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THE ANTICHRIST

IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Otto W. Heick

A German scholar whose name has escaped my memory is reported to have called the Book of Revelation the “Bilderbuch Gottes” (picture book of God). But the “pictures” are weird and eerie so that Luther was led to say in 1522 that the book makes him hold that “it is neither apostolic nor prophetic . . . My spirit cannot fit itself into this book.”¹ Later, however, (1545) he interpreted the book historically, speaking of events that were to come upon the church. The seven bad angels mentioned in chapters 8-10 and 13, he maintained, are referring to notorious heretics of the

1. *Works of Martin Luther*. Phil. Ed. Vol. VI, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press), 488 ff.

church: Tatian, Marcion, Origin, Novatus, Arius, Mohammed and the Pope.²

This historical approach was followed by many of the devotional expositors of Revelation. Ludwig Harms, for instance, (d. 1865), founder of the Hermannsburg Mission in Northern Germany which trained many pastors especially for the Joint Synod of Ohio, regarded the seven letters in Chapters 2-3 as successively portraying the spiritual development of the church. The letter to the church in Philadelphia, he says, is a description of the Lutheran Church from the time of its inception to about 1750, for ideally speaking, "the Lutheran Church is the only true church of Christ." But alas, since the age of Rationalism, the established Lutheran church, like the church in Laodicea is neither hot nor cold, but wretched and poor. The beast with its seven heads, he says, is represented today by Austria, Prussia, England, Russia, Italy and the Papal States. In all these states, to some degree, godless democrats are setting the fashion.³

Today it is widely held that Revelation must be interpreted in the light of its contemporary history albeit with an eschatological concern. Without taking the references to contemporary history into account, the expositor, Lilje says, the book "falls headlong into the slough of fantasy and speculation."⁴ But Lilje himself remains at times uncertain as to the person or event to which the text may allude. With respect to Rev. 17:10-12, he says that "it is pointless to calculate the five kings in terms of Roman emperors" though in the New Testament the emperor is called "basileus" (I Pet. 2:13, 17; I Tim. 2:2). While Deissmann⁵ and K.L. Schmidt⁶ agree with Lilje, Lohmeyer⁷ disagrees. To speak bluntly of seven Caesars in this connection would have led to a bloody repression of the church by the state, says Lohmeyer. Following an exclusively unhistorical, eschatological interpretation, Lohmeyer dismisses the passage as an esoteric, apocalyptic statement, reflecting no historical insight but only apocalyptic faith. Consequently he rejects the widely held notion that Nero is meant to be the eighth king returning from the dead.

Yet taking seriously the historical roots of Revelation implies that the passage must have been meaningful to the Christian readers in Asia Minor. Five kings, John writes, have fallen. Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero have died. Civil War seemed to be threatening again. The three contesting generals Alba, Otho and Vitellius were murdered in quick succession, the latter by the soldiers of Vespasian who restored order and tranquility in the empire. Thus the "mortal wound" was healed (13:5). Vespasian was the sixth king "who is" when John was writing. He was to be followed by Titus who, being of poor health,⁸ remained only a "little while" (A.D.

2. *Ibid.* pp. 488 f.

3. Ludwig Harms, *Die Offenbarung St. Johannis*. 10th Ed. 1910. Including the Papal States, indicates that the statement was originally made in the later forties of the last century when the newly elected Pope Pius IX seemed to favor the aspirations of the Italian liberals—A.J. Seiss of the former General Council followed a similar approach to the Seven Letters of Rev., Vol. I, 176-208. 12th ed. (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1917).

4. Hanns Lilje, *The Last Book of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 7.

5. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1922), p. 362, ft. 6.

6. K.L. Schmidt in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel. Vol. I, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1964 ff.), p. 577.

7. Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (1926), pp. 140 ff.

8. Seutonius, *Life of Titus*, 7.

79-81). The eighth king then, who himself does not belong to this series and yet belongs to it by his very nature, signifies Domitian (A.D. 81-96). In this person, the murderous Nero returned just as Jesus said (Matt. 11:14) that Elijah had come back in the person of John the Baptist.

Commenting on this passage, Lilje⁹ seems to contradict himself. On the one hand, he says that the numbers may contain illusions to contemporary history; on the other, that "this passage is not intended to be connected with contemporary history." But would the original readers of the Apocalypse not have recognized in these numbers a veiled reference to the political rules of their times? Suetonius writes that Domitian ordered the imperial decrees to begin with, "The Lord, Our God commands."¹⁰ Throughout his reign he was haunted by fear of Jewish messianism. In A.D. 95 he took action against members of the imperial family whom he suspected of leaning toward the new faith. One of them—Clement, tradition relates to have been the third bishop of Rome and the author of the First epistle of Clement. In the same year, Tertullian relates, he summoned a dangerous Hebrew prophesying in Ephesus the imminent end of the Roman empire and the rise of a new world ruler to Rome, and there examined and tortured him. Little wonder that in the eyes of John, Domitian was the incarnation of the "beast from the abyss".¹¹

But assuming that Revelation was written under Vespasian implies certain difficulties if we accept a statement of Irenaeus that it was written "almost in our day, toward the end of the reign of Domitian."¹² However, must we assume that the visions of John were received in an unbroken succession? May he not have included in the finished book events separated in time? Was, for example, the vision about Jerusalem (Chapter 11) experienced at an earlier date but included in the book in order to stress the fact that God suffered no loss when the temple was destroyed? Julius Wellhausen¹³ and R.C. Charles¹⁴ regarded the passage as an oracle by a prophetic zealot who believed in the abiding religious significance of Jerusalem. Lilje vacillates.¹⁵ On the one hand, he says, that Jerusalem "is no longer the place of actual saving significance," but that "in some way or other it will have its place in the history of the last days". The latter notion reflects his view that "God's will in creation and redemption reaches its goal *within* (italics ours) history." Schlatter¹⁶ regards Chapter 11 as a word of instruction and comfort for the believers from Judaism. Though as a nation Israel may reject Jesus, a remnant will be saved. Likewise in Chapter 12, John "prophesies" an event of the past in order to strengthen his readers in the persecution they have to endure.

To regard Domitian as the eighth ruler, I believe, is corroborated by 666, the number of the Beast (13:18). In the history of the Church, Christians have been tempted to read the names of notorious enemies of Christ into this number. The mat-

9. Lilje, p. 226.

10. Suetonius, *Life of Domitian*, 15.

11. For relevant passages see J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*. Part I, Vol. I, (London: Macmillan, n.d.), pp. 104 ff. Cf. also Ethelbert Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (London: SCM Press, 1955.).

12. *Against Heresies*. Vol. V, 30, 3.

13. *Analyse der Offenbarung des Johannes*. 1907.

14. R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*. 2 Vols. 1920.

15. Lilje, pp. 161; 251.

16. Adolf Schlatter, *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament*. 10. Teil. 6th ed. 1938.

ter is complicated, in that some manuscripts read 616. Concerning this number, Deissmann¹⁷ ventured to propose a solution: 616 = Kaiser theos: K=20; A=1; S=200; A=1; R=100; Th=9; E=5; O=70; S=200 = 616, for like Latin numbers which are still used occasionally, Greek and Hebrew numbers were also written with letters of the alphabet. The most sensible way of course, is to use the Greek alphabet which is used by John (1:8, 21:6). But all attempts to arrange the letters to disclose the meaning of the number 666 have failed. Lohmeyer¹⁸ has offered an entirely new approach to the problem. The number 666, he says, is a "Dreieckzahl" (triangular number), i.e. the sum total of numbers from 1 to 36 is 666. The number 36 is the triangular number to 8. 1 plus 2 plus 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 is 36. Every triangular number contains the same meaning as the final number. This means that the number 8 is the key to unlock the mystery of 666. The numbers 8, 36 and 666 have the same meaning as 8 in Chapter 17:11. Domitian is the incarnation of the Beast; he is the Antichrist, the supreme but also last expression of enmity against God and his Christ. The lesser ten kings, the vassals of Roman power, will at first join in making war on the Lamb; but their war-like mind will quickly (in "one hour"—18:17) turn against their supreme commander. Thus the imperial world-power will be overthrown by its own forces. In addition, Christ himself will appear as Victor over the Beast and its vassals (19:17-21) and will usher in a reign of peace for the church.

John's visions did not extend beyond his own time. Actually, the persecutions under Nero and Domitian were only the beginning of a reign of uncertainty and terror for the church for another 250 years. It was not until "the Rider on the White Horse" assumed historical form in the person of Constantine that the vision of John was fulfilled and peace became a reality for the church, A.D. 313. The Christians were jubilant as is, manifested for example, in the lengthy "Panegyric on the Splendor of Affairs" in Eusebius' *Church History*.¹⁹ For Augustine the church as the Kingdom in space and time is the fulfillment of the millennial hope of Revelation 20. Rome has a Christian emperor. Christ rules through those men by whom the church is ruled, the bishops and presbyters. An element of "realized eschatology" is implicit in Augustine's view of church and state.²⁰

17. Deissmann, p. 278.

18. Lohmeyer, pp. 115 f.

19. *Church History*, X, 4.

20. *City of God*. XX, 9.