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Sixteenth Century Journal, Vol. 29, No. 3. (Autumn, 1998), pp. 651-666.

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The Church Fathers and the Canonicity of the Apocalypse in the Sixteenth Century: Erasmus, Frans Titelmans, and Theodore Beza

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WHEN ERASMUS CHALLENGED the place of the Apocalypse in the New Testament canon in 1516 and in 1522, he was merely giving a fairly dispassionate appraisal of the patristic literature at his disposal: the ante-Nicene Fathers were chiliasts; Jerome had noted that the fourth/fifth-century Greek church did not accept the book. Eusebius and Dionysius of Alexandria questioned the Johannine authorship. Finally, Erasmus accepted the book because of the *consensus ecclesiae* and because of its historical value. In his reply to Erasmus (1530), Frans Titelmans insisted on the *consensus ecclesiae*, which he demonstrated went back to Dionysius the Areopagite and included the ante-Nicene Fathers and several later patristic and medieval commentators (excluding Joachim of Fiore and his disciples). Titelmans did not raise the question of chiliasm. Theodore Beza, who also tackled Erasmus (in 1557), chose to defend the book's canonicity on the strength of its generic similarity to Old Testament prophecies and because its status was guaranteed by the ante-Nicene Fathers. By privileging their testimony, Beza inadvertently admitted chiliasm. Erasmus' attack and the responses of both his adversaries show the fragility of the canonical status of the Apocalypse in the sixteenth century. The rediscovery of patristic literature meant in this case that the doubts of the early Greek church resurfaced in the totally Western context of the Reformation.

THE REVELATION OF SAINT JOHN THE DIVINE, or the Apocalypse, is the only Christian apocalyptic writing to have entered the biblical canon. It was held in high esteem and considered apostolic by ante-Nicene Fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, all of whom were chiliasts. From the third century onward, the Eastern and particularly the Alexandrian Church broke with millenarianism and consequently began to view the Apocalypse with suspicion. Dionysius of Alexandria questioned its apostolic authorship, ca. AD 250. In the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea admitted it into the canon with some reluctance while Cyril of Jerusalem rejected it.¹ In the West, although authors such as Jerome condemned ante-Nicene chiliasm and were fully aware of the strictures passed on the canonicity of the Apocalypse by the later Greek Church, the Apocalypse was received with far fewer hesitations. This was largely due to the influence of Tychonius' commentary (ca. AD 380) which neutralized the millenarian features of the text. Several medieval theologians such as Rupert of Deutz and Joachim of Fiore wrote outstanding commen-

¹Lee Martin McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 120-44.

taries on the Apocalypse. However, due partly to Franciscan interpretations of Joachim's work, the book became the source of eschatological speculations and antipapal propaganda in the later Middle Ages.²

In the sixteenth century, the first scholar seriously to investigate the book's status was Erasmus. His *Annotations*³ provoked furious responses from the Louvain Franciscan François Titelmans⁴ in 1530 and the Genevan reformer Theodore Beza in 1557. Both Erasmus' attack and his adversaries' defense were based on an appeal to the tradition of the Church, each protagonist interpreting it differently. That theologians of such different persuasion as Erasmus, Titelmans, and Beza were all put in the position of evaluating the status of a biblical book by recourse to tradition and church history was a proof of the fragility of the Apocalypse in respect to the biblical canon. The old doubts of the Eastern Church resurfaced in the context of the Western Reformation.

Erasmus' own low opinion of the Apocalypse was perhaps partly due to the difficulties he had in obtaining a Greek manuscript of it.⁵ However, such annotations on the text as there are make no mention of the difficulties and tend to concentrate on enumerating variant readings. Indeed it is only his final annotation (on Apc. 22:12, "yes, I am coming soon . . . I am the Alpha and the Omega") that reveals something of Erasmus' doubts about the book's apostolic origins and thus (implicitly) its canonicity. In order to make his doubts appear at all convincing, Erasmus could not and would not present them on the basis of personal experience or opinion; he had to appeal to the text and to tradition. Thus referring to Jerome's letter to Dardanus (ep. 129),⁶ he notes that the Apocalypse was rejected by the Greek Church in Jerome's time.⁷ For his second argument Erasmus invokes the

²On this see Irena Backus, *Les sept visions et la fin des temps: Les commentaires genevois de l'Apocalypse entre 1539 et 1584*, Cahiers de la Revue de théologie et de philosophie, vol. 19 (Geneva: Revue de théologie et de philosophie, 1997), 7–24, and the literature cited there.

³The annotation ad Apc. 22, 12, which occasioned the controversy, remained unaltered between 1522 and 1535. I refer to the text printed in [Erasmus], *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia emendatiora et auctiora, ad optimas editiones, praecipue quas ipse Erasmus postremo curavit, summa fide exacta doctorumque virorum notis illustrata: Tomus sextus, complectens Nouum Testamentum, cui in hac editione subiectae sunt singulis paginis Adnotationes* (Leiden: Petrus vander Aa, 1705), cited hereafter as LB6, on cols. 1123–26.

⁴On Frans Titelmans (1502–37) see Erika Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*, vol. 2, 1523–1536 (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1989), 14–22, 102–3, and the literature cited there.

⁵He finally obtained an incomplete manuscript from Johannes Reuchlin, who had himself borrowed it from the Dominican monastery in Basel. The manuscript dating from the twelfth century—no. 2814, according to E. Nestle and K. Aland, *Nouum Testamentum graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 711—lacked Apc. 22, 16–21, which Erasmus reconstructed. On this see Heinz Holeczek, *Erasmus von Rotterdam: Nouum Instrumentum: Faksimile-Neudruck mit einer historischen, textkritischen und bibliographischen Einleitung von Heinz Holeczek* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1986), xxvi–vii. Contrary to the information given by Holeczek, xxvi n. 50, Erasmus' manuscript of the *Apocalypse* is held by Augsburg University Library (Cod. I.1.4.1), and is in fact a *Kommentartext* to the commentary of Andreas of Caesarea. Jerry Bentley, in his *Humanists and the Holy Writ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 128, mistakenly calls it MS. 1 in what is otherwise an extremely reliable section on New Testament manuscripts used by Erasmus (in 1527 Erasmus supplied the Greek text of Apc. 22, 16–21, from the Complutensian Polyglot).

⁶Jerome, Ep. 129 ad Dardanum in *Patrologiae [latinae] cursus completus*, vol. 22 (Paris: Migne, 1859), 1103; hereafter PL 22.

⁷LB6: 1123: "Testatur diuus Hieronymus Apocalypsim ne sua quidem aetate fuisse receptam a Graecis."

authority of “very many very learned men (*plurimi doctissimi viri*),” all of whom are purported to have found that the book’s content lacks *apostolica grauitas* and is no more than a history expressed in figurative or allegorical terms.⁸ It is no wonder that its contents and tenor are correspondingly unapostolic (“deinde nec in sententiis esse quod apostolica maiestate dignum videatur: it says nothing that would seem worthy of apostolic grandeur”). Just one instance of this lack of majesty is John’s repeating “ego Ioannes, ego Ioannes” (“I, John”) as if he were writing a promissory note (“syngrapham”), whereas he refers to himself only periphrastically (if at all) in his Gospel. Paul, who also had visions, describes them as if they were someone else’s. And, continues Erasmus, the Greek manuscripts of the Apocalypse that he consulted do not contain the name *Ioannes Euangelista* but *Ioannes Theologus* in the title.⁹

Not accepted by the ancient Greek Church, dubious in style and content, not attributed to John the Evangelist by Greek manuscripts: the undermining of the Apocalypse on grounds of patristic tradition and linguistic evidence was beginning in earnest. However, just as he was about to draw the inevitable conclusion, the Dutch humanist took a step back, asserting that regardless of all textual and historical evidence the *consensus orbis et ecclesiae* was to be the final authority, and that he himself did not intend to violate the consensus by tampering with the biblical canon. Having thus attempted to protect himself against possible attacks, he goes on to examine the patristic evidence in greater detail: Dorotheus of Tyre, he says, does not mention that John was the author of the Apocalypse in his *De vita prophetarum et apostolorum synopsis*, even though he does say that John wrote his Gospel in Patmos (which would make it a priori likely that he was the author of the Apocalypse also written in Patmos), unlike Eusebius according to whom John wrote the Gospel in Ephesus.¹⁰ That Dorotheus’ work is of doubtful authenticity does not even occur to Erasmus, or perhaps he chooses to ignore the fact deliberately. He then goes on to examine the judgment of Dionysius of Alexandria as expounded

⁸LB6: 1123: “Ad haec quosdam eruditissimos viros totum hoc argumentum ceu fictum multis conuitiis insectatos fuisse, quasi nihil haberet apostolicae grauitatis, sed vulgatam tantum rerum historiarum figurarum inuolucris adumbratam.”

⁹LB6: 1123: “tam sollicitè suum inculcat nomen *ego Ioannes, ego Ioannes*, perinde quasi syngrapham scriberet, non librum, idque non solum praeter morem aliorum Apostolorum, verum multo magis praeter suum morem, qui in Euangelio modestiora narrans, non exprimit tamen vsquam suum vocabulum, sed notulis indicat: *discipulus ille, quem diligebat Iesus*. Et Paulus coactus referre de visionibus suis, rem sub alterius exponit persona.... Adhaec in Graecis, quos ego viderim codicibus non erat titulus *Ioannis Euangelistae* sed *Ioannis Theologi*....” The fact that Erasmus only used one manuscript of the *Apocalypse* for publication does not mean that he did not consult others, in England and elsewhere, prior to 1516. This applies to manuscripts of other books of the New Testament. Unfortunately only in very rare cases can the manuscripts consulted and not used by Erasmus be identified; see Bentley, *Humanists*, 124–27.

¹⁰LB6: 1123–24: “Iam Dorotheus Tyri episcopus ac martyr in Compendio vitarum prodidit Joannem Euangelium suum scripsisse in Insula Patmo, etiamsi Eusebius tradit Ephesi scriptum. Caeterum de Apocalypsi nullam omnino facit mentionem.” The 1516 *Annotation* ends here. On Dorotheus of Tyre, an author not earlier than the sixth century, not to be confused with the fifth-century bishop of the same name, see Theodor Schermann, *Propheten-und Apostellegenden: Nebst Jünger-katalogen des Dorotheus und verwandte Texte* (Leipzig: J. Hinrichs, 1907).

by Eusebius in his *Historia ecclesiastica* [*H.e.*] 7.25.¹¹ Erasmus initially seems to agree with Dionysius that the Apocalypse could not have been written by Cerinthus in an attempt to pass off as apostolic his heretical doctrine of the Millennium as a hedonistic paradise on earth. Notably, however, he dwells at great length on the details of Cerinthus' iniquitous doctrine and is strongly tempted to go against Eusebius (and Dionysius) and accept the hypothesis of Cerinthus as author. The only consideration that finally stops him is the work's very antiquity, well attested by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Erasmus then goes on to discuss Eusebius *H.e.* 3.39,¹² mistaking the testimony of Papias for that of Irenaeus. According to "Irenaeus" a "certain Aristion" and *Ioannes presbyter* were also among the disciples. Eusebius (this time Erasmus is correct in his attribution) thinks that the Apocalypse may well have been the work of *Ioannes presbyter*, an opinion which Erasmus is inclined to share.¹³

It is clear that (as he himself admits) the problem that confronts the Dutch scholar is the very problem that was expounded by Jerome in his Commentary on Ezekiel 36.¹⁴ From the late third century onwards the Greek Church rejected the Apocalypse. The ante-Nicene Fathers, however, had accepted it because they were all chiliasts (the names of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius, Victorinus of Poetovio, and Apollinaris [the opponent of Dionysius of Alexandria] are cited by Erasmus after Jerome) and indeed, notes Erasmus, the term *chilias* is frequently employed in the Apocalypse, chapters 12 and 20. However, his "solution" to the problem of millenarianism is radically different from Jerome's. Whereas the latter simply rejected the chiliasm of the early Church even if it meant rewriting Victorinus of Poetovio's commentary on the Apocalypse,¹⁵ Erasmus opts for a hermeneutical solution and asks simply whether all the doubts he has just voiced, including the question of chiliasm, suffice to discredit the Apocalypse. His answer is *no*. The book, he concludes, is composed entirely of allegories (presumably that would include the thousand years of ch. 20, although he does not say so) and is a very useful guide to the early

¹¹In the *Annotations* from 1522 onwards. I am referring to the text of Eusebius in *Patrologiae cursus completus*, series Graeca, vol. 20 (Paris: Migne, 1857), 695–704; hereafter cited as PG.

¹²PG 20: 299–300.

¹³LB6: 1124–25: "Dionysius Alexandrinus episcopus, qui candidissime sensisse videtur de hoc opere dissentit quidem ab his qui censebant esse Cerinthi haeretici, cuius erat dogma, in terris futurum aliquando regnum Christi.... Equidem quum ad haereticorum multitas artes respicio, facile possum adduci vt credam Cerinthum qui vixit aetate Ioannis et illi, opinor, superuixit, hoc commento voluisse suum virus in orbem spargere.... Nam opus hoc constat antiquissimum esse, quippe quod vetustissimus Irenaeus et hoc vetustior Iustinus Martyr commentariis suis dignati sunt. Quanquam Irenaeus apud Eusebium libro tertio, praeter apostolos quibus adiungit Ioannem Euangelistam, commemorat Aristionem quendam et Ioannem presbyterum, cuius Eusebius suspicatur esse Apocalypsin."

¹⁴Jerome, *In Hiezechielem* 11, ad 36, 1–15, in *S. Hieronymi presbyteri Opera: Corpus Christianorum*. Series Latina, vol. 75 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1964), 500–501. Cf. LB6, cols. 1125–26: "Idem [Hieronymus] rursus exponens Ezechielis chap. 36 fatetur Irenaeum non omnino fuisse alienum ab opinione Chilistarum, quemadmodum nec Tertullianum, Lactantium et Victorinum et Apollinarium. Cerinthus enim docebat Christum nondum resurrexisse, sed resurrecturum ac post mille annos cum suis regnaturum in terris incredibili rerum omnium felicitate."

¹⁵On Jerome's expurgated version of Victorinus of Poetovio, see Pierre Prigent, *Apocalypse 12: Histoire de l'exégèse* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959), 7–9.

history of the Church. Among holy things some are holier than others, he notes. After all, as Paul would have it, “he that is spiritual judges all things yet he himself is judged of no man.”¹⁶ Two factors are thus decisive in Erasmus’ very grudging acceptance of the book as canonical: the *consensus ecclesiae* and the historical value of what he sees as an allegorical (and therefore basically nonapostolic) text.

TITELMANS

Erasmus did no more than present the patristic evidence at his disposal before finally deciding to follow the Church and to leave the book of Revelation intact. However, the damage was done so that in 1530 Frans Titelmans, a Louvain Franciscan bitterly opposed to Erasmus’ views, published a substantial octavo volume entitled *Libri duo de autoritate libri Apocalypsis*.¹⁷

What Titelmans aimed to do was to exploit Erasmus’ wish not to depart from the *consensus ecclesiae*: he had to show his adversary that the consensus was unassailable and unbroken. If his demonstration proved successful, Titelmans could then use the work of any theologian from any period as an aid in refuting Erasmus’ doubts and objections. As an analysis of the whole of Titelmans’ treatise would far exceed the scope of an essay, I propose to show how Titelmans goes about establishing to all intents and purposes an invincible *consensus ecclesiae*, and how he then proceeds to refute the Dutch scholar’s main objections and tackle his assertion that only his respect for the *consensus* leads him to accept the Apocalypse as part of the canon and the work of John the Evangelist.

Referring to Jerome’s *De viris illustribus* and to Johannes Trithemius’ *Catalogus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum*, Titelmans notes that the first commentaries on the Apocalypse go back to the second generation of Christians. Among the earliest commentators, he singles out Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Although he gives no source for this information, it is obvious that the Franciscan means respectively *Dialogus contra Tryphonem* (chapter 81), unpublished in 1530 and therefore only known indirectly, and *Contra haereses* 5. 28.1–31.2 (where Erasmus’ 1526 edition of Irenaeus ended). He gives Jerome’s *De viris* (correctly) as a source for information about Melito of Sardis’ commentary on the Apocalypse. In short, it was the first book of the New Testament to receive a commentary, affirms the Franciscan,¹⁸ and this in

¹⁶LB6: 1126: “Sane chiliadis crebro fit hic mentio, velut capite 12. et 20. Ad euincendum hic liber non perinde valet, quum totus constet allegoriis, ad cognoscenda ecclesiae primordia conducit plurimum. Inter gemmas etiam nonnihil est discriminis et aurum est auro purius ac probatius, in sacris quoque rebus, aliud est alio sacratius. Qui spiritualis est, vt inquit Paulus, omnia diiudicat et a nemine diiudicatur [1 Cor. 2, 15].”

¹⁷In quibus ex antiquissimorum authorum assertionibus scripturae huius dignitas et autoritas comprobatur aduersus eos qui nostra hac tempestate siue falsis assertionibus siue non bonis dubitationibus, canonicae et diuinae huius scripturae auctoritati derogarunt. Per fratrem Franciscum Titelmannum Hasselensem, ordinis Fratrum minorum sacrarum scripturarum apud Louanienses praelectorem. Antwerpiae, apud Michaellem Hillenium, anno 1530.

¹⁸*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 4, fol. D6r: “Qua in re illud diligenter consyderandum est, quanta dignitate hic liber Apocalypsis emineat et quanto honore ab istis sit habitus, qui primum omnium meruit commentariis illustrari. Siquidem ante horum [Irenaeus, Iustinus, Melito] tempora non inuenimus in quemquam aliorum librorum Noui Testamenti aeditos villos commentarios.”

itself is a proof of its worth, he asserts triumphantly. He then gives the names (on the strength of Jerome's evidence) of other early commentators: Hippolytus, who incited Origen to write, and Victorinus of Poetovio.¹⁹ Among the later commentators, Titelmans lists Tychonius, Cassiodore, Apri[n]gius, Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Alcuin, Haymo of Halberstadt (in fact of Auxerre), Rabanus Maurus, Rupert of Deutz, Richard of Saint Victor, and Alexander of Hales. Barring inaccuracies and misattributions, the line is unbroken beginning with Justin and Irenaeus. His authors' (be they real or supposed) theological bias is of no particular interest to Titelmans, nor does he make a point of saying that he had read all the commentaries he lists. Furthermore, in sharp contrast to Erasmus, he does not distinguish between the Greek and the Latin Church, although he must be fully aware that most of the authors he cites are Latin and late. In fact, he constitutes his *consensus* by listing all the presumably respectable theologians who according to Jerome or Trithemius commented on the Apocalypse. Less universally respected medieval commentators such as Joachim of Fiore and his, as it happens Franciscan, disciples are simply left out.

Although an able biblical commentator himself, Titelmans was no great patristic scholar. Once he had established a consensus that satisfied him, he proceeded simply to cite the authors who were most familiar to him, all of whom happened to be medieval and Western. Thus an entire chapter is devoted to *Beda, Haimonis, Ruperti et Ricardi Commendatio Apocalypsis* with extensive quotations from Bede, Haymo (of Auxerre), and Rupert of Deutz.²⁰ Yet it would be wrong to accuse Titelmans of complete ignorance or naïveté. He knew very well, if only from reading Erasmus, that the apostolic authorship of the book had been challenged by the early Church and that it had been rejected by the Greeks. However, it was obviously not in Titelmans' interest to embark upon a lengthy analysis of Eusebius or Dionysius of Alexandria, as this would have shown his readers that the *consensus* he had striven so hard to establish was not total. He had to find a guarantor earlier than Justin Martyr or Irenaeus. Thus, attacking Erasmus' point that the allegorical nature of the book automatically placed it in a nonapostolic category, the Franciscan cites as his authority Dionysius the Areopagite, the apostolic Greek theologian par excellence and a contemporary of John the Evangelist, with whom he corresponded (ep. 10). Naturally Titelmans makes no mention of the doubts justly cast upon the Areopagite's identity by Lorenzo Valla and indeed Erasmus himself.²¹

¹⁹Ibid. Titelmans' information is drawn here mainly from Jerome, *De viris illustribus*, ed. G. Herding (Leipzig: Teubner, 1879), chaps. 56 (Origen), 61 (Hippolytus), 74 (Victorinus of Poetovio), although he does resort to Johannes Trithemius, *Catalogus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum* (first published in 1492) for more recent commentators on the Apocalypse such as the sixth-century Spaniard Apri[n]gius (D6v), on whom see Trithemius, *Catalogus* (Köln: Quentel, 1531), fol. 45r.

²⁰*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 5, fols. D8r–E1r.

²¹Lorenzo Valla, *Collatio Novi Testamenti ad Acts 17:34*, casts doubts upon Dionysius' identity; see Laurentius Valla, *Opera omnia con una premissa di Eugenio Garin* (Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1962; reprint of the 1540 Basel edition), vol. 1, fol. 852, col. A. For Erasmus' view of Pseudo-Dionysius, see *Annotiones in Nouum Testamentum ad Acts 17:34* in LB6, col. 503. Valla was also the first to question the

The relevant chapter is entitled “Ex Dionysio Areopagita causa assignatur ob quam videntur nonnullis hae reuelationes in contemptum venisse” (“From the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite we give the reason why some have come to despise these revelations”). Titelmans cites not the *Hierarchies* but Pseudo-Dionysius’ “Letter 9” to Titus where “the Areopagite” purportedly says:

Those Fathers who teach arcane wisdom leave an impression of great absurdity on untrained minds when they expose mystical truth not accessible to the profane by resorting to daring and abstruse puzzles. That is why so many of us find it difficult to believe in divine mysteries. For we study them only with the aid of linguistic and corporeal symbols, whereas we should be contemplating the mysteries in themselves which are bare and transparent.²²

Titelmans oversimplifies, of course. What Pseudo-Dionysius actually says is that the unskilled are unable to cope with the supreme noncarnal unity of God, having been taught to apprehend it only via a multiplicity of symbols, all of which are perceptible to the senses. Naturally he makes not the slightest reference to the Apocalypse; his preoccupation is the essence of God and not the way the Divinity makes itself manifest through the history of the Church.

Titelmans’ use of Pseudo-Dionysius is symptomatic of a certain view of Christian antiquity diametrically opposed to that of Erasmus. Laughable though this view may seem to the present-day reader, it is just as well to bear in mind that the authenticity of “Dionysius the Areopagite” was not finally discredited in most Roman Catholic circles until well into the eighteenth century.²³ In 1530 the figure

apostolic origin of the Apostles’ Creed; see Valla, *Apologia ad Eugenium III* in *Opera omnia*, vol. 1:800. Although Valla never questioned the apostolic origin or the canonicity of the book of Revelation, it might be argued that his philological exegesis of the book first caused Erasmus to closely examine its style and so note the linguistic discrepancy between Apc. and the fourth Gospel; see Prigent, *Apocalypse* 12:83. Rodney Petersen, *Preaching in the Last Days: The Theme of Two Witnesses in the 16th and 17th Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 125, talks about “early humanist mistrust of the book” without any further details; Erasmus is mentioned three times, but Titelmans’ name does not appear in Petersen’s work.

²²Titelmans, *De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 6, fols. E1r–E1v: “*Ex Dionysio Areopagita causa assignatur ob quam videntur nonnullis hae reuelationes in contemptum venisse*. Quod itaque a quibusdam eorum qui sibi eruditi videntur hic liber quasi somniis ac deliramentis anilibus plenus aestimetur, non ex ipsius libri dignitate, sed ex eorum qui sic temere iudicant imperitia (vt ne dicam peruersitate) procedit quod aperte testatur beatus pater Dionysius Areopagita in Epistola ad Titum cuius initium *sanctus quidem Timotheus*, quae est in ordine Epistolarum nona, vbi de significatiua theologia loquens sic ait: ‘absurditatem profecto maximam imperitis ac rudibus animis imprimant arcanae illius sapientiae (significatiuum theologiam loquitur) patres cum per obscura quaedam aenigmata diuinam illam plenamque mysteriis ac prophanis inaccessam veritatem enunciant. Atque ea ratio est quur plurimi diuinorum mysteriorum verbis difficile credimus. Ea enim cum adhaerentibus sibi tantum vernaculis et carnalibus signis aspiciunt, cum his amotis, ipsa in semetipsis nuda atque ad purum liquida intueri debeamus.’ Haec Dionysius.” See PG 3:1103–4.

²³See Jean-Louis Quantin, “The Fathers in 17th century Roman Catholic Theology” in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, ed. I. Backus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 2:978; Eric Wilberding, “A Defence of Dionysius the Areopagite by Rubens,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 52 (1991): 19–34.

and authority of the Areopagite, Paul's companion in Acts 17:34, would have fostered both Titelmans' love of tradition and his suspicion of the Erasmian "love of novelty" (*amor nouitatis*). Although verbose and tendentious, the Franciscan's critiques certainly did not miss their mark, hence Erasmus' letter to the Friars Minor of Louvain complaining of virulent attacks made upon him by members of their community.²⁴

After seeing him thus join forces with Pseudo-Dionysius, one would expect Titelmans to continue his attack by decrying allegory and its use in teaching theology. However, he well sees that were he to pursue this line of reasoning, he would find himself questioning the authority of the allegorical Apocalypse and so end up in Erasmus' camp, the very thing that he does not want. Nor obviously does he want to abandon a guarantor as authoritative as Pseudo-Dionysius. After an excursus specifying that symbolism and allegory constitute an even greater obstacle to the understanding of theology if students are not just unskilled but also perverse, as is only too often the case "hac nostra tempestate" ("in our unfortunate times"), Titelmans goes on to explain the Pseudo-Dionysius' "duplex theologia [dual theology] and why it is appropriate to express certain ideas enrobed in allegory [et quamobrem conueniat quaedam sub figurarum inuolucris tradi]." Dionysius, asserts the Franciscan, correctly distinguishes between "the arcane and mystical theological tradition ... symbolic and touching upon mysteries, and the philosophical and demonstrative theology (traditionem theologorum arcanam et mysticam ... symbolicam et ad mysteria pertinentem ... et ... philosophicam ac demonstratiuam)." The former sort is naturally only available to the initiated few.²⁵ How does this distinction apply to the Apocalypse? There is no doubt in Titelmans' mind that all those who understand Dionysius' words correctly "will have no problem in understanding that the allegorical nature of the book makes it a very worthy representative of apostolic gravity and dignity."²⁶ That Pseudo-Dionysius does not refer to the Apocalypse once in his "Letter 9" is neither here nor there so far as the Franciscan is concerned.

By his medieval style use of the Areopagite as an *auctoritas*,²⁷ Titelmans has proved his point, at least to his own satisfaction: the most apostolic of the Greek Fathers and a contemporary of John the Evangelist clearly granted his seal of approval to the figurative style of the Apocalypse. That other later Greek Fathers (and indeed Erasmus) thought it unapostolic is a mere detail. Titelmans' use of Pseudo-Dionysius makes the Areopagite the linchpin of the *consensus ecclesiae*.

²⁴See Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*, 2:14–22.

²⁵Titelmans, *De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 6, fol. E1v, chap. 7, fol. E2v: "Post quae tandem duplicis theologiae traditionem ponit his verbis: 'et hoc propterea operae pretium est animaduertere, duplicem esse theologorum traditionem, arcanam alteram et mysticam, alteram vero manifestam atque notioem; et alteram quidem significatiuam ac perficientem, alteram vero sapientiae esse studiosam et demonstratiuam.'" See PG 3:1105–6.

²⁶*De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 7, fol. E3r: "Cuius patris verba quisquis intelligit, facile videt non ideo hunc librum debere vel nihili vel minoris quam oportet reputari quod totus figurarum inuolucris sit plenus neque ob hoc non esse ipsum Apostolicae grauitatis iure cuique videri debet."

²⁷On this method, see J.-G. Bougerol, "The Church Fathers and *auctoritates* in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure" in I. Backus, ed., *Reception of the Church Fathers*, 1:289–336.

Unlike Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and the other ante-Nicene Fathers, he never commented on the book; not even Titelmans can pretend the contrary. The Areopagite does, however, guarantee the allegorical content as not only apostolic but also directed to the “*diuinorum mysteriorum studiosissimi* [those who are most eager to be initiated into the divine mysteries].” The authorship problem is thus automatically settled and any historical investigation in the modern or Erasmian sense of the term assumes secondary importance.

Erasmus’ individual arguments become very easy to manage once this framework has been established. Indeed, Titelmans cites them verbatim prior to refuting them. His method of attack is simply to invoke any single suitable author from the *consensus* he has just established. Thus, refuting the argument regarding frequent repetition of the name *John*, Titelmans cites the testimony of the twelfth-century theologian Rupert of Deutz from the latter’s remarkable Commentary on the Apocalypse. Rupert does indeed note that John repeats his name three times and explains that John, far from seeking to aggrandize himself in any way, was trying to stamp the difficult revelations he was about to expound with the mark of apostolic authority, lest they be despised and lest his authorship be put in doubt. Commenting on Apc. 1:1–2 (“He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John who has borne witness to the word of God”), Rupert remarks that this passage constitutes a categorical proof of the canonicity of the book, as it is a direct reference to the prologue of the fourth Gospel. Having thus accurately summarized Rupert’s testimony, Titelmans dwells on it at some length, and finds it conclusive.²⁸

Dismissing quickly Erasmus’ observations on the difference of style between the fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse (in Titelmans’ view merely the result of a difference in subject matter), the Franciscan prefers to use external evidence to prove that the two books are by one and the same author. The external evidence is provided by his favorite guarantor, Pseudo-Dionysius, who addresses his “Letter 10” to “John the Theologian, Apostle and Evangelist exiled on the island of Patmos [Ioanni theologo et apostolo et euangelistae in Patmos Insula relegato].” This superscript proves finally that *Ioannes Theologus*, author of the Apocalypse, is the same person as John the Evangelist.²⁹ Titelmans supplements this evidence with the testimonies of Ephraim of Edessa, Suidas, and Theophylactus, all intended to prove that John the Evangelist was the same person as John the Theologian.

With the Apocalypse and its author thus firmly anchored in the *consensus* and with no mention made of controversial points of doctrine such as millenarianism, Titelmans goes on to attack Erasmus’ point about yielding to the *consensus* of the Church. This position, as the Franciscan himself admits, is rather more difficult to refute, seeing that Erasmus does finally bow to the *consensus*, regardless of any his-

²⁸*De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 11, fols. E5r–E6v. On Rupert of Deutz and his Commentary, see John Van Engen, *Rupert of Deutz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

²⁹*De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 19, fols. F3r–F3v: “Ex qua primum superscriptione quis non prima facie videt eundem esse quem Dionysius et theologum et apostolum et Euangelistam nominavit?”; see PG 3:1117.

torical and textual evidence he can bring forward to invalidate it.³⁰ However, the very fact that Erasmus' own investigations contradict the *consensus* practically makes him a member of the *synagoga Satanae*. Most importantly, the Dutch humanist's hypothetical phrasing of his approval ("if, however, the Church approves of this work in such a way that it wishes that John the Evangelist be considered as the author and the book itself have the same weight as the other books in the Canon") indicates to Titelmans that Erasmus is skeptical about the unanimity of the *consensus*. It is this very skepticism that he wishes to eradicate (he says) by showing Erasmus that the Church's approval is unanimous and total.³¹ What seems to a modern reader to have been a weak concession on the part of the Dutch humanist was in fact viewed as a dangerously subversive position by conservative Catholic theologians such as Titelmans. The latter continues his response by noting that several books of the New Testament such as the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of James, the Second Epistle of Peter, and the Epistle of Jude, were at one time or another subject to doubt among isolated groups or individuals. These doubts, however, pale into insignificance when confronted with the *consensus ecclesiae* on the biblical canon.³²

In order to finally move Erasmus from his skeptical position, Titelmans points out that his adversary's respect for the Gospels and for the fourth Gospel in particular puts him in a difficult position: if taken to its logical conclusion, it could lead Erasmus to devalue the Pauline Epistles and indeed the whole of the Old Testament. Moreover, by questioning the status of the Apocalypse, Erasmus is wreaking havoc with the very consensus he claims to obey, and indeed with the scripture.³³ Here Titelmans cites at some length Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples' preface to Pseudo-Dionysius.³⁴ The Stapulensis, for whom Erasmus had a great respect despite their

³⁰*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 22, fol. F7r: "Quod enim tanti asseris tibi esse orbis consensum et ecclesiae auctoritatem vt propter eam tuas coniecturas (iudicio proprio alioqui satis validas vt te moueant ad non adhaerendum veritati) nolis insequi, est hoc proculdubio laude dignum."

³¹*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chaps. 22–23, fols. F7r–F8r: "Qui enim suum sensum vel suum etiam ingenium iudicio praeponunt ecclesiae, propter suas coniecturas aut rationes ... illius determinationibus submittere sese recusantes, hos certum est ad synagogam Satanae spectare, quantumvis se Christianos profiteantur. ... Atqui auctoritate certissima tum ex vetustissimis sanctissimisque orthodoxis patribus, tum ex ipsius ecclesiae decretis et conciliorum determinationibus atque adeo ex antiquissimo ecclesiae vsu ostendimus hunc librum ab ecclesia haberi vt Scripturam canonicam sicque pari pondere cum caeteris canonicis haberi libris, cum absque vlla discretione aut separatione hunc cum aliis connumerant."

³²*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 23, fol. F8r.

³³*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 24, fol. F8v: "Quod si iccirco forsitan dixeris non esse pari pondere hanc Scripturam cum caeteris canonicis, quoniam Euangeliorum maior ac dignior est auctoritas, sic et de Paulinis Epistolis et aliis similiter dici potest et debet atque adeo de vniuersis Veteris Testamenti libris. ... // G1r// Tu itaque videris Desideri amicissime, si non digne reprehensioni te ipsum subieceris, cum tuo isto annotatione ea in dubium vocas, de quibus nullo modo erat dubitandum, neque vllus syncerus ecclesiae subditus dubitat, nisi tantum Synagoga Satanae qui se mentiuntur Christianos esse."

³⁴*De autoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 24, fol. F8r–v. A modern edition of the preface is in Eugene F. Rice, *The Prefatory Epistles of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples and Related Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 20:60–61.

unfortunate quarrel of 1517–18,³⁵ does indeed say in his preface of 1499 that just as the light which is closest to the sun itself is the brightest, so whatever is closest to its origin is the purest. Thus, according to Lefèvre, the Gospels are the nearest to their divine origin. The apparent nearness of this view to that of Erasmus is deceptive, as Lefèvre specifies that the Gospels are closely followed by the “sanctae et arcae Iesu reuelationes, Apostolorum Acta et Epistolae et Prophetarum monumenta quae Veteris Legis continentur Organo.”³⁶ Titelmans is therefore in no doubt that Lefèvre holds the Apocalypse, i.e. the “sanctae et arcae Iesu reuelationes,” in high esteem, following “Dionysius the Areopagite” and thus showing himself to be, in contrast to Erasmus, in perfect agreement with the consensus.

The choice of Lefèvre was calculated to embarrass Erasmus: the memory of their dispute over Hebrews 2:7 was still relatively fresh, and by 1530 Erasmus had been disowned by humanist-minded reformers such as Melancthon and Oecolampadius³⁷ after refusing to depart from the *consensus ecclesiae* on the issue of the eucharist. Moreover, in 1529 he had sounded a resolute *no* to the reformers in his *Epistola in pseudeuangelicos*. Refusing to depart from the consensus while not in entire agreement with the Roman Church, he risked isolation. Titelmans highlighted that isolation by showing that Erasmus’ position on the Apocalypse was at loggerheads with that of a fellow humanist Lefèvre d’Etaples, who along with Iodocus Clichtove had joined the consensus.³⁸

B E Z A

Although, as I have shown elsewhere,³⁹ most of the Protestant commentators on the Apocalypse also heavily relied (more so than in commentaries on other books of the Bible) on patristic and medieval exegesis to support their own, and although most were anti-Erasmian, only Theodore Beza tackled Erasmus point by point in his *Annotations* of 1556–57. Beza’s actual annotations on the Apocalypse were as scant as Erasmus’ own, only the preface gave away the author’s intentions. As I have shown elsewhere, that very preface was translated into French in 1557 to introduce Antoine Pignet’s *Brieve Exposition de l’Apocalypse de S. Jean*, which underwent numerous editions in Geneva between 1539 and 1557.⁴⁰ Why did Beza undertake

³⁵The quarrel between Lefèvre and Erasmus over the interpretation of Hebrews 2:7 has received much scholarly attention recently. Lefèvre proposed “lower than God” claiming that *elohim* in Ps. 8:6 was wrongly translated by the LXX and referred in fact to the hypostatic union; Erasmus agreed with Aquinas: Christ was made lower than the angels in his human nature. See Rummel, *Erasmus and His Catholic Critics*, 1:48–58, and the literature cited there; Guy Bedouelle, “Lefèvre et Erasme: Une amitié critique” in *Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples (1450?–1536): Actes du colloque d’Etaples, les 7 et 8 novembre 1992*, ed. Jean-François Pernot (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1995), 23–42.

³⁶“The holy and arcane revelations of Jesus, the Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles, and the works of the Prophets contained in the textbook of the Ancient Law.” *De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 24, fol. G1r.

³⁷See Cornelis Augustijn, *Erasmus: Der Humanist als Theologe und Kirchenreformer* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 164–66.

³⁸*De auctoritate Apocalypsis*, book 2, chap. 53, fols. K4r–v.

³⁹Backus, *Les sept visions*, 11–73.

⁴⁰Backus, *Les sept visions*, 43–54.

to refute Erasmus' doubts on the canonicity and apostolicity of the Apocalypse chiefly for two reasons. First, as is well known, Beza's *Annotationes* and new Latin translation of the New Testament were intended to counter and supplant Erasmus' Second, particularly with regard to the Apocalypse, Erasmus' skeptical annotations coupled with Luther's early doubts on the canonicity of the book meant that despite the efforts of Protestant commentators, such as François Lambert (1528) Sebastian Meyer (1541), Antoine Pignet (1539–57), Theodore Bibliander (1545) Leo Jud (1542), and Heinrich Bullinger (1543, 1557), some pre- and post-Tridentine Roman Catholic theologians persisted in thinking mistakenly that one of the hallmarks of the Protestant heresy was its rejection of the book of Revelation.⁴¹

How does Beza's method of tackling Erasmus⁴² differ from that of his Roman Catholic "predecessor" Titelmans, whose work he would in any case either not have known or deliberately ignored? Beza, like Titelmans, also refers extensively to the writings of the early Church. His object, however, is not to establish a *consensus ecclesiae* but to select the most reliable testimonies. Dionysius the Areopagite plays no active part in his argument, having been safely relegated to the realm of the apocrypha by all Protestant theologians since Zwingli. Erasmus' note is summarized carefully by Beza.⁴³

Even were we to admit, says the Genevan theologian, that some Church Fathers (notably the Greeks according to Jerome's testimony in his "Letter 129" to Dardanus) did not believe in the apostolic origin of the book and so cast a doubt upon its canonicity, there were many others who did find it authentic. Beza cites by way of example the *Panarion* of Epiphanius of Salamis (365–403) who condemns (*haeresis* 51) as heretics all those who deny the canonicity of the Apocalypse. Beza then notes that the Apocalypse was not only approved but also commented upon by both Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.⁴⁴ The Genevan Reformer (like Titelman before him) is alluding to chiliastic interpretations of the Apocalypse in Justin's *Dialogus contra Tryphonem* (chap. 81) and Irenaeus's *Contra haereses* (5, 28.1–31.2). However, it is important to bear in mind that these, as it happens chiliastic, testimonies assume great importance in Beza's note, as they are singled out instead of simply assuming their rightful place in an all-encompassing *consensus ecclesiae*. Beza rejects the testimonies of Dionysius of Alexandria and Eusebius with total contempt. Dionysius is only known via Eusebius, and the latter, according to Calvin's successor, is not worth taking seriously "as all learned men find that he lacks judgment in

⁴¹On this, see Backus, *Les sept visions*, 25–54.

⁴²Beza's preliminary note to the Apocalypse remained unchanged in all the editions of his New Testament published between 1557 and 1598. I shall refer here to the posthumous 1642 edition, which reproduces the text of the 1598 edition without alterations: *Iesu Christi Domini Nostri Nouum Testamentum sive Nouum Foedus, cuius Graeco contextui respondent interpretationes duae: Una vetus, altera Theodorae Bezae ... Cantabrigiae, ex officina Rogeri Danielis, 1642*. Hereafter cited as: Beza, *N.T.* (1642).

⁴³Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 743, col. A.

⁴⁴Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 743, col. A: "Si spectetur quibus rationibus permoti sint nonnulli ad hunc librum repudiandum, tum demum facile appariturum quam immerito istud fecerint. Deinde sicut: quibusdam fuit repudiatus, ita fuisse a plerisque receptum, adeo quidem vt Epiphanius illos, a quibus reiiciebatur, aperte inter haereticos recensuerit, vt inter omittam antiquissimos scriptores, Iustinum philosophum et Irenaeum Lugdunensem episcopum...."

many of his writings [in quo docti omnes iudicium in plerisque scriptis requirunt].”⁴⁵

Attacking then the contention that the Apocalypse lacks *apostolica grauitas* because it is merely an allegorical representation of the history of the Church, Beza is not at all interested in the Pseudo-Dionysian understanding of allegory as directed to those wishing to fully fathom the divine mysteries. The Genevan’s approach is totally positivistic. Declining to dwell on the merits and demerits of allegory (except to admit that the Apocalypse is indeed difficult to understand), Beza takes as his authority Arethas, a tenth-century Greek compiler of a commentary on the Apocalypse, and notes that although (as Erasmus would have it) several *eruditissimi viri* have argued that the book lacks *apostolica grauitas*, several other equally learned men within the Greek Church have commended it. Arethas, emphasizes Beza, names Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Papias, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus. Beza is quite clear that although not all the Fathers guarantee the book’s canonicity, the most important ones in the Greek Church do. Moreover, he notes rightly, the book contains very little over and above what is to be found in the Old Testament prophecies.⁴⁶

In the third place, Beza replies to Erasmus’ objections to John’s repetition of his own name “as if he were writing a promissory note, and not a book.” Beza finds this indictment “weak and incoherent [infirmum ac imbecile]” but as he has not sought to establish a *consensus*, unlike Titelmans, he has no particular author to put forward in support of his own view. Instead, he turns directly to the text so as to demonstrate that the Apocalypse is not a historical account but a prophecy, and that the truth of a prophecy depends entirely on the authority of the prophet, which is why John found it necessary to repeat his name, just like Jeremiah, Daniel, or Isaiah.⁴⁷

Beza settles the question of whether John the Theologian is a different person from John the Evangelist by a tacit reference to Pseudo-Dionysius’ “Letter 10.” “The other John” Beza suspects to have been *Ioannes presbyter* (mentioned in Eusebius, *H.e.* 3:39).⁴⁸ Beza’s answer to arguments about differences of style between the fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse is identical to Titelmans’: different subject matter calls for a different style. (He adds as an afterthought that on purely stylistic

⁴⁵Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 743, col. A.

⁴⁶Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 743, col. B: “Quicumque tandem isti eruditissimi viri fuerint, magnam eos reprehensionem mereri in eo quod conuicti ausi sint eum librum exagitare qui sane sit breuissimus, si ea demas quae ad verbum ex Prophetis sint exscripta. Longe aliter Basilius, Gregorius, Cyrillus, Epiphanius, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, vt Arethas testatur, qui hunc librum non modo (vt Dionysius Alexandrinus) putarunt a sancto viro scriptum esse, sed aperte etiam Ioanni apostolo vendicarunt.”

⁴⁷Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 743, col. B: “Nam historiae veritas aliunde potius quam a scriptore pendet: in prophetia vero, quia res futurae praedicuntur nulla nisi reuelantis et annunciantis autoritate innixae, quis non videt hoc requiri imprimis vt vnde tandem illarum praedictio emanet, quis patefecerit, quis scripserit intelligamus?”

⁴⁸Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 744, col. A: “Atqui vel hic titulus eum Ioanni Euangelistae vendicat quem nemo ignorat . . . fuisse Theologum a veteribus appellatum. Alter autem ille Ioannes quem ego sane supposititium esse suspicor non theologus (quo cognomento nihil dici potest augustius) sed presbyter dicebatur.” Pseudo-Dionysius’ “Letter 10” is addressed to “Ioanni theologo, apostolo et euangelistae.” See PG 3: 1117–18.

grounds he would have been tempted to attribute the Apocalypse to Mark the Evangelist). However, Beza's explanation of the relationship between style and subject matter is very different from the Franciscan's: in the reformer's view, the rough style of the Apocalypse is a result of its literary genre: it is an imitation of an Old Testament prophecy, for which only Hebrew models were available. "Therefore no one should be surprised that his style is not particularly polished, seeing that he did not wish to depart from the prophets who wrote in Hebrew either by his vocabulary or by his style."⁴⁹ Whereas Titelmans stressed the *consensus ecclesiae*, Beza insists on the testimony of selected Fathers and on the links between the Apocalypse and Old Testament prophecy. Thus the use of prophecy as a genre helps him anchor the book in the biblical canon.

Beza also appears more willing than Titelmans to discuss the book's theology, especially in the light of Erasmus' accusations of chiliasm and the latter's thinly veiled wish to attribute the book to Cerinthus. Subjecting the latter hypothesis to a careful scrutiny on the basis of *Panarion* (*haer.* 28), Beza concludes that he finds no resemblance between the hedonistic, earthly paradise postulated by Cerinthus and the "thousand years" of the Apocalypse.⁵⁰ Thus reducing the problem of chiliasm to that of Cerinthus' heresy, Beza effectively neutralizes the issue and avoids going into the delicate question of possible links between the "thousand years" and millenarian doctrines in general. Yet Beza knew very well, both from his reading of Justin and Irenaeus and from Jerome's commentary on Ezekiel 36, that Justin, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus, the very Fathers he selected as privileged witnesses of the book's canonicity and apostolic origin, were all chiliasts. In privileging their testimony he was tacitly opening the door to ante-Nicene millenarianism without supporting it himself. Indeed, all he was prepared to admit about the Apocalypse was that it was written after the Ascension, that it contained prophecies for the most part already fulfilled, and that in common with many Old Testament prophecies it was obscure and difficult to understand. In fact, the Apocalypse is to Beza, when all is said and done, a continuation of Old Testament prophecies. "I would think," he says, "that the Holy Spirit wanted to assemble in this most precious book those things which the previous prophets had predicted would come to pass after the advent of Christ, and to those he added some that he knew would concern us."⁵¹ Are the "thousand years" to be counted in the latter category, and if so, in what sense? The whole of the history of the Church between the Advent and the Second Coming? A particular period of that history? The inner state of the faithful? Beza refuses to comment on this delicate issue.

⁴⁹Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 744, col. A: "Itaque mirum nemini videri debet quod non ita culto sermone vtatur, vt qui a prophetarum qui hebraice scripserunt ne verbis quidem nedum caractere discedere voluit."

⁵⁰Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 744, col. B: "[...] Quid vero quod vbi de mille annis loquitur nihil eorum narrat, de quibus Cerinthus tam impie garriabat? Vbi enim luxus ille?"

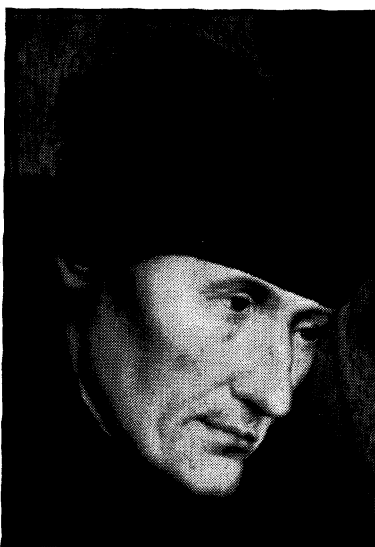
⁵¹Beza, *N.T.* (1642), 744, col. B: "Venio in eam sententiam vt existimem Spiritum sanctum in hunc pretiosissimum librum congerere voluisse quae ex superiorum prophetarum praedictionibus implenda post Christi aduentum superarent ac nonnulla etiam addidisse quatenus nostra interesse cognouit."



In his reply to Erasmus, Titelmans insisted on the *consensus ecclesiae* founded on "Dionysius the Areopagite," whereas Beza preferred to establish the Apocalypse within the biblical genre of prophecy and to name the ante-Nicene Fathers as prime guarantors of its canonicity. Some of Titelmans' and Beza's arguments were remarkably similar, notably their defenses of John's identity and his style. What differed was the way they used patristic tradition. In any case, neither managed to answer Erasmus' question on the book's millenarianism. Titelmans simply ignored it. Beza, by privileging the testimony of the ante-Nicene Fathers, implicitly admitted it without being in any way a party to it. Yet what could Beza have done? To echo Erasmus' doubts and to investigate the question of Eastern hesitations about the Apocalypse made him vulnerable to accusations of heresy. Moreover, it also meant writing off the already existing Protestant commentaries on the book, including that of Heinrich Bullinger. To cite Roman documents such as the Pseudo-Gelasian *Decree* or to invoke the *consensus ecclesiae* in support of the book's canonicity meant implicitly siding with Rome. Beza chose what was becoming the standard Protestant solution to the problem: anchor the book within the genre of Old Testament prophecies, and privilege the ante-Nicene testimonies while passing over in silence their chiliasm and the subsequent marginalization of the book by the Eastern Church.

The approaches of Beza and Titelmans were equally artificial, but each helped in his own way to defend the canonicity of the Apocalypse. It is in fact not likely that Erasmus would have succeeded in expelling it from the canon altogether. However, notwithstanding the efforts of Titelmans and Beza, he did do it some damage, at least so far as Protestant commentators were concerned. It is no accident that men like Sebastian Meyer, Theodore Bibliander, and Heinrich Bullinger all devoted a large section of their commentaries to justifying the book's place within the canon. Moreover, it is conceivable that Erasmus' doubts were at least partly responsible for Calvin's silence on the subject of the Apocalypse and, more generally, for the relative paucity of sixteenth-century Protestant commentaries on the book. Erasmus' note raised questions that no sixteenth-century commentator managed to answer.⁵²

⁵²A preliminary version of this article was given as a paper at the Institut d'histoire de la Réformation, Geneva, on 19 January 1998.



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the Anabaptists,
and the
Great Commission
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