CHAPTER 6

Prolepsis and Anticipation: The Apocalyptic Futurity of the Now, East and West

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6.1 Introduction

While not rare, depictions of the apocalypse are not all that popular in Byzantium when compared to the presence of other scenes from the narrative of Christ’s life or its own popularity in the western medieval world. The extant images often emerge in Byzantine provinces, such as Cappadocia, and where contact with the Latin Church is prominent, such as in Lusignan Cyprus, Crete, or Italy.¹ While the Second Coming is addressed in the textual tradition, its manifestation is often derived through synecdoche alone in the church program. Utilizing visual production, ekphrases, and liturgical commentaries, this chapter investigates how the apocalypse grounds a conception of a present for the Greek East relative to the Latin West. My goal, however, is not to produce a cohesive or comprehensive survey of the Last Judgment’s depictions in Byzantium, but instead to articulate non-normative temporalities that emerge through and around the Last Judgment scene.

6.2 The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition

As has been noted, the tradition of Byzantine apocalyptic thought has been overlooked by scholars working on Byzantine literature.² Many of these works have been disregarded due to their perception as popular, lowbrow texts lacking a sustained intellectual or literary tradition. Perhaps the most influential Byzantine apocalypse was written by Pseudo-Methodius, who was originally a

¹ The description of such places as ‘provincial’ or ‘colonial’ is found throughout their twentieth-century historiography. Such terms have come to refer to places outside the direct Constantinopolitan sphere, particularly where the boundaries with other neighboring groups were fluid or contested. For Cappadocia, see Wharton (1988); Métivier (2005). For Italy, see Demus (1948, 19–21; Ibid., 1960; Ibid., 1988). For Cyprus, see Ćurčić (1999, 71–94); Megaw (1974, 57–88). For Crete, see Georgopoulou (September 1995, 479–496).

Syriac and most-likely a Monophysite. In fact, many of the Byzantine apocalypses either had origins or more prominent social lives in adjacent spheres, such as the Armenian, Ethiopian, Coptic, and Slavic traditions. Thus, while existing within the various bounds of the Empire and its fields of influence, the tradition flourished primarily outside the Constantinopolitan sphere. Consequently, the tradition’s development does not lend itself to a singular narrative, but instead presents a wealth of varieties and contradictions. Unlike the West’s Joachim of Fiore, Byzantium did not produce a singular unifying figure for the apocalyptic genre. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the West was undertaking a vast exegetical project on the Apocalypse, redefining its eschatology and tradition, as in the work done in Paris on the *Glossa ordinaria*. These developments were strikingly absent in the East; in fact, from the eleventh century there was a “discreet silence of intellectuals” on eschatological matters, according to Paul Magdalino, who attributes this silence to a growing skepticism among learned circles.

The Byzantine tradition was quite different in its character from that of the West, even if one perceives a more constant concern with apocalyptic and eschatological thinking in Byzantium throughout its existence. The key sources of apocalyptic thought came from the Old and New Testament’s prophecies, such as the Book of Daniel, the account of the Second Coming of Christ in Matthew (Matt. 24), and St. Paul’s references to the advent of the Antichrist (2 Thess. 2:7–8); these would be accompanied by the apocalyptic prophetic Judeo-Christian tradition and also the Apocalypse of St. John. While the tenth century demonstrates an interest in the Book of Revelation – for example, Arethas of Caesarea produced a new commentary on it and Niketas the Paphlagonian argued for its canonicity – it never fully entered the Byzantine scriptural canon, except to some extent in the fourteenth century. The text was therefore not usually included in New Testament manuscripts and Byzantine texts on the Antichrist or the millennium tend to focus on the socio-political aspects of the end times.

In the Byzantine artistic tradition the apocalypse itself was not depicted until the post-Byzantine period, yet images of the Last Judgment scene were

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For an English translation, see Alexander (1985, 36–60).

For a survey of this material, see Baun (2007, 1–130).

Lobrichon (1979).


Magdalino (1993, 4).