THE PROBLEM OF ACCESSIBILITY

This article is designed to help scholars locate twenty-one commentaries on the Book of Revelation from the third through eighth centuries, which to a large extent are inaccessible to American biblical scholars.\(^1\) Respect for the opinions of our Christian forefathers and their opinions regarding the Scriptures have contributed to the publication of on-going series like Ancient Christian Writers and Fathers of the Church, and to the sustained popularity of the Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series, first published over a century ago.\(^2\)

Although the writers of the early church are by no means infallible in their interpretations of Scripture, their opinions often lend weight in theological controversies. For example, in matters of Bible prophecy, contemporary scholars continually bring the church fathers into their debates. This has been the case in the most recent discussions between futurists and preterists, between premillennialists and amillennialists, and between pretribulationists and

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\(^{1}\) An early version of this article was delivered as a paper entitled “Ancient Commentaries on the Book of Revelation: A Bibliographical Guide” at the Southeastern Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Dayton, Tennessee in March 2003.

posttribulationists. In these debates patristic texts are most often drawn from the aforementioned series that provide patristic literature in English translation. However, these translated texts represent a mere fraction of what ancient Christian writers have left behind. Most of the patristic literary monuments, especially ancient Biblical commentaries, are still in Greek and Latin. Commentaries on the Book of Revelation vividly illustrate this point. Portions of at least twenty-one on the Book of Revelation exist from the third through eighth centuries, but only three have been published in English: those of Victorinus (c. 260), Ecumenius (518), and Bede (c. 716); and two of these are problematic. The translation of Victorinus’ commentary, having been completed in the nineteenth-century, was not based on a

contains 116 volumes, and Ancient Christian Writers, published by Paulist Press contains 60 volumes.


4 Patristic biblical commentaries also exist in Syriac, Coptic, and Arabic. Series in the original languages include Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium over 500 volumes, Sources chrétienne (with French translations) over 400 volumes, Patrologiae, cursus completus, series Latina, 221 volumes, Corpus Christianorum series Latina over 175 volumes, Patrologiae, cursus completus, series Graeca, 161 volumes, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum over 90 volumes, and Patrologia Orientalis, over 40 volumes. Bibliographical information for most of these series is in the “Abbreviations” list.

5 No Revelation commentaries are extant from the second century.
critical edition of the text. Because of this, the translation contains some statements that are not Victorinus’ at all, but have proven to be recensions of Jerome dated about 398. Bede’s commentary, translated into English by Edward Marshall and published in London in 1878, has not been reprinted. Very few libraries in the United States own it, so it is virtually inaccessible to scholars in North America.

The need for translations of these ancient commentaries on Revelation is great. By providing bibliographical information on twenty-one commentaries on the Book of Revelation from the third through eighth centuries, this article hopes to serve as an aid for perspective translators, a research tool for theologians and expositors, and a guide for librarians and bibliophiles seeking to acquire ancient Apocalypse commentaries.

The commentaries are listed chronologically by their Latin titles, with its corresponding English title in brackets. Where an English translation of a commentary exists, it is listed first, followed by critical editions indicated by the word “edition.” Other printed editions are also listed, followed by the language in which they were published. Where a printed edition does not exist, the library that possesses a manuscript (MS) containing the commentary is listed, followed by the manuscript number.

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6 The translation of the Apocalypse commentary of Victorinus of Pettua in ANF 7:344-60 was done by Robert E. Wallis before 1886. The critical edition by Johannes Haussleiter, published in CSEL 49 in 1916, distinguished Victorinus’ commentary from Jerome’s recension of it.

7 Bede’s commentary has been critically edited recently by Roger Gryson in CCSL 121A. In 2006, Faith Wallis of McGill University was preparing a new translation forthcoming in the Translated Texts for Historians series from Liverpool University Press. In January 2008, William Weinrich of the Luther Academy in Latvia informed me of his agreement to translate Bede’s Apocalypse commentary for InterVarsity Press.
LIST OF COMMENTARIES

1. Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235)


2. Origen (d. 253) and Others

*Scholia in Apocalypsin* [Annotations on the Apocalypse]. In Constantin Diobouniotis...

3. Victorinus of Pettau (260)

Commentarii in Apocalypsin [Commentaries on the Apocalypse]. This commentary was written about 260 by Victorinus of Pettau (Ptuj, Yugoslavia), who died in the Diocletian persecution around 304. ANF 7:344-60. English; Johannes Haussleiter, ed. Victorini episcopi Petavionensis

4. Tyconius (380)


5. Didymus the Blind (d. 398)

Fragmentum in Apocalypsim [Fragment on the Apocalypse]. In his commentary on Zechariah [SC 83:123; 84:654-5], Didymus of Alexandria in Egypt mentioned that he had written a commentary on Revelation. A fragment of it survives in Scholium 1 of Diobouniotis and Harnack, Der Scholien-kommentar des Origenes zur Apocalypse Iohannis. Greek.

6. Jerome (398)


7. Ecumenius (518)


8. Caesarius of Arles (537)

Explanatio in Apocalypsin [Explanation of the Apocalypse]. This series of homilies on the Book of Revelation by Caesarius, bishop of Arles in Gaul (d. 542), were composed between 510 and 537, but were probably never preached. They circulated for a long time.

9. Primasius of Hadrumetum (540)


10. Apringius of Béja (548)


11. Cassiodorus (580)


12. Andrew of Caesarea in Cappadocia (d. 614)


13. Pseudo-Jerome, Pseudo-Isidore (c. 600)

14. Unknown (6th-7th c.)


15. Paterius (7th c.)

De Testimoniis in Apocalypsin S. Ioannis Apostoli [Concerning Testimonies on the Apocalypse of Saint John the Apostle]. This is a compilation of Pope Gregory the Great’s (d. 603) comments on Revelation by one of his disciples named Paterius. Gathered from writings of Gregory such as the Moralia on Job, homilies on Ezekiel, and the Pastoral Rule, it is arranged as a chapter and verse commentary on the Book of Revelation. PL 79:1107-22. Latin.

16. Pseudo-Cyril of Alexandria (7th c.)

Apocalypse Commentary. This Coptic commentary is contained in a manuscript in the J.P. Morgan Library in New York City. It claims to have been written by Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), but was composed after the Arab conquest of Egypt. Tito Orlandi, Omelie copte. Corona
17. Bede (710)


Different from his commentary on Revelation, Bede is believed to have also written *Capitula in Apocalypse* [Chapter Headings on the Apocalypse], thirty-eight chapter headings for the book of Revelation. Gryson, *Bedae Presbyteri. Expositio Apocalypseos*. CCSL 121A:136-151. Latin edition. Faith Wallis of McGill University has prepared a new English translation of Bede’s commentary and the chapter headings, to be published in a forthcoming volume of the “Translated Texts for Historians” series from Liverpool University Press. In 2008, William Weinrich of the Luther Academy in Latvia informed me that he is also preparing an English translation of Bede’s Apocalypse commentary for InterVarsity Press.
18. Ambrose Autpert (778)


19. Beatus of Liebana (786)


20. Unknown (8th c.)

*De enigmatibus ex Apocalysi Johannis [On the Mysteries of the Apocalypse of John]*. This commentary is contained in the so-called *Irish Reference Bible* or *Das Bibelwerk*, a one-volume

21. Unknown (6th–8th c.?)

Commentary on the Apocalypse. In MS: Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 17780. Latin manuscript. This manuscript, dated 1439, contains Caesarius of Arles’ homilies on the Apocalypse, the pseudo-Jerome handbook on the Apocalypse, Bede’s exposition of the Apocalypse, and another commentary on the Apocalypse whose attribution is uncertain. Since the manuscript contains Apocalypse commentaries, all of which are from the sixth through eighth centuries, perhaps the unidentified Apocalypse commentary is also from the same period. A description is in Roger Gryson, Commenataria minora in Apocalypsin Johannis. CCSL 107:167.

RELATED WORKS

There were several commentaries on Revelation written between the second and seventh centuries of which not even a fragment has survived. These include a commentary of Melito of Sardis in the second century, a fourth-century interpretation of Revelation by Nepos entitled Refutation of the Allegorists, fifth-century treatises on the Apocalypse by Gennadius of Marseilles and Vigilius of Thapsus, a commentary by Cominus Scotus of seventh-century
Ireland, and an anonymous commentary from the first half of the eighth century. In addition, in the second century Theophilus of Antioch in a book against a certain Hermogenis, and Apollonius in an anti-Montanist literary work made use of testimonies from the Book of Revelation. These treatises, however, described by Eusebius in the early fourth century, are no longer extant.9

There are many works from the early church that are not commentaries on the Book of Revelation per se, but contain interpretations of its passages. For example, Dionysius of Alexandria’s Two Books on the Promises is not a commentary but its whole focus was on the book of Revelation. Only fragments of it survived.10 The late second century Letter to the Lyons Martyrs cites the Book of Revelation five times.11 Interpreting chapter twenty on the millennium are Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho 80-81, Irenaeus’ Against Heresies, Book 5, Tertullian’s On the Resurrection of the Flesh 25 and Against Marcion, 3.24,12 Commodianus’

12 Comments on Revelation 6 can be found in Tertullian’s On the Soul, 55.4 and On Monogamy, 10.4.
Instructions, 43, and Lactantius’ Divine Institutes, Book 7. Cyprian of Carthage, in Three Books Against the Jews, Testimonies 36, used the description of the harlot of Babylon in Revelation 17 to teach that women should not adorn themselves in a worldly fashion. In addition, thirty different citations from the Book of Revelation in Cyprian’s treatises and letters can be found. These are all in English translation in the Ante-Nicene Fathers series.

In the third century Cyprian also interpreted Revelation 21 about New Jerusalem descending from heaven in his treatise On Mounts Sinai and Zion. In the fourth century, Methodius of Olympus (d. 311) wrote a lengthy interpretation of Revelation 12 in Logos 8.4-13 of his Symposium. Hilary of Poitiers (d. 368) commented on Revelation 3:7 and 5:1 in an introduction to his tract on the Psalms, Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373) made mention of the seven seals, and Ambrosiaster (c. 384) refuted the Novatians with several pages of commentary on Revelation 2. In another place he answered a question related to Revelation 10:8-9. Filastrius of Brixia (4th c.) and Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403) wrote about how the book of Revelation should be interpreted, and about a sect in the early church that did not accept its canonicity.

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In the early fifth century, the Christian poet Prudentius incorporated themes from Revelation 4-5 into one of his poems, and Paul Orosius commented on Revelation 5 in his Defense Against the Pelagians. Augustine (d. 430) interpreted Revelation 20 in book twenty of The City of God. John Cassian (d. 435) interpreted passages from Revelation 3 & 4 in his Conferences. About 445, Quodvultdeus interpreted many passages of the book of Revelation in his Book on the Promises and Predictions of God. In a question and answer manual on Biblical difficulties, Eucherius of Lyons (d. 450) interpreted the “seven spirits of God” in Revelation 1:4. An anonymous treatise from Vandal North Africa defending the Trinity cited twelve passages from the Book of Revelation to show the equality of the Father and the Son.

There is a Greek fragment of commentary on Revelation 22:3 edited in the works of Dionysius of Alexandria, but it is more likely to have been written by pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite about the year 500. In the second half of the sixth century or in the seventh century, an anonymous author wrote De monogramma, an explanation of the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18. A work attributed to Gregory the Great (d. 604) raised and answered a question about the relationship between the trumpet of 1 Thess 4:15 and the seven trumpets of Rev 8:6. At least seven different prefaces to the Book of Revelation from early Latin Bibles

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18 John Cassian, Conferences 3, 4, & 24. NPNF, 2nd series, 11.
19 Quodvultdeus, Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei. René Braun, ed. CCSL 60.
20 Eucherius of Lyons, Instructionum libri duo. Carolus Wotke, ed. CSEL 31:139.
24 Gregory the Great (dubious), Concordia quorumdam testimoniorum s. scripturae 27. PL 79:674.
have been preserved, and one is identified as coming from Isidore of Seville (d. 636). Julian of Toledo (d. 690) expounded upon the seventh trumpet of Revelation in his Prognostications of the End of the Age, and answered an apparent contradiction between 1 Thess 4:15-16 and Revelation 20:4 on the eternality of the kingdom of Christ. And an anonymous work called The Escorial Fragment on the Heavenly Jerusalem (c. 750) contains a series of questions and answers on the twelve gates of the New Jerusalem mentioned in Revelation 21.

Much of the apocalyptic literature of the early church also contains interpretation of Revelation. These include texts like the apocryphal Revelation of Saint John the Theologian, the Apocalypse of Elijah, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Revelations of Pseudo-Methodius, the Apocalypse of Daniel, and the Andreas Salos Apocalypse. Hippolytus, Pseudo-Ephraem, Pseudo-Epiphanius, Isidore of Seville (d. 635), and Bede all interpreted Revelation 11-13 in their writings about Antichrist.

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25 The prefaces are edited in Donatien de Bruyne, Préfaces de la Bible latine (Namur, Belgium: A. Godenne, 1920), 261-4. A bound photocopy of this hard to locate book is housed in the stacks of Butler Library at Columbia University in New York City.
Sermons are another valuable resource on interpretation of Revelation in the early church. For example, Sermon 21 of Chromatius of Aquileia (d. 407) is on Revelation 10:9-11, and the prologue to his sermons on Matthew’s Gospel contain an explanation of Revelation 4:7.\(^{30}\) Passages from the Apocalypse were read in churches between Easter and Pentecost in Spain and Rome in the seventh and eighth centuries.\(^{31}\) Since many collections of ancient and medieval sermons have been organized around the church calendar, there may be Lenten homilies in these collections that include commentary on the passages from Revelation that were read in the liturgy.

A CHALLENGE FOR PROSPECTIVE TRANSLATORS

This article provided a location guide for twenty-one commentaries on the book of Revelation that had been written between the third and eighth centuries of the Christian era. I believe that English-speaking Christians would be greatly enriched if able to tap this vast reservoir of patristic Apocalypse commentary. At present, only three of the twenty-one commentaries are available in English translation. Although making them accessible in English translation will require that prospective translators possess facility in patristic Greek or


ecclesiastical Latin, I do not believe such a goal is unrealistic. If just one of these commentaries were translated and published each year, this entire patristic treasury of Revelation commentaries could be available to English-speaking scholars within twenty years. Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.

ABBREVIATIONS


CCCM  Corpus christianorum, continuatio medievalis. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-present.

CCSL  Corpus christianorum, series latina. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-present.


CSEL  Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum. Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1866-present.


John Knox, 1960); Lucetta Mowry, “Revelation 4-5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage,”


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