

# **Insights Related to New Covenant Theology From Revelation Commentaries of the Early Church**

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## **Introduction**

The Problem. Revelation is arguably one of the most difficult of the 66 books in the Bible to understand. Jerome (d. 420) knew Hebrew and Greek so well that he carefully translated the entire Old and New Testament from those languages into Latin. He wrote commentaries on large and difficult books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. But when he came to the Book of Revelation he paused. He believed that it was inspired by God and profitable, saying “all praise of it is inadequate.” But, he said, “it has as many mysteries as it does words.”<sup>1</sup>

Augustine (d. 430) wrote about the Book of Revelation: “Although this book is called the Apocalypse,” meaning something unveiled, “there are in it many obscure passages to exercise the mind of the reader.”<sup>2</sup> John Calvin wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible except Revelation. Spurgeon was perplexed by it saying, “There is a whole Book of Revelation which I do not understand, but which I fully believe.”<sup>3</sup>

Part of the reason for the difficulty is Revelation’s literary form. It is not historical narrative like the Gospels nor didactic instruction like James or 1 John, but a series of visions. And when John was describing what he saw, he had drawn upon imagery from both the Old Testament and Near Eastern culture.<sup>4</sup> All of these things contribute to the book’s complexity.

The Solution. Illumination from the Holy Spirit who inspired the Book of Revelation is essential for properly interpreting it. God gives illumination to us today, and we believe that He has been illuminating His saints to understand His word for over nineteen centuries. And this is the value of reading, studying, and translating the biblical commentaries of early Christians. We believe that just as God gives us illumination today, He gave them illumination from which we can surely benefit. This is not to say that we should swallow everything they wrote hook, line, and sinker. But often they bridge the temporal, cultural, and linguistic gap that exists between the biblical writers and us today in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. Therefore, in this session I would like to share with you five insights that I have gained from reading the commentaries on Revelation that were written in the early centuries of Christianity. They are:

First, how to interpret the “book of life”

Secondly, the now-not yet principle when interpreting Bible prophecy

Third, that the structure of the Book of Revelation contains recapitulation

Fourth, how to interpret the first resurrection and reign of souls with Christ for a thousand years in Revelation 20

And fifth, whether the “budding of the fig tree” mentioned in Matthew and Luke refers to the formation of Israel in 1948.

### **How to Interpret the ‘Book of Life’**

The imagery of the ‘book of life’ appears several times in the Book of Revelation, in chapters 3, 17, and 20. Let us take a look at how some of the early commentators understood it. Please turn with me to Revelation 3:5.

To the angel of the church at Sardis our Lord said: *He who overcomes shall thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father, and before His angels.* On this passage a commentary, once attributed to Alcuin of York (d. 804) but now among his dubious works, says: “On this passage a huge question arises for us.”<sup>5</sup> The question relates to whether a person who has been chosen by God for salvation and has been provided the means of salvation can be removed from the book of life. The author answers the question by affirming that the book of life “is the particular divine decree, which before the world predestined a certain and definite number of the elect unto future glory.” For that reason, the author of the commentary recommended that his readers understand that it is “the names of the reprobate,” not of the elect, which will be erased from the book of life.<sup>6</sup>

Richard Rolle (d. 1349), who died during the Black Death in Europe, explained Rev 3:5 in this manner: “*And I will not erase his name from the book of life*, that is, from the divine presence which is his according to predestination.”<sup>7</sup>

Let us turn to Revelation 17:8. The angel interprets the vision for John saying: *The beast that you saw, was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and to go to destruction. And those who dwell on the earth will wonder, whose name has not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, when they see the beast, that he was, and is not, and will come.* Haymo of Auxerre (d. 875) wrote on this passage:

The book of life is the divine decree,<sup>8</sup> that is, the foreknowledge and predestination of the omnipotent God. For, those who will follow the Antichrist have not been predestined, that is, foreordained, to life since from those whom

God predestined from the beginning of the world to be saved none will perish (cf. John 10:28), about whom the Apostle [wrote]: *Those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to His image* (Rom 8:29-30). For, God knows to whom He is going to say: *Go into eternal fire* and to whom He is going to say: *Come, blessed of my Father* (Matt 25:34, 41).<sup>9</sup>

Finally let us turn to Revelation 20:15. The scene is the Last Judgment. John concludes his description of it saying: *And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.* Augustine, who wrote an extended commentary on Rev 20 in his book entitled *On the City of God*, said on this passage:

This book [of life] is not for reminding God, as if things might escape Him by forgetfulness, but it symbolizes His predestination of those to whom eternal life shall be given. For it is not that God is ignorant, and reads in the book to inform Himself, but rather His infallible prescience is the book of life in which they are written, that is to say, known beforehand.<sup>10</sup>

Ambrose Autpert, a monk from central Italy in the eighth century, wrote a commentary on Revelation between the years 757 and 767. He explained this passage in several paragraphs:

Truly, it should be known that when it is said: *Whoever was not found written in the book of life*, it is as if it were said “whoever has not been predestined to life.” For, that book should not be understood carnally, as containing the names of the righteous in ink or some other substance, or in such a way that it gives information to God, so that in case he forgets that information, reading it will recall it to his memory. Rather, it signifies the predestination of

those to whom eternal life will be given. Therefore, by no means does God not know and recognize them, as was said, as if he reads a book so that he may gain knowledge. But rather, the book is that foreknowledge of his, yea, even their predestination, which is not able to fail. In this book, the elect were written before the ages, that is, were foreknown and predestined.

Accordingly also, the Apostle says: *Those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to his image, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. But those whom he foreknew and predestined, those he also called; and those whom he called, those he also justified; and those whom he justified, those he also glorified* (Rom. 8:29-30).

And on this again he says: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ, just as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we might be holy and blameless before him in love, who predestined us unto adoption as children through Jesus Christ in him, according to the purpose of his will unto the praise of the glory of his grace* (Eph. 1:3-6).

On this again he says: *According to the good pleasure of God which he purposed in him, in the dispensation of the fullness of times to restore all things in Christ which are in heaven and which are on earth in him; in which lot also we have been called, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, that we may be unto the praise of his glory* (Eph. 1:9-12).<sup>11</sup>

These early biblical commentators on the Book of Revelation, such as Augustine and Ambrose Autpert, believed that to have one's name written in the book of life before the foundation of the world was another way of saying that one was divinely foreknown and predestined for salvation. Notice that they did not shrink away from this teaching, or try to explain it away. They saw that the omnipotent God, being eternal and all wise, had a plan from all eternity that is going to be fulfilled, and not going to fail. That is, a very large number of people from all time periods—from Adam to the last generation before Christ comes again—, from all nations, from every tongue, from all stations of life, the small and the great, will be among His people, “the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” (Heb 12:23)

“The Lord knows who are His,” Paul says. Predestination is God's business. Concerning our responsibility, Paul continues, “let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from iniquity.” (2 Tim 2:19) Our responsibility is not to try to comprehend the hidden things of God, but to believe in Christ, repent of our sins, and make our calling and election sure (cf. 2 Pet 1:10), so that when the roll is called up yonder, we'll be there.

### **The Now-Not Yet Principle When Interpreting Bible Prophecy**

The second insight from the early commentaries on the Book of Revelation that I would like to share is what we call the “now-not yet” principle. Sound Christian eschatology is characterized by a tension between the “now” and “not yet.” Eschatological hopes have already been realized in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, but fulfillment is yet to come. The kingdom of God has already arrived with Jesus, who said “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15), but the Lord also taught his

disciples to pray for the kingdom to come (cf. Matt 6:10), implying that it is future as well. Both aspects are highlighted by the apostle John who wrote: “Beloved, we are God’s children *now*; it does *not yet* appear what we shall be” (1 Jn 3:2).<sup>12</sup>

Early Christian writers from both the East and the West have expressed this principle, especially when introducing their comments on the Olivet Discourse. But the now-not yet principle also shows up in their commentaries on the Book of Revelation. These early Christians believed that with certain of the visions given to John, there would be a near fulfillment in that generation, that would act as a type of their ultimate fulfillment at the end of time.

From Latin speaking North Africa, Tyconius of Carthage (c. 380) spoke of this principle in his comments on Revelation 11. Turn there with me, please. In this vision John saw two witnesses and they were slain by the beast and their bodies lay in the street for three and a half days. On verse 9, Tyconius took notice of both the present and the future tenses that John used in his description of the vision. The apostle John, Tyconius says,

mixes tenses so that at one time he indicates the present, at another time the future, just as the Lord says in the Gospel: *The hour is coming, and is now, when everyone who kills you will think they are carrying out a duty for God. But the reason they do this is because they have neither recognized the Father nor me* (John 16.2-3). Indeed, he did not say *they will do, because they will not recognize*, but as the present tense shows, he said, *they are doing*, so that from present things he might more thoroughly teach future things. For the present time is never separated from the last time...”<sup>13</sup>

Interestingly, Tyconius saw the now-not yet principle in John 16:2-3.

In the Greek speaking East, Andrew of Caesarea in Cappadocia (7<sup>th</sup> c.) gave examples of this now-not yet principle in his comments on Revelation 7. [Please turn there with me] On Rev 7:1—*And after these I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, in order that no wind blows on the earth nor on the sea nor on any tree*—Andrew explained: “If some have interpreted these things as having happened to the Judeans under the Romans of old,” a first century fulfillment in the now, “this looks forward to the things that will occur in the time of the Antichrist,” the not-yet, “not (only) in the Judean part of the earth, but in all *of the earth...*”<sup>14</sup> Similarly on Rev 7:8 where John finishes his description of the sealing of the 144,000 from the Jewish tribes, Andrew wrote that it signifies “either the faithful from among the Hebrews who have escaped the captivity of the Romans who complete this number,” a near fulfillment in the first century, “or more correctly, those saved from among the Jews in the end of time...”<sup>15</sup> So Andrew gives two examples where the vision may have been fulfilled partially in a historical event in the first century, but that it ultimately points to the prophecy’s complete fulfillment near the end of the world. That is the now-not yet principle of interpreting Bible prophecy.

In the church in Armenia, Nerses of Lambron, the archbishop of Tarsus, wrote the first commentary on Revelation in the Armenian language about the year 1180. Nerses applied to the Book of Revelation the now-not yet principle of biblical prophecy. He understood some things as referring to historical events in the first century, which will have their ultimate fulfillment in end time events related to the persecution of the

Antichrist and the Second Coming of Christ. He expounded on his interpretive approach in his comments on Rev 6:

The apostles questioned our Lord concerning the destruction of the temple and the end of the world, and as they were able to bear it he told them: first, the future events which we have seen in the days of [the emperors] Vespasian and Titus, occurring to the Jews... The same commands of the Lord will again be fulfilled in the times of Antichrist.<sup>16</sup>

On Rev 7:1-3 where the angel is commanded not to harm the earth, sea, and trees until the servants of God are sealed, he wrote: “This [sealing] happened partially under Vespasian; for those who were ministers of Christ in Jerusalem fled from the Romans at the time of the destruction of the city...But it is fulfilled especially at the times of the Antichrist.” Nerses understood what happened under emperor Vespasian in the first century “as an image of the afflictions of Antichrist.” As for the 144,000 he explained that “this number was fulfilled bodily regarding the salvation of those who took refuge with the Lord from the rule of the Romans at the destruction of Jerusalem,” and “likewise the spiritual offspring of the holy apostles will be saved,” in the future, the not-yet, “from Antichrist throughout the whole world.”<sup>17</sup>

From the early commentators on the Book of Revelation we learn that they, like us, believed in what we call the now-not yet principle of interpreting biblical prophecy—that Bible prophecy often has a present aspect of fulfillment and a final fulfillment in the eschaton.

### **The Structure of the Book of Revelation Contains Recapitulation**

When looking at the structure of the Book of Revelation, some people believe that the visions are laid out progressively, that the visions of Chapters 4-22 represent a chronological progression of what is going to happen at the end of the world, mainly within the last seven years of history. A second approach, which I think is more accurate, is that Revelation's structure is recapitulatory. That is, in the visions, there is often a "recapping" or a repetition of something, which points to the *same* end time event. For example, a great end-time battle is described in a vision in 16:12-16. Let's turn there and read. Then again in another vision in 19:19-21 an end time battle appears. Let's read that. And still again an end-time battle appears in a vision in 20:7-10. So we see an end-time war in three different visions. I believe these are all different ways of teaching about *one* end-time battle, not three battles, between Christ and Antichrist with his followers. Similarly, the Second Coming of Christ for the Last Judgment is described in various ways in the vision in 6:12-17, the vision in 11:15-18, the vision in 16:14-16, the one in 19:11-16, and again in 20:10. There are four different visions of the Lord coming for the Last Judgment. But it is not as if the Lord is coming back four times. They all point to the *one* return of our Lord. Such recapitulation does away with the belief that the visions symbolize events as they will occur during the last seven years *in chronological order*.<sup>18</sup>

Some of the church's earliest interpreters of the Book of Revelation recognized that the structure of Revelation contains recapitulation or "recapping". For example, the earliest Latin commentator on Revelation, Victorinus of Pettua (c. 260), commenting on the relationship of the seven trumpets to the seven bowls, writes this: "Do not regard the order of what is said, because [Revelation, inspired by] the sevenfold Spirit, when it has

passed in review the events leading to the last times and the end, returns once again to the same events and completes what it had said more briefly. Do not seek the temporal order in the Apocalypse, but look for the inner meaning.”<sup>19</sup>

Similarly Tyconius, about a century later, commented in this manner on Rev 8:1:

“And when He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” Within the silence of half an hour, he shows the beginning of eternal rest. For, he did not see the whole, but a part of the silence. This same [rest] which he was later going to see more fully, he could not yet see, so that it might be seen more clearly [later. Cf. Rev 21-22].<sup>20</sup>

Commenting on the earthquake in Rev 11:13, Tyconius also saw that the visions were recapitulating. “And in that hour there was a great earthquake (11.13a). He confirmed what he said above by the recapitulation of the persecution.”<sup>21</sup> According to David Robinson’s analysis of Tyconius’ comment, for Tyconius the “earthquake recalls the ‘thunder, lightning, and earthquake’ of Revelation 8.5...The earthquake here reminds us that the foregoing narratives in Chapters 8 & 11 have been recapitulating.”<sup>22</sup> We see a great earthquake in Chapters 6, 8, and 11, but they are probably all symbols of one event.

On Rev 20:11, right before John describes the great white throne judgment, Tyconius says: “what he is going to say recapitulates the same judgment.”<sup>23</sup> For Tyconius, there is just one Last Judgment, but it shows up several times in the Book of Revelation under different visions. And this vision of the great white throne judgment is another picture of that same Last Judgment.

The aforementioned commentary attributed to Alcuin also affirmed that the structure of the Book of Revelation contains recapitulation, saying:

Sometimes it starts with the arrival of the Lord and carries through to the end of time. Sometimes it starts with the arrival of the Lord, and before it finishes, it returns to the beginning and by repeating in different figures both what it has left out and what it has said, it hastens to the second coming of the Lord. Sometimes it begins with the last persecution. But before it comes to the end it recapitulates and connects both [beginning and end].”<sup>24</sup>

Understanding that the Book of Revelation contains recapitulation is very helpful in interpreting its visions, so that one does not believe in three different end-time earthquakes, three end-time battles, or four Second Comings of Christ & Last Judgments. And some of the earliest Christian commentators on Revelation recognized this about the structure of this awesome book in Scripture.

### **How to Interpret the First Resurrection and the Reign of Souls with Christ for a Thousand Years**

A fourth insight from the early commentaries on Revelation regards how to interpret the first resurrection and the reign of souls with Christ for a thousand years. What are we to make of the reign of the saints for a thousand years in Rev 20? Please turn to Rev 20:4. Christians have been debating this for a long time. It helps if we realize that Rev 20 also contains recapitulation, where the souls of the martyrs came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years (20:4). Notice the parallel between Rev 6:9 and 20:4:

“I saw...the souls of those who had been slain” (6:9)

“And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded” (20:4)

“Because of the word of God and because of the testimony which they maintained” (6:9)

“Because of the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God” (20:4)<sup>25</sup>

Both visions describe the disembodied souls of deceased believers. Chapter 20 speaks of them reigning with Christ. Augustine explained:

“And the souls,” says John, “of those who were slain for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God”—understanding what he afterwards says, “reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Rev 20:4)—that is, the souls of the martyrs not yet restored to their bodies. For the souls of the pious dead are not separated from the Church, which even now is the kingdom of Christ.... Therefore, while these thousand years run on, their souls reign with Him, though not as yet in conjunction with their bodies. And therefore in another part of the same book we read, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from henceforth; and now, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works do follow them.” (Rev 14:13) The Church, then, begins its reign with Christ now in the living and the dead. For, as the apostle says, “Christ died that He might be Lord both of the living and of the dead.” (Rom 14:9) But he mentioned the souls of the martyrs only, because they have contended even to death for the truth, themselves principally reign after death; but, taking the part for the whole, we understand the words of all others who belong to the Church, which is the kingdom of Christ.”<sup>26</sup>

For Augustine, the thousand year reign is the reign of souls of believers who have died, but have not yet received their resurrected bodies, which awaits the final resurrection, after which they will reign, body and soul, with Christ forever and ever.

And although John only mentions martyrs, they should be regarded as a part designating the whole, a synecdoche: all who have died in Christ between His first and second comings.

An anonymous *Handbook on the Apocalypse* (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c.) interpreted Rev 20 similarly, saying on verse 5: “*The first resurrection* is of the righteous, when they leave from their body and go into rest.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Theodulph, bishop of Orleans, in his commentary on Revelation dated 810 wrote almost the same thing: “This first resurrection is of the righteous, when they leave from their body and go into rest.”<sup>28</sup>

Some believers today think that the first resurrection is a physical resurrection, and that the reign is an earthly reign for a thousand years after the Lord returns. Some early church fathers that were chiliasts believed similarly.

Others today see the first resurrection as the believer’s resurrection from sin at conversion, as when Paul said, “If you then have been raised with Christ, seek the things which are above.” (Col. 3:1). There were also plenty of early Christian writers who expressed that interpretation.

But the three commentators above—Augustine, the *Handbook on the Apocalypse*, and Theodulph—saw that the first resurrection was that of the soul leaving their body at death, and living and reigning with Christ in the intermediate state. The thousand year reign, they believed, was the reign of those souls in heaven with Christ even now before He returns. Then, when Christ returns with its accompanying general resurrection, the souls of all who have died will be reunited with their bodies. They will stand before Christ in the Last Judgment in body and soul. The unrighteous will be assigned to eternal

damnation in hell with the devil and his angels. But the righteous will reign with Christ in heaven forever.

So far, regarding insights from Revelation commentaries of the early church we have seen how they interpreted the names written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, the now-not yet principle of interpreting Bible prophecy, the concept of recapitulation in the Book of Revelation, and how some of the church fathers interpreted the thousand year reign, not as an earthly reign, but a reigning with Christ in heaven now, between the first and second advents, of those who have died in Christ.

### **Whether the “Budding of the Fig Tree” Refers to the Formation of Israel in 1948**

The final insight I would like to share with you concerns the question of whether the “budding of the fig tree” in the Gospel of Matthew refers to the formation of Israel in 1948. Many dispensationalists have expressed the opinion that the forming of the nation of Israel in 1948 was a fulfillment of prophecy, namely, the “budding of the fig tree” mentioned in Matt 24:32-33. It reads: *Now learn the parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender, and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near; even so you too, when you see all these things, recognize that He is near, right at the door.* The dispensational rhetoric says that after almost nineteen centuries of dispersion from their land, the Jews were miraculously brought back into their land by God. This, they say, was one of most significant fulfillments of Bible prophecy, and a sign that Jesus is coming back within a generation of that event.

Hal Lindsey expressed this in his 1970 book *Late Great Planet Earth*, which sold over thirty million copies<sup>29</sup> and was listed among the 100 Christian books that changed

the twentieth century:<sup>30</sup> He wrote, “The figure of speech “fig tree” has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the “fig tree” put forth its first leaves.”<sup>31</sup>

Harold Camping, infamous for setting the date of 1994, May 2011, and October 2011 for the rapture of the church, published a whole book on the subject of the fig tree. He followed the same line of interpretation as stated above in Hal Lindsey’s book:

In 1948 Israel is again a nation amongst the nations of the world. It is an event unmatched in the history of the world. Never has a nation been driven from its homeland and dispersed among the nations only to return almost 2,000 years later to its homeland as an intact nation. But this marvelous event did occur to national Israel. It is the beautiful fulfillment of the promise made in the parable of the fig tree as recorded in Luke 13:6-9.<sup>32</sup>

More recently prophecy teacher Grant Jeffrey weighed in on the issue. “For many years,” he said, “critics of modern prophecy teachers have denied that the prophetic passage of Christ’s message in Matthew 24 regarding the ‘fig tree’ actually referred to the rebirth of the nation Israel.” To prove that the critics are wrong and the parable of the fig tree does in fact teach this, Jeffrey retorts that “there is clear and unequivocal evidence from the teachings of the primitive church” to that effect. He then cites a section from the early Christian *Apocalypse of Peter*. He concludes that a statement in it “about the parable of the figs from the earliest days of the apostolic Church provides compelling evidence that believers who lived closest to the apostles understood the words of Christ in Matthew 24:30 to prophetically foretell the rebirth of Israel in the last days.”<sup>33</sup>

Let us evaluate what some of the early Christian authors wrote about the parable of the fig tree and a last-days rebirth of the nation of Israel, and see if their thoughts correspond with the views of the dispensationalists stated above.

Richard Bauckham, in an article on the fig tree parable as it was understood by the *Apocalypse of Peter*, cited the views of several early Christian writers on the budding of the fig tree; and these views differed greatly from those of the dispensationalists cited above. He summarized them as follows:

Hippolytus (*In Matt. 24:32*) takes the fig tree to be the world, the branches and leaves to be the miraculous signs given by the Antichrist, which soon pass away, and the summer in which the fruits are harvested to be the end of the world.

Tertullian (*Marc. 4.39*) takes the buds that precede the summer to represent the conflicts in the world that precede the coming of the kingdom.<sup>34</sup>

Nothing about the gathering of national Israel back to Palestine there! Curt Daniel wrote a paper on the concept of Antichrist in the early church in which he mentioned that Nerses Parthevi of Armenia and Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) both held that “*Antichrist* is the fig tree referred to in Matt. 24:32.” (italics mine)<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas in his *Golden Chain*, a commentary on the four gospels collected from works of the church fathers, quoted Hilary (of Poitiers?) as having written on Matt 24:32: “The Synagogue is likened to the fig tree; its branch is *Antichrist*, the son of the Devil.” (italics mine)<sup>36</sup> In other words, the budding of the fig tree symbolizes the coming of the Antichrist before Christ’s return.

The citations from some of the church fathers below will also demonstrate that many of the early Christians not only did not hold the view that God, in fulfillment of a

promise to Israel, would bring them back into the land, but held almost the exact opposite: that the gathering of the Jewish people back to Palestine would not be the work of God, but of the Antichrist in his role as end-time deceiver of the nations and especially of the Hebrew people.

For example, Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235) wrote about the Antichrist in his *Commentary on Daniel* in this manner:

He, being lifted up over every king and every god, shall build the city of Jerusalem and he shall raise the converted Temple, **he shall restore both all the land and its borders to the Jews, and having summoned their people from the slavery of the nations**, he shall exhibit himself to them as king, and at this the faithless shall worship him as God and shall bend the knee to him, considering him to be the Christ...<sup>37</sup>

A.J. Visser, in a journal article on ancient Christian eschatology, summarized Hippolytus' views, saying that one of Antichrist's crimes "will be the bringing back of the unfaithful Jews to Palestine; the Antichrist is a Zionist in Hippolytus' opinion."<sup>38</sup>

Another early Christian writing entitled *On the End of the World*, that was thought to be from the pen of Hippolytus but is among his spurious writings, expressed a similar opinion. "And by the offshoot horn none other is signified than **Antichrist** that is **to restore the kingdom of the Jews.**" And later in that treatise: "Christ gathered together the dispersed sheep, and he [Antichrist] in like manner **will gather together the dispersed people of the Hebrews.**"<sup>39</sup> Again, according to these early Christian writings, it is not God who gathers the Jews back into the land in the Middle East but the Antichrist.

Augustine (d. 430), in his commentary on the Psalms, expounded Psalm 106:47: *Deliver us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations*. He too expressed the ancient belief that not the Lord, but the Antichrist, would restore an earthly kingdom to the Hebrew people. He explained:

But when the Jews suppose that that prophecy belongeth to their visible kingdom, because they know not how to rejoice in the hope of good things unseen, they are about to rush into the snares of him, of whom the Lord saith, “I am come in My Father’s Name and ye receive Me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive.” [John 5:43] Of whom the Apostle Paul saith: “that Man of Sin shall be revealed, the son of perdition,” [2 Thess 2:3] etc. And a little after he saith, “Then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the Spirit of His mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of His coming,” [2 Thess 2:8] etc.... ***Through that Apostate***, through him who exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, it seemeth to me, that ***the carnal people of Israel will suppose that prophecy to be fulfilled, where it is said, “Deliver us, O Lord, and gather us from among the heathen.”***... Thus they will believe a lie, because they have not received the love of the truth, that they might love not carnal, but spiritual blessings.... “Deliver us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the heathen.” Not, as the Jews imagine it, fulfilled through Antichrist, but through our Lord Christ coming in the name of His Father.<sup>40</sup>

Augustine reads the Psalm as a Christian Scripture. He believed, like the author of the biblical *Epistle to the Hebrews*, that the land promise for the Jews was an old covenant

type that pointed to a spiritual reality fulfilled in Christ, a heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Heb 11:10; 12:22-23).

The widespread patristic idea, that the gathering of the Hebrew people back into the land of Palestine would be the work of Antichrist and not Christ, continued into the Middle Ages. The Coptic *Apocalypse of Daniel* from the year 1197 stated that “the king whose name makes the number 666...will order all the Jews which are in all places to gather in Jerusalem.”<sup>41</sup> And Peter John Olivi, a leader of the Spiritual Franciscans, in a lecture on the Apocalypse, taught that “Antichrist will call together the Jews into the earthly city of Jerusalem, preaching himself as Messiah and Savior of the Jews.”<sup>42</sup>

Today some dispensationalists think that the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948 was a fulfillment of the budding of the fig tree. It is very doubtful, however, that this is a proper interpretation of that passage. Allen Beechick refuted their interpretation, writing that if one takes a Bible concordance and counts the references, “you would discover that the fig tree stands for Israel only *one-tenth* of the times it is used in the Bible. Furthermore, even the few verses where the fig tree does stand for the nation, not one of them supports the idea that the leaves represent Israel’s *becoming a nation*.”<sup>43</sup> James McKeever did a lengthy study of the fig tree parable, and concluded: “I would have to say that the statement of many of these people that: ‘Israel is always represented by the fig tree in Scriptures’ is simply a false statement.” Another conclusion upon which he arrived was this: Jesus’ “mentioning of the fig tree example had *absolutely nothing* to do with the Hebrews forming a nation.” One of his arguments was based upon a comparison between Matthew and Luke. Luke’s gospel shows that Jesus taught the parable saying *Behold the fig tree and all the trees*. (Luke 21:29). McKeever explained:

We see in verse 29 that when the fig tree *and all the other trees* put forth leaves, we know that summer is near. Thus, obviously this illustration has nothing to do with establishing a Hebrew nation. Jesus is simply taking an example out of nature about all the trees putting forth their leaves as a signal that summer is near. If the fig tree represents the nation of Israel being formed in 1948, what do all of the other trees represent? The answer is that they are not meant to represent anything but trees, and neither is the fig tree.<sup>44</sup>

Even some of Lindsey and Camping's fellow dispensationalists like Thomas Ice and Timothy Demy do not believe that the budding of the fig tree teaches the 1948 reformation of the nation of Israel.<sup>45</sup> But not only do certain prophecy teachers continue to make their assertions that the formation of the nation of Israel in 1948 was a fulfillment of this parable, but even assert that early Christian history is on their side in interpreting the budding of the fig tree parable as prophetically symbolizing a rebirth of the nation of Israel in the last days. We have shown, however, that many early Christian writers believed almost the exact opposite—that Antichrist not God would gather the Jews from the nations back into the land in the last days as part of his attempt to deceive them into receiving him as their Messiah. These included Hippolytus, a work attributed to Hippolytus, Nerses of Armenia, Ambrose, Hilary, and Augustine.

## **Conclusion**

The commentaries on Revelation from the early church can be very helpful when trying to interpret this most difficult of books in the New Testament. In them we saw how many early Christian writers interpreted the people written in the book of life before

the foundation of the world. They believed that those written in the book of life were a reference to the elect, foreknown and predestined for salvation.

In the Revelation commentaries of the early church we also saw what we call the “now-not yet” principle of interpreting Bible prophecy— that often a prophecy has a near fulfillment which encourages that generation and acts as a type of its ultimate fulfillment at the end of the age.

In addition we saw that the very earliest Latin commentators on Revelation—Victorinus and Tyconius—recognized that the structure of the Book of Revelation contains recapitulation. That is, the prophecies of Revelation are not laid out progressively as if what John saw in Chapter 8 necessarily will follow what he saw in Chapter 6. Rather, the visions contain glimpses of the same prophetic event with different emphases or different shades and details. The end-time battle between the Antichrist and Christ is seen in three different visions. The Second Coming with its accompanying Last Judgment is seen in at least four different visions in the Book of Revelation. But all signify just one end-time battle and one Second Coming of Christ.

The church fathers help us to interpret the first resurrection and the reign of the saints for a thousand years in Rev 20:4-5. Several of them held, and I think correctly, that the reign is of the souls of those who have died in Christ, reigning together with Christ now in the intermediate state before He returns.

And finally, very relevant to the popular prophetic imagination of some of our dispensational brothers and sisters in Christ, is the way that many of the early Christian writers interpreted the budding of the fig tree. While the *Apocalypse of Peter* said it referred to Israel, a host of others saw it differently. In fact, they did not believe that God

was going to be the one to restore the Jews to their land, but that the Antichrist would gather the Jews back to Palestine in an attempt to deceive them into thinking he was their Messiah by fulfilling the land promise in a carnal manner, rather than through belief in the manner that Christ has fulfilled it and taught His apostles about it in the *Epistle to the Hebrews*.

Thank you.

At this time I am willing to take a few questions about this paper, about the Book of Revelation, or about early Christian commentaries on Revelation.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome, *Letter 53.9*. NPNF, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 6:102.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *On the City of God*, 20.17. Cited in Dennis Eugene Engleman, *A Rumor of War. Christ's Millennial Reign and the Rapture of His Church* (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 2001), 256.

<sup>3</sup> Spurgeon cited in Ian Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 262. Murray cites his source as Volume 45, page 402, of the works of Spurgeon.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Beast of Revelation*, Rev. ed. (Powder Springs, GA: American Vision, 2002), 3.

<sup>5</sup> pseudo-Alcuin, *Commentariorum in Apocalypsin libri quinque [Five Books of Commentaries on the Apocalypse]*. On Rev. 3:5. PL 100:1110: *Magna nobis hoc loco oritur quaestio*.

<sup>6</sup> pseudo-Alcuin, *Five Books of Commentaries on the Apocalypse*. On Rev. 3:5. PL 100:1110-1: *Restat itaque ut secundum usitatem sacrae Scripturae locutionem intelligamus reproborum nomina de libro vitae deleri...Liber autem iste est vis quaedam divina, quae electorum numerum certum ac definitum ante saecula praedestinavit in gloria futurum*.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Rolle, *Biblical Commentaries*. Robert Boenig, trans (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1984), 170.

<sup>8</sup> Latin, *jus divinitas*.

<sup>9</sup> Haymo of Auxerre, *Expositio in Apocalypsin [Exposition of the Apocalypse]*, Book 6. On Rev 17:8. PL 117:1146.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *On the City of God*, 20.15. Marcus Dods, trans. (New York: Random House, 1950), 734-5.

<sup>11</sup> Ambrose Autpert, *Expositio in Apocalypsin [Exposition on the Apocalypse]*. On Rev. 20:15. CCCM 27A:774-5.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Innes, "Towards an Ecological Eschatology: Continuity and Discontinuity," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81:2 (2009):126-44; Gary D. Long, *Context: Evangelical Views on the Millennium Examined* (Charleston, S.C.: Global Book Publisher, 2001), 244-6; Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), esp. Chapter 6: "The Tension between the Already and Not Yet."

<sup>13</sup> Tyconius of Carthage, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Turin fragment, 378-82. Translation in David Charles Robinson, "The Mystic Rules of Scripture: Tyconius of Carthage's Keys and Windows to the Apocalypse," (dissertation, University of St. Michael's College in Toronto, 2010), 206, with slight changes by me.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Apocalypse Commentary*. On Rev 7:1. In Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, "Andrew of Caesarea and the Apocalypse in the Ancient Church of the East," Part 2: Translation of the Apocalypse Commentary of Andrew of Caesarea (diss. Université Laval in Quebec, 2008), 84-5.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew of Caesarea, *Apocalypse Commentary*. On Rev 7:8c. Constantinou, 90.

<sup>16</sup> Nerses of Lambron, *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*. Robert W. Thomson, trans. (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 86.

<sup>17</sup> Nerses of Lambron, *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John*. Thomson, 88-9.

<sup>18</sup> On recapitulation in the Book of Revelation see R. Fowler White, "The Recapitulation of Revelation 19 and 20," *Westminster Theological Journal* 51:2 (Fall 1989):319-44; Charles Homer Giblin, "Recapitulation and the Literary Coherence of John's Apocalypse," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994):81-95; Aaron Goerner, "The Structure of Revelation," in Jonathan M. Watt, ed., *Pro Gloria Christi: A Festschrift in Honor of Edward A. Robson* (Beaver Falls, PA: Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2005), 161-93.

- <sup>19</sup> Victorinus of Pettau, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. On Rev 8:2. Cited in Bernard McGinn, "Turning Points in Early Christian Apocalypse Exegesis," in Robert J. Daly, *Apocalyptic Thought in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 81-105 at 102.
- <sup>20</sup> Tyconius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. Turin fragment, 128-30 on Rev 8:1-2. Robinson, 165.
- <sup>21</sup> Tyconius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, Turin fragment, 406-7. Robinson, 210.
- <sup>22</sup> Robinson, "Mystic Rules," 211-2.
- <sup>23</sup> Tyconius, *Commentary of the Apocalypse*. On Rev 20:11. CCSL 107A:221.
- <sup>24</sup> The commentary attributed to Alcuin cited in Barbara Nolan, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 7. Cf. PL 100:1089.
- <sup>25</sup> I am indebted to Gary D. Long (*Context*, 40) for notice of this parallelism.
- <sup>26</sup> Augustine, *On the City of God*, 20.0. Dods, 726-7.
- <sup>27</sup> Anonymous, *Handbook on the Apocalypse*. On Rev 20:5. CCSL 107:225. *RESURRECTIO PRIMA iustorum est, quando exeunt de corpore et vadunt ad requiem*.
- <sup>28</sup> Theodulph of Orleans, *Exposition of the Apocalypse of John*. On Rev 20:5. CCSL 107:334. *Haec resurrectio prima iustorum est, quando exeunt de corpore et vadunt ad requiem*.
- <sup>29</sup> Gary DeMar, *End Times Fiction: A Biblical Consideration of Left Behind Theology* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), xii.
- <sup>30</sup> William J. Petersen and Randy Petersen, *100 Christian Books That Changed the Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 2000), 165-6.
- <sup>31</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1970), 55. Cited in Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed. The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 50.
- <sup>32</sup> Harold Camping, *The Fig Tree: An Analysis of the Future of National Israel* (Oakland, CA: Family Stations, Inc., 1983), 253.
- <sup>33</sup> Grant R. Jeffrey, *Triumphant Return. The Coming Kingdom of God* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, Inc., 2001), 69-71.
- <sup>34</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The Two Fig Tree Parables in the Apocalypse of Peter," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104:2 (1985):269-87 at 279.
- <sup>35</sup> Curt D. Daniel, "The Concept of Antichrist in Pre-Gregorian Literature," unpublished term paper presented to Dr. Geoffrey W. Bromily (May 1975), 40. Dr. Daniel serves as pastor of Reformed Bible Church in Springfield, Illinois.
- <sup>36</sup> *Catena Aurea. Commentary on the Four Gospels Collected out of the Works of the Fathers by St. Thomas Aquinas*, Vol. 1. St. Matthew. John Henry Cardinal Newman, trans. (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999), 829.
- <sup>37</sup> Hippolytus of Rome. *Commentary on Daniel*, 4.49, 5. Thomas Schmidt, trans. (Charleston, SC: T.C. Schmidt, 2010) Available in paperback and digital download at [www.chronicon.net](http://www.chronicon.net)
- <sup>38</sup> A. J. Visser, "A Bird's Eye View of Ancient Christian Eschatology," *Numen* 14 (1967):4-22 at 14.
- <sup>39</sup> Pseudo-Hippolytus, *On the End of the World*. ANF 5:246, 247.
- <sup>40</sup> Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*. On Ps 106. NPNF, 1<sup>st</sup> series 8:532.
- <sup>41</sup> *Coptic Apocalypse of Daniel*, 23. This English translation, available at <http://www.ccel.org>, and accessed August 23, 2010, was made in April 2009 by Roger Pearse of Ipswich, who translated it from the French translation by Frédéric Macler in "The Coptic Apocalypse of Daniel," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 33 (1896):165-76.
- <sup>42</sup> Peter John Olivi, *Lectura super Apocalypsim*. Warren Lewis, ed. (dissertation, Tübingen, 1972), 604. My translation of *antichristus convocabit Iudeos in Ierusalem civitatem terrenam tanquam messiam et salvatorem se predicans Iudeorum...*
- <sup>43</sup> Allen Beechick, *The Pre-Tribulation Rapture* (Denver: Accent Books, 1981), 235.
- <sup>44</sup> James McKeever, *The Rapture Book. Victory in the End Times* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1987), 160, 162, 164-5.
- <sup>45</sup> Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy, *Fast Facts on Bible Prophecy from A to Z* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997), 80-1.