the purification of the church. Joachim condemned the spiritual and moral level of the clergy and monks of his day, insisting that purification would come only through suffering. But he anticipated that a new pontiff would arise, like an angel from the rising sun, who would “receive complete freedom in order to renew [*innovare*] the Christian religion and to preach the word of God.”¹⁰

⁷See Paula Fredriksen, “Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse,” in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 28.

⁸See Richard Endoes, *A.D. 1000: Living on the Brink of Apocalypse* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 1-9; quotations from p. 2.

⁹See Joachim’s *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) 136.

¹⁰Quoted in E. Randolph Daniel, “Joachim of Fiore: Patterns of History in the Apocalypse,” in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, 85.

This emphasis on meaning in history and reform of the church continued to figure into subsequent interpretations of Revelation. Joachim himself stopped short of a direct attack upon the papacy, but others, especially among the radical Franciscans, went further and insisted that the beast was the pope and that the harlot who rode on the beast was papal Rome. Conveniently, the numerical values of the Greek letters of Pope Benedict XI's name added up to 666, the number of the beast (Rev 13:18).¹¹ Connecting the beast with the pope soon became a commonplace. Another development was that Nicholas of Lyra (died 1340), the leading biblical interpreter of the period, abandoned the theory of recapitulation and maintained that the images in Revelation presented a sequential history of the church from the first century onward. He refused to equate the beast and the harlot with papal Rome, however, and held that the events in Revelation 17-20 remained in the future.

Luther was heir to both these approaches. Although he initially disparaged Revelation, he later wrote a lengthy "Preface to the Revelation of St. John" which correlated the visions with conflicts in the church's past, as Lyra had done, while unequivocally identifying the beast and the harlot with papal Rome. To some extent the preface is yet one more attempt to read the events of the interpreter's own time into Revelation. Yet unlike sensationalistic twentieth-century readings, Luther identified many of the figures in Revelation with people from the *past* rather than with his own contemporaries. By using the visions in Revelation to review the history of the church, Luther, like Lyra, allowed scripture to serve as a mirror that confronted the church with itself. The church's past put the present into perspective. Luther noted the irony that "we see clearly what ghastly offenses there have been prior to our times, when Christendom is thought to have been at its best. By comparison, ours is really a golden age."¹²

Luther's most distinctive contribution, however, is not in church-historical interpretation but in reading Revelation through the dialectic of warning and promise. In his often neglected conclusion to the preface, Luther said that Revelation warns us of "the great, perilous, and manifold offense that inflicts itself upon Christendom. Because these mighty and imposing powers are to fight against Christendom, and it is to be deprived of outward shape and concealed under so many tribulations and heresies and other faults, it is impossible for the natural reason to recognize Christendom." Therefore, Christians must view the church through the eyes of faith. Faith in turn is sustained by the promises in scripture. According to Revelation we "can rest assured that neither force nor lies, neither wisdom nor holiness, neither tribulation nor suffering shall suppress Christendom, but it will gain the victory and conquer at last." Therefore, "let there be offenses, divisions, heresies and faults...if only the word of the gospel remains pure

¹¹The values of the Greek letters for *Benediktos* are b = 2, e = 5, n = 50, e = 5, d = 4, i = 10, k = 20, t = 300, o = 70, s = 200.

¹²"Preface to the Revelation of St. John [II]," LW 35:410.

among us, and we love and cherish it, we shall not doubt that Christ is with us, even when things are at their worst.”¹³

III. DISPENSATIONAL AND HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Futuristic interpretations of Revelation remained popular after the reformation, especially among those who divided world history into different periods or “dispensations” in an attempt to locate their own time within God’s plan for history. Dispensationalists with a more optimistic view of history were known as *post-millennialists* since they thought that the millennial ideal would be realized through missionary work and social reform, and that Christ would return *after* the millennium. This approach, with its high hopes for human progress, was widespread in the early American republic.¹⁴ Those with a more pessimistic view of history were known as *pre-millennialists*, since they expected conditions on earth to worsen until Christ returned *before* the millennium to defeat evil and usher in the kingdom. Variations of this approach are found among groups like the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, but the most widely influential form is one developed around 1829 by John Nelson Darby (died 1882) of the Plymouth Brethren. His views were popularized by Cyrus Scofield in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and by Hal Lindsey in the runaway best seller *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which even includes maps forecasting troop movements in the battle of Armageddon.

This system pieces together various portions of scripture. Daniel 9 describes a period of seventy weeks of years (a “week of years” = seven years) which are understood to be the final years of world history. According to Darby’s reckoning, all but one of these seven-year periods elapsed prior to the time of Christ. When Christ was crucified and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, God kept history from running out with one seven-year period remaining, much as a referee might stop a basketball game with a few seconds left on the clock. The signal that the clock has started again will be “the rapture,” when Christ draws the faithful up to meet him in the air (1 Thess 4:16-17; Matt 24:40-41) thereby sparing them the final period of tribulation depicted in Revelation 6-19 and elsewhere. The adversaries of Christ include “the beast” and “the harlot,” who are usually identified with the United Nations and the Roman Catholic Church or World Council of Churches. The battle of Armageddon will involve a massive army from the east of Israel (Rev 16:12-16, usually identified with China) and Gog, which is a power to the north of Israel (Ezekiel 38-39, usually identified with Russia). After this battle Christ is to usher in the millennial kingdom on earth, which will be followed by Satan’s release, the last judgment, and eternity (Revelation 20-21).

The problems with this approach are legion, and only a few can be noted here:

¹³Ibid., 409-411.

¹⁴See the article by Nancy Koester, “The Future in Our Past: Post-millennialism in American Protestantism,” 137-144 in this issue.

(a) This system pieces together excerpts from various biblical books, interpreting many of them in a strained manner. For example, Darby's system maintains that God allowed time to elapse through Dan 9:26 then stopped the clock for over two thousand years without fulfilling 9:27; yet when read in context these two verses seem clearly to speak of the same period. Although neither Daniel nor Revelation refer to "the rapture," proponents of this system try to find the rapture in God's summons to John of Patmos: "Come up hither" (Rev 4:1). Yet when read in context, God's command clearly calls John into a temporary visionary ascent; it does not refer to the ingathering of all the faithful. According to this system, Christians can expect exemption from the tribulations depicted in Revelation 5-19 since the word "church" is not used in these chapters. Yet these chapters do speak of the suffering experienced by "the saints" (13:7,10; 14:12; 17:6), and there is no reason to think that the suffering saints include only those Christians converted after the beginning of the tribulations.

(b) The system has a mechanistic view of prophecy fulfillment that is foreign to Revelation. The Old Testament is frequently cited in Revelation but it is never quoted verbatim. In contrast, Darby's calculations depend not only on the wording but even on the punctuation found in the King James and New International versions of Dan 9:25; his reckoning collapses under the punctuation used in the New American Bible, Today's English Version, the New Revised Standard, and other versions.¹⁵ Old Testament prophecies are woven into Revelation in a way that shows *that* God will fulfill his promises but without clearly disclosing *how* he will do so.

(c) Darby's system does not take the introduction to the book literally enough: "John to the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev 1:4). Revelation is a letter addressed to particular congregations. Revelation 2-3 gives an extended commentary on conditions in those seven churches that provides the context in which the visions should be read. Nowhere does the text suggest that the seven churches should be allegorized, as they are in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, so that Ephesus represents the whole first-century church, Smyrna represents the persecuted church from A.D. 100-316, and Pergamum represents the church of the middle ages, etc. Revelation is a letter, and it should be read like other New Testament letters, which were sent "to" actual congregations (e.g., 1 Thess 1:1; 1 Cor 1:2; Rom 1:7).

The excesses of futuristic interpretation contributed to a developing interest in reading Revelation in its historical context. Some of the early efforts in this

¹⁵Dan 9:25 refers to seven weeks of years (= 49 years) and sixty-two weeks of years (= 434 years), a total of 483 years. The King James and New International versions say that all 483 years elapse between the command to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and the coming of the anointed one, Jesus. The New Revised Standard and most other recent translations say that an anointed one is to appear after a mere forty-nine years, that is, shortly after the exile. Thus this anointed figure would be Joshua or Zerubbabel (Ezra 3:2) or perhaps Cyrus (Isa 45:1). The remaining period of 434 years is roughly the period from the rebuilding of Jerusalem to the Seleucid persecution in the second century B.C., the time most scholars think Daniel was written.

direction were made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by Jesuit scholars seeking to counter the anti-papal animus in Protestant exegesis, but the historical approach has become standard among most scholars. Many now recognize that Revelation belongs to the genre of apocalyptic literature which was popular in antiquity and includes writings like 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, the Testament of Moses, and other texts. Comparison with these ancient texts makes Revelation seem less unique and esoteric. Attention to context provides important clues to the symbolism. The beast who was slain and yet lived bears the traits of Nero, who was thought to have committed suicide yet was reputed to be alive, and the mysterious number 666 is the numerical value of the name "Nero Caesar." Recent treatments of Revelation have considered the way in which the visions speak to Christians in a complex social situation in which they were confronted with the claims of the emperor, experienced friction with local synagogues, and had to deal with competing circles of prophets in Asia Minor.

The problem with historical interpretation is that while it restrains certain excesses it can also distance readers from the text in a way that deprives the text of its power. We may see what the text said to Christians in the past but do not see how questions about imperial Rome are relevant for us.

IV. INTERPRETATION AND FAITH

Revelation can speak with surprising immediacy when our focus shifts from eschatology to theology. Instead of first asking what the book says about final events we do well to listen to what it says about God. The book is framed by God's declaration that he is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end (1:8; 21:1; 22:13). "The end is not an event but a person," as G. B. Caird has rightly pointed out. Much debate "has turned on the nature of the *eschaton*, the final event...but the word *eschaton* (neut.) does not occur in the New Testament. John knows only of the *eschatos* (masc.), a person who is both the beginning and the end."¹⁶ In other words the book does not move from rapture to millennium but from God to God. The initial vision confronts the reader with Christ (1:12-20); none of the tribulations begin until we have spent two chapters encountering God on the throne together with Christ the Lamb who was slain (chaps. 4-5); and in the final scene we are again brought into the presence of God and the Lamb (22:5).

It is imperative that we understand Revelation in the context of the seven churches to whom the book was addressed, but this context must be understood theologically as well as historically. The seven churches were challenged in several different ways. At Smyrna and Philadelphia Christians faced the prospect of public reproach, imprisonment, and possible death for the faith. At Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira they had to deal with teachers who encouraged Christians to blend in to their environment, to go ahead and eat the meat offered to idols and engage in

¹⁶G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 266.

immorality rather than live as a people set apart. At Sardis and Laodicea they faced the problems of success and prosperity that threatened to replace faith with complacency. Problems differed from place to place yet all readers were challenged to resist anything that would undercut their commitment to God and Christ, whether the threat came from persecution, from seduction into false teaching, or from prosperity. The magnificent vision of the sovereign God and Christ the Lamb (Revelation 4-5) presses all readers toward a more vital confession of faith.

Revelation warns of the danger of placing trust in anything other than God and Christ. The literary structure and movement serves that end by undercutting our attempts to find security in our own abilities to discern where we are on the celestial timeline. The spiraling cycles of visions make it impossible to discover whether we are experiencing the afflictions associated with the sixth seal (6:12-17), the fourth trumpet (8:12), or the fifth plague (16:10). Wherever we are on the timeline, Revelation's vivid images call us to renewed faith in God and Christ, and unmask the powers that offer us false security. The images of life in God's presence which are interspersed throughout the book have frequently been expressed in our hymns. People experience the message of Revelation with compelling immediacy whenever they sing "Holy, Holy, Holy," the final verse of "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," or "For All the Saints." When Revelation moves us to confess our faith in God and the Lamb alone, and to join in worshiping them, it has had the effect for which it was designed. John of Patmos wrote so that people may be blessed and hold firmly to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, the Lamb who was slain (1:3).