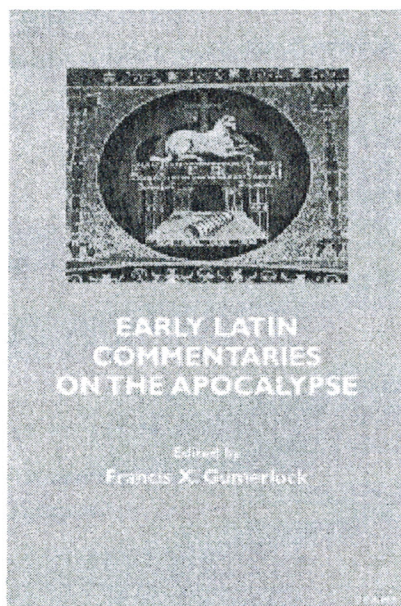


Dr. Palmer Reviews Early Latin Commentaries on the Apocalypse



This is a useful addition to recent literature on eschatological writing in the first millennium. In 2011 William Weinrich published translations of some of the most important commentaries on *Revelation*, by Victorinus of Petovium, Apringius of Beja, Caesarius of Arles and the Venerable Bede. A second translation of Bede's work, with an invaluable and rich commentary, was published by Faith Wallis in 2013. To these Francis Gumerlock now adds translations of two fascinating but neglected works: the late-seventh-century *Commemoratorium* (or 'handbook') and the eighth-century *Pauca problesmata* (also known as the as Irish Reference Bible). Both of these texts display Irish features, both in terms of their Latin and some of the sources used; but both are also known from early continental manuscripts, which reminds us of the lively international exchanges of knowledge in the early Middle Ages. Readers are encouraged to compare these texts to the rich two-volume collection of medieval Irish eschatological texts, *The End and Beyond*, edited by John Carey, Emma Nic Cárthaigh and Caitriona Ó Dochartaigh (2014), which otherwise lacks this kind of exegetical

material.

Gumerlock is for the most part a hands-off translator-editor, with an introduction and notes which provide the reader with enough guidance to understand the texts without getting too far into unnecessary complexities or new theses. The translation itself is crisp and accessible. He provides an up-to-date survey of opinions on different features of the texts in his introduction, rooted in the most recent critical editions of the texts. He takes time to set out clearly the crucial feature which might otherwise surprise or confuse any casual reader: a strong emphasis on symbolic readings of passage in *Revelation*, which creates an ecclesiological and/or moral meditation on suffering. Neither author was much interested in predicting the imminence of the End through the text. Indeed, as so often in the period, the authors were more concerned with what *Revelation* suggested about the dangers posed by heretics and other false Christians, many to be led by Antichrist himself in the Last Days. Here, the texts represent two different ways in which long-brewed traditions stretching back to Tyconius in the fourth century continued to be developed.

The two texts invite us to consider more widely the place of these kinds of commentaries in early medieval contexts. Both are fairly characterised by Gumerlock as essentially school or note books, containing a range of jottings which may have helped the author (let alone any imagined audience) to understand difficult passages of the Bible. The theological 'world view' of the texts comes out of the accumulation of quotations and thoughts about individual passages, rather than from any attempt to develop a coherent and sustained argument. Most books of the Bible were subjected to this kind of 'line criticism' in classrooms and scriptoria. Bishops and monks accumulated a wealth of traditional learning. But then, just every now and then, something resonated with a contemporary event, as when the author of the Handbook turned specifically to thinking about Arian (anti-

Trinitarian) heretics, or when the author of the Reference Bible made a comment about pagan Slavs. The relationships between these moments and the wider political and social worlds in which they produced still needs more mapping out, and Gumerlock provides a valuable service to historians in making two lesser-known texts more accessible.

Overall, this is a great little book, which helps to open up early medieval ideas on the apocalyptic – Insular and continental – while introducing readers to some of the key scholarly issues at stake at present. The choice of the Handbook and Reference Bible is to be praised, as these kinds of anonymous texts, while plentiful, are often neglected compared to those by named individuals. *Early Latin Commentaries on the Apocalypse* will be a valuable addition to many syllabi, with much to offer to anyone interested in different perspectives on the Last Things in Christian thought.

Review by Dr. James Palmer, University of St Andrews

Dr. Palmer has written about the Apocalypse himself, see *The Apocalypse in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2014). Here, we are excited that he will soon publish a book with us entitled *Early Medieval Hagiography*, learn more [here](#).