

Eschatology Towards the End of the First Millennium

MARK W. ELLIOTT

Keywords: Eschatology, millennium, apocalypse, Augustine, revelation, resurrection, antichrist, Byzantium, Jerusalem

As we, at the end of the second millennium, consider the beliefs which those approaching the end of first millennium held about it, it goes without saying that many things were different then. The extent to which the view of people living one thousand years ago yet professing the Christian faith has something to teach us, I shall consider in the final part of this article. First I shall sketch the history of the doctrine of the Last Things in the first millennium, paying particular attention to the use of Scripture and to the different concerns of the Byzantine and Roman churches

Reasons for sidelining the Apocalypse of John

Augustine believed that the millennium meant 'the age of the Church', the time during which the devil is

bound and evangelism can take place (*City of God* 20, 7&8 with reference to Rev. 20:5). It is well-known that Augustine set the tone for much thinking about the interpretation of the Revelation of St. John when he wrote that one was not to take the mention of the 'one thousand year reign' as pointing forward to any hoped-for one thousand years of paradise on this earth, such as 'the chiliasts' believed. After all, the mention of a 'first resurrection' (Rev. 20:5), often taken to mean that the martyrs are to be raised for a thousand years before the general resurrection (e.g. Irenaeus *Against the Heresies* 5.33.3-4), is interpreted by Augustine to mean 'baptism'. Nothing more is to be expected until the second, general resurrection, that of the body, by which time history will be left behind like markings on a runway. Until such time, the Augustinian view is that God acts in the realm of souls, not politics. Many have seen the Augustinian legacy as muting

the strong voice of the Book of Revelation. It betrays, perhaps, the North African's strongest debt to the ahistorical theology of Origen, although his near-contemporary and fellow North African, the Donatist Tyconius, was the immediate influence. However, Augustine cannot be held wholly responsible. Just as influential on the post-Augustinian climate of opinion was Jerome's determination to edit the Apocalypse Commentary of Victorinus of Pettau so that those passages which represented a 'chilastic' interpretation were removed.

In the Greek East

The dispute over the canonicity of the Book of Revelation in the East appears as early as Dionysius of Alexandria.¹ Interpretation of Revelation was generally avoided by the Greek commentators until the sixth century.² The Syriac-speaking church avoided it altogether so that, by the thirteenth century, a writer such as Bar-Hebraeus, argues, according to the Gospels, that signs and portents tell us that the end is near, but not exactly when it will take place; he discusses the Gospel passages, not the significance of Revelation.

The Bad News and the Enemy Within

The lack of interest in the Book of Revelation should not blind us to the early Byzantine fascination with the mysterious 'Antichrist figure', 'the man of lawlessness' in 2 Thessalonians 2:3f. The royal historian Procopius turned against his master the Emperor Justinian after the latter's death: 'This inscrutable man who, in his physical appearance, resembled the infamous Emperor Domitian, who was allegedly observed to turn late at night into a headless phantom, whose face was sometimes transformed into a mass of featureless flesh, could surely be regarded as the Prince of Demons or the Antichrist himself.'³

The idea that the world was in its last days was by this time well established. The early Christian apologist, Theophilus of Antioch (c. A.D. 180), had calculated that the Incarnation occurred five thousand, five hundred and fifteen years after creation. This chronology which Eusebius, the Emperor Constantine's theologian, adjusted meant that by A.D. 500 the world was approaching its seventh millennium, since the duration of the world was generally agreed to be 7×1000 years in accordance with the seven days of creation and the helpful equation in Psalm 90:4/2 Peter 3:8: 'One day with the Lord is as a thousand years: *unus dies apud dominum sicut mille anni*'.

In the mid-sixth century, the *Oracle of Baalbek* used another way of reckoning. According to its interpretation of Daniel 7:23 the Christian Roman Empire (held to begin properly in the 390s) was to last 180 years.

This added up to a date which *Baalbek* fixed as A.D. 572. The Antichrist was identified as an enemy within: there had been disobedience of Old Testament proportions at the heart of the Byzantine theocracy. God had laid bare his judgement in the defeat of the arrogant Emperor Heraclius in A.D. 636 at Yarmuk, and things could only get worse during the short time that remained.⁴

The Good News

It was a sign of how desperate things had become that theology demanded some sort of divine intervention. The *Revelation of Methodius of Patara* (mid-C7) employs the 'description' in Psalm 68:32 of a champion emperor coming from Ethiopia: 'Ethiopia will reach out her hand to God.' There was no room in this schema for chiliasm: events were telescoped into a few years' duration, according to the pattern of 2 Thessalonians. The champion would defeat the Arab rebellion, supported by the Archangel, when the northern forces of Gog and Magog attack his flank. However, he is not strong enough to withstand the Antichrist who comes out of Chorazin and was educated in Bethsaida (cf. Mt. 11:21). The Emperor is driven to Jerusalem, where, ascending Golgotha, he will hand over the crown to Christ who then descends to defeat the Antichrist.

Continuing Expectation and Indifference

The patriarch Sophronius viewed the Arab capture of Jerusalem and entry of Caliph Ummar into the Holy Sepulchre in A.D. 634 as 'the abomination of desolation.' The enemy is now 'without' and the expectation is of God's judgement wrought through the Byzantine 'Israel' on the Islamic 'nations'. *The Old Church Slavonic Vision of Daniel* includes a long list of Byzantine Emperors; the last, Michael II (820-829) is followed by the prediction of '... a series of eschatological emperors, for instance, a tetrarchy of two Eastern and two Western rulers — a feature to which no historical reality corresponded in the Ninth Century.'⁵ Yet in the East general fascination with the world's end waned as Byzantium settled down to 'business (trade, culture, religion) as usual'. Whereas, in the West ever since Jerome's *Hebraica veritas* was adopted by Bede, scholars realized that according to the Hebrew text the world began shortly after 4000 B.C., so that the end of the world was to come considerably later, the Greeks, who followed the Septuagint's reckoning of the world's beginning in c. 5325 B.C., when the world did not end by A.D. 675, began to lose interest in end-times.

From the mid-ninth century onwards Byzantium enjoyed easier and more prosperous times. Arethas (d.

944) gives the interpretation on Revelation 20:1–3 of his sixth-century predecessor Andreas of Crete, where the Antichrist's binding means simply the Incarnation, the *First Advent* of Christ, as Justin Martyr had said. Arethas takes this as a clue to set the clock ticking from the Incarnation with 1000 years to run, rather than fixing the End-time as six thousand years after creation. Arethas however goes on to defuse the notion that the world would end within the coming century (i.e., by A.D. 1000), since of course one cannot understand the millennium in terms of exact time. The Revelation of John was therefore used to support the Byzantine regime, not in order to tell of coming judgement and salvation. Despite indications of popular apprehension in late tenth-century Byzantium, Photius the Patriarch was typical in avoiding the subject of what happens between death and final judgement, preferring to focus on the resurrection. Although even in the twelfth century Alexios Komnenos would expect to lay down his crown in Jerusalem, 'Byzantine Emperors, by not recapturing Jerusalem, effectively postponed the end indefinitely.'⁶

The West

J.N. Hillgarth comments about Visigothic Spain: 'St Augustine's denial of the Eusebian assumptions, his separation of the heavenly city of God from the earthly city of men, was too radical to win general assent'. There was correspondingly an optimism that superseded the pessimistic 'wait and see' of the attitude of Gregory the Great. In the 680s Julian of Toledo replied to the Jewish assertion that the age of the Messiah had not yet come, saying that it had in fact begun with Christ's birth. This was reaffirmed by Elipandus of Toledo in his letter to Alcuin, Charlemagne's favourite scholar.

The Book of Revelation regained an audience in the context of oppression and resulting eschatological ferment, characterized by the Cordoba martyrs in A.D. 850.⁷ Beatus of Liebana, one of the most read commentators on the Book of Revelation during the Middle Ages proclaimed the end was nigh during an Easter vigil.⁸ Even though Beatus' own commentary is 'spiritualising' and interested in the poetic symbolism of Revelation rather than 'political' and predictive, nevertheless it contains a good deal of excitement! As Richard Southern wrote concerning Eulogius, the leader of the Cordoba Martyrs, and Paul Alvarus, who narrated the martyrdom soon afterwards: 'Briefly, both were impressed by the idea that the role of Islam was a preparation for the final appearance of Antichrist.'⁹ This could well be Mohammed himself who after all had died in A.D. 666 and whose namesake Mahomet I was now on the throne. Meanwhile Paul Alvarus, the chronicler of the Cordoba martyrs, estimated from Daniel 7:23 ('3.5 periods of years') that this meant the Muslim hegemony had 245

years to run from A.D. 618, resulting in an end-date of A.D. 863: its years, if not its days, were numbered.

Tenth Century France

While these Spanish expectations had been based on counting from the beginning of creation, Bede's new chronology (adopted from Dionysius Exiguus) meant that 'A.D.' began to be used for dating letters, edicts, and so on, although it took time to become established. The consequence was that some thoughts, especially in certain monastic circles, were fixed on A.D. 1000. Adso of Montier-en-Der, writing in A.D. 953, became acquainted with the 'Last World Emperor' motif, and transposed it into Frankish terms.¹⁰ To give a paraphrase of his letter to his queen, Gerberga: *Some of our learned men say that one of the Kings of the Franks will possess anew the Roman Empire. He will be in the last time and will be the greatest and the last of all kings. After he has successfully governed his empire, he will finally come to Jerusalem and will lay aside his scepter and crown on the Mount of Olives. This will be the end and the consummation of the Roman and Christian Empire.*

Late Tenth and Early Eleventh Century Western Europe

Despite the famous historian Michelet's conviction, based largely on sixteenth-century evidence, that there was widespread terror just before A.D. 1000, research by H. Focillon and G. Duby have shown that this is an illusion: no Papal or Imperial documents mention such a thing; wills were still being drawn up in 999 in the belief that it was worth disposing of property. However, they add that there was tension and fear bubbling below the surface. Abbo of Fleury and Odo of Cluny both spoke of the possible arrival of the Antichrist in either 1000 or 1033 (a thousand years after Christ's passion), although, as time went on, the former monk became less sure of this, yet had to preach against excited popular belief. The monastic historian Rodulfus Glaber saw the connection of unquiet times with the loosing of Satan (Rev. 20:3), for in those evil days in the early part of the eleventh century, Baptism, the Trinity, even meat-eating were slandered.¹¹ We see here the beginnings of Catharism, the heresy which, among other things, deprecated the body and believed in reincarnation. Not surprisingly, 1022 saw the first heretic burning in Medieval Europe. The end was not just 'nigh'; it was here: Glaber reports 'darkening of the sun' and visions of saints coming back to life. The tissue dividing this world from the next was wearing very thin. Relics of saints were clung to for protection while the trend of pilgrimages to Jerusalem (for the rich) was instigated, as the alarm was raised in the monasteries and spread to

the pious laity.¹² At the same time, as J. le Goff has argued, the doctrine of Purgatory began to develop in tandem with the monastic penitential piety as a response to deep fear of 'the afterlife'. In Germany, the Holy Roman Emperor Otto III re-interred the remains of Charlemagne at Aachen in order to identify with him to the extent, if recent scholarship is to be believed, of taking on the mantle of Last World Emperor.¹³ Eerily, he died soon afterwards and his spiritual adviser Pope Sylvester II, disillusioned, followed him to the grave. As Richard Landes has observed, similar hopes of the penitential leader were expressed about William of Aquitaine by Ademar of Chabannes,¹⁴ while the Legend of the Holy Grail in both its orthodox and heterodox forms emerged just after this period from the felt need of the laity to gain purity as God's judgement approached. A similar explanation underlies the phenomenon of the Crusading ideology: purification and the 'Peace of God' movement which mollified knights upset by losing their place in the changing social order by directing their energies towards unbelievers and to ensure the safety of the all-important Jerusalem, where the last battle would be played out.

An example to the church

A final good example of theologians' helping to channel people's raw religious emotions is the way in which the English bishops at this time, Aelfric and Wulfstan, encouraged their congregations and kings to live 'as if' the last judgement were about to fall.¹⁵ Faith does not seek the certainty of a date or a time — that would not be faith — but keeps watch. Faithful to the parables, their sermons about 'the end' instruct individuals whether high or low-born, Anglo-Saxons or Danes to see the troubles (warfare, unrest, famine) as not only signs but also the reality of God's approaching, with a subtle balancing of emphasis on the fate of individuals and (the end of) world history. These people did not 'banalise' evil as Bernard McGinn put it: nor should the church in any age.

Mark Elliott is Lecturer in Historical and Systematic Theology in the University of Nottingham.

Footnote

1 On the origins of and reaction to chiliasm, see Charles Hill, *Regnum Caelorum* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992) and, for the later patristic period, Brian Daley, *The Hope of the Early Church* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991).

2 Delay, *ibid*, 168.

3 See Procopius, *The Secret History* (*Patrologia Graeca*, 119, 202).

4 See J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the seventh century: the transformation of a culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

5 P.J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1985)

6 P Magdalino, 'The history of the future and its uses: prophecy, policy and propaganda', in R. Beaton & C. Roueche (eds.), *The Making of Byzantine History*, (1993), 31.

7 On this see J.A. Coope, *The Martyrs of Cordoba* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.) On the Spanish context, see R. Collins, *Early medieval Spain: unity in diversity, 400–1000* (2nd ed.; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996).

8 See B. McGinn, *Anti-Christ: Two Thousand Years of Fascination with Evil* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994), 85.

9 *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1962), 24.

10 'Adso of Montier-en-Der: Letter on the Origin and Time of the Antichrist' in B. McGinn (ed.), *Apocalyptic Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1980), 89–96.

11 Jean Duvernoy, *L'histoire des Cathares*, (Toulouse: Privat, 1979), 88–97.

12 For background, see R. Landes 'Lest the millennium be fulfilled: Apocalyptic Expectations and the Pattern of Western Chronography, 100–800 CE,' in W. Verbeke, D. Verhelst and A. Welkenhuysen (ed.), *The Use and Abuse of Eschatology in the Middle Ages* (Leuven: Leuven UP, 1988), 137–211; G. Duby, *L'An Mil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980) and H. Focillon, *The Year 1000* (ET; New York, 1969); also J. Fried, 'L'attesa della fine dei tempi alla svolta del millennio,' in O. Capitani and J. Miethke (ed.), *L'attesa della fine dei tempi nel Medioevo*, (Bologna: il Mulino, 1990), 37–86.

13 See Gerd Althoff, *Otto III* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1997), 268, which informs us that Otto had inlaid his crown with scenes from Revelation. The *Chronicon Novaliniense* iii, 32, 106 informs us that Otto found Charlemagne sitting up; his fingernails had grown through the 'gloves', so Otto clipped them and gave him a white cloak. According to Leo of Vercelli's *Versus de Gregorio*, the kingdoms of Greece and Persia did not yet belong to Otto: but eschatologically, once set free by Christ, they would bow to the Emperor as Christ's vicar. Sylvester's beliefs are clear from the prologue to his *Libellus de rationali et ratione uti* (1998).

14 R. Landes, *Relics, apocalypse, and the deceits of history: Ademar of Chabannes, 989–1034*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995)

15 This was not a Jungian 'live as if God exists', rather, given that God does exist, live as if he may return tonight. See D. Bethurum, *The homilies of Wulfstan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957) and M. Godden (ed.) *Aelfric's Catholic homilies, the second series text* (London: Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 1979).