

The Last Trumpet

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REVELATIONS Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation By Elaine Pagels

Many people mistakenly call the last book of the Christian Bible “Revelations.” It is actually the (one) Revelation to John. Elaine Pagels may be playing on that common error with the title of her latest book, “Revelations,” though in this case it is accurate: she places the biblical Book of Revelation in the context of other ancient narratives of visions and prophecy. Her account highlights several prophetic works and visionaries, from Ezekiel to Paul to the ancient sect of prophesying Christians called the Montanists, and others. Pagels also discusses the afterlife of Revelation in the Christianity of late antiquity through the fourth century. Her thesis is that apocalyptic literature — visions, prophecies, predictions of cataclysm — has always carried political ramifications, both revolutionary and reactionary, liberal and conservative, from the very beginning up until today, as seen in conservative iterations of millennial dispensationalism and the hugely popular “Left Behind” series of novels about the end of the world. The apocalyptic is political.

“Revelation” is from the Latin translation of the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which can designate any unveiling or revealing, fantastic or ordinary. Scholars also refer to the document as the Apocalypse of John. And that same Greek word provides the label for all sorts of ancient literature that scholars call “apocalyptic.” The biblical text purports to relate a real vision experienced by an otherwise unknown Jew named John — not the Apostle John, nor the same person as the anonymous author of what we call the Gospel of John. But we have no reason to doubt that his name was really John. It wasn’t an unusual name for a Jew.

John wrote his vision, prefaced with messages to seven churches in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey), from the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. We may imagine John, Pagels suggests, as an old Jew who had lived through the Jewish war with Rome, during which Jerusalem was decimated and the Temple destroyed in the year 70. He may have seen the thousands of Jews killed and thousands of others carried to Rome as slaves. Bitter about the dominating imperial power, he may have wandered through Syria and Asia Minor, along the way meeting other followers of the crucified prophet Jesus, other “cells” of worshipers of the Jewish Messiah who was killed and mysteriously raised from the dead.

However, when he gets to western Asia Minor, he comes across many gentile Christians, quite possibly in churches founded by the now dead Apostle Paul. Unlike John, they seem to be relatively well off. They usually get along fine with their non-Christian neighbors. They may be prospering from the Pax Romana, the “peace” sustained by Roman domination. They are marrying and having children, running their small businesses, ignoring the statues, temples and worship of other gods that surround them. For John, this Christian toleration of Rome and its idols is offensive. This is not a benign governmental power. It is the Whore of Babylon, arrogantly destroying the earth. John writes (in this theory) to warn the churches, and he relates his vision to provoke alarm at the Evil Empire. That vision predicts the destruction of Rome by angelic armies, followed by the salvation of faithful disciples of the bloody, horned warrior-lamb Jesus. Those who resist will, in the end, be rewarded.

The Apocalypse, the Revelation to John, has over the centuries been read by many Christians to predict events that might happen in their own time. In the 1980s, journalists discussed President Ronald Reagan’s statements that biblical prophecies might be fulfilled in our days, when other nations would attack Israel and a great war would end with the Second Coming of Christ. But Reagan was just one in a long line bringing John’s prophecy into our times. Pagels, the author of “The Gnostic Gospels,” details how Revelation and other apocalyptic writings have frequently urged fear and hatred of ruling powers, if not so often armed revolt. Revelation was originally anti-Roman propaganda. Two centuries earlier, around 164 B.C., a Jew wrote down another series of visions in order to incite resistance against Hellenizing Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and their patron king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ruler of the Greco-Syrian Seleucid

empire. That book, published in the Old Testament under the pseudonym Daniel, is one of the earliest ancient apocalypses, and it influenced Jewish and Christian literature thereafter. Around A.D. 100, another Jew, not a Christian, recorded his own visions, nowadays known as 4 Ezra, also stoking the fires of anti-Roman hatred and prophesying Rome's destruction. As Pagels illustrates, apocalyptic visions have been put to political purposes throughout history, down to the armies on both sides of the Civil War, echoed for Northern soldiers in "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" but also inspiring Southern generals.

One of the significant benefits of Pagels's book is its demonstration of the unpredictability of apocalyptic politics. Christians in the 2nd and 3rd centuries wrote "hidden" books that promoted a rather quietistic form of scholarly Christianity, more adventurous in its theology and mythology than what was coming to be called "orthodoxy." Many of the texts discovered in 1945 near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, sometimes called "Gnostic" scriptures, narrate "secret" revelations. Other Christians, who were winning the battle to own the label "orthodox," used Revelation to oppose Christians they labeled "heretics." They interpreted the "beast" it describes to be some arch-heretic or Satan as the inventor of heresies. The Whore of Babylon was no longer Rome, but a heretical opponent of orthodoxy. Revelation wasn't depoliticized. Its politics had shifted. Once the empire had a Christian patron in Constantine, the meaning of Revelation changed again. For Constantine, after his own "vision," he himself was the conquering ruler for good, and the "dragon" of Revelation referred not only to Satan but also to Constantine's human rivals for the throne. Constantine later took heretics, schismatics within the church and eventually even Jews to be the embodiment of the Evil One. Revelation had not lost its political power, but its political use had changed.

Pagels's book does contain a few minor historical mistakes. The apostate Jew Alexander, who rose to high political office in Egypt, was not the uncle of the Jewish philosopher Philo, but his nephew. Galatia is the name of a region, not a city. More important, Pagels sometimes makes ancient people and concepts too familiar to us. It is anachronistic, I believe, to portray the appeals for toleration made by Tertullian, a second-century Christian, or by Jews earlier, as anything like the Enlightenment principle of the separation of politics and religion. That is to take distinctly modern ideas into the ancient world, where they don't belong. However, such missteps do nothing to mar the story Pagels tells. The meaning of the Apocalypse is ever malleable and ready to hand for whatever crisis one confronts. That is one lesson of Pagels's book. Another is that we all should be vigilant to keep some of us from using the vision for violence against others.