

An Aesthetic of Reception and the Middle English Metrical *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius

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Though unfamiliar to many today, the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius* was unparalleled in its popularity across Europe during the Middle Ages, with a manuscript record unrivalled by any other non-scriptural text.¹ Originally composed in Syriac in the wake of the societal upheaval brought on by the Arab invasions of the seventh century, the *Apocalypse* draws on biblical history and the cycle of Alexander legends to produce an account of the world's history and future, thereby providing an eschatological lens through which to view the chaotic devastation of the Muslim incursions in the Middle East.

While it is easy to account for the popularity of such a text amongst Syriac and Byzantine Christians of late antiquity,² for

¹ Michael W. Twomey, "The *Revelationes* of Pseudo-Methodius and Scriptural Study at Salisbury in the Eleventh Century," in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 370.

² The author's ecclesiastical affiliation cannot be readily ascertained from the text; some scholars have pointed to his idealization of the last Roman (i.e. Byzantine) Emperor as evidence for the author being a Chalcedonian Christian. However, Chalcedonian Christianity never made any significant inroads in the region around Mount Sinjar, which had been predominantly Miaphysite since its evangelization in the early 500s. As Paul Alexander points out, there was a Miaphysite monastery there since the mid-sixth century, and internal evidence suggests the author was a priest or (hiero)monk. See Paul J. Alexander, *The Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, ed. Dorothy deF. Abrahamse (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 28. Thus, a

whom bewilderment and despair at the “heathen” conquest was common, the relevance of the *Apocalypse* to mediaeval Europeans is not so readily evident. Why did a text so far removed from their cultural and socio-religious circumstances hold such appeal for Latin Christians in the Middle Ages? How did European audiences and editors impose their own encounters with religious “others” (Muslim or not) onto the *Apocalypse*, which itself constructs a framework by which to understand the unexpected presence (and military success) of religious outsiders? And where European Christian responses to the text include such identification and conflation of various religiously foreign groups – be they Arab, Turkish, Viking, Norman, or Mongol – to what extent can we view these later readings (obviously unintended by the original author) as legitimate?

This study traces the *Apocalypse*’s translation and in particular its English reception history, taking note of the interpretations, uses, and processes of editing to which the text was subject along the way. I give detailed consideration to the text’s eventual transformation in the fifteenth century, amidst heretical uprisings and theological suppression, into a most peculiar Middle English poem, and speculate as to this poem’s original audience and purpose. Finally, applying modern literary theories of an “aesthetic of reception,” I offer an analysis which proposes to make sense of this convoluted and often seemingly farfetched history of transmission and interpretation. Confronted with such a variety of conflicting meanings, generated by audiences who all read the text as speaking to the unique forms of social upheavals which they experienced, the text in question having been originally composed in response to circumstances specific to the author’s time and place, our first reaction may be to dismiss such a contradictory textual legacy. Drawing on such theorists as Paul Ricoeur and Hans Robert Jauss, however, I advance a view of this reception history not as a cacophony of incongruous textual appropriations, but as a harmonious continuity of literary insights arising from different readers of the text in different times and places.

Mesopotamian Miaphysite clerical authorship for the *Apocalypse* seems most likely.

Context, Overview, and Reception of the Text

Though long considered to have been an originally Greek production, scholars now accept that the *Apocalypse* was first composed in Syriac,³ likely in the region of Mount Sinjar in Mesopotamia.⁴ There is disagreement as to when the text was first composed, but the consensus is that the *Apocalypse* first appeared between AD 650 and 692.⁵ Beginning with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, the *Apocalypse* provides a broad overview of salvation history (supplemented by various pseudepigraphal accounts), which, significantly, portrays the descendants of Ishmael (who are also equated with the Midianites) as having at one point conquered the whole world only to be subsequently cast down by God and driven into the Arabian desert.⁶ The Israelites' subjection

³ Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 14–16, 30–33.

⁴ The Syriac prelude makes reference to this location, which is obscure enough that it seems unlikely an author would refer to it unless he lived in the area. See Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 27–28, and Michael Philip Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 113.

⁵ The existence of Greek and Latin translations in the early eighth century as well as the *Apocalypse*'s predictions as to the precise date of the parousia strongly suggest that it was composed prior to 692. Michael Philip Penn concludes that the *Apocalypse* was likely written immediately before this year, “emphasiz[ing] the apocalypse’s imminence” and “correspond[ing] to the consolidation of Islamic power under the Umayyad caliph ‘Abd al-Malik,” which may explain the text’s “allusions to increased taxation and greater danger of apostasy.” Penn also notes, however, that Stephen Shoemaker has also recently “argue[d] that the text was [...] written in the 660s.” See Penn, *When Christians First Met Muslims*, 115. Paul J. Alexander likewise argues for a date “prior to 678” – i.e. the conclusion of the unsuccessful Arab siege of Constantinople – and “probably even earlier than the outbreak of the Arab civil war in 656” on the basis of the text’s silence on these events, the inclusion of which would have doubtless bolstered the *Apocalypse*'s predictions of the imminent Arab downfall. See Alexander, *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 25.

⁶ Here and throughout, I quote from Alexander’s English translation of the Syriac text, which he appends to his treatment of Pseudo-Methodius, in *Byzantine Apocalyptic Tradition*, 36–51. See also Benjamin Garstad, *Apocalypse & An Alexandrian World Chronicle* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 3–71, for a recent English translation of the Greek redaction.