

Apocalyptic Spirituality: Treatises and Letters of Lactantius, Adso of Montier-En-Der, Joachim of Fiore, the Franciscan Spirituals, Savonarola, ed. and trans. by Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 136 – 141, 294 – 296.

Book of Figures, The Fourteenth Table, The Seven-Headed Dragon ¹

I. THE CAPTIONS ²

"There are seven kings. Five have fallen, one is present, and one has not yet come. When he comes, he must remain for a short time" (Apoc. 17:9-10).

Herod. The First Persecution, that of the Jews. The Time of the Apostles. ³

Nero. The Second Persecution, that of the Pagans. The Time of the Martyrs.

Constantius. ⁴The Third Persecution, that of the Heretics. The Time of the Doctors.

Mohammed. The Fourth Persecution, that of the Saracens. The Time of the Virgins.

Mesemoth. ⁵The Fifth Persecution, that of the Sons of Babylon in the Spirit and not in the letter. ⁶The Time of the Conventuals. ⁷"These five have fallen" (Apoc. 17:10). The fifth persecution belongs to the King of Babylon. You will know later why you can write down Mesemoth for that king.

Saladin. The Sixth Persecution has Begun. The Seventh will Follow. "Another will arise after them and he will be more powerful than the previous ones" (Dan. 7:24). There are ten kings.

This is the Seventh King, who is properly called Antichrist, although there will be another like him, no less evil, symbolized by the tail. This is that king of whom Daniel says: "There will arise a king of shameless face who will understand dark designs. His power will be strengthened, but not by his own forces. He shall lay waste all things beyond belief" (Dan. 8:23-24).

Gog. He is the Final Antichrist. ⁸

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II. THE COMMENTARY ⁹

A. The Apocalypse: "A great sign appeared in heaven: a vast red dragon having seven heads and ten horns. His tail dragged down a third part of the stars of heaven and cast them to the earth" (Apoc. 12:3-4). The seven heads of the dragon signify seven tyrants by whom the persecutions of the Church were begun. ¹⁰The dragon's sixth head has ten horns because in the time of the sixth king, he of whom it is said "He is one" (Apoc. 17:10), many kings by destiny will be brought together to do battle with Christ and his elect. As it says in the Apocalypse: "The ten horns which you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but will receive kingly power for an hour after the beast. They have one design, and their power and strength they will give to the beast. They will fight with the Lamb and the Lamb will conquer them. Those who are with him are called elect and faithful. And the ten horns which you saw on the beast will hate the Harlot and will make her desolate and naked. They will eat her flesh and burn her with fire" (Apoc. 17:12-16).

From all this it can be understood that first **of** all the sixth king must begin to rule alone, and then later gather many kings to fight with the Lamb and to smite the sons **of** Babylon who say they are Christians and are not, but are the synagogue **of** Satan (Apoc. 2:9, 3:9). Their intention will be wicked in all things and in every way. Even though they are unwilling and unknowing, they will do God's will in both cases: either by killing the just who are destined to be crowned with martyrdom, or by judging the wicked by whom the earth was corrupted with blood (Ps. 105:38).
[11](#)

After this destruction, which has already in some part begun, the Christians will be victorious. Those who fear the name **of** the Lord will rejoice when that head **of** the beast over which the sixth king reigns has been brought almost to extermination and ruin. Then, after a few years, its wound will be healed, and the king who will be in charge **of** it (whether it be Saladin if he is still alive, or another in his place) will gather a much larger army than before and incite universal war against

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God's elect. Many will be crowned with martyrdom in those days. [12](#)

In that time also the seventh head **of** the dragon will arise, namely, that king who is called Antichrist, and a multitude **of** false prophets with him. We think that he will arise from the West and will come to the aid **of** that king who will be the head **of** the pagans. He will perform great signs before him and his army, just as Simon Magus did in the sight **of** Nero. [13](#) "There will be great tribulation, such as has not been from the beginning, in order to deceive, if possible, even the elect. The Lord will shorten those days for the sake **of** his elect" (Matt. 24:21, 24, 22), so that they will not exceed forty-two months. [14](#)

I should like to consider more closely why the dragon's two heads are joined together at the same time, and why the Church's tribulations are doubled only in the sixth age so that a twin tribulation arises in this time alone. [15](#) Just as the old Babylon was struck under the sixth seal, so the new one will be pierced under the present sixth opening. [16](#) Also under the sixth seal next Holofernes, the leader **of** the army **of** the king **of** Assyria mentioned in the history **of** Judith, and then Aman from the land **of** Agag found in the history **of** Queen Esther hardened their faces to destroy the remnants **of** the Jewish people everywhere. In the same way, after the imminent tempest and the serenity **of** the peace that will follow, the eleventh king mentioned in Daniel (Dan. 7:24) will rise up from the Saracen race, though it might not be the one who is present now (because he could fall and rise again after his overthrow, or another could be raised up in his place). There will be another king from a group **of** heretics who will have an appearance **of** piety and who will lie hypocritically. I say that he is the king **of** whom it is said in Daniel: "There will arise a king with a shameless face who will hatch dark designs. His power will be strengthened, but not by his own forces. He shall lay waste all things beyond belief" (Dan. 8:23-24).

These two will make a conspiracy to wipe the name **of** Christ from the earth. But Christ will conquer them, he who is King **of** Kings and Lord **of** Lords (Apoc. 19:16). There are bound to be many who will fight them for the sake **of** the faith.

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They will die for Christ's name and will at some time gain a triumph from the tyrants. Just as the sons **of** Israel used to walk through the desert for five days and on each morning **of** any week used to collect an omer **of** manna for the day, but only on the sixth day would gather a double ration so they could rest from labor on the sabbath (Exod. 16:16-23), so too he who says to his

people "I will strike you seven times because of your sins" (Lev. 26:24) will permit the two final persecutions to happen in the one sixth time so that at the opening of the seventh seal peace may come and his faithful people can rest from their labors. Therefore, these two last heads are joined together, because both these tribulations of the final week are destined to be fulfilled under the one sixth time.

B. Paul writes about the Antichrist: "He is lifted up and opposed to all that is called God, or that is worshiped, so that he sits in God's Temple, showing himself as if he were God" (2 Thess. 2:4). We should not think, as the holy teachers say, that when he has been judged the end of the world will come soon, just because he is said to come at the end of the world. The end of the world and the last hour are not always to be taken for the final moment, but for the time of the end, as John who wrote over a thousand years ago openly teaches when he says: "Little children, this is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now there are many Antichrists. Hence we know that it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). But we must note that John and John's Master say many Antichrists will come. Paul, on the other hand, foretells that there will be one. Just as many holy kings, priests, and prophets went before the one Christ who was King, priest, and prophet, so likewise many unholy kings, false prophets, and antichrists will go before the one Antichrist who will pretend that he is a king, a priest, and a prophet.

After the destruction of this Antichrist there will be justice on earth and an abundance of peace, "and the Lord will rule from sea to sea and from the river to the ends of the earth" (Ps. 71:8). "Men will turn their swords into plowshares, and their spears into sickles. One nation will not lift up the sword against the other, and there will be no more war" (Isa. 2:4). The

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Jews and many pagan races will be converted to the Lord, ¹⁷ and all people will rejoice in the beauty of peace because the great dragon's heads will be crushed and he will be imprisoned in the abyss (that is, in the remaining races who will live at the ends of the earth). God alone knows the number of the years, months, and days of that time. ¹⁸ When they have been finished and brought to end, once again Satan will be freed from prison to persecute God's elect, because there is still that other Antichrist who is symbolized in the dragon's tail.

At the end of the times and of the years "Satan will be freed from his prison, and will go forth and seduce the nations that are at the four corners of the earth. He will lead them in battle; their number will be like the sands of the sea. They will surround the camp of the saints and the beloved city" (Apoc. 20:7-8). That will be the final battle, in the last moment at the dragon's tail because the heads will have been already crushed. Then the commander of the army will be Gog, the final Antichrist. God will judge him and his army by fire and brimstone poured down from heaven. The devil who led men astray to do all these evil deeds will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the Beast and the False Prophet are (Apoc. 20:9-10). The Beast and the False Prophet (that is, the eleventh king mentioned in Daniel, along with his army) and the Seventh King written of above along with his group of false prophets are next thrown into the lake of fire. At the end Gog and his army will be judged; after them the devil and Gog himself will be cast into the lake of fire where the Beast and the False Prophet already are.

Among all the Antichrists who will appear in the world two are worse than the others: the one who is denoted by the seventh head and the one denoted by the tail. He who is denoted by the seventh head will come in hidden fashion like John the Baptist, who was not known to be Elias. He who is denoted by the tail will come in open fashion like Elias, who will come openly. The Lord promised one Elias and nonetheless two will come, one of whom will be called Elias. God's

saints have specifically spoken of one Antichrist and nonetheless there will be two, one of whom will be the Greatest

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Antichrist. ¹⁹The devil strives for nothing more than to appear like the Most High in every way possible. Because Jesus Christ came in hidden fashion, Satan himself will do his works hiddenly, that is, signs and false wonders will be designed to seduce even the elect if possible. Because at the end of the world Jesus Christ will come to Judgment in open fashion, so too the devil himself will go forth at the end of the world and will appear openly in the days of Gog. He will incite the pagan nations and will lead them to war so that he can pretend that he is Christ come to judge with his saints, avenging all who have suffered wrong. Just as Jesus Christ came with true signs, but cloaked and hidden because of the likeness of sinful human nature so that he was hardly recognized as the Christ by even a few, so too the seventh king will come with false signs and will be hidden and cloaked because of his appearance of spiritual justice, so that only a few will be able to recognize that he is the Antichrist. For this reason even the elect may be led into error if possible. And because the same Christ Jesus will come openly in the glory of his majesty surrounded with a heavenly army of angels and men, so too Satan will appear openly with armies of wicked men, so that on the basis of dread of his forces he may pretend to be him who will come to judge the living and the dead and the world by fire. ²⁰

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1. The most complete study of this figure is to be found in M. Reeves and B. Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae of Joachim of Fiore*, pp. 146-52. The authors point out one important fact for understanding some of the complications of the figure, i.e., that the seven-headed dragon of Apocalypse 12 always implies for Joachim both the four beasts from the seventh chapter of Daniel (the fourth of whom has ten horns and then a smaller eleventh growing in their midst) and the beast from the sea with seven heads and ten horns of Apoc. 13 and 17.
2. The essential message of the diagram is found in the identification of the kings and their respective persecutions inscribed above the dragon's heads and between the necks. Very similar lists are found in two other sources: the Introductory Book to the *Exposition on the Apocalypse*, ff. 10r-11r, where the kings are Herod, Nero, Constantius, Chosroes (whose kingdom was conquered by the sect of Mohammed), one of the kings of Babylon, and Saladin; and in the account of Joachim's interview with Richard the Lionhearted in Messina in 1190 where the heads are Herod, Nero, Constantius, Mohammed, Melsemutus, and Saladin. For the background on Joachim's views on the role of Islam in the apocalyptic crisis of his time, see E. R. Daniel, "Apocalyptic Conversion: The Joachite Alternative to the Crusades", *Traditio* 25 (1969): 127-39.
3. Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae*, pp. 149-50, note that passages in the *Exposition on the Apocalypse* also involve concordances of different orders of the Church raised up to overcome various persecutions. Ideally, this would be extended to include the order of the spiritual men for the time of the double persecution of the sixth age, though Joachim nowhere makes this explicit.
4. Constantius II (337-61), the persecuting Arian emperor.
5. *The Exposition on the Apocalypse*, f. 134va, says that the Mauri are popularly called Meselmuti, so Joachim seems to have had some north African Moorish ruler in mind here. See Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae*, pp. 87-88.
6. Other texts in the *Exposition* and in the early *Commentary on an Unknown Prophecy*

identify the fifth head with a persecution of the King of Babylon, that is, a German Emperor.

7. That is, clerics attached to collegiate churches.
8. This is inscribed at the dragon's tail.
9. The Commentary is in two parts: A, a reflection on Apoc. 12:3-4,

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giving further details on the sixth and seventh heads of the dragon; and B, a defense of Joachim's unusual doubling of the final Antichrist made necessary by his belief in a coming third state of history after the defeat of the seventh head of the dragon.

10. One of the most common patterns of history found in Joachim's writings, both early and late, is the parallel between the seven persecutions of the people of Israel in the time of the Old Testament and the seven persecutions of the Church in the era of the New. This is most frequently symbolized by the seven seals of the Apocalypse and their respective openings. See M. Reeves and B. Hirsh-Reich, "The Seven Seals in the Writings of Joachim of Fiore", *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 21 (1954): 211-47.
11. Speculation over the identity of the ten kings portrayed in the ten horns of the beast goes back to the patristic period when they were generally seen as ten rulers who would destroy the Roman Empire. Joachim sees them as kings who will be gathered by the sixth head (Saladin) and who will unwittingly serve God's design by slaying Christians.
12. As E.R. Daniel points out in "Apocalyptic Conversion," pp. 132-34, this passage is intelligible only if written before the death of Saladin in 1193. It is possible that Joachim expected a temporary victory over Islam from the Third Crusade (1189-1192), though it is clear that he later abandoned this view.
13. The belief in two Antichrists, one from the East and one from the West, common among patristic authors, may be echoed here, but a more likely background is to be found in Joachim's fears of an alliance between Western Patarene heretics and Moslems (see, e.g., *Exposition on the Apocalypse*, f. 134). The Simon Magus of Acts 8:9-24 became the subject of later legends in which he served as Nero's wonder-working adviser who was eventually destroyed by Saint Peter.
14. Forty-two months, or three and a half years, the traditional extent of the reign of the Antichrist.
15. Reeves and Hirsch-Reich, *The Figurae*, p. 150, show that the doubling of the persecution in the sixth age is a necessity in Joachim's thought so that the seventh age may be one of complete peace.
16. In a typical concordance, the abbot parallels the victory of Cyrus over Babylon in the sixth age of the Old Testament with the coming defeat of the German Empire at the hands of the revived sixth head allied with the seventh. Compare this with the "Letter to the Abbot Valdona" and the "Letter to All the Faithful," which also expect the destruction of the empire.
17. The conversion of the Jews was always an important theme in Joachim's apocalyptic. See B. Hirsch-Reich, "Joachim von Fiore und das Judentum", *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* IV (Cologne, 1966), pp. 228-63.

18. Joachim is notably chary of speculating on the length of the coming status of peace.
19. The term *maximus* or *magnus Antichristus*, later popularized by Peter Olivi in his *Postil on the Apocalypse*, seems to have originated with Joachim.

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20. In the words of Reeves and Hirsch-Reich: "This is the programme of the Last Things which is Joachim's unique contribution to this subject. Unlike the traditional view he places his 'age of gold' after, not before, the great manifestation of the Antichrist, but, contrary to what is often understood as Joachimism, he sees this third *status* itself as ending on a note of final tribulation" (*The Figurae*, p. 152).