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ENTERING THE CORRIDORS OF POWER: STATE AND CHURCH IN THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF REVELATION

ABSTRACT

This article discusses how Revelation with its vehement critique of its powerful first-century opponents was appropriated in a time when these opponents became its members, supporters and partners. It analyses how Revelation with its bitter attack on political and religious groups in the first century and with its potential for instigating millenarian groups to revolt against the State, was reinterpreted in times when the church enjoyed a special relationship with the State and had entered the corridors of power. In this regard, it focuses as example on the rereading of Revelation by Oecumenius, the Greek commentator of the sixth century C.E. This will be illustrated in terms of two examples. First, the article will discuss how Oecumenius rereads Revelation to appease the Roman Empire of his time and to resist an apocalyptic fervour that could threaten the well-being of the State. Second, it will show how Oecumenius, using the language of the Byzantine Empire, rereads the position of the Jews in the original text in order to present the church as the stable, trustworthy partner of the Empire.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an essay on the eschatology of Matthew, Hermie van Zyl (2009:1405) drew attention to the reinterpretation of early Christian expectations about the last days. Writing about the call in Matthew 24:1-3 to heed the signs of the last days, he refers to the differences between this passage and its parallel passage in Mark 13:4. Other than in Mark, the disciples in Matthew 24 do not ask when the temple will be destroyed, but when Christ will

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come. This difference, Van Zyl concludes, is because Matthew wrote his gospel after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. For Mark, the fall of Jerusalem was still outstanding. In the case of Matthew, a simple analysis of the historical context explains why the words of Jesus are presented so differently – even though Matthew also expected an imminent return of Christ.

What Van Zyl wrote so perceptively about the extensive reinterpretation of the Christian traditions in Matthew and its appropriation in a new situation can be supported and explained in equally striking ways by the way in which later readers reinterpreted early Christian eschatological traditions and their potential threat to political authorities.[1]

This later reinterpretation offers a good example of reading a text against its grain. Historical critical approaches to the Bible have made us aware of its dynamic nature, closely linked to the situation in which it was written. This awareness was strengthened in recent times as post-colonial discourse drew attention to the strategies of the dominant voices in a text that sought to establish their positions of power vis-à-vis alternative voices of marginal groups. Therefore, post-colonial scholars seek to uncover the way in which texts reflect the power struggles of the status quo with its powerful representatives and its attempts to manipulate or exploit the powerless, the marginal and the subaltern.[2]

However, there is a process of reading a text that reflects exactly the opposite dynamics. For example, little has been done on outlining the strategies of a dominant group in a given period of time to appropriate a text from a previously marginal and minority group. For example, what happens when a powerful group uses a text produced earlier by a previously marginalized, powerless group to support their own position of power? In this case, reading against the grain of the text reflects a hermeneutical strategy of domestication, whereby a radical text like Revelation is appropriated to serve the purposes and power struggles of a status quo group to prove itself to be non-radical and mainstream.

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1 With this reflection on and development of these remarks of Prof. Hermie van Zyl, I wish to honour him on the occasion of his 65th birthday and his retirement from a long career as Professor in New Testament Studies.

2 Cf. Bastian (2006:268) in general, but also Schüssler-Fiorenza (1998:227-9) who gave an insightful description of readings of Revelation against the grain in terms of gender and politics and an evaluation of how they function dialectically in order to be most effective and fruitful. Many recent post-colonial studies have been done on Biblical texts. Cf. Sugirtharajah (2003 and 2005) for examples of these studies and for the growing number of publications in the field.

Such an appropriation of Revelation takes place in Oecumenius's sixth-century commentary which, as the oldest, extant Greek commentary on Revelation, is an important witness about the way in which Christians in the East read Revelation. Oecumenius reads Revelation against its grain: When he is confronted with the contents of Revelation, he implements hermeneutical strategies that render the concerns of a minority group in the original text innocuous. His reading seeks to protect and promote the powerful position of the church in his time. He thus de-radicalizes the text to avoid potentially embarrassing and threatening consequences of earlier readings of Revelation. Oecumenius, as will be shown in this article, aspired to de-radicalize the challenge of Revelation to the status quo of its time and to defuse a potentially dangerous threat to his own position of power.[3]

To understand this, one has to take one step back and locate Revelation in its time. Revelation is a book that is generally understood to be permeated by a deep hostility to civil and political authorities in its first-century context.[4] The author of Revelation informs his readers early in his text that it is a product of first-century Christianity in Asia Minor (Rev. 1:4, 11) that lived in challenging, even dangerous times. The life of the church was characterized by internal strife, as is clear from such opponents as Jezebel and other Jews in Revelation 2-3. There was also external pressure, as is clear from the Evil Triad and the Prostitute as symbols of earthly powers (Rev. 12-13; 17-18). From earliest times, many interpreters understood the symbols of Revelation to refer concretely and specifically to the Roman State as a murderer of saints (Rev. 18:11-14, 24). For them, the book portrayed its addressees as a small group of martyrs on the margins of society who, despite being oppressed, persecuted and murdered by ruthless Roman rulers and their collaborators, witnessed fearlessly to their faith.[5] They believed the State was their prime enemy.

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3 Compare with this how a gender reading would challenge the status quo by reading against the grain. Liberationist readings question power games of power structures that produce and use texts to protect their own interests. Cf. Schüssler-Fiorenza (1998:227-9).

4 Kovacs and Rowland (2004). For critique of the State in Revelation, cf. Collins (1983:728-749) and Collins (1984:165-176).

5 In recent times, several scholars have questioned the persecution theory. For a full discussion and recent literature, cf. De Villiers (2002a) and (2002b). Whether the symbolic universe with its claim of extreme oppression of political authorities correlates with external conditions, is not relevant here. This article works with perceptions of persecution in readings of Revelation and Oecumenius's attempt to deconstruct them.

This reading created embarrassment in later centuries as the power and influence of the church in politics and in civil society increased. During the time of the Byzantine Empire, especially from the fourth century onwards, groups of Christians enjoyed a close and even intimate relationship with the State. Other than the ruthless readers in Revelation, they and their texts portrayed emperors in these times as respectful of and even reverential to the church. They were described as "devout, often to the point of religious ascetism, and all showed deference to the churchmen (sic) they considered orthodox".[6]

This privileged position of the church is also evident in the earliest extant Greek commentary on Revelation, written in the early sixth century by Oecumenius, an orthodox theologian from Isauria in Asia Minor.[7] A corollary of this position of power is the respectful attitude to existing powers that the church displays. A most striking example of Oecumenius's feelings for the State is found in his commentary on Revelation 17:9-14 where he speaks reverentially of "the pious Constantine" who changed the policies of the early Roman Empire according to which Christians were persecuted (*Oec.* 9.13.5-6). In his eyes, Constantine thus initiated a completely new period in church-State relations and brought about a very different relationship between the two.[8]

Oecumenius's attitude was striking, because many authors in the Byzantine Empire considered and named themselves as part of the Roman rather than of the Byzantine Empire. They saw an intricate link of their own time with the illustrious history of the Roman Empire. In their view, the Empire has upheld good relations with the church so that they would not have wanted to be associated with texts in which there was a negative perception of the relationship of the State with the church.[9] Furthermore,

6 Cf. Treadgold (1997:259) and Vivian (1997:164-169). This positive portrait of the Empire by some authors does not reflect the much more complicated realities of that time. For example, several pagan authors spoke disparagingly about the greed, extravagance and prodigality of Emperor Constantine. For example, cf. *Cameron &* Hall (1999:309). Emperors like Justinian were not always that tactful and could by times interfere in church matters by dealing harshly with theological disputes and dictating decisions to the church. Cf. Tzamalikos (2012:6).

7 For example, cf. De Groote (1995a), (1995b), (2001a), (2003) and his article in RGG 4, 458 for various aspects of Oecumenius's commentary.

8 Andreas (1.178) also refers in his commentary on Revelation to the pious rulers of his time, confirming the cosy relationship between church and State.

9 Olsten (2003:255-6) regards Byzantine apocalypses as a misnomer since Byzantine authors preferred to stress their continuity with the Roman Empire. He prefers to name them "very late Roman" apocalypses rather then Byzantine.

the Roman Empire of their time should not be threatened in any way by the Scriptures of the church, which enjoyed its full support. This indicates why Revelation with its criticism of Rome would offer a special challenge to a church that wanted to retain a special relationship with the Roman Empire.

At the same time, Oecumenius's positive appraisal of the State was linked closely to the central role of eschatology in Revelation. Therefore, in rereading the political dimensions of Revelation, Oecumenius had to address and modify its eschatological pronouncements as well because of the distinctive political consequences of this eschatology. For example, the expectation of the imminent end in Revelation created an apocalyptic fervour which often caused uprisings against the State, as happened often in Oecumenius's own context and time.[10] His commentary cannot be understood fully without reading it as a response to such movements and their challenge to the State as an earthly power.

Oecumenius's reception of Revelation thus promises to offer intriguing insight in power dynamics, in the way that the church related to the State in the post-Biblical era and in conflicting traditions within Christianity during an important phase and in an influential setting. An investigation in this regard will fill an important gap in present research. Not much has been written on how violent passages in Revelation functioned and were read in later times, especially in times of good relationships between the State and church. To do so in terms of the Byzantine Empire has now been made possible by the recent discovery of and subsequent growing interest in Oecumenius's commentary. The commentary has gone largely unnoticed in contemporary theological research (for example, cf. Suggit 2006:13-14),[11] even though it was so important that it influenced the later, (up to

He refers (2003:256) to the foundation of Constantinople and its identification as legitimate capital of the Roman Empire as a crucial event in the establishment of the Byzantine Empire. Oecumenius mentions this event when he writes that the seat of the empire ceased to be in Rome and was transferred to the city named after Constantine (*Oec*. 9.13.5).

10 For examples of the role of Revelation and apocalyptic literature in violent actions and in stirring up hatred, cf. Beckwith (1922:324) and De Villiers (2008:1855-1893).

11 How unknown or unused Oecumenius remained even after the publications of Diekamp (1901 and 1929), is clear from the fact that he is not mentioned in the commentaries of Beckwith (1922; esp. 325) and Giesen (1997), though Bousset (1906:64-65) does discuss him. In the commentary of Aune (1997-8), he is cited only 8 times, whilst Prigent (2001:475) refers to him once (and then after Andrew). The exception to this was Zahn, who discussed him extensively (1924:106-111).

now) better known commentaries on Revelation by Andrew (563 C.E.),[12] and Arethas Caesariensis (tenth century).[13] There is a strong need to do more research on hermeneutical insights the commentary can generate. It shows how the controversial book of Revelation was read in later times, for example when major developments took place in exegetical practices as interpretations of the text moved from literal to more symbolic and allegorical. This is even more intriguing, given the fact that the canonical status of Revelation was not always accepted in the East, stressing the accomplishment of Oecumenius in interpreting the book in such a way as to show its relevance.[14] A close reading of Oecumenius's commentary will show how later readers of Biblical texts can interpret Biblical books differently, even in opposition to previous traditions of interpretation. At the same time, it illustrates the dynamic interaction between Biblical texts and contexts of later interpreters in so far as these reinterpretations were driven by their particular power struggles.

Oecumenius's work accentuates the authority of Revelation, and yet, it also surpasses or subverts the text of Revelation in more than one way. He offered a reading of Revelation that was new, made the book acceptable to readers of his time and also pulled the rug from under dissenting groups who may have thought that it provided divine sanction for actions that provoked insurrection. This will be illustrated in terms of two examples. First, it will be discussed how Oecumenius rereads the picture of the Roman Empire in Revelation to eliminate the possible threat of the original text to the Byzantine Empire of his own time. Second, it will be shown how Oecumenius uses the language of the Byzantine Empire to reread the position of the Jews in the original text.

12 Diekamp (1901:1051-1054), who previously dated Andrews' commentary ca. 520, subsequently noted that it relies on and shortens Oecumenius' commentary, so that it must have been written later. Cf. also Schmid (1931:242-243) and Lamareaux (1998). A more common date for Andrew's work of between 563-614 C.E. is now accepted. Cf. Kilpatrick (1959:1 et seq.).

13 C. Kilpatrick (1959:1 et seq.) and Diekamp (1901:1051), who dates Aretas's commentary in ca. 895.

14 Cf. Francis (2007:67-78) and Constantinou (2007:79-84) for insightful remarks about the reception of Revelation as a canonical book in the Byzantine period.

2. HISTORICISING REVELATION: ROME IN THE DISTANT PAST

Oecumenius is aware that the Book of Revelation may be experienced as a threat to the Byzantine Empire of his times. From the very beginning of his commentary, his hermeneutical strategy is to create a gap between the situation in his own time and the time of Revelation that he wants to express as different and long gone. He does so by going out of his way to stress that symbols in Revelation refer to specific persons, events and places in the first century long before his own time and to a situation very different from the one in which he wrote his commentary. His hermeneutical strategy aims to create a then-now opposition that functions to present his own time as essentially different from earlier times.

2.1 Older than 500 years

Oecumenius underlines the huge time gap, first of all by the careful dating of Revelation in the time of Domitian, the first-century Roman emperor, which, he notes, was "a very long time, more than 500 years" before he wrote his commentary (*Oec* 1.2.6). Thus, he suggests that one should read the book as a text from the distant past.

Yet, there is much more to this dating than meets the eye. The number of 500 years was a feature of several readings of Revelation in post-Biblical times that tried to cope with its expectation of an imminent end. It is a number that was often used in a well-known time table in late Antiquity. Several authors from those times used the Biblical story of seven days of creation to reconstruct a world chronology or week that consisted of six thousand years. The number represents six days of creation comprising a thousand years each. The reading of a year as equivalent to a thousand was based on Ps. 90 (89):4, 2 Peter 3:8 and Genesis 1:1-2:3. Authors who used such a world week included Irenaeus and Latin commentators like Julius Africanus and Hippolytus, a third-century author (Wansbrough 2010:28).

Hippolytus reconstructed a world chronology in his well-known commentary on Daniel, drawing on the reinterpretation of Jeremiah's prophecy in Daniel 9, but also on information about the last days in Revelation. His key to understanding the world chronology was the predicted destruction of the Roman Empire as the last of the four beasts mention in Daniel at the end of 6 000 years. According to him, 5 500 years had passed after the creation of the world to the incarnation of Christ. This meant that the end would happen only more or less in the year 500 C.E.

Hippolytus wrote his work around 204 C.E., thus leaving about 296 years until the end.

Authors like Hippolytus used this world chronology in a deliberate attempt to oppose speculations about an imminent end of the world. Such apocalyptic movements, based on literal readings of Revelation, have been recurring over many centuries so that speculations about the end were constantly under discussion in the works of these authors.[15] Hippolytus, like several others, rejected the literal readings of these movements by underlining through allegorical hermeneutics that there was still a long time before the year 6000 when Rome, regarded as the last kingdom in Daniel's vision of the future, will be destroyed. They wanted to show that Biblical texts reveal a long period of time that is still to take place before the end. The expectation about the Antichrist, proposed in Revelation, would be fulfilled only much later. Therefore, it would be a mistake for believers to think the end was near. To the contrary, worst than the suffering and persecution believers were experiencing in their times was to come (Valdez 2010:151).

Similar speculations and expectations existed at the beginning of the seventh century when Oecumenius wrote his commentary. He lived in a context where such predictions were rife. He, too, resisted millennialist interpretations caused by apocalyptic fervour.[16] Some authors in the East, for example, taking over the predictions of their Western compatriots, predicted the end for the years 491 and 507/508.[17] Like many authors, he found the fervour dangerous because of its threat to social stability and to the State. During his times, this fervour was intensified because of major natural disasters and unusual phenomena, as well as by extensive wars with the Persians. Consequently, texts were written that were permeated with eschatological tension and that lead to riots and rebellion. So intense were the expectations that the smallest signs were regarded as indications of the imminent end, such as the fact that an emperor in those times was named Anastasius (Resurrection).[18] The effect of such an apocalyptic fervour on the common people was dramatic. Agathias, a sixth-century

15 For example, the third-century C.E. is known for the Montanist movement in North Africa, which was characterized by intense expectations of an imminent end of the world. Cf. Valdez (2010:139-140).

16 As an example of the consequences of such views on the life of the church, Weber (2000:44) refers to a bishop who took a group into the desert to meet the returning Lord (cf. Valdez 2010: 148-153).

17 Meier (2008:48-51); Louth (2005:93-117); Daly (2003:148-9).

18 This included works like the the so-called *Tübinger Theosophie* (474/75 – 476-491), the *Oracle of Baalbek* (510), the Greek *Vorlage* of an Armenian Apocalypse and *The seventh vision of Daniel*. Cf. Daley (2003:148-9). For the many visions

Byzantine author, described in his *Historiarum libri quinque* 4.5.1-3 how people reacted to an earthquake:

> Fantastic stories and amazing predictions that the apocalypse was near began to circulate among the people. Charlatans and self-appointed prophets roamed the streets prophesying whatever came into their heads and terrifying the people… Society never fails to throw up a bewildering variety of such people in times of misfortune.[19]

Though Oecumenius does not refer explicitly to a timetable or the world chronology, several factors suggest that he must have been aware of it. He refers respectfully to Hippolytus's commentary elsewhere in his work (*Oec.* 1.1.4), implying that he could have known of the world chronology which is prominent in Hippolytus's text. His awareness of the world chronology is also clear from his comments about what "must soon take place" in Revelation 1:1-2. He carefully notes that "a very long time, more than five hundred years, has elapsed" since those words were written. In his mind, the 500 years are conceptualised within an eschatological framework. Except for the use of the significant number of 500 years, he also stresses that they should not be understood literally as a remark about time.[20] This is confirmed by his next observation that the remark of John has nothing to do with "the actual time of the fulfilment of future events" (*Oec.* 1.3.6).

Therefore, this telling reference about the 500 years is more than a mere comment about the time in which he is writing his commentary on Revelation. It is also more than merely locating it in the past and creating a huge gap to events in those times. Scholars who read this reference mostly in order to date his work (Suggit 2006:4-6) overlook its symbolic value. The reference frames the commentary as a whole to distance it from end time fervour and speculations. He continues along these lines with a third observation in which he spiritualizes Revelation 1:1-2 with the remarks that John's reference to what must soon take place has to do with the power and eternity of God.

> For, in fact, all temporal extension, even though it may be as long and protracted as possible, is short when compared to eternity (*Oec.* 1.3.6; cf. *Oec.* 12.9.2).

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of Daniel, cf. Olster (2003:255). On Anastasius, cf. the extensive discussion in Louth (2005:93-117).

19 Quoted by Olster (2003:255).

20 Cf. Meier (2008) for the decline of these timetables in later times because of the influence of Jerome and Augustine.

Finally, his remark about the long time is so important to him that he quotes a Biblical text as support. He uses Psalm 89:4, which says that a thousand years is as a day which is past in the sight of the Lord.

The rhetorical effect of this implicit criticism of millenarian movements is that the time of Oecumenius is seen as very different from that of Revelation. His text shows that there is growing awareness that the book cannot be read literally as predictions of the last days, especially not as they threatened stability and order. Quite telling in this regard is how Oecumenius introduces theological motifs to reinterpret eschatological pronouncements in Revelation. In a new situation, he adds, the gospel is not about eschatological speculations, about "looking not to the actual time of fulfilment of the future events", but about being aware of divine power and eternity (*Oec.* 1.3.6; Suggitt 2006:22). Later on, he also speaks of a different way of life for believers. It is a time for a God-fearing life (*Oec.* 12.9.3), for all "to go on doing what they have been accustomed to do" and to "let them use their own free will as they wish, either for evil or for good" (*Oec.* 12.11.4). Oecumenius rejects eschatological speculations, but also replaces them with an alternative theology: a theology of divine, eternal power and of ongoing stability and order. In fact, the character of God is described in terminology that reminds one of imperial Byzantine language.[21]

Ultimately, the interpretation of Revelation by Oecumenius is a radical re-reading: The book is interpreted as no longer being driven by an expectation of the end. Practically, that expectation is eliminated. Revelation has become a book about theological truths, about the (imperial) power of God, the positive relationship with the State and about a stable lifestyle. The church has arrived in the corridors of power within which it feels comfortable and that it wants to defend. It needs to act in such a way as not to rock the boat.

2.2 Rome as a first-century persecutor

While Oecumenius goes out of his way to distance himself from speculations that may instigate rebellion against the State, he consciously promotes an image of the Byzantine State by contrasting it with the activities of some

21 Cf. Dagron (2003:8), who discusses how the Byzantine monarchy was described with divine imagery. The Emperor became the elect of God who had granted the government and salvation to humanity. Although this is mainly true of later Byzantine times, the beginnings of such thoughts are already to be seen in Oecumenius. Eusebius was especially influential in this regard. This also continued the close relationship between civilization, empire and religion in classical Roman thought. Cf. further below.

emperors in the time of Revelation. Several elements in Oecumenius's commentary reveal how he regards Revelation as part of a situation that existed many centuries before and that is no longer applicable to later times. In the introduction to the commentary, he goes out of his way to stress that John, the author, specifically linked his symbols with the Roman Empire of the first century. He reads certain pronouncements in the book literally. For example, he does not consider a symbolic reading of the image of the prostitute in Revelation 17-18. The seven heads of the beast on which the woman is seated in Revelation 17:9 are seven hills that must be regarded as a literal, geographical remark. The seven hills are

> a very clear indication that he is speaking about Rome, for Rome is described as seven-crested, and no other city is so called (*Oec.* 9.13.1).

This is striking, given the trend in his work to spiritualize many pronouncements in Revelation when he, for example, interprets hills or mountains elsewhere symbolically. In his comments on Revelation 16:17-21, he explains them as demons (*Oec.* 9.7.9). Here, though, the "hills" are taken literally to refer to Rome's physical location.

Furthermore, quoting sources like Josephus and Eusebius, he underlines that the Roman Empire of the first century was cruel and hostile to the church. He links references in the seven letters in Revelation 2-3 to the persecution of the Christians, with what "took place in the time of the emperor Domitian" (*Oec.* 2.13.9). Later, he again mentions the persecution of believers by some emperors (*Oec.* 9.12.3).

This negative depiction of the Roman State is not new. Oecumenius stands in the tradition that is also found in Lactantius, Victorinus of Petovium, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, who linked Revelation in general with Rome's exploitative and dangerous rule.[22] What is different, though, is how Oecumenius explicitly links the symbols with the Roman Empire in direct contrast with the rulers of his time. This is best illustrated by comparing it with the commentary of Andrew of Caesarea, written a few years after Oecumenius's text and reflecting much of Oecumenius's insights. Other than Oecumenius, Andrew is much less inclined to link Revelation to the Roman Empire. He also claims tradition for his interpretation when he quotes "ancient teachers of the Church" who "spoke against making an analogy of Babylon with the Romans".[23] Consequently, he interprets the seminal motif of the seven hills upon which Babylon sits in Revelation

22 Cf. Beckwith (1922:320-321); Kovacs and Rowland (2004:204); McGinn (1992:18).

23 Constantinou (2008: 226).

17:9 in a non-literal sense. For him, the verse does not refer to a specific city or place, but, surprisingly, to "ranks of glory".[24] Where Andrew does link symbols in the Apocalypse to Rome, he does so almost reluctantly, and sometimes linked with alternative interpretations. This is illustrated when, in his commentary on Revelation 3:10-11, he interprets (with sober language) the hour of trial as "either" the persecution by the impious kings of Rome against the Christians or as the world-wide movement in the last days.

All this underlines the effect of Oecumenius's literal reading of certain parts of Revelation. His reading is to define the political opponents and persecutors of the church in Revelation as people who acted negatively in times long gone and who could in no way be mistaken with present-day authorities. In contrast to that completely different type of political ruler, the emperors of his own time were benevolent and reverent towards the church. Thus, he reinterpreted Revelation in such an explicit manner so that his readers could not use its material to motivate any action against the State in their time in which State and church were in a powerful relationship.

3. THE CHURCH AS THE STABLE PARTNER AND MIRROR OF THE STATE

In his commentary, Oecumenius presents a picture of the church that, ironically, is influenced by the nature of the State in his time. The church thus becomes the spiritual equivalent to the Byzantine Empire, reflecting similar ideals and functions. With his hermeneutical approach and allegorical readings of the text, he rereads Revelation in such a way that the church is no longer a party next to other Jews, Christians or other groups.

This is evident in his comments about the Jews in the time of Revelation, namely that they were like the Roman Empire. Sometimes with extreme language, he stresses that they were guilty of severe oppression and persecution of believers. Thus, he continues a long-standing anti-Jewish

24 Cf. Costantinou (2008:160-1; 179; 224-5). Andrew relates Babylon also to various cities, amongst them former Rome, but also Persia and New Rome. Constantinou (2008:160-1, 224) ascribes the ahistorical interpretation to Andrew's tripartite approach to Scripture and the fact that the literal meaning, which referred to historical events, was only the first and lowest level of meaning.

polemic of Christian authors.[25] Portraying Jews in an extremely negative light (for example, cf. *Oec.* 2.5.5; 4.17.1-10; 6.13.4; 11.3.3-3), he writes that they were involved in the trial of Jesus and in persecuting Christians in Asia through blasphemous activities (*Oec*. 2.5.1-6). In his comments on Revelation 20:2-3, he speaks of "the souls of those who had been beheaded" as believers who were expelled from synagogues, assaulted with countless abuses and whose personal possessions were plundered. These Jews are practically demonised when he refers to believers

> who refused to obey the propositions of the abominable and blasphemous Devil.... For by the word *image* he [John] means the imprint of the [Devil] will be in the hearts of the Jews (*Oec.* 11.3.3-4).

Similarly, he calls Jews who remained in unbelief, a "blasphemous" synagogue under the command of Satan (*Oec.* 2.4.5, referring to Rev. 2:9).[26] Especially the Jews who were responsible for Christ's crucifixion are the object of his severest criticism. He argues extensively and with gruesome detail that they received their due punishment through the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans for their cruel killing of Jesus (*Oec.* 4.17.1-10).

Yet, in his historical reflection, Oecumenius is also careful to exonerate those who did not intentionally and wilfully engage in persecuting Christ. In his discussion of the sealing of the 144, 000 (Rev. 7:1-6), he differentiates between Jews who crucified Christ and those who did not participate in it (*Oec.* 4.17.7). This is why they escaped the destruction of the city, and he adds that it is even "likely that all... were later sealed in faith" (*Oec.* 4.17.7). According to him, Jews were part of the rush of all nations to accept the gospel and thus became, together with the church, the "spiritual" Israel.[27] The overall concept is that there is a worldwide movement of all nations, together with Jews, into the church. References in Revelation to Israel are thus interpreted as speaking about the church (for example, cf. *Oec.* 11.16.1-11). Those who confess Christ are the "true" Jews and the "spiritual" Israel (*Oec*. 2.5.5; 2.13.8). The "true Jews and the spiritual Israel would be those who confess Christ" (*Oec.* 2.5.5). Oecumenius is

25 Thornton (2001:565-571) describes the very negative attitude of and bleak remarks of some fathers like Hippolytus, Commodian, Lactantius, Cyril of Jerusalem and Maximus of Turin about Jews as ending up in hell because they persecute Christians or will do so in future in collaboration with the Antichrist. In contrasts he lists Tertullian, Victorinus of Pettau and others who argue that Jews will ultimately be saved.

26 In contemporary New Testament scholarship, many explanations are offered for the meaning of the term "synagogue of Satan" (cf. Friesen 2006:135-141).

27 His language in this regard is hyperbolic: Many Jews and "countless myriads of the nations... hastened to join the faith" (*Oec.* 5.1.1).

the reasonable, beneficial and authoritative interpreter of Revelation that thinks of Jews as those who exercise their free will to choose to do well through becoming part of the church. He sounds like the emperor who wishes to bring all the people together to the benefit of the empire.

This description of Jewish groups in the first century is of great importance to Oecumenius in another sense. He goes out of his way to stress that Christianity has deep roots in history. In some ways, this past history mirrors the history of the Byzantine State with its roots in the Roman Empire and with a tradition of emperors who governed with benevolence. Therefore, he offers a Biblical validation for the church as the true Israel through his allegorical reading of history and the Bible.

> Historically Israel is those who were born from Jacob the patriarch, but spiritually it means those who walk by the faith of our father Abraham (*Oec.* 11.16.9).

Specific names can be singled out in this regard. In his comments on the beast from the sea, Oecumenius mentions that in the past there were a few "untainted" worshippers of God. Among them were Job and his four friends, Melchisedek and the prophets; that is, "those who were distinguished in the Old Testament for their piety" (*Oec.* 7.13.6). In his discussion of the two witnesses in Revelation 11, following Paul's allegorical exegesis in 1 Corinthians 10:4 and also revealing his strong Christological approach, Oecumenius writes that Christ was in the old covenant. The only major difference between the two was that the believers in the old dispensation were not as numerous as those in the new dispensation (*Oec.* 6.9.1-7).

Oecumenius rereads references to Jews in Revelation in the sense that, in the distant past, there were those who rejected Christ – just as there were emperors who persecuted Christians. Those times, he stresses, are past. The hateful Jews of the times of Jesus and the early empire no longer threaten the church but have become part of the church. The church is now portrayed as the true, spiritual Israel that reflects the untainted faith of the earliest generations of believers in the Old Testament and who has been joined by most Jews and will be joined by the rest some time or another. With confidence, he portrays the church as an institution of true piety that even Israel, its worst enemy, has joined. The fact that the Jews have joined the church is an indication of its spiritual power and legitimacy. The church is now a stable institution in the world, just like the Empire that comprises all nations of the world.

With these remarks about the relationship between the church and Jewish groups, Oecumenius reflects a general attitude of Christians in the Byzantine Empire since the time of Eusebius (cf. Troianos 2011:144).

They afford a glimpse in the growing confidence of the Byzantine church about its own identity[28] and the increasing Christianisation of society.[29] In these remarks, one detects the *Nachwirkung* of imperial and universalist discourse of classical Rome and the Byzantine Empire. In this regard, it is well worth to attend to what Olster (2003:258) writes. He notes how, by the middle of the fifth century, Christians assumed an organic union of Christianity and imperialism that aimed at the attainment of two complementary ends under the aegis of Christ "to spread the Christian faith and to achieve universal peace." The church began to take on a similar, universal character of Imperial Rome. Even the most vehement opponents of the church confessed its character as the true spiritual representative of humanity.

The irony runs deep: The minority, persecuted church of Revelation no longer exists. That is part of the distant past. The old enemies of the church, the emperors and the Jews, are all gone. Those who did not die because of the divine judgment have joined the church. The church, joined by Israel and all the nations, has become the spiritual partner of the Roman State that shares its character and is now the natural home for the pious.

4. CONCLUSION

Oecumenius provides an example of the dynamic nature of Biblical texts. It shows how incisively the Bible can be reinterpreted in new contexts. On the one hand, some text functions as inspired Scripture that determines the life and thought of the church. Oecumenius indeed thought highly of Biblical texts as divinely inspired Scriptures (*Oec.* 12.20.1-3). His commentary begins with a quotation from 2 Timothy 3:1 that all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable (*Oec.* 1.1.1) and he often quotes earlier traditions in which the authority of Scripture, including Revelation, was emphasized. He repeatedly and extensively uses Scripture as decisive evidence for his arguments. And yet, in his completely different situation and time, driven by totally new concerns, Oecumenius reads Revelation against its grain. He integrates the text in his own situation and context in such a way that its meaning at times contradicts the original text of Revelation.

28 Oecumenius does not attack or exert pressure on contemporary Jewish groups. One detects in his work no opposition to them from church leaders on a national or local level, or, for that matter, from the imperial government. Jewish groups are almost non-existent in his commentary. On Jewish groups in this time, cf. Levine (2008:218).

29 Louth (2005:94, 116).

Thus Revelation becomes a different text when it is read in later times: The Revelation of Oecumenius is about the powerful church that surpasses previous sectarianism, emulates the Roman Empire in its nature and benevolently accommodates all in its midst. The church nurtures intimate links with the status quo and protects its newfound power from those who threaten it. Revelation is no longer about the persecuted and faithful witnesses of the first century that proclaimed the gospel in the face of deadly, dangerous opposition of opponents like the State and Jewish groups. The church, inside the corridors of power, has become confident and is now, together with the State, firmly in charge of affairs.

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