Chapter 4

The Western Apocalypse Commentary Tradition of the Early Middle Ages

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4.1 Introduction

Of the medieval textual genres dealing with the New Testament book of Revelation, the exegetical commentary surpasses all others in number and importance. As with most literary genres, however, the first commentaries on the Apocalypse were rhetorically unimpressive, experimental in nature, and most proved to be little more than literal explanations of the text. As E. Ann Matter explains, exegesis of the Apocalypse in its beginning stages “is a complicated story of obscure authors, tangled texts, and at least two paradoxes” – the “doubtful orthodoxy” of the first commentators, and the commentators’ eventual transformation of what she calls “apocalyptic fervor” into an extended allegory of the church.¹ Living under Roman rule, the first exegetes often experienced persecution at the hands of government officials and fully expected the return of Christ either within their own lives or in the very near future.² The triumph of the church over pagan rule, representing Christ’s triumph over Antichrist, would set into action the events leading to the Last Judgement and to the establishment of the Celestial Jerusalem.

With Constantine’s conversion to Christianity and the proclamation of religious tolerance through the Edict of Milan in 313, commentators of Revelation found it necessary to reinterpret the apocalyptic narrative in a less historical way. No longer could the beast symbolize Rome, the Antichrist signify the emperor, and the tribulations suffered just prior to Christ’s return refer to persecution and martyrdom. Indeed, since Constantine’s conversion had not brought about world peace, and since evil did not end with Theodosius’s 380

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² Bernard McGinn refers to two types of apocalyptic thought especially present in Christian writing of this period – predictive apocalypticism, in which the writer predicts when the end will take place, and non-predictive apocalypticism (psychological imminence), or “the conviction that the final drama of history is already underway and that current decisions and actions are to be made in the light of the approaching end, even when we cannot determine how near or far off it may be.” (McGinn, 1995, 58–89, at 60).
proclamation of Catholicism as imperial religion, exegetes were faced with a dilemma. The Apocalypse, interpreted as a linear history of Christ's church up to that point, could no longer be seen as a singular chronological set of events that would occur before the Last Judgement. Revelation had proven itself non-predictive, and many of the major exegetes from the late 4th century onward began to read Revelation as a more symbolical or allegorical text. Bernard McGinn explains:

[On] an exegetical level apocalypticism appeared to many to be a throwback to an outmoded, “Jewish,” literal reading of the Scriptures. The Revelation of John was not to be understood as prophecy of the last events of history, but rather as an allegory of the conflict between good and evil in the present life of the Church. Attempts to determine the time of the End of the world were ruled out with an appeal to “It is not for you to know the times or dates” (Acts 1:7).³

That is, commentaries on the Apocalypse now took the stance that John's Revelation could be used to interpret past and current events within the spiritual life of the church, but that using it in a predictive way to determine the dates of key turning points in the future of the church could lead to disappointment and possibly even to heresy. In this desire to turn away from literal historical interpretation and to search for the hidden moral and spiritual meanings within the apocalyptic text, many commentators from the Early Middle Ages to the end of the first millennium “introduced ambiguity and polyvalence that increase fascination while compounding obscurity.”⁴

4.2 Establishing a Tradition: Victorinus and Tyconius

At around 260, little more than a century and a half after Saint John’s vision, the Slovenian bishop and martyr Victorinus of Pettau wrote the first complete commentary on the book of Revelation in Latin. We know that he lived in mostly un-Christianized territory and that he probably died during the persecutions of Diocletian in 304. At the end of the same century Jerome wrote that

Victorinus, bishop of Poetovio, did not know Latin as well as he did Greek; as a result, his works, which are excellent in content, seem inferior in

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