Unsealing the Apocalypse

Key Themes from the Commentary of Victorinus of Pettau

Introduction: The First Commentary on Revelation

Victorinus of Pettau's Commentary on the Apocalypse, composed in the late third century, stands as the earliest known complete commentary on the Book of Revelation. Its historical significance is immense, offering a foundational text that shaped the course of Christian eschatology for generations. Rather than a roadmap of future events, Victorinus presents a symbolic and pastoral reading of St. John's vision, one deeply rooted in the unity of the Old and New Testaments. This report distills the key interpretive methods, theological insights, and enduring takeaways from his profound spiritual exegesis, revealing a text concerned less with prediction and more with the perseverance of the Church.

Victorinus establishes this practical and pastoral tone from his opening lines, focusing not on esoteric knowledge but on faithful action. He begins by citing the blessing promised to the book's audience:

> *"Blessed are they who read and hear the words of this prophecy, and keep the things which are written."*

His immediate gloss on this verse clarifies his purpose: "that he who takes pains about the reading may thence learn to do works, and may keep the precepts." For Victorinus, Revelation is not a puzzle to be solved but a divine message to be lived out in faith and obedience. To understand the conclusions he draws, one must first grasp his unique and influential method of interpretation.

The Interpretive Lens: How Victorinus Reads the Apocalypse

To appreciate Victorinus's insights, it is essential to first understand his interpretive framework. His approach is not a literal or chronological prediction of future history but a deeply thematic and spiritual exegesis. He sees the Apocalypse as a tapestry of repeating spiritual truths, where the Holy Spirit reveals the ongoing conflict between good and evil and the ultimate victory of Christ, rather than a linear sequence of events.

Thematic Over Chronological Reading

Victorinus explicitly instructs his readers to abandon a search for strict sequential order in Revelation. His core principle of interpretation is to follow the spiritual meaning, not the narrative sequence. He states this directly:

> *"Nor must we look for order in the Apocalypse; but we must follow the meaning of those things which are prophesied."*

He further explains that this non-linear structure is intentional, allowing the Holy Spirit to revisit and expand upon central themes. He notes that the Spirit often "returns again to the same times, and fills up what He had before failed to say." This interpretive key unlocks his entire commentary, allowing him to connect symbols and visions from different chapters to illuminate a single, overarching spiritual reality.

The Unity of the Old and New Testaments

A cornerstone of Victorinus's exegesis is the inseparable link between the Old and New Testaments. He argues that the New Testament does not replace the Old but fulfills and illuminates it, making its veiled prophecies clear through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

He powerfully illustrates this by interpreting the "book written within and without, sealed with seven seals" as the Old Testament itself. This book, containing God's covenants and prophecies, could only be "unsealed"—its true meaning revealed and its promises fulfilled—by the sacrificial work of Christ, the Lamb who was slain.

This unity is further symbolized by the Four Living Creatures, which he identifies as the four Gospels. Victorinus explains that their six wings represent the "fore-announced testimonies of the Old Testament." The connection is not merely symbolic but essential for faith. He reasons, "But as an animal cannot fly unless it have wings, so, too, the announcement of the New Testament gains no faith unless it have the fore-announced testimonies of the Old Testament, by which it is lifted from the earth, and flies."

His method, therefore, is one of Scriptural synthesis, consistently demonstrating how the New Testament reveals the profound truths hidden within the Old. This interpretive lens continually brings the focus back to the one who unseals the scroll: Jesus Christ.

The Central Figure: A Multifaceted Christology

Victorinus's reading of the Apocalypse is profoundly Christ-centric. Nearly every major symbol of power, authority, and judgment in the opening chapters is analyzed as a representation of Jesus Christ's divine nature, priestly work, and historical mission. For Victorinus, the vision is not merely from Christ but is fundamentally about Christ in all His multifaceted glory. The following table summarizes his detailed symbolic interpretations of the "one like the Son of man" from the first chapter.

Symbolic Representations of Christ

Symbol	Victorinus's Interpretation
One like the Son of man	Christ in His glorified state after His victory over death and ascension into heaven.
Garment down to the ankles	The long, priestly garment represents Christ's flesh, which was not corrupted by death and through which He exercises His eternal priesthood.
Golden girdle	Represents the two Testaments, with the "golden girdle" being the choir of saints who bind them together. Alternately, it is the enlightened conscience given to the churches.
White head and hairs	The white head symbolizes God the Father ("the head of Christ is God"). The white hairs represent the multitude of church leaders, "like to wool, in respect of simple sheep; to snow, in respect of the innumerable crowd of candidates taught from heaven."
Eyes as a flame of fire	God's precepts, which provide light and guidance to believers but bring burning judgment to unbelievers.

Symbol (Continued)	Victorinus's Interpretation
Feet like yellow brass	Represents the apostles, hardened like brass through the furnace of suffering, who carried the Gospel throughout the world.
Two-edged sword	The Word of God, which proceeds from Christ's mouth to both declare the law and the gospel, and to execute judgment. Victorinus notes that this sword "arms the soldier, slays the enemy, punishes the deserter," citing Christ's own words ("I came not to send peace, but a sword," Matt. 10:34) and prophecies of His judgment ("Whom the Lord Jesus will slay by the breath of His mouth," 2 Thess. 2:8; "By the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked," Isa. 11:4).
Voice of many waters	Represents the many peoples of the world or, alternately, the gift of baptism that Christ sent forth through His apostles to all nations.
Lion of the tribe of Judah	A title signifying Christ's divine power and His ultimate victory in overcoming death through His resurrection.

Following this rich symbolic portrait, Victorinus masterfully explains the dual titles used for Christ in Chapter 5: the "Lion" and the "Lamb." He reconciles these seemingly contradictory images by showing they represent two aspects of Christ's single redemptive work. He is the Lion of the tribe of Judah because of His divine power and triumphant victory over death. Simultaneously, He is the Lamb "as it were slain," because His victory was achieved through His sacrificial suffering for humanity, bearing the marks of that sacrifice even in His triumph.

This multifaceted depiction of Christ as Priest, Judge, Victor, and Sacrifice is central to the entire commentary, establishing Him as the sovereign Lord of both the Church and history. From this portrait of Christ, Victorinus turns his attention to the nature of the Church He founded.

The Church: Its Universal Nature and Diverse Flock

Victorinus's ecclesiology—his doctrine of the Church—is a crucial element of his commentary. He does not see the seven churches of Asia Minor as merely local, historical congregations. Instead, he interprets them as representative types or spiritual categories that exist within the one, universal Catholic Church throughout all ages. His analysis is a pastoral call for the Church to examine its own internal state.

The Church Universal

Victorinus establishes the universal nature of the Church through key symbols. He interprets the "seven golden candlesticks" as the churches and the "seven stars" in Christ's hand as the sevenfold Spirit given to them. The number seven, for him, signifies completeness and universality. He drives this point home with the definitive statement that "what he says to one, he says to all."

He argues that the Catholic Church is a single body arranged "by sevens" to signify its wholeness and universal mission. This vision of a unified Church is further developed in his interpretation of the "woman clothed with the sun" in Chapter 12. He identifies her not as Mary, but as the "ancient Church of fathers, and prophets, and saints, and apostles." Her travailing pain represents the deep, collective longing of God's people throughout history for the coming of the Messiah, a longing fulfilled in the birth of Christ.

The Seven Classes of Believers

In his commentary on the letters to the seven churches, Victorinus constructs a timeless typology to address believers in all spiritual conditions—those who labor patiently, those who suffer persecution, those who tolerate sin, the complacent, the merely nominal, the humbly faithful, and the proud but lazy. These seven classes or spiritual states are represented within the universal Church:

1. **First Class (Ephesus):** Those who work patiently and stand for truth but have lost the intensity of their "first love" and must repent.
2. **Second Class (Smyrna):** Believers who are rich in faith while enduring severe poverty and tribulation, and are called to be faithful unto death.
3. **Third Class (Pergamos):** Those who are strong in their faith but are dangerously tolerant of members who hold to unlawful teachings, like those of Balaam and the Nicolaitanes.
4. **Fourth Class (Thyatira):** The faithful and noble who nevertheless tolerate those with an "easy disposition to grant unlawful peace" and listen to false prophecies.
5. **Fifth Class (Sardis):** Careless and negligent believers who are "Christians only in name" and whose works are not perfect before God.
6. **Sixth Class (Philadelphia):** The "best election"—believers who are lowly and have little strength but hold immoveably to their faith.
7. **Seventh Class (Laodicea):** Wealthy, dignified, and self-satisfied believers who are lukewarm, being "neither unbelieving nor believing."

Through this typology, Victorinus transforms the letters to the seven churches into a timeless pastoral tool for self-examination, urging all members of the Church to assess their spiritual state as they face the prophesied tribulations ahead.

Decoding the End Times: Persecution, Antichrist, and the Millennium

Victorinus interprets the dramatic end-times events of the Apocalypse not as a literal future timeline but as a spiritual and political allegory. For him, the visions of seals, horsemen, and beasts represent the recurring struggles between the Church and worldly powers, a conflict that culminates in the final, great persecution under the reign of Antichrist.

The Four Horsemen and the Great Persecution

- **White Horse:** The triumphant "word of preaching with the Holy Spirit sent into the world" by Christ's apostles to overcome unbelief.
- **Red Horse:** The "coming wars," signifying conflict and bloodshed among nations.
- **Black Horse:** A great "famine," which he specifically connects to the deprivation that will occur in the times of Antichrist.
- **Pale Horse:** Represents "great pestilences and deaths" that will afflict the world.

He interprets the cataclysmic events of the sixth seal—the sun turning black, the moon to blood, and the stars falling—as symbols of the "very last persecution." In this final trial, the brightness of doctrine will be obscured by unbelievers, the Church will pour out its blood for Christ, and the faithful will be shaken from their places. This persecution is so severe that "the Church shall be taken away."

The Identity of Antichrist and the Beast

Victorinus directly identifies the worldly power behind the Beast with the Roman Empire. He states plainly that the "seven heads" of the beast are both the "seven hills" of the city of Rome and "seven kings of the Romans."

He makes a specific and fascinating connection between the Beast and a resurrected Emperor Nero. Interpreting the vision of the head that was slain and healed, Victorinus argues this refers to Nero, who "himself cut his throat." He believed Nero would be raised up by God and sent back as a false messiah to deceive the Jews and persecute the saints. To identify the number of the beast, 666, Victorinus analyzes three possible Greek names whose letters, when treated as numerals, add up to the total:

- *τειταν* (Teitan)
- *αντεμος* (Antemos)
- *γενσήρικος* (Gensericus)

He also notes that *τειταν* can be translated into Latin by the "antiphrase" DICLUX, which also calculates to 666 and signifies a false "light-bringer."

The Symbolic Millennium

Critically, Victorinus rejects a literal, future thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Instead, he interprets the "thousand years" symbolically as the entire period of the Church's history, from the "first advent of Christ, even to the end of the age."

During this era, Satan is "bound" not in a physical prison, but by being "excluded from the hearts of believers" through the power of faith in Christ. Victorinus saw the notion of a future earthly millennium as a dangerous error and explicitly refuted it, likely in response to chiliastic heresies of his day. He concludes with a direct rebuttal:

> *"Therefore they are not to be heard who assure themselves that there is to be an earthly reign of a thousand years; who think, that is to say, with the heretic Cerinthus."*

For Victorinus, the kingdom of Christ is a present spiritual reality in the hearts of the saints, not a future political one. His focus remains fixed on the spiritual state of the believer and the Church as they navigate the trials of the present age.

✓ Conclusion: The Enduring Takeaways from an Ancient Reading

In his Commentary on the Apocalypse, Victorinus of Pettau provides not a crystal ball for predicting the future, but a spiritual mirror for the Church of every generation. His primary goal was never speculative prediction but urgent spiritual exhortation. By reading Revelation through a thematic, Christ-centered, and pastoral lens, he offers timeless wisdom for Christians facing a hostile world. His foundational interpretation leaves us with several critical takeaways.

- **Revelation as Spiritual Allegory:** Victorinus teaches a deeply symbolic reading of the Apocalypse, urging believers to look past literalism and see the profound spiritual truths being conveyed. The book is an allegory of the cosmic battle between Christ and evil, the trials and triumphs of the universal Church, and the internal spiritual life of every Christian.
- **The Unity of Scripture:** A core tenet of his work is the belief that the New Testament is the divinely intended "unsealing" of the Old. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ illuminate the laws, histories, and prophecies of Israel, revealing a single, unified story of salvation that runs from Genesis to Revelation.
- **A Pastoral Call to Perseverance:** Above all, Victorinus reads Revelation as a practical and urgent call to action. It is a message intended to comfort the persecuted, awaken the complacent, and challenge the compromised. For him, the ultimate message of the Apocalypse is a timeless exhortation for believers in every age to examine their faith, repent of their failings, and persevere through tribulation to inherit the eternal kingdom.