
ATHEISM VS. FAITH

THE EARLY CHURCH AND THE REVELATION IN ENGELS' VISION

Aurel Pavel¹ and Dan Țăreanu^{2*}

¹ 'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu, Faculty of Theology, Mitropoliei street 20, Sibiu, 550179, Romania

² 'Lucian Blaga' University of Sibiu, Research Centre of the Faculty of Theology, Mitropoliei street 20, Sibiu, 550179, Romania

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Abstract

Our study aims to make a theological diagnosis of how dialectical and historical materialism 'explained', at the horizon of the nineteenth century, the emergence of Christianity and its assertion as a global religious phenomenon. The main thesis we are analysing in our approach is the premise that the Marxist view on religion is built upon, that is: any religious fact does nothing but express in mythological forms the effects generated on the religious consciousness of the popular masses by the accumulation of historically determined antagonisms and economic-social tensions. Such a thesis, from our theological perspective does not have only historical limits, but, especially, ideological limitations related to the historical materialistic paradigm of the human history based on 'class struggle as a driving force of social development'. To this end, we will go through the main coordinates of Friedrich Engels's vision of the birth and 'horizontal' development of the early Church, while trying to assess the theological-historical viability of his vision and interpretations that rely on a simplistic and difficult to accept causal determination between social inequalities and economic deprivations and religion. At the same time, we will look at how the German thinker uses the text of the canonical 'Revelation', cited as the most reliable source of knowledge of early Christianity, to base the 'official' view of Marxism on faith, the eschatological teaching and expectations of the early Christians.

Keywords: Book of Revelation, Marx, early Christianity, philosophy-theology, Roman emperors

1. Introduction

We are convinced that the elaboration of a study dedicated to the way in which Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) perceived and interpreted the history of primitive Christianity comes to respond to current and relevant theological knowledge needs, present especially among those who have not experienced the

*Corresponding author, e-mail: dantareanu@yahoo.com

theoretical content itself of the atheist Marxist ideology. At the same time, we believe that bringing to the attention of young theologians (and intellectuals in general) an analytical attempt specifically dedicated to the interaction of dialectical materialism with the faith of the Church can align with necessary and timely directions of pastoral-missionary action, if only because the offensive atheism, agnosticism or religious indifferentism of neo-Marxist origin is an indisputable reality today.

While Marx generally confined himself to criticizing Christianity based on general philosophical arguments, Friedrich Engels treated the religion of Christ somewhat more ‘applied’, allocating to its appearance, evolution and doctrinal content a series of articles and works. In practice, Engels sought to challenge the authenticity and theological sustainability of Christianity by using, in addition to the ‘arsenal’ of Marxist dialectics, his dogmatic data and contents, as well as his history. It must be said that Engels never underestimated the attractiveness, influence, prestige and authority of the Christian Church, admitting that, at least until the Enlightenment, any major political or economic and social fact always had its religious dimension, often a defining one.

2. The birth of Christianity

Considering the dialectical and historical materialism, the Christian religion would represent nothing but the ‘extension’ and concretization at the level of individual and group religious consciousnesses of historically determined economic and social circumstances. Therefore, the time, place and circumstances of the emergence of a faith of the type and ethical-social peculiarities of Christianity should be regarded as the only unknown truly relevant facts to those who research the origin of the Church.

2.1. Circumstances and conditions

Despite his unconditional adherence to this analytical perspective, Engels avoids viewing the birth of Christianity unilaterally, that is, by absolutizing economic and social causality, admitting that, despite their decisive role, they were not “the only active” [1] for the process in question. As a result, the German thinker will postulate that for the Genesis and for outlining the doctrinal and moral-ethical profile of early Christianity, a series of non-economic factors would have been relevant, which he will locate, in line with the atheist thinker Bruno Bauer (1809-1882), in the space of philosophical thought of the first century AD, especially in the works of Philo of Alexandria and Seneca [2].

Beyond the problem of the role played by the thinking of the two philosophers, Engels insists that having its origin among the most disadvantaged social categories, primary Christianity, would have been established, in fact, as a movement with implicitly revolutionary connotations [2, p. 177]. The early Church would therefore have been an institutionalized expression of those social forces directly interested in the radical change of the “hitherto order of things”,

so it should come as no surprise that its adherents came chiefly from “the poor, the wretched, from the slaves, and sinners, despising the rich, the strong, and the privileged” [2, p. 178]. As a result, Engels concludes that by bringing together slaves and freedmen, but also debtors, vagrants and “all sorts of adventurers”, that is, the “tired and burdened”, the first Christian communities, strongly connected to “the lower strata of the people” [2, p. 178], would have represented “a great revolutionary movement” [2, p. 179], with the potential to be directly opposed to the dominant slave order.

Looking at Christianity as the necessary result of economic and social facts and explaining its doctrinal content and moral values, Engels can develop his ideas by passing Christ on a completely secondary level, for, according to the controversial Soviet philosopher S.A. Tokarev, Engels said that “at a time when the new [Jewish] sects, the new religions, the new prophets were rising by the hundreds”, Christianity “appeared spontaneously, simply as a result of the mutual influence exerted by the most developed of these sects”, but admitting that, beyond this general statement, the details of the process in question are practically entirely out of his hands [2, p. 178]. Consequently, in the logic of dialectical materialism, the emergence of Christianity was not due to public works and the teaching of the Saviour and the grace of the Holy Spirit, but to precise economic and social circumstances, completed by an accumulation of external philosophical influences.

2.2. The historicity of the Saviour

Given these aspects, it should come as no surprise that Engels viewed and treated the issue of the historicity of Jesus Christ as effectively marginal to the issue of the origin of Christianity [3], considering that the existence or the non-existence of the Saviour would not have been decisive for the emergence and development of the new religion. “Although it was condemned as *religio illicita*, Christianity conquered by its force of nobility and sacrifice” [4]. Christianity should have detached itself from Judaism with the same ‘objective’ necessity even if Christ simply did not have an earthly existence.

We believe that Engels is inclined to accept the Saviour’s historicity, the real historical existence of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the German thinker considers that Bruno Bauer’s insistence on seeing in the emergence of Christianity “a simple process of ideological derivation from Greco-Roman philosophy and Jewish mythology” leads him to the situation of “portraying the authors of the New Testament... as plagiarists of Philo and especially of Seneca” [5]. Then, Engels believes, to somehow preserve the coherence of his discourse, Bauer is compelled to proceed with the “complete” suppression of what constitutes “the historical background of the New Testament stories about Jesus and His Apostles” [2, p. 301], erroneously equating evangelical accounts to mythological narratives devoid of any historical relevance. Then, the logic of that exclusive and unilateral “ideological derivation” forced Bruno Bauer to make Christianity a later phenomenon to Philo and Seneca, hence his assumption that the Saviour’s

religion appeared “under the kings of the Flavian dynasty” [2, p. 291] the earliest in the time of Vespasian (69-79), while the writings of the New Testament are not older than the time of Adrian (117-138). Consequently, considering all these assumptions to be devoid of historical realism, Engels will not hesitate to *fix* the date of the emergence of the new religion half a century later.

2.3. The problem of philosophical influences

Insisting on the fundamental role that Philo of Alexandria’s thought will play in the genesis and ‘theoretical’ content of Christianity, Engels puts himself in the position to hyperbolize the meaning of the fact that the discourse of the Jewish philosopher aligns itself with certain sequences of the Church’s teaching. Thus, even for Philo, “man’s noblest aspiration is to become like God as far as possible”, while “to become like Him means to become holy, just and wise” [6]. However, it is difficult to accept that Philo’s thinking could encompass the mass of the simplest Jewish believers, influencing them in a way compatible with the supposed process of birth of Christianity. Without explaining exactly how this would have been possible, Engels merely suggests that, by spreading it among the masses, Philo’s thinking would then have metamorphosed, simplifying and losing its initial philosophical scope, but keeping enough theoretical elements to be able to determine the individualization of the first Christian communities.

As Seneca did, Engels shows the same tendency to overbid the meaning of a type of discourse that is formally compatible with the Christian one. Given “its elevated conception on divinity, the feeling of an increased spirituality of man, but also a human weakness, as well as the idea of brotherhood between men or the preaching of goodwill and love” [7] Seneca’s ethics resonates not infrequently with the Christian one, being able to feed interpretations such as the one suggested by Bauer and accepted by Engels. However, even though Seneca wrote at one point that “divinity comes to man, and even more penetrates man” (Epistle LXXIII), Stoicism and Christianity “are universes too distinct to be put in direct connection and therefore to put one in a condition of prehistory and another in that of finality” [7, p. 228] that is, in a relationship of direct causality, as Bauer and Engels believed.

3. Profile of the primary Church

Engels’s analysis of early Christianity is atypical, for apart from the *Book of Revelation* (read through the grid developed by Benary) and the ‘theoretical’ framework provided by Bruno Bauer, the German thinker does not use other relevant theological or historical resources. Under these circumstances, the image of the early Christian communities will be dominated by the emphasis that Engels understands to place on their supposed improvised character the exclusivism and radicalism that would have dominated the new religion.

3.1. The Book of Revelation as historical resource

The *Book of Revelation* is the main resource that Engels uses to conduct his analysis. Why the *Revelation*? Because, following Ferdinand Benary, Engels is convinced that, dating from '68-'69, it is 'the oldest' of the books of the *New Testament*. Implicitly, it will reflect the state of the first Christian communities [8] and will highlight the vision and discourse of the early Church at the doctrinal, cultic and moral-ethical level [2, p. 189] surpassing any other historical testimony in the matter, as "in the *Revelation*, Christianity appears to us in the crudest form ever transmitted to us" [2, p. 305].

It must be said that to argue for the choice of placing the book in '68-'69, Engels resumes Benary's argument based on the succession of the seven kings indicated in *Revelation* 17.10-11. Since the text could only refer to the chronological order of the Roman emperors (whose authority Palestine was subordinated to) starting with Octavian Augustus (27 BC-14 AD), and "five fell", respectively the first five in a row, it follows that the *Revelation* was certainly written during the reign of the sixth emperor ("one is still" and "the other did not come"). In other words, if Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero "*fell*", and Galba (Servius Sulpicius, June '68-January '69) is the sixth emperor, the one who '*is still*', the temporal limits in which the *Revelation* was written appear explicitly [2, p. 305].

It must be said that in the matter of the early dating of the *Revelation*, Engels acquires *de facto* through Ferdinand Benary, the position of those theologians, relatively numerous in the nineteenth century (B.F. Westcott, J.B. Lightfoot, F.J. Hort, G. Salmon, H. Ewald, K.I. Lücke [9] a.s.o.), who believed that it must have been written before 70. Insisting on the writing of the *Revelation* during the reign of Galba (68-69), Engels sided with a minority opinion, most scholars inclining on the opinion - supported by Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Origen or Eusebius of Caesarea - that it must have been written rather towards the end of Domitian's reign between 95-96.

3.2. Christianity and Judaism

Keeping only *Revelation* as the norm in the entire *New Testament*, Engels will conclude on the strongly Jewish dimensions of early Christianity. Thus, the first followers of the Saviour's religion would identify with those Palestinian Jews who, against the background of *a priori* reserved attitude toward the ordinances of the Temple and its ministers, adopted the thesis of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ. Giving a higher meaning to the "old idea of the Jews... that the god or gods must be reconciled through sacrifices", they must have proceeded to absolutize the meaning of the Saviour's work, which they interpreted according to their grid, different from the traditional Old Testament framework, respectively in the sense that "the death of Christ is a great sacrifice, valid forever and ever" [2, p. 189]. Engels tries to convince us that at the middle of the first century, among the Palestinian Jews, had penetrated the teaching

saying that the death of Christ would have outweighed the saving consequences of the Temple sacrifices.

Engels insists that, in agreeing to refer to the sacrifice of Christ and believing in its absolute value, the early Christians did not consider that doing so would be outside of Judaism, for “Christianity does not define itself differently than as a Jewish sect, which he considers to be self-evident” [2, p. 190]. Writing that “*And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed a hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel*” (Revelation 7.4), that is, expressing a supposed confidence in the ethnic limits of Christ’s saving work, Saint John himself would give the measure that, in the space of the early Church, “we are not dealing with conscious Christians, but with people who [consider] themselves Jews” [2, p. 295]. Even if, gradually, proselytes from Greco-Roman or Oriental paganism were added to them, the traditional ethnocentrism of Judeo-Christians will not be diluted at all, so that the communities of those who believed in Christ would continue, unperturbed, to believe that they are merely hypostasizing “a new form of Judaism”. As a result, none of the adherent Jews of the early Church would have been “in the least aware that he was the representative of a phase of the religious development of Judaism” [2, p. 190].

At the time of Pentecost, in the year 30, and the first decades thereafter, the Christian Church was an institution consistently connected to Judaism, both in terms of ethnic composition itself and the perspective of the structure of the public divine worship. Thus, as Jean Daniélou noted, the early members of the Church “were Christians attached to the Jewish homeland, faithful to the worship in the Temple, rigorous practitioners of Jewish customs” and who, consequently, “attracted the sympathy of the Pharisees through their zeal for the law” [10]. They faithfully respected the ritual prescriptions, including those relating to the Sabbath, circumcision, food, or purification, the Temple unconditionally preserving its defining liturgical role [10, p. 18-19]. As a result, the early Judeo-Christians, Gentile Jews and believers of the Saviour had maintained their loyalty to the Temple, to its religious and identity significance, so that “none of [Christ’s] disciples suspected that their devotion to Jesus could mean a break with Israel’s national religion” [11]. This ‘rabbinic Christianity’, strongly imbued with Judaism as described by Jean Daniélou, revolved around the Church in Jerusalem and its bishop, James the Just, ‘the brother of the Lord’.

Even though at the time of the Apostolic Council in year 49, Judeo-Christians “represented almost the entire Church”, it is sure that the mission of the early Church “addresses from the beginning the pagan circles” [10, p. 38-39]. And, because the apostles understood that “God is the One who decides the entry of the pagans into the Church” [12], Saint Peter opens the way for the mission between the nations through the conversion and baptism of the house and friends of the centurion Cornelius. As a result, the priority that the twelve gave to the conversion of their compatriots, was conjugated with the missionary work between the pagans, the two being practically complementary. Therefore, the scope of the first Christian missions will soon transcend the boundaries of

Jewish ethnicity, thus responding to an explicit divine imperative. Saint Paul “snatched the Gospel from its native land”, proclaiming “emancipation from the Old Law” [13], paving the way for an immune Christianity under the pressure of Judaism-derived traditions and obligations.

Thus, Engels’ assumption about the exclusively Jewish character of Christianity in 68-69 proves itself to be risky at least as long as Paul, Barnabas, Silas and Judas devote themselves to pagans and build churches beyond the barriers of ethnic Judaism. After the first Christian missionary actions concerning the pagans in Palestine were carried out in the first part of Claudius’ reign (41-54), Syria’s Antioch became “the first centre of an important pagan-Christian community” [13, p. 33-34]. Although Judeo-Christians “were not prepared to accept the idea that, among the Gentiles, the communities were becoming much more numerous than those of them” [11, p. 87]. The pagan-Christian Churches proliferate Syria - “the great queen of the expansion of Christianity during the first fifteen years” [10, p. 38-39], Cilicia (43-44), Cyprus (45), followed by the communities born through the work of Paul (Philippi, Thessaloniki, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus) and communities that gave shape to that Syriac and Greco-Roman Christianity.

Retaining from the whole *New Testament* only the *Revelation* and, ignoring writings of indisputable historical value such as the four *Gospels*, the *Acts of the Apostles* or the Pauline *Epistles* [14], Engels could only reach such conclusions. Arbitrarily narrowing his area of research, the German thinker didn’t notice the change of missionary paradigm that Saint Paul implemented after 49 when the “apostle of the Gentiles” understood that “it is essential to free Christianity from its Jewish ties”, so that, as a consequence, he “put on mourning for Judeo-Christianity” [10, p. 43].

3.3. Church or sects?

Moreover, the exclusive use of the *Revelation* compels Engels to admit that, historically, the essential landmarks of the history of early Christianity remain virtually unknown to him. However, the German thinker believes that as it gradually spread among the Palestinian Jews, the belief in the absolute saving value of Christ’s sacrifice found its first followers divided into a series of distinct nuclei (“the first Christians were divided into innumerable sects” [2, p. 297]), more or less independent.

Engels concludes that seen from the perspective of the *Revelation*, Christianity of 68-69 can be described as “a savage and confusing fanaticism, with only the seeds of dogmas, and from the so-called Christian morality only the mortification of the flesh” [2, p. 179-180], its doctrinal and liturgical contents being completely incompatible with those consecrated a few centuries later by the “universal religion of the time of Constantine” [2, p. 294]. Practically, apart from the teaching of the Saviour’s sacrifice, completed by faith in His imminent return and, besides, by the expectation of the establishment of the Millennial Theocratic Kingdom, the primitive Christianity was completely

devoid of any ‘theoretical’ landmark, a situation unilaterally compensated by the stimulation of internal unity based on cultivating “... the feeling that the Church is fighting the whole world and this fight will be successful” [2, p. 296].

4. Interpretation of the Revelation

Focusing on the content of the *Revelation*, Engels does so with the confidence that this “is by no means the most mysterious and incomprehensible Book, but the simplest and clearest in the whole of the New Testament” [2, p. 188]. Therefore, once decrypted, it will provide the exegete with a series of decisive details about the situation, faith, fears and the eschatological expectations of the first Christians.

4.1. Principles of analysis

Following Benary, Engels sees in the prophetic-visionary content of the *Revelation* an ‘almost word for word’ takeover of the texts of Old Testament prophets, especially of the *Book of Daniel*. Also, the author of the *Revelation* also used the contemporary intertestamental literature, especially the Greek version of *Book I of Enoch*, so that, on the whole of the *Revelation*, “his original contribution is extremely small” [2, p. 190]. As a result, as long as Saint John did nothing but resume the supposedly ecstatic visions of some Jewish predecessors, the canonical Revelation, “built exclusively of pre-Christian Jewish material” [2, p. 302] would remain firmly entrenched in the religion of the Temple, its Christian dimension being narrow and rather marginal.

We believe that, in ruling on the quasi-total dependence of the *Revelation* on Judaism, Engels merely hyperbolizes a state of the fact that it is authentic in itself and therefore precisely quantifiable. Although “he does not quote from the Jewish apocalypses”, it is perfectly true that Saint John wrote his writing “on [their] structure”, using primarily the “model” represented by the eschatological writings of the prophet Daniel, of which, practically, is inspired. The way John organizes the material obtained from the revelations proves that the apostle “is connected with the world of the ideas of the Jewish apocalypses”, either those included by the Old Testament canonical texts or the apocryphal ones, from whose “very rich current”, Saint John’s writing “draws his sap” [15]. The Revelation appears to us to be “full of Old Testament frescoes”, fully reflecting the “spirit of Old Testament prophecy” [16]. As a result, the “structure of the eschatological scenario” proposed by the *Revelation* will include approaches, themes and images compatible with those put into circulation by Jewish prophets [15, p. 34], so that from this point of view it is certain that there is a certain continuity between Saint John and the Old Testament prophets.

All these connections with Judaism are not able to affect the eminently Christian character of the *Revelation* [17]. It retains a relevant Jewish matrix, which is why the Calvinist theologian Eberhard Vischer did not hesitate to consider it “a Jewish apocalypse in Christian processing” [18]. This state of

affairs is easily explained if we take into account the proximity of Saint John to traditional Judaism, as well as the consistency of the Judeo-Christianity from Asia Minor, one consolidated after the year 70 by the significant wave of Palestinian refugees [16, p. 359] and which, according to Saint Ignatius Theophorus, generated, at least in Ephesus, Philadelphia or Magnesia, obvious Judaizing inclinations [19]. Therefore, in writing the *Revelation*, Saint John highlights “the continuity between the Old and New Testaments, as well as the organic unity between them” [16, p. 33], proceeding in a way that highlights and certifies the Christian approaches to Theology, Christology, soteriology or ecclesiology.

We must also note that the *Revelation* follows only in part the distinctive specificity of the 13 homologous apocryphal writings of Jewish origin [20], Apostle John’s writing is not a pseudo-epigraphic document and does not make use of the procedure known as *vaticinium ex eventu*, respectively does not claim the status of prophecy on account of accounts made in reality after the event, a procedure used in the intertestamental literature. Besides, the author of the *Revelation* uses to a very limited extent the support of an ‘angel hermeneut’ (*angelus interpres*) to decipher the meaning of his visions, unlike, for example, Daniel, where we often encounter such interventions [20, p. 71-72].

In addition to all these aspects, the *Revelation* serves the purpose of a pastoral-missionary nature completely and utterly specific to Christianity and which, in no case, can be anchored in Judaism. This is the so-called problem of *the delay of the parousia*, which disturbed the Church towards the end of the first century. We have in mind that many Christians were tempted to wait for the Second Coming of the Saviour in the short term, as suggested by texts such as “we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds [being alive], to meet the Lord in the air” (1 Thessalonians 4.17). Hence Saint John’s concern that “the parousia is near, very near”, and “the end will come unexpectedly” [15, p. 24-25], for which reason the zeal of Christians must remain unchanged.

Writing in a time when the Church was fully feeling the pressure of the imperial authorities [21], Saint John draws the revealed landmarks of the ultimate horizon of eschatological expectation, assuming a consistently Christocentric perspective, that is undoubtedly Christian, at which point any ‘dogmatic’ convergence with contemporary Judaism disappears [13, p. 962].

4.2. The Antichrist - the key to the Book of Revelation

For Engels, the key to understanding the *Revelation* is to establish the identity of the Antichrist, more precisely, to identify the one whom Saint John presumes to be the eschatological adversary of the Saviour. Once known the Antichrist, knowing that he “was given the power to continue forty and two months” (Revelation 13.5) and that, subsequently, “God will rise, and overcome the Antichrist... and will keep the devil in chains for a thousand years”, installing

thus an earthly millennial theocracy [2, p. 193], the temporal landmarks of the waiting horizon of Christians facing world hostility will be fully elucidated.

Engels will adopt the interpretation and conclusions of German Protestant theologians Fritzsche (published in 1831), Benary (1836), Hitzig (1837) and Reuss (1837), after whom, in the vision of the author of the *Revelation*, the only relevant one, the eschatological Antichrist will be identified with the Roman emperor Nero (Claudius Caesar 54-68).

To reach this conclusion, Engels also proceeds by putting together and interpreting the details that chapters 13 and 17 of the *Book of Revelation* include regarding the theriomorphic hypostasis of the Antichrist. Since “*the seven heads... seven kings: five are fallen, and one is, and the other is not yet come; and when he comes, he must continue a short space. And the beast that was, and is not, even he is the eighth and is of the seven, and goes into perdition*” (Revelation 17.9-11), the key to identifying Antichrist will also be the chronological order of the Roman emperors. Thus, applying the analytical grid suggested by the literal reading of the paragraphs above [2, p. 305], the emperors who “*fell*” must have been Octavian Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero, the “*one who is*” must have been Galba (July 68-January 69), the following *imperator*, the one who “*when he comes has little time to rule*”, being implicitly the Etruscan Otho (January-April 69). Therefore, the Antichrist, who will succeed the latter, will be one of the first seven Roman emperors, i.e. one of Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Galba and Otho. Whereas “*...one of his heads as it was wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed*” (Revelation 13.3), and the coming to power of the Antichrist will be a miraculous restoration. It means that the king sought will be the one previously “wounded to death and he no longer reigns”, but after the ephemeral reign of Otho, “he will be healed and come again to complete the kingdom of blasphemy” [2, p. 304]. At this point, the legend of *Nero redivivus* comes to the aid of Engels’ interpretation, for since the reign of Galba, the death and cremation of the emperor-artist began to be questioned, especially in Achaia and Asia Minor. Thus, Engels is convinced that the historical persistence of the legend of *Nero redivivus* can undoubtedly indicate the eighth emperor in the line opened by Octavian Augustus [2, p. 306-307].

One argument, for the identification of Antichrist with Nero, is represented by the firm connection that can be established using the gematry between the cypher of the beast, 666 and *Nerōn qaisar*, the Hebrew transliteration of the first name (*praenomen*) and surname (*cognomen*) Nero Caesar, transliteration which, according to Engels, can be found in the Talmud. Moreover, the application of the same method, assimilable to a ‘magical art’, much appreciated throughout the Semitic world, and in connection with the Latin name/surname Nero Caesar leads to the number 666, which appears in a minority of ancient manuscripts of the *Revelation* instead of 666, so that “if the solution found (Nero-Antichrist) corresponds equally to both figures 666, respectively 616, the proof of the identity of Antichrist is made” [2, p. 306].

Engels considers that he fully decrypted the historical-eschatological content of the visionary exercise articulated by Saint John. Thus, concluding his writing no later than January 69, the apostle will ‘predict’ first of all that the emperor who will succeed Galba ‘has a short time on the throne’, which will happen with obvious accuracy, the reign of Otho (January-April, 69, killed in a fight with the suitor Vitellius) only lasted three months. Then, after the disappearance of Galba’s successor, Nero will return to the throne of the Empire and, this time, will act as Antichrist, ‘unleashing terror’ against the Church, and the persecution will last 42 months (Revelation 13.5). After this interval - which Engels relates to the 1,260 days of *Revelation* 11.3 and 12.6, God intervenes, the Antichrist is defeated, and the Devil, chained (*Revelation* 20.2), which will pave the way for the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom [2, p. 193].

However, given that the *Revelation* does not date from 68-69, but from the years 95-96, respectively from the time of Domitian, a persecutor more cruel than Nero, it is perfectly plausible that Apostle John had in view a different monarchical chronology than that assumed by Engels. Thus, the possibility was considered that the line of emperors should start with Julius Caesar or with Tiberius. If, however, we consider the moment of the crucifixion to be the most important point in history, then the first emperor of our calculation must be Caligula (37-41), and if we exclude from the series the three ephemeral reigns from 68-69, the seventh emperor, in this case, the one with a short reign, will be Nerva (96-98), who ‘preceded the return of Nero Antichrist’.

All of these divergent interpretations only prove the difficulties inherent in the historian-type exegesis of the paragraph in *Revelation* 17.8-11. An approach such as that used by Engels risks being perceived as unilateral as long as it does not incorporate any exegetical reference to the paragraph immediately following the one being evaluated, *Revelation* 17.12-14. Through the exegetical operationalization of these verses, the problem of the beast’s identity becomes suddenly complicated, because these ten new monarchs “are... contemporaries and accomplices of the beast”, receiving their power “directly from the hands of the Antichrist” [22]. Besides, the whole paragraph should be linked to the parallel reference from *Daniel* 7.24.

At the same time as overcoming the temptation to interpret the paragraph from Revelation 17.8-11 from an unilateral historical perspective, the area of exegesis on the ‘number of the man’ that 666 represents also proves to be one lacking homogeneity. Thus, not later than 190, Irenaeus of Lyons, assuming a symbolic interpretive key, considers that the number 666 comes to recapitulate “all injustices and cunning”, that is, “idolatrous wandering, killing of prophets, and burning of the righteous” [23]. ‘The number of the beast’ may be related to all arbitrary acts, persecutions and violence against Christians [24], coming to reflect their increasing accumulation to the threshold of the Saviour’s *parousia*. Therefore, even if it no longer appoints a certain Roman emperor, 666 undoubtedly refers to the idea of the imprescriptible evil that all persecutors, including Nero or Domitian, pose. From this point of view, the ‘number of the man’ is opposable and must be received as the antonym of the pair composed of

888 or 777, that “symbolize perfection in their heavenly and earthly hypostasis” [25], because in the *Sibylline Oracles* “Jesus Christ is presented with the number 888” [15, p. 213] (as does the Gnostic Mark, for whom the Saviour is the “incarnation of the Ogdoad” [22, p. 118], while “number 7 is the symbol of perfection” [25].

‘Released’ from the constraints induced by the historical interpretation of the passage in *Revelation* 17.8-11, the attempts to establish the identity of the Antichrist starting from the summed numerical value of the letters (Hebrew, Greek or Latin) in the composition of his name (which obviously, must be equal to 666), have proliferated incessantly.

5. Conclusions

We are aware that the analysis of Engels’ perspective on the origins of Christianity could be made from different perspectives and with the most diverse analysis tools. As a theological approach, our analysis identifies two main limitations in Engels’ perspective on the origins of Christianity. One of them is the historical knowledge and cultural determinants of the epoch with respect to the biblical texts. A second limitation that we consider essential regarding Engels’s conception of the origins of Christianity refers to the methodological error of interpreting a strictly religious content, its spiritual foundation and historical evolution by the instruments and the conceptual system of the ‘dialectical and historical materialism’ - a body of ideas that has become in history a revolutionary social and political ideology on which a number of political regimes have based their foundation.

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