The (Latin) Revelation of John about Antichrist

A translation and introduction

by Charles D. Wright

The Revelation of John about Antichrist (Rev. John Ant.) is a brief Latin apocalypse in which Christ responds to questions from John the Evangelist about the end of the world, focusing mainly on Antichrist. Rev. John Ant. is not a translation of any known Eastern apocalypse, and there is no concrete evidence that it was translated from Greek or another language. There are late-medieval to early-modern Irish translations or adaptations of Rev. John Ant. whose relation to it has gone unnoticed because Rev. John Ant. itself has remained almost completely unknown and unstudied, despite the fact that two versions appeared in print in the later nineteenth century.

Contents

Rev. John Ant. survives in a Longer Version and a Shorter Version. Both begin (without a specific narrative setting) with John asking the Lord about the end of the world. Christ responds with a list of portents that will occur at that time, and reveals that Antichrist will reign and perform signs and miracles. John then asks what Antichrist will look like (1). Christ answers by revealing details of Antichrist’s birth and upbringing and by giving an extended description of Antichrist’s grotesque physical appearance (2; this description is lacking in the Shorter Version). Christ continues with an account of Antichrist’s branding of his followers and a list of his miracles (3). He then reveals a sign that will mark the day of Antichrist’s birth and describes the social evils and cosmological disasters that will occur during his time (4). Christ next relates how Antichrist will slay his adversaries Enoch and Elijah and then in turn will be slain by the archangel Michael, after which three and a half years will remain until the end of the world. The Shorter Version ends here, while the Longer Version continues with very brief descriptions of a great silence in heaven and earth (6) and of the resurrection of the dead (7).

Manuscripts and Versions

The Longer Version of Rev. John Ant. survives in three late-medieval English manuscripts (two complete, one fragmentary), as well as in fragmentary form as brief quotations from a lost manuscript incorporated into one of three Irish translations (described below). The Latin manuscripts of the Longer Version are:

London, British Library, Add. 33969, fol. 89v (early 14th cent.; from Lincoln) [contains only 1:1–4; 2:1–7; 3:1, 3; 2:8]

London, British Library, Royal 17.B.xvii, fol. 97r–98v (late 14th cent.; Northern England)

London, British Library, Add. 37787, fol. 23r–24v (late 14th or early 15th cent.; Bordesley, Worcestershire)
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Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 23 N 15 (490), pp. 53–58 (fragmentary Latin quotations in Irish Text 2, written in 1740 with additions in 1810)

Carl Horstmann printed the text of the Royal manuscript, without commentary or discussion, in an appendix to his 1895–1896 study Yorkshire Writers, where it has remained virtually unnoticed ever since.¹

The Shorter Version was inserted by Roger of Howden (Hoveden) in his Chronica under the year 1190–1191 as the last of three “views” (opiniones) about Antichrist (the first consisting of an interview between Joachim of Fiore and Richard the Lionheart, the second of extracts from the popular ninth-century treatise De ortu et tempore Antichristi by Adso). Roger claims to have found this third opinio “among the books of blessed Pope Gregory,” evidently referring to manuscripts containing works by Gregory the Great; but no manuscript of the Shorter Version separate from Roger’s chronicle has been identified. Roger’s Chronica was edited by William Stubbs in 1868–1871 from the autograph manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 582; the other manuscripts of the Chronica that include this addition therefore have no textual authority, since Laud Misc. 582 is their archetype). Stubbs deemed the work a “curious document” but was not able to identify it.² The text has occasionally been mentioned in passing by scholars more interested in Joachim of Fiore’s account of the Antichrist, but to my knowledge there has been no extended discussion since it was published by Stubbs,³ nor has it previously been identified as a variant version of the same apocryphon printed a few decades later by Horstmann, who did not refer to the version in Roger’s Chronica.

Noteworthy in its own right as a previously neglected apocryphal apocalypse of John, Rev. John Ant. is also important as the hitherto unrecognized source of four vernacular Irish Antichrist texts,⁴ three of which (Irish Texts 1–3) represent fairly close and related translations, though with substantial elaborations in Irish Texts 2 and 3. The fourth (Geimhuih Antichrist or "Birth of Antichrist") is a looser adaptation but nonetheless clearly dependent on Rev. John Ant. In addition, chapter 7 of the Longer Version must share a common source with certain Irish and Old English descriptions of the resurrection of the dead. The relationship between Rev. John Ant. and its vernacular analogues will be detailed in the forthcoming edition of the Irish texts together with the Latin texts of Rev. John Ant. in the series Apocrypha Hiberniae.⁵

Literary and Theological Importance

As the summary above indicates, Rev. John Ant.’s account of Antichrist and the end times is for the most part an amalgam of traditional motifs, both scriptural and apocryphal.⁶

1. Horstmann, Yorkshire Writers, 2:63–64. The work’s existence has been briefly registered by cataloguers of the three manuscripts, but without discussion and without reference to the Shorter Version in the chronicle of Roger of Howden.
2. Roger of Howden, Chronica Magistri, 3:85–86.
4. See McNamara, “Irish Legend of Antichrist.”
6. Bousset, Antichrist Legend, remains a valuable overview, but has been importantly supplemented by.
Within this conventional framework, however, there are a number of rare, archaic, or exotic details and embellishments. The most striking is the elaborate and grotesque physiognomy of Antichrist (2:2–8), a feature more characteristic of Eastern apocalyptic. Antichrist's birth is, apparently uniquely, said to be manifested throughout the world by a sign—a corpse appearing in every house—that is supported by an otherwise unattested quotation from "Scripture" (4:1). The social evils that occur in his time include the immodesty of women who display their menstrual cloths (4:3). The list of Antichrist's miracles (3:4) includes raising the dead (though this is a sham) and turning trees upside down and making their roots flower. (The latter miracle—apparently unique to Rev. John Ant. in Latin apocalyptic tradition—found its way into the Middle English Chester play The Coming of Antichrist and several other late-medieval vernacular Antichrist texts, and was occasionally illustrated in manuscripts of these works.) When Michael slays Antichrist, he cuts him in two with his sword (5:5). During the period of silence that follows, no creature in the world makes a sound or is heard (6:2). The angels do not blow trumpets but proclaim "Arise!" three times, awakening all those who had been burned by fire, submerged in the sea, or eaten by beasts (7:1–2).

It is also worth remarking how many traditional elements of the Antichrist legend the author of Rev. John Ant. ignores. He has no interest in relating Antichrist to any historical or end-time tyrants. There is no account of kings who will precede Antichrist—including the last Roman emperor—and no reference to Gog and Magog or the armies that precede Antichrist. There is no reference to Antichrist's number 666 or its mystical significance. There is no reference to Antichrist sitting in the temple of Jerusalem (though the Irish Texts 2 and 3 do include this episode), and his specific relation to the Jews is barely mentioned. In short, Rev. John Ant. is distinctive in its selection of traditional elements as well as in its transmission of several rare ones.

Rev. John Ant. belongs to the genre of the post-resurrection revelatory dialogue. The work bears a very general resemblance to the much-longer Greek First Apocryphal Apocalypse of John (or Apocalypse of John the Theologian), but specific parallels are few, and most are commonplaces. In chapters 6–9 of the Greek apocalypse, John asks Christ to reveal Antichrist's nature (6) and Christ responds with a physical description (7), but the details do not agree. Christ then tells John that he will send Enoch and Elijah, who will expose Antichrist but then be slain by him (8). Then Gabriel and Michael will sound among others, Emmerson, Antichrist in the Middle Ages; Jenks, Origins and Early Development; McGinn, "Portraying Antichrist"; Geert W. Lorein, "The Antichrist in the Fathers and Their Exegetical Basis," SacEr 41 (2003): 5–60; Kevin L. Hughes, Constructing Antichrist: Paul, Biblical Commentary, and the Development of Doctrine in the Early Middle Ages (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005); and Cristian Badilota, Métamorphoses de l'Antichrist chez les Pères de l'église, Théologie Historique, 116 (Paris: Beauchesne, 2005). Rev. John Ant. is not referenced in any of these studies.


8. See, for example, Emmerson, Antichrist, fig. 4 and p. 198. For the Chester play see Linus Urban Lucken, Antichrist and the Prophets in the Chester Cycle (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1940). 44 and 53.


The year by original John does Rev. physiognomy seems consistent with the recent discovery of Latin Revelatio Iohannis, particularly in the details of Antichrist's physiognomy.

Original Language, Date, and Provenance

While the contents of Rev. John Ant. share many features with early Christian apocalyptic, in its surviving form the work is not earlier than the second half of the tenth century, since it appears to draw on Adso of Montier-en-Der's De ortu et tempore Antichristi, written about 950. Roger's insertion of a text of the Shorter Version in his Chronicle for the year 1190-1191 proves that this version existed by the late twelfth century, and probably by the mid-twelfth century. Close parallels in Irish and Old English vernacular texts for chapter 7 of the Longer Version suggest that this chapter is based on a source that existed already by the tenth century; but since chapters 6 and 7 are lacking in the Shorter Version and also in Irish translations of the Longer Version, both could be later additions to the original work. Lexical evidence common to both versions, moreover, favors a twelfth-century date of composition. The Latin word menstruaciones (at 4:3 in the Longer Version), meaning "menses," but in this context perhaps by extension "menstrual cloths," is exceedingly rare prior to the Renaissance and is not attested at all before 1255. While it is possible that menstruaciones existed prior to the twelfth century, its occurrence in Rev. John Ant. is consistent with a twelfth-century date. Allowing for some prior circulation of the work before it was discovered by Roger of Howden, a mid-twelfth-century date for the composition of Rev. John Ant. is the most likely.

Though absent in Roger of Howden's Chronica, the physical description of Antichrist does occur in the three Irish translations, which also indirectly bear witness to a version of Rev. John Ant. lacking chapters 6-7. The fantastic and lurid quality of the Antichrist physiognomy may well have led Roger (or an earlier copyist) to censor it. Even if the description of Antichrist is a later addition to Rev. John Ant., it certainly draws on much older sources, for some striking parallels to certain details exist in a fragmentary apocalypse copied in the tenth century, and the inclusion of a physical description of Antichrist seems to have been a stock feature of such apocalypses from an early date.

Aside from its length, the text of the Shorter Version does not differ greatly from the Longer Version in the passages transmitted by both; the notes to the translation draw attention to the more substantive differences in individual readings. Only select major differences in the Irish versions will be noted here, along with any individual readings that indirectly support an emendation of the base manuscript (British Library, Add. 37787).

The exclusively Irish and English transmission (on present evidence) of Rev. John Ant.,

11. The Revelatio Iohannis, recently discovered by Jean-Daniel Kaestli, has not yet been edited, but a description of its contents has been published: Kaestli, "Un nuovo apocrifo," with Italian translation of the text by Norelli, "Appendix."

12. Adso of Montier-en-Der, Adso Dervensis, Rev. John Ant. appears to draw on Adso for the information that Antichrist will be raised in Chorazin and dwell in Bethsaida (2:9).

13. The Old English passages have been discussed (without reference to Rev. John Ant.) in connection with the theme "the ways of bodily destruction and the resurrection" by James E. Cross, "On The Wanderer Lines 80–84: A Study of a Figure and Theme," Vetenskaps-Societetens i Lund Årsbok (1958–1959): 86–99.

14. The word may be a corruption of menstruatæ in 4 Ezra 5:8 (see the note to 4:3 below). An attestation of Latin menstruatio from 1255 is cited by the Oxford English Dictionary in its etymology of "menstruation."

15. The Avranches apocalypse, edited by Bischoff, "Vom Ende der Welt."

16. See note 7 above.
as well as its survival in the vernacular Irish versions, raises the question of an Insular origin, though it may only be an Insular translation or adaptation of an older Continental (or perhaps Eastern) apocalypse. The English circulation of the work is localized in the North and Midlands. Roger was from Howden in the East Riding of Yorkshire, though he traveled widely in the service first of Henry II and then of Hugh of Puisset, bishop of Durham, so it is not possible to say where he encountered a copy of Rev. John Ant.; but all three manuscripts of the Longer Version are northern: one (British Library, Royal 17.B.xvii) is perhaps from Derbyshire, and contains works by the Yorkshire writer Richard Rolle, while the other two are from Worcestershire and Lincoln.

Translation
Because I believe that the description of Antichrist is an original part of the work, I have chosen to translate the Longer Version of the text instead of the Shorter Version. Manuscript L (British Library, Add. 33969), though a century older than A (British Library, Add. 37787) and R (British Library, Royal 17.B.xvii), transmits only the first half of the work, so it cannot serve as the base manuscript for a critical edition. The text of A preserves a more logical and presumably original sequence of verses in chapters 2–3, and therefore is the base manuscript for the critical text translated here, but I have emended A as necessary where A is corrupt, or when another manuscript offers a superior reading. The chapter and verse divisions are my own.

Only scriptural sources are cited here; for a full discussion of the sources and analogues of Rev. John Ant., especially in other apocryphal texts and (for chap. 7) in Old English texts, see my forthcoming critical edition.

Sigla
Longer Version:
A London, British Library, Add. 37787
R London, British Library, Royal 17.B.xvii
L London, British Library, Add. 33969
D Dublin, Royal Irish Academy, 23 N 15 (490) = Latin quotations in Irish Text 2

Shorter Version:
C Roger of Howden, Chronica (for the year 1190/1191) in Oxford, Bodleian Libr., Laud Misc. 582

Irish Versions:
Ir1 Irish Text 1
Ir2 Irish Text 2
Ir3 Irish Text 3
GA Geinimhuin Antntichrist in the Irish Life of John

Bibliography

EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS
Roger of Howden (Hoveden). Chronica Magistri Rogeri de Houedene. Edited by William
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STUDIES


The (Latin) Revelation of John about Antichrist

John asks Christ about the end of the world and about Antichrist
1 'John the Evangelist' asked the Lord about the end of the world. 2 The Lord replied to him: "The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, and blood shall drip from trees, the stones shall utter voices; the peoples shall be troubled. 3 Antichrist—that is, the devil—will reign and will perform great wonders and signs among the people."

4 And John said to the Lord, "Lord, in what likeness will he be, so that those who see him will not believe in him?" 5, 6

Antichrist's birth and upbringing, and his physical description
2 'Christ said,' "He will be born to a woman, a harlot from the tribe of Dan in Israel, having 600 cubits in the length of his body and 400 in width. 3 And he will have one eye in his forehead, one ear in his head, (and his) lip hanging down to his chest. 4 He will have no upper teeth or knees; 5 the soles of his feet (will be) round like the wheels of a cart. 6 One rib will be visible in his left side without others. 7 The hairs of his head will be black and terrible. 8 A threefold fume will go out through his nose like a sulphurous flame reaching up to heaven. 9 He will be raised in Chorazin; after that he will dwell in the city of Bethsaida, but only for a few days. 10


a. There is no title in A; R has the heading, "About Antichrist according to John the Evangelist"; L: "About the gospel." I have chosen the title "Revelation" instead of "Apocalypse" since there are several apocryphal Apocalypses of John in addition to the canonical one. The qualification "about Antichrist" (based on R's heading), accurately summarizes the main focus of the revelation and also serves to distinguish this apocryphal revelation of John from the recently discovered Revelatio Iohannis.

b. C identifies John as "apostle and evangelist, a virgin chosen by God and the more greatly loved among the others."

c. D: "The sun and the moon shall be turned to darkness."

d. C lacks John's question about Antichrist in 1:4 as well as Christ's description of him in 2:2-8.

e. C lacks "Christ said" and the verses it retains (see previous note) are in the order 3:1, 2:1, 3:3, 2:9, 3:2, 3:4.

f. A lacks "his."

g. R lacks "without others."

h. L moves 3:1 and 3:3 after 2:7.

i. D lacks "threefold" and lists the features in the order eye, nose, knees.

j. R and L: "and."

k. L breaks off with "hea[...]."

l. R has this and the following four verses in the order 3:1, 3:3, 2:9, 3:2, 3:4-5.
Antichrist's victims and followers, and his miracles

3 4No one will be able to hide himself from him. 5 All those whom he himself will kill and who will die from hunger and thirst under his dominion will be God's elect. 6 And all who will believe in him will mark with a single letter on their forehead, and no one will be able to erase that device. 7 He will raise feigned dead, he will make rivers reverse their course, he will uproot trees and turn the branches to the ground and their roots aloft, and he will make them flower by his diabolical wiles. 8 And he will seduce many.

The tribulations of the time of Antichrist

4 4On the day he is born, all who inhabit the four parts of the world will realize he has been born, as the Scripture testifies that says, 'In every house the corpse of a dead man will be the sign.' 5 Then in that time father will kill son, and son father, and brother brother, and in every dealing there will be no faithful person. 6 Women will reveal their menstrual cloths and will not conceal themselves from men. 7 Churches will be destroyed, priests will lament; people will have no thought for holy relics, nor for those places where the bodies of saints had lain at rest. 8 They will worship profane idols, like pagans and Jews. 9 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes in various places, plagues and famines, and stars will fall to the earth, rivers and all waters that are below heaven will be turned to blood.

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a. C lacks "to hide."

b. R: "who have died."

c. RLC have the present tense.

d. So RC; A lacks "with a single" and adds "them" in the margin to read: "marks them with a brand" (an alternative meaning of character).

e. R lacks "no one."

f. The expression "feigned dead" seems to mean that Antichrist "raises" persons only pretending to be dead, as in the twelfth-century Ludus de Antichristo, ed. Gerhard Günther, Der Antichrist: Der staufische Ludus de Antichristo (Hamburg: Friedrich Witter Verlag, 1970), 140 (scene 69, stage direction).

g. Ir 1–3 have nothing corresponding to this verse.

h. This alleged quotation of "Scripture" is not elsewhere attested.

i. So RC; A lacks "dealing" (Latin re might also be translated "circumstance," "matter").

j. C has the plural "faithful persons"; A adds "for you."

k. C has "will receive"; in the following clause A has present tense "conceal."


m. R has "from everyone."

n. R lacks "Churches will be destroyed" and adds "faithful" before "priests."

o. C adds "and Saracens."
Antichrist slays Enoch and Elijah, and is slain by Michael

5 "During his reign the two prophets Enoch and Elijah, who are now said in Paradise because of the expectation of death, will wage war against him. And Antichrist will slay them. They will lie dead in the streets for three days and three nights. On the fourth day they will arise into eternal life. On the next, that is on the last (day), almighty God who desires everyone to be saved, will dispatch his archangel Michael, holding in (his) hand his sharp sword—that is, the sword of the Holy Spirit—and he will slay him and split him in two from the top to the bottom; not so that the world should be destroyed, but so that it should be made anew in a better condition. It will be thus for three years and six months until the consummation of the world.

Silence in heaven

6 "After these tribulations there will be a great silence in heaven and earth for forty days and nights. No creature will make a sound or be heard.

The resurrection of the dead

7 "And angels will come from the four parts of the earth and cry out, saying three times, ‘Arise! Arise! Arise!’ And all who have died from Adam until that day will rise in the age of thirty years, whatever fire had burned on earth, animals devoured, or sea engulfed.”

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a. So RC; A lacks “now.”
b. I adopt C’s reading tristantur, an allusion to a common Insular motif that Enoch and Elijah are sad despite being in Paradise: see John Carey, ed., In Tenga Bithnua / The Ever-new Tongue. Apocrypha Hiberniae, vol. 1: Apocalyptica 1 (CCSA 16; Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 366. A reads “are ministered to” (ministrantur); R “are settled in” (collocantur).
c. So C; AR read “war against war.”
d. R has “God Christ” instead of “almighty God.”
e. So RC; A lacks “who desires everyone to be saved.”
f. R lacks “dispatch” and “his.”
g. C: “In.”
h. Ends here, as do 1r 1–3; GA translates chapter 6 and has a loose adaptation of chapter 7.
i. R: “thirty.”
j. R lacks “three times.”
k. A adds “ye dead, come to the true judgment,” probably elaborating from memory of a popular dictum attributed to Jerome in the Middle Ages: “Whether I eat or drink, or whatever else I may do, I always seem to hear that trumpet resounding in my ears, ‘Arise, ye dead, come to judgment!” See William W. Heist, The Fifteen Signs before Doomsday (East Lansing: Michigan State College Press, 1952), 40–41 n. 21.
l. R has “33”; the perfect age at the resurrection was believed to be “the age of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13), which could be reckoned either as the age of one’s baptism or death.
m. A ends here; the remaining words are only in R, but equivalent phrasing is found in the Irish and Old English analogues.
n. R alone adds “will worship,” an abrupt concluding phrase not paralleled in the Irish and Old English analogues.