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Revelation and Revolution:
Friedrich Engels and the Apocalypse

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Abstract

In tracing a relatively unknown but important feature of the work of Friedrich Engels, this article offers a critical commentary on his lifelong engagement with the New Testament book of Revelation. Beginning with material from his late teens, when he was undergoing the long, slow process of giving up his Calvinist faith, Engels used the text for humor and satire, for polemics, and as a way to express his own exuberance. As the years unfolded, he would come to appreciate this biblical book in a very different fashion, namely, as a historical document that offered a window into earliest Christianity. Through three essays, one on Revelation, another on Bruno Bauer (from whom Engels drew increasingly as he grew older), and a third on early Christianity, Engels developed the influential argument that Christianity had revolutionary origins. In closing, I ask three questions: What is the abiding relevance of Engels's work? Where does it fall short? And what tensions does he open up in his thought by allowing ideas and beliefs to influence history?

Similarly Isaac Newton in his old age busied himself with expounding the Revelation of St. John.

Engels 1973g: 337, 1987: 345¹

That the millennium was here depicted in *earthly colours* goes without saying. Even *Revelation* cannot rest content with such heavenly delights as sitting with a bare bottom on a damp cloud, twanging a harp with more or less gory hands and singing hymns to all eternity

Engels 1973l: 277, 2004c: 329

The changing nature of Engels's attitudes toward The Revelation of Saint John the Divine, the last "book" of the New Testament, signals the transformations in his own relationship with Christianity, from the intense, Calvinist faith of his youth to his appreciation of Christianity's revolutionary origins and potential. To uncover the importance of Revelation for Engels's own thought, I offer a critical commentary on his various dealings with that text. I begin by tracing his early uses of Revelation, especially in his letters, his poetry, and his writings on Schelling, in which we find Engels deploying Revelation for the sake of humor, satire, and his own exuberance—but not, it should be noted, in any way as a politicotheological tool. From that point, we leap to three crucial essays from his mature years: one on the Book of Revelation itself, another on Bruno Bauer, and another on early Christianity. These three essays show a very different, historical approach to this text that, by this date in Engels's view, provides the earliest evidence for the revolutionary origins of Christianity. Because Engels's biblical work is relatively unknown (except perhaps the essay on early Christianity), my engagement requires a good deal of exposition as a prerequisite for any critique, which in itself will be concerned with the abiding relevance, if any, of Engels's arguments.

A SOFT SPOT FOR APOCALYPTICISM

For almost two millennia, Revelation has been a favorite of all manner of Christian movements, many of them quite revolutionary. Full of the rich imagery of the final battle between good and evil, the beast and the whore of Babylon, the four horsemen and the seven scrolls, the lamb and the new Jerusalem, Revelation continues to be a ready resource for people who expect an imminent end to the world, who are oppressed, or who are keen to proclaim themselves prophets and gain

¹ For the sake of thoroughness and further research, where Marx and Engels wrote first in German an item which was subsequently translated, I cite both references. On some occasions, a work has been published only in English, in which case I cite that source only.

followers. As far as I can tell, none of these reasons counts for Engels. In fact, Engels's solid Calvinist upbringing would not have emphasized this text much. Suspicious of enthusiasm and millenarian frenzy, Calvinists prefer to focus on predestination, the task of the elect, the evils of the damned, and matters such as justification by faith through grace.² Of course, God would eventually destroy the damned, and Jesus would return. But Calvinists did not need him to do so now to save them from an intolerable situation. Yet Engels did resort to apocalypticism, especially the theme of the final battle between good and evil in all its gory detail.

What catches my eye is that Engels uses Revelation in a number of ways: playfully, as critical satire, and as the positive celebration of a new era (in his own life and perhaps for Germany). As for the first use, we find a sustained play with Revelation in two letters to his one-time close friend and pastor, Friedrich Graeber: one from the beginning of their correspondence on February 19, 1839, and the other from the last letter dated February 22, 1841 (Engels 1975g, 1975h, 2008a, 2008b). In the first letter, Engels expresses mock horror at the news that his good friend the pastor actually plays cards. Engels throws a few biblical curses at Graeber and then portrays a vision like that of John the Divine (or, for that matter, the prophet Ezekiel).³ What does he see? It is a great final battle between the King of the Orient, the prince of the Occident, and the Prince of the Sea—a rather more homely version of the battle between the archangel Michael, the Devil, and the Beast of the Sea in Revelation 12–13. Seven spirits appear—modeled on the seven angels of Revelation 8–10 and 14—but they turn out to be a little more earthly: Faust, Lear, Wallenstein, Hercules, Siegfried, Roland, and Mio Cid (with a turban). The whole parody becomes even more complex with the crisscrossing of Old Testament allusions: the children of Anak (Numbers 13:33, Deuteronomy 2:10), letters on the door in Hebrew (Daniel 5:5, 5:24–28), and being struck dumb (Ezekiel 3:26). The point of it all was that even though they may have brought the world to an end, nothing will stop the card players in their evil pastime.

All this is good fun. The second letter is different (Engels 1975g, 2008a), for its playfulness is a rather poor camouflage for a more serious tone. Engels and Graeber, his childhood friend from Wuppertal, have become estranged since the time when they began their epistolary debates two years earlier, for now they are

² For example, in over 800 pages of the modern edition of Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* (1960), a work saturated with the Bible, one finds just twenty-six references to Revelation. Calvin counsels against such millennial speculation, especially since it was rife in his own day among the radical Anabaptists (see Boer 2009).

³ "On the nineteenth day of the second month of 1839, on the day when midday is at twelve o'clock, a storm seized me and carried me afar and there I saw them playing cards" (Engels 1975h: 414, 2008b: 361) is playfully modeled on the beginning of Ezekiel's vision: "In the sixth year, in the sixth month, on the fifth day of the month . . . the spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem" (Ezekiel 8:1, 3).

taking different theological directions. In a curious intersection where the apocalyptic battle at the end of the age wraps up a friendship, we return in this letter to the final battle between good and evil, between God and the devil. On one side stand evil Straussians and Hegelians (the side Engels had joined); on the other are the less capable orthodox—names we hardly recognize now, such as Tholuck, Hengstenberg, Neander, Nitzsche, Bleek, and Erdmann (Friedrich Graeber's preferred theologians). Yet despite portents of the great battle, such as the earth's eclipse and the storm raging through the forest, Graeber has not yet readied himself for combat with the "critical-speculative devil" and his enormous following (Engels 1975g: 527, 2008a: 479). The problem, it seems, is that Graeber has already disengaged from their debates. Engels berates Graeber for his "calm and detached" writing, as if nothing can stir the placidity of his orthodoxy. Engels, by contrast, wants a fight, and David Strauss—author of the bombshell known as *Das Leben Jesu* (Strauss 1835, 1902)—is the super-weapon with which he will knock down Graeber and any other orthodox champion. But Graeber, it seems, has already declined the struggle.

We have already slipped from the playful use of the final apocalyptic battle to a more polemical use. The next occasion on which Engels engages Revelation is more fully polemical, and the humor starts to have some bite. It is in the long poem from 1842, *The Insolently Threatened Yet Miraculously Rescued Bible* (Engels 1975c, 1985c). For one who decided to give up his aspirations to be a poet in favor of direct political writing and an increasing fascination with martial matters, Engels has written a poem that is quite good. It is a narrative poem written with Edgar Bauer, brother of Bruno and member of "The Free," and its satire owes much to the style of Young Hegelian polemic.

The poem sets a cracking pace, and the reader is drawn into the story (at least, I was). It begins with a Job-like opening (though not without some influence from Goethe) in which Satan slinks his way into heaven, upsets the heavenly chorus, and demands access to Bruno Bauer, radical biblical critic and leading Young Hegelian. God asserts that for all Bauer's research into the Bible, for all his doubts, he still remains faithful and will come through to truth as he sees the flaws of philosophy. The devil is not so sure and secures a chance to test Bauer's faith. Unlike the outcome in the prologue to the book of Job, Bauer does succumb to Satan, although it takes some persuasion. By the time Bauer begins lecturing again, he is a servant of the devil and sets the pious and atheistic students against one another. All of this eventually leads to a final confrontation between Hegel (who is a confidant of the devil), the Young Hegelians, and some French *philosophes* such as Voltaire on one side and the pious defenders of the faith on the other. Steeped in terminology from the Book of Revelation, this final battle shifts back and forth. The Young Hegelians build a fortress out of the books they have written and use the books as missiles against the attacks of the pious believers.

Despite many heroics and pinpoint accuracy with their projectiles, the Young Hegelians fare badly until they dump the weak-kneed devil—he is all talk and no action—and call for reinforcements: Danton, Edelman, Marat, Napoleon, Robespierre, and Voltaire appear. Bauer takes charge, and they rout the pious, who now flee heavenward. Hegel urges the atheists to attack heaven itself, and he leads the charge. But just as they about to succeed, a small piece of paper floats down, coming to rest at Bauer's feet. Its message: Bauer has been dismissed from his teaching position. In dismay, the forces of chaos flee, and the host of heaven pursues them with glee.

Much more developed than the two letters to Friedrich Graeber, this last great battle of Armageddon is a send-up of the conservative reaction to the challenges of the Young Hegelians, some of whom called themselves “The Free.” Although all this lighthearted play with the Bible might seem relatively innocent, we must keep in mind that for someone with Engels's upbringing, the very act of making fun of the Bible was potentially blasphemous. For Calvinists, the entirety of the Bible is serious business.⁴ There are apparently no jokes to be found within the Bible, and one should in no way jest about it. After all, the Bible deals with matters of life, death, sin, salvation, and the future of the universe. So also for Engels: What seems like some harmless joking has a more significant undercurrent of protest.

Engels made yet a third use of this biblical apocalyptic material that indicates the complexity of his interactions with the Bible. I think in particular of the closing pages of one of his three pamphlets on Schelling: *Schelling and Revelation* (Engels 1975d: 238–240, 1985d: 312–314). While most of the text is an effort to report on the content of Schelling's lectures in Berlin in 1841, interspersed with some critical commentary, the closing pages comprise a paean to the new directions of theological and philosophical ideas that were sweeping Germany at the time. Engels had just read Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* [*The Essence of Christianity*], and it obviously set his adrenaline pumping. The framework is, once again, the Apocalypse: Heaven has come down to earth (Revelation 21:1); its treasures lie scattered for whoever wishes to pick them up (Revelation 21:18–21); the great final battle has been fought and won (Revelation 18–19; see also 1 Timothy 6:12); the thousand-year reign of freedom has begun (Revelation 20:6). Thus Engels evokes the vast celebration in heaven after the victory of Armageddon: “And this crown, this bride, this holy thing is the *self-consciousness of mankind*, the new Grail round whose throne the nations gather in exultation and

⁴ I speak from my own experience of being saturated in (Dutch) Calvinism in my youth (a legacy I share with Engels), but there were variations, as an anonymous reviewer of this article has pointed out. For example, in the Blantyre Mission, the Scottish Calvinists taught their disciples that dancing was not permitted; but in the Livingstonia Mission, Scottish Calvinists of a not very different sort taught their disciples that dancing was permissible.

which makes kings of all who submit to it, so that all splendor and might, all dominion and power, all the beauty and fullness of this world lie at their feet and must yield themselves up for their glorification” (Engels 1975d: 239, 1985d: 313; cf. Revelation 19–20). As is his wont, Engels draws on other texts in building his picture,⁵ but the focus has shifted from his previous apocalyptic visions. Now we are in the millennium, after the great battle, and Engels looks forward to the unfolding of the new age.⁶ Yet there is a twist. It is not some heavenly victory that he celebrates, but a distinctly earthly, human one—all cast in biblical terms.

What are we to make of such a passage? It seems as though Engels’s eyes have been opened and a way out of the stifling conservatism of his youth has now shown itself.⁷ We can write this enthusiasm off as youthful high spirits or perhaps too much beer and fine tobacco (of which he was very fond), but I would like to put in a word for Engels. Over against the world-weary cynicism of age, is there not still room for that sparkle in one’s eye at a new discovery, a zeal and enthusiasm that really fire one up?

Engels obviously had a soft spot for the glorious apocalyptic language of Revelation. The youthful Engels uses the book in various ways: to make fun of and attack those who would hold him back, to tease his friend Graeber, and to celebrate his own awakening. So it seems that the terms, images, and modes of expression of Revelation provided a distinct component of the framework of Engels’s thought, indeed of his way of understanding his own changing place in the world. Eventually, Revelation will become a major feature of his argument for the revolutionary origins of Christianity, especially because he came to regard it as the earliest Christian text.

I will have more to say on that soon enough, but for now, there are two questions with which I want to close this section. First, is this the origin of the infamous secular apocalypticism of Marxism? The point has gained authority through endless repetition: The Marxist narrative of the end of capitalism through revolution and the beginning of the new social formation of communism is but a secularized version of the Christian apocalyptic myth of the end of the world. It is

⁵ They include renouncing the world (John 12:25, 15:18, and the whole of Chapter 17); what was formerly obscure is now clear (1 Corinthians 13:12); the jewel that was found after a long search (Matthew 13:44–46); giving up everything to follow the truth (Luke 9:57–62); it is stronger than everything in heaven and on earth (Romans 8:35–39); it provides a firm confidence that it can never waver or yield (Hebrews 11:1).

⁶ See also: “I hope to live to see a radical transformation in the religious consciousness of the world” (Engels 1975j: 456, 2008d: 402).

⁷ As Engels comments, “Among my own family—and it is a very pious and loyal one . . .” (Engels 1975f: 231) and “If I had not been brought up in the most extreme orthodoxy and piety, if I had not had drummed into me in church, Sunday school and at home the most direct, unconditional belief in the Bible and in the agreement of the teaching of the Bible with that of the church . . .” (Engels 1975k: 466, 2008e: 413).

nothing less than another version of Armageddon. Detractors and believers alike continue to make this point. I am not so sure. For one thing, Engels's explicit use of apocalyptic language has petered out by the time of *The German Ideology*, in which he uses it in a satirical way to speak of Bauer and Stirner.⁸ Also, in later life, especially in light of the parliamentary success of the German Social Democrats, Engels became increasingly wary of insurrection. It still had a valid role to play, but in his later letters, there are more cautions against untimely acts that would provide the authorities with any excuse to crush all forms of the left. His own bitter experience in the revolutions of 1848–1950 made him think deeply on these matters.

Above all, there is a marked change in Engels's approach to Revelation. Instead of manifesting itself in an apocalyptic Marxism, his interest in Revelation follows another line, one that would eventually contribute to his argument that early Christianity was a revolutionary movement that was co-opted by the Roman Empire. Furthermore, this revolutionary origin would show up again and again through history, most notably with Thomas Müntzer. However, that line takes an enthralling detour through Engels's newfound skill in war correspondence.

Engels's fascination with grand battles goes straight into his love of military analysis and journalism. As anyone who has taken the time to work through these pieces soon finds out, Engels penned numerous articles on battles, campaigns, the nature of armies across Europe, strategies, tactics, equipment, uniforms, and so on.⁹ These are rather well written, clear, and engaging, with the occasional reference to the Bible, such as Numbers 1:2 and the construction of the camp of the

⁸ See the section entitled "The Critical Last Judgment" (Marx and Engels 1974: 222–223, 1975: 210–211). The other samples come from early pieces, such as an account of the struggle between the Hegelian Michelet and the Pious Leo (Engels 1975i: 435–437, 2008c: 380–383), the street fight between the supporters of the two ministers in Bremen, Krummacher, and Paniel (Engels 1975g, 2008a), and his anticipation concerning the overcoming of Hegel (Engels 1973e: 13, 1982d: 13). Engels also makes use of language laced with biblical quotations and allusions to blast the close ties between the German nobility and an arrogant Roman Catholic Church (Engels 1975b: 66–67, 1985b: 98–99). Only passing allusions turn up in later works (see Engels 1973c: 382, 1973h: 474, 1983: 7, 1986d: 376).

⁹ I will not list them all here, since there are scores of them, beginning with Volume 11 of *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (also *Marx Engels Werke*, Volume 11, though with fewer items). They run through assessments of the revolutions of 1848–1849, the Crimean War, the Franco-German War, the Indian uprising against the British, and so on. A great cluster appears in Volume 18 with articles on "Attack," "Bayonet," "Army," "Bivouac," and many more for *The New American Cyclopaedia*. My favorites are the pieces on "Cavalry," "Infantry," and, above all, "The History of the Rifle" (Engels 1982c), written for a journal with the fantastic name *The Volunteer Journal, for Lancashire and Cheshire*. Engels also wrote extensively on the connections between social relations and the nature of the army, pointing out that the nature of a society's military is a good indicator or the nature of its social relations. He pushed for a militia as the best form for communist society, argued for the vital role of guerrilla warfare, and saw the value of even the clergy becoming involved in such militias and guerrilla warfare (see Engels 1986c: 198–200).

Israelites in the wilderness after their escape from Egypt, the fact that the Romans used 300 catapults in the siege of Jerusalem in 68–70 C.E., and the allusion to the walls of Jericho in Joshua 6:20 in regard to the siege of Paris in 1870 (Engels 1982a: 263, 1982b, 1986b: 73).¹⁰ I found myself enjoying his first articles on the Hungarian revolution and the way in which Engels is able to cut through to the key tactical issues. I began to look forward to his next dispatch analyzing the Crimean War or the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. He had found a distinct niche. His period of voluntary military training in Berlin with the 12th Foot Company of the Guards Artillery Brigade in 1842 seems to have borne some intriguing fruit. No wonder he volunteered to join the revolutionary armies of Elberfeld and Barmen in 1848 (however short his stay might have been) and then the armies of the revolutionary movement in the Palatinate and Baden.

This military interest is one of the developments of Engels's early fascination with biblical apocalypticism. In those texts on military matters, he developed theories about the reorganization of revolutionary armies. This is where we find Engels arguing that a revolutionary who neglects the state and discipline of his army does so at his peril, that the nature of the military is a good indicator of the nature of class and social formation in a society at large, that any revolutionary act requires swift and bold action along with a good army, and that the ideal form for the army is a militia drawn from the whole population. No wonder his nickname became "The General." But even this general later found a place for peaceful agitation, since untimely violent uprising bred violent repression. This, then, is the detour Engels's early interest in the apocalyptic texts of the Bible took before he came to reflect on early Christianity.

EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Although he had been thinking about early Christianity since 1841, his essay *On the History of Early Christianity* appeared a few months before Engels died in 1895 and may well be seen as his final coming to terms with his Christian past (Engels 1972b, 1990c).¹¹ Not only do we find Revelation still important after

¹⁰ Of course, there are more: "'Providence always is on the side of the big battalions' was a favourite way of the Napoleon to explain how battles were won and lost" (Engels 1986a: 104).

¹¹ On July 28, 1894, Engels wrote to Kautsky, "There is no hurry about printing the article. Once I have seen to the proofs you can print it when you wish, in September, say, or even October. I have been mulling over the thing ever since 1841 when I read a lecture by F. Benary on *Revelation*. Since then I have been in no doubt that here we have the earliest and most important book in the New Testament. After a gestation period of fifty-three years there is no great need to hasten its emergence into the world at large" (Engels 1973l: 276, 2004c: 328–329). He also sent regular updates to Kautsky, who published the essay in *Neue Zeit* (Engels 1973j: 260, 1973k, 2004a: 314, 2004b: 321). Kautsky and Engels entered into extensive correspondence over matters of the Bible and Christianity. (See, for example, Engels 1968a: 88, 1968b: 114, 1968c, 1968d: 422–423,

more than half a century, but this essay by Engels also had an abiding influence on New Testament scholarship, especially the argument that the early Church appealed to the lower classes of Roman society. It is really the mature form of an argument with which Engels had been toying for years, namely, that Christianity began as a revolutionary force.¹² He also carries on a fascinating exercise comparing early Christianity with the communist movement in his own day, drawing one parallel after another.

However, let me begin with a curious feature about this essay that takes us all the way back to Engels's early enthrallment with apocalypticism: The final pages deal with Revelation. It may be exactly the same biblical text, but the way he uses it is vastly different from his use in the early days. Basing his research on some contemporary biblical scholarship, especially that of Ferdinand Berner of the University of Berlin and Bruno Bauer (1840, 1841, 1842, 1850–1851), Engels argues that Revelation is the earliest Christian document. Now he can use it as a purely historical source, mining it for information about the beliefs and practices of the early Christians. Above all, he seeks to decode it and show that all those who use it for speculation about the end of history are simply misguided. Yet these arguments are expanded from an essay he had written and published eleven years earlier titled simply "The Book of Revelation" (Engels 1990a). So let us have a look at this earlier text.

In that essay, published in 1883 in *Vorwärts*, Engels seeks to introduce the still relatively new German critical approach to the New Testament.¹³ Today this approach goes by the name of historical criticism, for its two main drives are to reconstruct the history of the literature of the Bible and the history behind the Bible. It is now a tired orthodoxy, zealously defended by a dwindling number of practitioners. In Engels's day, however, it had a radical freshness, since it undermined many of the traditional positions that the churches held regarding the Bible. All the same, Engels is after the most critical work of the lot, bypassing

2001a: 174, 2001b: 200, 2001c, 2001d: 493–494) One gains the sense that had Engels had the time, he would have written more on religion himself, but he was passing on the baton—on religion at least—to Kautsky.

¹² Already in 1843, Engels wrote, "In general, this is a feature of every revolutionary epoch, as was seen in particular in the religious revolution of which the outcome was Christianity: 'blessed are the poor' [Matthew 5:3], 'the wisdom of this world is foolishness' [1 Corinthians 1:20], etc." (Engels 1975e: 380, 1985e: 451–452).

¹³ For all the work done in New Testament criticism at the time, Engels laments in an early piece—an analysis of Karl Gutzkow's play *König Saul* (Engels 1975a: 73–80, 1985a: 87–94)—that similar work has not been done on the Hebrew Bible with a figure such as King Saul.

those who sought to reconcile historical criticism with religious belief. So he settles on the work of none other than Bruno Bauer.¹⁴

For some strange reason, Engels does not mention Bauer in the essay on Revelation. Part of the reason was that the year before (1882), Engels had written a piece entitled “Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity” (Engels 1989a). Composed on the occasion of Bauer’s death, it is an appreciative essay that goes to great lengths to show how the form of Christianity that has come down to us has little, if anything, to do with its earliest forms. Of course, once one has taken such a position, the next step is to account for that well-known final form. Following Bauer, Engels argues that what we now know as Christianity is the result of a combination of vulgar and popularized versions of the neo-Platonism of Philo of Alexandria, Seneca’s stoicism, and Roman imperial beliefs about the emperor as son of God. But why did Christianity catch on? Here, Engels moves beyond Bauer to offer a materialist analysis spiced with some Darwinian observations: The class structure of the Roman empire (the rich, including the last few patricians, the propertyless freemen, and the slaves) along with crumbling cultural and religious options opened the way for a system of belief that answered personal despair by offering an otherworldly solution that was open to anyone and everyone. It was a case of survival of the fittest. By contrast, what lay behind all of this, back at the earliest moment, was very different.

Now all three essays converge, for Engels takes up Bauer’s argument that Revelation is the best window into early Christianity. Assuming a date of composition between late 68 and early 69 C.E., it presents a group of Jews (not Christians) who believed that the end would come soon. There is no Trinity, for Jesus is subordinate to God, and there is certainly no Holy Spirit. There is no doctrine of original sin, no baptism or sacrament of communion, no justification by faith, and no elaborate story of the death and resurrection of Christ. And there is no religion of love, for the author preaches “sound, honest revenge” on their persecutors (Engels 1972b: 465, 1990c: 462). The author of the text is unknown (certainly not the legendary disciple by the name of John), and all of the “visions” find precursors in the Hebrew Bible and other apocalyptic documents that preceded Revelation. To top it off, Engels recounts a theory heard in a lecture by Ferdinand Berner that the infamous number 666 (the mark of the beast) can easily be deciphered through some deft playing with numbers: Given that Hebrew uses letters of the alphabet for numbers, all we need do is add up the value of the Hebrew *Neron Kesar* (in Greek, it is *Neron Kaisar*), and we have 666. So Revelation predicts the end of the “beast,” Nero, at the hand of God and ushers in the new age.

¹⁴ Engels’s relationship with Bauer moves in the reverse direction from that of Marx. While Marx gradually became estranged from his one-time friend, Engels moved from satire and dismissal to a deep appreciation of Bauer’s contribution to biblical and philosophical thought.

How has Engels's reconstruction stood the test of time? It is easy to dismiss it as reliant on out-of-date scholarship, to say that Bauer was too extreme in his skepticism, and to point out that Berner's numerical theory is implausible. We can hardly blame Engels for using the biblical scholarship that was available at the time. Nor can we accuse him of complete ignorance of biblical criticism, for he recounts at great length the positions of the dominant Tübingen school (Ferdinand Christian Bauer, Heinrich Ewald, Friedrich Lücke, et al.), where Strauss also began, and the popularizing work of Ernst Renan.¹⁵ I would be in a similar situation if someone a century from now were to read a position I take today in relation to contemporary biblical scholarship, especially if I was dependent on that scholarship rather than developing my own position. The strange thing is that the underlying assumptions of Bauer's work—and thereby that of Engels—are the same in the historical critical scholarship of the Bible today (which no longer has the hegemony it once had). The tides of some forms of scholarship may rise and fall, but the basic assumptions remain unchanged: One must be very careful in using the Bible for any historical reconstruction, since it is unreliable to some degree (Engels actually opts for a median position between Bauer's skepticism and the Tübingen school's optimism regarding reliability); the overwhelming concern is with origins, whether that of early Christianity or early Israel; archaeology plays a crucial role, since it provides evidence that is external to the text; and one spends an inordinate amount of energy discussing authorship and dates, which, like the fashion in skirts, can go in only one of two directions: up or down. Engels, Bauer, the Tübingen School, and historical critical scholars today all share the same assumptions. Furthermore, some of Bauer's concerns are still very much alive in biblical criticism, such as the influence of Stoicism and the connection with Philo (e.g., see Engberg-Pedersen 2000; Lee 2006; Loader 2004; Winter 1997). Bauer's argument that the letters of Paul predate the Gospels, which come from the second century C.E., still holds water, although his theory on Revelation as the earliest document has little credibility. However, his radical skepticism has returned to biblical scholarship, especially through the so-called minimalist school, which finds little that is historically reliable concerning Jesus in the texts of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament (Davies 1995, 1998, 2008, 2009; Lemche 1988, 1998a, 1998b; Price 2000; Thompson 1992, 1999, 2005; Zindler 2003).

As for Engels's longstanding interest in Revelation, these later studies seem like a complete turnaround. Once he took up and often mocked the speculation concerning the Last Judgment, but now Revelation is useful to provide a glimpse into the earliest form of Christianity. As he puts it at the close of his essay on

¹⁵ Engels is not overly keen on Renan, since he feels that Renan borrowed and distorted German biblical scholarship. See also the short review of Renan's *The Antichrist* (Engels 1988b).

Revelation, “All this has now lost its interest, except for ignorant persons who may still try to calculate the day of the last judgment” (Engels 1990a: 117). Engels might no longer estimate the day of judgment, but he certainly hasn’t lost his interest. There is also something deeply Reformed about this exercise. Luther and Calvin claimed to be restoring the purity of the early church from its corruption and accretion of apparently pagan elements. It is as though Engels is saying, “If you really want to recover the early church, here it is!”

The details of Engels’s reconstruction might not have grabbed the imagination, but there is one item in all these essays that remains very much part of current debate: the appeal of Christianity to the lower classes, especially slaves. The argument actually undergoes a shift across the three essays. In the first essay, Engels takes it directly from Bauer, who argued that a part of Christianity’s appeal lay in its reversal, for it despised wealth, power and privilege, seeking disciples among the rejected—the poor and slaves (Engels 1973a: 299, 1989a: 429). The catch is that the religion that made such an appeal was for Bauer the full-fledged form of Christianity, with all of its borrowed and blended pieces from Philo and Stoicism. By contrast, when we get to the essay on Revelation, Engels shifts ground, arguing that this appeal to the lower classes was actually a feature of earliest Christianity, before all the accretions. In other words, it is what he finds in the picture depicted by Revelation. He would hold the same line in the third essay: “Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and freedmen, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome” (Engels 1972b: 449, 1990c: 447). Apart from a few general comments about the effect of Roman imperialism, which he argues crushed older social structures of clan and polis, imposed a new juridical system, exacted punishing tribute, and exacerbated the hopeless state of the vast majority of slaves, impoverished peasants, and desperate urban freemen, Engels gives relatively scant attention to the details of this crucial point.

Nevertheless, it is the point that has stuck. In fact, Engels is also the source of the idea in New Testament studies and church history, especially in terms of class analysis rather than the dominance of ideas such as despising the rich (Bauer’s position). Mediated and elaborated by Luxemburg (1970, 1982) and Kautsky (1977, 2007), this position became by the early 20th century the consensus among New Testament scholars (see, for instance, Deissman 1929) and among sociologists (see Troeltsch 1992), holding sway until the 1960s. Then, however, reaction set in, and more conservative scholars reclaimed the older argument that predates Engels: Christianity also drew its membership (albeit a minority) from the middle and upper strata of Roman society. The problem with either position is that there is there is no conclusive evidence—not an uncommon problem in biblical criticism.

So how does Engels get to the position that the early Christianity of Revelation appealed to the lower classes? He cannot rely on direct evidence, since there is very little outside the notoriously unreliable documents from the time. Nor does he draw on any other literature, mainly because it is his own proposal. It comes from an audacious exercise in comparison. As in his essay on the Peasant Revolt, Engels sets out to show that early Christianity and the communist movement have multiple parallels. Both appeal to the oppressed classes, both suffer from sectarian squabbles and endless splits, they have countless false prophets who arise and lead people astray, they suffer from a tension between ascetic self-denial and libertinism, they also suffer from persecution and ostracism, and they both hope for a better world that keeps them struggling despite numerous setbacks. Indeed, Engels and Marx were given to making such comparisons, often in relation to various opponents and sectarian tendencies in the communist movement. There are myriad comments in this vein scattered through their works on Proudhon, Bakunin, Mazzini, and many others.¹⁶ As Marx put it in a comment on Lasalle, “In fact, every sect is religious” (Marx 1973a: 569, 1988: 133).

This comparative exercise is the underlying theme of Engels’s essay on early Christianity. For example, just as the author, “Paul,” of the second letter to the Corinthians complains that contributions are not coming in, so also with the International: “How many of the most zealous propagandists of the sixties would squeeze the hand of the author that epistle, whoever he may be, and whisper: ‘So it was like that with you too!’” When Engels turns to Revelation, he picks up the fictional letters to the seven churches in its opening chapters as evidence of sectarian splits—so also with the workers’ movement, with its warring factions of Weitling communists, Proudhonists, Blanquists, the German Workers’ Party, and the Bakuninists (Engels 1972b: 453, 1990c: 449). Revelation shows us that such splits are but the sign of an immature revolutionary movement. And on they go.

There are simply too many parallels for Engels to avoid the inevitable conclusion that Christianity was originally a revolutionary movement. As he puts it succinctly in a text written at about the same time, at the turn of the year 1895:

¹⁶ Engels wrote to Bebel: “Incidentally, old man Hegel said long ago: A party proves itself victorious by *splitting* and being able to stand the split. The movement of the proletariat necessarily passes through different stages of development; at every stage part of the people get stuck and do not participate in the further advance; and this in itself is sufficient to explain why the ‘solidarity of the proletariat’, in fact, everywhere takes the form of different party groupings, which carry on life-and-death feuds with one another, as the Christian sects in the Roman Empire did amidst the worst persecutions” (Engels 1973i: 591, 1989b: 514). As a sample of a widespread theme in their work, see Engels (1973d: 219, 227, 267, 274, 286; 1973f; 1982e; 1988a: 323, 331, 371, 378, 391) and Marx and Engels (1973a: 459–463; 1973b: 346, 376–377, 382–383, 400, 403, 407, 437–438; 1978: 528–532; 1988: 470, 498–499, 503–504, 519, 522, 525–526, 553–554).

It is now, almost to the year, sixteen centuries since a dangerous party of overthrow was likewise active in the Roman empire. It undermined religion and all the foundations of the state; it flatly denied that Caesar's will was the supreme law; it was without a fatherland, was international; it spread over the whole empire, from Gaul to Asia, and beyond the frontiers of the empire. It had long carried on seditious activities underground in secret; for a considerable time, however, it had felt strong enough to come out into the open. This party of overthrow, which was known by the name of Christians . . . (Engels 1972a: 526, 1990b: 523).¹⁷

In comparable oppressive economic situations in which class conflict was rife, both movements sprang up not because of great leaders or prophets but because of the masses. No wonder, then, that the revolutionary movements before the socialists arrived on the scene were invariably Christian, at least if one restricts the sample pool to Europe.

Before we dismiss Engels's extensive exercise in comparison, I should point out that such comparisons abound today. It seems that every second book dealing with the New Testament has "empire" somewhere in the title (Carter 2001, 2006; Elliott 1994, 2000; Horsley 2000, 2002, 2003, 2008). These works do not seek merely to situate the New Testament within the Roman Empire, a somewhat obvious point that is a response to the earlier emphasis on its deeply Jewish nature, but also argue that these texts are anti-imperial documents or at least that one can find a consistent anti-imperial theme running through them. Invariably, the comparison is made with our own times, whether focusing on the imperialism of the United States, the global ravages of transnational corporations, or the profound difference between the majority of impoverished peoples of the world and small number of the obscenely rich. While all this is salutary, I can't help wondering whether it loses touch with the political tensions in the Bible, tensions between power and insurrection, reaction and revolution (see also Boer 2007). Most of these studies call for some fundamental economic change, but few if any espouse a revolutionary agenda. However, we do find in much of this New Testament scholarship an item that Engels studiously avoids: a revolutionary Jesus. This idea simply will not go away; the opposition that we find in the Gospels to wealth, power, and vested clerical privilege returns again and again to inspire one guerrilla after another. Not a few liberation theologians have heard the call to arms and joined a guerrilla group. Ernst Bloch was also keen on the idea, but I must admit to being a little skeptical for the simple reason that it is well-nigh impossible to come up with any viable historical Jesus, no matter how many people have tried.

¹⁷ See also Marx 1973b: 161, 1992: 67.

CONCLUSION

I have followed a trail all the way from Engels's playful—and thereby protesting (in his Calvinist context)—engagements with Revelation in his teenage years to the final and full assessment of Christianity's revolutionary origins in one of the last essays he wrote. By way of conclusion, I would like to raise two conundrums that emerge from Engels's enthusiastic embracing of a revolutionary Christianity.

The first conundrum is that Engels takes a significant step, following on from his essay on the Peasant War (Engels 1973b, 1978),¹⁸ toward identifying a tradition of revolution in which the communists stand as the most recent exemplars. This is a tricky move, since Engels is all too aware that those earlier revolutions were inspired by the insurrectionary texts of the Bible. The advantage clearly lay in showing that the communists were not the new kids on the block, touting some newfangled theory and practice that undermined the good old tradition. No, suggests Engels, for we have breathed life into the age-old aspirations of the downtrodden.¹⁹ The disadvantage is that such a move would undermine the determined efforts Marx and Engels had made to separate themselves from the theological trappings of earlier expressions of communism, which, as they put it in the Manifesto, were nothing “but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat” (Marx and Engels 1972: 484, 1976: 508).

The second conundrum is whether Christianity provides a motive force for revolutionary movements. In other words, can an ideological system become a cause for political action? Here, Engels equivocates. On the one hand, he argues that Christianity was a cloak for political and economic agitation, providing in a theological *lingua franca* the common aspirations of people before science and materialist socialism. The impetus for revolution came not from Christianity itself but from oppressive social conditions. With socialism, the time has come to shed that cloak and speak of the real causes. The difference between Christianity and socialism is that the former offers a heavenly answer to intolerable conditions, for one could look to salvation in an afterlife as an antidote to present suffering. Socialism differs, for it offers a solution in this world.

On the other hand, Engels also toys with the possibility that a system of ideas, beliefs, and even myths can influence the way in which people act. As Georges Sorel (1961) argued, such a system is told in narratives (Sorel called them *myths*) to motivate people, to give them hope that things will improve, and to incite them to persevere in the face of innumerable setbacks. This theme also runs through Engels's study of early Christianity. It seems to me that it is a more dialectical

¹⁸ Although it is tempting to include a discussion of this essay on Müntzer and the peasants, I have decided to leave it to another time, since it does not deal directly with Revelation.

¹⁹ In an excellent pair of essays, John Roberts (2008a, 2008b) calls this “invariant communism.”

approach to the interaction of theory and praxis, for the beliefs that people develop and the narratives they tell are as much a response to pressing social and economic problems as they are reasons for changing things. Does not the revolutionary theory of historical materialism also play such a role, at least in part? Of course, such beliefs, narratives, and myths never appear in a vacuum; they are connected in complex ways with social and political movements.

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