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## *John Wesley on the Book of Revelation*

### **Abstract:**

This article focuses on how John Wesley interpreted the Book of Revelation, especially within his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, published in late 1755. In particular, the central concern here is the interpretation of the middle of the book, especially chapter 12 of Revelation. Wesley does not approach the task of interpreting the Apocalypse lightly. He states that while the beginning and end of the book of Revelation are rather evident, he had for years been “utterly despairing” of understanding its intermediate parts. As a result, he relied heavily on the works of the German Lutheran Pietist theologian and biblical scholar Johann Albrecht Bengel (John Albert Bengel) (1687-1752). Bengel’s complex mathematics and chronology provided an historical interpretation of Revelation which was focused on European history, and this led to some unusual interpretations in Wesley’s understanding of the book. Yet, the function of prophecy does not appear to be a mere curiosity for Wesley. His concern is more pastoral, for he believed that awareness of the signs and the nature of the time provided believers with necessary strength to go on when times are difficult. It is this practical application and reading of Revelation which ultimately emerges from Wesley’s work.



**Keywords:** John Wesley, Revelation, Johann Bengel, prophecy, interpretation

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## Introduction

The focus of this article is primarily on how John Wesley interpreted the Book of Revelation and depends heavily on his *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, which Wesley published in late 1755. In particular, for this article, the concentration will be on the central part of the book, especially chapter 12 of Revelation. In addition, Wesley preaches several sermons on the matters of the end times, which provide more background in conjunction with his *Notes*.<sup>1</sup> His sermons mostly post-date the *Notes*, and include: *The Great Assize* (1758), *The General Deliverance* (1781), *The Mystery of Iniquity* (1783), *The General Spread of the Gospel* (1783), *The New Creation* (1785), *The Signs of Times* (1787), *Of Hell* (1788), and *On Faith* (1791). The latter also being the last sermon Wesley wrote. According to Olson, “Wesley’s journal records him preaching from Revelation several times during the 1780s, mostly chapters 14 and 20.”

## Wesley’s Sources on Revelation

John Wesley does not approach the task of interpreting the Apocalypse lightly. He states that while the beginning and end of the book of Revelation are rather evident, he had for years been “utterly despairing” of understanding its intermediate parts.<sup>2</sup> It is only “the works of the great Bengelius” that gave him hope of understanding some of the prophecies of this book. Clearly, the German Lutheran Pietist theologian and biblical scholar Johann Albrecht Bengel (John Albert Bengel) (1687-1752) provided the foundation for Wesley’s *Notes* on Revelation. Wesley used both his *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (1742) and especially *Ekklarte Offenbarung* (*Exposition of the Apocalypse*) extensively. Bengel’s *Order of Times* provided some of the chronological calculations used in the *Notes*.

Bengel studied at Tübingen and became a professor at Denkendorf, Germany, and his method of exegesis included a thorough study of the original languages and manuscripts. He oversaw the corrections made to the new German Bible and also published his own Greek New Testament. Bengel has been rightly esteemed to be “the father of textual criticism.”<sup>3</sup> Among other things he established the principle that the more difficult reading of a text is to be preferred, which became the standard in textual criticism. Bengel’s exegetical intent was “to bring nothing to the scripture, but to extract from it everything that it contained.”<sup>4</sup> But many think that in some occasions he extracted out more than it actually contained. He constructed a biblical chronology from Genesis to Revelation and expected

the millennium to begin on June 18, 1836. For this “date setting” and his extravagant readings of Revelation he ended up having disagreements with other pietists, especially Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf.<sup>5</sup> Yet, Bengel was a dedicated pietist living and teaching others to, “Apply the text wholly to yourself; apply yourself wholly to the text,” something that John Wesley also admired.<sup>6</sup>

Wesley states that he does not necessarily defend all of Bengel’s positions, which were popular in England at the time, but recommends that the reader at least consider them. Wesley did not claim extensive knowledge of the book of Revelation, stating from the beginning, “I by no means pretend to understand or explain all that is contained in this mysterious book.”<sup>7</sup> Steven O’Malley points out that Bengel “brought to a culmination the tradition of symbolic-prophetic Biblical exegesis that is traced to the federal school of Dutch and German Reformed Pietism. Its principal representatives were Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) and his student Campegius Vitringa (1659-1722).”<sup>8</sup> Yet, virtually everyone admits that Bengel has provided in the *Gnomon* substantial and scholarly exegetical insight and valuable text critical remarks. His chosen historicist method, however, did not survive very long. Lewis comments that since the middle of the 18th century the tendency in Germany has been to use a more preterist interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

Outside of Bengel, for his understanding of the first century history, Wesley valued highly Flavius Josephus’ *History of the Jewish War*. While for early Church history, Wesley relied on the 4th century writer Eusebius. Wesley read Revelation through the lens of the Reformation conviction that the Roman Papacy was the Beast. Therefore, he includes extensive historical detail concerning the affairs of various popes. For such material Wesley consulted the work of a Catholic historian and Vatican librarian Bartolomeo Platina (or Plantina) (1421-1481) whose *Lives of the Popes* (1479) may have been the first systematic handbook of papal history. It appears that Wesley sought to rely on respected authors, but also provided a more popular and publicly accessible commentary. Writing to English readers using heavy weight Latin and German commentaries, he edited out unnecessary technicalities, but revealed sources for his more skeptical audience.

In the preface of his *Notes* Wesley also credits John Heylyn (d. 1759), John Guyse (1680-1761) and Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) who were postmillennialists. Olson notes that “Wesley never mentioned in

his *Notes* Joseph Mede, the great expositor of English eschatology, or his supporters Isaac Newton and William Whiston, all premillennialists.”<sup>10</sup> According to O’Malley, the Halle Pietists (esp. Philipp Jacob Spener) and Rhineland and Württemberg Pietists, as well as English Puritans, also had a formative influence on Wesley’s eschatology.<sup>11</sup>

### **Wesley’s Understanding of Revelation as a Book**

From the start of his *Notes*, Wesley calls Revelation a book of prophecy “showing things to come.”<sup>12</sup> Revelation is placed into the same genre with Old Testament prophets, but with this exception, it is prophecy unveiled. Wesley finds in Revelation “a rich treasure of all the doctrines pertaining to faith and holiness,” but those are also found in other parts of the scriptures. This strange book is meant to shine light onto things to come. Concerning the audience of this book, Wesley notes that while Revelation is “dedicated particularly to the servants of Christ in the seven churches in Asia,” it does not belong to them exclusively. It belongs to God’s servants “in all nations and ages” and must be read as prophecy about the future.<sup>13</sup> Thus Wesley chose a historicist approach in his interpretation.

Wesley took prophecy very seriously. What God spoke through prophets must come to pass. For example, when Wesley preached on Isaiah 11:9 “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea,” he proclaimed, that one day “we should see a Christian World.”<sup>14</sup> World mission was going to be gradual, it may experience setbacks, but it will be inevitably successful, because God has promised this conclusion.<sup>15</sup> It is perhaps because of that confidence in fulfillment that he subscribed to the idea of two millenniums. He was concerned that there would otherwise not be enough time to fit in all the promises of God. Wesley also took prophecy personally. In order to understand and relate the prophecies of Revelation to his own time and place and the experience of his community, Wesley labored in the manner of the scriptural prophets of old who “made careful search and inquiry, inquiring about the person or time that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the subsequent glory” (1Peter 1:10b-11).

His understanding of the fulfillment of the prophecy paradigm is evident from how Wesley structured the book. In Revelation chapter 4, Wesley reveals from the outset where he believed the passage to be situated within the timeframe of Revelation:

The first, second, and third chapters contain the introduction;  
 The fourth and fifth, the proposition;  
 The sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth describe things which are already fulfilled;  
*The tenth to the fourteenth, things which are now fulfilling;*  
 The fifteenth to the nineteenth things which will be fulfilled shortly;  
 The twentieth, twenty-first, and twenty-second, things at a greater distance.<sup>16</sup>

Yet, the function of prophecy does not appear to be a mere curiosity for Wesley. His concern is more pastoral, for he believed that awareness of the signs and the nature of the time provided believers with necessary strength to go on when times are difficult. Wesley writes: “God has not given this prophecy, in so solemn a manner, only to show his providence over his church, but also that his servants may know at all times in what particular period they are. And the more dangerous any period of time is, the greater is the help which it affords.”<sup>17</sup> The nature of prophecy for Wesley was first to give hope to sustain faith and to transform lives, and only secondarily to inform people about future outcomes. Despite this, Wesley was also very critical of end-time predictions and the frenzies created by such apocalyptic enthusiasm. For example, when George Bell in early 1762 taught that the millennium was already arriving and the world was going to end on February 28, 1763, Wesley was unmoved figuring that Bell would receive his correction shortly.<sup>18</sup>

### **Method of Interpretation**

Wesley was not the first, nor is he likely to be the last, person who struggled with the interpretation of Revelation. Wesley wrestled with Revelation’s symbolic language and imagery. At times he recognized and accepted *symbols and metaphors* as what they are: symbols and metaphors. At other times he interpreted them literally ending up in strange places. Interpreting scripture with scripture, Wesley looked for and recognized some intertextual references and followed them through. For example, when dealing with the scriptures about Satan being cast out of heaven, Wesley was really wrestling with that theme canonically. But then again, there are literally 24 Jewish elders before the throne of God (these are even named in Bengel, but Wesley omitted that part), there are 144,000 literal

faithful Jews from every tribe, and there must be two literal Jewish prophets witnessing in Jerusalem in Revelation 11.

As soon as Wesley applied his historicist lens he ended up in strange territories. Sometimes Wesley laid out a pretty good symbolic reading of the text and then suddenly crashed to earth ending with a lesson on western political and church history. With the help of Bengel's magical mathematical key, Wesley calculated when these events would take place. Chronologies extend the fast-paced biblical narrative into artificially long periods of human history. For example, the woman's story in the wilderness became artificially divided into two separate (but partially overlapping) periods in church history: one as 677 years (847-1524) and the second 777 years (1058-1836). There was an underlying presumption that in order for something to be "real" it must be fulfilled literally within history. So, the beast represents the Roman papacy, the woman fed in wilderness must include the spread of the Reformation in Europe, etc.

Fulfillment of prophecy required not just a time, but also a place. Following Bengel, Wesley offered an innovative geographic proposal. The four corners of the earth in Revelation 7:1 are literally the four directions on the compass from John's point of view on Patmos: east is Asia and Palestine, west is the sea and Europe (particularly the Roman Empire), south is Africa (Egypt in particular), and the north consists of various nations such as the Goths and the Huns on the outskirts of the Roman Empire.<sup>19</sup> Because west of Patmos is the sea and the sea stood for Europe, Wesley deduced that the beast rising from the sea is a pope rising in Europe. One can also see where Wesley (and Bengel) are located. Focus is on Europe, and particularly northern and remote parts of Europe. "On this side of the Danube" - from Wesley's perspective, are the northern parts of Europe.

### **Chronology of Revelation: Troubles Multiplied**

A large part of Bengel's work is occupied with the deciphering of the prophecies. He proposes no less than 20 definite dates in his commentary. Lewis laments concerning Bengel, "how sad it is that a spirit so noble, so richly endowed in many things, so far in advance of his age, should in this respect be so enslaved by it as to waste such vast scholarship, labor and genius, on what, after all, was only a blunder!"<sup>20</sup> Bengel himself believed that he had discovered a key to unlock the timeline of Revelation. He distinguished between the seven different names for time in Revelation: hour, day, month, year, time, (*kairos*), period (*kronos*) age or era (*aion*).<sup>21</sup>

He also noted that Revelation speaks both of common time and prophetic time. In Revelation 13:18 Bengel sees a command to compute an actual number. He takes the number of the beast to be literally 666 years. He then takes 666 and divides it by 42 and arrives at fifteen and six-seventh years, for the value of a prophetic month. So, a prophetic day is about half a year. Comparing this 666 with the 1000 years of Revelation 20, the proportions are nearly 2:3. Bengel assumed that it must be exactly this, and so made the 666 stand for 666 and 2/3. Dividing this by 666 (or 1000 by 999) the result is 1 and one-nine hundred and ninety-ninth. From this he deduced the apocalyptic century (111 of the units) to be 111 and 1/9. On this basis, he reckoned the short time mentioned in Revelation 12:12, as 888 and 8/9 years; the no more-a time (time no longer, Revelation 10:6) as between 999 and 9/9 and 1111 and 1/9 years; and even the era (*aeon*, eternity) as 2222 and 2/9 years. Thus, Bengel's time units look like this:

A half-time is in ordinary years 111 1/9th  
 A time (*kairos*) is 222 2/9th  
 The number of the beast 666 6/9th  
 Time, times, and half times 777 7/9th  
 A short time 888 8/9th  
 A millennium 999 9/9th  
 A *chronos* (period) 1111 1/9th  
 An age 2222 2/9th<sup>22</sup>

With the help of this "key" Bengel, calculates the following exact dates that correlate to the events in the Book of Revelation:

1832 antichrist's three-and-a-half-year reign  
 1836 fight with beast from the abyss  
 1836 on June 18th Christ's appearing, Satan is bound  
 2836 Satan is bound until this date, now loosed  
 2947 Satan is loose until this date (a season)  
 2836-3836 millennial reign of saints in heaven  
 3836 end of the world and final judgment

O'Malley emphasizes that: "Wesley issued disclaimers with reference to Bengel's chronological speculations on the millennium. For example, when Bengel claimed that Christ's millennial kingdom would begin in 1836, Wesley declared that he "had no opinion" about this, for "these calculations are far above, out of my sight. I have only one thing to do — to save my soul, and those that hear me."<sup>23</sup> Wesley affirmed events that had found their fulfillment in the past, but as for the future, he admitted

his lack of insight into that deep book.<sup>24</sup> One may safely conclude, that there were no signs of a millennium's arrival in 1836. Wesley, of course, did not live to see Bengel's dates come to climactic non-fulfillment as he died in 1791.

### **Wesley's Reading of Revelation 12: "Little Time in Wilderness"**

Laying aside the numbers and chronology, it needs to be pointed out how Wesley experienced the narrative location of his own community. Wesley unpacks the vision of the woman in Revelation 12:

The emblem of the church of Christ, as she is originally of Israel, though built and enlarged on all sides by the addition of heathen converts; and she will hereafter appear, when all her "natural branches are again 'crafted in'." *She is at present on earth. and yet, with regard to her union with Christ, may be said to be in heaven,* Ephesians 2:6. Accordingly, she is both assaulted and defended in heaven, verses 4, 7.

Wesley envisioned that the true church was already seated with Christ in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). He just needed to add that this "being seated in heaven" happened while they were still on earth physically. That heavenly position of the church is clear and undisputed.

Concerning the woman's features, Wesley's historicist lens kicked in. Following Bengel, Wesley believed that Revelation 12 referred entirely to "the state of the church from the ninth century to this time."<sup>25</sup> Taking the ninth century point of view, Wesley interprets the sun that the woman is wrapped in as a representation of the Christian world, the moon under her feet as the Moslem world, and the 12 stars around her head as the 12 tribes of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Here and elsewhere we see Wesley's optimism that missionary work will be successful. The three monotheistic groups will one day all come to Christ, and will all be a part of the woman. (This interpretation does not stop Wesley from viewing Muslims as persecutors of the church later in the same vision.) From his *Notes*, as well as his sermons, it is clear that Wesley was bothered by accounts of Muslim cruelties. He called the Islamic (Mahometans) faith a "miserable delusion" and "a disgrace to human nature, and a plague to all that are under their iron yoke."<sup>27</sup> However, he placed them "[a] little, but a little, above the heathens" and anticipated that they would convert when Christians become real Christians. Wesley saw the current unholy lives of Christians as "the grand stumbling-block" that

prevented Muslims conversion.<sup>28</sup> Thus Wesley distributed the blame and responsibility for their iniquities.

Based on Romans 11 and the various Old Testament promises (Jeremiah 32, Ezekiel 36, etc.), Wesley anticipated that all Israel too shall be saved.<sup>29</sup> Israel has only hardened its heart temporarily. On Romans 11:18 “Boast not against the branches,” Wesley wrote - “Do not they do this who despise the Jews? or deny their future conversion?” However, he observed that being broken off for unbelief and standing by faith are both conditional, not absolute statements. Wesley turned Romans 11:19-20a into a question: “Wilt thou say then, the branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in? Well; they were broken off for unbelief and thou staidest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear.” By turning the statement into a question, Wesley further highlighted the need for humility in the question of salvation. He cautioned against any confidence, but one must fear God. With Paul, Wesley considered the salvation of the Jews a great mystery. Gentiles’ responding to God’s grace in great numbers would spark the Jews to believe also. “Being convinced by the coming of the gentiles.” This revival will be compounded: “But there will be a still larger harvest among the gentiles, when all Israel is come in.”<sup>30</sup> It does not appear to be that apart from Christ the promises and gifts to the Jews shall be fulfilled. The great mystery is fulfilled by 1836, the great revival happens just before the millennium.

Concerning the woman in birth pains, Wesley wrote: “The woman groaned and travailed in spirit, that Christ might appear, as the Shepherd and King of all nations.” It is not *parousia* in view here. Wesley believed that sometime in the ninth century Christ began ruling in heaven over all the kingdoms on earth. This event was announced in heaven, but was not an observable event on earth. The male child that is born of woman is Christ, not in person, but in his kingdom. Wesley points out that in the ninth century many nations with their rulers turned to Christianity.

The red dragon in Revelation 12:3 is generally understood as Satan. According to Wesley, the dragon’s seven heads represent his vast wisdom. Ten horns (perhaps on the seventh head) are the emblems of power and strength. Seven diadems show that he is “the prince of this world.” The tail represents the falsehood and subtily by which the dragon draws down the third part of the stars of heaven. The stars of heaven are “Christians and their teachers, who before sat in heavenly places with Christ Jesus.” The dragon himself is still in heaven, not on the earth. The dragon is chronologically

placed “between the beginning of the seventh trumpet and the beginning of the third woe; or between the year 847 and the 947; at which time pestilent doctrines, particularly that of the Manichees in the east, drew abundance of people from the truth.”<sup>31</sup>

The dragon wishes to swallow the child to hinder the spread of the kingdom of Christ abroad. “*And her child* - Which was already in heaven, as were the woman and the dragon. *Was caught up to God* - taken utterly out of his reach.”<sup>32</sup> Apparently, for Wesley, “being seated with Christ in heavenly places” is not the same as being “caught up with God.” It needs to be noted, that Wesley does not explain further at this point, nor does he develop any teaching on rapture. It is possible, that he has in mind a higher spirituality that elevates the church’s faith and thus preserves it in the middle of the troubles with Satan on earth. Suddenly Wesley’s interpretation descends (or should I say crashes) back to earth and the celestial vision with all its symbolic interpretation gets rapidly processed into the religious history of ninth to sixteenth century Europe. The woman fled into the wilderness. Wesley writes, “This wilderness is undoubtedly on earth, where the woman also herself is now supposed to be.” Wesley did not explain further. The church was, of course, always on earth. The church did not ascend and descend from heaven. It was always both on earth and in heaven simultaneously.

Geographically, the wilderness must be in Europe (because Asia and Africa were in the hands of the Turks and Saracens), and lie “on this side the Danube” (speaking from his vantage point in England). With the help of Bengel’s magic formula, Revelation’s 1260 prophetic days are converted into 777 years (from 847-1524). Wesley’s conclusion, “So long the woman enjoyed a safe and convenient place in Europe, which was chiefly Bohemia: where she was fed, till God provided for her more plentifully at the Reformation.”<sup>33</sup> Wesley had in view various small groups of “true believers” and early reformers in Europe when he thought of the church in the wilderness, with Christians that were experiencing persecution and poverty. Wesley points out how the woman is fed during the first wilderness period: first by others, then she had her own food and seems to hint that during the last part of the second wilderness period the so called “half time” that lasts from 1725 to 1836 (overlapping with Wesley’s own time) she is fed by God.<sup>34</sup> It seems, that Wesley interprets the unprecedented spiritual awakening and the movement of the Spirit in England during his own lifetime as God nourishing the church directly and as a time foretold

in the visions of the Apocalypse. Kingdoms and rulers are used by God to shelter the church at times. But persecution of Christians always results in greater numbers of believers.

In Revelation 12:7-9 there breaks out a war in heaven. Upon Revelation 12:8 Wesley seemed to struggle with the location of the dragon. He supplied some important New Testament background passages related to the subject of Satan being cast out: Luke 10:18; Ephesians 2:2; 4:8; 6:12, that show how deeply he has grappled with this passage, and he commented: "How deep a mystery is this!"<sup>35</sup> He observed from the text, that "It is not yet said, *unto the earth*" and left the dragon sort of hanging out there somewhere while he explained the different Greek and Hebrew words for the grand adversary of all the saints. Then he continued more decisively: "*He was cast out unto the earth* - He was cast out of heaven; and being cast out thence, himself came to the earth." But still Wesley added a clarification "Nor had he been unemployed on the earth before, although his ordinary abode was in heaven."<sup>36</sup> It seems, Wesley anticipated a more direct involvement of Satan within the scheme of human history during this period on earth as he is so prominently (and once again) cast out of heaven to the earth.

### A Most Important Time

Wesley noted on Revelation 12:11 that the Swedish king Olam was killed for his faith in the year 900, and this is mentioned as an example of a testimony, as well as the Bohemian Christian martyrs in the 916 persecution under queen Drahomire. On Rev 12:12 Wesley announced that "We are now come to a most important period of time." No doubt Wesley's contemporaries as well as current readers were leaning in to listen carefully at this point. Wesley writes:

We live in the little time wherein Satan hath great wrath; and this little time is now upon the decline. We are in the "time, times, and half a time," wherein the woman is "fed in the wilderness;" yea, the last part of it, "the half time," is begun. We are, as will be shown, towards the close of the "forty-two months" of the beast; and when his number is fulfilled, grievous things will be.<sup>37</sup>

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Wesley applied some of Bengel's math (too elaborate to replicate here) and suggested that this period is four-fifths of a *chronos*, or somewhat above 888 years. "This, which is the time of the third woe, may reach from 947-

1836.”<sup>38</sup> The third woe of the narrative corresponds to the 10th century in human history. He also applied his four-square geography and suggested that the third woe impacts both Asia and Europe (earth and sea). This information was going to impact the lives of his contemporaries. Wesley anticipated that some may “take these warnings for senseless outcries, and blind alarms.” He prayed that God would give them “the heavenly light within” to heed the warnings lest they may fall and worship the beast and end up in the lake of fire.<sup>39</sup> According to Wesley, the “time, times and half a time” corresponded to the following in church history:

10th-11th century the church was persecuted by heathens (Prussia, Hungary, Vandals)/ as the dragon persecuted the woman.

10th century was also the time of the great spread of Christianity (to Denmark, Poland, Silesia, Russia, Hungary, Sweden, and Norway), and in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century to Transylvania and Dacia.

11th -12th century the Turkish “flood” destroying much of the church.

13th -18th century the Turks are more under the control of various rulers in Europe and will be probably swallowed up by Russia, which has during this period risen to power in the east.

18th c. the dragon continues to persecute, especially Christians living under Turkish reign.

This applied chronology stretches out the vision, and consequently Wesley needed to note that the wilderness mentioned in Revelation 12:14 was no longer the same wilderness as the one mentioned in 12:6, although it overlaps with it significantly. It is clear, however, that Wesley was looking into the text with an expectation of territorial advancement of the church as a fulfillment of prophecy. Wesley was certainly thinking of his own people as being nourished by God in the wilderness while having to resist the beastly powers! Although Wesley’s path to this reading is a bit sketchy (especially his application of Bengel’s historicist approach), it is not a bad reading in terms of the intended function of the prophecies of Revelation, which is to encourage Christians to resist, endure, worship and witness to Christ.

### Wesley's Key Interests and Message

Wesley's primary concern was revival versus nominal religion. That often boiled down to Methodism as God's eschatological movement versus the Anglican or Catholic church. Wesley believed that the spread of true Christianity would continue regardless of the resistance. It is not just Christians versus non-Christians that Wesley sees in opposition, it is true believers versus Arians, Catholics and even formalistic Protestant Christians.<sup>40</sup> In his exegesis, Wesley views earthly rulers who help the church as instruments of God to nourish the church. And those who at any times persecute the true believers are likewise participants in the prophetic story but on the side of the dragon.<sup>41</sup> Christian against Christian violence really bothered Wesley. Such violence was all too frequent in Europe since the turmoil of the Reformation but also a part of a more recent history of the rebellion of 1671 which sparked 11 years of bloody religious conflict in the British Isles.<sup>42</sup> Satan does his worst harm to the church in and through such violence. Wesley traced the theme of saints and martyrs and expected that his people would have times of suffering ahead. Success in mission does not come without sacrifice and persecution.

The question of the Jews and the Muslims mattered, especially towards the former. Wesley entertained hopes of revival for the Jews, but also for Muslims as well. Unlike some reformers, Wesley does not hold antisemitic views. The persecution of Jews is described with compassion. The crimes of the Muslims or Turks are described in detail, regardless of their target (Jews or Christians). Wesley interpreted the flood by which the dragon was trying to hurt the woman in wilderness as a Turkish invasion of the Christian parts of Asia and Europe.<sup>43</sup> But most of Wesley's critique is given to the violence of popes and the Roman empire and its successors. Wesley condemns violence in a sweeping statement: "It is Christ who shed his own blood; it is antichrist who sheds the blood of others."<sup>44</sup> He brings historical evidence for the violence of Roman Papacy:

And what immense quantities of blood have been shed by her agents! Charles IX, of France, in his letter to Gregory XIII, boasts, that in and not long after the massacre of Paris, he had destroyed seventy thousand Hugonots. Some have computed, that, from the year 1518, to 1548, fifteen millions of Protestants have perished by the Inquisition. This may be overcharged; but certainly the number of them in those thirty years, as well as since, is almost incredible. To these we may add innumerable

martyrs, in ancient, middle, and late ages, in Bohemia, Germany, Holland, France, England, Ireland, and many other parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia.<sup>45</sup>

The mingling of political authority with spiritual power in the Papacy is viewed as the spirit of the antichrist. From this position, the papacy of Pope Gregory VII is viewed as the kingdom of the beast.<sup>46</sup>

While Wesley sometimes violated the nature of the book of Revelation, to his credit, he applied it personally. In fact, he picked a very critical part of the narrative to be involved with; between the call to be a prophetic witness to the world, yet before the end would come. He found himself and his community in that story as being fed in the wilderness and resisting the beast. This seems to be precisely where the seer of Revelation wishes the readers to locate themselves.

### **Did Wesley Consider Other Options?**

Systematic discussions on Revelation are typically fitted into three categories: pre-, post- and amillennialist. In some circles, such categories have acquired some political or denominational point of view which make dialogue difficult. We should not assume that the three views are always clearly distinguishable and exclusive of one another. Categorizing the commentaries on Revelation solely based to their approach to Revelation 20 is limiting and says nothing about the quality of their hermeneutics. Wesley's reading of Revelation falls in the systematic category of post-millennialist readings. But did he consider other options?

Wesley would have been aware of amillennialist readings, but he firmly rejected them, at least in as much as it included the Roman Catholic Church as the visible kingdom of God. In *The Mystery of Iniquity* Wesley writes:

Persecution never did, never could give any lasting wound to genuine Christianity. But the greatest it ever received, the grand blow which was struck at the very root of that humble, gentle, patient love, which is the fulfilling of the Christian law, the whole essence of true religion, was struck in the fourth century by Constantine the Great, when he called himself a Christian, and poured in a flood of riches, honors, and power upon the Christians, more especially upon the clergy.<sup>47</sup>

And this is the event which most Christian expositors mention with such triumph! Yea, which some of them suppose to be typified in the Revelation by the “New Jerusalem coming down from heaven!” Rather say it was the coming of Satan and all his legions from the bottomless pit.<sup>48</sup>

Wesley’s observation is that excessive wealth equals less true Christianity. He is highly cautious of models that portray the church as rich and powerful on earth. Wesley sees the church combining religious and political power not with the millennial rule of Christ, but with the deceptions of antichrist.<sup>49</sup>

Wesley was exposed to the premillennialist option as well. Premillennialism was popular and Joseph Meade’s *Clavis Apocalyptia* and *Apostasy of the Latter Times* were influential and also read by Wesley. Wesley’s father Samuel was a committed premillennialist, as was his brother Charles. So also, Asbury and Coke.<sup>50</sup> Randy Maddox has suggested, that Wesley tended to be premillennial in the early part of his life (before Bengel, perhaps). Together with many of their contemporaries Wesley saw life as a burden. Death was viewed as a passage to a better place.<sup>51</sup> Wesley was also challenged after he published his *Notes*. “Soon after publishing his *Notes* Wesley received a letter from John Fletcher encouraging him to consider the premillennial option and cautioned against date setting.”<sup>52</sup> Fletcher wrote:

I rejoice that you find everywhere an increase of praying souls. I doubt not but the prayer of the righteous hath great power with God; yet I cannot believe that it should hinder the fulfilling of Christ’s gracious promises to his church. He must, and certainly will, come at the time appointed; for he is not slack, as some men count slackness; and although he would have all to come to repentance, yet he has not forgot to be true and just. Only he will come with more mercy, and will increase the light that shall be at eventide, according to his promise in Zechariah xiv.7. I should rather think that the visions are not yet plainly disclosed, and that the day and year in which the Lord will begin to make bare his arm openly are still concealed from us.<sup>53</sup>

Later in his life John Wesley also read and even praised Thomas Hartley’s book, *Paradise Restored: Or a Testimony to the Doctrine of the Blessed Millennium, with Some Considerations on its Approaching Advent* but kept his own post-millennialist views.<sup>54</sup>

## Final Observations

John Wesley was not a systematic theologian. His eschatology as a whole is both complex and interesting primarily because he did not intend to impose a system of eschatology; he was a believer looking for answers. He was lost in his interpretation of the Book of Revelation, in particular, and unfortunately, the guidance he received from Bengel was not all that helpful. Practical and pastoral concerns led him to seek a viable framework which would address the then contemporary church's needs. Bengel's understanding of Revelation offered answers which Wesley found sufficient. I believe Wesley deserves commendation for actively seeking and engaging with Revelation as scripture, which many reformers considered beyond their intellectual grasp and Enlightenment scholars found too primitive for the modern mind. However, Wesley should have trusted more in his own biblical intuitions and imagination which we see in his sermons and hymns rather than in the *Notes*. His own thoughts became buried under the weight of Bengel's chronology.

On his own, Wesley saw God being active in this world. Beyond the religious wars, persecution, disease and poverty God through his true followers, whose number was increasing day by day, was bringing about the kingdom. He saw reasons to be hopeful for God's people amidst of persecution. He sensed his time to be special and urgent and that what God has done in heaven was going to be revealed on earth very soon. Through his reading of Revelation, Wesley prepared his people for both crises and hope ahead, as a pastor should always do.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mark K. Olson, *A John Wesley Reader on Eschatology*, 32.

<sup>2</sup> John Wesley, *Notes, Introduction* (p 220 in reader).

<sup>3</sup> J. Weborg, "J. A. Bengel." Pages 184-188 in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*. Edited by Donald K. McKim (Intervarsity Press Academic, 2007), 185.

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann\\_Albrecht\\_Bengel](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Albrecht_Bengel) .  
Accessed on June 3, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Roger E. Olsen, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition*. Cambridge USA: Eerdmans Publishing (2015), 76, 78.

<sup>6</sup> J. Weborg, "J. A. Bengel," 188.

<sup>7</sup> Olson, *Reader*, 220.

<sup>8</sup> O'Malley, "Pietist Influences," 128.

<sup>9</sup> Charlton T. Lewis, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, 833.

<sup>10</sup> Olson, *Reader*, 32.

<sup>11</sup> "It has been shown that Spener (and the Hallensian Pietism that followed him) derived his eschatological orientation from the influence of the federalist school of Reformed theology and the Reformed separatist, Jean Labadie, whose work he encountered at Strassburg. Likewise, it is the connection with Rhineland (Reformed) and Württemberg Pietism that was a primary contributor to Wesley's eschatological ideas, together with influence from the English Puritanism that was indigenous to his immediate environment." See Steven O'Malley, "Pietist Influences", 128.

<sup>12</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 1.1

<sup>13</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 1.1.

<sup>14</sup> John Wesley, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, 99.

<sup>15</sup> John Wesley wrote: "They shall all know me,' saith the Lord, not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God) but 'from the least to the greatest,' that the praise may not be of men, but of God. Before the end even the rich shall enter into the kingdom of God. Together with the will enter in the great, the noble, the honourable; yea, the rulers, the princes, the kings of the earth. Last of all the wise and learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will be convinced that they are fools; will 'be converted and become as little children, and enter into the kingdom of God'." See, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, page 103.

<sup>16</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 4 Introduction. Emphasis mine.

<sup>17</sup> John Wesley, *Notes* 12.12, 291.

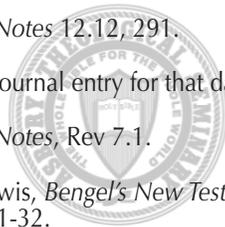
<sup>18</sup> See Wesley's journal entry for that date.

<sup>19</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 7.1.

<sup>20</sup> Charlton T. Lewis, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, Vol 2. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 831-32.

<sup>21</sup> Charlton T. Lewis, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, 832.

<sup>22</sup> Bengel, *Bengel's New Testament Commentary*, 898.



<sup>23</sup> O'Malley, "Pietist Influences", 129. See also John Wesley, Letter to Charles Wesley—1788, No. CCCVI, in *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, London, 187 2 (repr. 1979, Baker), XII, 319.

<sup>24</sup> Olson, *A John Wesley Reader*, 35, in footnote 39 it references John Wesley's Journal 12/6/62, Works 21:400.

<sup>25</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, 12.2.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, 12.2.

<sup>27</sup> John Wesley, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, 3.

<sup>28</sup> John Wesley, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, 21.

<sup>29</sup> John Wesley, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> John Wesley, *The Epistles of Paul Rom* 11.26-27.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, *Notes Rev* 12.3-4.

<sup>32</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.5.

<sup>33</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.6.

<sup>34</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.14 and 16.

<sup>35</sup> John Wesley, *Notes Rev* 12.8.

<sup>36</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.9.

<sup>37</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.12.

<sup>38</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.12.

<sup>39</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.12.

<sup>40</sup> John Wesley, *Notes Rev*. 8.10; 12.11; 18.24.

<sup>41</sup> E.g John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 12.6 and 12.13.

<sup>42</sup> John Wesley's library reveals Wesleys desire to understand the topic of religious conflicts between Christians. For example he read Warner, Ferdinando (1703–68). *The History of the Rebellion and Civil War in Ireland*, (2 vols) detailing the religious massacres and murders by both Irish Catholics and Protestants and Robertson, William (1721–93). *The History of Scotland during the Reigns of Queen Mary and of King James VI till his Accession to the Crown of England* (2 vols. London: A. Millar, 1759), which give an historical account of the fierce political hatred embittered by religious zeal since the October 23 1641 rebellion, which triggered a

period of 11 years of bloody conflict in the region. See Randy L. Maddox, "John Wesley's Reading: Evidence in the Book Collection at Wesley's House, London" pages 118-33 in *Methodist History* 41.3 (2003): 126-27.

<sup>43</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev. 12.15-17.

<sup>44</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 13.15.

<sup>45</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 18.24.

<sup>46</sup> John Wesley elaborates on this subject extensively in *Notes*, Rev 13.1.

<sup>47</sup> John Wesley, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> John Wesley, *The Mystery of Iniquity*, 28.

<sup>49</sup> John Wesley, *Notes*, Rev 13.1.

<sup>50</sup> Bruce Rodger Marino, *Through A Glass Darkly, the Eschatological Vision of John Wesley* (dissertation, Drew University, Ann Arbor: UMI1995), 91. See also letter from Fletcher Nov 29, 1755. *WJW* 26:613-16 and *The Christian Workers Magazine*, 17 (1916):96-101, esp. 98-99.

<sup>51</sup> Randy Maddox, "Nurturing the New Creation" in collection of essays *Wesleyan Perspectives on the New Creation* Edited by M. Douglas Meeks.

<sup>52</sup> Olson, *A John Wesley Reader*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> John Fletcher, London, May 26, 1757 in *Letters of the Rev. John Fletcher, Vicar of Madeley*, Edited by Melvill Horne, Carltonn & Phillips, New York, 134-5.

<sup>54</sup> Eschatology Sources <https://wesleyscholar.com/eschatology-sources/>

