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Unravelling revelation : the apocalypse in England, 1700-1834

Burdon, Christopher (1995) *Unravelling revelation : the apocalypse in England, 1700-1834*. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow.

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Abstract

This thesis argues that, while the Revelation of John claims to unveil reality, the interpretative structures built on the book are undermined by its own rhetoric. A historical examination of its use shows the fragility of hermeneutics, but also the power of the 'apocalyptic tone' to engender new unveilings.

The first chapter presents the Apocalypse as a book constantly inviting but constantly confounding interpretation, refusing to fit conventional generic definitions or strategies. The next two chapters show the book's continuing prominence in eighteenth-century England after its pivotal role in the Reformation. First - writers such as Newton and William Whiston - it serves as rationalistic evidence for God's providence, as well as giving encouragement to moral 'usefulness' and to the reformation of Christianity. Secondly, its imagery reinforces the more individualistic appeal of the Wesley's preaching and hymns. But it is only with the French Revolution (treated in Chapter 4) that the Apocalypse recovers political immediacy, as seen in both radical millenarian writers like Priestley and Bicheno and in conservative ones like Burke and G.S. Faber.

The Romantic period also saw a revival of prophetic and visionary writing, and for many poets John of Patmos was a guiding spirit. Coleridge, the subject of Chapter 5, moved from the millenarian declamation of 'Religious Musings' and the fragmented vision of 'Kubla Khan' to an attempt to interpret the Apocalypse as symbolic representation of polar logic and moral order.

Item Type:	Thesis (PhD)
Qualification Level:	Doctoral
Subjects:	P Language and Literature > PN Literature (General) B Philosophy. Psychology. Religion > BS The Bible
Colleges/Schools:	College of Arts > School of Critical Studies > English Literature
Supervisor's Name:	Jasper, David and Prickett, Stephen
Date of Award:	1995
Depositing User:	Elaine Ballantyne
Unique ID:	glathesis:1995-2516
Copyright:	Copyright of this thesis is held by the author.
Date Deposited:	21 Apr 2011
Last Modified:	10 Dec 2012 13:56
URI:	http://theses.gla.ac.uk/id/eprint/2516

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Review of Warren Johnston, *Revelation Restored*. This is a very good book, one that provides a thorough survey of apocalyptic literature printed in England between 1660 and 1700. Challenging in particular the assessments of Christopher Hill and William Lamont, that after the Restoration millenarian and apocalyptic views were mainly articulated either by fanatics bent on violently overturning monarchy and episcopacy or by harmless eccentrics out of step with the increasingly secular tendencies of the times—"the prerogative of cranks" to slightly misquote Lamont (pp. 18, 226, 247), Warren Johnston, *Revelation Restored. The Apocalypse in Later Seventeenth-Century England*. Chapter. Chapter. Perhaps the best-known instance of English apocalyptic belief of the late seventeenth century is the movement associated with John Mason in Buckinghamshire. Mason was the Church of England rector of the parish of Water-Stratford, and in the early 1690s he preached a sermon entitled *The Midnight-Cry*. In it Mason assured his audience of the impending advent of the millennial reign. This kingdom, inaugurated by Christ's personal appearance on earth, would be ruled by the saints and accompanied by the conversion of the Jews. The *Apocalypse of John* is perhaps the most alluring and dangerous text in any scripture. This study looks at English responses to it in political pamphlets and scholarly exegesis, in poetry and preaching and visual art. Those who set out to find enduring meaning in the book failed. -- My Blog! -- Download NitroFlare. Publication archive. Home. Music. TV Series.