

A Refutation of Fred Harding's
“The Apocalypse Deception: The Book of Revelation is not what it claims to be”
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Introduction

To most faithful and traditional Christians, the mere title of this book has a blasphemous ring. It is provocative to claim that any book is a total deception, most of all if that book is held to be sacred by a faith community. If the author identified with a rival religious community, the claim would be bad enough. What makes it even more odious is that, seeming to be Christian himself, the author argues from the other books in the New Testament and admits his aim is to remove the Apocalypse from the New Testament canon. Aware that this is unattainable physically, he attempts to de-canonize the book spiritually by demonizing it and all those involved in its making. This intention betrays a special hatred for the Apocalypse, which is both religious and intense. Though presented as scholarship and feigning to continue in the footsteps of the biblical scholar R.H. Charles, Harding's polemical and antagonistic thrust shows he is closer to D.H. Lawrence, et al.¹ Antipathy and contempt notwithstanding, Fred Harding's book sets a challenge, throws down the gauntlet, to those who are offended by it and wish to provide an antidote for its venom. I hope I am not the first or the last to accept this challenge.

The author's overarching strategy of demonization is structured on the first two verses of the text, where its chain of transmission is outlined: “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show his servants what must happen soon and he signified it by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to all that he saw*” (Rev 1,1-2). Nobody in this chain of transmission escapes Harding's ‘thoroughgoing demonology’, starting from the last to the first: John of Patmos is not John the Apostle but the heretic Cerinthus, the revealing angel is not the angel of the Lord but the messenger of Satan, Jesus Christ is not the expected Messiah but Lucifer, and Almighty God is not God but Satan. With monotonous hostility, Harding searches the Bible, Christian tradition and modern scholarship until he finds an argument, any argument, that will help him to demonize each and every element responsible for the Apocalypse. His book is a compendium of arguments, new and old, whose sole purpose is to discredit the Apocalypse and the authority of all its sources.

Our method is simple. Harding's interpretive assaults are built upon several false premises. Our plan is to identify these, and take them down one by one, so that there will be no need to get caught up in the complex web of conjecture and presumption that spins off them. Once caught in that web, it would require a lengthy book to disentangle the truth from the error, distortion, and outright fabrication. As the first seven chapters of his book are concerned with questions of authorship, it is clear that Harding's main assault has been directed against the author of the Apocalypse, and so this will be the main focus of our response. The other three chapters (chs. 8,9 and 10) concern parts of the text that have been specifically selected to attack the other links in the chain of transmission and will be dealt with separately.

¹ On p. 45, there is a staggering confusion of D.H. Lawrence with Lawrence of Arabia (T.E. Lawrence), which can be taken as a warning sign: if the writer is capable of confusing two authors who lived only 90 years ago, how is he not going to confuse authors who lived 1,900 years ago?

Our refutation of Harding's thesis will refer to recent or authoritative research by biblical scholars, whose work will be duly acknowledged. It is true that Harding also quotes from the works of certain scholars, but it should also be said that, except for Richard Bauckham, these are neither recent nor authoritative in their fields. For example, he tends to quote from 19th century encyclopedias and journals on Biblical topics, and treats the commentary of R.H. Charles (1920) as his main authority on the Apocalypse. Pierson Parker is another favorite (c.1960). Elaine Pagels is claimed as an authority on the Apocalypse, although her speciality is Gnostic literature. In summary, Harding's scholarly sources are carefully chosen, somewhat quirky and outdated by more recent studies.

Chapters One to Seven

Harding begins his assault on the Apocalypse by denying its apostolic authorship and authority. The history of this type of challenge is long and complex, and provides an endless supply of fuel for further speculation and hypotheses. Harding has managed to combine arguments old and new and has skillfully woven them into a seamless narrative, which draws the reader little by little to its predetermined conclusion, the one reflected in his book's title. The whole edifice, however, is built upon four tenuous pillars, or premises, and to these we will focus our attention. Harding claims:

1. *That John the Apostle, the author of the Apocalypse and Gospel according to tradition, was martyred by King Agrippa's men, along with his brother James, in 42-43 CE.*
2. *That references to John the Elder in early Christian writings have no relation whatsoever to John the Apostle, son of Zebedee.*
3. *That the author of the Apocalypse was Cerinthus, a heretic from Ephesus, writing under the pseudonym of John.*
4. *That John's exile on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1,9) never happened and was invented by the author pretending to be John.*

1. Harding claims John the Apostle, the author of the Apocalypse and Gospel according to tradition, was martyred by King Agrippa's men, along with his brother James, in 42-43 CE. However, there is no unambiguous evidence for the early death of John the Apostle before 5th century CE, but there is ample evidence for his survival to the end of the first century CE, in Ephesus.

Harding starts his investigation with the announcement of the early martyrdom of the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, despite the absence of any contemporary record of this. He alleges that John was killed by the sword of Herod Agrippa's men, c. 43 CE, along with his older brother James, though only James' murder is reported in Acts 12,2. Furthermore, St. Paul encounters John in Jerusalem, c. 49 CE, along with Peter and James the brother of the Lord, and calls them 'pillars' of the Church (Gal 2,9). So, on the fragile premise of the Apostle John's early martyrdom, and regardless of the lack of evidence, Harding sets out on his search for the author of the Johannine writings, namely the Gospel, the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Letters and the Apocalypse.

To try to justify the whole exercise, Harding cites the scholar Hugh Schonfield (1901-1988), who mentions an excerpt by the Byzantine Church historian Philip of Side (c. 440 CE),² claiming that Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis near Ephesus, had written in his long-lost work *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord* (c.110-120 CE) that "John the theologian and James his brother were done away

² The excerpt survives in a 7th century collection preserved in a single 14th- 15th century manuscript called *Codex Baroccianus* 142 (also known as the 'De Boor fragment').

with by Jews”, without giving any details of time, place or manner. Harding supports this statement with a passage from the 6th–7th century CE anti-Christian, Jewish tractate called *Toldot Jeshu*, which describes the arrest and beheading of a certain John at the orders of the king (ch. 8). So, the entire narrative Harding is about to relate is built upon the 5th century report of a vague 2nd century statement about the martyrdom of James and John, and a 6th–7th century collection of anti-Christian fables.

Not only is this evidence insufficient to justify Harding’s claim for the Apostle John’s early death, but it is also readily disprovable, as pointed out by Prof. Paul N. Anderson. In one of the surviving fragments (*Frag.* 4.3), Philip of Side goes on to confirm exactly what Eusebius had written in his *Church History*, that John the son of Zebedee lived a long life, culminating in Ephesus, where he died at the start of Trajan’s reign, and that during Domitian’s persecution against Christians, harsher than that of Nero, John the Apostle and Evangelist was banished to Patmos.³ In the 9th century, another historian called George Hamartolos, echoing Philip of Side’s reference to Papias’ remark on the martyrdom of James and John, also agrees with Eusebius about the Apostle John’s residence in Ephesus.⁴ So, whatever Philip of Side may have understood from reading the long-lost work of Papias, it was clearly not about the early martyrdom of St. John. It was, in fact, perfectly consistent with Church tradition, as recorded by Eusebius in his *Church History*. After all, Eusebius, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and many other early Church Fathers had read the *Exposition* by Papias, and none of them had ever noted that it referred to the Apostle John’s early death. In fact, they all remained convinced that John had lived to an old age in Ephesus and was the author of the Johannine Gospel, Apocalypse and Letters.⁵

As a last resort, Harding quotes R.H. Charles’ suggestion that there must have been an ecclesiastical conspiracy to cover-up the evidence of the Apostle John’s early death, and several scholars have followed him in that ruse. It should be enough to remind these scholars that the early Church welcomed martyrdoms and was never known to hide them. On the contrary, they were and are solemnly commemorated every year. Furthermore, as the martyrdom of John and James had been

³ “The Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel: Some Clues to John’s Authorship and the State of the Johannine Question”, by Paul N. Anderson, p. 19, accessible at www.academia.edu ; published in “El Evangelio de Juan. Origen, Contenido, Perspectivas—The Gospel of John. Origin, Content, Perspectives”, *Colección Teología Hoy*, No. 80. Edited by Bernardo Estrada and Luis Guillermo Sarasa (Bogota: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana / Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas, 2018), 17-82. Presented at the 2016 Montreal SNTS meetings. From the introduction on [academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) website: “this expansive analysis of the last 130 years of discussion on Johannine authorship suggests that the state of the Johannine Question is still open for discussion. The “Early Death of John” is an embarrassment to critical scholarship--neither Philip Sidetes nor George Hamartalos ever believed it--and Pierson Parker's 21 “assured results of critical scholarship” should be critically parked by the curbside. None of them is compelling, and every other theory of Johannine authorship brings with it new critical problems even more formidable than a modified traditional approach.”

⁴ Also affirmed by Paul N. Anderson, *op.cit.* p.19. The 9th century *Chronicle* by George Hamartolos survives in 26 manuscripts dated to 11th–12th century. 25 of these manuscripts record that John died peacefully, but one recalls the excerpt of Philip of Side (*Codex Coislinianus* III.134): “John has been deemed worthy of martyrdom. For Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis, having been an eyewitness of him (or of it?), says in his second book of his ‘Dominical Oracles’, that he was killed by Jews, having evidently fulfilled with his brother the prediction of Christ concerning them”. Quoted from R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 171.

⁵ A full list of references, in the *Church History* of Eusebius, to John’s residence in Ephesus, his exile in Patmos, and his authorship of the Johannine Apocalypse, Gospel and Letters, in various combinations, would look like this: III.1.1; 18.1-3; 20.11; 23.1-4,6; 24.7-14; 24.17-18; 31.2-3; IV.14.6; 18.8; V. 8.4-7; 18.13; 24.3; VI.25.9-10. It is a huge body of evidence collated from the earliest Christian sources in Ephesus, Asia Minor and the Eastern Mediterranean.

foretold by Christ (Mk 10,39; Mt 20,23), there would have been a great incentive to make it known, as the fulfilment of Christ's prophecy. It is baseless and irrational to propose that the Church would have hushed up the Apostle John's martyrdom, in order to falsely claim he had written the books attributed to him, but—according to a few modern scholars—were written by someone else.

Finally, no reliance can be placed on the stories in *Toldot Jeshu*, not just because of the mockery, malice and distortion on display there, but especially because the report about John's beheading actually takes place while Jesus is still alive. If there is any truth in this report, it is probably confused with the killing of John the Baptist.

Relevant here, but not mentioned until later, is the establishment of a date in the liturgical calendar, December 27th, to celebrate the "martyrdom of the apostles John and James at Jerusalem". It appeared first in the Syrian martyrology of Edessa in 411 CE, but ultimately derived from a Greek martyrology composed at the Byzantine city of Nicomedia c. 360 CE, more than 300 years after the alleged event. The factors leading to the adoption of this commemoration are not known, but it is likely to have been the presumed fulfilment of Christ's prediction about the sons of Zebedee (Mk 10,39, Mt 20,23). The joint commemoration spread to a few areas, but not to all, and certainly not to Jerusalem, where the absence of a memorial to the martyrdom of St. John the Apostle, up to this day, is strong evidence against its veracity.

The persistent 'rumours' that the Apostle John died an early death are unfounded, for the evidence is near to non-existent. In contrast, the evidence that he lived to the end of the first century in Ephesus and was exiled for a time on Patmos, is pervasive and persuasive. Eusebius refers to "ample evidence", from "early Christian tradition" (e.g., *Ch Hist* III.18.1-3; 20,11; 23.1-6). If this early tradition is accepted, there is no need to speculate who wrote the Apocalypse, for the John who wrote the Gospel and lived to a great age in Ephesus, was the same John who was exiled for a time on Patmos, the island where he wrote the Apocalypse. The question is no longer who wrote the Apocalypse and Gospel, but how was this achieved by the same person, John the Apostle, son of Zebedee.

The force of this conclusion may explain why it is necessary for Harding to invoke the 'literary critical objection' of St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, still favoured by scholars, including R.H. Charles (p. 44-55). Around 250 CE, Dionysius argued that whereas the Apostle John wrote the fourth Gospel, he could not have written the Apocalypse, because it uses different terms and expressions and is full of grammatical mistakes, which he calls 'barbarisms and solecisms' (*Ch Hist* VII.25). On this everyone is agreed: the Greek of the Apocalypse is inelegant and often grammatically incorrect. For Dionysius this could only mean that it was not written by the apostle, to whom God had surely given the gift of good writing. But the very same argument can, and should, be applied in reverse: the poor literary quality of the text is exactly what you would expect from a first century CE Galilean Jew who had learnt Greek as a third language, after Aramaic and Hebrew. It is an unmistakable sign of authenticity, especially when attached to a severe warning against changing the text (Rev 22,18-19). The unpolished Greek eliminates the suspicion that it was written by an educated priestly scribe. Moreover, shining through the barbarous Greek is an Aramaic text written in the Biblical Hebrew narrative style, somewhat similar to the ancient Targums. This is also what you would expect from a Galilean Jew, whose memory of the Scriptures was first formed by the Aramaic Targums. And by prohibiting alterations to the text, the Apostle John was ensuring that this mark of authenticity is preserved. In this way, he may be indicating that the text should be retranslated literally into Hebrew or Aramaic—the traditional language of prophecy.

2. Harding claims that references to John the Elder in early Christian writings have no relation whatsoever to John the Apostle, son of Zebedee. On the contrary, there are good reasons to identify references to John the Elder with John the Apostle and to see them as the same person.

Those who continue to believe in the early death of John the Apostle, despite the paucity of evidence, cling to a tentative proposal of Eusebius, arising from another excerpt from the long-lost *Exposition* of Papias, identifying the author of the Apocalypse with another John (*Ch Hist* III.39.1-7). It should be stressed that this hypothetical alternative for the apostle was, and remains, unknown and undocumented, and that Eusebius continued to identify John the Apostle as the resident of Ephesus who was exiled to Patmos and then returned to write the fourth Gospel (*e.g.*, *Ch Hist* III.18.1-3; 20,11; 23.1-6).⁶ Preserved in Eusebius' *Church History*, the crucial part of this excerpt is a description of the sources used by Papias: "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter said (εἶπεν), or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, are saying (λέγουσιν)" (*Ch Hist* III.39.4).⁷

The traditional interpretation of this passage is guided by the fact that Papias freely uses the terms 'elder' (underlined by me) and 'disciple', but does not allow himself to use the term 'apostle', even though the first list of 'elders' are all well-known 'apostles'. In this short passage, at least, it appears that wherever Papias writes 'elder', 'apostle' can be substituted. Applying the same rule in the second list, the 'elder' John can thus be identified with the 'apostle' John. The 'apostle/elder' John is repeated again in the second list, because Papias needed to stress that he was still a living source when he was collecting sayings for his book. There is no logical reason here to distinguish John the 'apostle/elder' in the first list from John the 'apostle/elder' in the second list, and so they should, from the wording itself, refer to the same person. No one until Eusebius himself (c. 325 CE) had ever expressed a doubt that the elder John, mentioned here as a source, referred to John the 'apostle/disciple' of the Lord, and up to this day there is no documentary evidence anywhere for the existence of a second John in Ephesus, a 'non-apostolic John the Elder', at that time or at any other time. One modern scholar has referred to this figure as an "elusive ghost", and another as having a 'phantom-like quality'.⁸ The alternative is to view him as a literary fiction, invented by Eusebius, under the influence of St. Dionysius (*Ch Hist* VII.25), in order to explain obvious literary differences

⁶ Eusebius' position regarding the authorship of the Apocalypse is ambiguous: he was so impressed by the literary arguments of St. Dionysius of Alexandria, against apostolic authorship, that he published them in full (*Ch Hist*, VII.25). Following Dionysius' suggestion that it may have been written by another John, he then reproduces the excerpt of a work by Papias (quoted), which he interprets as indicating the existence of a second John, whom he tentatively proposes as author of the Apocalypse. He also places the Apocalypse in both the 'Accepted' and 'Disputed' categories of writings, saying that opinions were evenly divided. However, at the same time, he repeats over and over again the early Christian tradition (see n.5 above), which records John the Apostle living in Ephesus until the end of the 1st century, exiled on Patmos from 95-96 CE, where he wrote the Apocalypse, and then returning to Ephesus, where he wrote the Gospel before he died c.98 CE. However, despite all his prevarication on the authorship of the Apocalypse, Eusebius never questions the apostolic authorship of John's Gospel and first Letter.

⁷ This is our translation from the Greek text published in the Loeb Classics Series.

⁸ After his survey of the research, R. Alan Culpepper writes: "Most Johannine scholars would probably agree with the sentence of Robert Eisler that nowhere in the whole realm of history is there a more elusive ghost than "John the Elder." In fact, even the existence of John the Elder has been contested. D.A. Carson recently concluded: "it is far from certain that there was an 'elder John' independent of the apostle, and if there was, it is still less certain that he wrote anything. The ambiguity of the evidence, which makes disparate interpretations virtually inevitable, lends the whole issue of John the Elder a phantom quality", *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 298.

between the Apocalypse and John's Gospel and Letters, a point that troubled the early Church, and continues to create discord and discussion up to this day.⁹

With this fragment of Papias, however, the root of the discord is exposed, and it concerns the use and meaning of the terms 'apostle' and 'elder'. Again, and again, Harding rigidly distinguishes John the Elder from John the Apostle solely on the basis of the descriptive title, 'elder', or 'apostle' (e.g., p. 16,18,205, 206). This is now recognized as a common mistake, based on a tendency to interpret first-century usage of the terms 'apostle' and 'elder' from a later perspective, when 'elder' (πρεσβύτερος) had become the title of a particular office and rank within the Church hierarchy.¹⁰ In the first century CE, however, there was no such distinction between 'elders' and 'apostles'.

Alastair Campbell explains this in his study on 'The Elders of the Jerusalem Church': "The elders' did refer to those who succeeded members of the original Twelve in the leadership of the Jerusalem church as they died or departed to other places, but the title did not exclude members of the Twelve, since it was never the title of an office separate from that of an apostle. *Some of the elders belonged to the original Twelve, others were replacements.* The term 'elder' connoted dignity and authority; it did not denote someone who had not been an original member. Quite the reverse! There were no more worthy bearers of the title 'elder' than those who had been there from the beginning".¹¹

Campbell continues, "Support for this can be found in the way a connection between apostles and elders surfaces persistently in Christian writings both in and beyond the New Testament. Thus the writer of 1 Peter has the apostle in whose name he writes style himself 'fellow-elder' (1 Pet. 5:1). The author of 2 and 3 John, while doubtless claiming apostolic authority, styles himself "The Elder" (2 John 1). Papias uses the term 'elder' either of the apostles themselves (as many think) or of their immediate disciples, but in any case not of a church office (Eus. *HE* 3.39.4). Ignatius, who finds the bishop and deacons to be types of the Father and of Christ, consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles (Ign. Magn. 6.1, Trall. 3.1, etc). Only in the perspective of a later generation did the terms 'elder' and 'apostle' become mutually exclusive terms of rank within a hierarchy."¹²

In addition to the interchangeable use of 'apostle' and 'elder' in the first century, there arose a preference for the latter, as the apostles died (Acts 15,2.4.6.22.23; 16,4 'apostles and elders'; Acts 11,30; 21,18 'elders'), and then, from the end of the first century, a complete avoidance of the former, at least in Asia. We noted that Papias did not allow himself to use the term 'apostle', even when we would have expected him to do so. Others have noted the same moratorium on the use of this term in the Gospel of John "It seems that the Fourth Gospel, without offering reasons, studiously avoids using the title apostle, while presuming the concept and terminology of sending".¹³ In the above passage, Campbell remarks that Ignatius "consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles". Also, Irenaeus and many of the other Asian writers of the second century adopt the same policy of avoiding the word 'apostle' and using 'disciple' or 'elder' instead. There must have been good reasons for this policy, and since it appears first in John's Gospel and Letters, it may indeed have

⁹ Please see 'Ch.3 The Johannine Question Answered' by John Ben-Daniel, on academia.edu, for this author's solution.

¹⁰ This may explain why Eusebius interpreted the excerpt of Papias in a way that his predecessors had not.

¹¹ Alastair Campbell, 'The Elders of the Jerusalem Church', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol 44 (1993), 511-528; quote is from 519 and the italics are mine.

¹² Alastair Campbell, op.cit. 519.

¹³ Hans Dieter Betz, 'Apostle', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. D.N. Freedman, 6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992; vol 1, 311.

originated with the ‘apostle/elder’ John himself. We can suggest two pressing reasons why the leader of the Asian churches may have wanted to ban the use of the term ‘apostle’:

1. In the first century, before the church hierarchy was established, the local churches were served by missionary ministers and preachers who were called ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’.¹⁴ As the letters of Sts. Paul, Peter and John confirm, many of these enthusiasts were not adhering to the teaching of the original apostles, and were therefore identified as ‘false apostles’ and ‘false prophets’. With the rapid expansion of Christianity at the end of the first century, the number of these missionary leaders increased greatly, forcing the institution of a fixed and approved hierarchy. Nevertheless, a large number of the ‘false apostles’ continued to circulate bringing the apostolic role into utter disrepute by the end of the first century.
2. At the same time, hopes were rising among the Jews for their religious and national restoration, centred on Jerusalem. With the passage of time, this hope became mixed with a belief in the imminent coming of their messiah. Their fervour led eventually to the diaspora revolt (‘War of Qitos’, 115-117 CE) and to the second Jewish revolt (132-135 CE). There would have been many Christians in the churches, of both Jewish and Pagan origin, who shared this hope, fed by an expectation that the apostles would return with Jesus and help to bring it about. In order to prevent ‘false Christs and false apostles from deceiving even the elect’ (Mk 13,20-22 et par), the banning of the title ‘apostle’ would have been seen as a necessary step.

The apostle John would also have had his own reasons to prefer being called ‘elder’ rather than ‘apostle’: as the sole surviving apostle in the last decade of the first century, John would have had to contend personally with misplaced messianic fervour in the Church, directed towards Jewish national restoration. As a member of the ruling body of the mother Church in Jerusalem, he had remained at the head-quarters of the Church’s mission. In this role, ‘elder’ was the more appropriate name for him than ‘apostle’, which denotes one who is sent out from there to accomplish a mission. Finally, in the local Church, St. Paul had become known affectionately as ‘the Apostle’, so an alternative was needed for St. John. For all the reasons given above, and for others no doubt, ‘the Elder’ was an optimal title for John, in addition to simply being ‘a disciple’ of the Lord.

3. *Harding claims that the author of the Apocalypse was Cerinthus, the heretic from Ephesus, writing under the pseudonym of John. On the contrary, the Apocalypse is neither pseudonymous, nor heretical.*

As with the Gospel of John, a certain mystery surrounds the author’s self-presentation in the Apocalypse: his name is John, he was familiar with the situation in at least seven churches in Asia Minor, where he was so well-known that he felt no need to spell out his credentials. To the extent that he wanted to be recognized as the author, he trusted the local Church to let this be known quietly to other areas and future generations. We could call this type of presentation ‘semi-anonymity’.

Like many others before him, Harding sees it differently. He claims that the Apocalypse is an example of ‘pseudonymity’, which is when someone pretending to be John the Apostle uses the name of John as a ‘pseudonym’. In fact, all of the pre-Christian and contemporary apocalypses had been written in this way, under the name of a celebrated figure from the past (e.g., the Apocalypses of 1Enoch, 2Enoch, Abraham, Moses, Daniel, 4Ezra, 2Baruch, Isaiah). The reasons for this

¹⁴ *Didache*, 11-13.

pseudonymous attribution are still debated, but there can be no doubt that it gave the text an authority and readership it would not otherwise have had.

In the early Church too, there were people like Harding who disliked the Apocalypse and wanted to deter the faithful from reading and understanding it. Around 200 CE, a Roman churchman called Gaius declared that the Apocalypse was written pseudonymously by a heretic called Cerinthus, a contemporary of John the Apostle, who also lived in Ephesus. According to Epiphanius (c. 375 CE), Gaius' claim was echoed by others whom he nicknamed the Alogi, meaning 'without the Logos', therefore 'without reason', because they rejected both John's Gospel and the Apocalypse, saying again that they were written by the heretic Cerinthus.¹⁵ They were all successfully challenged by another Roman priest, St. Hippolytus, in a lost work called "Chapters against Gaius", and in the Western Church the idea that the Apocalypse was written by the heretic Cerinthus was laid to rest.

Now, 1800 years later, Harding has chosen to resurrect it. However, in the meantime, modern biblical scholars have unanimously rejected the view that Apocalypse of John was written pseudonymously. This development began in 1979, when the definition of 'apocalypse' was updated by the Society of Biblical Literature's Genres Project on Apocalypse, led by John J. Collins.¹⁶ The new definition does not include pseudonymity as one of the defining characteristics of the genre. A work can be a true apocalypse, arguably even more true, without being pseudonymous, the main examples being the Apocalypse of John and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the 1980's, Adela Yarbro Collins applied the new definition specifically to John's Apocalypse: "In modern times, some scholars have argued that the book of Revelation was written pseudonymously, because pseudonymity is a typical feature of ancient Jewish apocalypses. This argument is not compelling because there was a revival of prophecy among the followers of Jesus, which led, for a short time at least, to the willingness to prophesy and write books of prophecy in one's own name. The apocalyptic work from the second century called *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, was written by a Christian in Rome, Hermas, in his own name. Another reason that this argument is unpersuasive is that the author would probably have taken care to specify more clearly that he was an apostle or a disciple of the Lord, if he had intended to be so recognized".¹⁷

This last observation takes us back to the text of John's Apocalypse and to what we have called its 'semi-anonymity': not only did this protect the author at a time when his identification may have led to further persecution, but it also defends against the accusation that the book was written pseudonymously. An author pretending to be John the Apostle would have stated clearly in the text that it was written by John the Apostle and then embellished this attribution with well-known personal details to make sure the reader understood. By contrast, the author of the Apocalypse describes himself as a servant, who is given a prophecy to write, but not as an apostle or disciple. He

¹⁵ Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion*, 51.3.1-6.

¹⁶ John J. Collins, 'Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews and the Genre of the Revelation of John', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39, (1977): 329-343; J.J. Collins, ed., "Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre", *Semeia* 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979, quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998, 39-40, 4-5. The definition has withstood well the test of time, cf. idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 1-20.

¹⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, 'The Book of Revelation', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 385; also Adela Yarbro Collins in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984; 27-8. For other arguments, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014; 106-7.

describes himself with a minimum of detail, just enough to explain why he is writing this prophecy. By maintaining a certain level of anonymity, and not revealing his full identity, he gives no reason to suspect he is writing under a pseudonym.

None of this makes an impression on Fred Harding, whose next ploy is to identify the author of the Apocalypse with John's heterodox contemporary, Cerinthus. He recruits Elaine Pagels for the task, but instead of quoting directly from her work, he cites a biblically insensitive and Johannophobic review of her book *'Revelations'* (2012) by a CNN political journalist called John Blake (p. 50-52). This enables Harding to mischaracterize the author of the Apocalypse as a traditional Jew, who opposed St. Paul, could hardly be called a Christian, could not accept the admission of women or gentiles without adopting the requirements of the Torah, and contradicted the eschatological teaching of Jesus Christ and St. Paul, on the question of the millennium. In other words, he was alleged to be a Jewish heretic, who 'combined Ebionite and Gnostic teaching into one' (p. 51-52). A quick glance at the text of the Apocalypse will show that there is nothing Ebionite, Gnostic or otherwise heterodox about the Apocalypse of John, which could justify Harding's distorted profile.¹⁸

Another example of Harding's dishonest method is exposed when he tries to recruit St. Dionysius of Alexandria to amplify his claim: in a quote from the *Church History* of Eusebius (*Ch Hist* III.28.4), he takes 24 words out of context to make it appear that Dionysius is the one saying that Cerinthus 'forged' the Apocalypse (p. 115). Eusebius gives the full quote later, in context, where it is clear that Dionysius did not agree with this, but was merely reporting that the followers of Gaius claim Cerinthus was the author (*Ch Hist* VII.25.2). For himself, Dionysius then affirms that he would not dare to reject the Apocalypse, like they do, because he did not understand it well (*Ch Hist* VII.25.4). If Harding was honestly listening to Dionysius, he would do likewise.

At this point, Harding seizes on the vision of the millennium in the Apocalypse and hastily concludes that this has the 'fingerprint of Cerinthus', because he knows of no other source for the idea of a millennium, except the heresiarch Cerinthus (p.136-43). So, he confidently declares "This points conclusively to Cerinthus as the writer of the book of Revelation" (p.143). Harding is again making sensational claims, based on scanty evidence and flimsy arguments. Firstly, Cerinthus allegedly taught about the messianic age, not about the millennium—the 1,000-year long messianic age.¹⁹ Secondly, Cerinthus espoused a grossly materialistic messianic age, remarkable for the abundance of sensual delights (*Ch Hist* III.28.1-6; VII.25.1-3) and nothing of this kind is to be found in John's Apocalypse (cf. Rev 20,4-6). Thirdly, Cerinthus is not the only source for these sensual imaginings about the messianic age, for similar features can be found in Papias (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, V.33.3-4) and in contemporary apocalyptic works (*1Enoch* 10:19, *2Bar* 29:5-7; *4Ezra* 7:26-28). From these passages in the contemporary literature, it is probable that the character and duration of

¹⁸ "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins with his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and the might for ever and ever, amen" (Rev 1,5-6); "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you bought people for God from every tribe and tongue and race and nation, and made them a kingdom and priests for our God and they shall reign on the earth" (5,9-10). These quotations could hardly be more Christian, less Torah-based (traditional Jewish), or more Pauline, and they certainly extol the universality of the new Faith. On the subject of 'ruling on the earth' (Christ's millennial reign), please continue reading. As for Gnosticism, the higher God of the Gnostics, of whom Christ is said to be the Son, is completely divorced from the created world. On the contrary, the Almighty God and the Risen Christ of the Apocalypse are totally involved in the life of the Church and events in the world. No marks of Gnosticism here.

¹⁹ The 1,000-year duration of Christ's messianic age is uniquely important, as it is key to its interpretation according to the text of Ps 90,4.

the messianic age was a hot topic at the end of the first century CE, when John wrote the Apocalypse.

It is in the context of this speculation that the millennial reign of Christ with his saints, described in the Apocalypse (Rev 20,4-6), must be interpreted. In this vision, John saw the souls of resurrected martyrs and saints, and he did not see carnal banquets, voluptuous women, super-abundant grape clusters, nor a rebuilt Jerusalem in Judaea.²⁰ Once the reader notices that John's description in Rev 20,4-6 is of a predominantly spiritual kingdom, then all preconceptions of worldly sovereignty, whether focused on wealth, pride, patriotism or sensual pleasures, can be immediately discarded. In its most general form, the millennium represents the messianic age as a long era of sanctity and blessedness in heaven and, by means of those sitting on thrones (Rev 20,4), also on earth, all under the rule of Christ and his saints. Members of the Church will recognize here a sketchy portrait of the Communion of Saints, represented on earth by bishops ruling from their 'cathedrae', the Latin word for 'thrones'.

The problem arises when the millennium is interpreted as a messianic kingdom which has not yet begun, but is expected to begin—according to the literary sequence in the Apocalypse—after the Second Coming of Christ (Rev 19,11-21). According to this 'premillennialist' interpretation, the messianic kingdom of Christ will be manifest in the world for a literal 1,000-period between the Second Coming of Christ and the final Judgment. So, up to today, there are Christians who disagree that this kingdom is present now, saying it is yet to come, and this disagreement can be traced directly to the sequence of visions in the Apocalypse. However, most Biblical scholars know that the visionary sequence in the Apocalypse does not always determine the order of the corresponding events.

The sketchiness and lack of detail in the vision of Christ's millennial kingdom (Rev 20,4-6) invites the reader to contribute his preconceptions about this kingdom. If formed by the Gospels, it is a kingdom of service and humility, in which the humblest member is the greatest (Mk 10,42-45 et par), and is therefore known mainly by faith and not by sight. So, we should not be surprised that for many its presence is hidden, and not yet perceived as a reality. For these people, its reality may not be revealed until the Second Coming, just as the old heaven and old earth are passing away. Then, Christ's kingdom will be revealed as it reaches its completion in the new heavens and new earth following the final Judgment. Indeed, the right frame through which to see and interpret this millennial kingdom is given to us in Psalm 90,4: "for a thousand years in your sight (O Lord) are as a day, *a day that is passing*, a watch in the night". The millennium will then vanish into the past, as we are confronted with the imminent consummation of God's universal kingdom (Rev 11,15-19). The 'millennial problem' does not concern the identity of the author, as Harding would have it, but reflects, like a mirror, the spiritual state of the interpreter and hearer.

If that was his only difficulty with the content of the Apocalypse, then Harding would not have been able to write such a long book. In fact, several other aspects of the text prompt him to impugn the author. The most important of these is related to the millennium and concerns the question of 'imminence'. Harding joins a chorus of people who accuse the author of prophesying falsely over the timing of the Second Coming, for nearly two thousand years ago the sacred text emphatically warned the faithful that the 'time is near', and that Christ is coming 'soon' or 'quickly'. As the Second Coming

²⁰ For a comprehensive and decisive refutation of the charge that the author John was a millennialist/chilist, please see *Regnum Coelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, by Charles E. Hill, 2nd edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

failed to happen when Harding thinks it should have happened, he refers to this failure as the ‘coupe de grâce’, for it allows him to declare that the Apocalypse is false prophecy and its author is a false prophet (p. 206-10).

However, there are two ways in which the author John is right and Harding is too hasty in his judgments. Firstly, just as the formula equating a thousand years to one day, in the eyes of God, is used in 2 Peter (3,1-10), so also here the author of the Apocalypse proposes the duration of Christ’s reign, understood as the time between his First and Second Comings, to be a thousand years. But instead of interpreting this period literally, as some do, it is best to recall Psalm 90,4, and understand it as a lengthy historical epoch on the human timescale, but to God and those who dwell in heaven it is like a day. According to the divine timescale, which is probably similar to that of the geological/cosmological order, the time of the end is indeed near, and the Second Coming is soon. However, there is another sense in which the author’s warnings of imminence are true. At the centre of the text (Rev 10), the author finds himself on earth again, seeing and prophesying the events leading up to the Second Coming (Rev 10,7; 10,11). John’s presence on earth in this vision indicates that he has an important role in the unfolding of the events that he is about to prophesy (Rev 11,1-2). In other words, when John declares that the end is near, he is placing himself at that critical moment in the future, a moment when the Second Coming is imminent indeed.

Another of Harding’s objections to the text concerns its ‘horrifying’ descriptions of divine judgment. On this, we can all agree: no one should try to ignore or underestimate the terrible realities of divine judgment, especially of the final Judgment which John is describing here. However, Harding has a lapse when comparing the Apocalypse with other works in the New Testament, saying he sees ‘contradictions’. There are differences in emphasis, not contradictions. The Gospel of Matthew frequently mentions the final Judgment (Mt 5,21-22; 7,21-23; 10,15; 11,22.24; 12,36.41.42; 13,41-50; 24,50-51; 25,31-46), as do many of the Letters (1Cor 4,5; 2Cor 5,10; Heb 6,2; 10,27; 1Pet 4,17-18; 2Pet 2,4; 1Jn 4,17; Jude 1,6.14-15). Throughout the New Testament, the final Judgment is a fixed part of the scenery of Jesus Christ’s salvation. It also appears in Christian art and culture, as seen so vividly in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. As the prophet of the end-times (Rev 10,7), it behooved John to bring this part of the scenery into the foreground in his Apocalypse. Harding’s fabricated ‘contradictions’ appear to be nothing more than a tactic to try to isolate the text from the rest, and single it out for censure. Or is he trying to protest against the final Judgment itself and get it removed from the divine agenda?

4. Harding claims that John’s exile on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1,9) never happened and was invented by an author pretending to be John. On the contrary, John’s exile on Patmos is well attested by the early Church and coincides with the Emperor’s clamp-down on non-state religions, as recorded by other historical sources. The Roman laws of exile confirm that John was a high-ranking Christian leader in Asia Minor and amplify the earliest traditions identifying him as John the Apostle and Evangelist.

The author of the Apocalypse clearly states that he was on the Aegean Island of Patmos when he received the revelation whose content fills his Apocalypse (Rev 1,9). His testimony is backed up by numerous reports in Eusebius’ *Church History*, which go further and associate the Patmos exile with John the Apostle and allow us to date it from the end of Emperor Domitian’s reign to the start of Nerva’s (95–96 CE). The same sources confirm that the same John lived in Ephesus and directed the Church there until his death at the beginning of Trajan’s reign, probably around 98 CE (e.g., *Ch Hist* III.18.1-3; 20,11; 23.1-6).

In fact, Eusebius describes the exile of John the Apostle on Patmos in the context of a final outburst of violence and “appalling cruelty” by Domitian against perceived opponents far and wide, including Christians (*Ch Hist* III, chs.17-20) and this persecution is reported by other historians as well. The Roman historian Cassius Dio, for example, explains that many of the victims were senators charged with “atheism, for which many others also were condemned having drifted into Jewish ways” (*Roman History* 67.14). Among these were close members of Domitian’s family, including his cousin Flavius Clemens, who was executed in 95 CE, and his niece Domitilla, Clemens’ wife, who was exiled to the Island of Pandateria. Of their seven children, two of whom were future heirs to the throne, no more was heard. It was a path that led directly to Domitian’s assassination at the end of 96 CE. The historian Suetonius ascribes the same outburst of violence at the end of Domitian’s reign to a paranoid frame of mind (*Twelve Caesars: Domitian*, chs.14-15).

Despite this accumulation of historical evidence recounting John’s exile on the Island of Patmos and the circumstances related to it, Harding flatly denies that John was exiled on Patmos, insisting that John was a pseudonym and that his exile was the literary invention of an author writing under his name.²¹ Not just John of Patmos, but also several sections of Eusebius’ *Church History* and parallel historical accounts by Cassius Dio and Suetonius are all ‘cancelled’ in what appears to be a foolhardy experiment in ‘cancel culture’, doomed to the dustbin. This is not scholarship, but tendentious historical revisionism mixed with anti-Christian contempt.

To those who would not go so far as Harding in his denial of historical records, but nevertheless have doubts about the traditional attribution of the Apocalypse to the Apostle John, Roman penal law has something to say. At the end of the first century CE, Roman law allowed convicted citizens of high social class to go into exile rather than face more serious penalties at home. Exile had many grades of severity according to whether it involved retention or loss of citizenship and property, whether it was to be temporary or permanent, and whether it was to be spent *away* from a certain place, or *at* a certain place, usually a remote island. In John’s case, the exile was probably the time-limited *Relegatio ad insulam* (‘*Relegation to an island*’) rather than the more severe, life-long *Deportatio ad insulam* (‘*Deportation to an island*’).²²

As for the reason for his conviction, John indicates it was due to his preaching the “Word of God and the Witness of Jesus” (Rev 1,9). This agrees well with recent research, which has determined that the aim of exile was to restrict the ability of influential, high-ranking, oppositional figures from exerting their influence against central or provincial government.²³ The provincial governor must have interpreted the success of John’s preaching as a threat to public order and state religion, and requested authorization from the Emperor to sentence him to exile. As only the highest-ranking citizens of Roman society (*honestiores*) were punished in this way, it is evident, firstly, that John had acquired Roman citizenship and, secondly, that the governor regarded John as having a high social status.

In view of the curious remark by Bishop Polycrates of Ephesus a century later (c.190 CE) that John had worn the ‘petalon’, the gold plate worn by the high-priest on his forehead (*Ch Hist* III.31.3;

²¹ Later, Harding seems to suggest that it was Cerinthus who was ‘imprisoned on Patmos’ (p. 157,161), in which case the whole story is more autobiographical than fictional, but what kind of story does Harding spin to explain how Cerinthus, and not John, was the one imprisoned on Patmos? In the end, it is all fiction—fiction of the kind one finds in ‘historical novels’ with a very thin smattering of history.

²² David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52a, Dallas: Word Books, 1997; 78-80.

²³ Fred K. Drogula, ‘Controlling Travel: Deportation, Islands and the Regulation of Senatorial Mobility in the Augustan Principate’, *Classical Quarterly* 61.1 [2011]; 230-266.

V.24.2), it is possible that he was presented to the governor as the ‘high priest’ of the majority of the local Jews. As the most senior leader of the Church worldwide, this title would have been an honest reflection of his position at the time,²⁴ and also a century later when Bishop Polycrates needed to invoke John’s superior authority to try to win over the Pope in a dispute about the date of Easter. If not for his high status, John would almost certainly have been put to death, according to the law for the lower classes (*humiliores*).

So, Roman penal law confirms that the exiled author of the Apocalypse was a Christian leader from Asia Minor with Roman citizenship and high social status. It agrees well with the reports that have come down to us in Eusebius’ *Church History* and offers a further check on their veracity. Contra Harding, it is inconceivable that such a prominent figure, whose high standing was recognized even by the Roman Emperor and his provincial governor, would have been overlooked or confused with any other Johns in the Asian Church at the time. It is even more inconceivable that John could have had his identity stolen and abused by an imposter from the same city and at the same time, without immediate reaction and retaliation on the imposter. The tradition of John’s exile on Patmos not only identifies him as the author of the Apocalypse (Rev 1,9), but also with John the Apostle/Evangelist who resided in Ephesus. John’s experience of exile would have been engraved on the collective memory of the Asian communities, where it may indeed have been recognized as a kind of martyrdom, or at least as a fulfillment of Christ’s prophecy for John (Mk 10,39; Mt 20,23).²⁵

None of the four pillars of Harding’s edifice remain standing, when subjected to scrutiny in the light of modern research. John the Apostle was not martyred early in his life, he preferred to be called John the Elder rather than John the Apostle, he was not a pseudonym or a heretic, but a Christian leader in Asia Minor, whose high social status was recognized even by Emperor Domitian and his provincial governor. The rest of Harding’s tedious and tendentious narrative against apostolic authorship can be ignored, because it has all fallen to the ground with these four pillars.

Chapters Eight to Ten

What cannot be ignored, though, is Harding’s manipulation of the text to attack the identities of the other elements of the chain of transmission: the revealing angel, Jesus Christ, and the Lord God Almighty (Rev 1,1-2). Up to now, the arguments have been limited to human agency, about people and their histories. Harding’s next move is to lift the argument to the level of spiritual agents, angels, and the loyalties of those that appear in the Apocalypse.

Because, in Harding’s view, 1) the Apocalypse was revealed by an angel without a name, 2) Jesus had already told his disciples “everything ahead of time” while he was with them (Mk 13,22-23), 3) the Apocalypse is an impenetrable “mishmash of gobbledygook”, which generates a multitude of

²⁴ It is possible that the reference to ‘high priests’ in Didache 13,3 may also be relevant.

²⁵ One can imagine a situation where John was brought before a local magistrate and sentenced to death for preaching the Gospel. His followers then appealed to the magistrate, saying that he was the ‘high priest’ of their sect of Jews. Perhaps they even produced a gold ‘petal’ to prove this to the official. The case went up to the provincial governor, who, with the approval of the Emperor, offered John the option of exile on an Island, according to the law for the upper social class. It must have been a difficult choice for John: martyrdom for Christ in fulfillment of Christ’s prophecy or exile on an Island. Only a word from the Lord would have persuaded John to accept exile. Implicit in the text of the Apocalypse (1,9) is the Lord’s instruction to go to Patmos, in order to receive his Revelation for the Church, ‘the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus’. Seen in this way, the Apocalypse was given to the Church instead of John’s martyrdom. The Lord must have considered the Apocalypse to be more important for the Church, in a way suggested by the prophecy of John remaining until the Second Coming (Jn 21,20-23). In the Apocalypse, John is commissioned to prophecy about the end-times and ‘remains’ in the Church until this task is fulfilled (Rev 11,10; 11,1-2).

different interpretations without consensus, and 4) there are scenes of terror and destruction that create confusion and fear, Harding now feels free to announce what he calls “Apocalypse’s dirty secret”, which is that its words come from Satan and not from Jesus (p.144-58). The unnamed revealing angel, who appears to the author, is Satan disguised as an angel of light, and the words he speaks amount to an autobiography of Satan, uttered in the third person. In Harding’s ‘thoroughgoing’ demonology of the Apocalypse, there is no room for God or for the angels in God’s service, because Satan has taken control of them all. He has won the cosmic war of good and evil, and is now launching a psychological war against God’s faithful, according to Fred Harding, through the words of Satan in the Apocalypse. Before tackling the errors here, it is worth checking the credentials of the person making these dire claims.

From the opening words in the preface of his book, Harding is upset that the Apocalypse was and continues to be a source of “endless discord, confusion and debate ever since it was penned”. This may or may not be true, but by expressing his incomprehension in so many ways, Harding is signaling that he too is confused, that he has no new insights to contribute and that his own failure and frustration may have soured his treatment of the text. So, if the reader is looking for a deeper understanding of the Apocalypse, this is not place to find it. Harding is not going to be part of the solution to its mysteries, which means he may even be adding to the discord, confusion and impassioned debate. More importantly, the author’s self-confessed incomprehension of the text (pp. 201-203) weakens his judgments and criticisms, for the reader cannot respect the judgment of a writer who does not understand what he is judging. Not everyone who has difficulty understanding this text is quick to demonize it. St. Dionysius was careful not to (*Ch Hist* VII.25.4-5). Most people would simply put the book aside and leave it to those with greater insight.

In the preface, Harding also makes the case for rejecting the Apocalypse because, in the Gospels, Jesus told his followers “take heed, I have told you everything in advance” (Mk 13,24), giving us “a comprehensive and clear picture of the future” (p.7). Harding then interprets this dictum, together with the end-time prophecies in the Old Testament and in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and concludes that there was nothing more to add to what Jesus told us then in person, and that therefore the John’s Apocalypse is superfluous (p. 201-2). Harding has entirely overlooked the Fourth Gospel, where Jesus tells his disciples at the Last Supper: “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come” (John 16,12-13; cf.15,26). In this way, the Fourth Gospel prepares for the Revelation of Jesus Christ, transmitted to John by the angel of the Lord.

This brings us to the main premise, or pillar, supporting Harding’s ‘thoroughgoing’ demonology of the Apocalypse. Harding is scandalized that the revealing angel sent by Jesus to John has no name: “What is odd about the Apocalypse is that we find Jesus speaking to the author in visions through an angel who has no name”. The unnamed angel then becomes the receptacle for all of Harding’s most diabolical suspicions: because he has no name, he must be Satan in disguise, “dressed up as an angel of light” (2Cor 11,14). This is where Harding ‘loses it’.²⁶

Firstly, Harding has no reason to be suspicious of the revealing angel because he has no name. This is not an innovation: in the Old Testament, the angel sent from God is called the ‘angel of the Lord’

²⁶ This is one of Harding’s favorite themes, to which he returns frequently. A search in his electronic text for ‘unnamed’ will turn up the following references to the unnamed angel: pp. 7, 70, 129, 145-146, 153, 157, 159, 175, 192, 203, 205-206, 212-213.

at least 58 times without any personal name. And in the Apocalypse the situation is similar: Jesus sends his angel (Rev 1,1; 22,16), who is the same angel sent by God (Rev 22,6). This angel is therefore appropriately called the ‘angel of the Lord’, or the ‘angel of the Risen Lord’. When this angel speaks, it is the Lord who is speaking. Since he carries the name of the Lord, he has no need for another name. The same angel is often mentioned in the New Testament as well: the angel of the Lord appears twice to Joseph in a dream (Mt 1,20; 2,13); and to the shepherds receiving the good news of Jesus’ birth (Lk 2,9). In the Acts of the Apostles, the angel of the Lord appears at night to open the prison doors for the apostles (Acts 5,19), then gives instructions to Philip (8,26) and rescues Peter from prison a second time (12,7.11). The ‘angel of the Lord’ is so well known in the Bible, appearing to his people at crucial moments, that his role in the Apocalypse should cause no alarm or suspicion. Furthermore, it is entirely consistent with the appearances reported by St. Paul (1Cor 15,3-8), in situations that bear no relation to his warning that Satan “disguises himself as an angel of light” (2Cor 11,14).

Secondly, and more significantly, the angel of the Lord is the one who takes John up to the heavenly throne (Rev 4,1), where he witnesses scenes that St. Paul could not even put into words (2Cor 12,1-4). What John sees there, and records in the Apocalypse, is nothing less than the elevation and glorification of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (Rev 5), followed by a continuous series of actions that lead inexorably to the universal salvation of God’s people and the judgment and total elimination of evil. The prophecy ends with a vision of creation transformed by the presence of God and the eradication of evil. Now if Harding believes that Satan is the angel who is revealing the prophecy describing his own eternal condemnation, then he is greatly confused and mistaken. Satan is the one opposing it, as is clear from the text itself to anyone with discernment. It hardly needs to be said that Harding is also opposing it, by the line that he has taken.

Harding is wrong about the Satanic identity of the revealing angel, but he is right about the origin of the terror, destruction and fear. The attentive reader will have noticed that, as the prophecy proceeds towards the conclusive intervention of God, evil is granted greater freedom to act openly and shamelessly. In the language of Apocalypse this is represented by the ‘falling’ of angels from heaven and the liberation of those who have ‘fallen’. These angels serve Satan and are responsible for the terror, confusion and destruction on earth that Harding rightly protests. God does not cause or command the terror and destruction, but prior to the final Judgment God gradually releases his control over these rebellious angels. For the Judgment to be universal and eternal, everything that is hidden must be revealed. Certainly, Satan and his angels, and their so-called ‘mystery of iniquity’, are an important part of this cosmic unveiling prior to Judgment, and so it is not surprising that they are at the forefront in some of the visions of the Apocalypse. These parts of the text can therefore be called a ‘biography of Satan’, for they deal with Satan’s rebellion and condemnation, but it is misleading to call this ‘Satan’s autobiography’ (p.158-60), as if Satan were free to tell the story himself. Satan is the defeated villain in the prophecy of the Apocalypse and is absolutely not in a position to dictate the prophecy from his point of view.

Nevertheless, Harding insists that the Apocalypse is Satan’s ‘autobiography’ and returns to ‘prove’ it before the book finishes (p.178-91). Only if he can prove Satan is the origin of the whole revelation can Harding claim it was from Satan posing as God, and not from the God Himself, as stated (e.g., Rev 1,1.8). So, Harding argues that only Satan himself could have known that he was the ‘original serpent’ (Rev 12,9), and only Satan could have known that his ‘throne’ was in Pergamum (Rev 2,13), where the evidence can still be seen in the ruins of a compound dedicated to Aesculapius, which had

an underground snake-park for healing the sick. Few will be convinced by the naïve assumptions and reasoning here, but it sounds like Harding enjoyed his visit to Turkey.

Harding then asserts that even the figure of Jesus Christ has been taken over by Satan, because Jesus is entitled the ‘bright morning star’, which Harding interprets as ‘Lucifer’, another name for the devil. This is because “O shining one, Son of the Dawn” (הילל בן שחר), in an unrelated passage of Isaiah (Isa 14,12), is translated by the word ‘Lucifer’ in both the Vulgate and the King James Bibles. However, ‘bright morning star’ is a well-known messianic epithet (cf. Num 24,17; *Test Levi* 18:3; *Test Judah* 24:1), unsurprisingly attributed to Jesus Christ in the Apocalypse (Rev 22,16). Harding has taken a pre-Christian messianic epithet and has twisted it into a euphemism for the devil, by means of inappropriate word association. To show what nonsense this leads to, it is only necessary to make the same substitution in another New Testament expression: “Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and *the morning star rises in your hearts*” (2Pet 1,19).

Conclusion

Harding finishes his book by ridiculing the content of the Apocalypse, comparing it with its Old Testament sources and advocating a reversion to these sources. For everyone who knows and respects the Apocalypse, it is upsetting to read this mess, created largely out of patchy and incoherent interpretations that have little relation to the text. He seems to have been totally misled when it comes to the meaning of the Apocalypse. We enter a bizarre realm—the metaphorical flagellation of a false image of the text—where Harding’s thoroughly twisted interpretations lead to baseless insults and further calls to reject the Apocalypse. Here, the ‘straw man fallacy’ is practiced to perfection.

For example, he manages to confuse the millennial reign of Christ with the role of the 144,000 celibate males, all of whom he erroneously identifies as Jews (p.170-76), despite the fact that only 12,000 are from the tribe of Judah, and then, perceiving discrimination, he indignantly labels it an insult to the Gentiles. Elsewhere Harding seems to have exaggerated the casualty count for he claims that the earth and its nations will have been destroyed and all the people killed after the battle of Armageddon (p. 169,198), so nobody is left to fight the final battle of Gog and Magog (Rev 20,7-9), even though “those destroying the earth will be destroyed” at the final Judgment (Rev 11,18) and soon after that the nations still exist and interact with the Holy City (Rev 21,24.26; 22,2). Ignoring this, he dismisses the final battle of Gog and Magog in the Apocalypse as “another invention of the author” (p.168), and declares he will rely on the original Gog of Magog oracle of Ezekiel, seemingly unaware that Ezekiel prophesied 2,600 years ago, about the first post-exilic period. Although Ezekiel’s visions were not completely fulfilled at that time, the situation has radically changed since then, most especially with the Advent of the Messiah and a long second exile—historical facts which the Apocalypse duly takes into account.

One final swipe at the text focuses on the solemn warning at the end of the Apocalypse, against adding or taking away from its words (Rev 22,18-19). Harding initially perceives this as a “potent and scary threat, not to be taken lightly” (p.7-8), but by the end of his book this ‘threat’ has grown into a ‘curse’, to instill fear of death and eternal damnation “on anyone who dares to question the book’s authority” (p. 213). The wording of the text identifies this ‘threat’ as a ‘warning’, not a ‘curse’, but Harding has hardened while writing his book. Here he inflates a ‘threat’ into a ‘curse’ and then uses the straw-man fallacy to attack a false image of the Apocalypse. As a threat, or warning, it is neither unprecedented nor contradictory, as Harding asserts: St. Paul’s letters are

replete with warnings of one kind or another, against those who would distort the Gospel (Gal 1,6-9), those who eat the Lord's supper unworthily (1Cor 11,27-34), those who are immoral (1Cor 5,1-13), and also against "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (2Cor 11:13-14). Neither is it surprising, in a work that presents itself as "the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ" (cf. Rev 1,2,9), to find a warning of this kind for translators and copyists.²⁷ With such a sacred description, it would be negligent not to have a warning, and it is certainly not unprecedented in the Torah (Dt 4,2). As with the Torah, the warning at the end of the Apocalypse is a sign of the great importance of this book, which Harding is unable or unwilling to see.

To sum up this final section, Harding's message appears to be: 'discard the Apocalypse and go back to the original Old Testament prophets'. Of course, that is not just Harding's message, it is Satan's ardent desire. It is also the misinformed hope of all those people who continue to reject Jesus Christ as Messiah. Since the Apocalypse is the recasting of the Old Testament prophecies in the light of the Messiah's First Advent, returning to a literal reading of the ancient prophets will take us back to the *status quo ante*, the situation before his First Advent, as if the Messiah had not yet come. Jesus may have come, but since he did not fulfil the prophecies the way Harding wishes, then for Harding he cannot be the Messiah. By discarding the Apocalypse, Harding would have us go backwards in prophecy to that pre-Christian condition, so that Satan and all those who reject Jesus Christ can nominate another individual and call him their messiah. Perhaps to Harding's surprise, this individual is indeed prophesied in the Apocalypse, where he is described as the 'Beast from the Sea', the ultimate false messiah, aided by an accomplice, the 'Beast from the Land', or 'false prophet' (Rev 13). When this happens, everyone will know who is their Messiah, Jesus Christ or the Beast, for upon that choice the final Judgment is decided. The prophecy of the Apocalypse is more important than ever, in spite of, and possibly even because of, everything Harding has written in his blasphemous book. As for the Apocalypse, it may be necessary to repeat "These words are faithful and true" (Rev 22,6).

John Ben-Daniel
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²⁷ One gets the impression from some of the letters in the New Testament (e.g., 1Peter) that it was not uncommon for translators and copyists to alter manuscripts in the process of translating and copying them, mainly through additions. Their intentions were undoubtedly sincere and good, but ran the risk of removing signs of authenticity. John the Apostle knew about this habit of translators and copyists, and for this reason considered it necessary to include a serious warning to prohibit their most minimal interference with the text of the Apocalypse.