REFORMATION READINGS OF THE APOCALYPSE
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REFORMATION READINGS OF THE APOCALYPSE
Geneva, Zurich, and Wittenberg
Irena Backus
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ABBREVIATIONS

Apc  The Apocalypse of John.

ASD  Desiderius Erasmus. *Opera omnia*. Amsterdam, 1969.

CCL  *Corpus Christianorum*. Series Latina.

CPG  *Clavis patrum graecorum*.

LB   Desiderius Erasmus. *Opera omnia emendatora et auctiora, ad optimas editiones, praecipue quas ipse Erasmus postremo curavit, summa fide exacta doctorumque virorum notis illustrata*. Leiden, 1705.


WA   *D. Martin Luthers Werke*.

Z    Ulrich Zwingli. *Huldreich Zwinglis sämtliche Werke*.
Early Exegesis of the Apocalypse

Although much has been written already on the Apocalypse text itself and on its early exegesis,1 some preliminary remarks are useful. As we shall see, some problems inherent in the text and methods of exegesis which were developed between the second and the twelfth centuries were known to sixteenth-century commentators and did, to a greater or lesser extent, influence their approach.

The Apocalypse, or Revelation, of John is the sole Christian apocalyptic writing to enter the biblical canon. Apocalypses as a genre was quite unknown in the sixteenth century, and none of the authors we shall be discussing was ever aware of Jewish or Christian apocalyptic literature as a specific genre, although, as we shall have occasion to see, all were aware of the elements of Daniel and Ezekiel imported into the text of the Apocalypse. According to most scholars, the origins and growth of Jewish apocalyptic literature reflect the history of Israel’s conflicts with other nations and the conviction that trust in military power was useless. As the nation continued to be subjected to foreign domination, it despaired of attaining political supremacy, and the conclusion was drawn that God would eventually intervene, destroy Israel’s enemies, and set up his kingdom on earth. Apocalyptic literature proper begins with the book of Daniel, probably written during the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.). Important Jewish apocalyptic writings outside the Old Testament canon are the first and second books of Enoch, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the

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Assumption of Moses, and the Ascension of Isaiah. All, with the exception of the very slightly later Ascension of Isaiah, are dated as originating in the second half of the first century, after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, and are therefore roughly contemporary with the Apocalypse of John, normally considered to have been written in the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81–96). The chief characteristic of apocalyptic literature is its recourse to one or several visions of the past, the present, and the future (both real and eschatological). The vision is normally granted to the seer by God himself, but it is mediated by one or several angels. This enables the author to transmit new prophecies without fearing accusations of excessive self-importance. For the same reason, most of the Jewish apocalypses appear under the names of great prophets such as Moses, Enoch, or Isaiah. Their real authors remain unknown.

Apart from the Apocalypse of John, the most important Christian Apocalypse is that of Peter, which never entered the canon. John’s work contains one interesting feature which was to earn it much criticism in the sixteenth century and which distinguishes it sharply from the Jewish apocalyptic literature: It is written under the author’s own name. In Apc 1.9, he says quite openly that he is the brother of the seven churches in Asia Minor and that he has shared in their suffering. Whether John was in fact John the Evangelist or, most likely, another John is without importance. He above all wanted to make his identity known to the communities he was addressing, as they could thus decipher what lay behind the deliberately cryptic language of the visions. The Apocalypse was not intended for general consumption. Its visions hide all sorts of allusions to the particular situation of particular Christian communities in the second half of the first century.

As is well known, the Apocalypse (as we shall call it from now on) was held in great esteem by the millenarian ante-Nicene Fathers who took it to be the work of John the Evangelist. Justin Martyr praised it in his Dialogue with Trypha (chap. 81), and Irenaeus used it (together with other writings) to defend chiliasm against the doctrine of spiritual resurrection put forward by the Valentinian Gnosis. However, as millenarianism began to lose hold in the Eastern, and particularly the Alexandrian, church, the respectability of the Apocalypse was challenged. Dionysius of Alexandria questioned its apostolic authorship, ca. A.D. 250, on grounds of difference in style and content from the Fourth Gospel. Eusebius of Caesarea admitted its place in the canon with some reluctance. Some subsequent Eastern writers and councils (Cyril of Jerusalem, Council of Laodicea, John Chrysostom) did not include it in the canon.

In the West, the attribution to John the Evangelist was maintained in the Muratorian Canon and also by Tertullian and Hippolytus, so that the Apocalypse was viewed more favorably. It is no accident that the most influential commentaries on the text were Western.
The Spiritual Interpretation

The commentaries of Victorinus of Poetovio (d. ca. 304) and Tyconius (d. ca. 380) shaped in different ways, and for different reasons, the exegesis of the Apocalypse in the West in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Victorinus, bishop of Poetovio in today’s Slovenia, suffered martyrdom under Diocletian. His commentary on the Apocalypse was “revised” by Jerome. Although there is some disagreement among scholars about the number and the nature of corrections Jerome introduced into the body of the text, there is no doubt that the translator of the Vulgate rewrote the millenarian ending of Victorinus’ commentary, bringing the heavenly Jerusalem down to the realm of ethics. Victorinus’ original commentary with its millenarian ending remained quite unknown until 1916, when Y. Haussleiter discovered a fifteenth-century manuscript of it at the Vatican (Ottobonianus Latinus 3288A, fol. 1–22). However, Jerome’s version of the commentary circulated throughout the Middle Ages and was published in the sixteenth century in two recensions, the shorter and the longer. Victorinus saw the Apocalypse not as a prophecy but as an unveiling by Christ of the true sense of Scripture. He was also the first exegete to apply the principle of recapitulation to the text; according to him, the Apocalypse relates the same events in different ways, so that, for example, the bowls do no more than elaborate on the persecutions, which have already been revealed by the trumpets. It is not chronology but understanding that is of crucial importance in John’s Revelation.

Tyconius’ commentary is no longer extant, and its contents can only be reconstructed from later commentaries that made extensive use of it, notably those of Beatus, Primasius, and the Venerable Bede. We do know that it was written after a persecution of Donatists during a period of relative tranquility. As a Donatist, Tyconius found in the Apocalypse a prophecy of the suffering and hopes of his church. The Satanic forces in the text represented to him the sum total of the ecclesiastical powers of the Catholic Church, which he found to be worldly and decadent. Openly spiritual in his interpretation, Tyconius rejected, for example, the idea that the two witnesses should be identified with persons past or present; he preferred to interpret the passage as referring to the church holding the two testaments. More important, the Antichrist ceased to be a person but became identified with the corpus diaboli, the omnipresent evil, and the false Christians, not easily distinguishable from the true and the good. Tyconius completely neutralized the millenarianism of the Apocalypse by referring the thousand years of the chaining up of Satan to the Incarnation. However, while doing away with the messianic interregnum, the Donatist did not minimize the importance of the Apocalypse as the text of the latter days, seeing himself as living at the end of time. Taking the cosmic week as the basic scheme of the duration of the world, he thought that Christ was born halfway through the sixth day, the seventh day being already
situated after the Last Judgment. The three and a half years of Apc 12 thus stood for 350 years, the period of the church’s testimony. By the time Tyconius was writing, 850 years of the “sixth day” had passed, which meant that around 150 years were left until the Last Judgment.

It is not useful to speculate on whether the influence of Tyconius on the later Apocalypse commentaries would have been as great had Augustine not made so much use of Tyconius in his De ciuitate Dei 20.7–20. In his sermon 259, Augustine adopted a millenarian position and envisaged an earthly period of peace for the just before the final resurrection. In the De ciuitate Dei, he adopts Tyconius’ interpretation of the thousand years and situates the chaining up of Satan at the same time as the Incarnation. The thousand years thus simply denotes a period from the Incarnation until the Last Judgment. However, it is important to remember that Augustine, like most of his contemporaries, considered himself to be living in the last days and also followed the scheme of the cosmic week, although what interests him most in De ciuitate Dei is not the number of years left until the Last Judgment but the identity of “the devil” and the relative nature of both his captivity and his release. For Augustine as for Tyconius, “the devil” represents all the wicked and the enemies of the Christian church, whose power is contained by Christ. His release does not mean that he will be able to seduce the Christian church, the true faithful, but that during that brief release there will be no more new converts, with the exception of newly born Christian infants, who will still be able to undergo the baptism of regeneration. The first resurrection was to Augustine the life of true believers during the chaining up of Satan, which was equivalent to some sort of spiritual millennium.

The spiritual school of the exegesis of the Apocalypse which was to dominate the Western interpretations of the book for several centuries was thus born. Among its most eminent and influential representatives were Primasius (d. ca. 560), bishop of Hadrumetum in Africa, and the Venerable Bede (672–735), the English Benedictine monk. Both made extensive use of Tyconius, while adapting his work to “catholic” use. Bede’s chief innovation was to divide the Apocalypse into seven sections or summaries (“periochae”), which gradually became seven visions, the standard division of the text. Bede explains how he proceeded in his prefatory epistle to Eusebius (PL 93:130–131). The first section comprises the address to the seven churches which represent the church universal and the promise of the return of the Son (Apc 1–3). The second section describes the opening of the seven seals of the book in which the Lamb will read the conflicts and triumphs that the church has been confronting since the Incarnation. The order of opening is maintained until the sixth seal; the contents of the six seals are then recapitulated in a narrative section, before the narrator moves on to the seventh seal (Apc 4–8.5). The third section follows the same pattern, depicting the same events in the form of seven trumpets (Apc 8.6–11.19). The fourth
section (Apc 12–14) describes the joys and tribulations of the church, while
the fifth “afflicts the earth with seven plagues” (Apc 15–16). The sixth sec-
tion describes the judgment on the great whore, Babylon (Apc 17–20), and
the seventh (Apc 21–22) describes the heavenly Jerusalem and the eternal
peace after the Last Judgment.

As we shall see, several Protestant commentators in the sixteenth cen-
tury took over Bede’s division. As well as “conveniently” dividing the text
into easily distinguishable sections, it had the advantage of concealing any
millenarian tendencies of the text and of focusing the reader’s attention on
the trials and tribulations of the church since the Incarnation. In other words,
the provided an ecclesiological as well as a spiritual framework. It was also
flexible enough to be adapted by, for example, Joachim of Fiore.

Bede also included in his preface Tyconius’ seven rules for the interpre-
tation of Scripture (the Liber regularum),5 which, if applied to the Apoca-
lypse, were apt to accentuate its spiritual implications even more. As the rules
were to be cited again by some of the Protestant commentators that we shall
be considering, it is worth reminding the reader of their content. The first
rule is that of the Lord and his body; it allows us to distinguish propositions
concerning Christ himself from those concerning his church. The second
rule concerns the Lord and the communication of his body via the communion;
it allows us to correctly pick out the eucharistic content of the Bible.
The third rule is to do with relating law and grace, in other words, the Old
Testament and the New Testament. The fourth rule is that of the genus and
the species; it shows us how to distinguish what is said about an Old Testa-
ment person—for example, Salomon—as a historical figure from what is said
about him as a prototype of Christ. The fifth rule is to do with the interpret-
tation of times and tenses, and the sixth is the rule of recapitulation. As a
representative example of the latter, Bede cites Gen. 10.32–11.1, which ap-
ppears to state that the tribes of Noah had one common language when they
were dispersed. It is only further on in Gen. 11 that we learn that the lin-
guistic division was completed before the dispersal. The seventh rule is to
do with the devil and his body; according to Tyconius, the Scripture often
attributes to the devil actions which are committed by the wicked, that is,
by the members of his “body.” The Apocalypse was thus stabilized in the
spiritual and ecclesiological realm. However, changing social conditions soon
dictated a different way of reading the text.

The Historico-Prophetic Interpretation

Kamlah’s book6 sketches out the chief features of the historico-prophetic
method, which, by the sixteenth century, became integrated into the spirit-
ual hermeneutic. We shall therefore confine ourselves to some remarks on
two of the most characteristic and influential representatives of this school
of interpretation, Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129) and Nicholas of Lyra (d. 1340), both of whom were much used in the sixteenth century. The basic feature of the historical approach was to divide the Apocalypse into six rather than into seven parts and to read it as a history of salvation from Adam until a certain date. Depending on the terminus ad quem chosen by the exegete, John thus became either a historian or simultaneously a historian and a prophet. For Rupert of Deutz, John was basically a historian and the Apocalypse a history of salvation from Adam until the Council of Nicaea, although the commentary also contains numerous references to Rupert’s own time and to the life of the church in general. Rupert was the first commentator to have recourse to ecclesiastical histories of Eusebius and Flavius Josephus in order to establish parallels between events in history and prophecies in the text. As an example of Rupert’s method, we shall cite here some of his comments on Apc 4, where the celestial church service receives a historically based interpretation. John’s vision of the door in heaven thus signifies heavenly life, which Christ on his Resurrection guaranteed for the church, which also rose with him. The first resurrection is the Resurrection of Christ, which also caused the church to rise to life. The twenty-four ancients around the throne pose a problem to Rupert, as he notes that the figure was variously interpreted by the church Fathers; Jerome saw the twenty-four ancients as representing the twenty-four books of the Old Testament. Others, notably Primasius and Bede, took the figure to symbolize twelve patriarchs and twelve apostles, the church of the New Testament and its precursor in the Old Testament. Rupert, for his part, sees in the twenty-four ancients a representation of the history of Israel. There are twelve judges (Rupert includes Samuel) who preceded David; the other twelve are those who succeeded David’s direct descendant, Christ—in other words, the twelve apostles.

The sea of glass evokes to Rupert the crossing of the Red Sea in the Old Testament, and baptism in the New Testament. Both denote liberation. The Christocentric nature of his commentary coupled with his interest in the Old Testament and his interest in the history of the early church in general was probably what made Rupert’s commentary popular with reformers like Sebastian Meyer.

Nicholas of Lyra’s postill on the Apocalypse (ca. 1329), which reproduced portions of the commentary of Alexander of Bremen and of other Franciscan commentaries, was much more grounded in historical events which took place between the Ascension of Christ and his own time. The seals thus refer to Domitian’s reign, and the trumpets symbolize the era of heresies, particularly the Arian heresy. The first beast of Apc 11 is Kavat, the son of Cosdroes (the Persian enemy of the emperor Heraclius), and the second beast is the Islam. The seven bowls stand for the first Crusades. According to Lyra, Apc 19.11 (white horse with its rider, Faithful and True) refers not to Christ but to Baldwin, the Christian king installed in Jerusalem (after the First Crusade of 1099) who finally capitulated to Saladin in 1187. Even Apc 20.1
is interpreted historically, as a symbolic account of the investitures quarrel between Pope Calixtus and the emperor Henry V. The tying up of Satan thus simply means the limiting of imperial power by the 1122 Concordat of Worms. Nicholas of Lyra’s commentary was not original. However, it had the merit of being easily accessible, and, although few Protestant commentators followed it in every detail, they did draw on it for historical facts which fitted into their own exegetical framework.

**Joachim of Fiore (d. 1202) and the Spiritual Franciscans**

It is difficult to estimate the extent of the influence of Joachim’s commentary on sixteenth-century exegetes. His major work on the Apocalypse was published in Venice in 1527 but was not reissued in the course of the century. Due to the papal condemnation of the Franciscan Gerard of Borgo San Donnino in 1254 for his proclamation of the *Eternal Gospel* (excerpts from Joachim’s works), intended to supersede the Old Testament and the New Testament, and due to the condemnation of Joachim’s own doctrine in 1215 by the Lateran Council and in 1263 by the provincial Council of Arles, the Calabrian abbot enjoyed a dubious reputation. However, his hermeneutic implicitly underlay some of the ideas expressed in the commentaries that we shall be studying and therefore deserves some consideration.

Joachim wrote his commentary around 1195. He divided it into eight parts. Unlike Bede, he begins part 7 with Apc 20 and not with Apc 21, and he ends part 7 at Apc 20.10. Apc 20.11 to the end of chapter 22 thus represents the eighth part or book, treating of the eternal rest.

To Joachim, the Apocalypse encapsulates the latter two *status* in history, the Age of the Son and the Age of the Holy Spirit. The first six parts of his commentary cover the Age of the Son (forty-two generations, each lasting about thirty years), and part 7 covers the Age of the Holy Spirit. The eighth part, extremely short, treats of the metaphistorical heavenly Jerusalem. Thus, part 1 (Apc 1–3) contains seven generations and treats of the struggle of the apostles against the synagogue. Part 2 (Apc 4.1–8.1) treats of the struggle of the martyrs against pagan persecutions. Part 3 (Apc 8.2–11.18) deals with the struggle of the doctors of the church against heretics and lasts until the Constantinian settlement. Part 4 (Apc 11.19–14.20) is the struggle of the monastic orders against the Islam, and part 5 (Apc 15.1–16.17) represents the conflict between the church of Rome and the Holy Empire. Part 6 (Apc 16.18–19.21) represents the struggle of the spiritual men (represented by two new religious orders), first against the dragon, then against the two beasts, which represent, respectively, Saladin (Joachim’s contemporary) and the “maximus Antichristus,” a person who combines the heresy of Islam and all the Western heresies.

Joachim wrote his commentary at the end of the twelfth century. The Age of the Son would, according to his calculations, come to an end in 1260. It would
be succeeded by the Age of the Holy Spirit depicted in part 7 (Apoc 20:1–10),
when Satan would be chained up and the church freed from all persecution
after the final conflict. At that point, the contemplative order would take pos-
session of the church and there would be a complete spiritual renewal. Although
Joachim’s commentary is characterized by his underlying conviction of spiri-
tual progress in the history of the church, it would be naive to consider him a
hard and fast millenarian. Indeed, he himself was very careful to relativize his
interpretation of Apoc 20 by distinguishing between the chaining up of Satan,
which could not begin in earnest until the defeat of the beast and the false
prophet, and the thousand years, which had begun the moment the Resurrec-
tion of Christ took place (Joachim considers the actual number thousand to be
symbolic) and during which Satan’s power was to some extent limited. His
seventh age is an age of full monastic spirituality prior to the Last Judgment.

Two features of Joachim’s hermeneutic would have been of interest to
the Protestant commentators of the Apocalypse—first, his idea that after a
series of struggles there would emerge an age in which the faithful would be
in some sense “closer to God” than hitherto, and, second, his idea that the
Antichrist was an unspecified individual (emanating from Rome) who would
combine all the heresies. The latter idea in fact captured the imagination of
the spiritual Franciscans long before the Reformation.

Thus, Petrus Joannis Olivi (ca. 1248–1298), writing nearly a hundred
years after Joachim, also describes six periods in the church corresponding
to six parts of the Apocalypse. However, unlike Joachim, he saw part 4 as
the era of the Greek monks, part 5 as the era of the monastic orders under
Charlemagne, and part 6 as Franciscan reforms, which were in his eyes
equivalent to Joachim’s Age of the Holy Spirit. There was thus no part 7 in
Olivi’s Lectura super Apocalypsim, as the transcendent age was already to take
place in the sixth part. The teachers of the sixth status were, according to
Olivi, totally successful in combatting the forces of the Antichrist. The im-
mediate precursor of the Antichristus magnus was the Antichristus mysticus,
or the papacy, thus named because it was opposed to the strict application
of the Rule of St. Francis. The Antichristus magnus designated, for Olivi, the
emperor Frederick II together with a pseudopope.

Ubertino de Casale, who wrote his Arbor vitae crucifisae at the begin-
ing of the fourteenth century, was even more explicit in his designation of
the beast and the Antichrist. To him, the first beast of Apoc 13 was Pope
Boniface VIII (1294–1303) and the second, Benedict XI. Slowly, the idea
of the Roman Antichrist took shape and was ready for use by the reformers.
However, at the same time, the Franciscan exploitation of the Apocalypse
certainly did not improve the reputation of the book. By the time of the
Reformation, there was a general aura of unease surrounding it.

The aim of the present book is to examine commentaries on the Apocalypse
produced in or around Geneva and Zürich between 1539 and 1584 with the
aim of analyzing their methods and their views of the status of the Apocalypse and its place in the religious and cultural context of the Reformation. In chapter 5, two commentaries produced in the Lutheran context are intended as a point of comparison.

I have concentrated on authors who made an effort to produce a commentary on the Apocalypse, irrespective of what else they wrote, and I have ignored authors such as Piscator, Pareus, or Flacius Illyricus who produced a commentary on the Apocalypse as part of a commentary on the whole of (or almost the whole of) the New Testament. I have also deliberately excluded English commentators, who were the object of a very good study by Richard Bauckham in 1978 and whose works were in any case to some extent dependent on the commentaries we analyze here. With the exception of Bullinger’s *Sermons*, sixteenth-century Protestant commentaries on the Apocalypse are not easily available. The same goes for Lutheran commentaries. The desire to write the present book was partly the result of frustration. Only too often one reads a statement in secondary literature such as “Meyer’s commentary has been unavailable to me,” which apparently does not stop the author from pronouncing on Meyer’s exegesis. The resulting analysis is unreliable by its very nature.

The other reason for writing the present book was the wish simply to examine whether there was such a thing as a single Protestant approach to the Apocalypse or whether varying social, linguistic, and political conditions determined the way that different writers read the text. The choice of Zurich, Geneva, and Wittenberg was thus deliberate.

I first examine the issue of canonicity, which resurfaced in the sixteenth century after being initially raised in third-century Alexandria. As for the commentaries themselves, I chose, for Geneva, that of Antoine du Pinet (Pignet), a commentator considered by some modern authors as Calvin’s mouthpiece, which is studied here in the light of sources du Pinet claims to have used, especially François Lambert and Sebastian Meyer. I also examine, for Geneva, the commentaries of Augustin Marlorat and Nicolas Colladon. Marlorat constitutes something of a methodological exception, seeing as his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* is a part of his *Expositio ecclesiastica* on the whole of the New Testament. I included it deliberately, however, as it provides an excellent indication of the way Meyer’s commentary left an imprint on the Calvinist conception of the Apocalypse. Colladon’s commentary has never been the object of any detailed study and is particularly important, as it claims to mirror Calvin’s own views on the Apocalypse, of which Colladon apparently had inside knowledge.

Among the Zurich commentaries, those of Heinrich Bullinger, Theodore Bibliander, and Leo Jud are considered. The choice of the Lutherans David Chytraeus and Nikolaus Selnecker was dictated by the circumstances in which the two wrote their commentaries and also by their proximity in time to the mainstream of the Protestant commentaries. In Chytraeus’ case, as I shall
show, there are definite traces of Bullinger’s exegesis, whereas Selnecker with his desire to make the Apocalypse comprehensible to the common man can be considered a Lutheran counterpart to du Pinet.

So as to avoid a patchwork effect and in order to show the varying degree of the different commentators’ dependence on tradition, I have concentrated my analysis on the exegesis of Apc 12 and 20—on Apc 12 because of its ecclesiastical connotations and because many ancient commentators saw it as the central vision, and on Apc 20 because of the variety of interpretations that were sparked by the famous passage on the thousand years of Satan’s imprisonment. However, I have also devoted some attention to the commentators’ global approach to the text and to the interpretation of the seven seals in the more historically inclined commentaries. The resulting work will, it is hoped, throw light on how different groups and individuals within the Reformation establishment viewed the Apocalypse.
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