On 19 April 1993 the now infamous siege of the headquarters of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas, was brought to a fiery and dramatic close. As the dust settled and the smoke dispersed the horror of what had happened became clear. Not only had David Koresh, the self-styled prophet and leader of the movement, perished, but so too had some ninety of his followers. The count included a high number of children.

Scholars are only now beginning to probe into the reasons for the Waco tragedy and there is much work still to be done, especially in the area of the social-scientific study of this particular religious group. To any one involved in the study of the interpretation of the book of Revelation, however, the events in Waco are no less important, for the siege and its consequences provide a dramatic, if unwelcome, reminder of the extent to which the book of Revelation inspires, or at the very least is conducive to, acts of religious madness. To be sure Koresh did claim prophetic authority and was thereby able to make what he considered to be divinely inspired pronouncements. However, from documents and other sources that have so far become available it is clear that Koresh saw his primary task as interpretative. It was, he claimed, his God-given responsibil-

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1 The most readily available material is found in a collection of essays and documents edited by James Lewis *(From the ashes, making sense of Waco* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994)). However, the remarks made above are based more directly upon a collection of nine audio tapes, which record a series of Branch Davidian recruitment meetings held in Manchester, England in early 1990, and a series of primary documents and letters sent to me by one of the survivors of the Waco siege.
ity in these last days to interpret the book of Revelation, especially the seven seals of Rev. 6:1–8, 1ff, and it was this task above all other that dominated his theological agenda. In Revelation’s symbols Koresh saw reflected a picture of his apocalyptic world and in its words he found the voice of God. Similarly it was his claim that he was the divinely appointed interpreter of the book that gave him status and authority among his followers. Thus the remarks made above seem correct: the Waco tragedy is a vivid, if unpleasant and unwelcome, reminder of the potential power of the Apocalypse, a power which does not always have positive results.

This apparent negative aspect of the afterlife of the book of Revelation is not an isolated case, for the book has been a significant and important factor in many other outbreaks of apocalyptic zeal which have similarly led to death and destruction. Such movements are not, however, the focus of this study. Rather I wish here to draw attention to a different aspect of Revelation’s negative legacy, namely the use of that book to support anti-Catholic sentiments in eighteenth-century England. The study therefore draws attention to an aspect of Revelation’s afterlife which is all too often neglected, for it examines the use of Revelation by the strong (Protestant majority) to demonize the weak (Catholic minority) and hence provides a balance to the often repeated remark that the Apocalypse is the voice of the underdog. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, whose comments are not untypical, notes that

In contrast to mainline churches and theology, ‘Bible-believing’ Christians, who often belong to socially disadvantaged and alienated minority groups, give Revelation pride of place in preaching and life. They read Revelation as allegory and often utilize it as prophetic oracle predicting the schedule and plan for the end-time events which can be deciphered. Other oppressed and disadvantaged Christians read Revelation contextually as a political–religious typology that speaks to their own situation. Latin American or South African liberation theologies cherish Revelation’s political world of vision for its prophetic indictment of exploitation and oppression as well as its sustaining vision of justice.

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2 'Afterlife' is used here in preference to either Wirkungsgeschichte or Auslegungsgeschichte since by it either of these two latter terms are meant. Some texts do exert an influence upon their readers and have a definite 'effect' while others, it seems, are used only in a passive, often retroactive, way to support views or actions already adopted by the interpreter (see further Heikki Raisänen, 'The effective “history” of the Bible: a challenge to biblical scholarship?', Scottish Journal of Theology, 45 (1992), 303–24 for a discussion of the issue). Often of course it is extremely difficult to disentangle the two, as is probably the case with Koresh. Koresh certainly used Revelation and read into it what he wanted to find. However, the contents of Revelation gave to his theology a definite (if difficult to untangle) structure and focused his thinking on the interpretation of a set number of images and symbols.

3 Numerous examples are to be found in Norman Cohn, The pursuit of the millennium: revolutionary millenarians and mystical anarchists of the Middle Ages (London: Paladin, 1970).

4 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation: vision of a just world (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 7.
Schiissler Fiorenza may well be right: the book of Revelation can and is often 'utilized' by the kind of readers to which she refers and to the entirely positive and laudable ends she identifies. However, there is surely a need to balance this remark, for, as the history of its interpretation and influence clearly indicates, Revelation can be used no less effectively in the hands of oppressors and can be used to demonize others and justify religious intolerance. The book appeals to those within the established Churches, no less to those on the margins. It appeals to the powerful no less than to the powerless; to the strong no less than to the weak.

This study also raises once again the question of the relative contributions of the text and interpreter in the process of interpretation and suggests that the disciplines generally known as the history of interpretation (Auslegungsgeschichte) and the history of influence (Wirkungsgeschichte) ought, in some cases at least, to be redefined as the history of eisegesis and exploitation, for it often seems to be the determined interests of the interpreter rather than the influence of the text itself that is the dominant factor. This is a methodological quagmire, but as Heikki Räisänen has recently pointed out, some attempt ought to be made to find at least some firm ground. The study is focused upon Rev. 13, though almost any part of Revelation would have served the purpose just as well. Naturally the discussion is limited and is concentrated upon two individual commentators, William Whiston and John Gill. In addition some general remarks on more popular sources (hymns, sermons, tracts, annotated Bibles) are offered in an attempt to show that the use of Revelation to support anti-Catholicism was not limited to the scholarly elite or found only in academic monographs. Despite these limitations, however, some general conclusions can be made, for the work here surveyed

5 This is a point upon which, its seems, Schüessler Fiorenza may be challenged, for her remark that in general 'mainline Christianity insisted upon its [Revelation's] canonical marginality' (6) seems incorrect, at least in the context of eighteenth-century England. See further note 12 below.

6 Räisänen, 'Effective "history"'.

7 William Whiston, An essay on the Revelation of Saint John so far as concerns the past and present times (1706); references to John Gill are to the 1809 edition of his work An exposition of the New Testament, 3 vols, which was first published in 1746–48. Arthur W. Wainwright, Mysterious Apocalypse (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 21–103 gives a useful brief overview of pre-critical scholarship on Revelation and pages 49–66 of that study are particularly relevant to the topic here under discussion. The second volume of Le Roy Edwin Froom's survey, The prophetic faith of our father's, 4 vols (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1946–54) covers the period in considerable detail, though the anti-Catholic, premillennial views of the author somewhat colour his evaluation of those commentators he surveys. David Brady's work, The contribution of British writers between 1560 and 1830 to the interpretation of Revelation 13.16–18 (the number of the beast): a study in the history of exegesis (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), is useful though, as its title indicates, deals with only three verses.
is fairly typical and is indicative of the broader conspectus. As we shall see, the evidence suggests that during this period and in this geographical location the book of Revelation was more the subject of *eisegesis* than *exegesis*; it had more use than influence. Indeed, any one who has read even a small portion of the huge number of commentaries and monographs devoted to Revelation during this period might well agree with the fact (if not the desirability of it) noted by Robert Morgan that ‘texts, like dead men and women, have no rights, no aims, no interests. They can be used in whatever way readers and interpreters choose’.

### The Book of Revelation in Eighteenth-Century England

In eighteenth-century England the study of Revelation was high on the exegetical agenda. Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727), for example, who ranked St John second only to Daniel, once wrote that ‘giving ear to the Prophets’ was ‘a fundamental character of the true Church’ and consequently devoted a great deal of time and effort to the task of interpreting the prophetic books. Similarly, the eminent Unitarian scientist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804) thought that the discernable fulfillment of prophecy in his own day meant that the book of Revelation must now command particular and detailed attention. Many other biblical commentators similarly paid special attention to the book of Revelation (which was often taken together

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8 There were of course exceptions. Catholic commentators in particular had good reason to deviate from the exegetical norm and it was largely in Catholic circles that the ‘futurist’ scheme of interpretation was initiated and gained a following (but see for example J.A. Oddy, ‘Bicheno and Tyso on the prophecies: a Baptist generation gap’, *Baptist Quarterly*, xxxv (1993), 81–9 for one example of a non-Catholic, futurist interpreter). According to the futurists, most of the prophecies in Revelation have yet to occur. The antichrist is a literal figure who will reign for 3½ years/1,260 days/42 months etc. and the judgments, vials, seals still await their fulfillment. For a brief discussion of futurism see Wainwright *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 61–3. More extensive is J.A. Oddy, ‘Eschatological prophecy in the English theological tradition, c.1700–c.1840’ (University of London Ph.D. thesis, 1982), 94–179, who charts the rise and development of futurism in England during the eighteenth century. ‘Preterism’, the forerunner of modern critical contemporary-historical interpretations, was also accepted in some circles. According to the preterists most of the prophecies of Revelation have already been fulfilled in the past (see Wainwright *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 63–6; Oddy, ‘Eschatological prophecy’, 46–8). A good early example of this latter view is Henry Hammond (1605–60), who argued that the bulk of the prophecies contained in Revelation were fulfilled before the conversion of Constantine to Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century (Henry Hammond, *A paraphrase, and annotations upon all the books of the New Testament* (1653)). The millennium, on this scheme, extends from c.A.D. 300 to c.A.D. 1300 and hence the period after that is the period of the last judgment immediately before the end of the world. On Hammond see further Froom, *Prophetic faith*, 524–5.


10 Sir Isaac Newton, *Observations upon the prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St John* (1733), 14.

with Daniel in the pre-critical period) and hence the eighteenth-century literature devoted to the interpretation of this book is vast.\(^\text{12}\)

Naturally not all commentators agreed on all points of prophetic interpretation. However, on some very general points at least, there was a fair degree of consensus. This consensus is perhaps best seen in the basic approach to Revelation that was adopted in this period, the assumption being that the book is to be read as a timetable of world history stretching from the time of the prophet John (usually thought to be around the end of the first century) to the end of the world. Thus, according to this view, the Christian era is a period punctuated by prophetic fulfillment. Consequently, the one who studies the book of Revelation in conjunction with secular and Church history will be able to tick off those prophecies which have been fulfilled, note those which are now in the process of fulfillment and identify those which are yet future. In this way one's own coordinates on the map of world time may be fixed. This view of Revelation has become known as historicism (more correctly world- or church-historicism) and as a basic methodology it dominated eighteenth-century English expositions of the Apocalypse.\(^\text{13}\)

In eighteenth-century England there was general agreement also on the so-called 'year-day principle'. According to this view, in prophetic time periods a day is equal to a literal year. Thus the 1,260 prophetic days of Rev. 11:3 and 12:6 are to be counted as 1,260 literal years, the same period as the forty-two months of Rev. 13:5 (one month is taken as thirty days) and the 'time, and times and half a time' (taken as three and a half years of 360 days each) of Rev. 12:14. This principle is of fundamental importance, for it enabled commentators to chart and predict the fulfillment of particular prophecies with assumed accuracy. Further, since such a prophetic time period is mentioned in connection with the rise and

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\(^{13}\) Such a view has a detailed history. However, as Wainwright correctly notes (Mysterious Apocalypse, 49–53), it was largely as a result of the influence of the twelfth-century Abbot Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202) that this approach gained a firm foothold on scholarship. See further Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the history of western thought* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1985), 145–60. A full and detailed study of Joachim and his legacy is to be found in Marjorie Reeves, *The influence of prophecy in the later Middle Ages: a study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). As a method of approach historicism has now died out in scholarly circles, though it continues to live on in some ecclesiastical ones. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, for example, from which Koresh and his followers came, continues to adopt a fairly raw eighteenth-century, anti-Catholic, premillennialist version of this approach.
career of the first beast of Rev. 13:5 and the persecution of the faithful witnesses in Rev. 11:3 (cf. Rev. 12:6, 14) it gave a key, so it was thought, both to the identity of the beast and the period of his dominance. As noted below both Whiston and Gill used this year-day principle to support their readings of Revelation. 14

Most Protestant commentators of the eighteenth century were also agreed on one further point: Rome, which now meant the Roman Catholic Church, is antichrist and it is therefore that institution which comes under such sustained attack in the book. Rome is the beast that descends from the bottomless pit in Rev. 11:7; Rome is the great harlot of Rev. 17; Rome is Babylon of Rev. 18 etc. In particular eighteenth-century English Protestant commentators saw in Rev. 13 a prophetic picture of the Roman Catholic Church.

Revelation 13
Chapter 13 of the book of describes the rise and blasphemous career of two 'beasts'; the first comes up 'out of the sea' and the second 'out of the earth'. The description of these beasts which follows in Rev. 13 clearly indicates that they are powers opposed to God. The first beast blasphemes terribly and the second ensures that any who do not worship the first beast are killed. The two therefore work hand in hand to deceive the inhabitants of the earth. Throughout the course of the eighteenth century this particular passage of scripture was the subject of intense debate. Opinion on the correct interpretation of the passage was naturally divided, however most Protestant interpreters were agreed at least that the arch villain of the passage was none other than the pope and/or the Church of Rome in general. It was the career of this blasphemous institution which, according to the majority of eighteenth-century English Protestant interpreters, is charted in the chapter. As noted briefly above, the identification of the Church of Rome as the great antichrist was standard in eighteenth-century England, and indeed has a long his-

14 This 'year-day' principle has a long history. It was among Tyconius's principles of interpretation (late fourth century) and appears frequently throughout the history of the interpretation of Revelation. In the eighteenth century it was almost completely standard, though as always there were exceptions. Catholic futurists in particular disagreed with the interpretation of the various time periods mentioned in Revelation and argued that the period of 1,260 days was literal and was the period during which the antichrist (who was yet to come) would rule. Such a view was put forward by the Jesuit scholar Francisco Ribera (1537–91), whose 500 page commentary on the Apocalypse (c.1590) laid the foundations of the futurist school of interpretation (see Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 61–2; Froom, *Prophetic faith*, 2:489–94). This literal understanding of the 1,260 day period thus became standard in commentaries of that school.
tory in English Protestant scholarship (and Luther's views on the matter are of course well-known). An early expression of it is found in John Bale’s work The ymage of both churches after the moste wonder­ful and heavenly Revelacion of saincte John the evangelist (1550).

1. William Whiston (1667–1752)
The general thrust of Bale’s work was repeated in numerous commentaries throughout the latter part of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries and at the beginning of the eighteenth gained adequate expression in the work of William Whiston. Whiston was Sir Isaac Newton’s successor as professor of Mathematics in the University of Cambridge, although he is perhaps better known to biblical scholars as the translator of Josephus. Whiston’s views on Revelation were put forward in his work An essay on the Revelation of Saint John, first published in 1706 and revised several times thereafter. His interpretation of Revelation is ingenious and...
often strays from the well-beaten exegetical path of his pre­decessors, 21 on Rev. 13, however, Whiston is fairly typical of the general trend of eighteenth-century interpreters.

Whiston saw the Catholic hierarchy clearly portrayed in Rev. 13, most especially in verses 11–18. In the vision of the rising of the beast, according to Whiston, ‘We have a plain account of the Rise of Antichrist himself, strictly so called; or the Pope of Rome. 22 This antichrist has the outward appearance of a lamb (he calls himself the vicar of Christ), but speaks like a dragon

exalting himself above all that is called God: Excommunicating and Destroying Princes; Absolving Subjects from their allegiance; Introducing new, false, and per­nicious doctrines and practices; Commanding Idolatry in the worship of Angels, Saints, Images and Reliques; Tyrannizing over the Consciences of Men; and Ana­thematizing all who will not submit to his ungodly doings. 23

Whiston is of course reflecting the common assumptions of his day. The pope is antichrist, therefore it must be the case that it is the pope who is depicted in Rev. 13. The text suits Whiston’s pur­pose well, for the rich imagery there employed is pliable in the extreme and is able thereby to regurgitate to Whiston’s satisfaction all the religious prejudices and preconceptions he feeds into it. Indeed as one reads Whiston on the matter of the identity of the beast, one is struck by the obvious sense in which Whiston assumes what he wishes to prove, namely that the pope is the beast of Rev. 13:11ff. To be sure, Whiston cites other writers who have said the same thing and appeals to the common consensus for support, but there is little if any attempt actually to argue the case. The best argument Whiston offers is that in fulfillment of Rev. 11:13–14 the

21 The outline of what Whiston has to say on Revelation can be seen in the diagram he prints between pages 100 and 101 of the Essay. Whiston divides the history of the world into three epochs: the period of ‘emptiness’ (Whiston appears to have הים for ים), the period of law and the period of the Messiah. Each of these periods is ‘2,000 [years]’ long. There follows the sabbath-millennium of Rev. 20. Whiston constructs his interpretation around this basic framework, seeking to integrate the various sequences of seals, trumpets, and vials and woes into it (understood of course along standard historicist lines). The end will come in the year A.D. 2000. However, for Whiston the year 1716 is also particularly significant for it is in this year, he argues, that the millennial dawn will begin to break and the pre-millennial period of preparation begin. The view that the world would end after 6,000 years has a long history in Christian thought. As Wainwright notes (Mysterious Apocalypse, 231 n. 1) it is found clearly already in the Epistle of Barnabus (late first or early second century A.D.). After reminding his readers of the fourth commandment, the writer of the Epistle continues ‘Consider, my children, what that signifies, he finished them in six days. The meaning of it is this; that in six thousand years the Lord God will bring all things to an end. For with him one day is a thousand years . . . Therefore, children, in six days, that is, in six thousand years shall all things be accomplished’. (Epistle of Barnabus 12:4–6).

22 Whiston, Essay, 243.
23 Ibid.
papal beast works (Whiston adds 'seems to' to the biblical text at this point)

a multitude of strange Miracles; and pretends to abundance of lying Wonders; by which he strangely prevails with, and amuzes, and enslaves the World; and so deceives them into an implicit obedience to his dictates. 24

Whiston then goes on to note that

all [of] which characters are so peculiar to, and notorious in the Pope and his Subordinate Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, that I need spend no more words about them. 25

It would of course be unfair to criticize Whiston for not conforming to or abiding by the norms of modern biblical scholarship and that is not the intention here. However, what should be noted is the fact Whiston has, fairly obviously, brought to the text his own prejudices and beliefs. His interpretation of the text is more or less pure eisegesis. The text has served the needs and desires of the interpreter. In this case at least, however, this seems not to have been an altogether positive thing, for one result is that it has confirmed Whiston’s view’s that the pope and his hierarchy and by extension Roman Catholics in general are servants of Satan whose desire it is to pervert truth and thwart the plans of God for the salvation of humankind. In the context of eighteenth-century England this is the voice of the persecutor not the persecuted and the eisegesis is used to support the strong not the weak. 26

In his attempt to ascertain the time of the beast’s rising and the length of his blasphemous career, Whiston becomes even more ingenious. Drawing on Daniel and well as Revelation, Whiston argues that the beast will last for a ‘time and times and the dividing

24 Ibid., 244.
25 Ibid.
26 No attempt can be made here to outline even in brief form the position of Catholics in eighteenth-century England. Suffice it to say, however, that their lot was not a particularly happy one. The reasons for this situation are complex indeed, and go back at least as far as the social, religious and political tensions spilling over from the Henrician Reformation of the sixteenth century. The very real ‘gun-powder plot’ of 1605 had not been forgotten and neither had the fabricated ‘popish plot’ of 1678. Both were seen as evidence of Rome’s continued desire to rule once again over the religious consciences of the English. Similarly, the three Jacobite rebellions of the first part of the eighteenth century (1708, 1715, 1745) were seen as obvious examples of Rome’s desire to restore a Catholic monarch to the throne of England. The situation of Catholics in Britain during this period is discussed generally in Colin Haydon, Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England c.1740-80: a political and social study (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). A briefer account is found in David Butler, Methodists and papists: John Wesley and the Catholic church in the eighteenth century (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995), 1-19. Butler also prints an illuminating list of penal laws in force against eighteenth-century English Catholics (205-10).
of time' (Dan. 7:25). Whiston argues here, as did most of his con­
temporaries, that a 'time' is a year and that 'times' is therefore two
years. On the meaning of the phrase a 'dividing of time', however,
Whiston is unusual. The most natural understanding of this phrase,
states Whiston, is a month, for the month is the principal division
into which the year is divided; the phrase 'time and times and the
dividing of time' therefore indicates a period of three years and one
month. This is taken by Whiston as thirty-seven months at thirty
days per month or 1,110 literal years. Armed with this information,
Whiston approaches the question of when this period is to end. The
little horn (Dan. 7:8)/lamb-like beast, according to Whiston, arose
in A.D. 606 when the pope took to himself the title of 'universal
bishop' and began the reign of 'Ecclesiastical Tyranny'. The
period will thus end in 1716.

Whiston has of course carried off a master-stroke: not only does
his interpretation of the text now support his view of the religious
opposition, thereby enabling Whiston to stake out his existential
claim in terms of his religious allegiance and divine standing, but it
assures him that the end is not far away and hence gives him a
definite locus on a clearly mapped out chronological scale. For
Whiston the final coming of Christ is still some 300 years away.
However, he expects the dawn of the premillennial kingdom in
1716. It is in this year, he argues, that antichrist, the Roman church,
will fall.

Whiston is, then, clearly reading the book of Revelation through
Protestant-tinted spectacles and it is not surprising that he con­
sequently finds there the confirmation of all his worst fears and pre­
judices and well as the affirmation of his millennial dreams. The
powerful symbolism of the text and the determined interests of the
reader have formed together an explosive mixture. The result, as we
have seen, is an act of wanton eiegesis which would not be excus­
able today. Whether it is excusable within the context of the eight­
eenth century is perhaps not for us to judge. However, the fact that
to the modern reader Whiston's work seems in some way to be ille­
gitimate, being the product of an unholy alliance of an almost
infinitely malleable text and the powerful emotions of the inter­
preter, should not be dismissed without further note. The fact that
we are dealing here with a work which is of some considerable dis­
tance both culturally and chronologically, perhaps enables us to see
clearly the extent to which some readings appear to be objectively

27 Whiston, Essay, 4.
28 Ibid., 245.
wrong and even morally reprehensible. Whiston’s work is pure eisegesis. The actual text is almost incidental to his purposes. Indeed, had ‘Old Mother Hubbard’ been in the canon in place of Rev. 13, Whiston would probably have concluded that the cupboard represents the Roman Church barren of any spiritual sustenance, the bone for which the dog longed a symbol of righteousness and communion with God and the dog itself a symbol of the hungry Christian soul which is starved as a result of papal error.

Thus while the text has certainly been used by Whiston, it can scarcely be said to have had an influence upon him. As Morgan has said in more general context

The interests of the readers and interpreters affect how texts are used and understood. In many cases, especially legal codes and religious scriptures, these interests are those of a community, not simply of individual readers. But it is still the aims or interests of the readers, rather than the intentions of the authors, which are decisive.  

However, although subjectivity in biblical interpretation might be inescapable, it should surely not be allowed to reign unchallenged. Not all eisegesis is good eisegesis, for texts can be used to negative no less than to positive ends. This is seen fairly clearly in Whiston’s interpretation of Revelation, where we have the spectacle of an Oxbridge academic using a text to support and prop up the demonized view of the small and largely underprivileged Catholic minority.

2. John Gill (1697–1771)  

Much of John Gill’s work on Revelation was standard within a broader eighteenth-century context and hence his work is indicative of the broader stream. It comes as no surprise, then, to discover that Gill had no doubts regarding the identity of the beasts of Rev. 13. The whole chapter, states Gill, describes the rise of the great Roman antichrist who at the instigation of Satan seeks to deceive and destroy God’s people on earth. Commenting on Rev. 13:11 Gill writes that the second beast which is there described is

The same with the first beast, only in another form; the same for being and person, but under a different consideration; the same antichrist, but appearing in another

30 John Gill (1697–1771) was an eminent Baptist minister. Although he had little formal education, Gill became skilled in Hebrew, Latin and Greek and in 1748 was awarded the degree of D.D. from the University of Aberdeen. He was the author of numerous works, including a multi-volume *Exposition of the Bible* (N.T. 3 vols, 1748; O.T. 6 vols, 1766).
light and view: the first beast is the pope of Rome . . . this other beast is the same pope of Rome, with his clergy, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests &c. 31

Gill then goes one to describe the actions of this papal antichrist, who has come up from the ‘bottomless pit of hell’ (cf. Rev. 9:1ff)

Pretending great humility and holiness, shewing signs and lying wonders, obliging to idolatry, and exercising tyranny and cruelty on all that will not confess his religion. 32

This onslaught against the pope and the Catholic Church continues unabated throughout the whole exposition. As with Whiston, Gill offers little argument in favour of his position. Rather he states, and restates the common assumptions of his day.

Gill’s reading of Rev. 13, like that of Whiston, is imaginative. One detail will suffice. In the King James Version Rev. 13:18 reads

Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six.

This is an enticing text and needless to say it attracted a great deal of attention in the eighteenth century. We must remember of course that the commentators dealt with here understood Revelation as a time-map of history which lays out in chronological order the events that will come upon the world from the time of John to the coming of the New Jerusalem and the eradication of all wickedness. Given these basic assumptions there was clearly scope for some imaginative interpretations of the number 666, for in each successive age the number was thought to be of particular and contemporary significance.

There were three basic positions that emerged regarding the way in which a correct interpretation of the number could be achieved. There were those who felt that the number was to understood as the number of years during which antichrist would rule. In 1693, for example, Samuel Petto argued that the period of antichrist was from c.1050–1716. 33 Some other interpreters, however, argued that the

31 Gill, Exposition, 794.
32 Ibid.
33 Samuel Petto, The Revelation unveiled (1693), 36. Such an interpretation of the number 666 is also a central component of the interpretation proposed by the German expositor Johann Albrecht Bengel (Apparatus criticus (1734), Erklärte Offenbarung Johannis (1740), Gnomon Novi Testamenti, 1742)). Bengel’s work is highly complex and need not be entered into fully here. However, we may note that the period 1143–1810 (Bengel argued that actual period indicated by 666 in Rev. 13:18 was 666 and six-ninths) was central to Bengel’s scheme. Bengel’s work on Revelation was highly influential. It left its mark, for example, on John Wesley (see John Wesley, Explanatory notes on the New Testament (1755), 932) and upon his brother Charles (see Kenneth G.C. Newport, ‘Charles Wesley’s interpretation of some bib-
number gave a clue either to the time of the rise of antichrist or else of his downfall. In this latter context it was perhaps not surprising that the year 1666 gave rise to intense eschatological speculation. Indeed, Gill himself refers to this earlier view that antichrist would fall in 1666 or, more colloquially, in '666' 'the number of the thousand being dropped, as it is in our common way of speaking'. Perhaps a larger group of interpreters, however, saw the number as being the numerical value of the letters of the beast's name. Historical-critical scholars will of course be aware of the attempt to get the numerical value of the letters in the name of the beast. It is not easy, but it can be done. Those who were not wedded to an historical-critical framework for their interpretation, however, had a much freer hand and expositions abounded.

Gill sets to work on the problem with characteristic ingenuity and argues that in fact the number signifies both the name of the beast and the date of his rising and falling. The name of the beast is straightforward enough. The key, argues Gill, is the word Lateinos which, when written in Greek, adds up to the required number. Similarly, Gill observes, the Hebrew הָיָה adds up to the same figure. But Gill goes on. France is particularly Catholic and a common name of French kings, Gill notes, is 'Louis' which may be latinized to 'Ludovicus', and the numerical value of the letters in...
Ludovicus is, says Gill, 666. Hence, he notes, we have a further key. Antichrist, Rome, will fall when a King by the name of Louis is on the throne of France. The time of the rise of antichrist can similarly be worked out from the number. The key, says Gill, is to be found by discerning the square root of 666, which is, as close as can be discerned, 25. Add 25 to the date of the crucifixion (taken as A.D. 33) and the result is 58. This was the year of the birth of antichrist (though Gill does not say what is significant about the year). Add 666 years to this date and one lands on 724, the date at which, according to Gill, antichrist reached his 'manhood' and engaged in controversy over the worship of images. Thus, it seems, Gill is able to link the number 666 to the Roman Church on several points. Gill's case is therefore proved: the Roman Church is antichrist as the uncanny recurrence of the number 666 (or its square root) in the history and descriptive titles of that institution prove. Thus the pope is the instrument of the devil and Catholics are his servants. The popular attitude to Roman Catholics in Gill's eighteenth-century England is hence justified.

**Bibles and Popular Sources**

It may of course be argued that neither the work of Whiston nor Gill can really be taken as representative of anything other that the views of a relatively small scholarly élite. Above, however, we have noted that the work of these two scholars is fairly typical of the broad trend and represents not the views of the few but of the many. In English Protestant scholarly circles anti-Catholic readings of Revelation were absolutely standard and a force to be reckoned with. Such readings represent the scholarly paradigm of the period, and are indicative of a broad interpretative school.

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40 Gill, *Exposition*, 3:797. The linking of Ludovicus with the number 666 was not altogether uncommon, especially, naturally enough, after the outbreak of the French Revolution. Gill may have been influenced in this interpretation by the work of his fellow Baptist, Sayer Rudd (d. 1757), who published *An essay towards a new explication of the doctrines of the resurrection, millennium, and judgement* in 1734. On Rudd see further Brady, *Number of the beast*, 40-5 (who seems to misread Gill on this point) and Froom, *Prophetic faith*, 2:681-2.

41 The view that the importance of the number 666 is to be found in its square root was put forward over the course of over 200 pages by Francis Potter (*An interpretation of the number “666” or “The number of the beast”* (1642)). See further Brady, *Number of the beast*, 111-24.


43 In this context it is perhaps worth noting the remarks made by Benjamin Keach (1640–1704) who shortly before the close of the seventeenth century noted 'tis evident to all who are men of any Reading, that most of our Eminent Protestant Writers, both Ancient and Modern, do affirm without the least doubt, that the Church of Rome is the great Whore spoken of [in] Rev. 17' (Benjamin Keach, *Antichrist stormed* (1689), 1).
But evidence of such views is not limited to strictly scholarly sources alone or confined to academic monographs. In a hymn first published in 1762, Charles Wesley wrote (as a poetic comment on Rev. 12:10–12)

Now is the saints' salvation come,
The strength that slays that beast of Rome,
The Kingdom of our God below,
The power of Christ against our foe,
Which forces Satan to submit,
For ever bruised beneath our feet.  

In a hymn designed for public consumption and use, then, Charles is linking Rome to the great beast/dragon of Rev. 12–13. And Charles's mind is drawn once again to Revelation when considering his son Samuel's defection to 'the Romish sect' (an institution elsewhere described as 'the Babylonish beast') in 1784. In words clearly reminiscent of Rev. 13:13–14 Charles wrote

Thy power be in his weakness seen,
Nor let him the commands of men
Rashly mistake for thine,
Nor heed to lying wonders give,
Or legendary tales receive
As oracles divine.

Pamphlets, tracts and sermons which similarly use Revelation as a vehicle for anti-Catholic sentiments are copious and no significant attempt to enter into that literature can be made here. In passing, however, we may note the work of Thomas Simmons, who in a sermon preached on 5 November 1714 makes frequent allusion to the book of Revelation in arguing that God is on the side of the Protestants and against Papists. (The date of course is significant, Simmons is reflecting on God's mercy in delivering England by thwarting the gun powder plot of 1605). Indeed, despite the fact that Simmons hardly ever quotes directly from the book of Revelation, the text of the Apocalypse is clearly in his mind as he constructs his arguments. Thus, for example, Simmons refers to the previous condition of the Church

45 Osborn, Poetical works, 8:424.
46 Ibid., 8:398.
48 The sure side: or, God and the church. A sermon preached on the fifth of November, 1714 in the parish of St. John Wapping (1714).
when she was ‘in the Wilderness’ and when ‘Popery as a Deluge overflowed almost all the Face of the Christian World’. Such remarks clearly reflect Rev. 12:6, 13–15 and further allusions are found in Simmons’ reference to those who hold to the ‘testimony of Jesus’ (cf. Rev. 1:9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10). Simmons then goes on to argue that with the coming of William and Mary, God delivered a part of the Church from Popish (= Satanic) domination. The rest of the work continues in this vein and despite few direct quotations from the book of Revelation (the reference to the ‘Souls under the Altar’ [cf. Rev. 6:9] is one exception) it is immediately apparent that it is largely from that book, and the prevailing anti-Catholic readings of it, that much of Simmons’ imagery and argumentation is drawn. Simmons’ sermon, then, gives one example (and others could have been listed easily enough) of the use of Revelation to support fervent anti-Catholicism among the populace.

Perhaps even more illuminating than sources such as hymns, tracts and sermons, however, are the marginal notes and brief exegetical remarks found in many eighteenth-century Bibles. Such notes, unlike, one might argue, more extended scholarly treatises, were likely to be of more significant influence among the rank and file. A survey of such material reveals the anticipated results: the kind of interpretation found in the marginal notes and exegetical remarks in many eighteenth-century Bibles is wholly consistent with the general thrust of the more extended and scholarly treatments referred to in detail above. One might note, for example, The family Bible of 1771. On the words ‘The name of blasphemy’ (i.e. the one written on the heads of the beast of Rev. 13:1) the editors quote with apparent approval the words of Doddridge that any who do not (with hindsight) see in this prophetic picture a reference to the papal hierarchy ‘must have very little acquaintance with the arrogant

49 Simmons, *The sure side*, 8.
50 Ibid., 13.
52 Simmons, *The sure side*, 15.
53 *The family Bible; or, Christian’s best treasure. Containing, the sacred text of the Old and New Testament, with annotations from Grotius, Boyle, Prideaux, Pearson, Tillotson, Poole, Whitby, Henry, Burkitt, Doddridge, &c. &c.* (1771).
54 The reference here is to Philip Doddridge (1702–51) a nonconformist minister. Doddridge’s six-volume work *The family expositor; or a paraphrase and version of the New Testament; with critical notes* was published during the period 1739–56, the last volume being edited and published posthumously by his close associate Job Orton. The advertisement prefixed to that sixth edition clearly indicates that Doddridge completed his notes on Revelation in 1748. Doddridge’s work is now more readily available in the one-volume reprint edition of 1825 (*DNB* 5:1063–9).
titles which have been assumed or admitted by the Popes’. The editors quote Doddridge again (who himself is quoting Newton) on the meaning of the number 666. The number refers, it is argued, to the name of the beast, namely ‘Latinum’ in the original language (i.e. the Greek λατείνο). However, the number also refers to the time of the beast’s arising, which, it is claimed was 666 years after the writing of the Apocalypse in A.D. 96, i.e. in A.D. 756 (sic) ‘or thereabouts’ when the pope became a temporal monarch. Again the eisegetical process is clearly visible here and again the eisegesis is used to foster and support a demonized view of a religious minority. Exactly the same process can be seen in other editions of the Bible. To note more individually seems unnecessary, but the Family expositor Bible (1763) is one further example to which reference may be made.

In eighteenth-century England the book or Revelation was widely used. The emotional and intellectual energy invested in the book and the ingenuity with which it was made to suit the interpreter’s ends is apparent. Such a process is of course not by necessity a bad thing. Religious texts can and often do bring support and hope to those badly in need of it. In general terms the book of Revelation fits this pattern, and individuals like Wainwright seem justified in pointing to the use of Revelation in the works of black South Africans such as Alan Boesak and Latin Americans like Dagoberto Ramírez Fernández to support the view that

In every age and in most branches of the Christian church the Apocalypse has made its impact through worship, bringing comfort in times of sorrow, giving expression to dreams and hopes, and providing the language and images of adoration and praise.

The book is able to give inspiration and hope in to the socially disadvantaged, the persecuted, the poor and the weak.

However, though the book can and often does appeal to the weak and/or the persecuted, it has no less an attraction for the strong

55 Family Bible, 1434.
56 Ibid.
57 Family expositor; containing the sacred text of the Old and New Testament; illustrated with a commentary and notes, historical, geographical and critical, taken from the most eminent commentators ancient and modern (1763).
58 Wainwright, Mysterious Apocalypse, 222. On the following page Wainwright repeats these sentiments in more detail stating that the Apocalypse has strengthened the faith of those facing natural and man-made disasters and appeals particularly to those who believe themselves to be in a situation of crisis. It must be said that Wainwright does refer briefly to the possible negative use of the book (229), but does not dwell upon this at any length.
59 Wainwright, Mysterious Apocalypse, 177–87.
and/or the persecutor. It may appeal to and inspire the higher religious emotions, but it may also be used to express wholly less palatable sentiments. In this article we have perhaps caught a glimpse of that, for when in the hands of some, indeed most, eighteenth-century Protestant interpreters, the book became a means of divinely sanctioning the contemporary society’s anti-Catholicism. Catholics were servants of the antichrist and Satan and hence their influence upon Christendom must be negated.

Koresh too comes back to mind. One might of course wish to see the Branch Davidian group as a whole as a persecuted if fanatical minority, but even so there can be little doubt that within the group Koresh himself exercised extreme authority and that the book of Revelation assisted him in his acquisition and retention of that power. After all, those who accept the infallibility of the Bible, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church from which Koresh and his followers came fall into that group, are faced with a difficult situation vis-à-vis the Apocalypse. On the one hand it is in the canon and is therefore inspired. Not only that but it is called a ‘Revelation’ suggesting that the meaning of its contents are not to remain a mystery. On the other hand, however, its symbols and imagery are mind-boggling to those seeking its one correct interpretation. Koresh and his evangelists could appeal to this sense of faith-inspired frustration in offering to interpret the book for them. The result was not a happy one.

Once cut loose of its historical-critical moorings Revelation is indeed an open text and it is difficult to see upon what basis, if not an historical-critical one, some readings might be judged less authentic than others. At the very least, however, biblical interpreters might well wish to bear in mind the advice of St Paul, for, to misquote him a little, ‘all things may indeed be lawful, but not all are beneficial’ (1 Cor. 6:12).

Note for example the first of the twenty-seven ‘fundamental beliefs’ of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which states ‘The Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God, given by divine inspiration through holy men of God, who spoke and wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In this word, God has committed to man the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are the infallible revelation of his will. They are the standard of character, the test of experience, the authoritative revealer of doctrines, and the trustworthy record of God’s acts in history’ (Seventh-day Adventists believe.... A biblical exposition of 27 fundamental doctrines (Washington, D.C.: The Ministerial Association of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1988), 4.)

A point made in The Seventh-day Adventist Bible commentary, 8 vols (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957), 7:728, which states that the title of Revelation ‘denies the charge that the Revelation is a sealed book and thus cannot be understood. It contains a message God proposed that His “servants” on earth should “hear” and “keep” (v.3). This they could not do unless they first understood. It is noticeable that Steve Schneider, an individual who conducted a series of Branch-Davidian recruitment meetings in Manchester in 1990, appealed several times to this kind of argument.