

HISTORY, MYSTICISM AND ETHICS IN OECUMENIUS: A HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE EARLIEST EXTANT GREEK COMMENTARY ON REVELATION

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Abstract

This article discusses the earliest extant Greek commentary on Revelation, written by Oecumenius in the sixth century C.E. It investigates first of all the discovery of the commentary's manuscript in the twentieth century and the subsequent re-evaluation of Oecumenius. It secondly outlines Oecumenius' significance for historical and biblical studies before it and thirdly focuses on his hermeneutics by analysing his historical, mystical and ethical interpretation of Revelation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Up to the twentieth century the person and work of Oecumenius represented a true riddle to scholars in biblical and historical studies. Before this time, he was mostly and mistakenly thought to have been a tenth century bishop of Tricca in Thessalonica who wrote a number of commentaries on Acts, the Pauline letters and the seven Catholic letters. Donatus Veronensis, who edited them in 1532, ascribed these works to Oecumenius on the grounds of their contents.ⁱ Over a period of time, scholars like Overbeck (in 1864) expressed their doubts about this identification, though it was accepted that fragments in these works indeed stemmed from Oecumenius and pointed to the existence, amongst others, of a commentary that he wrote on Revelation.ⁱⁱ Diekamp (1901:1046) summed up the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century by noting that “über die Stellung dieses Exegeten in der theologischen Litteraturgeschichte lässt sich fast nichts Gewissen aussagen”.ⁱⁱⁱ (“Practically nothing is clear about the position of this exegete in the history of theological literature.”)

At that stage, the situation changed quite dramatically. A detective tale unfolded itself as the German scholar, Diekamp followed up on a chance discovery he had made when he was paging through the 1749 catalogue of manuscripts in Turin. He was intrigued to note among the writings in codex gr. 84 a Greek commentary on Revelation by “Rhetorician Oecumenius”, because he was not aware that a manuscript of the commentary actually existed. Upon checking the *Index Scriptorum*, he discovered that it was not listed there^{iv} – which would explain why the manuscript previously went unnoticed. Diekamp, funded by the German Royal Academy of Sciences, then followed up on this discovery by travelling to Turin to investigate the manuscript (*Taurin.84 - T*), which stemmed from Messina and which contained a note dated 29 January

1548 that mentioned Georgios from Constantinople as scribe. But, disappointingly, almost half of the twelve *Lovgoi* were missing. They had not been copied by some earlier scribe because they were regarded as fulfilled prophecies.^v

Pursuing his quest for the commentary, Diekamp subsequently visited the Vatican library in Rome, where he found two other manuscripts (*Vatic.gr. 1426 - V*, from the end of the 15th century, and a later copy of it). Both were incomplete as well. Despite some variance between them, both stemmed from a manuscript that was produced in Messina in 1213. Diekamp, noting this provenance, promptly set off to visit to the university library there. Among the archives of the dissolved convent of Saint Salvatore he finally discovered “zu meiner freudigen Überraschung” (“to my pleasant surprise”) a manuscript (codex Mess.S.Salvatore 99; now known as *M*) of the complete commentary (Diekamp 1901:1048). It also dated from the twelfth century, but unlike the other manuscripts that had other works added to the commentary – this one contained only Oecumenius’ commentary. Thus, within a sort period of time, several manuscripts of the commentary became available through the assiduous work of Diekamp. It was now evident that these manuscripts shared a common text, though their different readings revealed that they were not simply copies of each other.^{vi}

Diekamp’s intention to publish an *editio princeps* of the commentary did not materialise, but he fortunately reported his discovery at an early stage and offered a first evaluation of the manuscripts (cf. Diekamp 1901).^{vii} The prolific American author and text critic, Hoskier,^{viii} continued the work on Oecumenius. His interest in Oecumenius was a result of the fact that he was working on a text edition of Revelation (cf. Hoskier 1929). Mercati,^{ix} the famous Vatican librarian, brought Diekamp’s article to Hoskier’s attention in 1913. After his initial general essay on Oecumenius (1913), Hoskier (1928) finally published the *editio princeps*. This edition was severely criticised by Heseler, who noted in his review the groundbreaking work of Diekamp on Oecumenius and expressed his disappointment that the two scholars, who spent so much time and effort in researching Oecumenius, did not collaborate to provide a more insightful edition of the commentary.^x For the rest, Heseler drew attention to flaws in Hoskier’s work^{xi} and concluded that it lacked scientific rigor.

In 1999 De Groote, known for his scholarly research on Oecumenius,^{xii} published an improved version based on an exhaustive list of manuscripts (9 main and 29 secondary versions). Access to Oecumenius’ commentary remained restricted, however, because it was only available in the Greek original. Neither Hoskier nor De Groote provided a translation of the Greek original. Only recently did Weinreich (2005) include passages from Oecumenius’ commentary in English translation in his publication. In 2006 the full commentary was translated into English (Suggit 2006).

Several general articles have appeared on Oecumenius’ work and some research on its significance for New Testament has been done (cf. e.g. Suggit 2006:13-14), but much still needs to be done.^{xiii} This is especially true of his

place in the exegesis of Revelation and particularly of the hermeneutical perspectives in his commentary. This is necessary in the light of the significance of Oecumenius' commentary, which will be explained in more detail now.

2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OECUMENIUS

The discovery of Diekamp brought about a thorough re-evaluation of Oecumenius. It was ultimately found that Oecumenius should be dated much earlier than the tenth century. This is evident from Oecumenius' own words. He wrote in his commentary that it was composed about five hundred years after Revelation was written (*Oec.* 1.3.6). Since he repeatedly dated Revelation in the time of Domitian (95 C.E.),^{xiv} this could mean that he wrote at the end of the sixth century. This is supported by De Groote, who dates him late in the sixth century, after 553 C.E. Some scholars cite other evidence that they think indicates that he may have lived and written his commentary even earlier. In a Monophysite *catena* there is a reference to an Oecumenius who wrote a commentary on Revelation and who was engaged in correspondence with Severus, the bishop of Antioch who died in 538 C.E.^{xv} If this Oecumenius mentioned in the *catena* is the same person as the one who wrote the commentary, the reference to five hundred years should not be taken literally or has a different starting point - which, in turn, would mean that Oecumenius should be dated even earlier in the first half of the sixth century.^{xvi} Other information is also relevant here. Lamoreaux (1998:100-102) investigated the letters of Severus in which Ecumenius is described as a "married layman who was closely involved in the doctrinal and disciplinary problems of the early sixth-century Severian Monophysite community, especially in Isauria, and himself a close confidant of Severus" (Lamoreaux 1998:102). He identified the author of the document on the Apocalypse as this Oecumenius because of information in a seventh century Syriac fragment and because Oecumenius is a rare name.^{xvii} He (Lamoreaux 1998:105) solved the problem of Oecumenius' remark regarding the 500 years by noting that it meant 500 years after the first coming of Christ (his birth). It is certain that Oecumenius' views were used by Andrew in his commentary^{xviii}, which was previously regarded as the oldest extant Greek commentary. Andrew can be dated after 563, so that the possibility is very strong indeed that Oecumenius wrote his commentary in the first half of the sixth century. It must therefore be regarded as the oldest extant Greek commentary on Revelation.^{xix} Of special importance in the dating, and often too quickly overlooked in the debate about the date of Oecumenius, is the seventh century Syriac fragment that refers to him. For a commentary to be read so widely that it becomes known in the seventh century in a different, Syriac context, requires much time - which favours a date early in the sixth century.

Whatever the precise dating, the commentary is of special value because there are not many other commentaries from this early period. Only a few other early Greek commentaries on Revelation exist, of which Charles (1920:clxxxvii) remarked that "the earliest were probably the best".^{xx} His remarks about the few available Greek commentaries illustrate the importance of Oecumenius' commentary even further. Some early church fathers commented on Revelation or parts of it. Justin and Irenaeus (cf. Jerome, *De vir. illustr.* ii. 9) and his student Methodius, were among these. The two earliest complete commentaries were by Melito (cf. Eus. *H.E.* iv. 26. 2) and Hippolytus (Jerome, *op. cit.* 61 - this writing was lost). Clement of Alexandria (Eus. *H.E.* vi. 14. 1) also commented on the Apocalypse, whilst Origin

intended to do so.^{xxi} There are later commentaries by Andrew of Caesarea in Cappadocia in the sixth century^{xxii} and the much later one by Arethas of Caesarea in Cappadocia, written in the tenth century and modelled strongly on that of Oecumenius.^{xxiii}

Not only the small number of commentaries, but also the general reception of Revelation in the east, underlines its significance. Schmid (1931:228) drew attention to the fact that, given the opposition to Revelation in the east, Greek exegetes avoided commenting on it. It was a strongly controversial book, so that it required courage and insight for someone from within this context to defend its authority and then to comment on it in such a learned manner. It is thus remarkable that we now have at our disposal the full text of a commentary on Revelation that dates from the sixth century.

The historical status of Oecumenius is also enhanced because he is now dated much closer to Origin, which makes it possible to evaluate the conflict between Oecumenius and Origin.^{xxiv} And, finally, Oecumenius' commentary has become a reliable source for the study of the church fathers because of his extensive allusions to and quotations from their works (De Groote 2001:191-200). He displays, as De Groote formulated it, "eine frappante Kenntnis von der Literatur der Kirchenväter" ("a striking knowledge of the literature of the fathers of the church") (De Groote 2001:191). This is clear from early on in his commentary, when in its introduction he defends the authenticity of Revelation by quoting Athanasius, Gregory the Theologian, Methodius, Cyril the Great, Hippolytus and their works (*Oec.* 1.1.4-5). His wide knowledge of the early fathers continues to be reflected throughout the rest of his commentary.

Other aspects of the significance of this commentary should be briefly mentioned. It has been valued in New Testament Studies because of its early uncial text of the Apocalypse, which was useful in the light of the problematic state of the Apocalypse's text (Lamoreaux 1998:88; Kilpatrick 1959:1). His work also reveals some of the arguments (based on contents, function and ecclesiastical use) to defend the Book of Revelation against its critics, which ultimately contributed to its inclusion in the canon of Christian Scriptures in the east. All this illustrates the significance of Oecumenius for historical and biblical studies.

3 HERMENEUTICS

Oecumenius' commentary offers valuable insights into the way early Christians interpreted the Bible, and then especially Revelation as controversial and difficult text. Despite the commentary's ideological character, which is evident from the way in which Monophysitism and Oecumenius' own orthodox position appear in it, useful perspectives on early Christian exegesis can be gained from it. For example, Oecumenius developed his exegesis in debating critical readings of Revelation. He responded to doubts about Johannine authorship of Revelation because of differences between Johannine texts, to the predominant chiliastic interpretations of earlier interpreters^{xxv}, and to the *Naherwartung* that some readers read into the text.^{xxvi} In our time, in which ancient Christian exegesis is

increasingly drawing attention (e.g. Weinrich 2005 and the important *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*), it is especially his hermeneutics that is of interest. In his hermeneutics, three matters stand out - his mystical, historical and ethical approaches to Revelation, each of which will be discussed in more detail now.

3.1 Historical reading

The commentary of Oecumenius displays a keen historical awareness. Oecumenius repeatedly illuminates the text by framing it with historical detail and he approaches the text from a distinct historical perspective by, for example, pointing out that the author was a disciple of Jesus. John “the evangelist and theologian” was the author of Revelation (*Oec.* 1.2; 12.20). He was the disciple who was “lying on the breast” of the Lord and was called “son of thunder”. John’s historical situation at the time of the writing of Revelation is also explained and placed within a Roman context. He was banished under Domitian, sentenced “to live on the island of Patmos” (*Oec.* 1.21), which was “a small and desolate island” (*Oec.* 2.13). John’s Christian readers are also given a historical face. He reflects on the historical number of churches mentioned in Revelation - as was done more than once in the early Christian exegesis of Revelation 1-3 - and explains why some churches in Asia are left unmentioned. He knows that there are more cities in Asia than the seven mentioned in Revelation 1-3, so he needs to figure out why then only these are mentioned. He deduces that John “is ordered to write to those converted by him” (*Oec.* 1.25).

His historical interest is by times intriguing. He, for example, offers valuable insights to modern exegetes when he compares Revelation as prophecy with the prophecies of pagan visionaries. Though the pagan visionaries have been “held in disdain by our prophets”, they also, like John, have “the mark of consummate prophecy” which is to know past, present and future events. He adds, though, “For their diviners never had knowledge of everything, nor did even the demonic powers at work in them” (*Oec.* 1.1). Too often modern exegetes of Revelation link prophecy to the Judeo-Christian prophetic movement, forgetting that prophets and prophecy were a widespread religious phenomenon. Oecumenius’ historical remarks sensitise the reader of Revelation to the fact that account must be given of the place of Judeo-Christian prophecy within this wider phenomenon.^{xxvii} When a Greek commentator from the provinces was reading Revelation, he could not but take into account that it was part of a wider pagan context in which prophecy played a major social and religious role.^{xxviii}

Most prominent are Oecumenius’ historical observations about the main characters and events in Revelation. These, according to him, share a Roman context. The Severus correspondence suggests that Oecumenius lived in Isauria, in Asia Minor (cf. Rev. 1:4), so that the provenance of Revelation was closer to him than to any other commentator from that time. The contents of his commentary thus provide a special insight into the experiences of an early Greek Christian in this Roman context, in the Roman provinces. It is a work written “from within” the same context in which the original text originated.^{xxix} In this sense, his historical observations reflect first-hand experiences. He repeatedly links Revelation to Roman rule. Roman rule was powerful, “secure,

populous and the receiver of tribute” (*Oec.* 9.15; *Oec.* 9.19). The Romans were, in addition, exploitative rulers who oppressed and persecuted their subjects.^{xxx} Roman rule is described with such negative attributes as “fornication”, “mad idolatry” and “persecutor of the saints” (*Oec.* 9.6). It was so evil that it would come under the judgment of God. Oecumenius’ language about this is direct and clear. Babylon, he notes in his comments on Revelation 16:19, is not the original Babylon, but, in his words, “some other one. And I fancy he (i.e. John) is talking about Rome and all the calamities that will later overtake it, as the account will proceed to describe”. Oecumenius notes that the author intended through his visions to speak about a concrete state of affairs. When he comments on Revelation 17, he simply remarks (*Oec.* 9.9):

After completing the account of the end of the present age and of all that will then happen, the vision turns to something else, as it wishes to show the evangelist what will happen to Rome.

When Revelation speaks of the seven heads that are seven hills on which of the women are seated, “this is a very clear indication that he is speaking about Rome, for Rome is described as seven-crested, and no other city is so called”. And when Revelation calls the seven hills seven kings, it “reasonably regards the kings as heads, for the kings are the head and summary of the Roman Empire”. He knows the names of the Roman Emperors and their times of office. Of the many emperors, Revelation mentions only seven because they made the beast, that is the devil, “raise up his head against the Christians, by stirring up persecutions against the church” (*Oec.* 9.13). Revelation 17:10 reads, “They also represent seven kings: five had already fallen, one is now reigning, and the other has yet to come.” Those who persecuted the saints and who had already died were Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Severus, Decius, Valerian, and Diocletian. Valerian is the one who remained. He was Roman Emperor from 253 to 260 C.E. and infamous for his persecution of Christians in 258. The other one, that “has yet to come” was Diocletian (245-312 C.E.) who was emperor from 284 to 305. Oecumenius is once again historically precise, because he explains the fact that this king would “last for only a little while” (Rev. 17:10) by linking the “little while” with his persecution of the Christians. Diocletian reigned for twenty years, but he began persecuting the Christians during the last two years of his reign, which, he argues, explains the short period of time mentioned in Revelation (cf. *Oec.* 9.13.6). After these seven, ten kings and the Antichrist would arise from the rule of the Romans, whereupon they would be defeated by Christ (*Oec.* 9.13.8-11).

These remarks indicate that on a basic level Oecumenius attached a straightforward historical meaning to the text. To him Revelation meant literally what it said. It spoke about people and events in Asia Minor and was to be understood in that historical context. This may seem obvious to a modern exegete, but in the light of Oecumenius’ spiritual reading of the text, it is significant - as will be explained now.

3.2 Spiritual reading

From a historical point of view, Oecumenius followed a conventional approach when, for example, he interpreted Revelation historically in terms of its genre

as prophecy and in a first century Roman context. But fundamentally he is part of the Alexandrian exegetical tradition. The commentary contains many examples of imaginative allegorical interpretations, for example, when he interprets the millennium (Rev. 20:2) in “mystical fashion” as the binding of the devil during the time of Christ’s incarnation (after which the devil would be unbound). This allegorical approach makes it clear that Oecumenius wanted to move to a deeper level of meaning with his commentary. To him the historical and concrete aspects represented only one facet of interpretation. It was transcended by his spiritual reading of the text.

Oecumenius summarises Revelation in the beginning of his commentary as a mystical text, an insight that steers his exegesis in a fundamental manner. Describing John as holier than all the other preachers, Oecumenius names Revelation as the most mystical of his writings. It contains both plain and polished mysteries. He concludes from these remarks that this challenges the reader, “(s)o it is necessary for those attempting to interpret spiritual things to be spiritual and wise regarding divine matters” (referring to 1 Cor. 1:23; *Oec.* 1.3). With this remark, Oecumenius requires from his readers a particular pre-understanding when they read Revelation. It is a book that must be understood in terms of its spiritual message. In this sense, his interest in such historical matters as Rome and the Roman emperors is qualified by a deeper issue, namely to understand Revelation religiously. The text finds its highest fulfilment in creating a transformative experience of spiritual blessings in its readers.

This mystical interpretation is accompanied by several references in the commentary to the motif of “mystery”. When he discusses Revelation 2:17 on the promise to the church in Pergamum that they would be given manna, Oecumenius formulates this as, “I shall give him some of the hidden manna *of the mystery*” (*Oec.* 2.7). Suggit (2006:41, note 23) comments on the fact that this word is absent from the original text of Revelation 2:17. It is an insertion of Oecumenius that betrays his real concern with the text. Oecumenius explains that with this remark, John said “in other words ..., ‘I shall grant them to be filled with the spiritual and future blessings’” (*Oec.* 2.7). The text nurtures the reader with spiritual nourishment.

Other pronouncements in Oecumenius’ commentary illuminate this further. In his comments about the Letter to Laodicea with its promise to the Laodiceans that Christ would enter and have supper with them if they opened the door, Oecumenius observes that “The Supper with the Lord signifies participation in the holy mysteries” (*Oec.* 3.10). The mystical dimension thus obtains a sacramental nature. Not only does the text provide spiritual nourishment, but it also speaks of and confirms the sacrament as *locus* of spiritual feeding. What these spiritual blessings are, is also explained further in Oecumenius’ comments on the New Jerusalem. Jerusalem

symbolizes the blessed lot and dwelling of the saints. He (i.e. John) called this figuratively *Jerusalem* both here and later, and he has fittingly adorned it with magnificence, so that what is said about the perceptible Jerusalem may turn our thoughts to the spiritual blessedness of the saints and their way of life (*Oec.* 11:10).

Oecumenius' remarks on the pronouncement in Revelation 21:25 that "the gates of the city shall never be shut by day" that it implies a double thought: It could mean, firstly, that there will be peace and freedom from fear so that there will be no need of a guard over the city, or, secondly that the apostles "will be there, too, as teachers of new and more divine doctrines to the saints" (*Oec.* 12.5). In *Oec.* 11.12 he develops the deeper meaning of this, when he remarks that Revelation 21:3 discloses the symbolism of Jerusalem and the residence of the saints in it: *See, the dwelling of God is with human beings. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.* To experience spiritual blessings is to be in the presence of God. Oecumenius quotes 1 Thessalonians 4:17 as support - Paul remarks that "the saints will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" and will "always be with the Lord" (*Oec.* 11:12; cf. also 11.16). In his discussion of Revelation 22:3, where it is said that the saints will worship God in the New Jerusalem, he writes (*Oec.* 12.7.6) that they will be pure and free from defilements of body and soul. They will worship God with a pleasure and spiritual joy. "This will result from their beholding his face." The following comment that God's name shall be on their foreheads, "symbolizes God's unceasing remembrance of them and communion with them. For, since God is imposed and inscribed on them, he will always be present with the saints".

The spiritual reading that Oecumenius pursues with his commentary thus reveals to the reader the spiritual contents of Revelation. "In their new abode the saints are aware of their spiritual blessings" (*Oec.* 12.5.1). To be in the presence of God is special (*Oec.* 12.5.4):

For, since they are 'sons of the day and of light', the righteous will revel in the divine and illuminating praises and mysteries since they are constantly wrapped in daylight and the light of divine brilliance.

The mystical reading discloses to the readers two states: a divine state of existence, or a demonic state of non-existence. In his discussion of the vision of the prostitute in Revelation, Oecumenius notes the introductory remark in Revelation 17:7 where the angel promises to explain the "mystery of the woman". He remarks that the "pictorial images" are explained "in mystical fashion" (*Oec.* 9.11). He then focuses on the passage about the beast who was, and is not, and is going to ascend. Oecumenius offers two options to understand this phrase, of which the second one is that the phrase *was and is not* should be understood in terms of Philippians 1:1 where Paul addresses the saints:

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who have their being in Philippi, calling the saints "beings" because they are in Christ and held in God's intimacy and memory.

To exist in faith, then, for Oecumenius means to be involved in an intimate relationship with God and to be in God's memory. Without faith, the impious person is in a state of non-being. The Devil is not now a *being*, he remarks.

Similarly also the impious, even if they seem to be beings in virtue of their substance and existence, in fact are not beings when it comes to the decree and memory of God.

This mysticism is firmly based on a positive image of God's character. Oecumenius stresses the benevolence of God, as is especially clear in his discussion of the vengeful passages in Revelation. Oecumenius has problems regarding the instructions in Revelation 18:4-8 to repay Babylon double for her evil deeds. He explains this double rendering as not meaning twice as much. That, to him, would be out of tune with God's character. He thus tries to tone down any impression of wild retaliation and vengeance:

Because God is benevolent and good, and punishes much less severely than the offence merits, he (John) thinks he has rendered double even when he has rendered a part, and not any double, but also sevenfold.

Quoting Psalm 78:12, "render sevenfold into the bosom of our neighbours the taunts with which they have taunted you, Lord", he reads this moderately as, "By this petition for sevenfold he is asking God for a due punishment of his enemies" (*Oec.* 9:19). That this was important to Oecumenius is confirmed by his comments on Revelation 4:3, where it is said the One on the throne looked like jasper. The jasper motif, he writes, is used to describe God as awesome. But this should be understood well: God's nature "is goodness itself, kindness, and gentleness. God wishes to be our father rather than a tyrant". If God is the judge who punishes, the reason is to be found in ourselves. "We compel God to be awesome and ready to punish, so that he often puts aside his natural gentleness, and is driven to unnatural severity" (*Oec.* 3.5.7).^{xxxi}

The practical effects of this mystical reading of Revelation are intriguing. When Oecumenius talks about the future, he lacks any interest in historical calculations about this coming judgment. In general, he avoids speculating about the future and, in fact, he reads references to an imminent end in an allegorical manner. Clearly allegorical are his remarks on Revelation 1:1, that the Revelation was given to John about *what must soon take place*. He notes that after the long period of five hundred years nothing has been fulfilled. "Soon" must, however, not be seen "as the actual time of the fulfilment of the future events," but has to do with the power and eternity of God. Here he cites Psalm 89:4, that a thousand years "are as yesterday which is past, and a watch in the night". Though all temporal extension may seem long and protracted, it is short when compared with eternity.

With this reading, the reader of Revelation is steered towards understanding that the deepest dimension of the text is to experience the presence of God and that even eschatological pronouncements serve to illuminate characteristics such as the power and eternity of God. In times of tribulation, it is not the *when* question that is important, but *who* is with the person in his/her oppression and persecution. Eschatology is consequently linked with and interpreted in terms of deeper mystical truths.

Oecumenius also interprets eschatological material elsewhere in an allegorical manner, as, for example, through a spiritual reading of the number 666 in Revelation 13:18. For him the instruction to calculate the name of the beast, is not “strange or unusual ..., but it is a well-worn method of reckoning known to people”. Once again, he reads the text historically, assuming an approach from his own times to interpret it. But then it changes: According to him, this number applies to many names and titles. He then lists names like that of Lampetis, Benediktos and Titan that were suggested as possibilities. Most interesting is his suggestion that the word “the conqueror” (*οJ nikhthv*) is also a possible interpretation. He relates this word to Daniel 7:8, where the little horn takes the place of three of the beast’s ten horns. Oecumenius then describes the conqueror as “the unstable one, the evil guide, the truly noxious one, the ancient sorcerer, the unjust lamb”. The conqueror, he continues, will not only feel disgraced by such titles, but will even rejoice in them. He concludes this section by observing, “Since, then, many names have been proposed, anyone can apply to the accursed demon the one that is most appropriate” (*Oec.* 8.4-5).

These names and this exposition are not new.^{xxxii} Oecumenius takes them over from other church fathers like Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Victorinus.^{xxxiii} Striking is his suggestion that readers need to name evil in terms of its context. For instance, in passages about Christ’s imminent coming, he spiritualises the text so that it should not be reduced to a mere historical report about earthly events and people. What is more important is to discover the deeper, mystical meaning of the text that will allow readers to deal with the text in terms of their context.

3.3 Ethical or transformative reading

At this point, it is necessary to qualify the mystical interpretation further, also in terms of the perspective of transformation - which in reality represents a third perspective. The intimate relationship with the divine has transformative effects on the faithful. It generates and brings about a new lifestyle. In *Oec.* 12.12.8, where Oecumenius discusses Revelation 22:17-18 (*The Spirit and the bride say, Come!*), he notes that this passage not only represents a call to seek the second coming, but also to put it into prayer. Thus the following sentence (*Let him who hears say, Come*), means that everyone should “utter a prayer for the kingdom of the coming of Christ”. For Oecumenius this implies more than simply a prayer. Prayer is transformative of one’s own lifestyle in an ethical sense as well: “In saying this he is urging everyone to follow the works and practice of righteousness.” Only those who are “conversant with righteousness” could pray for Christ’s coming. Praying in this way requires a righteous lifestyle that fits and reflects that prayer. This insight is underlined by its reverse side. In *Oec.* 12.11.2, commenting on Revelation 22:10, he observes, “what is the use of making prayers for those who go on striving to act wickedly or virtuously?” Human relations cannot remain untouched by the mystical experience. With this perspective of transformation, the mystical moment in the text is linked with the ethical.

4 CONCLUSION

In the light of the above, it has become evident that the hermeneutics in Oecumenius' commentary reveals three aspects of special relevance. In addition to the literal, concrete historical interpretation of the text, Oecumenius interpreted Revelation allegorically in terms of its mystical meaning. This included the ethical perspective with which he approached the book. In this regard the informed reader will recognise the influence of church fathers like Irenaeus and Origen. Oecumenius, as Suggit (2006:10) pointed out, explicitly concurs with some of Origen's exegeses, making it evident that he was acquainted with him. Oecumenius' tripartite hermeneutics certainly reveal Origen's influence. As Zahn (1924:110) observed, the same tripartite nature of biblical contents is also to be found in the commentary of Andrew, which in turn reflects the ongoing influence of Oecumenius. This tripartite interpretation does not really involve three different methods of reading Scripture, but rather the tripartite nature of the contents of Scripture (Zahn 1924:110).

Finally, it has to be underlined that the special contribution of Oecumenius can only be fully appreciated within the Greek context in which he wrote. It is no coincidence that no commentary on Revelation appeared in the previous centuries. Revelation was a despised book. Its neglect was essentially the result of the theological malaise in which a large part of the Greek-speaking church found itself. There was little understanding and expectation of a visible rule of Christ and hardly any future expectation, because the church excluded Revelation for such a long time from its collection of sacred writings. Because commentaries on Revelation did not exist, there was also no exegetical tradition from which interpreters of the Bible could draw. Within this situation, it is remarkable that Oecumenius could produce his commentary, defend the special status of Revelation and introduce the church to it in such a learned manner.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 Cf. Diekamp 1901:1046. On the confusion regarding Oecumenius, cf. also Lamoreaux (1998), who observes that the confusion intensified when Cramer published a scholia-commentary on the Apocalypse under the name of Oecumenius. This commentary turned out to be an abbreviation of Andrew of Caesarea's commentary on the Apocalypse.
 - 2 According to Diekamp 1901:1046-7, only fragments with the lemma Oijkomenivou in the so-called commentary of Oecumenius on the Pauline Letters could claim authenticity, but even then this had to be decided from case to case. See also his other remarks (1901:1056) on the authenticity of these writings. Cf. also Heseler 1930:772.
 - 3 He quoted Ehrhard that "der Name Oekumenius ... stellt uns vor ein warhes Räthsel."
 - 4 This was a time of discoveries of ancient manuscripts. Thus Haussleiter discovered an original, unedited review of Victorinus' significant commentary on Revelation in 1895.

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- Cf. Beckwith 1922:322, but especially the new critical edition by Dulaey 1997. On Victorinus generally, see also Weinrich 2005:xx-xxi and xxix.
- 5 The scribe began with the septet of seven bowls in Revelation 15 which to him began the unfulfilled prophecies in Revelation.
- 6 They should all, therefore, be consulted to determine a reliable text.
- 7 He revisited his work 28 years later in an article published in *Biblica* in which he discussed other manuscripts of Oecumenius' commentary (*cod. Vatic. Chisianus R. V. 33, cod. Vaticanus 2062* saec.10 and *codex Parisinus 491* saec 13-14). Cf. Diekamp 1929. In this article he explains the delay in publishing an *editio princeps* as a result of the fact that he could not obtain a manuscript from Saloniki, which he thought was needed to ensure a scientifically adequate edition of Oecumenius' commentary.
- 8 Hoskier's name is associated with extensive text critical work on ancient manuscripts like the *De Contemptu Mundi* by Bernard of Morval (monk of Cluny) and the Golden Latin Gospels. In addition, he edited a text of Revelation (cf. Hoskier 1929). He received (together with amongst others Mowinckel) an honorary doctorate from the University of Amsterdam in 1932.
- 9 Diekamp 1901:1052 also acknowledges Mercati as a "in jeder Art der patristische Literatur erstaunlich belesene" person and as the one who drew his attention to a quotation from Oecumenius' commentary in a Syriac manuscript of the seventh century and thus helped date Oecumenius and his work much earlier. Cf. also Hoskier 1913:300, who describes Mercati as "learned, patient and enthusiastic."
- 10 He noted (1930:772-3) that it is twice as sad in the case of Hoskier, whose work has formal value, but lacks inherent quality ("deren innerer Wert keineswegs der äusseren Ausstattung entspricht").
- 11 He lists (1930:772-4) many mistakes, amongst others the dating of the manuscripts, at least 300 accent mistakes and blunders like misreading the numeric indication ih (18) for ihl (Israel! – thus interpreting "book of Israel" instead of "eighteenth book").
- 12 Cf. e.g. De Groot 1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2003 and his article in RGG 4, 458.
- 13 How unknown or unused Oecumenius remained even after the work of Diekamp, is clear from the fact that he is not mentioned in the good commentaries of Beckwith 1922 (esp. 325) and Giesen (1997), though Bousset 1906:64-5 briefly discusses him. In the commentary of Aune (1997-8) he is cited only 8 times, whilst Prigent 2001:475 cites him once (and then after Andrew). However, his work and relationship with other commentators was extensively discussed by Zahn 1924:106-111.
- 14 Cf. Lamoreaux 1998:88; Suggit 2006:28, 48, 149, 203. (All references in this essay to the work of Oecumenius are taken from Suggit's translation.) The "evil trail" in the Letter to Philadelphia (Rev 3:10), for example, is described by him as the persecution of Christians that "took place in the time of Emperor Domitian". He adds, "who was 'the second persecutor after Nero'". Oecumenius then attributes the quotation in this reference to Eusebius and he mentions the *Ecclesiastical History* and the *Canonical Chronicle* as sources. Cf. Suggit 2006:47-48.
- 15 Cf. Lamoreaux 1998:92 and Schmid (1931) for the lemma in a Monophysite *catena* of Oecumenius. The lemma speaks of, "From Ecumenius, a careful man, who is very orthodox, as the letters which Mar Severus sent to him show, from the sixth discourse of those which he composed on the revelation of the Evangelist John." The connection with this lemma was first pointed out by Pétridès (1903) soon after Diekamp published his first article on his find.
- 16 This theory was proposed by Schmid (e.g. 1931). Cf. further Lamoreaux 1998:88-108 for a careful weighing of the relevant data and arguments. He also responds to De Groot's dating as an appendix to this article.
- 17 Lamoreaux 1998:96 note 35 mentions only two other instances. He concludes, "Given the rarity of the name, without evidence to the contrary, it seems futile to posit two homonymous biblical commentators."
- 18 Schmid 1931:242-3 gives many examples to prove that Andrew used Oecumenius. Zahn 1924:106-111, however, argued that Andrew wrote his commentary first. But see the response in Lamoreaux 1998. A more common date for Andrew's work between 563-614 C.E. is now accepted – Kilpatrick 1959:1ff. (Also see this work for a discussion of Schmid's edition of Andrew's commentary.)
- 19 Though Hippolytus is known to have written a commentary on Revelation earlier on, it is lost. Cf. Kilpatrick 1959:1.

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- 20 Charles was aware of Diekamp's discovery, but could not at the stage that he was writing his commentary have had access to the commentary itself.
- 21 On these, cf. also Bousset 1906:49-56 for an overview over Greek and Latin commentaries. Also Swete 1911:cxcviii-cxc1x (who refers to Diekamp); Beckwith 1922:318-325, but very extensively Schmid 1931 and, more recently, Weinrich 2005:xx-xxxii.
- 22 Diekamp 1901:1051-4 who previously dated Andrews' commentary ca. 520, subsequently noted that it relies on and shortens Oecumenius' commentary, so that it must have been written later.
- 23 For a discussion of his work cf. Kilpatrick 1959:1ff; Diekamp 1901:1051 dates it ca. 895.
- 24 Suggit 2006:9-13 comments on Oecumenius' ambiguous relationship with Origin: he accepted some of Origin's views, shared his spiritual reading of Revelation to a strong degree, but never mentioned Origin by name. It seems as if he was careful to distance himself from Origin's unorthodox positions. This is why he rejected any Arianist readings of Revelation. See esp. also on this Lamoreaux 1998.
- 25 In his rejection of a chiliastic reading of Revelation, he breaks with a strong tradition. Cf. Beckwith 1922:320, who refers to Justin Martyr as the first of several interpreters who expected a literal millennial kingdom of the saints. He notes that this was the common view by the middle of the second century.
- 26 This does not mean that Oecumenius gives up eschatological expectations. He expects the second coming of Christ (e.g. *Oec.* 1.15; 2.7) and vigorously defends the resurrection of the body (*Oec.* 11.10).
- 27 On this, cf. further De Villiers 1999a; 1999b; 2000.
- 28 This should not be misunderstood as implying that the prophetic tradition from Hebrew Scriptures is not vitally important to understanding Revelation. Oecumenius repeatedly and extensively links Revelation with that tradition as intertext. His emphasis on this link reveals how early readers recognized Hebrew Scripture as a necessary foil for the interpretation of Revelation. Exactly because of this vital link, it is striking that he still mooted pagan prophecies in his introductory remarks about Revelation's prophetic nature.
- 29 In this regard the interpretations of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and Hippolytus, who all refer to Roman rule as oppressive (Beckwith 1922:320-321).
- 30 Oecumenius' perception of Revelation is determined by the later official persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. It is thus a challenge to test his observations in terms of the original text, in which official persecution could not have been under discussion. On this problem, cf. De Villiers 2002 (a) and (b).
- 31 Indirectly, Oecumenius' remarks about the *apokatastasis* doctrine are relevant here. In his comments on Revelation 9:5-6 (*Oec.* 5.19), on the five months' torture of sinners, he does not reject this doctrine outright, but wants to hold on to it *and* to the "accepted" Scriptures that teach an eternal punishment. Sinners would be punished, "in a kind of mystical way" for five months, whereupon a more gentle punishment would follow. Cf. Diekamp 1901:1053 about the way in which Oecumenius supports Origin on this point. In his comments on Rev. 10:4, where the revelation of the seven thunders is sealed, Oecumenius notes that it may be because "the punishments were lighter than those normally considered appropriate and reflect the goodness of the one inflicting the penalty, and so tended to make them contemptible for people" (*Oec.* 6.3.11; Suggit 2006:97). Andrew takes over this perspective in his commentary (cf. Diekamp 1901:1054).
- 32 Beckwith 1922:320 noted that Irenaeus saw the Roman Empire as the embodiment of evil forces, but regards its dissolution as part of the time before the end. He does not identify the Antichrist with a Roman emperor.
- 33 Lampetis, it is suggested, is the daughter of the Sun God, Teitan/Titan, a pagan god of vengeance and Benediktos is interpreted as Blue Bastard. That these names are not unusual, is indicated by the commentary of Andrew of Caesarea who adds four more (Palaibaskanos, an ancient sorcerer; Kakos Odegos, Wicked Guide; Alethes Blaberos, Really Harmful; and Amnos Adikos, Unjust Lamb. On this, cf. Beckwith 1922:320 and Weinrich 2005:xxii.