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Item Type	Article
Authors	Vogel, Winfried
Publisher	Andrews University
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-09-22 08:45:11
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/237514

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER

PART II: LUTHER'S EXPOSITION OF DANIEL AND REVELATION

WINFRIED VOGEL
Marienhoehe Seminary
D-6100 Darmstadt
West Germany

In my earlier article in this series,¹ I treated in a general way a number of aspects of Martin Luther's "eschatological theology," including the existential component in that theology, Luther's allegorical application of apocalyptic language and symbols, his attention to what he considered signs of the imminent advent of Christ, his desire for the "dear last day," his concept(s) of the antichrist, and others. The present essay explores a bit further the great Reformer's eschatological theology by focusing specifically on the attention he gave to the two Bible books that are generally considered as full-fledged apocalypses—the OT book of Daniel and the NT book of Revelation (the latter being also referred to as "the Apocalypse").

1. Luther's Developing Attention to the Books of Daniel and Revelation

It would appear that in his early reformational career, Luther was not particularly interested in biblical apocalyptic. His negative attitude in particular to the book of Revelation may be seen in the appended position he gave that book (along with Hebrews, James, and Jude) in the first edition of his NT in 1522 and in the preface he also prepared for the same book in that NT edition.

However, as Luther's eschatological concerns deepened, his interest in, and respect for, biblical apocalyptic grew. Factors involved in this were his practical-mindedness in seeing prophetic

¹Winfried Vogel, "The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther, Part I: Luther's Basic Concepts," *AUSS* 24 (1986): 249-264.

fulfillments in events and entities of his own day and his growing emphasis on the pope as the antichrist (or, as the main antichrist). By 1529, the advance of the Turkish forces under Suleiman to the very environs of Vienna (after their frightening earlier victories in Christian Europe, including the disastrous defeat of the Hungarian forces at Mohács in 1526) led Luther to hasten his translation of the book of Daniel, placing it ahead of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (which, in the order of biblical books, should obviously have been treated first). From that time on, Luther refers, in his interpretation of Dan 7, to the “little horn” as the Turk, who fights “against the saints of the Most High.” We can imagine how convincing this sounded in view of the fact, just mentioned above, that the Turks besieged Vienna in 1529!

Our awareness of this typical phenomenon of Luther’s making specific applications of his Bible knowledge to his “here and now” in not very practical terms must not, however, obscure for us the fact that he was never totally carried away by those rather overwhelming political circumstances of his day. The spiritual significance always remained, even as he mentioned the Turk—not just as a political threat, but primarily as a God-permitted scourge on an ungodly Europe. Moreover, his concept of the Turk as antichrist always took second place to his interpretation of the papacy as the antichrist of Daniel and Revelation (and of Paul in 2 Thessalonians). That his main concern still focused on the papacy is clearly evident from various observations Luther made, as we shall see later. This concern appears to be inherent, as well, in his remark that just as body and soul belong together, so it is with regard to the antichrist: The spirit is the pope, and the flesh is the Turk! “The Pope is a liar, and the Turk is a murderer,” Luther further declared; but if the two characteristics are combined, then both lying and murdering are found in the pope.²

It should be pointed out that in his growing interest in identifying the pope as antichrist, Luther certainly was informed also by earlier expositions. Indeed, the uniqueness of Luther’s teaching on the antichrist did not lie in his referring to the papacy thus, for this was an understanding he shared with others, notably

²*Weimar Ausgabe* of Luther’s works, *Tischreden* 3: 158, no. 3055a. The *Weimar Ausgabe* will hereinafter be cited as *WA*, with additional abbreviations for the *Briefwechsel* (*WA-Br*), *Deutsche Bibel* (*WA-DB*), and *Tischreden* (*WA-Tr*).

the Hussites in Bohemia, as Paul Althaus has pointed out.³ However, the Hussites' main concern was the unchristian life of the pope, whereas Luther focused on the church's teaching.⁴ This new approach assured not only wider attention but also more revolutionary and long-lasting results. And it is, as well, a demonstration of Luther's holistic approach to theology—this interpretation being, to his mind, a concrete building-block within his overall theological concerns.

With this brief background, we are now ready to take a quick overview of some of the specifics of the Reformer's interpretation in his dealing with the books of Daniel and Revelation.

2. *Luther's Interpretation of the Book of Daniel*

It has recently been pointed out by W. Stanford Reid that although the book of Revelation was a perennial favorite for all kinds of interpretations and speculations in the time of Luther, the prophet Daniel was preferred by many theologians, including the Reformer.⁵ It seems, however, that Luther had originally avoided comment on Daniel just as much as he had done with regard to Revelation, and apparently for the same reason—namely, because he did not want to participate in any of the speculative interpretation which was so rampant in his time, and whose originators he disparagingly called “superficial spirits” and “new quibble masters.”⁶ In fact, it is of interest to note that it was in the very same year—1529—that he wrote his introductions to both Daniel and the Apocalypse (the latter introduction replacing his earlier negative preface to the book of Revelation prepared in 1521/22).

It has been convincingly argued by Hans Volz that Luther's interest in the book of Daniel was spurred by Philip Melancthon, who had related certain Daniel passages to the Turks before Luther did so (and that it was spurred also, of course, by the quick advance of the Turks to the gates of Vienna, mentioned earlier).⁷ Another

³In “Luthers Gedanken über die letzten Dinge,” *LJB* 23 (1941): 30.

⁴*WA* 51: 598-600.

⁵W. Stanford Reid, “The Four Monarchies of Daniel in Reformation Historiography,” in *Historical Reflections* 8/1 (Spring 1981): 115-123.

⁶Cf. *WA* 23: 485.

⁷*WA-DB* 11/2: xxvi and passim.

influence might have been a pamphlet by the Wittenberg scholar Justus Jonas, who had translated the seventh chapter of Daniel, commented on it, and applied it to the Turks.⁸

Although his Daniel Introduction of 1529 represents Luther's first extensive application of the prophecies of Daniel, he had as early as 1521 interpreted Dan 8:23-25 as pointing to the Pope as the antichrist, as well as applying the little horn in Dan 7 to the papacy.⁹ Luther interpreted the prophecies on the antichrist and on the little horn in this general fashion, except that in Dan 8 he saw both the pope and the Turk represented. In one of the table-talks he is even quoted as bringing the pope, the Turk, and the antichrist together into a combined interpretation of Dan 7 and Rev 13.¹⁰ Among these entities, however, it was the pope who remained the chief object of Luther's attention.

In addition, Luther, obviously basing his interpretation of Dan 8 mainly on the Maccabean Books, saw the little horn in that chapter of Daniel as reflecting Antiochus Epiphanes.¹¹ This Seleucid king he considered as the foreshadowing of the great antichrist, described not only in Dan 8:23-25 but also in chap. 12 (a chapter whose discussion Luther actually begins with 11:36).¹² The Reformer also viewed the Daniel material as a source for the Apostle Paul's portrayal in 2 Thess 2.¹³

Luther's interpretation of the four kingdoms in Dan 2 and Dan 7 was along the traditional line—Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. Presumably, Luther relied here, and in other ways, on Jerome's Daniel Commentary.¹⁴ However, in focusing on the contemporary political situation and seeing in the little horn of Dan 7 the manifestation of the Turkish power, Luther added a peculiar prophetic touch of his own. He derived comfort from the fact that three horns of the fourth beast—namely, Egypt, Asia, and Greece, in his view—had already been plucked out by the Turk. He concluded therefrom that no other horn—i.e., no other nation—

⁸Ibid., p. xxx; see also n. 94.

⁹WA 7: 722 and passim; 7: 744.

¹⁰WA-Tr 3: 645, 646, no. 3831.

¹¹WA-DB 11/2: 14.

¹²Ibid., p. 48.

¹³Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 6.

would have the same fate as those three and that therefore Germany would be spared!¹⁵

The mention in Dan 7 of a judgment and of the new kingdom was to Luther clear evidence that the end was fast approaching, and for him the book of Daniel had thus become a source of comfort "in these last times"¹⁶—a book which he commended to all pious Christians to read.¹⁷ He says, in fact, that the book was written for the sake of "the miserable Christians" and had been saved for "this last time."¹⁸

In interpreting the 2300 days of Dan 8:14, Luther again followed Jerome." He believed these days to be 6 1/4 years when Antiochus raged against the Jews.

In the year 1530 Luther's attention to Daniel focused strongly on the 70 weeks of Dan 9:24-27 and on an historical interpretation of 11:2-35. The 70 weeks were, in fact, treated quite extensively by the Reformer, and the result is indeed noteworthy. Acknowledging these 70 weeks as 490 literal years, Luther refers to Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra 6 for a clue as to their beginning. Relying apparently on royal genealogies by pseudo-Metasthenes and pseudo-Philo,¹⁹ Luther begins with Darius Hyastasapes as the very king who issued the decree for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. However, Luther seems hardly ever to state the exact year with which to begin the 70 weeks—at least, not in terms of the usual chronological reckoning. In his *Supputatio annorum mundi* of 1541 and 1545, in which he begins his chronology with Adam and paradise, he gives the year 3510 (after Creation) as the starting point for the 70 weeks—which, according to him, was the second year of Darius.

In the same chronology, Jesus was born 450 years later—in the year 3960—and died exactly 33 1/2 years afterwards, in the middle of the 70th week.²⁰ We should not fail to notice, however, that in 1523, when Luther for the first time tried to calculate the 70 weeks,

¹⁵Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁶WA-Br 5:242, line 11, to Nikolaus Hausmann on Feb. 25, 1530.

¹⁷WA-DB 11/2: 128.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 383, in the dedicatory letter of his Daniel translation to Johann Friedrich, Duke of Saxony.

¹⁹These are believed to be scholarly forgeries that were first published by the Italian Dominican Giovanni Nanni (Annius). See *ibid.*, p. xliii.

²⁰WA 53: 107, 124, 125.

he reckoned backwards from the 30th year of Christ and arrived at the 20th year of Cambyses as the beginning of those 70 weeks or 490 years.²¹ In 1530 Luther mentioned this date again, alongside his new proposal for a dating from the reign of Darius, which he now seemed to favor. He observed that in trying to harmonize the two possible calculations, as well as in figuring out the first one, there is a time lapse of three years. But Luther was not the least embarrassed, and he justified the discrepancy by simply saying that in such grand time calculations it is difficult to pinpoint the exact day and hour, and that therefore one should be content with being so close to accuracy.²² Later, however, in his *Supputatio* he applied a more mechanical approach, as mentioned above.

While in his Daniel exposition Luther passes by chap. 10 rather quickly, he concentrates his attention on chap. 11 and supposes that he gives help here against confusion over so many names and persons apparently referred to in that chapter.²³ Then, contrary to the usual tradition, Luther begins his treatment of chap. 12 with 11:36, as mentioned earlier. He sees at this point in chap. 11 the end of a mere description of historical events and the beginning of a prophecy of the last time. This also marks for him the transition point at which the pope becomes the real Antiochus. Interestingly enough, one of the first indications for Luther that the pope is meant here is the phrase in vs. 37 that the king shall not regard the lure of women—which Luther connects with the pope's forbidding of clerical marriage. But above all, Luther sees the "bright Gospel" shining through again.²⁴ In the form of this concluding prophecy in Daniel, it is especially given for the last time.

After voicing his desire that someone else should have taken care of chap. 12 in Daniel in order to "strengthen our faith and to awaken our hope for the blessed day of our salvation," Luther acknowledges the fact that no one else had done this, and so proceeds with his own interpretation.²⁵ This discussion becomes,

²¹WA 11: 334.

²²WA-DB 11/2: 22.

²³Ibid., pp. 32, 34.

²⁴Ibid., p. 48: "Darumb ist hie keine Historien mehr zu suchen, sondern, das helle Euangelion zeigt und sagt itzt einem jedern wol, wer der Rechte Antiochus sei. . . ."

²⁵Ibid., p. 50.

in fact, the climax of his whole commentary on Daniel, in which he devotes to Dan 12 more than double the space that he has given to the entire rest of the book! Also, he makes his exposition of this chapter one of his masterpieces on the subject of the papacy and its evil effects. But as was usual for him, the Reformer ends his treatise on a joyful note. He anticipates the "promised and certain" future return of our Savior Jesus Christ as a "blessed and glad salvation from this vale of misery and woe."²⁶

Although Luther's interpretation of Daniel was somewhat influenced by traditional views and could not always free itself from the interpretations of forebears and contemporaries, it still shows remarkable creativity and freshness of thought, especially when dealing with the central eschatological concern of the book of Daniel. Perhaps Luther's main innovation with regard to interpretation of Daniel was his incorporation of the Turks; but even here, his treatment clearly indicates that he successfully escaped the pitfall of a mere sensational approach that would take into account only the happenings in the present world. Indeed, there were some inconsistencies in Luther's interpretation of symbols, such as the little horn. Nevertheless, in light of his understanding of his own time and in view of his fervent desire for a soon-returning Christ, he still deserves commendation for not losing sight of the eschatological gospel contained in the book of Daniel, and for demonstrating an appreciation of the real spiritual dimensions of the controversy revealed in that book.

3. *Luther's Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*

As we noted in the first section of this article, Luther's attitude towards the Apocalypse underwent a marked and rather drastic change during the time between 1522 and 1529/30. The first of these years saw the publication of a brief preface, in which Luther almost totally rejected the book of Revelation, because to him it did not reveal Christ. At that time he looked upon it as being neither apostolic nor prophetic (apostles, he felt, preach with simple and clear words!), and he also considered that there were "many of the fathers" who had dismissed the book.²⁷ Indeed, the Reformer felt

²⁶Ibid., p. 130.

²⁷WA-DB 7: 404.

himself in darkness regarding John's visions and descriptions and could not interpret them. More over, he was apparently afraid of being classified with those who claimed all kinds of divergent and speculative meanings to be the correct interpretation of the book.²⁸ It is even possible to conclude, as does H.-U. Hofmann, that Luther regarded the Apocalypse as apocryphal.²⁹

By 1529/30, however, Luther came to have a much more favorable attitude toward the Apocalypse, as we have also noted. This new outlook toward the book of Revelation most probably originated in Luther's concern over the same situation that led to his translation of, and comment on, the book of Daniel, prepared in the same year. By now Luther was willing to acknowledge the striking relationship between these two prophetic books—at least, insofar as they both seemed to him to deal with the papacy and were both for “comfort in this last time.” And thus, it is interesting to take note of Luther's new approach to prophecy in this second introduction to Revelation. In it he distinguishes between certain types of prophecy: first, in clear words; second, in pictures and dreams with their interpretation; and third; as in the Apocalypse, only in pictures and symbols, without an accompanying interpretation. As long as this last type of prophecy is not interpreted, it is, says Luther, “hidden” and “mute.”³⁰ Nevertheless, and in any case, it is “given by the Holy Spirit”—a statement that is in sharp contrast to Luther's first preface of 1522.

Hofmann in his seminal work on Luther and the Apocalypse has recently pointed out that in order to gain a correct understanding of the Reformer's relationship to the book of Revelation, it would be most helpful to have an overview of his use of this last book of the Bible in his entire work.³¹ Hofmann has taken upon himself this painstaking task and consequently has come up with some quite interesting results, which are presented in statistical tables and their interpretation by the author. What concerns us most, in the context of this article, however, is simply to get a general idea of how Luther used the Apocalypse and how his

²⁸Ibid., p. 408, lines 9-24.

²⁹Hans-Ulrich Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes-Apokalypse* (Tübingen, 1982), p. 296.

³⁰WA-DB 7: 408, line 11.

³¹Hofmann, pp. 9-10.

understanding of it contributed to the eschatological nature of his theology.

It is important to note that despite his new and more positive attitude towards the book of Revelation by 1529/30, Luther still did not see fit to offer his interpretation of it with the same conviction and certainty that he manifested with regard to the prophecies of Daniel. In dealing with Revelation, he saw his efforts merely as a proposal "to cause others . . . to think."³² Hofmann is certainly correct in his assertion that Luther eventually took upon himself the task of interpreting the Apocalypse because he now wanted to show those "irresponsible Spirits" with their "allegorical playing around" how it could and should be done.³³ Thus, it seems that the situation in the church and in the world toward the end of 1529 was incentive enough for Luther to be motivated into approaching this book because of the very reason that earlier had kept him from doing so.

Luther's major hermeneutical principle applicable here, next to the one that asks for the Scripture text to interpret itself, is the one that takes into account the history of the church and the world and compares that history with the pictures that John describes—this in order to see what had been fulfilled already by Luther's time and what was still pending. Luther's main purpose in using this principle was to arrive at an "indisputable interpretation."³⁴

Highlights of this interpretation include, first of all, Luther's preterist view of the seven churches of chaps. 2 and 3. Then, the fourth and fifth chapters, he felt, contain visions and pictures that depict Christendom—i.e., the church—here on earth.³⁵ In order to give an impression of Luther's way of doing exegesis, it may be of interest to point out that in his interpretation of Rev 5:8 he saw the "playing with harps" as signifying "preaching."³⁶ This kind of allegorizing is quite common with Luther, and it reveals his pre-occupation with certain ideas and his readiness to apply these ideas to the text. Thus, in a sense, he unwittingly fell into the very trap that he so desperately wanted to avoid.

³²*WA-DB* 7: 408, lines 20-22.

³³Hofmann, p. 410.

³⁴*WA-DB* 7: 408, lines 22-30.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 431; cf. gloss to Rev 4:1.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 410, lines 1-7.

Chaps. 6 and 7 in the Apocalypse Luther interpreted as a picture of unfolding world history and then church history in particular. In this panorama angels play a rather important role: The evil angels are heretics, and good angels are the "holy fathers, like Spirido, Athanasius, Hilary, and the Council of Nicea."³⁷

In this vein, Luther also offers a very concrete application of the seven trumpets of chaps. 9 through 11. These trumpets, played by (apparently for Luther) evil angels, depict seven major heretics during the early period of church history. However, Luther does not intend to present them in chronological order, but rather has systematic aspects in mind. The first trumpet is Tatian, with his righteousness by works; the second must be Marcion, with his followers, such as now "Muentzer and the *Schwermer*"; the third angel is Origen, with his allegorical interpretations; the fourth is Novatus and later the Donatists;³⁸ the fifth represents "Arius, the great heretic, and his companions"; and the sixth is "the evil Mahometh."³⁹ After dealing thus with the first six trumpets in Rev 9, Luther proceeds to Rev 10 and sees the angel with the little book as being in the line of the preceding six trumpeting angels. This seventh angel, or heretic, is the pope, who spreads human teaching—in contrast to the angel with the pure Gospel in Rev 14:6-7.⁴⁰ The seventh trumpet, in Rev 11:15 (in Luther, 12:1), is, according to the Reformer, a repetition of the one in chap. 10, with the only difference being that the angel in chap. 10 is the spiritual pope, whereas the one in chap. 11 is the secular (or worldly) pope.⁴¹

In chaps. 11 and 12 Luther sees two comforting pictures: the visions of the two witnesses and of the pregnant woman and the dragon. These "are to show that there are yet some pious teachers and Christians that remain."⁴² Luther says surprisingly little in interpreting chap. 12, although he uses pericopes from it in

³⁷Ibid., lines 18-25.

³⁸Ibid., lines 31-33.

³⁹Ibid., p. 443; cf. gloss to Rev 9:1 and 9:13; see also *ibid.*, p. 412, lines 10-11, 18, 19.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 445; cf. gloss to Rev 10:9; see also *ibid.*, p. 412, lines 20-22.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 449; cf. gloss to Rev 12:1.

⁴²Ibid., p. 412, lines 27-28.

sermons, hymns, and apologetic statements.⁴³ One interpretation that he does provide is with reference to the woman that flees from the dragon into the wilderness: This is "the church that is hidden from [literally, "under"] the papacy."⁴⁴

Up to this point Luther seems to have prepared the way for the climactic chap. 13, to which he gives his full attention, because he sees in the two beasts of this pericope a clear reference to "the papal empire and the imperial papacy": "The papacy," he declares, "brings the secular sword under its control" by giving the fallen Roman Empire to the Germans.⁴⁵ This *translatio imperii* for Luther is the healing of the deadly wound in 13:3. Hofmann correctly points out that here may be seen a clear connection with Luther's Daniel interpretation—one that helps to explain the lasting presence of the fourth kingdom of Daniel until the end of the world.⁴⁶

Why Luther held this view on the two beasts of Rev 13 in 1529/30, while declaring the first beast to be the Turk in 1539, when the Turkish threat was not so immediate and strong as it had been in 1529 or 1532, is somewhat puzzling. Perhaps this can be regarded as another piece of evidence for Luther's main interest in dealing with the pope, who, in his view, was the church's foremost enemy. In any case, Luther's interpretation in 1529/30 did manifest a dependence on, and embeddedness in, the circumstances of the contemporary political and ecclesiastical scene, for in a description of the devil's last wrath, he interprets the "second woe" (sixth trumpet) as "Mahometh and the Saracens" and the "third woe" (seventh trumpet) as "the papacy and the Emperor." The latter two are joined by the Turk, Gog, and Magog; and "in this most miserable and horrible way Christendom in all the world is plagued from all sides by false teachings and wars, by book and sword." This, Luther adds, "is the rock bottom [*grund suppe*]" and "is followed by pictures of comfort concerning the end to such woes and abomination."⁴⁷

⁴³Cf. Hofmann, pp. 426-427.

⁴⁴WA-DB 4: 501, line 33: "Ecclesia latet sub papatu."

⁴⁵WA-DB 7: 414, lines 2-8.

⁴⁶Hofmann, p. 429.

⁴⁷WA-DB 7: 414, lines 17-24.

In treating Rev 13 Luther could not refrain from commenting on the mysterious number “666” of vs. 18. In the margin next to this verse he put the note: “These are six hundred and sixty-six years. For so long [a period] will the secular papacy last.”⁴⁸ According to one of his table talks, Luther saw the beginning of the secular papacy with the crowning of Charlemagne by Leo III in 800.”⁴⁹ Since it was not important for Luther that the years fit exactly, he expected the end of the papacy in his own time. Then he also split the number “666” into smaller units and applied these to letters of the alphabet, but there is uncertainty as to which word or even which language he had in mind.⁵⁰

Rev 14 brings, according to Luther, the counterattack of the Word of God against the papacy—this in the figure of the angel with the eternal Gospel, the first of three angels with messages in vss. 6-11. Here it is interesting to recall that Luther never rejected the identification that had been suggested by Michael Stifel and others that it was Luther himself who was symbolized by this angel.⁵¹ This conviction, of course, gave an even greater impetus to the life and work to which the Reformer felt himself called. It dramatically added to his apocalyptic message, and in his own mind it must have placed him near the center of his eschatological theology, with its emphasis on the coming of Christ, the end of the world, and the role of the papacy.

As to the second angel of Rev 14:8, he announces the papacy, declares Luther; and here the Reformer is very clear on the equation of Babylon with the spiritual papacy.⁵² The third angel in the series is not even mentioned by Luther.

For Luther, the last part of chap. 14 and all of chap. 15 provide a description of judgment and of the wrath of God coming upon those who adhere to the papacy and resist the gospel. Chap. 16 has an even greater counterattack of God’s Word against the papacy; and interestingly enough, the angels with the bowls are considered as symbolizing “learned, pious preachers.” The picture

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 453.

⁴⁹*WA-Tr* 4: 108; lines 18-22.

⁵⁰Hofmann, pp. 432-433. Hofmann calls attention to Bousset’s suggestion that Luther had in mind the Hebrew term for “Roman” (with “Empire” understood).

⁵¹See Vogel, p. 257, and Hofmann, p. 434.

⁵²*WA-DB* 7:414, lines 29-30.

of the three frogs in 16:13 Luther uses to caricature "the Sophists, like Faber, Eck, Emser, etc."⁵³

Rev 17 introduces the harlot, which for Luther was another description of the papacy—a description which he used quite often in order to demonstrate the rise and corruption of the Roman Church. The interpretational gloss that Luther gives for the seven heads and ten horns of the beast carrying the woman as being specific nations of his own time shows once again how much he lived in the contemporary scene and tried to apply Scripture and especially its apocalyptic literature to the "here-and-now."⁵⁴ The same is true for his view on the destruction of Babylon in chap. 18, which, as pointed out by Hofmann, Luther applied to the sack of Rome in 1527 and the assault on the Vatican by imperial troops.⁵⁵

The white horse of 19:11 plays a decisive role in the Reformer's interpretation of the book of Revelation and in his expectation of the end of the age. Here he sees the Word of God that goes to a triumphant victory over "the protectors of the pope,"⁵⁶ and which causes "both beasts and the prophet" to be thrown into hell⁵⁷ (an anticipation, perhaps, of the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 and the ultimate victory of the Protestant confession?).

In any case, it is significant that Luther thought the prophecies of the book of Revelation had been fulfilled up to and including the white horse of 19:11. This he declared to be the case in 1536, in a table talk recorded for that year. On the same occasion Luther also remarked that in his opinion the end would come before 100 years would pass.⁵⁸

Concerning Rev 20, Luther's introduction to the Apocalypse of 1529/30 interprets Gog and Magog as a manifestation of the Turks. (A little later, while at the Coburg Castle in the summer of 1530, he translated Ezek 38 and 39, and in a preface and glossaries therewith he set forth the same view.⁵⁹) With regard to the millennium, Luther suggests that this time period began with the writing

⁵³Ibid., p. 414, lines 25-29, and p. 416, lines 3-7.

⁵⁴Cf. *ibid.*, p. 463, gloss to Rev 17:9-14.

⁵⁵Hofmann, p. 444.

⁵⁶*WA-DB* 7: 467, gloss to Rev 19:11.

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 470.

⁵⁸*WA-Tr* 3: 321, lines 25-28.

⁵⁹*WA* 30/2: 223, lines 4-13.

of the Apocalypse and ended with the appearance of the Turks.⁶⁰ If he had set the date for the Apocalypse at around A.D. 95, which he never did explicitly, he would have seen the end of the 1,000 years with the First Crusade around A.D. 1095. We have already noted in the previous article in this series that in 1540 Luther held a slightly different view—starting the millennium with Christ's birth and concluding it with the accession of Pope Gregory VII in A.D. 1073.⁶¹

Luther ends his preface to the Apocalypse with statements of comfort and warning. In fact, he sees the whole purpose of the book as embracing these two contrasting aspects. We should be comforted because Christendom will receive the final victory over all its enemies, he says, but at the same time we should also be warned to guard against heresies and all "annoying evils" that have crept into the Christian church, have distorted her testimony before the world, and have thereby provided an obstacle to the faith of many. The last sentence in the preface is one of expressed comfort: "We should not doubt that Christ will be with us and near us, even if it comes to the worst. Here in this book we see that Christ amidst and above all plagues, beasts, and evil angels. will nevertheless be with and near to his saints and will finally triumph."⁶²

4. History and Effects of Woodcuts to the Apocalypse

Our discussion of Luther's understanding of the Apocalypse would not be complete without mentioning one of the most powerful means the Reformer employed to convey the message that is contained in the book—namely, the woodcuts. Twenty-one of these, most of them apparently created by Lukas Cranach, a personal friend of Luther, appeared in Luther's first NT, the so-called "September Bible."⁶³ The triple-crown on the heads of the beast

⁶⁰WA-DB 7: 469, gloss to Rev 20:3.

⁶¹Vogel, p. 256; cf. the chart on p. 259.

⁶²WA-DB 7: 420, lines 14-17.

⁶³See, e.g., Ph. Schmidt, *Der Illustration der Lutherbibel 1522-1700* (Basel, 1962), pp. 93-98; Kenneth A. Strand, *Woodcuts to the Apocalypse in Dürer's Time: Albrecht Dürer's Woodcuts Plus Five Other Sets from the 15th and 16th Centuries* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1968), p. 37. Schmidt reproduces a number of these in reduced size

(Rev 11 and 16) and the harlot (Rev 17) rather unambiguously demonstrates Luther's interpretation of certain passages. It appears that Duke George of Albertine Saxony protested to his cousin Frederick the Wise and succeeded in getting the triple-crown reduced to a single crown in Luther's "December Testament" of 1522.⁶⁴

But now something interesting happened. Jerome Emser, Duke George's court secretary, bought the woodcuts from Cranach (with Luther's consent), so as to include them in his own Bible that was meant to compete with Luther's. Thus, in this Catholic Bible of 1527, even though the single crown appeared in the woodcuts for Rev 11, 16, and 17, some of the polemical scenes from Luther's Bible were reproduced—such as the portrayal of the second beast of chap. 13 (the beast from the land) as wearing a monk's cowl, and the depictions for chaps. 14 and 18 of the fall of Babylon as the destruction of Rome.⁶⁵

With regard to Luther's own Bible editions, the triple-crown reappeared in his first complete Bible of 1534. This Bible had a series of twenty-six woodcuts for the Apocalypse.⁶⁶ Taken over, copied, and slightly altered by various artists (Holbein, Brosamer, Woensam, and others), the woodcuts from Luther's first NT appeared not only in Bibles but also independently, making these illustrations a powerful communicator during Luther's own time of the message that he wished so fervently to proclaim.

Art historians have pointed out that these woodcuts have also had another interesting effect. In a number of monasteries in the monk's Republic of Athos, Greece, there are cycles of monumental frescoes of twenty-one illustrations each, the first probably prepared in the year 1547. Though these appear in Greek iconic style, they are said to be large copies of the woodcuts from Luther's NT of 1522. They even include the illustration of the Babylonian harlot

(nos. 47-51, 53, 54, 56-58, and 60, on pp. 99-103, 105, 106, 108-110, 112). The entire set is reproduced by Strand in full size (nos. 33-43, 45-49, 51, and 53-56, on pp. 38-48, 50-54, 56, 58-61).

⁶⁴See the notation by Schmidt on p. 95, no. 11. Strand has placed all three woodcuts in both forms on facing pages (nos. 43, 44, on pp. 48, 49; nos. 49, 50, on pp. 54, 55; and nos. 51, 52, on pp. 56, 57).

⁶⁵Cf. Hofmann, p. 325; also woodcuts 46, 47, and 53 in Strand, pp. 51, 52, and 58.

⁶⁶See Strand, p. 73. The woodcuts themselves are reproduced as nos. 78-103 on pp. 74-86.

with the triple crown.⁶⁷ These frescoes demonstrate again the powerful influence that the Luther-Bible woodcuts had, even apart from the written word, for the Apocalypse was not recognized as canonical in the Greek Orthodox Church!

Luther's intent was to make the Bible accessible and readable to the common person in the street, and he duly realized that woodcuts were an invaluable help in accomplishing this goal. Interestingly enough, when baroque Bible illustrations ceased, the people's interest in illustrated books of the Bible like the Apocalypse also subsided.⁶⁸

5. Conclusion

The survey of the eschatological themes in Luther's writings as presented in my earlier article and of his interpretation of biblical apocalyptic literature as set forth in the present article not only shows clearly his vivid interest in the end of the age and coming of Christ but also reveals that his understanding of the eschaton strongly protruded into his life and theological thought. Apocalyptic prophecy was not something the Reformer dealt with only from time to time; it was not simply one interesting feature of Scripture among others. I would propose that Luther in his daily activity and ongoing theological enterprise was continually driven by his fervent desire for the consummation of all things and by his firm conviction that events and developments in church, society, and the political arena were the direct fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

This study also shows that there need not be any suspicion on our part that for Luther eschatology meant sectarian rigidity, ego-centric particularity, or ethical and social passivity. For him it meant quite the opposite, as evidenced by his lively interest in the things that were going on around him. In many instances he even interfered with pen and voice when he deemed it his Christian responsibility to do so. It would be difficult to make Luther an adherent of quietism.

A number of NT scholars today locate the "core" of the Apostle Paul in the apocalyptic texture of his thought.⁶⁹ Perhaps it is not

⁶⁷See Hofmann, pp. 327-328.

⁶⁸Cf. Schmidt, p. 392.

⁶⁹See, e.g., J. Christian Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia, 1980), pp. 16, 17; esp. note 19.

far-fetched, therefore, to claim that inasmuch as Paul's writings had such a strong and penetrating influence on Luther's thought, the Reformer incorporated the Apostle's apocalyptic drive into his own theology. Luther's apocalyptic perspective in no way dethrones his concept and message of *sola fide*, but rather strengthens it in the true biblical sense.