

Revelation

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READING the Book of Revelation has tended to be more of an obsession than a pastime. Those readers who could dismiss it, either with a quip like George Bernard Shaw (“a curious record of the visions of a drug addict”) or with studied indifference like John Calvin, have been few. Many who have hated the book have been unable to escape it. D. H. Lawrence, for instance, felt compelled to write his own form of commentary to try to exorcise it from his mind. Suspect in its origins, controversial throughout its history, even today Revelation raises the question of how it is to be read in a more dramatic way than perhaps any other book of the New Testament. The insistence of many commentators, both early and late, that they alone have found the real key to this unveiling of the mysteries of the end has served only to compound the enigma as history has demonstrated the errors or insufficiencies of various readings. St. Jerome showed more wisdom than most, not only in merely revising someone else’s commentary rather than writing his own, but also in remarking that “Revelation has as many mysteries as it does words.”¹

The variety of modern readings testifies that the obsession persists and that there is still no commonly agreed upon approach. Millions of Christian fundamentalists read Revelation in a highly literal way as a blueprint for coming crisis, while liberation theologians and others look to it for a political if less literally prophetic message. Biblical scholars advance interpretations based upon the historical-critical method, theologians and literary critics experiment with more existential or immanent readings dependent upon diverse hermeneutical theories, while artists and poets are content to mine the book for its rich symbolism. Ends are as necessary to all literary works as beginnings, and the absolute end of that library of books we call the Bible has provoked as much controversy as the Bible’s account of the absolute beginning in Genesis. It sometimes appears that Revelation is a book whose literary interest has been transferred from the text to the readers. In itself arcane and full of secret allegories at whose original reference we can only guess, it has offered all the more opportunity to researchers who can with impunity discover in its pages the message they themselves put there out of a sense that so menacing a document, full of hitherto misunderstood detail, can have

application only to the unprecedented world-historical crisis of their own moment in time. Consequently the meaning of the book is, almost uniquely, identical with its various applications. We learn most about it from later interpretations which may be manifestly unacceptable to us.

Yet at first glance Revelation seems a less difficult book than its history has proved. Both its author and its purpose are clearly proclaimed at the outset. Most Christians have believed that the John of Patmos who announces himself as the author (1:1, 4, and 9; 22:8) was none other than John the beloved disciple. Though the identification had been doubted in antiquity, not until the end of the eighteenth century was it challenged by critical scholarship. Debate continues about the social setting and ecclesial identity of John of Patmos, but most current scholarship views him as an itinerant Christian prophet of Asia Minor who wrote in the last decade of the first century.

All classic interpreters conceived of Revelation as a literary unity, the work of a single author. The same wave of historical-critical scholarship, largely German in inspiration, that questioned traditional views of authorship also attacked the book's unity, claiming that it was either composed of a variety of sources (frequently seen as Jewish rather than Christian in origin) or was a *mélange* of different redactions. Though the denial of literary unity won the day among critics at the end of the nineteenth century, it has recently come under increasing fire to the point where most biblical scholars would hold that Revelation is indeed the work of one author, whatever fragments of earlier traditions and materials he might have incorporated. Thus both scholars and those critics who believe that the passage of time as well as authorial intention affects the meaning of a work now admit the literary integrity of the text.

Revelation was traditionally conceived of as a prophetic book in accordance with its opening words: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass" (1:1). Its author identifies himself as a prophet and speaks of his book as "words of prophecy" (1:2; 22:18, 19). Many interpreters, taking this claim at face value, tended to read Revelation in accordance with a simplistic understanding of prophecy; they held that just as the Old Testament prophets foretold things to come, Revelation prophesies the coming events of the end of time. On the basis of this understanding, John's book offers many difficulties in relating history and prophecy. Granted that Revelation discloses the final events, does it also reveal the course of history leading up to the end? If the message revealed embraces the whole of history, as many have thought, the complex structure of Revelation makes it exceedingly difficult to correlate its profuse symbolism with historical events in any simple way. It is not so much that the commentators have to match individual symbols with particular historical events, but that sequences of images need to be correlated with sequences

of events.² Both ancient and modern readers have been perplexed by the relation between the book's structure and its message. How does Revelation say what it is trying to say?

Interpretations of the structure of Revelation are almost as many as its readers, but three general tendencies are discernible. One view, found among many classic Christian exegetes and modern fundamentalists, insists that the structure and message of the book is basically linear and prophetic, that is, that the images reveal the course of history, or at least the events imminent to the end of time. A second and rarer approach (represented today by the theologian Jacques Ellul) sees Revelation as a carefully crafted theological treatise containing a complex moral message and theology of history. Most modern scholars, however, view John's Revelation as a cyclical presentation of visions repeating, or recapitulating, the same basic message of present persecution, imminent destruction of the wicked and reward of the just.

The basic element in this recapitulative structure is the pattern of seven, a sacred number indicating fullness and completion. Sequences of sevens determine the course of the book: the seven letters (2:1-3:22), the seven seals (6:1-8:1), the seven trumpets (8:2-11:19), seven unnumbered visions (12:1-15:4), the seven vials (15:1-16:21), and a final seven unnumbered visions (19:11-21:8). These sequences are made more complex by such literary devices as inclusion, whereby a sequence can be seen as part of the final act of its predecessor (for example, the relation of the seven trumpets to the seventh seal in 8:1-2), and the method of "intercalation" in which two episodes that belong together are interrupted by another incident (for example, 8:2-6, in which the angels with the trumpets are introduced, but a heavenly liturgy intervenes before they begin to blow).³ Nor is it always clear how these series of sevens relate to the general structural principles of the work, such as that discerned in the two great books: the "closed book" with the seven seals (5:1), which can be taken as containing what is revealed in chapters 6-11; and the "open book" that the "mighty angel" gives John to eat in chapter 10, which can be seen as the message of the second half.

The difficulties in relating the sequences of Revelation to the external text of history largely explain why many early interpreters eventually abandoned historico-prophetic readings of the text to concentrate either on internal or on purely future ones. In modern times this tendency has been encouraged by the discovery of the differences between Old Testament prophecy and intertestamental apocalyptic literature. In order to grasp the divergence between most older Christian interpretations of Revelation and contemporary historical-critical understandings it is necessary to take a look at both apocalyptic eschatology and the genre of apocalypse, the most potent but also most problematic literary contribution of intertestamental Judaism to Christianity.⁴

Since the late eighteenth century, scholars have recognized the importance of the new form of eschatology, with its deliberately opaque imagery, that arose among the Jews in the centuries immediately before Christ. This form of belief about the end centered on a divine revelation concerning God's coming intervention to do justice upon the wicked and to reward the good in a new aeon. The backdrop to this conviction, implicitly or explicitly expressed (sometimes through a sketch of the ages of the world), was a deterministic view of universal history seen as culminating in the triple drama of crisis-judgment-vindication. The vindication was conceived of in many ways, though it usually involved some kind of personal immortality, at times even the hope of resurrection from the dead (Dan. 12:2), a concept that apocalyptic eschatology introduced into Judaism. One of the frequent features of this new view of history was a sense that contemporary events, if correctly understood, could be seen as "signs of the times" that would reveal the imminence of the appointed end.

Though the identification of the groups and situations in which apocalyptic eschatology arose has proved difficult to ascertain in particular cases, there is general agreement that this view of history and the end was produced for purposes of consolation and theodicy among a subject people frequently laboring under a strong sense of persecution. This sense of opposition helps explain the dualistic elements found in the apocalyptic view of the world. Its colors, as can be seen in the Book of Revelation, are generally strong ones—blacks and whites, rather than muted tones.

General agreement about the meaning of apocalyptic eschatology has masked significant confusion about apocalypse considered as a literary genre. In recent years it has become increasingly evident that the Jewish and Christian apocalypses were part of a range of revelatory and oracular texts that proliferated in the Hellenistic world, and that the contents of the texts that can be called apocalypses included a wealth of heavenly mysteries broader and more diverse than just historical and eschatological secrets. One current view would define an apocalypse as a revelation mediated by a heavenly messenger and presented in written form (and in Jewish examples always pseudonymously ascribed to an ancient seer) containing both a horizontal, or historical, dimension and a vertical one concerning the relation of the terrestrial and celestial realms.⁵ It is also becoming evident, as more work is done on early apocalypses and their later influence, that this genre not only introduced a new conception of history into Western religions but also was central in the development of the visionary tradition in Western literature and mysticism.

Apocalypses, by their very nature, were designed both to reveal (to believers) and to conceal (from the unworthy). The pseudonymity that characterizes all Jewish apocalypses, though not John's Revelation, was designed to heighten this sense of concealing and revealing. Secrets hidden

long ago by the sages now were seen to uncover the course of history and what was to come. Perhaps the ancient apocalypses concealed much even from their original readers. Some scholars seem to assume that the first readers of the apocalypses had a magic key that unlocked the full meaning of the text in some exemplary fashion, but the nature of the genre itself and the evidence of the apocalyptic tradition, which from the start showed a concern for revising, interpreting, and adding to what had been revealed, points in the other direction. John's Revelation was probably at least partly mysterious even to its early audience.

No small part of the difficulty of interpreting apocalypses such as Revelation has to do with the way in which they make use of mythological symbolism. The apocalyptic authors used the ancient Near Eastern combat myth, which saw the formation of the world as the result of the victory of the divine warrior over the monsters of the watery chaos, to give meaning to present and future events. Thus in the apocalypses myth and history became inextricably intertwined as the "old story" of the myth and the "new story" of recent history enriched and transformed each other like two voices in a line of polyphony.⁶ (An example in Revelation is the way the career of the persecutor Nero and expectations of his return have colored the picture of the seven-headed eschatological monster in 13:1-3 and 17:8-13). Of course, there is a sense in which even the most realistic narrative blends myth and the representation of contemporary fact; but the relation is special in the apocalypses because the writers' purpose is not to submerge the old in the new, but to give a higher meaning to history by relating it to transcendental mythic patterns. Along with the basic cosmogonic symbolism came a host of other symbols, spatial and temporal, human and animal. All too often these symbols have been read as ciphers for some one hidden message, but such reductive interpretations are usually too simple. By tapping into the deep mine of myth in order to give meaning to history, apocalyptic literature introduced ambiguity and polyvalence that increase fascination while compounding obscurity and that help explain why modern theorists of symbolism, both psychological and literary, have been so interested in the Book of Revelation.

Apocalypses belong to a literary form that absolutely requires to be read as containing more than apparent senses. But because of the difficulties just described, opinions about the character of these concealed senses vary greatly; and, in view of the association of the apocalyptic genre with theories of world history, it is not surprising that much interpretation has taken the form of historical prophecy.

Given this situation, the history of the ways in which Revelation has been read can provide a useful starting place for contemporary readers who wish to approach the book from a perspective that is both informed and modest. Such a history of interpretations may seem a distinctly secondary enterprise both to scholars who believe that the historical-critical

method has canceled out all other readings, or to those critics who insist that to decipher a text correctly one need take no notice of either its original historical situation or its subsequent use. I side with those who argue that the history of the interpretation of a text is an integral part of its meaning, especially in the case of works that have been as influential and as controversial as Revelation. History constitutes the beginning of a fruitful reading, if not its end.

The inherent difficulty that all eras have found in reading Revelation is evident in the writings of some of its most noted interpreters.

In the *City of God* St. Augustine admits that he had once held to a futurist millenarian reading of 20:1–6, but that after seeing the error of literal or “carnal” interpretations of the millennium he came to identify the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints on earth with the history of the Church.⁷ The difficulty he had in dealing with Revelation, he tells us, was not only that the book, like all prophecy, mingles literal and figurative expressions, but also that it has few plain passages to help illuminate the obscure ones and that it frequently repeats the same things in different forms.⁸ Augustine’s solution was to adopt a spiritual interpretation based on that of the Donatist exegete Tyconius, which reduced the prophetic part of Revelation to the minimum and read the symbols as messages about moral conflict within each person and in the Church in general. The shift from ends conceived of as mythically imminent to those seen as fictionally immanent, which Frank Kermode has suggested is central to the influence of apocalyptic eschatology on Western literature, had an analogue in early Christianity in the writings of Augustine and the other spiritual interpreters.⁹

Joachim of Fiore, a Calabrian abbot of the twelfth century, studied Revelation with unmatched passion, but he too found the book difficult and at first intractable. In his massive *Exposition on Revelation* he reports that as early as the tenth verse of the first chapter he was stymied by the mysteries of the text. Then, early on Easter morning in 1183 or 1184, he was granted a divine revelation: “About the middle of the night’s silence, as I think, the hour when it is thought that our Lion of the tribe of Judah rose from the dead, while I was meditating I suddenly perceived in my mind’s eye something of the fullness [*plenitudo*] of this book and of the entire harmony [*concordia*] of the Old and New Testaments.”¹⁰

Joachim may have been the first (though he was certainly not the last) exegete to claim that the meaning of Revelation had been divinely revealed to him. He described this divine gift not as the charism of prophecy itself, but as a “gift of understanding” (*donum intellectus*), the ability to see what the text really meant to say. The abbot’s discovery of a new interpretation that remained influential for centuries might have made him the patron saint of critics had he been canonized rather than condemned.

Martin Luther was a third influential reader who confessed his initial difficulties with Revelation. In his 1522 Preface he almost excluded it from the New Testament canon as “neither apostolic nor prophetic,” because “Christ is not taught or known in it.” But eight years later, chastened by Rome’s obduracy and Münzer’s radicalism and with a greater grasp of Church history, the Reformer performed a *volte-face* in a new Preface to the German Bible.¹¹ Here Luther offered a brief sketch of the meaning of Revelation that proved central for Protestant interpreters for centuries, both because it identified the papacy with the Antichrist and because this identification was made within the context of a historically progressive reading of the text. Earlier interpreters, such as Joachim (but not Augustine), had also claimed to find a consonance between Revelation’s prophecies and the events of Church history, but they had begun with Scripture and used it as the key to unlock history. Paradoxically, Luther, the great champion of the biblical word, claimed that history enabled him to make sense of Revelation:

Since it is meant as a revelation of what is to come, and especially of coming tribulations and disasters for the Church, we can consider that the first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have happened to the Church before now and to hold them up alongside these pictures and so compare them with the words. If, then, the two fit and agree with each other, we can build on that as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable, interpretation.¹²

For Luther, even though it is the text of history that illuminates Revelation’s obscure pictures, the message that is revealed is fundamentally an evangelical one, the trials and tribulations of the “one holy, Christian Church.”

The difficulties that Augustine, Joachim, and Luther experienced in dealing with Revelation go back to the origins of Christianity. The earliest debate over Revelation, one that almost prevented its inclusion in the canon, concerned a central feature of its message about the future, the prediction of the thousand-year (that is, chiliastic) reign of Christ and the saints on earth in 20:1–6. This prophecy developed elements found in Jewish apocalyptic eschatology and was echoed in a famous saying, attributed in a number of early Christian sources to Jesus, about the physical abundance of the coming kingdom. Major Christian writers of the second century, such as Justin and Irenaeus, read Revelation historically and interpreted literally its images of things to come, especially the reign of Christ and the saints; but a reaction against literal readings of the coming rewards, particularly when pictured as a millennium of banqueting and the propagation of children, is evident from the end of the second century. The delay of the expected return of Christ made historical interpretations and calculations based on Revelation more difficult, and the book’s strident

anti-imperial stance was increasingly uncongenial to Christians seeking accommodation with Rome. Furthermore, the expectation of some Christians that the coming kingdom would be in a restored earthly Jerusalem seemed dangerously close to the political aspirations of Jewish messianism. All these factors contributed to the first great debate over how to read Revelation.

Although Greek writers were the first to begin working out principles for a spiritual, or immanent, interpretation of Revelation, it was more fully achieved in Latin Christianity, and the book long remained marginal in the East. The early third-century commentary of Hippolytus, surviving today only in fragments, rejected attacks on Revelation on the basis of a synoptic understanding of eschatological texts from both the Old and the New Testaments. Origen used Revelation freely, giving it the same highly spiritual reading he gave to all Scripture; but the fact that he did not live to write the commentary he promised was a sore blow. The greatest of the Greek exegetes decisively rejected Christian chiliastic hopes for an earthly kingdom in a restored Jerusalem as delusions of those who “understand the divine scriptures in a Judaistic sense.”¹³

Methodius of Olympus, like Origen, provided spiritual interpretations for key passages. His *Symposium* outlined a spiritual reading of one of the most powerful but challenging passages in Revelation, the account in chapter 12 of the battle between the woman in heaven and the great red dragon with the seven crowned heads and ten horns. The woman is identified with the Church bringing forth “those who are washed in baptism,” while the dragon is the devil, whose heads and horns are given an allegorical interpretation as vices. Significantly, the 1,260 days of the woman’s sojourn in the wilderness (v. 6) are taken not as a real historical period, but as a symbol of the Church’s perfect knowledge of the Trinity.¹⁴

The earliest surviving complete commentary is the work of a Greek martyr bishop writing in Latin about 300 C.E. Victorinus of Pettau has received less attention than he deserves. His commentary may be inelegant in style and pedestrian in particulars, but it tries to give a coherent reading of the whole book and uncovers one of the fundamental principles still used for dealing with its structure, the notion of recapitulation. “Do not regard the order of what is said,” he writes, “because the sevenfold Holy Spirit, when he has run through matters down to the last moment of time and the end, returns again to the same times and completes what he has left unsaid.”¹⁵ The idea that the structure of Revelation is recapitulative rather than linear or progressive has remained a major option for readers ever since. Since its revival half a century ago, it has been increasingly influential in historical-critical studies.

Victorinus does not deny a historical aspect to Revelation, but he stresses moral and theological applications. In chapter 12, for example, he agrees with Methodius, and indeed the whole tradition of the Fathers, in

seeing the woman as the Church and the dragon as the devil; but he identifies the dragon's seven heads with six persecuting Roman emperors and the coming Antichrist, and he views the 1,260 days of verse 6 as a real three and a half years of the preaching of Elijah. Victorinus' highly literal interpretation of the coming kingdom described in 20:1-6 was also increasingly suspect at the time.

It was left to the late fourth-century Donatist exegete Tyconius to cap the spiritualizing reading of Revelation by providing a fully comprehensive interpretation based upon coherent exegetical principles (including recapitulation) that excluded any hope for a coming earthly kingdom. Many aspects of Tyconius' approach can be recaptured in his *Book of Rules* for interpreting Scripture and in the surviving fragments of his *Commentary*. He is concerned exclusively with the struggle between good and evil throughout the history of the Church, which he conceives of as the "twofold body of the Lord." Current events such as the persecution of the Donatists are a part of the revealed story, but in only a general way, that is, as exemplifications of something that has and always will be the case. Tyconius does not historicize the text by showing how it correlates with the Church's history; rather, he synchronizes images and symbols to show how they have meaning for each moment in the Church's life. (For example, the 1,260 days of the woman's flight into the desert signify the entire age of the Church's existence in the world of the wicked.) Although he does not deny a final personal Antichrist, he is much more interested in Antichrist conceived of as the increasing body of evildoers within the Church. From his perspective, even the mildest forms of chiliastic expectations are gross misreadings—the thousand years of 20:1-6 are nothing else but the Church's rule in living and dead down to the coming of Doomsday. Though Augustine and Jerome were largely responsible for spreading this ahistorical, moral, ecclesiological, and antimillennial interpretation to later commentators, it originated with Tyconius.¹⁶

The Tyconian-Augustinian tradition dominated Latin readings of Revelation for seven hundred years. Although it did not deny all prophetic dimension to the book, it tended to eschew attempts to read current events as signs of the end in accord with the Lord's command, "It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power" (Acts 1:7). Those who followed the tradition did not engage in historical readings of Revelation, but in finding moral messages to encourage the struggle against vice and error. Though the centuries from 400 to 1100 saw many events that heightened people's sense that the approach of the end was imminent, and though the same period produced considerable apocalyptic literature in both the East and the West, the Tyconian-Augustinian tradition did little to encourage these ideas. There were, to be sure, innovation and variety within the tradition, especially after the eighth century, when Bede introduced an analysis based upon

seven recapitulative visions rather than the line-by-line readings preferred by former exegetes.¹⁷ At the end of the same century, the Spanish monk Beatus of Liébana penned an extensive if unoriginal commentary that soon came to be richly illustrated with a series of vibrantly colored illuminations. The surviving Beatus manuscripts of the tenth through twelfth centuries are priceless examples of medieval art.

The Tyconian-Augustinian reading of Revelation began to be questioned about 1100. Rupert of Deutz, a reforming German monk, saw the conflict between the woman and the dragon in chapter 12 as a prophecy, or at least a type, of the struggle between Gregory VII and Henry IV; his massive commentary made unprecedented use of parallels between historical events and the symbols in Revelation. Exegetes in the rapidly expanding new schools of the twelfth century addressed the problem of Revelation within the context of their desire to systematize Bible reading and study, though apparently with only fairly traditional results. The great innovator was Joachim of Fiore, the Calabrian abbot who owed his new reading to divine inspiration.

Joachim's interpretation, most fully set forth in his *Exposition on Revelation* but present in almost all his works, is among the most complex ever attempted. Without giving up the ecclesiological and moral dimensions of the Tyconian-Augustinian line, and while fully agreeing that recapitulation was an essential feature of the text, the Calabrian produced the first fully developed historical reading of Revelation, one which showed in detail not only how the symbols of the book correlated with the major events of Church history, but also how they enabled the reader to see, at least in broad lines, what was to come. Although Joachim sees the Bible as a whole as revealing the trinitarian structure of the world-historical process, its last and most important book is the culminating disclosure of the "fullness of history" (*plenitudo historiae*). It is "the key of things past, the knowledge of things to come; the opening of what is sealed, the uncovering of what is hidden."¹⁸

For Joachim the meaning of history is tied to the growth of the spiritual understanding (*intellectus spiritualis*) of the Old and the New Testaments. This spiritual understanding was first revealed at the Resurrection (hence the abbot's Easter revelation). Its painful progress through centuries of conflict with carnal understanding is to reach a culmination in the dawning third *status*, or age of history, when, after the Antichrist's defeat, the Holy Spirit will reveal the fullness of Scripture and thus the ultimate meaning of history in the reformed and purified monastic Church. In this conception of the third *status* Joachim broke with Augustine and his followers and reintroduced millenarianism into Christianity, claiming that although the bishop was right to attack a literal reading of the thousand years, belief in a coming more perfect age of uncertain duration was no error but "a perfectly evident interpretation" (*serenissimus intellectus*). Joa-

chim's millenarianism presupposed a detailed historicizing of the entire symbolism of Revelation; thus, for example, he analyzed the seven heads of the dragon of chapter 12 as seven persecutors culminating in the imminent Antichrist of the second *status*.

The Calabrian abbot's powerful and original exegesis not only introduced a new understanding of history into the West but also influenced and challenged interpreters of Revelation for centuries to come. During the thirteenth century, the debate between the two great protagonists, Augustine and Joachim, grew and intensified among their followers.

Joachim's followers took over the novel exegetical techniques and startling views of the abbot and extended them in ways that he might well have rejected, especially in their virulent criticism of the papacy and in their willingness to see a particular form of current religious life (usually Franciscan) as identical with the form to be realized in the imminent millennial age of the Church. The best example of this approach is the Franciscan Peter Olivi's *Postil on Revelation*, finished shortly before his death in 1298 and still unedited. The work was considered dangerous enough to merit papal condemnation in 1326.

Building on hints in Joachim's own writings, the radical Joachites emphasized a dialectical view of the papacy's role in the coming crisis that would mark the transition to the better state of the Church. On the one hand, the see of Peter was central to the destiny of Christianity and would therefore have an important part to play in both the crisis and the age to come; on the other hand, given the prediction that the Antichrist would be a false teacher enthroned in the Temple (2 Thess. 2:3-4), it was possible to regard unspiritual popes, especially those who attacked the evangelical Franciscan way of life, as predecessors or embodiments of the Antichrist. The eschatological conflict between good and bad popes (the *pastor angelicus* and *antichristus mysticus*) was among the major innovations of late medieval commentary on Revelation. Unlike the Reformation commentators and their Hussite predecessors, however, the Joachite exegetes never lost faith in the essential importance and eschatological role of what they conceived of as the highest office in Christendom.

Alongside the Joachite commentaries on Revelation, increasingly bold in their historicizing use of the symbols of the book, there was a broad middle range of exegesis that used both the Tyconian-Augustinian tradition and more recent methods of interpretation. These commentaries, though rarely exciting, were widely used by those afraid of the excesses of the Joachites and also influenced the profuse use of Revelation in late medieval art.

Finally, Joachim's complex reintroduction of a historical dimension opened the way to less complicated views of the relation between history and prophecy in Revelation. In the fourteenth century the most famous of late medieval exegetes, the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra, popularized a

new form of linear prophetic reading of Revelation in his *Postil on All Scripture*. According to Nicholas, "In the Spirit through images he [John] saw the Church's course from the time of the apostles down to the end of the world."¹⁹ In his precise correlations between symbols and past events, the Franciscan appears even more arbitrary and bizarre than Joachim, as when he says that the book John is commanded to eat in 10:9 is Justinian's *Digest*, or when he interprets chapter 12 as prophesying the Emperor Heraclius' defense of the Church against the Persian persecutor Chosroes symbolized by the dragon. Nevertheless, Nicholas wisely forbears from attempting to find any correspondence between current events and Revelation and also avoids any hint of millenarianism. Concerning chapters 17 through 20 he drily remarks: "Because 'I am not a prophet, or the son of a prophet' (Amos 7:14), I will not say anything about the future, except what can be taken from Scripture or the words of the saints and the established teachers. Therefore, I leave the interpretation of this to the wise. If the Lord were to grant me its understanding, I would be glad to share it with others."²⁰

Although late medieval sectarians, especially the Hussites in Bohemia and the Lollards in England, abandoned the Joachite dialectical view of the apocalyptic role of the papacy and identified it only with the evil symbolic figures found in Revelation, they did not create any new principles for interpreting the relation between history and prophecy in the mysterious last book of the Bible. On the eve of the Reformation there were, then, three broad ways to interpret the book: the Tyconian-Augustinian model (recapitulative, moral, and ecclesiological, but resolutely ahistorical and antimillenarian); the Joachite (also recapitulative, moral, and ecclesiological, but progressively historical and millenarian); and that disseminated by Nicholas of Lyra and his followers (linear-historical, ecclesiological, and antimillenarian). All three models would influence sixteenth- and seventeenth-century readers, though they were radically transformed by the energies and passions unleashed by the split within Western Christendom.

Although Luther's reading of Revelation was linear-historical (and thus not unlike Lyra's), his insistence that history enabled him to make sense of Revelation introduced a tension into Reformation commentary that is evident in the following centuries. Joachim, Nicholas of Lyra, and other medieval authors had searched for correlations between historical events and the symbols of Revelation, but history took on a new and more important role in classic Reformation commentary. The Protestants' need to demonstrate the evangelical claim that the papacy itself (along with the dread Turk) constituted the institutional embodiment of the Antichrist was at the heart of this new historicization. It has been suggested that the fulfillment of apocalyptic prophecies in the rise of the Reformed

churches against Rome served the Protestant cause as a rebuttal to a Roman Catholic apologetic based on miracles.²¹

This is not to say that Protestant interpretations were uniform, especially on such questions as the meaning of the millennial kingdom. Luther's own reading was historical and evangelical in its stress on the preaching of God's word in history. The three "woes" announced by the eagle in 8:13 were central to his understanding of the progress of history revealed in the book. The first woe (9:1-12) was the heretic Arius, the second (9:13-21) the Muhammadan attack on the Church, the third the papal empire announced in 11:14 and described in chapter 13. Thus Luther gave the woman who bears the man-child in chapter 12 a more spiritual interpretation; she signified that "some pious teachers and Christians will continue under the first two woes and under the third which is still to come."²² Luther was resolutely antimillenarian. His experience with the radicals had convinced him that the thousand years of chapter 20 had begun at the time when the prophecy was written. Not all of his contemporaries or successors were so sure.

The emphasis on history that Luther made central to Reformation reading of Revelation was variously appreciated by his followers and by the other Reformers. Heinrich Bullinger, in his influential *Hundred Sermons on Revelation* (1557), was less interested in drawing correlations with historical events than in creating an evangelical version of the old moralizing Tyconian interpretation; but others were more historical in orientation. Lutherans soon began to find a place for Luther himself in the scheme of history, identifying him with the angel bearing the Eternal Gospel in 14:6-7. Joachite exegesis, with its historicizing tendencies and reformist stance, influenced many Reformation commentators. But binding all the classic Reformation commentaries together was their anti-Romanism—Revelation, correctly understood, showed how the papacy through history had functioned as the persecuting Antichrist.

Nowhere was Revelation more avidly studied and more vociferously debated than in Reformation England. The reasons for this are complex, but part of the explanation lies in the close linkage established between the English national identity and the cause of the Reformation, and the growth of the radical Puritan strain that eventually led to a revival of millenarianism. The Anglican mainstream, like the Continental Reformers, justified their break with the pope by equating Rome and Babylon; but those groups that came to question the Elizabethan settlement turned the tables on the moderates by viewing the established episcopal Church as Laodicea the lukewarm (3:16) or even as Babylon on native shores.

John Bale originated the mainstream English interpretation with *The Image of Both Churches* (1548), a rather disorganized work in three parts which showed how Revelation disclosed the struggle between the true

evangelical Church and the false Babylonish Church down through seven ages of history. In his first part Bale asserted that the binding of the dragon (20:2) began with the Reformation, but under the influence of the Continental commentators he later abandoned this view with its millenarian implications, giving an allegorical reading of chapters 20–22. Like Luther, Bale was concerned with relating historical events and the prophecies found in Revelation. His reading of the seven heads of the dragon was an original historicizing one, viewing them both as seven figures of deceit spanning all of world history and as seven periods of attack on the Church since the coming of Christ. Unlike Luther, Bale insisted that “the text [is] a light to the chronicles, and not the chronicles to the text.”²³

Bale’s interest in martyrdom as a sign of the true Church was developed by John Foxe in his famous ecclesiastical history *Actes and Monuments* (1563). Foxe had a powerful influence on Edmund Spenser and on the development of an English variant of the imperial apocalyptic myth in the Elizabethan period. At his death Foxe left an unfinished commentary on Revelation called the *Eicasmī*, which was more mathematically precise and historicizing in its attempts to correlate history and prophecy than Bale had been. This concern for chronological accuracy was even more marked in the case of the noted Scottish mathematician John Napier, who wrote *A Pleine Discovery of the Whole Revelation of St. John* in the wake of that singular historical “proof” of the Protestant view of history, the defeat of the Armada in 1588. Napier demonstrated how precise a timetable could be uncovered in Revelation, even down to the determination that the seventh and last age of history had begun in 1541 and would last until 1786. Although Napier saw this age as concluding with a harvest period of peace from 1688 on, he rejected a millenarian reading of chapter 20, placing the thousand-year binding of Satan in the past, as the classic Reformed tradition always had.

The revival of truly millenarian readings of Revelation, which often included a sense of England as an apocalyptically elect nation, did not become popular until the seventeenth century. In the 1640s and 1650s hundreds of sermons and pamphlets, frequently based on texts from Revelation, fueled the fires of social and political unrest.

The academic commentators of the previous generation initiated this new millenarianism. The chief figures were Thomas Brightman, a Bedfordshire parson, whose *Revelation of the Revelation* was published posthumously in Latin in 1609; and Joseph Mede, a Cambridge don and teacher of Milton, whose *Key of Revelation* first appeared in 1627, also in Latin. Brightman’s work, written partly in response to Jesuit attacks on Protestant exegesis, differed little from its predecessors in method but introduced some important new ideas. The parson not only emphasized the role of England as a chosen nation but also reintroduced hopes for a millenarian era, to be fully realized after the defeat of Rome and the dragon

(in 1650 and 1695, respectively). Brightman did this by distinguishing between two millennial ages, one (prophesied in 20:2) lasting from 300 to 1300, and the other (found in 20:4–5) beginning in 1300. He was convinced that the patristic chiliasts “did not wander much from the truth.”²⁴

Mede’s method of interpretation was more original and his millenarianism, though guarded in expression, no less real than Brightman’s. Mede adopted an internal, philological method which gave the various symbols of Revelation consistent historical and political meanings (for example, “winds” always means “wars”), so that the repetition of an image indicated a return to the same topic. On this basis Mede worked out a scheme of temporal repetitions, or “synchronizations,” that were really nothing more than ancient recapitulations with a new twist.²⁵ In Mede’s scheme the third woe, seventh seal, seventh trumpet, and seventh vial all corresponded to the coming millennium, when Christ would return to earth, bind Satan, and reign with the saints, an event which Mede predicted would occur between 1625 and 1716.

The great age of English commentary on Revelation did not end with the Restoration, but there was little innovative thought. Henry More, the Cambridge Platonist, defended Mede’s views against the rising tide of more critical scholarship, and Isaac Newton perfected the mathematical approach to prophetic calculations of world history with a monotony that led Voltaire to remark that “Sir Isaac Newton wrote his comment upon the Revelation to console mankind for the great superiority he had over them in other respects.”²⁶ One change of note did occur in the eighteenth century, when interpreters such as Daniel Whitby turned away from Mede’s premillennial position (that Christ’s second coming would inaugurate the reign of the saints) in favor of a postmillennial view that saw Christ’s return as following a new and better age soon to dawn for mankind. This position influenced the first great American commentator, Jonathan Edwards, who wrote extensively on Revelation in the first half of the eighteenth century.

In the nineteenth century the American and British heirs of the millenarian tradition of interpreting Revelation, reacting to such dramatic events as the American and French Revolutions and the careers of Napoleon I and III, continued to produce apocalyptic treatises and commentaries. Among the most influential figures on both sides of the Atlantic was John Nelson Darby, the founder of the Plymouth Brethren and in many ways the originator of present-day fundamentalism.

While Protestants, both on the Continent and in England, were developing their distinctive readings of Revelation, Jesuit exegetes were also busy. From 1581 to 1593 Cardinal Bellarmine published his three-volume *Controversies* attacking Protestant theology and exegesis. Several generations of Jesuits furthered this theological counterattack, not least by showing that the Protestant readings of Revelation based on a historical inter-

pretation of the text and the identification of the papacy with the Antichrist were erroneous. The Jesuit commentators of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were hampered by a hankering after Joachite exegesis that helped them to provide their own order with a unique historical status; but the best of the group—notably Franciscus Ribeira, who published his commentary in 1591, and Ludovicus ab Alcasar, whose work came out in 1614—are regarded as the ancestors of the historical-critical interpretation of Revelation. Not only did they bring vast erudition to bear in showing that there was no evidence for identifying the papacy with the Antichrist, but they also denied the basic premise of exegetes since Joachim and Nicholas of Lyra that Revelation foretold the course of history. For them the book was to be understood in the light of what we could know about the original early Christian context in which it was written. The fulfillment of whatever prophecies it contained still lay in the future.

This new literary and critical reading of Revelation soon influenced Protestant scholars, first Hugo Grotius in his *Notations to the New Testament* (1644), and then Henry Hammond in England in 1653. During the eighteenth century, despite commentaries such as Johann Albrecht Bengel's, which combined philological erudition with exact chronological predictions and fervent millenarianism, the strengthening current of Enlightenment criticism further eroded the foundations of traditional historical readings of Revelation. By the century's end, when Johann Salomo Semler and others denied the Johannine authorship of the book and emphasized the Jewish background of its apocalyptic imagery, the era of modern critical study of Revelation had begun.

In the great proliferation of commentaries on and readings of Revelation since 1800, almost all of the traditional interpretations have continued to exert an influence. Today, however, the primary question confronting readers of Revelation seems to have shifted from the relation between history and prophecy to that between prophecy and science. Is it possible to give a reading of the book that is both prophetic and also in some sense scientific?

The term *scientific*, of course, can be understood in various ways. The desire for greater mathematical accuracy among commentators such as Napier and Newton could be said to be a scientific claim, just as the philological approach of Brightman, Mede, and Bengel made an appeal to scientific learning. But the historical erudition and use of literary criticism introduced by the Jesuits, developed by Grotius and others, and eventually pushed beyond the theological boundaries which held that Revelation must always be seen as a book in some way prophetic, won the day. By the nineteenth century historical science had overcome prophecy in interpretations of Revelation, at least in the scholarly world. The victory, of course, has been at least in part a pyrrhic one. The academic

triumph of the historical-critical method has not produced any one generally agreed-upon explanation of the structure of the book and the meaning of the mysterious sequences of symbols of which it is composed, even among scholars, and outside the academy many continue to read and to use Revelation in very different ways.

Two kinds of reaction to the dominance of scientific approaches to Revelation have been evident in the past two centuries. First, the book, having long exerted so strong an influence on art and literature, might itself be viewed primarily as an imaginative creation, as a work of literature rather than as a repository of truths about the course of history and the events of the end. Johann Gottfried von Herder, the Romantic philosopher, pioneered this approach in his effusive commentary on Revelation, *Mar-anatha* (1779). The nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries have seen numerous examples of this tendency, as well as an abundance of studies of the influence of Revelation and the apocalyptic mentality upon Western literature. In recent years most historical-critical interpreters of the book have discovered the importance of literary criticism, and many commentaries and studies now employ at least some elements of contemporary literary theories.

The other reaction to the victory of the historical-critical method was the rise of the fundamentalist interpretation in the nineteenth century, a kind of inverted scientific approach in its adherence to a crudely literalistic reading as providing the only true "objectivity."²⁷ Modern critical readers of Revelation tend to forget that most of those who ponder the book today see it through the eyes of the Hal Lindseys and the Billy Grahams as the divinely given plan for the coming Armageddon. The conflict of interpretations between academic readings carried on in schools of divinity and religion and in departments of English on the one hand and the mass of general readers on the other is probably greater now than ever before.

This cleavage of viewpoints may give some scholars cause for despair, but it also can be taken as a message of hope: at least it indicates that Revelation is still widely read and greatly treasured. When the book ceases to be controversial, it is likely to be forgotten. Those who value Revelation, though they will doubtless continue to quarrel about the meaning of its bold and provoking symbols and its intricate recapitulative structure, can agree with the words of the American divine Cotton Mather: "I confess *Apocalyptic Studies* are fittest for those Raised Souls, whose *Heart Strings* are made of a Little *Nicer* Clay than other mens."²⁸ Perhaps the last word can be left to Herder, who for all the disorder of his own reading was among the first to recognize that although Revelation may be many things, we cannot afford to forget that it is a great symbolic work of literature, more of a poem than a philosophical or historical treatise: "Where a book, through thousands of years, stirs up the heart and awakens the soul, and leaves neither friend nor foe indifferent, and scarcely has a

lukewarm friend or enemy, in such a book there must be something substantial, whatever anyone may say."²⁹

NOTES

1. Jerome, *Letter* 53.8.
2. As pointed out by Michael Murrin, "Revelation and Two Seventeenth Century Commentators," in C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich, eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Manchester, 1984), p. 126.
3. On the importance of intercalation see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 172-174.
4. An important recent study on the genre is John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre, Semeia* 14 (Missoula, Mont., 1979). More recent debate on definitional questions can be found in David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen, 1983).
5. See Collins, *Apocalypse*, p. 9.
6. These terms are taken from Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, 1979), p. xi.
7. Augustine, *City of God* 20.7 and 9.
8. *Ibid.*, 20.21 and 17.
9. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York, 1967).
10. Joachim of Fiore, *Exposition on Revelation* (Venice, 1527), fol. 39v.
11. Luther's 1522 Preface is found in *Luthers Werke*, vol. VII, *Die Deutsche Bibel* (Weimar, 1931), p. 404. For the 1530 Preface see *ibid.*, pp. 407-421. Luther's views on Revelation have recently been treated by Hans-Ulrich Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tübingen, 1982).
12. Luther, 1530 Preface, *Deutsche Bibel*, p. 408.
13. Origen, *On First Principles* 2.11.2.
14. Methodius, *Symposium* 8.4-13. On the history of the interpretation of chapter 12, see Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse 12. Histoire de l'exégèse* (Tübingen, 1959).
15. Victorinus, *Commentary on Revelation* 8.2-3.
16. On the Tyconian-Augustinian tradition see Wilhelm Kamlah, *Apokalypse und Geschichtstheologie* (Berlin, 1935); and Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York, 1985), chap. 2.
17. On these two types see Robert E. Lerner, "Joachim of Fiore's Breakthrough to Chiliasm," *Cristianesimo nella Storia*, 6 (1985), 500-501.
18. Joachim, *Exposition*, fol. 3r. On Joachim's exegesis see McGinn, *Calabrian Abbot*, chaps. 4 and 5.
19. Nicholas of Lyra, *Postil on All Scripture*, 6 vols. (Basel, 1506-08), VI, fol. 246v.
20. *Ibid.*, fol. 270v.
21. Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain 1530-1645* (Oxford, 1979), p. 178.
22. Luther, 1530 Preface, *Deutsche Bibel*, p. 412.
23. John Bale, *The Image of Both Churches*, in *Select Works of John Bale, D.D.*, I (Cambridge, 1849), 253.

24. Thomas Brightman, *The Workes* (London, 1644), p. 825.
25. On Mede's method, see Murrin, "Revelation and Commentators."
26. Newton's *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* appeared posthumously in 1733. Voltaire's remark was quoted in Bishop Thomas Newton's *Dissertations on the Prophecies*, III (London, 1759-60), 4.
27. See Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago, 1970), especially pp. 110-112.
28. Quoted by Stephen J. Stein, "Transatlantic Extensions: Apocalyptic in Early New England," in Patrides and Wittreich, *Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature*, p. 277.
29. Quoted in Moses Stuart, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, II (Andover, 1845), 501.

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