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Imaginations of the Other Side: Heinrich Bullinger, the Apocalypse and the Pastoral and Exegetical Challenges of the Future

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Abstract: Interpretations of the Book of Revelation were extremely popular in the 16th century, not least due to the precarious situation of Protestantism in Europe. In these contexts, the Revelation of John was of utmost importance to the issue of pastoral care in the early modern period, despite the intensive discussions about its canonicity. It contained the most detailed explanations of what awaited Christians after their death and how the events of the end times would unfold until the return of Christ. The perspective of what to expect after death was of great pastoral, and therefore, theological importance. One of the most important commentaries was the ‘Hundred Sermons on the Apocalypse’ by the Zurich-born reformer Heinrich Bullinger. This article examines the biblical concepts of the future that Bullinger identified, as well as the reformer’s own emphases and their practical implications. This article combines, therefore, the flourishing history of the reception of the Bible with the history of Christian conceptions of the future—and its pastoral implications—that have yet to be applied to the Swiss Reformation.

Keywords: Heinrich Bullinger; apocalypse; exegesis; future; pastoral care



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1. Introduction

In various research contributions in recent years, there have been indications of how important a pastoral and counselling approach was for the life and work of the Zurich reformer Heinrich Bullinger. This insight applies not only to his works with a decidedly pastoral orientation, such as the “Bericht der Kranken”, which appeared in 1535, but also to large parts of his interpretation of Scripture as a whole (Mühling 2002). A few years ago, Andreas Mühling emphasised the extent to which the Bible was a source of comfort for Bullinger, which also had an impact on his exegetical work. The argument that death was not the end and did not have the last word in the life of a Christian (Jüngel 1971) was a guiding principle for the pastoral impulses that clergymen in the 16th century—and beyond—wanted to pass on to their congregations. The images and imaginary worlds that the Bible captured in its various passages were of the utmost importance for this.

In these contexts, the Revelation of John was of utmost importance to the issue of pastoral care in the early modern period, despite the intensive discussions about its canonicity. It contained the most detailed explanations of what awaited Christians after their death and how the events of the end times would unfold until the return of Christ. The perspective of what to expect after death was of great pastoral and therefore also theological importance. From an analytical point of view, my article examines the biblical concepts of the future that Bullinger identified, as well as the reformer’s own emphases and their practical implications. This article combines, therefore, the flourishing history of the reception of the Bible

with the history of Christian conceptions of the future—and its pastoral implications—that have yet to be applied to the Swiss Reformation. In this way, my contribution attempts to show a new direction for future research.

The history of the interpretation of the Bible and the associated pastoral implications could benefit significantly from the field of Historical Future Studies. This historical approach which has its roots in the theories of Reinhart Koselleck ([Jordheim 2012](#)). Hoffmann argues in favour of assuming a plurality of ideas about the future, which can be methodically taken into account by starting from certain actors or thought collectives when analysing them and examining their horizons of expectation. A distinction can be made between normative, possible and probable concepts.

“Normative future concepts are positively connoted, desirable futures, i.e., hopes and (temporalised) utopias, or fears as concepts of a negatively connoted future or even dystopias, which are radically different from the present [...]. Normative futures convey different intentions than those of explorative futures, i.e., possible or probable futures. The latter include prognoses as specific, exact statements about an expectable future, while scenarios, which are more open, describe possible and alternative futures as paths on the way to the future”. ([Seefried 2023](#), 8. All translations, if not otherwise stated, are my own)

The historical study of concepts of the future also examines the modes of production and communication of futures. How and in what ways and with what methods were certain futures developed and communicated? It is important to include the ways in which the future was presented, communicated, and visualised, and to examine which media and forms of linguistic appropriation were used ([Seefried 2023](#), p. 9). Historians Rüdiger Graf and Benjamin Herzog have emphasised the modes of generating the future, distinguishing between expectation and formation, risk and preservation ([Graf and Herzog 2016](#); [Hölscher 2017](#)). All of this is highly relevant to the history of the church and theology in view of the importance of ‘time and eternity’ ([Landmesser and Schlenke 2024](#)) for theology, but has hardly been utilised to date ([Brunner 2022](#); [Hölscher 2004](#)).

The Book of Revelation is particularly suitable for interpretations of time and history, as can be seen not only in Bullinger ([Rissi 1965](#)). Bullinger, who himself had a keen interest in history, interpreted this book to generate various ideas about the future. He used these, on the one hand, to better understand his own time, and, on the other, to offer a vision of the afterlife, which, according to the argument, also had consoling, pastoral intentions ([Gordon 2012](#)). This is also evident from the fact that this book itself was instrumentalised in the struggle between the confessions, although both Luther and Zwingli were unusually united in their scepticism regarding the book’s canonicity. Bullinger’s interpretations, but also those from the Lutheran tradition by David Chytraeus, were informed by at least two aspects: on the one hand, they sought to counter spiritualistic interpretations such as those of Melchior Hoffman and in Anabaptist circles with their ‘orthodox’ interpretation of the book ([Deppermann 1987](#)). The events in Münster, with the failed establishment of the ‘Anabaptist kingdom’ in 1535, created a sense of urgency ([Feik 2023](#)). On the other hand, this book offered a variety of points of reference for making statements about the present and future of Christianity due to its historical dimensions. The commentary on the Book of Revelation is of great importance for the ‘apocalyptic imagination’, which, according to John Jeffries Martin, made an important contribution to the emergence of the modern world ([Martin 2022](#), especially chapter 2).

2. The Example of Heinrich Bullinger's "Hundred Sermons on the Apocalypse"

Faith and life belong closely together in Heinrich Bullinger's theology. Faith in Jesus Christ, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture, must not remain without consequences, but must at best be visibly reflected in daily life (Walser 1963). Recent research has also repeatedly emphasised the extent to which Bullinger saw himself as a counsellor and pastor, not only for his Zurich congregation, but also in particular for the persecuted Christians in Europe (Mühling 2001, 2004, 2007). Thinking and acting pastorally is therefore a fundamental feature of his theological profile, although this has rarely been the focus of research to date (Zsindely 1977). Exegesis and church practice belonged very closely together; the Bible was the central source of consolation from which Bullinger drew to pass on comfort, instruction and guidance for the conduct of life to his listeners and readers (Mühling 2017).

Bullinger's "Hundred Sermons on the Apocalypse" was one of his most successful exegetical publications, which, however, has not resulted in a corresponding amount of research. Fritz Büsler stressed the importance of this source in an important article written over twenty years ago. There is still no critical edition of the sermons, which is why we must rely on Büsler, who has reconstructed their underlying character and publication history. Bullinger preached the sermons between 21 August 1554 and 29 December 1556, on Tuesdays in Zurich's Grossmünster (HDB 46, 23f; 50, 19). They appeared in print for the first time the following year, initially in Latin. Just one year later, the first German edition appeared in Mulhouse and the first French edition in Geneva, which were followed by another Latin edition in 1559, and the first English edition in 1561, published in London. In 1567 there was also a Dutch edition, which went to print in Emden. Among his exegetical writings, Revelation was the commentary with the highest total number of editions (Büsler 2000, p. 117). It is even more astonishing, especially in view of the number of editions and the European circulation, that Bullinger's commentary seems to have played hardly any role in previous research on the history of interpretation (cf. Maier 1981, p. 212).

Fritz Büsler already noted in his authoritative essay from 2000 that this success cannot come as a surprise if one takes a closer look at the historical conditions in the 16th century and the particular developments that affected the Protestant cause in Europe. Famines, armed conflicts, and persecution and expulsion of religious dissenters, all increasingly left their mark on European societies from the middle of the 16th century (Greengrass 2015). "The church schisms, religious wars and persecution could easily be interpreted as the final phase in the great struggle between Christ and the Antichrist" (Büsler 2000, p. 118). The topos of identifying the Antichrist with the Pope, which goes back to the Middle Ages, quickly spread widely through the work of Martin Luther (Leppin 1999a, 1999b; Hofmann 1982). After the catastrophic defeat of Zurich in the Second Kappel War, Switzerland was still in a phase of consolidation, the successful outcome of which was for a long time by no means certain (Gordon 2002a, pp. 146–90). Overall, this period was also characterised by waves of religious refugees making their way to Switzerland, particularly to Geneva and Zurich (Terpstra 2015; Lachenicht 2016).

In addition to these historical circumstances, it was also Bullinger's own interest in the Revelation of John and his intensive exegetical and homiletical engagement with the text that made his commentary a bestseller (Büsler 2000, p. 118). We can agree with Büsler that Bullinger approached the interpretation of the Revelation with such great prudence and care, and with extraordinary diligence, "that it has become an unusual masterpiece in the history of exegesis in every respect—a masterpiece that has, however, hardly been noticed by research so far" (Büsler 2000, 118f. For the different approaches to interpret Revelation cf. Backus 2000, pp. 87–133).

This assessment of the state of research on Bullinger's commentary remains largely correct; very little has changed in the last almost 25 years, especially as no critical edition is available. The following section will therefore begin by setting out Bullinger's exegetical principles. The dire circumstances of the time demanded from Bullinger a theological and thus also pastoral answer, which, in accordance with the new focus on the Word of God, was expected only from the Bible. Bullinger's personal interest in revelation was certainly a catalyst, as was his great interest in history in general (Moser 2004; Archilla 1992; Bächtold 1996). We have already mentioned the central importance of the Bible for Bullinger and the central role of the interpretation of the Bible in this context. From 1532 at the latest, Bullinger had defined God's covenant as the main theme of Scripture (Spijker 2007; Baker 1998), consciously distinguishing it from the conceptual pair 'law and gospel'. The content of the covenant is the promise of God's grace and the obligation of people to live a virtuous life; the biblical scriptures therefore refer to *fides et Innocentia* (Opitz 2004, pp. 121–25).

For the Zurich reformer, the Word of God, as revealed in Holy Scripture, is the source and norm of Christian faith and life (Walton 1980). In the *Decades*, he explains that Christ is to be identified with the Word of God and that Scripture can therefore be regarded as God's self-revelation. Its message is addressed to all people because God wants them to be saved through faith in Jesus Christ and to experience who Christ is. Scripture also teaches, as Bullinger expresses in the second sermon of the *Decades* "what is due to true worshippers of God, what they should avoid or do. It is not enough to know the will of God if we do not do it and be saved" (Quoted with Opitz 2004, p. 76). This reaction consists of the faithfulness required of man regarding God's covenant with him. Through the Holy Spirit, man is placed in a process of rebirth that is intended to bring about a renewal of his heart. For Bullinger, faith is nothing other than a life-changing listening to God's word.

In the third sermon of the *Decades*, Bullinger explains how important the 'rightful interpretation of Scripture' is and what he understands it to include. This is because the arrival of the divine word to man requires a legitimate interpretation of Scripture that has been developed by man himself and is methodologically appropriate to him. Bullinger mentions four points in particular: the consideration of the context in which the verses are placed, the orientation towards the *loci* method, and the consideration of the *regula fidei* and the *regula dilectionis*, to which the interpretation must not contradict. Of course, due to his humanist background, it was also absolutely clear to Bullinger that Scripture has to be interpreted according to all philological rules of the art. In his actual practice of interpretation, Bullinger followed the maxims that he had already laid down in 1527, inspired by Erasmus and other humanists, in his work "*Studiorum Ratio*". The Swiss New Testament scholar Samuel Vollenweider has identified three points from "*Studiorum Ratio*" and Bullinger's *Decades* that aptly summarise his hermeneutical programme (for the following cf. Vollenweider 2017, pp. 3–5; Backus 2004).

Firstly, it should be emphasised that the Swiss reformer wants both the preceding and the following verses to be adequately worked out in the interpretation, just as the circumstances, i.e., the historical context, which must also be considered. It is a matter of placing an expression or sentence in its textual context (*contextus*), but also in its historical context (*circumstantia*) (Opitz 2004, 101f). However, Bullinger also knows "canonical reading" as a methodological principle (Vollenweider 2017, p. 4), which aims to take a hermeneutical view of the Bible as a whole. In his exegetical practice, he seeks to highlight the main question that a scriptural passage attempts to answer, and from which it is organised (Bullinger 1987, vol. 1, pp. 21, 98). Secondly, Bullinger gives numerous indications as to how the knowledge to be conveyed can be organised according to *loci*. In his view, the exegesis of biblical texts could improve considerably if it could competently relate *loci* to one another. Thirdly, Bullinger develops a variation on the basic Reformation

principle of “*sola scriptura*”, focussing on the commentary literature: “*scripturam sui ipsius esse commentarium*”. Scripture is its own commentary, which must be read and interpreted by humans with great care and refined judgement (Bullinger 1987, vol. 1, p. 30:3f; Ceard 1981; Hagen 1990). Human interpretations as such always remain flawed and must always refer back to the biblical foundation and, if necessary, be corrected.

As Samuel Vollenweider and Luca Baschera have shown, Bullinger worked out these fundamental decisions in even greater detail in his interpretations from the 1530s onwards (Vollenweider 2017, pp. 5–7; Baschera 2023). He emphasised two central points in the preface to his complete edition of the commentaries on the epistles in 1537: “*quae sit orationis series, quod filum, hoc est, quis scopus eorum, quibus de disseritur, quae sententiarum et argumentorum inter sese connexio, quo referenda sint omnia, quid probent taut quid sibi velint*” (What is the line of argument, what is the thread, that is, what is the aim of those by whom it is discussed, what is the connection between their opinions and arguments, by which all of it is presented, what do they prove and what do they want?) (Bullinger 2012, p. 7, lines 18–20). What is needed, therefore, is a precise, focussed linguistic and rhetorical analysis aimed at simplicity, on the one hand, while taking into account the current ecclesial problems, on the other (Vollenweider 2017, p. 5). Many difficulties in a text can be resolved if the text is analysed thoroughly enough. The exegetical orientation around the loci experienced a covenant theological culmination at this time (Koch 1978; Mock 2013). The principle of self-interpreting Scripture also underwent an expansion “through the “rule of love and faith”” (Vollenweider 2017, p. 6; Beutel 1998).

Bullinger’s aim in interpreting biblical writings was to present their content to his readers in a clear, precise, and comprehensible manner. His humanistic character is reflected to a not inconsiderable extent (Hausammann 1970, pp. 88–191; Staedtke 1962, pp. 27–39). Irena Backus already pointed out in 2007 how much this influence was still reflected in the “mature antistes” in the interpretation of the Revelation of John (Backus 2007, pp. 652–58). At the same time, and this is no less significant, his interpretations always aim to speak into the present in a programmatic way and thereby also develop a pastoral efficacy.

Let us now turn to the importance of pastoral care for Bullinger. As mentioned, Andreas Mühling has spoken emphatically of the Bible as a source from which Bullinger could derive comfort. The Zurich reformer placed correct interpretation of Scripture in doctrine alongside its application in practice. For him, the two belonged closely together. In all areas of his work, Bullinger’s thinking was always characterised by the theological search for answers to pressing, existential questions. In Bullinger’s view, all ecclesiastical, political, but also individual action had to be a “reflection of the intensive endeavours towards a biblical exegesis appropriate to the Word of God” (Mühling 2017, p. 266). In doing so, Bullinger was reacting to the “Reformation crisis in pastoral care” (Cornick 2000) diagnosed by David Cornick. In a broad sense, Bullinger saw pastoral care as his central field of work, which can be found in almost all of his writings in one way or another. This disposition was fuelled by his conviction that a comprehensive guide to a good and blissful life had been revealed in God’s Word. His interpretation of scripture carries this idea forward and therefore always contains pastoral intentions. During his work in Zurich, he increasingly focused on the question of how to adequately deal with omnipresent suffering and the answers and comfort that the Bible provides in this regard. These answers, in turn, had to be conveyed to people in the interpretation of Scripture and then in preaching. To understand the “age of consolation” more thoroughly, it is important to include Bullinger’s position to a greater extent (Rittgers 2017).

3. Imaginations of the Other Side—Exegetical “Futures” and Their Pastoral Implications

There is no definitive study about Bullinger’s eschatology apart from a few comments in Peter Stephen’s monograph on Bullinger’s theology (Stephens 2019, pp. 449–82). Except for Bullinger’s exposition of the Book of Daniel (Krüger 2004; Timmerman 2009), there are few sources where we learn as much about his view of the eschatological complex as in the Hundred Sermons on the Apocalypse. Bullinger’s understanding of providing orientation and comfort to the persecuted Protestants is fundamental to my question in this article. In this way, the prophetically understood biblical scripture is to have a direct effect on the present. In its preface he dedicates the whole book “Ad omnes per Germaniam et Helvetiam, Galliae, Angliae, Italiae, Aliorvmqve regnorvm uel nationum Christi nomine exules, atq, adè ad uniuersos ubiq, fideles, Christi Domini iudicisq, aduentum expectantes, in Anpocalypsism IESV Christi per Ioannem apostolum & euangelistam euulgatam [. . .]” (Bullinger 1557, unpaginated) (The Preface of Henry Bullinger vpon the Apocalips of Iesu Christ set forth by the Apostle and Euangelist John, vnto all the exiles for the name of Christ in Germany and Swyserland, of Fraunce, England, Italy and of other realmes or nations, and generally to all the faithfull where soeuer they be, abiding and lokyng for the commying of Christe our Lorde and Iudge (Bullinger 1573, unpaginated)). Bullinger’s commentaries were primarily aimed at the preachers he was educating, whom he intended to provide with the exegetical tools to enable them to deliver their sermons in accordance with his theology (Vollenweider 2017, p. 2; Engammare 2018, pp. 95–107). Through the numerous vernacular translations, however, his commentaries were also able to have a direct impact, especially in England and for the English-speaking communities in exile (Bauckham 1978, 1999; MacCulloch 2006; MacCulloch 2007; Zika 2016). The Book of Revelation, in general, had an important role for pastoral purposes (O’Banion 2006).

This fundamental constellation will be illustrated using several examples that make it possible to understand how Bullinger imagined the afterlife on the basis of revelation, and what normative goals he pursued regarding it. The topics of the Last Judgement and the Antichrist will not be considered here, because there are already some studies on these topics, and they are not the actual core of the research interest of this article (Gordon 2002b; Moser 2003; Campi 2003). Instead, the following examples are intended to draw on characteristic examples of pastoral care within the Apocalypse, in which Bullinger wishes to evoke certain ideas of the future for his recipients.

A first insight into the events of heaven is provided in Revelation 4:1-11, which brings the reader before the heavenly throne of God. In German translations, it is often entitled ‘Prelude in Heaven’ (Müller 1984, p. 140). Bullinger first interprets this passage in the 23rd sermon. At the beginning, he explains John’s intention with this vision: “That through the most wyse and excellent gouernement of Christ he [God, BB] ruleth all thinges, that the holy Angels also and all creatures doe acknowledge him, and geue glory vnto him. And so it teacheth vs. to acknowledge the prouidence and good will of God towards vs., and his most iust gouernement in all our doings, yea euen in ye grievous calamities and persecutions whereof it shall prophesy anonf” (Bullinger 1573, 63v).

At this point, it is therefore a matter of drawing a parallel between the terrible events described in the Book of Revelation and those of Bullinger’s own time. This goes hand in hand with the affirmation that nothing that happens takes place outside the authority and powerful providential action of God. Just as John was prepared for his vision, the reader, each individual Christian, must also orientate his mind to God and to the heavenly dealings of God. “Therefore must our mynde be lifted vp into the contemplation of heauenly thynges, and be poured as much as may be from earthly affections, that we may behold heauenly thynges with an heauenly contemplation” (Bullinger 1573, 64r). The Seven Seals,

which dominate the content of Revelation until Chapter 8, would always be associated with “comfortable & effectually consolations” (Bullinger 1573, 64r). In this sermon, Bullinger also gives an overview of the corresponding overall section of Revelation, which largely corresponds to the categorisations still common today (Müller 1984, pp. 139–84; Roloff 1987, pp. 65–91).

For the interpretation of the visions that now follow, Bullinger states that John does not reveal anything that has not already been said about Christ elsewhere in the Bible. Most of what is said in Revelation had already been stated in the Old Testament prophecies (Bullinger 1573, 64v). Regarding the heavenly throne, which John sees seized in the Spirit in Rev 4:2, Bullinger states that this was intended to express “souerein maiestie, and execution of Justice” (Bullinger 1573, 64v). Bullinger connects the rainbow mentioned in verse 3 with a reference to God’s everlasting grace and, above all, to God’s covenant with mankind, as reported in Genesis 9. While God on his throne can justifiably cause fear in people, the rainbow has a different effect, as seen in the following: “Therefore the raynebow putteth vs. in remembraunce of Gods grace, and that God which by his prouidence gouerneth all thynges, hath bounde hym selfe in league to man kinde, to whom verely he wisheth well” (Bullinger 1573, 65r). The glimpse into heaven thus conveys two things: on the one hand, God sits on his throne and has control over all things that happen in heaven and on earth. On the other hand, Bullinger repeatedly emphasises the divine grace that God has granted to people in his covenant with them and the many comforts and consolations that they can expect from him. Bullinger thus attempts to depict a space without fear. As recent research has shown, fear played an important role in the Reformation (Tarantino and Zika 2019), which was particularly fuelled by experiences in exile (cf. also Terpstra 2015).

Revelation 7 is also of great importance, especially verses 13 to 17, in which the protection of the church in the time of divine judgement is described. This was preceded by the breaking of the first six seals, which are associated with corresponding afflictions. Verses 13 to 17 were particularly popular in the funeral sermon literature of the following period (Brunner 2020). The entire 36th sermon is dedicated to those who were protected by God. Bullinger’s commentary on this passage aims to clarify three questions: Who is the passage talking about? How did these beings become so pure and holy? And what is the nature and also the benefit of their blessedness? (Bullinger 1573, 104v). Bullinger thus focuses on those who have passed through the tribulations and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, which has made them holy and “white”.

The explanation of these questions is largely guided by the text, which Bullinger repeatedly contextualises within the Bible. The historical background of his interpretation becomes clear through references to martyrs who were immediately given white garments such as those described in the passage (Bullinger 1573, 104v), even if the passage is basically aimed at all “godly people” (Bullinger 1573, 104v). Bullinger was thinking primarily of the persecutions in England under Queen Mary I, about which he had been informed both by letter and through the presence of English exiles in Zurich. He speaks directly to those whose faith could cost them life and limb: “For the Saintes beyng in this world turmoyled with sundry euils, haue shed most plentyfull teares: but in the world to come, the Lord comforteth them, gladding them with ioy euerlastyng, neither geuying them at any tyme any occasion to grief” (Bullinger 1573, 106r). At such points, explanation of the biblical passage, analysis of the present and pastoral orientation towards the future that awaits the faithful Christian coincide in a concise manner.

His comments on the question of how the saved and newly clothed souls perceive their existence before God are particularly fascinating. The passage is a “schawbissen” (Bullinger 1587, LXXVIIr), in Latin “gustus” (Bullinger 1557, p. 103), i.e., a foretaste, and is written with comforting intentions. Bullinger then shares a whole series of observations.

The saints stand before God's throne, directly in the presence of the Holy Trinity, and not somewhere outside the gates of the inner city. Some space is given to describing the joys that characterised everyday life in the presence of God. The rest of the sermon concludes with a Christocentric focus on Jesus Christ the Saviour, the cause of the well-being of the saints mentioned earlier. References follow to Ezekiel 34 and John 10 and 16. In the sermon, Jesus himself comforts the readers: "verely I say vnto you, ye shall wepe and lament, but contrarywise the world shall reioyse: and ye shall mourne, but your mourning shall be turned into ioye" (Bullinger 1573, 106r). Bullinger engages in pastoral care with the Apocalypse by contextualising the statements of the biblical book in terms of contemporary history and the working out their specific pastoral potential. The talk of a foretaste makes it clear that the interpretation is spoken directly into the reality of the recipients' lives.

In his preface, Bullinger had initially emphasised that his work was aimed not least at the persecuted Christians around the world. The sections in chapters 17:1–19:10, in which God executes judgement on his adversaries, are therefore of particular interest. Bullinger understood the judgement of the "whore" of Babylon, in line with his understanding of the Antichrist (Moser 2003), as a judgement of the Roman papacy, which would in any case receive its punishment for persecuting the faithful. This future prospect thus contains a decidedly consoling component. Initially, however, the "whore" is described in some sermons in all its horror. This is also to be understood as a description of the current activities of the Catholic Church and its followers (Bullinger 1573, 232r and on the following pages). After these descriptions Bullinger states: "And therefore for a comfort here is consequently annexed, and the Lambe shall ouercome them. For albeit that Popish kynges and Princes seeme to ouercome the Saintes, whom they burne, murther, and destroy: yet Christ lyueth for euer, and the redemption of Christ florisheth" (Bullinger 1573, 237v).

There is a fundamental difference between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world: the latter can be changed, the former cannot; the former can be destroyed, but "Christ neuer perisheth" (Bullinger 1573, 238r). And even more, for the "seruauntes of Christ" (Bullinger 1573, 238r) victory has been promised surely. Therefore, he encourages his readers at the end of the 75th sermon: "Let vs. holde fast these thynges, and be constant and without feare in the troubles of this world" (Bullinger 1573, 238r). Such insertions directed at the addressees were intended to provide comfort in the present, and thus also contribute to a prepared orientation towards the future.

However, there are sections in the Book of Revelation that are even more explicitly focussed on the future, especially towards the end of the book. Chapters 19 to 22 contain the final visions of the Apocalypse. The 21st chapter speaks of God's new creation after the Last Judgement, in which God creates a new heaven and a new earth. This indeed opens up a perspective that is not yet present but represents a perspective of hope for the future. John reports two things in the fifth section of the book, which Bullinger has divided up from chapter 15 to chapter 22. Firstly, the punishments that will befall the Antichrist and his followers, and secondly "of rewardes, especially in the end of the world, to be imployde vppon all Saints" (Bullinger 1573, 286r). He follows the explanation of Arethas, according to which John is not speaking here of an annihilation of the given world, but of a "renewing for the better" (Bullinger 1573, 286v). Alongside Arethas, Augustine plays an important role in Bullinger's explanations of the heavenly Jerusalem, as can be demonstrated in many places (Schindler 2004; Biel 1991).

Heaven and earth must experience a renewal and glorification because they are the eternal dwelling place for the glorified people, whose immortal soul has been reunited with a renewed body. This dwelling place is presented as the New Jerusalem by the angel who guides John through his vision (Hirschberg 1999). "This cite therefore is not onely the place of the blessed, but also the very communion of Saints, in olde tyme prefigured in the

citie of Hierusalem" (Bullinger 1573, 287r). The important thing is that this city is not on earth, but completely in the heavenly presence of God. This is tied to the many blessings that await believers there.

"Blessedness chiefly consisteth in two thynges. For God will geue vnto his Saintes all that good is, and will take from them all euil: and so shall they for euer enjoy the soueraine good, and felicitie most perfit, and shall be free from all payne and miserie". (Bullinger 1573, 287v–288r)

Bullinger repeatedly expends a great deal of argumentative effort on this point: the future of believing Christians is something that should be seen with great hope and confidence. Continued existence in the presence of God without the presence of any suffering awaits Christians. And the only thing required for this is to accept in faith the offer of grace undeservedly given by God. In the 92nd sermon on Rev 21:6f, it is stated in the introduction that this passage declares "that the hope of the euerlastyng and blessed felicitie and glory is certaine and vndoubted" (Bullinger 1573, 289v). Bullinger demonstrates here that he takes doubts and difficulties of understanding seriously, but at the same time is convinced of the effectiveness of God's Word, as long as it is interpreted correctly. However, he also leaves no doubt that those who do not belong to God are threatened with terrible torments in hell with the second death, which is mentioned in verse 7.

This is followed by a more precise description of the heavenly Jerusalem in Rev 21, 9–14, which Bullinger interprets in the 93rd sermon. It should be noted that talk of a divinely ordered city was particularly successful in the urban contexts of Zurich and elsewhere (Büsser 1998). In the heavenly realms, there is a great city in which the saints dwell. This is the city of the great king "and in it shall dwel an innumerable number of ye blessed, and of Angels thousandes infinitie, whih shal haue the fruition of great glory: neyther is there any feare, least the place should not suffice s great a host of men and sprites, or that it shal be ouer straitte. Great is the citie of God, which is verily able to receiue all good men aboundantly" (Bullinger 1573, 295r). In other words, a fear-free space is described, in which a large number of inhabitants can live together without any conflicts. This was also intended to have a normative effect on the Zurich community, for example, where Bullinger had initially preached his sermons in publicly. The treatment of religious refugees seems to be particularly emphasised at this point, an event not with conflict in Zurich either and which was a pressing issue during Bullinger's preaching of the sermons on Revelation (Taplin 2003; Pfister 1955).

Revelation 22:1–5 describes a river of living water flowing from the throne of God, which is located in the centre of the heavenly Jerusalem, towards its central square. On both sides there are trees of life that bear fruit all year round. There will no longer be anything cursed there, which is why the local people will be able to see God face to face. The Lord God will enlighten them, which is why there will be no more night, and just as God rules his saints, they themselves will rule from eternity to eternity. In the 96th sermon, Bullinger interprets these verses in an affirmative manner, but he points out that millenarian positions that transfer this event to earth are mistaken. All this would happen after the thousand-year reign within the framework of the new creation. The things that we can only read about now "may shortly be felt by experience on our souls and bodies, so as we may cry with ioye, to God the father most mercyfull, and to Jesu Christ the redemer most mighty and benigne, and to the holy ghost the most swete comforter be prayse and glory for euermore" (Bullinger 1573, 305v).

In heaven, physical evidence will show whether someone belongs to God or not, in the form of a sign on the forehead. While it is sometimes difficult to determine whether someone belongs to God or the devil on earth, there will be no doubt about it in the hereafter. "And verely the brightnes of Gods hall shyne from the foreheads, or countenaunces of

the elect: as in tymes past the brightnes of the Lord shone from the face of Moses and Christ. Or because all Saintes shall know one an other, since the vertue of God resteth in their countenances [. . .]” (Bullinger 1573, 305v). Due to his rigorous exegetical method, Bullinger rarely goes beyond such rather abstract descriptions of the afterlife. The other side is imagined by biblical motives. However, his contemporaries—like people in all ages—lived in a world that was largely characterised by the horsemen of the Apocalypse, plague, war, and famine (Cunningham and Grell 2000). Bullinger’s descriptions of heaven work particularly well in the sharp contrast to the world of his recipients.

4. Conclusions: History of Exegesis and the History of Futures Past

The future that awaits Christians is a central theme of Bullinger’s pastoral endeavours, as he develops them in his interpretation of Revelation. Through his exegetical work, Bullinger’s commentary can be understood as a generator of Christian ideas about the future. In his commentary, the Zurich reformer skilfully integrates different time levels into his interpretation. It provides comfort and guidance to help the persecuted in the here and now, encouraging patience and strength in these persecutions. At the same time, Bullinger also recognises a future that has not yet come to pass, and which is the object of Christian hope: the coexistence of believers in the heavenly Jerusalem, which he describes in some detail.

David C. Steinmetz stated about the exegetical practices of early modern times: “The principal value of precritical exegesis is, that it is not modern exegesis; it is alien, strange, sometimes even, from our perspective, comic and fantastical. Precisely because it is strange, it provides a constant stimulus to modern interpreters, offering exegetical suggestions they would never think of themselves or find in any recent book, forcing them again and again to rereading and re-evaluation of the text. Interpreters who immerse themselves, however, not only in the text but in these alien approaches to the text may find in time that they learned to see, with eyes not their own, voices too soft for their own ears to detect” (Steinmetz 1995, p. 107; cf. also Steinmetz 1980, 2011; Briggs 2022).

It is perhaps not necessary to add that Steinmetz was a church historian. And this statement has often been misunderstood, especially by other biblical scholars, who saw it as calling into question the value of the historical–critical method. However, the value of pre-modern exegesis lies precisely in the experiences of alterity, or otherness that these interpretations facilitate. And, as should have become clear, they also have a lot to say to us theologically. Hardly anyone would deny the normative impact of the Reformers on crucial aspects of the church. Why should we not take their interpretations of Scripture or their pastoral endeavours seriously?

The impact of Bullinger’s commentary can hardly be overstated. His commentary was an important source for the annotations of Revelation in the Geneva Bible of 1560 (Olsen 2009), and it received several editions and translations into German, French, English, and Dutch. Until the end of the 16th century there were thirty editions of this book (Büsser 2000, p. 117). Particularly in England, we know of an intensive reception of the book that had a massive influence on the world of ideas of Protestantism there (Bauckham 1978, 1999; O’Banion 2006). It was also accessible to Puritan authors. The question remains as to whether and to what extent Bullinger’s commentaries could also be effective in the New World, for example, in Puritan New England.

The history of the Reformation’s interpretation of Scripture will benefit from taking the fundamental pastoral intentions more seriously and working them out more precisely from a historical perspective. Conversely, I am also convinced that current pastoral teaching can benefit from these historical insights and could stimulate joint theological reflection. This is all the truer as the normative commitment of Protestant theology to Scripture is

hardly ever questioned, despite all the crisis rhetoric. A group of younger New and Old Testament scholars as well as systematic theologians have recently emphasised that the interpretation of Scripture is a common task of the theological disciplines (Focken and van Oorschot 2020). Unfortunately, in this aspect church history often plays only a minor role, and at the same time, corresponding statements usually focus solely on Luther, at least in the German discussions. It is therefore necessary for church historians to become involved in the discussion and provide the insights of both historical depth and greater breadth of historical references.

Reformation interpretation of Scripture as pastoral care is a genuinely church-historical, and therefore also a profoundly theological approach that can make an original contribution to current debates against the backdrop of the diversity of Reformation positions. In addition to Bullinger, other reformers also agreed that pastoral care could only be meaningfully practised with the interpreted word of the Bible. The present analyses and future prospects that emerge are highly relevant both historically and theologically.

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