

Joachim of Fiore

By Toby Affleck

The twelfth century monastic theologian Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) holds an important place in the progression of the linear Christian theory of time, through his reinvention of a numeric plan for history, and the widespread diffusion of his interpretations of the Apocalypse with their extreme consequences for the medieval Church. Joachim, held as both *magnus propheta* and heretic, contested the existing Catholic faith by proposing a new conclusion to history that effectively challenged the clerical dominance of the ecclesiastical body as well as bringing forward the dire implications of the rise to power of the Anti-Christ; issues that turned extreme ascetism into condemned dissent. It is with this in mind that it becomes relevant to examine the fundamental theories of Joachim's interpretation of the past, his vision for the future, and its implication for the future direction of Christendom. What were the principles upon which his biblical commentaries were laid? In doing so, this paper examines the allegorical reading of Scriptures, in particular that of Revelation, as well as Joachim's belief in the significance of "spiritual numerology" and the critical importance of his Doctrine of the Trinity.

Joachim was born in Calabria, and acted as an official in the Sicilian court at Palermo until he experienced a religious conversion, prompting his pilgrimage to the Holy Land¹. Upon his return to Calabria around 1171, Joachim entered the Benedictine monastery of Corazzo where he soon was elected to the post of Abbot². His desires to have Corazzo included in the Cistercian Order led to his journey to Casamari where he experienced visions that provided the basis for his "insight" into the future of Christian civilisation, shaping his notions regarding the apocalyptic path that the Church was destined to follow³. Joachim's work found the approval of popes, being declared orthodox after inquisition in 1200 and by Honorius III in 1220, providing a legitimacy that would allow his ideas to find forums and be propagated throughout western Christendom⁴. Eventually he became dissatisfied with the Cistercian Order, inducing him to establish his own monastery at Fiore, providing the foundation for the development of Florentine monasticism⁵.

In the early thirteenth century, the Christian "ground-plan" of time and history and expectations for the future, were largely conceived of in Augustine terms of Seven Ages, symbolic of the seven days of Creation and culminating in a Sabbath Age⁶. Augustine looked upon this Seventh Age as existing outside of the time process, asserting that the climax of history had already taken place with the Advent of Christ. All that remained for humanity therefore was a period of repentance in anticipation for the apocalyptic conclusion to civilisation, or rather life "under the shadow of impending judgement"⁷. Marjorie Reeves asserts that the Augustine theory

¹ Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), p. 126.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Margaret Deanesly, *A History of the Medieval Church: 590-1500* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1965), p. 226.

⁵ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, p. 126.

⁶ Marjorie Reeves, in Malcolm Bull (ed) *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*

of time and history, based on scriptural passages such as Matthew 24, represented an inherently pessimistic pattern; that all that was left for humanity was to wait for the end.

*The world was doomed to an age of deterioration, iniquity would increase and love would grow cold, the final tribulations would come suddenly upon it, and immediately after, the Son of Man would appear to judge the human race and make an end to history.*⁸

Christianity then, hardly represented a spiritually progressive future. The high-point had already come and gone, with the Scriptures promising an age of wars and famines that would be brought to a sudden and ignominious conclusion along with all Creation. Delno West discusses the timing of Joachim in terms of the hardships of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, characterised by destructive wars, massive drops in population, and economic slumps.

*European society ... displayed a tendency to be on the verge of the Apocalypse. Joachim's interpretations ... did answer the all-important question "Why?". His predictions also held out hope that the trauma of the times was a part of Divine Plan and would eventually be replaced by a New Age.*⁹

Joachim's theory however, while holding onto the notion of an apocalyptic conclusion to existence, represented a more optimistic prediction for the future of Christian society. Based on a Trinitarian pattern of three statuses or epochs, Joachim's notions provided a catalyst for more positive expectations of the Church in the impending third epoch¹⁰. The underlying principles for Joachimist belief was that the three epochs were based on the characteristics of the Trinity; the first age being that of the Father and a stage of law, based upon the wrathful God of the Old Testament; the second age was that of the Son, characterised by its being a stage of grace; while the third age, the epoch to come, was to be one of "Illumination" in the Holy Spirit¹¹. Essentially then, this future illumination provided a challenge to the Augustine notion that the climax of history had already passed with time becoming a movement towards a future spiritual climax¹². Joachimist thought, therefore implied a shift from a pessimistic view of the future to an optimistic expectation for a renewed Church. Such optimism can be held to have originated in Judaic theology, originating in the Jewish notion of a "Messianic Age" in which holy people were expected to "reign in Palestine in an era of peace, justice and plenty, in which the earth would flower in unheard of abundance"¹³. It should be noted however that Joachim's optimism was more moderate in its nature, viewing his own age as one of crisis. Various signs, such as the resurgence of Islam under Saladin seemed to point towards the coming of the

⁸ Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 295.

⁹ Delno C. West (ed.), *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet*, vol. 1 (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1975), p. ii.

¹⁰ Marjorie Reeves and Warwick Gould, *Joachim of Fiore and the Myth of the Eternal Evangel in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 8.

¹¹ Reeves, quoted in Bull, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, p. 90.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 295.

anti-Christ at a juncture when Christendom was at threat¹⁴. Indeed Joachim feared that the anti-Christ had already been born and would soon rise to power.

The fundamental tenets of Joachim's notion of time are the three epochs and are directly associated to his doctrine of the Trinity; "God is one God without confusion of Persons and three Persons without division of substance"¹⁵. God is omnipotent in nature and cannot be changed, divided, increased or decreased¹⁶. God's existence is eternal; he "always was, is, and shall be that which he is"¹⁷. The origins of the Persons is also of vital importance to the nature of God and is symbolised by the Joachimist theory of history. God the Father is unbegotten (*ingenitus, a nullo*), God the Son is begotten of the Father (*genitus, natuo*), while the Holy Spirit proceeds from them both¹⁸. With each epoch representing the majesty of a single member of the Trinity, the periods thus can also be seen as representing the co-existence and unity of the Trinity despite the existence of linear divisions which are based upon the two testaments, the three statuses, and the seven ages that pervaded Augustine beliefs. Walter Klaason establishes that Joachim's patterns of threes passed beyond the division of time into three ages, using triplets to help explain the differences and the positive progression between the ages: "knowledge, wisdom, complete understanding; servitude of slaves, service of sons, complete freedom; plagues, action, contemplation; fear, faith, love; starlight, dawn, full daylight"¹⁹.

The Jews of the Old Testament relate to images of the Father while the Gentiles of the New Testament relate to images of the Son²⁰. Joachimist thought relates that spiritual men left the House of Israel as did the Fathers of the Greek Church who travelled to the deserts of Egypt and Syria to practice an extreme ascetism²¹. Joachim held that images of the Holy Spirit related to these spiritual men who had been entrusted with the understanding of both testaments in what was essentially a universal and "Eternal Gospel"²². Accordingly, this personification of the Holy Spirit can be deemed as coming from both the Father and the Son, in terms of heritage as well as scriptural understanding. Such an ideology clearly indicates the future eminence that Joachim felt would be bestowed upon the monastic orders of the third age, which would not hold its own testament but instead represent an era of deeper understanding of the two existing. Joachim held further that the third age would also experience a conversion of Judaism and Orthodox Christianity to the "Universal Church of St Peter"²³. West and Zimdars-Swartz maintain however, that the Advent of Christ remained the critical juncture of history, but that the new age of the Spirit would be guided by this new order of holy men who would be able to truly contemplate and envisage the nature of God, guiding the renewed and united Catholic Church to a future spiritual climax which would culminate in the Second Advent, and a temporal period of peace and tranquillity²⁴.

¹⁴ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, p. 128.

¹⁵ Delno West, and Sandra Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore: A Study in Spiritual Perception and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Walter Klaassen, *Living at the End of the Ages: Apocalyptic Expectation in the Radical Reformation* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), p. 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore*, p. 67.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 12.

Joachim calculated his three epochs in terms of the generation of men, concluding that the first two epochs contained three sets of twenty-one generations, which in turn allowed him to provide a relatively "exact" chronology of the first two epochs, and providing a basis for him to predict the length of the impending third²⁵. It should be noted that the ages would overlap, providing further evidence of the unity of the Trinity²⁶. The year 1260 was particularly associated by Joachimist philosophy with the transition from the second to the third status²⁷. With the prediction of the rise of the Anti-Christ at the end of the second status, papal succession became of critical importance to Joachimist followers. Worthy of note is that such notions of the Anti-Christ, when placed in the context of statuses that last for approximately a thousand years, reflect an inherent millenarianism, indicating the emphasis placed by Joachim on the book of Revelation in which Satan is bound for a thousand years (20.1-3)²⁸. The Oracles of Leo the Wise embraced the notion of a radical break in papal succession, with the selection of a "hermit among the rocks" as Pope²⁹. From fear of the coming of anti-Christ, arose the notion of the "Angelic Pope", a figure who would espouse the importance of divine contemplation³⁰. The Angelic pope, being a response to a more sinister threat, acts to embody the positivist sentiments inspired by Joachim. The future was not to be a period of continual decline; it was to be one of religious achievement before the end of time.

The future direction of Christianity proposed by Joachim did much to alter monastic impressions of their own place within the ecclesiastical structure of Catholicism. Particularly effected was the Franciscan Order which split after 1250 when a Spiritualist faction saw themselves as the spiritual successors of the third age³¹. Their persecution by ecclesiastical authorities did much to reinforce them with the conclusion that they were the "true successors" to be "battling the forces of human wickedness"³². Pope John XXII was in fact the anti-Christ and with him the rest of Christendom descended into heresy³³. It was in this way that Joachim's apocalyptic model had indirectly led to one of the most serious Christian divisions of the fourteenth century, incorporating the idea of the anti-Christ with that of a false Pope. These Franciscans regarded themselves as the "saving remnant gathered in the frail bark of the true Church, the Noah's Ark of the Last Age"³⁴. Intrinsic in this conflict is the challenge of Joachimist ideas for the rise of monasticism to the status quo of the church's cleric dominated infrastructure. Joachim's church then was not an extension of the existing Church of St Peter, rather it threatened a complete upheaval of the ecclesiastical power and authority as it then existed. Joachim had not just predicted the rise of monastics; he had simultaneously predicted the fall of the clerics. Harbison elicits this point when he points out that "to speak of a new age in which the Church

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd, 1970), p. 237.

²⁸ Marjorie Reeves, "Joachimist Influences on the Idea of A Last World Emperor", quoted in Delno C. West (ed.) *Joachim of Fiore in Christian Thought: Essays on the Influence of the Calabrian Prophet*, vol. 2 (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1975), p. 511.

²⁹ Reeves, quoted in Bull, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, p. 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, p. 237.

³² Christopher Brooke, *Medieval Church and Society: Collected Essays* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1971), p. 211.

³³ Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages*, p. 213.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

would be superseded was, of course, to talk heretically, because it was to say that history was not realized in the visible Roman Church”³⁵.

Joachim's treatment of Augustine theory showed a conditional acceptance of Augustine's Seven Ages however, Joachim chose to bring the Seventh Age into history instead of it existing outside of time³⁶. The Seventh Age then was transformed from a spiritual period into a materialistic one to be followed by spiritual eternity, for all intensive purposes an eighth age. Joachim also saw Seven Ages of the Christian Church as echoing the seven tests of Israel, being that of:

1. the Egyptians;
2. the Midianites;
3. that of other nations;
4. the Assyrians;
5. the Chalcedians;
6. the Medes and the Persians; and
7. the Greeks under Antiochus.³⁷

These were correlated to the seven persecutions of Christianity, which were that of:

1. the Jews;
2. the Pagans;
3. the Arians (consisting of the Goths, Vandals, and Lombards); and
4. the Assyrians who devastated the many Greek churches as they had previously devastated the ten tribes of Israel.³⁸

This outline meant that three persecutions remained, however Joachim foretold that the first would especially hurt the clergy, while the remaining two would be against all in general³⁹.

The importance of numbers and numeric patterns hold a significant weight in Joachim's theory of time and history, as indicated by his division of history into three based upon the Trinity. Indeed all the numbers used in his interpretation of history hold a special spiritual significance. The seven days of Creation provide the basis for his division of the three epochs into seven ages and seven tribulations. Indeed the very idea of a Sabbath Age seems to pay particular homage to the explanation of the world's unfolding in Genesis. The number seven, however was deemed spiritual for reasons other than this, representing a combination of spiritual things (three for the Trinity) and worldly things (the earth was created on the fourth day; it has four ordinal points)⁴⁰. Also in relation to the Creation analogy, seven was seen as representative of completion, with God resting on the seventh day⁴¹.

As previously indicated, Joachim held that the book of Revelation held a special significance in the outlaying of Christian society. Indeed if read properly, the monk was sure that despite its allegorical content, the book was potentially the most meaningful of all the scriptures, revealing the entire history of the Church, and

³⁵ E.H. Harbison, *Christianity and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. 273.

³⁶ Reeves, quoted in Bull, *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*, p. 91.

³⁷ McGinn, *Visions of the End*, p. 131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore*, pp. 118-119.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

providing the basis for predicting its future⁴². Millenarianism however was heretical for its conflicting ideology with Catholic tradition based upon Acts 1.7., in which Christ told the Apostles "It is not for you to know the times or season which the Father hath put in his own power"⁴³. Joachim's treatment of Revelation was therefore a dangerous path towards theological acceptance. Nonetheless his *Exposition on the Apocalypse* was among the most significant medieval commentaries⁴⁴. Worthy of note is Joachim's pictorial representation of the seven headed dragon from Revelation 12, used to illustrate the figures behind Christianity's persecution: Herod, Nero, Constantine the Arian, Mohammed, Mesemoth (probably a North African ruler), Saladin, and the coming Anti-Christ⁴⁵. The drawing goes to illustrate the symbolism that Joachim saw as prevalent in the Book as well as his tendency to have faith in the worth of "significant" numbers.

West and Zimdars-Swartz also reveal that the number seven held further significance for Joachim for its association with the seven seals of the Apocalypse which in turn correspond to his notion of the seven persecutions of Christendom. For Joachim, the White Horse that appeared at the opening of the first seal was the primitive church persecuted by the Jews; the Red Horse that arises at the breaking of the second seal symbolised the Roman pagan priests and armies; the Black Horse which emerged at the breaking of the third seal was seen by Joachim as the Arian heresy with its corrupt clergy and "disputed Word"; and the Pale Horse of the fourth seal is the Saracen threat to Christianity⁴⁶. The fifth seal, conjuring the image of the altar of God, was regarded by Joachim in his philosophy as the "coming to age" of the Church of Rome despite the Moslem threat, while the opening of the sixth seal, bringing with it the Day of Judgement for Babylon, represented all opposition to the Church of St Peter, including false Christians and fallen church members⁴⁷. The silence in heaven at the opening of the seventh seal was the last age in which contemplative silence would bring the line of Psalm 74 into fruition: "I will be silent to hear what the Lord God may say concerning me"⁴⁸.

Joachim of Fiore can be looked upon as crucial to the late medieval revival of Christian optimism through the succession of his theory to the inherently pessimistic overtones of Augustine's Seven Ages of history. Joachim's third epoch promised a glorious renewal of ascetic contemplation, although this in itself represented a threat to the existing order of clerical superiority in the Catholic infrastructure. Based upon the Trinity, Joachim's statuses of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit provided an example of spiritual progression which would lead to a new and everlasting gospel after the tribulations and eventual defeat of the Anti-Christ. However this theory, while promising a future enlightenment for the church, also provided the impetus for the development of the Spiritualists, an extremely schismatic sect of ascetics that clouded the boundary between a righteous Church and a false one. Furthermore, Joachim's reading of the Book of Revelation, while providing a major part of his prophetic vision for the future walked a fine line between orthodoxy and heresy. Nonetheless his work can be seen as among the crucial commentaries of the later

⁴² Robert E. Lerner, "Antichrists and Antichrist in Joachim of Fiore", *Speculum*, 60,3 (1985), p. 557.

⁴³ Robert E. Lerner, "Ecstatic Dissent", *Speculum*, 67 (1992), p. 40.

⁴⁴ Bernard McGinn, *Apocalypticism in the Western Tradition* (Norfolk, Great Britain: Variorum, 1994), III p. 279.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ West and Zimdars-Swartz, *Joachim of Fiore*, pp. 22-23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

Middle Ages and was readily embraced by many, perhaps for its innate millenarianism (people wanted explanations for the hardships of the period) as well as its optimistic outlook for a new and future spiritual climax; a desolation leads to the final and everlasting tranquillity. It was in this way that Joachim can be looked upon as a crucial figure in defining the outlook of latin Christendom and contributing to the revival of religious positivism in the “shadow of the last days”.

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