The Book of Revelation: Plagues as Part of the Eschatological Human Condition

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Abstract
Although plagues and disease do not feature prominently in the book of Revelation, specific images from the book, including the four horsemen (Rev. 6) and bowls of wrath (Rev. 15–16), have been used in certain traditions in which epidemics and pandemics have been, and still are, being interpreted as part of the eschatological human condition: they are seen as inflicted on humanity, ultimately by an angry God, whose wrath will lead to a final judgment.

Keywords
Epidemic, plague, eschatology, Revelation, Devil, angels

In his *Epidemics and Society* of 2019, Frank Snowden indicates that there are two popular models for accounting for diseases and their origin. The first is to see a disease as sent by a deity, and therefore divine in origin (2019: 10-13). Snowden gives examples from not only biblical traditions, but also from Homer’s *Iliad*, a group of Yalees from the nineteenth century, the so-called *perfectionists* headed by John Humphrey Noyes, and, as a modern version of this belief, the controversial preacher Jerry Falwell. So, although belief in God as originator of an ailment or sickness dates back to antiquity, this particular way of coping with disease is still present. The second way of accounting for the origin of disease is to regard the ailment in question as caused by a demon (2019: 13-14). Hippocrates,
in the fifth century BCE, developed a medical strategy that approached sickness and disease with, what Snowden calls, a ‘naturalistic, secular view’ (2019: 14). The use of the term ‘secular’ here may be questioned, since it would seem to be an anachronism, but the point Snowden makes is valid. Hippocrates, and in his wake Galen, did not need the gods or demons in order to make sense of human ailments (Snowden 2019: 9-27). In the book of Revelation, it seems a third theological approach to human suffering is offered. Here, suffering and afflictions are caused either by Satan and his allies or by angels, as part of the eschatological scenario described in the book. Humanity is thus stuck between Scylla and Charybdis: one either gets beaten by the Devil or by God’s angels, and there seems to be no way to survive, unless one belongs to the select group of 144,000 members of Israel and the many who join them from the Gentiles, chosen as God’s elect. Accordingly this contribution aims at analysing the ways in which the book of Revelation, and a number of early receptions of Revelation, dealt with human suffering.

The Book of Revelation in its Context

Suffering features prominently in the book of Revelation. In its current form, the book of Revelation begins and ends with an epistolary framework (1.1-3; 22.21), and chs. 2 and 3 consist of seven letters dictated by Christ to John and addressed to seven groups of Christ followers in Asia Minor: Ephesus (2.1-7), Smyrna (2.8-11), Pergamum (2.12-17), Thyatira (2.18-29), Sardis (3.1-6), Philadelphia (3.7-13) and Laodicea (3.14-22). It is commonly assumed that these seven congregations symbolize the whole of the Christ movement, and the seven letters, though clearly written with knowledge of the local situation of each of these groups, are meant for a general readership, as the book as a whole is (Karrer 1986).

John describes an apparition of the heavenly Jesus Christ in the first chapter (1.9-20), and after the sequence of the seven letters just described, the rest of the book consists of a series of partly overlapping and repetitious visions. These

1. On the use of biblical texts in antiquity as apotropaic, meaning to ward off illnesses, see Lietaert Peerbolte 2017: 27-43.
2. See Rev. 7.1-8 for the 144,000 and 9-17 for the elect from the Gentiles. In 14.1-5 only the first group is described.
3. Originally, the idea was that it would be followed by a second contribution, by Ana Valdez, who would write on modern receptions of Revelation in relation to pandemics and other disasters, but unfortunately COVID-19 prevented her from finishing the essay.
4. For a list of references, see Aune 1997: li. At a certain point in the early church, a number of authors became convinced that the less than orthodox character of the book was caused by the fact that it was in fact a forgery: the real author would not have been John, but the arch-heretic Cerinthus. Cf. Ehrman 2013: 74-77.
visions begin with a description of how John is welcomed to heaven by the opening of a door (4.1). Christ’s voice, described as that of a trumpet in 1.9, now urges John to enter heaven, and from that moment on the description continues with a mish-mash of visions. For now, it may suffice to mention the three septets in Revelation, which reflect the idea that history develops according to a set course and will show a rising degree of torment, tribulation and evil. There are seven seals, which are opened by the Lamb (=Christ) in 6.1-8.5, seven trumpets blown by angels in 8.6-11.19 and seven bowls ‘of the wrath of God’ in 15.1-21. The first two septets are interrupted by an intercalation after the sixth phenomenon. After the sixth seal, a multitude of 144,000 elect from Israel is described (7.1-8) followed by a multitude from the Gentiles (7.9-17), and after the sixth trumpet John describes how an angel hands him a scroll that he has to eat (Rev. 10.8-10; an echo of Ezek. 2.8–3.3) and continues with the depiction of the two witnesses that prophesy on behalf of Christ, but are killed by ‘the beast from the bottomless pit’ (Rev. 11.7).

Chapters 12–14 form an independent vision (or perhaps two visions) that focus on the defeat of Satan by means of the Christ event. The discourse used for describing this, in chs. 12–13, is strongly coloured by elements from pagan myths and the tradition of the two chaos monsters Leviathan and Behemoth that is found in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 14 describes the fate of the 144,000 followers of Christ and proleptically refers to the final defeat of Babylon. In the apocalyptic discourse of John, Babylon symbolizes Rome: just like Babylon, Rome had devastated the temple in Jerusalem. The actual defeat of Babylon is described in Rev.17–18, and after that, the visions continue with a description of the final war that leads to the defeat of the powers of evil (Rev. 19). This war ushers in a thousand-year reign of the Messiah on earth (Rev. 20.1-6), after which Satan will be finally destroyed (20.7-10), and the final judgement will be passed (20.11-15). The final two chapters describe the arrival of a new heaven and a new earth, with a new Jerusalem and a river of life (21.1–22.7), to end with an epilogue in which John addresses the reader directly and a conversation with the angel who functions as intermediary between him and Jesus (22.8-20).

The symbolic universe of the book of Revelation is dark and complex. Written in the last decade of the first century by a Jewish follower of Christ, it directs its images against the imperial power of Rome. As is the case in most apocalypses, Revelation depicts history as a process that is ultimately ruled by God. Humankind is treated as a pawn on the chessboard of history, and plagues, tribulations and other forms of evil are poured out on earth throughout the book. This brings us to the problem of evil and suffering in Revelation.

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5. Much has been written about the mythological backgrounds of the imagery of these chapters. The most influential study remains Collins 1976.
Evil and Suffering in Revelation

Theologically, the book of Revelation poses difficult questions. Why does God allow humans to suffer? Why is God depicted as such an angry, revengeful God, and why does he have his angels pour out his wrath over humankind? The God of Revelation is far from loving and friendly. Instead, the God of Revelation sheds his anger over his own creation and has human beings destroyed at large. Given the impact this writing has had throughout history, and still has in the world of today, it is important to look into the characters that bring evil and tribulation in this book. Let us first focus on the depiction of the Devil and his companions, and subsequently look into the roles of the angels.6

The Devil and his Companions

The main evil protagonist of the book of Revelation is the dragon depicted in ch. 12. Here, the imagery is rooted in pagan mythical discourse, and the ‘great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his head’ (NRSV) is identified as ‘that ancient serpent, who is called Devil and Satan’ in v. 9.7 The image of the dragon trying to devour the woman and her new-born baby may be rooted in pagan mythology but made its way into later Christian iconography as one of the most compelling visualizations of the evil and its protagonists in the Bible as a whole. After the rapture of the child – it is ‘snatched away and taken to God and to his throne’ (v. 5) – the Dragon is cast out of heaven by Michael and his angelic forces. Thus, Rev. 12.1-6 pictures the Messiah as sought after by a raging Devil, but the next section of the chapter (12.7-12) depicts the defeat of the Devil as a result of the advent of the Messiah. The result of this defeat, however, is that the Devil is unleashed and rages on earth: ‘Woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short’ (v. 12).

The description of the vision continues. The Devil rages against the woman and the rest of her offspring. It is very likely that the woman symbolizes Israel, and ‘the rest of her offspring’ are described in v. 17 as ‘those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus’. In John’s discourse, the ‘commandments of God’ probably stand for the Mosaic Law, and thus the followers of Jesus are here identified as Messiah-confessing Jews.

Densely symbolic as the imagery of Rev. 12 may be, it is clear that the chapter contains a rather unconventional theodicy. The Christ event led to the demise of

6. The reception of Revelation in works of art cannot be dealt with in this contribution but forms a rich source of information on the interpretative tradition of Revelation throughout history; see esp. van der Meer 1978; Carey 1999; O’Hear and O’Hear 2015.
7. See Lietaert Peerbolte 1996: 138-41 for a discussion of the pagan backgrounds of Rev. 12.
the Devil and his being cast out of heaven. The defeat of the Devil, in turn, caused his rage against the followers of Jesus, and their perceived (or real!) persecution thus becomes proof of the victory of God in Christ rather than disproving it (Lietaert Peerbolte 1996: 166-69). The Devil turns against the followers of Jesus, but not only is his anger caused by his heavenly defeat, but he also knows that he only has a short period of time to rage.

The vision continues in ch. 13 with an adaptation of the two chaos monsters known from the book of Job, Leviathan and Behemoth. The two beasts reflect a similar iconography as the Devil, but especially the first beast also has a number of characteristics that make him reflect the persona of the Lamb. It is not by accident that interpreters from the second century on have identified this beast as Antichrist, the legendary final eschatological opponent of Jesus Christ, who looks like him, but is sent by the Devil as the ultimate attempt to lead humanity astray.

Fascinating as the satanic trio’s description may be, for the present purpose it is enough to notice two things in the way the Devil and his helpers are pictured in Revelation. On the one hand, they hold power over human beings and beguile them in order to lead them astray. On the other hand, the parameters for their seductive and destructive work are divinely ordained, and they are only allowed to act within these parameters. After the description of the fall of Babylon, Rev. 19.11-16 continues with the portrayal of a rider on a white horse. There can be little doubt as to the identity of the rider – this is a depiction of Christ who returns to defeat the Devil and his allies. Revelation 19.19-20 deals with the defeat of ‘the Beast and the false prophet’, the latter being the same as the second beast of ch. 13. They are thrown into a pool of burning sulphur and therefore destroyed. This victory is described as the beginning of the millennium, a thousand-year reign by the Messiah Jesus, together with his faithful ones, the deceased of whom are resurrected for this purpose (20.4). During this period of a thousand years, the Devil is incarcerated only to be unleashed one final time before the Last Judgment.

In the symbolic universe of the book of Revelation, the Devil and his allies stand for persecution and deceit, but they are not held responsible for plagues and other horrific events bothering humankind. At a somewhat closer look, John’s visions ultimately put the responsibility for these elements of history in the hands of the angels who are sent by God to wreak vengeance on earth. It is time to turn to these angels now.

Angels bring Terrors and Plagues

In the three septets that symbolically depict the course of history in the book of Revelation, the seals (6.1–8.5), the trumpets (8.6–11.19) and the bowls (15.1-25), the main protagonists are angels who act on behalf of God. The first four
seals bring about the four riders on horses, who cause perdition and slaughter, the fourth of whom is even equated with Death itself. Destruction and perdition continue right through the sixth seal, and it is the opening of number seven that changes the scenery (8.1-5). Incense fills the room of heaven, the prayers of the saints reach the divine throne, and subsequently the overwhelming presence of God is implied in the description of elements of theophany.

The active role of the angels is even more clearly described in the second septet. Here, the trumpets are blown by angels, and they have awful consequences for the inhabitants of the earth. The first trumpet brings hail and fire, mixed with blood (8.7), the second transposes a mountain into the sea (8.8), the third causes a star named Wormwood to fall unto the earth and cause the death of many human beings by making the water bitter (8.10-11). The torments continue in similar fashion. The fourth angel causes cosmic turbulence, the fifth opens a bottomless pit and thereby causes herds of locusts and scorpions to cover the earth, and number six releases the four angels that were bound at the great river Euphrates (9.13-14), who wreak bitter havoc among humankind by causing the death of many people through the plagues they are responsible for. As in the first septet, the seventh trumpet brings a change of scenery: this time, the heavenly senate of 24 elders turns to God to worship him, and after their hymnic appraisal God’s heavenly temple opens up, together with the ark of the covenant, and again elements of theophany fill the scenery without God himself being explicitly described.

The third septet is much shorter in composition than the first two, and unlike the other two it is not interrupted by an intercalation vision. It begins with a description of the tent of witness in heaven, and from there seven angels appear with seven bowls of wrath (15.5-7). In the subsequent description of the action of the seven angels with the bowls, plagues and terrors are brought upon the earth that are strongly reminiscent of the plagues described in Exodus as punishment of the Egyptian pharaoh and his people. This septet, too, forms a climactic sequence where the sixth phenomenon is the most devastating one, in this case the start of the battle of Armageddon. The seventh bowl then describes the divine judgment of the earth and the execution of God’s wrath over Babylon and the entire earth.

For the present enquiry, three questions are of crucial importance: (1) How is God seen in relation to the plagues and destructions caused and brought by the angels? (2) What exactly is the role of the angels in these three sequences of septets and how do they relate to the picture of angels elsewhere in Revelation? (3) How do these septets relate to the visions of chs. 12–14 and chs. 17–22? For the sake of the logic of this argument, it is best to deal with these questions in reverse order.

To begin with the last question: the chronology of the septets is, in the first two cases, interrupted by an intercalation after the sixth phenomenon. This is the case
in the septet of seals and also in the septet of trumpets. First the seals. The first four seals unleash four horses. The first of these is an ambiguous figure (does he correspond to the white horse with Christ on it in ch. 19?), but numbers two to four are bringers of plagues, destruction and death. The fifth seal represents a call of the ‘souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given’ (6.9; NRSV). After that, the sixth seal (6.12–17) leads to an intercalation: the description of the multitude of 144,000 elect from Israel (7.1–8) and another multitude from the Gentiles (7.9–17). Then, the seventh seal is described (8.1–5), which leads to the second septet, that of the trumpets.

The first five trumpets are described in 8.6–9.12. In 9.13 the sixth trumpet sounds and four angels – probably an echo of the four riders of ch. 6 – are unleashed to chastise earth (9.14–21). In 10.1–11.14 ‘the second woe’ (11.14) is described and this episode can be taken to depict the current state of affairs John and his readers lived in. It consists of two parts: first, the seer is instructed to read a scroll, the content of which he is to keep secret, and subsequently devour it. The episode is an intertextual allusion to Ezek. 2.8–3.3, where the same thing is described: there, Ezekiel is instructed to eat a scroll and proclaim its content to the people of Israel. For this reason, it lies at hand to see the second part of this episode, the description of the two witnesses who preach during a period of 1260 days (11.1–13), as the content of the proclamation. The two witnesses symbolize the role of the prophetic followers of Jesus, and their characteristics are taken from scriptural allusions to Moses and Elijah (Lietaert Peerbolte 1996: 123–27). So, in the intercalation of the second septet, the description of the state of affairs after the sixth phenomenon is actually a description of the context of John and his readers. It is therefore also an instruction for the followers of Jesus to act as the two witnesses do: they have to bear witness even if death is the result.

In the septet of the bowls (15.1–16.21) the description is more concise. Here an intercalation after the sixth phenomenon is lacking. In 16.2 a voice from the temple sounds and instructs the seven angels with bowls to pour out these bowls on earth and thus bring chaos and destruction to humankind. After the seventh bowl is poured out, a heavenly voice says, ‘it is done’ (16.17), and then the description of the fall of the whore of Babylon and the beast commences.

In the plot of Revelation, angels function as envoys who mediate between God and the cosmos, including humankind. They function as communicators of divine messages to the seven congregations addressed in the seven letters of Rev. 2 and 3. Here, the discussion is about the status of each ‘angel’ of the congregation. It is not easy to decide whether the word is used for a human messenger in these cases or for a superhuman angelic figure. If the latter is the case, this would form a parallel to the idea found in documents from Qumran. There, a number of texts speak of the community’s guardian angels, and in especially the War Scroll (1QMI) it is the archangel Michael who spearheads the forces of the Sons of
Light in their final battle against the Sons of Darkness, who have Belial as their *stratègos* (see, e.g., 1QM. 13.10-12; 14.8-10).

Angels in the rest of the book of Revelation are mostly presented as bringers of doom. They wreak havoc on behalf of God himself and thereby act as mediators of divine wrath. So, plagues and afflictions are seen as God-sent punishments for humankind. They are usually described as elements from the divinely ordained sequences of seven phenomena that strike the earth. As will become clear, the apocalyptic tradition of Western Christianity is thus firmly rooted in the idea that plagues and disasters are part of the cosmic scheme and thus do not contribute to but confirm God’s rule.

In the book of Revelation, this point is made most clearly in ch. 12. The imagery used in this chapter is derived from the narratives surrounding the deity Isis, who gives birth to her son Horus while being attacked by Seth-Typhon. In 12.1-6 the advent of the ‘male child’ (v. 5) is described in a way that clearly indicates his identity: the child symbolizes Jesus who is seen as the Messiah. The reference to Ps. 2.9 (*ὡς μέλλει ποιμαίνειν πάντα τὰ έθνη ἐν ράβδῳ σιδηρᾷ*), which is preceded by a similar reference in 2.27 and repeated in 19.15, is a marker to identify him as the Messiah, and thus the symbolic description of the woman, the child, and the dragon depicts the effects of the Christ event. This description is followed by a heavenly battle in which the dragon, whose identity in turn is revealed as ‘the ancient snake, who is called Devil and Satan’ (v. 8), is cast out of heaven by the archangel Michael and his angelic helpers (12.7-12). Subsequently, the description continues with an introduction to the Devil’s rage on earth (12.13-18). Here, the theodicy of Revelation comes to the fore: the Devil rages exactly because he has been defeated in heaven. So, the problems he creates on earth are not seen as defying God’s rule but interpreted as confirming it. The Devil rages not because he has such tremendous power, but because he has already been defeated. Chaos, suffering and plagues are thus subsumed under the larger umbrella of God’s cosmic plan, and aligned with the expectation that, in the end, God will be victorious through his Messiah.

The determinism with which the book of Revelation describes the course of human history includes the fate of humanity as suffering from plagues inflicted by angels on behalf of God. Thus, in Rev. 9, a third of humankind is said to perish at the sixth trumpet: the ‘four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates’ (9.14) are unleashed, and they bring disaster upon humankind, killing a third of all human beings. The remainder of humanity, however, is described as unrepentant (9.20-21), and is therefore eligible to a similar disastrous fate.

If the three series of seven phenomena are indeed repetitive, the seven bowls described in Rev. 15–16 characterize the septets in general terms as plagues.

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8. See Beale 1999: 639-40. Aune 1998a: 689 indicates that LXX Ps. 2.9 was already interpreted messianically in PssSol. 17.23-24. ‘Here, the judicial authority of the Messiah is emphasized.’
In 15.1 John describes ‘another portent in heaven’: seven angels with seven plagues that execute ‘the wrath of God’. The seven bowls of wrath are described in terms that strongly remind us of the plagues of Exodus’s account of the liberation of Israel from its captivity in Egypt. The underlying assumption of this description seems to be that God is rightly vengeful with regard to his creation and that divine action consists of executing revenge by the plagues brought by the angels. Seen in this perspective, Revelation contains an intensely dark view of human history, and seems to push the reader into embracing this dark view and thus accepting the fact that suffering and plagues are part and parcel of the human condition. Still, and this is for our present purpose perhaps the most important part, it seems that the plagues brought by the angels are expected to usher in the eschatological era in which all this misery is overturned. It is not by accident that the climax of the book describes a New Jerusalem in which God will live directly among humankind and will even wipe off the tears of humans’ eyes.

**Early Reception of Revelation**

**Justin Martyr and the Chiliastic Interpretation of Revelation**

It is remarkable that the negative view of the human condition hardly plays any role in the early reception history of Revelation. In the second century, Justin Martyr refers to the book of Revelation in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. Justin thus becomes the first Christian author to explicitly embrace the idea of the millennial reign of Christ and his followers and inaugurates a long and, in some circles, still vivid tradition of chiliastic beliefs. Justin ascribes the Apocalypse to John, ‘a disciple of Christ’ (*Dial.* 81.4) and is convinced that John’s vision of the thousand-year reign should be taken literally. The background to the number of a thousand years may indeed be sought in the exegetical tradition that interprets Gen. 2 allegorically and divides the entire lifespan of creation into 7000 years (cf. Barclay Swete 1908. 264-65). According to Justin, the reign of the Messiah had already been predicted by Isaiah (*Dial.* 81.1), and subsequently he interprets that reign from the perspective that is also found in 2 Pet. 3.8: ‘with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day’. This equation no doubt forms a reference to Ps. 90.4, and it requires little imagination to see how the notion of ‘the Day of the Lord’ could be expanded in Revelation to a thousand-year reign of the Messiah and his elect. David Aune distinguishes between amillennialism, postmillennialism and premillennialism; in this, the first refers to the idea that ‘the thousand-year reign of Christ is a symbol for the period of the Christian church’, the second ‘holds that the kingdom of Christ is a reality in the hearts of Christians’, and the third ‘holds that the return of Christ will occur before the beginning of the millennium, which is understood as a literal period.
of a thousand years (Dispensationalism). It is this last, literal, interpretation of the millennium that goes back to Justin Martyr’s dialogue:

There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him, that those who believed in our Christ would dwell a thousand years in Jerusalem; and that thereafter the general, and, in short, the eternal resurrection and judgment of all men would likewise take place. Just as our Lord also said, ‘They shall neither marry nor be given in marriage, but shall be equal to the angels, the children of the God of the resurrection.’ (Dial. 81.4).

Justin’s interpretation became immediately influential. His example was followed by Irenaeus, Melito of Sardis, Tertullian, and Hippolytus. In Adv. Haer. V.28.3 Irenaeus indicates the length of history. ‘For in as many days as this world was made, in so many thousand years shall it be concluded … For the day of the Lord is as a thousand years; and in six days created things were completed. it is evident, therefore, that they will come to an end at the sixth thousand year.’ In V.30-36 Irenaeus subsequently develops an extensive argument to show that Revelation has the correct approach to the eschatological return of Christ: he will come back to earth to usher in the final thousand years of history, and in that millennium, he will be joined in his rule by the elect who will share in his reign. Irenaeus deals with a variety of scriptural passages and then concludes that John’s chiliastic scenario indeed offers the right interpretation of these texts: ‘Therefore, John has correctly foreseen the first resurrection, that of the righteous, and their inheriting of the earth in the Kingdom, and the prophets have prophesied accordingly’ (V.36.3).

As already indicated, other interpreters followed this literal interpretation of the millennium, and thus turned the book of Revelation into an eschatological text that was read in order to reflect upon the end of time. In book 3 of his Against Marcion, Tertullian finishes his argument by describing the eschatological age. Tertullian describes the thousand-year reign as the ‘heavenly politeuma’ that defines the identity of Christians, combining Rev. 20 with Phil. 4.20, and then notes that ‘Ezekiel knew it, and the apostle John saw it’ (Hanc et Ezechiel novit, et apostolus Iohannes vidit; 24.4) (Tertullian, Contra Marcionem III, SC 399; 206).

In his Hexaemeron 2.4, Hippolytus argues that the course of history should consist of a period of 6000 years, implicitly suggesting that the final stage of history will be the Sabbath, so a period of 1000 years: the millennium. In his description on the advent of Antichrist, however, the temporal element is

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9 Aune 1998b: 1089. For a thorough discussion of the various converging traditions about the Kingdom in Rev. 20, see Aune’s Excursus 20A: The Temporary and the Eternal Kingdom in Aune 1998b: 1104-108.
lacking, although Hippolytus is clearly convinced that the saints will reign with Christ (*De Antichristo* 5.2).

The literal interpretation of Rev. 20 and the chiliastic ideas based on it would remain popular throughout the history of Christianity, and have become more and more popular since the rise of evangelical, fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible (see Boyer 2003: 516-44). In this modern, American dispensationalist interpretation, the book of Revelation is taken literally again, and the thousand-year reign is seen as the penultimate stage of history (Boyer 2003: 530).

**Revelation Spiritualized. Origen and his Successors**

In their commentary on the book of Revelation, Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland are clear with regard to Origen:

A pioneering exegete, Origen was the first to explicitly reject the chiliastic interpretation of the Apocalypse. He emphasizes the book’s meaning for the present, focusing especially on what it teaches about Christ and about the spiritual life of the believer. Since the key event of redemption has already happened in Christ’s incarnation and passion, Christians stand in the last times. What remains is a gradual process of ascent and return to God through an indefinite number of aeons, which is determined by the moral progress of the creature, not by the fall of this or that kingdom … (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 16)

Origen used the book of Revelation extensively, given the references to it in his *Contra Celsum*, his *De Principiis* and the *Commentary on John*. Interestingly enough, Origen sees a connection between, on the one hand, the allegorical meaning of texts such as the book of Revelation and, on the other hand, the fact that mystical knowledge should not be written down. In *Contra Celsum* VI.6, he reflects upon Plato’s remark on writing for the masses in *Ep.* VII.341D. Origen argues that ‘prophets also had certain truths in their minds that were too exalted to be written down and which they did not record’. He gives the example of Ezekiel, who was instructed to eat a scroll that contained secret information and mentions the fact that John, too, was instructed to do this. ‘Paul heard unspeakable words which it is now lawful for man to utter’, according to Origen, thereby referring to 2 Cor. 12.4. And coming back to John, he continues: ‘And again, John teaches us that difference between matters that may and that may not be written down when he says that he heard seven thunders teaching him about certain subjects, and forbidding him to commit their words to writing’ (Rev. 10.4; translations Chadwick).

Certainly, the most influential Christian author of the patristic age who turned against a literal reading of Revelation was Augustine of Hippo. Especially in his *City of God*, he deals with the Apocalypse and develops the argument that the
writing should be interpreted along other lines. In 20.7 of his *opus magnum*, Augustine is quite clear with regard to a chiliastic interpretation of Revelation. He starts his argument by pointing at the description of two resurrections in Revelation:

The same evangelist John has spoken of these two resurrections in the book entitled the Apocalypse, but in such a manner that the first of them, not being understood by some Christians, has in addition even been turned into absurd fables (*in quasdam ridiculas fabulas reveretur*). (Augustine, *De Civ. Dei* LCL ad loc.)

After describing how some interpret the scenario of Rev. 20 as a literal description of a bodily resurrection of the saints and their thousand-year reign with Christ, he refers to the spiritual dimension of the description that implies a thousand-year sabbath and subsequently refutes his opponents for not doing this. In his refutation, Augustine introduces the term ‘chiliasts’:

But since they say that those who are to rise again will enjoy a holiday of most immoderate carnal feasts, in which food and drink will be so plentiful that not only will they observe no limits of moderation but will also exceed all bounds even of incredulity, all this can be believed only by the carnally minded. Those who are spiritually minded call those who believe these things, in Greek, chiliasts, and we may in Latin translate the term literally as ‘millenarians’. (*De Civ. Dei* 20.7)

It is obvious in Augustine’s refutation of this chiliastic interpretation of Revelation that he considers it profoundly mistaken. Chiliasts deny the spiritual character of Revelation and are unable to move beyond a carnal reading of the text.

Augustine was not the only authority to regard a chiliastic interpretation of Revelation wrong – Jerome was on his side, this time. In the appendix to his edition of Victorinus of Pettau’s commentary on Revelation, he clearly does away with a literal interpretation of the thousand-year reign.

I do not think the reign of a thousand years to be an earthly reign, or if it would, one would have to agree that once these thousand years are finished, it would end. (*Nam mille annorum regnum non arbitror esse terrenum. aut si ita sentiendum est, completis annis mille regnare desinunt*) (de Poetovio 1997: 126).

Having seen how the issue of the millennium divided interpreters in the early church, we should now, as the last part of this enquiry, turn to what these early interpreters have to say on illnesses and ‘plagues’ (*πληγή*), the term used in Revelation.

**Plagues as Part of the Human Condition**

The above-mentioned commentary of Victorinus of Pettau (or Petovium) was written in the third century and has been quite influential in the reception history
of the book of Revelation. This is probably not in the last case the result of the
revision of this commentary that Jerome made: he considered the Latin too vul-
gar and may have removed parts of the text – it is remarkable that the chapters in
which the millennium is described are lacking from Jerome’s version.

In Victorinus’s comments on Rev. 6, he makes a tantalizingly brief remark on
sicknesses by which he inaugurates an important element in the exegetical inter-
pretative tradition of Revelation. He describes the fourth horse, the pale one,
with its rider who carries the name ‘Death’, and explains his appearance by referring
to a prediction by Jesus with regard to the plagues of the final period of history:

The Lord had predicted, among other catastrophes, that there would certainly come
plagues and pestilences. (Haec eadem quoque inter ceteras clades praedicaverat
Dominus: venturas pestes et mortalitates).

Remarkably enough, the French translation in the Sources Chrétienes edition
speaks here of ‘epidemics’: ‘Le Seigneur avait, entre autre catastrophes, prédit
qu’il y aurait aussi des pestes et des épidemies’. The prediction by Jesus may
indeed, as suggested by SC 423, be Lk. 21.10-11. There, Jesus says: ‘Nation
will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earth-
quakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful
portents and great signs from heaven’ (NRSV). So Victorinus implicitly uses the
authority of Jesus’ words in Luke to interpret the description of the four horse-
men in Rev. 6, a strategy that is as old as Christianity itself.

In the scholia on Revelation edited, translated, and commented upon by
P. Tzamalikos (2013: 178-80), scholion 35 explicitly speaks about the plagues
inflicted upon humankind and reflects on the question why some people are left
unafflicted:

Once God determined to inflict plagues upon sinner, he left some people unaffected
by these plagues. They were either those who persisted in the [depraved] works
they committed, or those who had been excused from plagues during the period of
infliction, thus allowing room for repentance for them, so that they should no longer
worship devils of gold and the statues which were made of different materials. These
[words] suggest that certain people worship devils of gold, and silver, and brass,
and of wood, whereby as ‘devils’ one should understand the spirits which dwell
within the inanimate [sculpted] forms. These are the perceptible statues, which are
made either of gold or of the rest [of the materials]: they do not have the senses of
vision and hearing, and they cannot walk. For they have a mouth, but they speak not,
and the rest as written in the Psalms (Tzamalikos 2013: 179-80).

According to Tzamalikos, the scholia he presents belong to the ‘Book of
Cassian’, part of Codex 573 of the Metamorphosis cloister, and seem to have
been written and collected by Cassian in the sixth century. Scholion 35 contains the only explicit reference to plagues as inflicted by God, and the function of the plagues seems to be twofold: on the one hand, those hit by a plague are punished for their wrongdoings, and on the other hand, those who are not afflicted are given spare time in order to repent. This interpretation appears to be the most common approach to apocalyptic plagues: the idea is deeply rooted in this apocalyptic tradition that God has every reason to hit humanity with afflictions. These afflictions are then seen as proof of the eschatological character of the age in which the readers live, but also as forms of divine wrath.

**Modern Interpretations: Apocalyptic Plagues**

The interpretation of epidemics as eschatological punishment for human sins is found throughout the Middle Ages (cf. Cohn 1993), but also in later times. Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell refer to a sermon preached by John King in London in 1619, in which he stated: ‘Sin, the sickness of the soul, is the real and radical cause of all bodily sickness’ (Cunningham and Grell 2000: 289). Some decades before this sermon, however, Theodore Beza had published a *Treatise of the Plague* (1580). According to Beza, a plague should not be seen as divine punishment. Cunningham and Grell summarize the view of Beza’s opponents:

> The plague, they claimed, is sent direct from God. It is the Hand of God, they said (citing 2 Samuel 24, 1 Chronicles 21 and Psalms 31 and 90), and it is His arrows which He sends direct, and sometimes, they said (citing Revelation), He sends it via His angels: therefore it does not come from infection or from other natural secondary causes. Beza countered this claim by saying that ‘in the same book 6, verse 8 [of Revelations (*sic*)] the pale horse, on whom death the rider sitteth, receiveth power to kill with the sword, famine and pestilence, and with sending of wild beasts’: here then is an angel, Beza claims, using second causes, so there is no reason why God should not be acting out His anger through a natural secondary cause such as infection. (Cunningham and Grell 2000: 287)

The example of Theodore Beza shows how, at various moments in the reception history of the book of Revelation, discussions flared up on whether or not epidemics and plagues should be seen as sent by God in order to punish mankind. In Beza’s treatise, the fourth horseman is used as an argument for an indirect responsibility of God for epidemics, and the eschatological dimension of Revelation is neglected.

In nineteenth-century popular Christian literature, which is still influential today, chiliasm Charles T. Russell described the effect of the millennium. Until that heavenly reign of a thousand years arrives, the human condition will be characterized by sickness, pain, weakness and death, but, Russell argues, from
the advent of Christ, the inauguration of the millennium, all this will gradually vanish:

Their restoration to perfect human nature, as well as that of the world in general, will be a gradual work, requiring all of the Millennial age to accomplish it fully. During that thousand years’ reign of Christ, Adamic death will be gradually swallowed up or destroyed. Its various stages – sickness, pain and weakness, as well as the tomb – will yield obedience to the Great Restorer’s power, until at the end of that age the great pyramid of our chart will be complete. (Russell 1891: 241)

In more recent times, Hal Lindsey’s Late Great Planet Earth has influenced evangelical views of eschatology and the current age as an eschatological one (Lindsey 1970). Lindsey’s work is an excellent example of traditional Christian apocalyptic eschatology. The author combines a whole repertoire of eschatological sayings from the entire Bible into one eschatological scenario, which is strongly based on the book of Revelation, and applies that scenario to his own day. As is common since the second and third centuries, this scenario describes how Antichrist will appear, a character now mentioned in Revelation, and inserts his advent into the descriptions of Revelation:

The Red Horse Unleashed

‘And another, a red horse, went out; and to him who sat on it, it was granted to take peace from the earth, and that men should slay one another; and a great sword was given to him’ (Revelation 6.4 NASB).

Almost immediately after the Antichrist declares himself to be God, God releases the dreaded second of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. This is a figure of the unleashing of war upon the earth.

That beautiful balance of power established by the Antichrist is suddenly ruptured. God begins to show man that the Antichrist’s promises cannot stand. The thing which man feared most, an all-out war, now rushes upon him (Lindsey 1970: 153).

At a later point in his book, Lindsey describes how Christ will return to earth and install a thousand-year reign. According to the author, this will be the true reign of peace, contrary to what the United Nations bring:

Men today vainly seek after peace while they reject and shut out of their lives the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. The name of Christ is not mentioned at the close of prayer in the United Nations. In fact, Jesus has been excluded from the premises. Man has shut out the only hope of peace, according to the Bible. The spirit of ‘antichrist’ reigns in the governments of the world, for Christ is said not to be relevant to the problems we face.
Peace is available to the individual today as he invites Christ into his heart and allows Him to reign upon the throne of his life. But the Bible teaches that lasting peace will come to the world only after Christ returns and sits upon the throne of David in Jerusalem and establishes His historic kingdom on earth for a thousand years (Revelation 20.4-6) (Lindsey 1970: 170).

Half a century after Lindsey wrote these words, his views are still popular especially in evangelical circles, and their political influence is strong. As said, the practice of combining a variety of scriptural passages into one eschatological scenario is attested ever since the second century, and in chiliastic circles this practice is combined with the conviction that all of these source-texts should be taken literally.10

Even though it seems that epidemics are not a major point of concern in popular Christian eschatology, it is worth ending this contribution with a quotation from Ian Willis and Barbara Willis. In their discussion of ‘Plagues’, the authors show some reluctance in siding with too strong an apocalyptic interpretation of the phenomenon described:

Why are illnesses such as AIDS and Ebola still so threatening in today’s scientific environment, which has at its disposal a host of life-saving medical miracles?

Predictably, some in the religious community, such as Dennis L. Finnan, host of the weekly radio broadcast The World, the Word, and You, say the answer is that we are living in the ‘last days’ predicted by Jesus, when ‘pestilences in various places’ (Luke 21.11) will be one of the signs of the end. (Willis and Willis 2006: 323)

The authors add two other possible causes for infectious epidemics (‘overpopulation’ and ‘too much information’ [sic]), and do not choose between the three possibilities. Yet the interpretation of epidemics and pandemics as proof of the eschatological character of the age in which they occur has been a part of Christian eschatology already since the early church.

**Conclusion**

Although infectious diseases and other sicknesses do not play a major role in the book of Revelation, the interpretation of the four horsemen of ch. 6 and the bowls of wrath of chs. 15 and 16, especially when combined with Jesus’ prediction in Lk. 21.11, has given rise to a tradition in which epidemics and pandemics have been and still are being interpreted as part of the eschatological human condition: they are seen as inflicted on humanity, ultimately by an angry God,

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10. The same thing is the case in other popular works such as Jong 2003 and Chamberlain 2012.
whose wrath will lead to a final judgment. The sectarian and violent theology of Revelation has made its way into mainstream Christian eschatology, even though early interpreters already warned against a literal interpretation of the writing, and especially modern chiliastic interpreters in evangelical circles tend to overlook the warnings by Augustine and Jerome.

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