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The Mark of the Beast, the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the End of the World

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Religious Studies

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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Lewiston, Maine

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Introduction

Infectious diseases have impacted our world and sparked chaos in human communities since the beginning of time. The COVID-19 pandemic was no different, as it was the first global pandemic to “shut down” the world. In March of 2020, very little information was known about the Coronavirus, which led to widespread fear, suffering, and death amongst people everywhere. American borders were shut, government officials issued stay-at-home orders, and social life completely disappeared. Most of the world had no experience dealing with an infectious disease outbreak of this scale, which specifically led to a dramatic crisis in the United States. The virus touched almost every aspect of people’s lives, but how different communities and individuals faced this dilemma whilst being shut in their homes and left in the dark varied greatly. For some, their religion was the only thing to turn to in a time like this.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in the summer of 2020 reveals that more Americans than people in other economically developed countries say that the outbreak has bolstered their religious faith and the faith of their compatriots. Nearly three-in-ten Americans (28%) report stronger personal faith because of the pandemic, and the same percentage think the religious faith of Americans overall has strengthened, according to the survey of 14 economically developed countries (Mitchell, 2021). The pandemic led to the cancellation of religious activities and in-person services around the world, but this did not weaken religious faith. People found ways to use their religious identity to make sense of the events of the world around them. Evangelical Christian communities in particular relied on biblical prophecy to guide their lives during the crisis and provide explanation for what was playing out before their eyes. In regards to these communities, medical anthropologist Rebecca Lynch writes,

“Put simply, popular fascinations with the end of the world did not begin with COVID-19, nor, in our view, will they end with it. Taken literally, rather than as a bad pun, this observation about the *longue durée* of apocalypticism provokes new and important questions which I seek to answer. How do human imaginations of the biomedical and spiritual future alter life in the present? What happens, in this forward-looking temporality, to human reflections on the past – to ‘lessons learned’ about old diseases now eradicated, or past sins now atoned for?” (Lynch et. al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many to declare that humanity is facing the end of the world as we know it. It would be easy to imagine that these times we now live in are somehow exceptional, but apocalyptic narratives have dominated discourse surrounding crisis throughout history. Certain narratives about the End Times have been especially embraced by a group of Southern Baptist Christians in my hometown in rural Maine.

Because I grew up in a church community in which some members believe we are living out Revelation’s apocalyptic prophecy, this topic is of great interest to me and presents a complex moral and ethical dilemma within myself. Members of the Baptist church I grew up attending (and my parents still actively attend) have been claiming that the vaccine contains microchips or are construing associations between vaccine ingredients and the devil. Others talk about how coronavirus vaccines and masks contain or herald the “Mark of the Beast,” (Revelation 13¹). This complicated relationship between science and religion and/or reason and faith can be ethically and empirically explored through my two areas of interest: anthropology and religious studies. In a journal article titled, “Apocalyptic Futures: Morality, Health and Wellbeing at the end of the World,” the authors argue we should, “think more clearly about time and the future, because such an uncovering might also help us to situate elements of health and wellbeing outside the normal possibilities of medical intervention, revealing apocalypticism as a space where the ‘religious’ and the ‘medical’ are intertwined, reminding us afresh that these are

¹ All quoted scripture comes from the King James Version Bible [KJV]

never far away from each other,” (R. Lynch, et al, 2021). I grapple with these questions because I find myself at an intersection of these belief systems and care deeply about how they can simultaneously exist, clash, and work to complement each other to create and sustain a view of how the world works.

In chapter one, I explore the Revelation apocalypse and demonstrate how literature born of crisis can become applicable during modern times of crisis. The book of Revelation is a narrative that is figurative, symbolic, and provides a threatening warning to Christians of Satan’s attempt to break their faith. It is a complex book with no clear message, opening it to great debate and countless interpretations. But despite the complexity of the imagery, I argue that the book of Revelation still provides convenient “sockets” into which the COVID-19 pandemic may be fit as a way to illuminate and explain the crisis. I draw inspiration from authors Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. They introduce the concept of a “little machine” and I argue that Revelation functions as one of these “little machines” as it so easily operates in connection with unfolding events in the broader society, institutions, and practices. I build upon the same reading tactics Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari utilize and explore specifically why Revelation continues to remain relevant and applicable in times of crisis. I present discourse that arose during historical pandemics and epidemics, such as the Black Plague and AIDs, by which communities tried to make sense of their current events by using Revelation’s convenient narrative of the End Times.

In chapter two, I present examples of modern discourse connecting the COVID-19 pandemic to Revelation’s apocalypse. By highlighting specific Tweets and online posts, I demonstrate that the specific sockets of “beasts” and “plagues” from Revelation remain significant and dominant in discussion regarding the End Times. Because these “sockets” work

so well and the events of COVID-19 can so easily fit these elements of Revelation's narrative, members of the Evangelical Christian faith are left with a feeling of assurance and comfort in the fact that this devastating and unprecedented crisis fits into God's plan and happened because it has purpose. The End Times signify Jesus Christ's second coming and the rapture of his people into heaven. The events of the apocalypse, while simultaneously scary and evil, signify an end to earthly suffering and pain with assurance of revenge on the powers of evil. In this chapter, I explore these themes and specifically how the language and story of Revelation functions online for the wider Evangelical Christian population.

In chapter three, I introduce the ethnographic component to my research to show what this discourse looks like on the most local level. Looking at the personal stories of members in a church community can help us understand their scripture's socio-cultural significance. Revelation is a living and breathing text, taking on a life of its own, and ethnography can provide a glimpse of the unique ways in which the book works in people's lives. My specific approach will not be about exposing people's "mistaken" beliefs but showing the complexity that arises when grappling with cosmological and deeply personal questions of human experience and existence and our relationship with others and a Creator being in this space. Revelation is a book that gives meaning to certain events when people cannot find meaning on their own, and during a time of many unknowns, turning to scripture like this gives communities some sort of reasoning and explanation for the chaos. The qualitative data I analyze came from four informants, all of whom have a personal relationship or connection to me or my family. The stories and perspectives they shared with me during our conversations demonstrate how meaningful and powerful apocalyptic prophecy is and I argue that, even though there is not one homogenous

belief when it comes to the end of the world, the major themes of Revelation (along with other biblical apocalyptic writings) function quite similarly in the lives of all of my informants.

This project is important now because it wrestles with big questions about our society and how we cope with catastrophe. Thus, I propose that the biblical apocalyptic discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic helps to define what the pandemic is and to illuminate how people translate their religious understandings into common practice. We must look at this problem through both qualitative-ethnographic and religious-studies lenses because the two combined serve better to show us that COVID-19 is so much more than a disease, it is also a powerful tool for making sense of the world.

Chapter 1

Revelation and its Reception History

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many to believe that we are facing the end of the world as we know it. It would be easy to imagine that these times we now live in are somehow exceptional, but apocalyptic narratives have influenced discourse surrounding crisis throughout Western history. The book of Revelation, an early Christian apocalyptic narrative, is the last book of the New Testament and predicts an end to the world that is terrifying, yet triumphant amid much suffering, suffering that is intensified as the end draws near. This ancient narrative is figurative, symbolic, and continues to this day to provide a threatening warning to Christians of Satan's attempt to break their faith. Revelation is a complex book with no clear message, opening it to great debate and countless interpretations. The goal of this thesis project is to explore how the book of Revelation provides convenient narratives into which the COVID-19 pandemic has been fit as a way to contextualize and explain the current crisis. In this first chapter, I provide a brief description of the apocalypse itself and the socio-political climate from which Revelation was born; I introduce the two major themes of Revelation that have functioned as "sockets" during periods of history in which communities were making sense of great catastrophe; and, finally, I explore the assurance and comfort that this narrative provides to Christian people who count themselves among the righteous.

Rather than describing the entirety of Revelation and attempting to make sense of the full apocalyptic narrative, it will be sufficient for this project to focus on the elements of Revelation that rise to the surface in Evangelical Christian discourse around pandemics. During modern pandemics there are two primary themes from the book that dominate Evangelical Christian

discourse: plagues and beasts, and within these two main motifs there are sub-themes such as the “Mark of the Beast” and Antichrists.²

In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define key literary works, like the book of Revelation, as, “‘little machines’ that are immensely more powerful than most other literary machines, and extremely effective in their relatability. To understand what this little machine does, what it is capable of doing, is to determine which other machines it ‘can be plugged into’ so as to operate optimally,” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Drawing on this theoretical model of “little machines,” I seek to understand how a book like Revelation operates and functions in connection with broader social relations, institutions, and practices. Thus, I argue, Revelation is just such a “little machine” as described by Deleuze and Guattari, and its power and relevance reside in how it functions in connection to human communities and events. Revelation provides convenient “sockets” into which COVID-19, as well as other pandemics, may be “plugged” as a way to contextualize or explain the crisis. As noted, those sockets, in this case, are devastating “plagues” and conniving, sinister “beasts.”

Before analyzing each of these sockets in turn, I want to provide the historical context out of which the book of Revelation arose and other parts of the Bible that helped influence its content. The author of Revelation positions himself on the island of Patmos (Revelation 1:9), located off the coast of what is referred to as Asia Minor (present day Turkey) and from there addresses the churches located in seven major cities on the mainland (Revelation 1:11), which were all under Roman rule at the time. It is commonly assumed amongst religious communities that the author of Revelation, who calls himself John, is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John, the final Gospel in the New Testament. Yet the style, the vocabulary, and the theology of

² The term “Antichrist” never appears in Revelation itself, but is a later gloss on the text.

the Apocalypse are sufficiently different from the Gospel of John to lead scholars to conclude that common authorship is highly unlikely (Frankfurter, 2017).

The structure of Revelation is nicely summarized by David Frankfurter in his brief introduction to the book found in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*:

After an introductory frame story that situates the author, followed by seven letters to congregations in Asia Minor, the scene shifts to heaven, where John offers glimpses of the heavenly Temple, its angelic worshippers, surrealistic forms of the heavenly Christ, and the various monsters of the end-times, all appearing according to divine schedule. The drama unfolds as each of seven seals on a mysterious scroll is opened, followed by a series of seven trumpets blown and the seven bowls emptied. The use of each ritual precipitates different forms of terrible destruction on earth. At the end John describes an earth cleansed of monsters and evil, with a new Jerusalem. The last chapter consists of a series of oracles concerning the time and use of the book itself. (Frankfurter, 2017)

Revelation is part of a genre of “visionary literature,” belonging to a tradition that reaches back to the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. In his study, *The Apocalyptic Vision of the Book of Daniel*, John Collins writes, “Daniel is, with the Apocalypse of John, one of the two universally accepted specimens of apocalyptic in the biblical canon,” (Collins, 1977, pg. xiii). Daniel is presented with an apocalyptic vision very similar to John’s, but preceding John’s by more than two centuries. For example, Daniel envisions a great sea, churned up by four winds of heaven from which great beasts emerge (Daniel 7:2). It continues, “He [one of the beasts] will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time,” (Daniel 7:25) and he shall “magnify himself above every god” (Daniel 11:36). Daniel grapples with chaos and crisis and tells a story to try to interpret devastating events of his time in a way that is relatable and meaningful. Some images in John’s apocalypse are drawn directly from Daniel, while others are not. Revelation is filled with vivid depictions of a heavenly world populated with frightening angelic beings and it provides cryptic predictions of events to come.

Historical events already known to the readers are “revealed” as if by prophecy, followed by events that the author imagines will happen (Frankfurter, 2017). Thus, Revelation details the coming sufferings of sinners in order to excite and/or comfort the intended audience with the prospect of their enemies’ downfall.

Nothing the audience can do will change the predicted course of events; apocalyptic visions can only mediate a knowledge of the inevitable, they cannot change it. Revelation is feared because of the horrors of judgment of which it speaks and because of its intense and gruesome symbolism. But it simultaneously offers comfort and assurance to members of some faith communities due to the overarching message that evil and suffering will not endure forever. Despite the difficulties in interpreting the complex motifs and understanding the time-frame of the multiple “seals,” “trumpets,” and “bowls” that organize the narrative, the macro-structure of the book is fairly clear, its major themes are apparent, and its most significant symbolic elements - including “plagues” and “beasts” play distinct roles in the narrative.

Plagues

I saw in heaven another great and marvelous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass glowing with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and its image and over the number of its name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of God’s servant Moses and of the Lamb:

“Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. Who will not fear you, Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come, and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

After this I looked, and I saw in heaven the temple—that is, the tabernacle of the covenant law—and it was opened. Out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues. They were dressed in clean, shining linen

and wore golden sashes around their chests. Then one of the four living creatures gave to the seven angels seven golden bowls filled with the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever. And the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were completed. (Revelation 15:1-8)

While there is not one specific plague, the author uses the language of “plague” to describe the trials which Christians will surely endure in the End Times. At various moments in the reception history of the book of Revelation, discussions flared up on whether or not epidemics and other widespread catastrophes should be seen as sent by God in order to punish humankind. Many Christians believe that God is the originator of an ailment or sickness, and this particular way of coping with disease is still present. But another way of accounting for the origin of disease is to regard the ailment in question as caused by demonic forces, or an “Antichrist.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, many attributed the suffering to something ungodly, which led them to draw on those elements of Revelation and its narrative. But the seven “plagues” delivered by the angles do not all take the form of sickness; rather: sores on men will develop, sea water will turn to blood, fresh water will also turn to blood, men will get scorched, darkness and pain will prevail, rivers will dry up, and other natural disasters will occur (Revelation, 16:1-21). Throughout history this book has served to provide an interpretive matrix for all kinds of different disasters, but prominent among them have been pandemic diseases (Dein, 2021). So, why is *this* the predominant theme that gets mobilized, given that the seven plagues refer to a variety of circumstances or events that don’t necessarily correlate to disease and sickness?

One of the most striking historical events that led to warnings of a looming apocalypse took place hundreds of years ago in fourteenth century Europe: the so-called Black Death. This

plague killed a substantial population of Europeans and those who managed to survive its grip were left feeling stranded and defeated. Groups most ravaged by the Black Death³ had already suffered from famine earlier in the fourteenth century as storms and drought caused widespread crop failures (Marks, 1971). Cities teemed with corpses as people spent their last days and nights in the public streets, and it was only by the sight and stench of their dead bodies that they proclaimed their death to the world. Christians used biblical narratives and tropes to make sense of and accept the horrible disease shaking Europe. Others thought that “the Plague” was a sign that Christ's return to reign over the earth was imminent (Web, 2010). Centuries after the Black Death, the “Great Plague of London” incited similar feelings. In his article titled, “The Plague of 1625-26: Apocalyptic Anticipation,” Ryan Hackenbracht states, “Apocalyptic anxiety of seventeenth-century Englishmen was similar to that of their ancestors during outbreaks of plagues in the Middle Ages when the high mortality rates and indiscriminate nature of the disease led people to believe the apocalypse was imminent,” (Hackenbracht, 2011). Moralizing Christian writers during this time commonly identified the outbreak with the End Times. For example, the author of *Lachrymae Londonenses* wrote in 1626, “O Lord! As thou hast permitted the Black Horse of the Pestilence to trample on us in so great a measure...let not as bad or worse plague overtake us, that thou shouldn't utterly destroy us from off the Earth” (Hackenbracht, 2011). Plagues and the apocalypse were inextricably joined and the anxiety about the unknown that apocalyptic visions induced was joined with a considerable degree of joy at the notion of final unification with Christ after many years of turmoil (Hackenbracht, 2011). This has been a recurring pattern since the Middle Ages and continues to arise during modern pandemics.

In 1918, an Influenza pandemic swept the world and killed an estimated 50 million people. One fifth of the world's population was attacked by this deadly virus. Within months, it

³ This is the Black Death that raged from 1346-1353 in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa (Getz, 1991).

had killed more people than any other illness in recorded history (“The Black Death: Horseman of the Apocalypse in the Fourteenth Century”). In a short novel titled, “Pale Horse, Pale Rider” by an Influenza survivor, the author, Katherine Porter, refers to this time period as a nightmare that, “tangles images of life and death with images of remembering and forgetting, and the relationship between survival and memory,” while making repeated allusions to the horsemen of the apocalypse from Revelation (Bollinger, 2011). This is just one instance of the ways in which comparisons were drawn and continue to be drawn between the apocalypse and the Influenza epidemic. Fast-forward to the 1980’s when Africa and the U.S. faced another deadly and tragic epidemic. During that time, some U.S. public discourse characterized AIDS as an apocalyptic plague: a punishment for sin and a sign of the end of the world. Many Evangelical religious communities believed that this was definitely a signifier of the End Times. In his book, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism*, Thomas Long states, “religious discourse typically associated with groups who stigmatized both AIDS and the earliest visible victims of the syndrome, gay men, indicates some of the resilience of this ancient discursive form as well as its pervasiveness in American cultural life...Apocalyptic discourse is particularly effective in promoting group solidarity by engaging the individual and collective sense of threat and crisis,” (Long, 2005, pg. 8). Similarly, in 2014, health and humanitarian agencies used apocalyptic discourse to describe the Ebola epidemic and the state of affairs in parts of Africa at the time. Ebola swept through villages and communities, and took the lives of almost all who contracted it. “It has an atmosphere of apocalypse,” Ken Isaacs said of a report issued by the Liberian Ministry of Health at the time. “Bodies lying in the street...gangs threatening to burn down hospitals. I believe this disease has the potential to be a national security risk for many nations. Our response has been a failure” (Haglage, 2014). News at the time was replete with biblical language and metaphor,

characterizing the Ebola crisis as apocalyptic. Throughout the 2014 Ebola outbreak, the vibrant nature of, and public familiarity with, apocalyptic frames allowed the rhetoric of social media users, like Donald Trump, to, “constitute an apocalyptic counterpublic where unsubstantiated claims increased public panic in the United States,” (Salek, 2019). Trump joined in the conversation about Ebola in 2014, before his presidential run, offering 95 tweets about the disease’s deadly nature and the threat it posed to those living in the United States (Salek, 2019). Online discussion, reaction from government officials, and subsequent media coverage during the Ebola outbreak parlayed the existence of a potentially serious public health crisis into a hypothetical apocalyptic nightmare. Throughout history, apocalyptic discourse has had the power to construct a collective identity and cohesiveness of a community under stress, while drawing people together and providing coping mechanisms for those grappling with the unknown.

These examples demonstrate how communities of people compare their pandemics to the “plagues” described in Revelation, even though the seven plagues don’t necessarily correlate exclusively to the “modern pandemic” as we understand it. In an article titled, “The Book of Revelation: Plagues as Part of the Eschatological Human Condition” Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte writes, “plagues and disease do not feature prominently in the book of Revelation, specific images from the book, including the four horsemen and bowls of wrath, have been used in certain traditions in which epidemics and pandemics have been, and still are, being interpreted as part of the eschatological human condition: they are seen as inflicted on humanity, ultimately by an angry God, whose wrath will lead to a final judgment,” (Lietaert Peerbolte, 2021). He goes on to observe that humankind is treated as a pawn on the chessboard of history, as plagues, tribulations and other forms of evil are poured out on earth throughout the book. Although infectious diseases and other illnesses do not play a major role in the book of Revelation, there

remains a strong and persistent tradition that points to epidemics and pandemics as signifying the coming of the End Times.

Pandemic as plague plays out in the discourse around COVID-19 in a very particular way which requires brief clarification. In twenty-first century Evangelical Christian discourse, the COVID-19 pandemic rarely gets characterized as *a plague from God*, that is, as a form of divine punishment for sinful behaviors. Instead, it gets characterized as a plague manufactured by the powers of evil who align with “The Beast” (i.e., an evil regime) and are actively working against God. Evangelical discourse surrounding the AIDs epidemic provides a helpful contrast to COVID-19 in this regard because the AIDS epidemic was characterized in Evangelical discourse as sent by God to punish sinners, whereas the COVID-19 pandemic is not characterized as divine retribution. Instead, COVID-19 is a contrivance of the Beast, manufactured as a means by which unsuspecting people are lured into aligning with its sinful regime and ultimately receive “the Mark.” Mondo Gonzales, for example, shares in his popular Evangelical Christian podcast the ways in which our world and country are being conditioned to accept the future Mark of the Beast: public health guidelines and mask mandates are among these “conditioning” strategies (Gonzales, 2021). I will delve into this more substantially in the following chapters. Hence, the two sockets I highlight here are not equivalent when it comes to the COVID-19 pandemic, the discourse of epidemic as a divinely ordained plague is not central to this particular apocalyptic discourse. In this circumstance, the pandemic is characterized as a demonic tool rather than a divine tool, which helps to illustrate COVID-19’s peculiar relationship to the category of “plague.” We will see this particularity borne out in the qualitative data collected, that is, the notion of pandemic as born of sinful intent and the product of a beastly conspiracy.

The Beasts and the Mark of the Beast

The dragon stood on the shore of the sea. And I saw a beast coming out of the sea. It had ten horns and seven heads, with ten crowns on its horns, and on each head a blasphemous name. The beast I saw resembled a leopard, but had feet like those of a bear and a mouth like that of a lion. The dragon gave the beast his power and his throne and great authority. One of the heads of the beast seemed to have had a fatal wound, but the fatal wound had been healed. The whole world was filled with wonder and followed the beast. People worshiped the dragon because he had given authority to the beast, and they also worshiped the beast and asked, “Who is like the beast? Who can wage war against it?”

The beast was given a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies and to exercise its authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to blaspheme God, and to slander his name and his dwelling place and those who live in heaven. It was given power to wage war against God’s holy people and to conquer them. And it was given authority over every tribe, people, language and nation. All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.

...Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth. It had two horns like a lamb, but it spoke like a dragon. It exercised all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose fatal wound had been healed. And it performed great signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to the earth in full view of the people. Because of the signs it was given power to perform on behalf of the first beast, it deceived the inhabitants of the earth. It ordered them to set up an image in honor of the beast who was wounded by the sword and yet lived. The second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed. It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name.

This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.”
(Revelation 13:1-18)

For close to two thousand years, communities have studied and speculated about the identity of “the Beasts” of Revelation. Who or what are the beasts? Have we encountered these beasts? Can we identify the beasts as contemporaries of John of Patmos? Or are the identities of these beasts yet to be revealed? While popular narratives tend to associate just one singular entity as the beast, in Revelation there are two: the beast of the sea and the beast of the earth. Both of these beasts are described in Revelation chapter 13 and both are represented as horrifying and gruesome creatures that aim to break believers’s faith. For this reason it is easier to conflate the two into one, but it is important to explore each beast’s identity before providing any contemporary analysis of the combined “Beast.” I also want to reiterate that even though there is no explicit use of the term “Antichrist” in the book, the “Beasts” actively work as a counter-force to Revelation’s “Christ” figures and so have traditionally come to be identified as “Antichrist.” I will briefly explore the complicated relationship between these two symbolic characters and how they become interchangeable in discourse surrounding the apocalypse.

The title “Antichrist” refers to a specific individual who will usher in the Apocalypse and actively work against Christians, similar to the beast. This figure will work in opposition and ultimately be the enemy of Christ; he will reign terribly in the period prior to the Last Judgment. As noted above, we actually first encounter a blasphemous beast in the book of Daniel: “The fourth beast is a fourth kingdom that will appear on earth. It will be different from all the other kingdoms and will devour the whole earth, trampling it down and crushing it... He will speak against the Most High and oppress his holy people and try to change the set times and the laws. The holy people will be delivered into his hands for a time, times and half a time,” (Daniel 7:23-25). The description in Revelation draws many parallels with a vision in the book of Daniel where four beasts symbolizing a succession of kingdoms come out of the sea in the forms of a

lion, bear, leopard and a beast with ten horns (Collins, 1977). Very similar language is used in Revelation to describe the beast who will try to rule in opposition to God and Christ, which blends the description of the “Antichrist” with that of the beast. This language allows for modern figures to be fit into this narrative and signal the End Times. Although there, no doubt, have been thousands of suspects, the seven most popular candidates for the Antichrist throughout history are: the Pope, Nicolae Jetty Carpathia (from the *Left Behind* series)(LaHaye and Jenkins, 2011), Nero Caesar, Hitler, Henry Kissinger / Mikhail Gorbachev, Napoleon, and the American president (Carter, et al., 2012). These historical figures have all been identified in Evangelical Christian discourse as demonstrating some kind of resemblance to the beast described in Revelation, and acting as a signal for these faith communities of a looming apocalypse.

The connection between the beast and a public/political figure or group has become a crucial signifier of apocalyptic End Times for generations of Christians. The beast that John of Patmos had in mind has been identified by New Testament scholars as Emperor Domitian and/or Emperor Nero during Roman rule of the Mediterranean. Nero burned down Rome, killing countless citizens, destroying historic buildings, and obliterating literature, art, and shrines (Grout, 2022). He was perceived as a persecutor of Christians, and, “was the first emperor who dyed his sword in Christian blood, when the religion was just arising at Rome," (Grout, 2022). It is likely that Revelation was a response to this period of time in ancient history. Nero also had a strong connection with the number 666, which is found in Revelation chapter 13. “If the Greek spelling of Nero Caesar is transliterated into Hebrew, the numerical equivalent is 666, although it should be remembered that this number was not represented as a figure but as letters of the alphabet or written in full,” (Grout, 2022).

Similarly, an essential claim of historical Protestant Reformation faith is the doctrine that the pope or the papacy was to be regarded as the Antichrist. Martin Luther is quoted as saying, “I am persuaded that if at this time St. Peter in person should preach all the articles of Holy Scripture and only deny the Pope’s authority, power and primacy and say that the Pope is not the head of all Christendom, they would cause him to be hanged,” (Buice, 2017). Many preachers and theologians throughout church history in the wake of the Reformation pointed to the Pope as the Antichrist (Buice, 2017). During World War Two, some identified Hitler as the beast and Mussolini as the “false prophet” in the years leading up to the war. Now that these two famed fascists have met their respective fates, there is little reason to connect them any more to anything prophetic such as Antichrist or beast (Joyner, 2019). Populist preacher Josh Buice states it nicely, “we can conclude that the sign of the antichrist, like the other signs of the times, is present throughout the history of the church. We may even say that every age will provide its own particular form of antichristian activity. But we look for an intensification of this sign in the appearance of the antichrist whom Christ himself will destroy at his Second Coming,” (Buice, 2017).

One of the strongest warnings in the Bible is given to people who worship this future beast. This warning includes the threat of receiving God’s wrath, but also a “Mark” signifying that you are among the unfaithful and deceived: “It also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads, so that they could not buy or sell unless they had the mark, which is the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666,” (Revelation 13:16-18). For apocalyptic-minded Christians, it is very important to understand the warnings about the beast so

that when he appears, they can avoid being deceived into worshipping him. Because of Revelation and its message, many people have developed a keen eye for the “Mark of the Beast.” Barcodes, in particular, became notable objects in this modern form of salvation anxiety (J-T., 2021). The entire concept of a cashless society has provoked similar foreboding. More recently, another new technology emerged as a potential Mark of the Beast: cryptocurrency, (Merlan, 2019).

Revelation’s description of the “Beast” and its “Mark” is very metaphorical and broad, rendering it a powerful socket into which current phenomena may fit as a way to illuminate or explain whatever crisis may be occurring. History is littered with failed attempts to identify Revelation’s beast and its mark, but the search for the mark persists, as the Antichrist stubbornly refuses to make his final appearance.

Political leaders with uncontrolled power, nations on the verge of war, or high-status individuals who find themselves in leadership roles have been compared to, or identified as, the beast. During the COVID-19 pandemic, popular narratives concerned themselves more with the mark of the beast than the beast itself, but the beast has variously been identified as Bill Gates, the World Health Organization, and China, amongst the most prominent (Dwoskin, 2021). Doing things like obeying health and safety guidelines by wearing a mask, maintaining social distance and adhering to lockdown regulations where applicable were frequently identified as either the “Mark of the Beast” or as preparing one for receiving the “Mark of the Beast.” The COVID-19 vaccine was interpreted as a mechanism for testing one’s willingness to submit without question (Rensburg, 2021). Another direct comparison to the beast is that the number of the beast can easily be found in the various vaccine numbers by playing around with them a little – for example, 060606 is clearly just an attempt to “hide” 666. There is also terror surrounding the deployment of 5G technology, which ties into all of this as the way in which “we will be

controlled” once we have been vaccinated (Rensburg, 2021). Social media was/is riddled with this kind of propaganda warning people to be safe and not trust the government. The “Beast” and its “Mark” remain a central theme throughout Evangelical Christian apocalyptic discourse around COVID-19.

Comfort & Assurance

The way in which events can be “plugged” into the Book of Revelation’s “sockets” is so efficient and easy that comfort and assurance can be found amidst this seemingly terrifying apocalyptic story. The timeline and sequence of events in Revelation may appear grim and scary, but John’s conviction that good will ultimately triumph over evil lies at the heart of the narrative and comfort can be found through his assurance of an end to suffering. For believers, there are terrible times ahead, but the book of Revelation reveals God’s merciful intervention during the return of Jesus Christ at His Second Coming, which is something worth looking forward to. The book confirms and reveals the hope that awaits God’s people, despite the visions and imagery of great human suffering.

It is important to note that biblical narratives often address the reality of harm and suffering. So, the hope that such narratives give is a realistic hope, one that promises to move human life and human history toward the fulfillment of God’s purpose. Hence, underneath the images of famine, death, beasts, and natural disasters there ultimately lies a message of hope and optimism. The final chapter of Revelation states,

And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book. And I, John, saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I

fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellow servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God. And he saith unto me, Seal not the sayings of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand. He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still. And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city (Revelation 22:6-14).

The book ends with God's assurance of return and the promise to believers that through their obedience and righteousness, they may be allowed into the gates of heaven. This passage encourages believers to immerse themselves in the word and live every day in the image of God because the book ends with His ultimate victory over evil. It is important for Christians to be on the right side of the battle when the time comes so that they may experience a new life without pain and suffering.

In providing "sockets" into which crises may be plugged, apocalyptic narratives like Revelation mean that all events can be explained and made sense of in relation to God's divine plan. As I've demonstrated, plugging certain events into Revelation's "sockets" is not a practice unique to the COVID-19 pandemic, as this narrative has continually offered explanation and assurance throughout history. David Frankfurter states,

The point of apocalyptic literature lay in revealing the heavenly world not as a paradisiacal delight but as a super-reality: the true divine (or demonic) action "behind the curtain" of lived history. Readers' attention to these supernatural realities behind historical experience would allow them to conceptualize better the crises and frustrations around them. Thus Revelation, for example, details the multiple eschatological sufferings of sinners, to excite or comfort audiences with the prospect of their enemies' downfall. (Frankfurter, 2017, pg. 537)

The prospect of reward and revenge at the end of the tunnel in a Christian's lifetime can provide a real sense of ease and solace. The Gospel Coalition insists in an article concerning Revelation's

importance and significance, “while many seek to decode Revelation’s riddles with the key of current events or ancient history, we must remember that God has given us this book with its apocalyptic imagery in order to decode our reality, to capture our imaginations, and to guide our way in this world. Revelation is written for embattled Christians who need endurance, wisdom, and hope,” (Tabb, 2022). The more one immerses themselves in the text and the signs, the more secure and strong in their faith they may feel.

The book of Revelation has functioned in this way since its origins, since John and his original audience apparently lived and struggled in Roman society as a group of people who understood themselves as an embattled minority. The vision John has, “entangles itself in all power structures in all dimensions of human society,” (Thompson, 1990, pg. 196). This community was in crisis and the specific sociopolitical context of John’s time molded Revelation and gave the book a message for Christians to cling to during periods of hardship. In *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, Leonard Thompson writes,

People discover the crisis dimensions of their existence by reading an apocalypse. An apocalypse thus functions in a social situation not only to bring comfort, hope, perseverance, and the like but also to cause people to see their situation as one in which such functions are needed and appropriate. An apocalypse can create the perception that a situation is one of crisis and then offer hope, assurance, and support for faithful behavior in dealing with the crisis. (Thompson, 1990, pg. 28)

It thus functions as a tool to reinforce a faith-based identity, and offers comfort, assurance, and a sense of righteous empowerment within a sacred apocalyptic framework for believers.

Along with the major literary sockets I've identified as being “plagues” and “beasts,” this idea of hope and comfort amidst chaos is equally as important and drives Christians in their pursuit of identifying elements of the apocalypse in major world events. The apocalyptic story that works in conjunction with Revelation’s “sockets” functions so well that assurance is able to arise the way it does in people’s lives in times of distress. Even though Christians can be

prepared and attempt to identify the signs, it is stated in Revelation that, “Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame,” (Revelation 16:15). We will not know the day nor hour when Christ will return, but regardless, preparedness and awareness during this time will strengthen a believer’s faith and secure their ticket to heaven during the rapture. The Gospel Coalition states, “We don’t read the news to decode Revelation’s mysteries. It’s the other way around: Revelation gives us profound resources to make sense of our world and live with wisdom and hope through difficult days” (Tabb, 2022). Despite the imagery and warnings of death and extreme suffering, there is a fundamental reason why Christians are eager to experience the end days and unite with God during Christ’s Second Coming.

Summary

My goal in this first chapter has been to highlight the parts of the Revelation narrative that get mobilized and rise to the surface repeatedly in times of crisis. I do not have to come to a final conclusion about what, or who, the “Beast” is or why people cling to the language of a plague when predicting End Times, but it is important to highlight the fact that these themes remain current and have been so for thousands of years. These same themes have gotten mobilized during the COVID-19 pandemic, just as they had been for the Black Plague, the AIDS epidemic, and Ebola outbreaks, to name just a few. Revelation has become a book that gives meaning to life when people cannot find meaning on their own. During a time of many unknowns, turning to sacred literature like this gives communities a sort of reasoning and explanation for the chaos.

In the following chapter, I will present and analyze specific examples from current Evangelical Christian media (social media and mass media) of how these two concepts: “beasts” and “plagues,” have been functioning as sockets that the COVID-19 pandemic has been easily plugged into in order to make meaning of experience. In subsequent chapters, through the use of qualitative, anthropological data, I will then explore how apocalyptic discourse gets mobilized “on the ground.” The small group of Baptist church members whom I have interviewed will provide further glimpses into how Revelation’s sockets are actively working in small communities in Maine.

Chapter Two

COVID-19 and Revelation's "Sockets"

After analyzing the historical reception and relevance that the book of Revelation has had throughout time, and specifically during global epidemics, I now transition to the current period and a fine-grain examination of the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic that first began in 2020. By presenting and analyzing some specific social media posts, podcasts, YouTube videos, and other sources, I demonstrate how elements of Revelation's apocalyptic narratives influenced the ways in which many Evangelical Christians in the U.S. defined and made sense of the current pandemic and how the two sockets I have presented, "beasts" and "plagues" continue to function similarly, but unequally. This work also serves to illustrate how social media has come to play a new role in how information, propaganda, and news gets shared and understood in the current era.

The Coronavirus first arrived in the United States in 2020 and because of the rapid and uncontrollable spike in transmission rates, world leaders encouraged and mandated lockdowns. Religious and non-religious communities alike both felt the impact COVID-19 had and in March 2020, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, an influential figure in British public life, described the COVID-19 catastrophe as "the nearest we have to a revelation for atheists,"(Susskind, 2020). This comparison captured the biblical magnitude and sense of shock that many people felt in the face of such a sudden and swiftly accelerating crisis. It was a period of time characterized by extreme unknowns. What made this crisis so alarming, in part, was that it had several new and unfamiliar features that we still do not fully understand.

On Dec. 11, 2020, the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine was available under Emergency Use Authorization for individuals 16 years of age and older, and the authorization was expanded to include those 12 through 15 years of age on May 10, 2021 (FDA, 2023). Approximately 9 months after the virus first hit the United States, the FDA was able to make available a COVID-19 vaccine for anyone who wanted it. Since then, booster shots have been promoted and encouraged, but there has been growing push-back and hesitation. Initially, the internet became riddled with skepticism and fear as the government and others heavily promoted receiving the vaccine. The Center for Global Development published an article explaining that, “never have so many people been vaccinated in one year against a single disease than were vaccinated against COVID-19 in 2021, and never has a global vaccine rollout covered such a large percentage of the population so quickly,” (Cornaro, 2022). The rapid availability of vaccines ignited certain fears about the complacency of humans and the striking resemblance to biblical prophecy.

Plagues

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has also been widespread skepticism regarding the origins of the virus and whether it arose naturally or artificially. Infectious-disease researchers agree that the most probable scenario is that the virus evolved naturally and spread from a bat either directly to a person or through an intermediate animal. But others have theorized that the virus was leaked from a lab either intentionally or unintentionally. As Jane Qiu observes, “disease detectives have yet to find the guilty animal or other indisputable evidence of natural origins,”(Qiu, 2022). Speculation over the possibility of a lab accident has surged and

scientists, such as Qui, who spent time in the Wuhan Lab address these concerns with the same skepticism and hesitation.

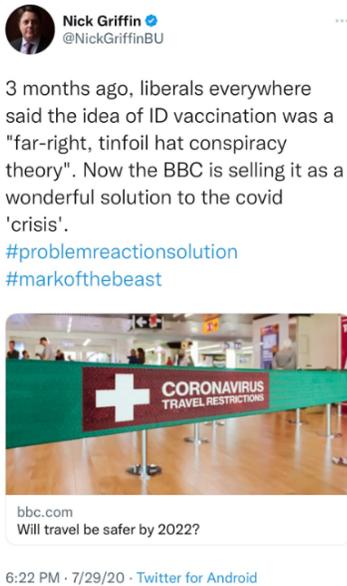
Within Evangelical Christian circles, similar speculation tended to take the form of theories postulating that this “plague” was intentionally manufactured by the powers of evil and purposefully released into the population as not only a harbinger of the End Times, but a precursor to the vaccine which could be the infamous “Mark of the Beast.” The pandemic, then, functions as a type of bioweapon, testing believers and their faith through lockdowns, which prohibited in-person church gatherings, imposed vaccine mandates, and other public health guidelines that purportedly hindered the ability to worship freely (*Billy Crone: Covid and the Rise of the Antichrist*, 2022). This is not a divine plague, sent by God to punish sinners, but rather a plague designed and implemented by the powers of evil in an attempt to break the faith of believers and to test or reinforce the gullibility and complacency of humans all over the world.

The Mark of the Beast

I write this thesis and position myself three years into the pandemic. It has been approximately two years since the first vaccine was released and the booster has been made available to the general public. Because I grew up in an Evangelical Christian church that my family still actively attends, my personal social media feed was replete with streams of posts connecting the pandemic to the prophecy in Revelation. This is what first sparked my interest in this project and in questions of religious identity during periods of crisis. I personally observed that during the height of the pandemic (2020-2021), some churches and Christian ministries with large online followings, as well as Christian influencers on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter

and YouTube, were making unfounded claims that vaccines contain fetal tissue or microchips, or were otherwise drawing associations between vaccine ingredients and the devil. Others talked about how coronavirus vaccines and mask mandates were connected to the “Mark of the Beast.” Because of the vast spread of information or propaganda that encouraged anti-vaccination, social media companies have all banned “misinformation” about the coronavirus and the vaccine, citing the potential for such material to cause “imminent harm,” (Dwoskin, 2021). Facebook and Facebook-owned Instagram, hired thousands of content moderators and developed algorithms to better police its sites. They decided to take a more aggressive stance, prohibiting misinformation regarding the coronavirus, which has made it difficult for Evangelical communities to promote or share content containing certain beliefs regarding the vaccine and the pandemic.

While conducting research for this thesis in 2022-23, it has been difficult to locate primary data and evidence from platforms like Facebook and Instagram for the reasons described above. But recent circumstances have helped me to retrieve some forms of social media data dating to the height of the pandemic. In October 2022, Twitter was bought by Elon Musk, who has since allowed all information to be posted and shared. There are no content moderators or algorithms removing misinformation about the pandemic. Tweets that were previously deleted have become resurfaced and viewable. I preface the following analysis with this information because it informs what has been included here based on what remains available.



The [#ChineseCommunistCoronavirus](#) [#COVID-19](#) all [#COVIDVaccines](#) and [#VaccinePassports](#) are all tantamount to the [#MarkOfTheBeast](#) #666 [@afbranco](#)



6:12 AM · 11/7/21 · Twitter for iPhone



8:53 AM · 7/13/20 · Twitter Web App

Figure 1: Twitter Screenshots

The tweets above exemplify some of the messages being shared about the COVID-19 pandemic and the vaccine during the first two years of the pandemic. Presenting social media research allows access to the unprompted feelings and opinions of users, something that would otherwise be solely collected by researchers through surveys, interviews, or focus groups. This makes a huge scale of data available, in people’s own words, for researchers to analyze as primary evidence for trends of belief and behavior in self-selecting online communities.

The first tweet posted by verified user, Nick Griffin, on July 29th, 2020, pits the politically conservative right against the progressive left and compares ID Vaccination cards to the “Mark of the Beast.” This comparison between vaccine status travel cards and the mark of the beast highlights the distrust and anxiety felt by some conservative communities after news regarding the potential enacting of vaccine verification protocols was shared. The threat of losing medical freedoms, such as the right to choose what gets injected into the body because vaccination status might come to determine one’s ability to access other rights and privileges is

felt to reflect a situation similar to one described in Revelation: “And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom,” (Revelation 13:16-18).

A similar Tweet, posted on November 7th, 2021, includes an illustration of a graphic “666” barcode mark on the hand of a person and another stark comparison to Revelation’s “Beast” and his number. The vaccine can be interpreted as the “Mark,” but there is also some indication of a growing anxiety regarding the development of a “vaccine passport,” which would ban travel for the unvaccinated. The mark then represents the label or documentation one is given upon being vaccinated, such as the 666 barcode illustrated in the graphic. In Revelation it is stated, “Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six,” (Revelation 13:18). This is a direct comparison between biblical prophecy and COVID-19 anxieties. Vaccine status and documentation thus serves as the “the Mark” which becomes a compelling argument for true Christian believers to not receive the vaccine.

The third image is a tweet with an attached video of a pastor preaching that wearing a mask, itself, is heralding the “Mark of the Beast.” He states, “This is one of, actually many reasons, that I believe that the COVID-19 vaccine will ultimately become the Mark of the Beast.” Connecting the “mask” to the “mark” is a creative – and, to some, a compelling – argument. The video attached to this Tweet has since been removed from all other internet platforms and I cannot access the full sermon because the original website has also been removed. This Tweet, nonetheless, provides a glimpse of what numerous Evangelical Christian

preachers preached to their followers throughout the pandemic and demonstrates the symbolic, apocalyptic language being used to interpret what was happening in the world.

These few examples demonstrate how the Book of Revelation invites readers to imagine the secrets and clues at play in the cosmos. Importantly, Revelation warns Christians that the beast has a goal of tricking and deceiving them, as it is stated, “And deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, which had the wound by a sword, and did live,” (Revelation 13:14). "The Beast" will have powers that appear to be miraculous and death-defying (it had a deadly "wound" but was "still alive" and it had "miraculous powers.") Similarly, those who created/promoted the COVID-19 vaccines had the (seemingly miraculous) power to protect millions of people from the very contagious virus that had already killed millions of people. It becomes crucial that Christians are aware of the signs and warnings so they may avoid being tricked by the powers of evil. This is why there is so much discourse connecting modern events to certain passages of scripture. God gives Christians

The COVID injection was never a vaccine.
Shame the Devil and save the world.
[#TwitterFiles](#)



58 views

11:54 AM · 12/13/22 · [Twitter for Android](#)

The "covid" vaccines are deadly poison.
They are killing people in droves.
People are dropping dead in front of us daily from this horrendous toxic deception. The devil dances.
Thank you [@elonmusk](#) for letting me say this.
God bless us all in this darkest of times.

6:43 PM · 12/12/22 · [Twitter Web App](#)



Figure 2: Twitter screenshots



the scripture so they may immerse themselves and avoid temptations and tricks that may arise during their lifetime.

“Mark of the Beast” references were among the most popular during the pandemic, and these were often accompanied by references to the devil and/or Satan and his part in promoting the deadly plagues and deceptions. In the first Tweet, above, the writer simply denies the vaccine’s legitimacy and makes an argument in favor of the COVID-19 vaccine functioning as “the Mark.” There is a sense of urgency and warning, as the writer encourages people to “shame the Devil” and reject the “injection.” Similarly, the next Tweet describes in more detail the horrors they are experiencing. The COVID-19 vaccine is compared to, “deadly poison” that, “kills people in droves,” while this Tweet only mentions the Devil and its tricks, it still exemplifies the distrust and uneasiness people have with the vaccine. Its reference to “the darkest of times” likely stems from belief regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as a harbinger of the end of the world. Finally, the third Tweet echoes the analysis above regarding travel passports and internal identification based on vaccination status. In this specific post, there is even a hashtag, #Markofthebeast, to lump it in a group of other Tweets with similar messages. Postings like this one become easier to locate and share when grouped in a hashtag such as this. All of these Tweets demonstrate how people are communicating virtually about the virus and prophecy in Revelation. These posts, as well, fit into the two “sockets” of “beasts” and “plagues” and continue to illustrate how Revelation and its narrative of apocalypse function in relation to unprecedented and devastating crises.

Not only was this narrative being shared by users on social media platforms, it had entered the political arena and even celebrities were making statements regarding the brewing distrust regarding the vaccine and its relationship to biblical apocalypticism. A CNN article⁴

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/08/02/politics/kfile-rnc-peter-feaman-covid-19-vaccine/index.html>

posted in 2021, reported that, "amid recent surging coronavirus cases in Florida, a top Republican National Committee official in the state has spread anti-vaccine rhetoric and misinformation, comparing the Biden administration's vaccine efforts to Nazi-era 'brown shirts,' and twice calling the vaccines 'the Mark of the Beast,' comparable to a 'false god.'" A review by CNN's KFile found that Peter Feaman, a lawyer and RNC committeeman from Florida made the comments on his blog the "The Backhoe Chronicles," which he publishes regularly in a private group on MeWe. The social media platform bills itself as the "anti-Facebook" app," (Steck, Meyers, and Kaczynski, 2021). This narrative was promoted at the national level by those with even larger platforms.

On an even grander scale, famous rapper Kanye West, stated in a fiery interview, "It's so many of our children that are being vaccinated and paralyzed, so when they say the way we're going to fix COVID-19 is with a vaccine, I'm extremely cautious. That's the mark of the beast. They want to put chips inside of us, they want to do all kinds of things, to make it where we can't cross the gates of heaven." (Espinoza, 2022). West very blatantly uses the language of "the Mark of the Beast" to present an argument against the vaccine. He is skeptical of the government and leans into the theories about the scenes of Revelation playing out in front of us. This statement similarly promotes the responsibility of Christians to be cautious and wary when presented with something seemingly mandatory by the government. Claims such as these appear to promote a culture and cycle of distrust between conservative Evangelical Christian communities and public health guidelines enacted by governments.

The mistrust at the heart of the relationship between Evangelical Christians and the U.S. government is easily seen as it plays out online. Apps such as TikTok became extremely popular during the COVID-19 pandemic and were used as a tool for spreading these same narratives and

ideas. In January 2021, TikTok banned two hashtags, #MarkOfTheBeastIsTheCovid19Vaccine and #VaccineIsTheMarkOfTheBeast. The company said the hashtags and affiliated ones, which had over 700,000 views in December, were tied to misinformation about coronavirus vaccines and violated the company's medical misinformation policy. The company has banned such misinformation since March 2021 (Dwoskin, 2021). Fashion influencer, Taylor Rousseau, said she and her family received numerous threats after posting a viral music video on TikTok last year in which she pretended to be injected with a deadly microchip for refusing the vaccine (Dwoskin, 2021). In addition to "everyday" people who were posting and producing content connecting the pandemic to the End Times, people with thousands of followers and an extremely far-reaching and diverse audience were doing so.

Here I've presented just a glimpse into the discourse online comparing and drawing connections between the COVID-19 pandemic and key tropes from Revelation. Similar to previous pandemics and epidemics, apocalyptic narratives have dominated conversations among Evangelical Christians about the virus and the system of belief that supports this comparison. The posts and statements I have collected all fit into the "plague" and/or "beast" sockets I have described above. It is these major themes of Revelation that get harnessed and used over and over by people trying to spread the apocalyptic message and to warn others of the "signs" they may be seeing. This is significant because it further proves Revelation's relevancy in times of crisis and its ability to generate meaning amidst chaos and uncertainty for communities of Evangelical Christians.

Comfort and Assurance

“RESOLVED, The messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, June 15-16, 2021, mourn the lives lost to this disease, awaiting the day when “Death will be no more; grief, crying, and pain will be no more, because the previous things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4),” (SBC, 2021).

This resolution from the Southern Baptist Convention, on their homepage, regarding the COVID-19 pandemic highlights a different use for Revelation - one that is grounded in hope and anticipation. There appear to be two contending and/or complementary ways of interpreting the message of Revelation during the time of a global pandemic, one is rooted in fear, distrust, and anger, and the other emphasizes comfort and joy. What makes the book such a powerful “little machine” is not only its ability to be applied to different types of crises and circumstances, but how it can mean different things to different people – or even to the same people. For religious communities, the future is determined by divine intervention, and because pandemics indicate the fragility of life and the world and engender a paralyzing anxiety that society is crumbling, it becomes a good time to immerse yourself in the faith.

During the beginning and height of the pandemic, churches, religious leaders, and everyday people publicly entertained the notion that we were living through the prophesied End Times. In 2020, Simon Dein, observed that, “Christian social media threads like #Jesusiscoming are replete with discussions of the imminence of the End Times” (Dein, 2020). *Watch Jerusalem* editor-in-chief and Evangelist pastor, Gerald Flurry (2020), asserted the coronavirus is a sign from God redirecting humanity onto the right path before the ultimate clash between the forces of good and evil: “God is pleading, he’s pleading. We know there’s all kinds of imminent pestilence epidemics that are going to sweep across this world during the Great Tribulation. The

epidemic, disguised as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, will wipe out a quarter of the planet’s population,” (Dein, 2020). This is an example of one of countless messages sent during 2020, before pandemic misinformation was censored from major social media platforms. It is hard to determine the extent to which such discourse continues within these communities because many of these messages are no longer publicly shared. I believe that the narrative has shifted in a way that now centers the believer and their confidence in the faith and their relationship with God.

As I explored in Chapter 1, Revelation ultimately offers God’s people wisdom and hope in difficult days. The narrative of the apocalypse has always been rooted in the believer’s faith and relationship with God, but from what I observed, online discourse made this public shift to emphasizing messages of comfort well after the initial shock of the outbreak. As Tweets and posts about conspiracies and the “Mark of the Beast” began to get removed from the internet, Evangelical discourse began to re-center the notion of preparedness and readiness. A primary Evangelical Christian value is to spread the word of God and get as many people to heaven as possible. This message was conveyed through posts and sermons as the panic calmed down and people were able to make sense of the events of the time.

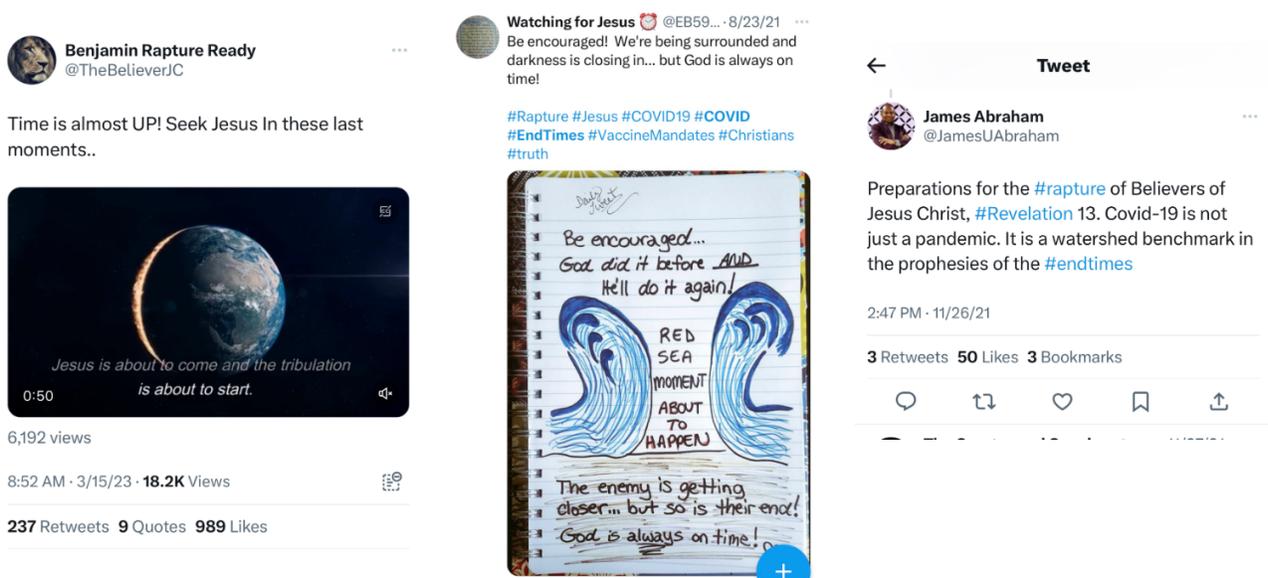


Figure 3: Twitter Screenshots

In the first Tweet, a popular user warns his followers of the imminent tribulation and rapture and urges them to “seek Jesus in these last moments.” In short, somebody must receive Jesus Christ as their Savior in order to be raptured. The concept of “the rapture” derives from St. Paul’s earliest letter, preserved in the New Testament:

According to the Lord’s word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:15–18)

If one can come to Jesus and decide for themselves that he is their Savior, they may be saved from the horrors of the End Times.

Similarly, the second Tweet conveys a message of encouragement to followers as the user appears to feel excitement for the end days because it means they will be reunited with Jesus and saved from the evils of the world. Invoking the biblical narrative from Exodus 14, of God saving the Israelites from deadly pursuit by Pharaoh’s chariots, they state, “the enemy is getting closer, but so is their end!” Yes, the apocalypse is grim and the imagery is frightful, but woven into the narrative is also a message of assurance and hope that works in conjunction with the warnings presented. Jonathan Kirsch in his book *A History of the End of the World*, states, “the book of Revelation offers a happy ending, at least for those which are saved. Everyone on earth in the End Times is destined to suffer horribly at the hands of the Antichrist and most of them will die just as horribly, but a select few will be resurrected, judged, and granted eternal life in the world to come. The yearning to be counted among the saved, and the loathing of everyone who is *not* saved, turns out to be one of the great engines of history,” (Kirsch, 2006, pg. 12; note Kirsch’s use of the phrase “engine of history” - a phrase that echoes strongly with the concept of “little

machines” employed throughout my study). If one is able to endure the prophetic events of Revelation, then they shall be granted a life better than one could imagine.

The final tweet alludes to these same points. There is heavy emphasis on the notion of preparedness and knowing in your heart that Jesus is your Savior. If one is unprepared for the final judgment then they must hurry up and open their eyes to what is going on around them. This post hashtags Revelation 13 and it is this chapter which contains four of the most iconic concepts contained in Revelation: the two "Beasts" and the symbol mandated for all followers of Antichrist, the "Mark of the Beast," which is further related to the number 666. There is nothing in this chapter which explicitly alludes to preparedness, so I would infer that this person draws from the Book of Matthew. In Matthew 24:42, Jesus says, "Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come," (Matthew 24:42). Jesus warns his disciples not to be deceived in verses 23-26, "Then if any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there; believe it not. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before. Wherefore if they shall say unto you, Behold, he is in the desert; go not forth: behold, he is in the secret chambers; believe it not," (Matthew 24:23-26). There are warnings about these widespread events, and the Bible commands Christians to "watch." This means people should be alert to newsworthy events happening in the world we live in, and that when there are major shifts in the political climate, and nations are seen jockeying for position and preparing for war, believers should take note.

Revelation 16:15 states, "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame." By the time the signs in heaven begin to appear, it will be too late if a Christian has been spiritually deceived. All that a

secure believer can do now, however, is watch and pay attention to the signs that are being presented. This is the shift that I propose is happening in discourse connecting the COVID-19 pandemic to the apocalyptic prophecy in the Bible. People are still seeking to connect the events of the modern period to the apocalyptic story of Revelation, but they are doing it in a way that centers the believer and their relationship to the divine. There is a real sense of eagerness and urgency when it comes to the notion of an approaching End Times, that comes as a result of the efficiency of Revelation's "sockets" and the ways in which crisis can so easily be made to fit the narrative.

Summary

In this second chapter, I have presented and analyzed specific pieces of online discourse that connect the COVID-19 pandemic to biblical prophecy in order to strengthen my argument that the virus is so much more than a disease: it is a tool for making sense of the world, reinforcing an identity, and offering comfort, assurance, and a sense of righteous empowerment within a sacred apocalyptic framework. Even though much of the discourse is focussed on "plagues" and "beasts" and they have continued to remain the two most popular themes to lean on during times of crisis, the promised outcome of the apocalyptic destruction is equally important, as it provides a feeling of security and comfort for Christians trying to navigate and make sense of seemingly random and devastating events. Evangelical Christians see everything in terms of God's control, and because this is the case, it is obvious why they seek to determine the meaning of COVID-19 in the scheme of God's divine plan. There seems to be something

very satisfying in seeing modern circumstances fit perfectly into ancient narratives, because for some, it adds meaning to life.

In my next chapter, I narrow down my research and explore what this looks like on the ground in my local community. Using ethnographic methods and anthropological analysis, I present qualitative data collected during interviews with members of my Baptist Church in rural Maine. I plan to focus on a small group within a very large religious denomination but understand that these shared apocalyptic motivations found within a wide range of fragmented communities can, nonetheless, provide common ground and unite unexpected partners, even when addressed from very different perspectives. I observe how the sockets of “plagues” and “beasts” play out in people’s lives in efforts to add a dimension of humanity to my argument and uncover the complexity and plurality that exists within the denomination when it comes to the End Times.

Chapter 3

End Times Ethnography

My own experiences within my family's evangelical Christian community during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the research I have conducted more recently, have affirmed my theory that, for such communities, the book of Revelation continues to provide a blanket explanation and a uniform sense of reassurance and comfort in times of widespread catastrophe. Nonetheless, there is no single, homogenous theory embraced by all members of Evangelical communities when it comes to how to read the signs that will foretell the end of the world. Drawing on my own experience, alongside the stories and experiences of people in my local community, I explore the complexities that arise when grappling with questions of human existence and the plurality of belief regarding the apocalypse in order to highlight the differences among people whose outlooks are commonly assumed to be uniform. A book like Revelation has proven to provide comfort for people during times of crisis, but how it does that specifically varies amongst members of the church community.

In order for me to do this, I must first address the intrinsic motivation I possess for pursuing such a weighty project. Situating myself in this research is important and I am specifically inspired by anthropologist Leila Abu-Lughod. In her book, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*, first published in 1986, she conducts her ethnography with the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin peoples of North Africa. She spends the entirety of her study living with the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin people in their villages. Abu-Lughod, who is only partly Arab/Muslim, struggles to integrate herself as an unmarried American woman above marriageable age. Her unconventional approach allowed her to gain the trust of the community but she couldn't have

written the piece appropriately without addressing her unique position in the community. She integrates the stories that she hears, embedding them in their social settings, which makes them exceptionally complex and interesting. My unique identity as a former member of the Baptist Church allows me insight into this community of believers. I can situate the stories of a few into a larger narrative of the whole whilst weaving my own experiences into the narrative.

I grew up in a religious household with both of my parents and most of my extended family being active members in the local Southern Baptist Church. Since before I can remember, I attended church every Sunday, Bible study or Sunday school before service, and youth group during the week. Being a Christian was a part of my identity, and my attitude and outlook on life were deeply influenced by Southern Baptist beliefs. Because this is what surrounded me, it was my sole perspective on life. As a first-year student in college, being introduced to both the fields of Religious Studies and Anthropology genuinely changed my entire perspective on the world and opened my eyes to a different way of understanding my role in society. I have spent an immense amount of time exploring my own identity through my education and bringing my own experiences into conversation with the experiences of others.

COVID-19 first arrived in the U.S. in March of 2020, halfway through my second semester in college. I was given two days to pack my things and move home for what was supposed to be two weeks. During this period of time, my social media feeds were replete with posts and discussions construing connections between the book of Revelation and the virus. I remember engaging in conversations with my family about these ideas and even though I believed in the validity of CDC reports on the virus and trusted the vaccine when it was finally made available, I still felt very compelled by the arguments being presented. Growing tension was evident in my personal feed amongst people with whom I used to go to church and friends of

my family, and, as time progressed, feelings on all sides became more extreme and the rhetoric more animated. I made the choice to get vaccinated but felt torn between two worlds; one that supported “science” and one that did not. Even though I was confident in my decision to be vaccinated, it felt as if I was waging an ethical and moral war with those around me. This thesis is deeply personal because it seeks to find a common ground between two seemingly opposing worlds of thought.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I assumed the conversations surrounding the End Times and the pandemic to be much more black and white, but with support of my ethnographic data and the arguments presented by other anthropologists, I argue that for my interlocutors and members of the community in which I studied there is no binary between “science” and “belief” and that they can coexist simultaneously and intertwine in ways that are impossible to separate. When it comes to the end of the world, there isn’t a spectrum of belief, because that implies opposite poles, assuming a binary. Rather, I argue that this relationship is much more dynamic, three-dimensional, and liminal. Liminality is the condition that prevails during rites of passage – rituals performed in many societies to transfer a person from one stage of life to another. Anthropologist, Victor Turner, argues that the liminal phase is ambiguous because it is a threshold between more or less stable phases of the social process (Turner, 1964). The process of moving from life to death or from worldly existence to being raptured, involves inhabiting a liminal phase/space in which people make meaning and reflect on their everyday actions. Turner writes in his article “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” “Liminality may be partly described as a stage of reflection,” (Turner, 1964). How people interpret Revelation and the End Times is not black and white, rather, it is a changing, dynamic, and multi-dimensional process that cannot be simplified into a spectrum.

I hope that through telling my story alongside the stories of others, I can make an argument in support of plurality of belief when it comes to the End Times and that a middle ground can emerge between and among multiple perspectives. My position as a former member of the Church has allowed me insight to a community that uses apocalyptic prophecy to guide decision making and motivate action. I have interviewed members of a specific Evangelical Christian community in rural Maine about their perspectives on the prophecies in Revelation and what someone needs to understand about the faith in order to correctly interpret events in the world around them. I recognize that Southern Baptists are a large denomination, and that the opinions of just a few cannot fully represent the whole. But shared apocalyptic motivations found within a wide range of disparate communities can, nonetheless, provide a glimpse into how people engage and function in society. A small ethnographic sample can help investigate very complicated and critical questions about how Evangelical Baptist Christians think about life when the world is about to end.

I found my sample of interviewees through both familial and personal connections from the church I grew up attending. The first woman I met to interview, who I will refer to as Mrs. A, was recommended to me by my mother. I had known her for most of my life, and was welcomed into her home with a warm embrace. We sat and talked for over two hours, first catching up on my life and my family, and our conversation naturally and effortlessly gravitated towards the pandemic. I had entered this conversation with a relatively robust knowledge of Revelation and how communities have used Revelation as an explanation or reasoning for major catastrophe. I did not expect to know everything already, but expected her beliefs to align with what I assumed to be the most common theory regarding the virus and the vaccine. One of the first things she said to me was, “Covid was just one example of the rampant evil in our world. Satan is trying to

take over and scare us all into submission so he can have total control. Covid was a man-made virus, not God ordained, which means that the vaccine is not the Mark, but the Devil is preparing us and setting us up to receive the Mark. This was a test for submission.” The framework into which I had envisioned my ethnographic data easily falling had still been met, but not in the ways I expected. I concluded this interview with two hours worth of quotes and ideas, none of which seemed black and white.

I sat with this discomfort for a while and left her warm and welcoming home feeling completely insecure about my ability to accurately portray the passion and sincerity with which she spoke. Her argument was convincing and well-informed, shattering any preconceived notions of “conspiracy theorists” I carried with me into that room. While this quote implies a belief in a satanic conspiracy to trick everyone, her tone lacked panic and mania, and she seemed rather at ease about the whole matter. I knew this project would expand my understanding of apocalypticism during pandemics and how the book of Revelation affects the lives of real people, but I didn’t expect it to reveal much bigger questions about life, death, identity, and relationships.

Next, I interviewed the pastor who I grew up with and who baptized me when I was 12. He is a close friend of my family and has guided the church for many years. I will refer to him as the Pastor in the following sections. My third interview was with a close family member who is a deacon of this same church. Similarly, I will refer to him as the Deacon for ease of identification. These men expressed similar concerns and elaborated in depth on the ways in which COVID-19 reflects biblical prophecy, but also how Christians should live their life when the end of the world is imminent. I will use their knowledge and insight to better explain how people are making sense of COVID-19 and why there appears to be hesitation around following public health guidelines and receiving the vaccine. Their leadership position in the church means that

what they believe and preach helps to shape and reinforce the perspectives of regular congregants. The perspective they share allows better insight to what the body of the church believes, without having to interview each individual. My goal is not to expose these people or prove them wrong, rather, I wish to humanize this population by highlighting their complex and sophisticated set of beliefs that must be taken into account when defining what the pandemic is and how it functions in people's lives.

As stated earlier, I decided to receive the vaccine so I could keep myself safe and return to college in the fall. This doesn't mean I didn't experience personal hesitancy or pushback from those around me and, for a long time, I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt for receiving the vaccine and even getting boosted. During this pivotal point in my life, when I am grappling with my faith and my relationship with the church, I am also living through and navigating a global pandemic. I find asking myself questions about the relationship between science and belief, and about what I need to know about religion in order to make sense of the world around me. As I restructure and define my own view of the world, I position myself in this research and pursue the questions in which I have personal stake.

My final interview was conducted virtually and, although it lacked a personal connection, I hope to still capture the urgency and passion with which this informant spoke. I will refer to this informant as Mr. B for the purpose of confidentiality and clarity throughout my discussion, below. Not only was he concerned about the vaccine's ingredients and that we are living out our final days, he was equally invested in the status of my personal relationship with God and the influence that institutions like Bates College have on my personal spiritual journey. In the process of collecting valuable ethnographic data for this thesis, I am faced with serious questions about my own belief and certainty. He began by stating, "Fortunately for you, your interest in

Revelation indicates that there are still threads of both interest and hope that the Scriptures are true. What I am about to share with you is not simply a matter of academic interest. It is personal to the point of literally determining the future.” All of my conversations have been deeply serious and moving. I’ve quickly realized that this ethnographic research not only reveals perspectives and angles to better answer the questions I have asked about COVID-19 and the apocalypse, but also questions of faith and community. While my data might not fit perfectly into the historical/thematic framework I wished to apply, it does highlight the pluralism of belief within Christianity and supports the argument that there is not just one set-in-stone reality for believers and that Revelation, as a tool, is extremely versatile and flexible.

In this thesis, I commonly refer to the COVID-19 pandemic as a perceived “crisis” and I write about the ways in which people respond to this crisis using the Book of Revelation as a tool. In her book, *Anti-Crisis*, anthropologist Janet Roitman doesn’t merely analyze a specific crisis in detail, rather she uses examples of crisis narratives to demonstrate how a crisis is constructed as an object of knowledge. How we categorize certain events as crisis sheds light on the ways we construct our idea of normalcy. When one labels an event a crisis, we can characterize it as a “moment of truth” (Roitman, 2014, pg. 3), a turning point in which actions are pursued and decisions made. I believe that she is arguing that it is in these historical moments of truth, we call crisis, that we learn the most about the culture in which this event takes place. I find this piece relevant to my work because it is in these periods of crisis that Evangelical communities rely on Revelation and other biblical scripture to guide them through the difficult times. In these moments of vulnerability and distress, people are capable of finding hope and comfort in the word of God. This ethnographic research reveals how just a few people made decisions during this period and what guides their actions.

In the following sections I address the recurring themes from my interviews and share some of the most common connections between COVID-19 and biblical prophecy. From what I have researched and collected, it is evident that Revelation provides convenient “sockets” into which COVID-19, as well as other pandemics, may be “plugged” as a way to explain and find reassurance amid the crisis. As noted, those sockets, in this case, are devastating “plagues” and sinister “beasts.” I will detail how these major themes of Revelation arose during conversations with interviewees, but also highlight some of the unique responses I collected in order to paint a complex and nuanced picture of Evangelical Christian perspectives on COVID-19. Finally, I explore questions of life and death in an apocalyptic framework to provide a sense of how Evangelical Christians navigate their lives and make everyday choices when the world is always about to end. Hopefully, this research bridges a gap of understanding between evangelical and non-evangelical communities and encourages respectful and productive dialogue between seemingly opposite groups of people.

Pandemic as Plague

Throughout history the book of Revelation has served to provide an interpretive matrix for all kinds of different disasters, but prominent among them have been pandemic diseases. My first interviewee, Mrs. A., had much to say about this and provided me with my first personal glimpse at opposing ideas circulating about the COVID-19 virus. With an intense and serious tone, she stated,

“We are now getting information from medical staff that Covid was most likely developed in labs. There are striking similarities between what we see happening with Covid and the Race of Giants found in the Old Testament. The Devil is trying to alter our DNA so that he may change God’s creation, this has happened before and it was why

God flooded the Earth. All of these crazy times can be explained by prophetic scripture, life is not going in a way that is normal.”

For my informant, this pandemic is not a direct, active punishment of God; it is a consequence of the human condition that the Bible calls sin and rebellion against God. According to the Bible, God is the sustainer of life and has a hand in all earthly matters. But there are forces in the universe that oppose God and create pain and destruction, like the Devil or “Beast.” To the degree that the phrase “divine judgment” is appropriate in a pandemic, it is God allowing the human condition to take its course and reap its consequences. She also mentions the “Race of Giants” which are also known as the Nephilim, the product of the sons of god mingling with the daughters of Adam and the great biblical giants (White, 2023). While the giant Nephilim are barely mentioned in the Genesis narrative, they were the subject of great fascination in later apocalyptic literature. These giant super-humans were accused of corrupting God’s original creation, therefore, in Genesis, God destroyed the human race via a great flood because of the wickedness of man, repenting that he ever made man at all (Roos, 2023). Mrs. A compares the ways in which COVID-19 interacts with our DNA to the ways in which human’s DNA was altered by these giants. If we stray too far from what God intended for mankind, then He will have to act upon this, just as He did in Genesis.

In my final interview, Mr. B similarly disavowed the notion that this plague is that of Revelation. The seven plagues in Revelation are identified as the completion of God’s wrath, and the plagues seem directed solely towards those who belong to the kingdom of the Antichrist. But this virus is not as discriminating and nobody appears to be immune to it. Christians and non-Christians alike are susceptible. He told me that,

“Matthew 24:1-14 is the period in which we live now. It is the only place in all of Scripture where Covid can be found (verse 7). Covid will not be found in Revelation at

all because Revelation covers the wrong time period as you will see. Matthew 24:15-31 covers the 7 year period which immediately follows, but the Christian believers who are ready for the return of Jesus will not be on earth during this time. This directly corresponds to the time period mentioned in Daniel 9:27. Revelation 4-20 is a depiction of this 7 year period.”

Here, he is arguing that true Christians will not see the plagues mentioned in Revelation because pious members of the Church will have been “raptured”⁵ already. It is impossible for this to be the apocalyptic plague because Christians are still on this earth. He references Matthew 24:1-14 which states,

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world? And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in diverse places. All these are the beginning of sorrows. Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matthew 24:1-14).

⁵ According to the Billy Graham Evangelical Association, “There are many Christians who believe that the second coming of Jesus Christ will be in two phases. First, He will come for believers, both living and dead, in the “rapture” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). In this view, the rapture—which is the transformation and catching up of all Christians, dead or alive, to meet Christ in the air—will be secret, for it will be unknown to the world of unbelievers at the time of its happening. The effect of this removal, in the absence of multitudes of people, will, of course, be evident on earth. Then, after a period of seven years of tribulation on earth, Christ will return to the earth with His church, the saints who were raptured (Matthew 24:30, 2 Thessalonians 1:7, 1 Peter 1:13, Revelation 1:7). He will be victorious over His enemies and will reign on the earth for 1,000 years (the millennium) with His saints, the church,” (Graham, 2017).

Christians may endure terrible events that test their faith, but the prophecy in Revelation will not be fulfilled until Jesus returns. This is similar to my first quotation from my first interviewee (Mrs. A) who believes this COVID-19 virus is not that of Revelation 13, but rather an inherently evil and man-made contagion. It is important to note that both of these informants use another, albeit different, scriptural reference to interpret and situate different aspects of the pandemic. All of these references are similarly apocalyptic and are interpreted in an interlocking, rather than mutually exclusive, fashion.

Expressing similar hesitation and concern, The Deacon stated, “I do not believe the Covid pandemic is End Time plague type stuff, not from God, rather it is the sin nature of man that causes these things. The virus originated in China, and we know that scientists were manipulating genes. Could it have been a terrible accident? Why were these people messing around with something so risky? It makes you wonder was this being done for profit? Was this research funded by vaccine companies? If that was the case, that is so evil and wrong.”

COVID-19 seems to be just an event rather than a supernatural action of God or Satan. It is an event that is not unique in history but is still alarming and concerning to Evangelical Christian communities.

There appears to be much hesitation around claiming this is one of the plagues foretold by Revelation, and more confidence in the idea that this is a plague of the sort foretold in the Gospel of Matthew. In Chapter Two, I highlighted some of the earlier discourse that is still accessible on social media platforms that connects the two (Revelation and Matthew), because attitudes have never really been focussed on COVID-19 as being divinely-ordained. Mrs. A. referred me to a website titled, Prophecy Watchers, and specifically to a pastor named Billy Crone. In his book titled, “The Great Covid Deception,” Crone states,

Jesus predicted there would first be a massive rise of false messiahs and false prophets spreading massive lies and deception across the whole planet. In fact, these global tyrannical imposters would be deceiving the world in such a powerful way, that if it were possible, even the elect could fall for it. Believe it or not, those days are fast upon us with the current global manufactured crisis called COVID-19. The facts are, it's not a pandemic, rather it's a plandemic by these global elites to usher in the rise of the Antichrist Kingdom. (Crone, 2022)

Unlike other historical pandemics, this narrative concerning the origins of the virus as being manufactured by evil humans appears to be unique and much more niche.

Because my interviewees adopted something along the lines of this stance, I still asked, “why plagues?” What is it about illness that sparks these conversations about the End Times, when in the book of Revelation, the seven plagues refer to a variety of events rather than simply pandemics? In order for me to understand this common connection, I was encouraged to look outside of Revelation at other scriptures concerned with the End Times. The Pastor told me to read Luke 21, which states,

“And he said, Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them. But when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified: for these things must first come to pass; but the end is not by and by. Then said he unto them, Nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: And great earthquakes shall be in divers places, and famines, and pestilences; and fearful sights and great signs shall there be from heaven. But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake.” (Luke 21:8-12)

In these verses, Luke warns of pestilences during the End Times, but this is very vague. All of the great plagues of history have the capacity to fit into this End Time vision. Whether it is Revelation or Matthew or Luke, the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other epidemics, can very easily be seen to fit this narrative. Through my interviews, I learned that looking solely at the prophecy in Revelation does not provide enough information about the end of the world. Plagues

and pestilences are explicitly mentioned in other books of the Bible, and it is this full spectrum of apocalyptic sources that is drawn on in interpreting massive viral outbreaks.

The Bible warns of horrible events and plagues during the final days, but I have learned that there is a common understanding amongst Evangelical Christians that they, themselves, will not experience these events. The “rapture” will happen before God punishes those who did not obey him and “true” Christians will not experience the horrors described in Revelation. Mr. B. stated, “Between the present era and the era to come, there will be a removal of all true believers from the earth. This is spoken of at the end of Matthew 24, 1 Corinthians 15, and 1 Thessalonians 4, as well as other places in the New Testament. We call this the Rapture.” I expected more hesitancy and caution when claiming that the novel Coronavirus is not the plague of the Apocalypse. Instead, every one of my informants were secure and confident in their interpretation of the meaning of the pandemic. Although the coronavirus is the most disastrous plague that has impacted humanity this century, nobody I spoke with shared the notion that COVID-19 is one of the final plagues prophesied in Revelation.

I am hesitant to make definitive claims about how attitudes changed throughout the pandemic in terms of how Evangelical Christians have tended to interpret what type of plague COVID-19 is or is not. Since approximately three years have passed since the original outbreak and time continues to pass without the return of Christ, the likelihood of this “plague” being of divine origin or being associated with the “final days” has decreased for certain believers. The longer that it takes for Christ’s Second Coming, the less likely Christians are to believe this pandemic is a prophesied plague from Revelation. If I had conducted this research three years ago, I may have received different answers because attitudes have likely shifted as we get deeper into this “post-COVID-19” way of life. From my own experience, there used to be much more

concern about this pandemic being deadly enough to be of biblical magnitude and significance. When the world is supposed to end, and doesn't, attitudes and ideas must shift to make sense of what is going on around us.

In the early days of the virus, the possibility of COVID-19 being one of the plagues sent by God to punish sinners was plausible. Many people were concerned and sought the advice of church leaders, such as pastors and deacons. The Deacon told me that, "Concerns were wide amongst people. Pretty much everyone had concerns about what was going on, whether they were scared for their health, this was being advertised as a deadly virus, the elderly were scared they were going to get sick and die. Some were totally opposed, and the concern revolved around restrictions on liberty and freedoms, most went to our pastor, but a lot of people had conversations informally with him, rather than seeking advice." The Pastor I spoke to stated that, "People were anxious to thumb their nose at the government, but we tried to follow public health guidelines, we separated seats, and recommended people wear masks, and for the most part people followed the church's guidelines, but we lost folks on both sides of the coin." The government and their role in the pandemic was a common topic during my conversations. I do not know if this distrust towards the government is unique to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is definitely prevalent and plays a large role in how people in Evangelical Christian communities are thinking about and conceptualizing this period of time.

An interesting article on a popular Christian website elaborated on why there appears to be growing mistrust between the government and the Church, one of the reasons being, "The work of government is fundamentally concerned with matters of justice, and people who have been justified by Christ—Christians—care about justice. They care about *righteous judgments*, which is one way to define justice from the Bible. It makes sense, therefore, that you would ask

questions, even become skeptical, when people choose what appears to be a path of injustice. They appear to be making unrighteous judgments,” (Leeman, 2020). These are theologically fueled debates at play and it becomes obvious during times of political and social crisis that there are deep-rooted concerns about the role of government in the life of Christians. These become heightened when people think their liberties and freedoms are at risk. The Deacon I spoke with stated, “A lot of church members saw the government mandates as a first amendment issue, preventing their right to worship, this was not from a biblical standpoint but from an American standpoint.” I think this is a really interesting point. It begs the question, what about these feelings and attitudes towards COVID-19 and the mandates and guidelines implemented are influenced by Christian doctrine and values and what are more specifically American influenced?

For my informants the pandemic can never be completely separated from apocalyptic prophecy. The Deacon stated, “Looking back on this time, I have a pretty different perspective. I had no problem taking the vaccine, just because of my own health history, and I knew it was the responsible thing to do. My problem lies with the government mandating vaccination. The fear started when the government forced us to get the vaccine. Now, I never saw the vaccine as itself fulfilling an End Times prediction, however, I do think it is playing a larger role moving towards End Times prophecy.” This insight serves as a segway into another common narrative during pandemics and specifically, this COVID-19 pandemic, which is of the “Beast” and its “Mark.”

The perspectives of these four informants have allowed me valuable insight into a larger community of believers. While the Book of Revelation is still being used as a “little machine” whose power and relevance resides in how it functions in connection to humans and events, the ways in which this “machine” is used varies amongst members of the Christian faith. The malleable and vague nature of the Book - and, importantly, the way it is read in tandem with

other apocalyptic narratives found throughout the Christian Scriptures - provides it with powerful “sockets” into which unexplained and unprecedented events may be plugged in order to reassure, comfort, and make sense of crises within an apocalyptic framework. Looking back at the history of other pandemics and how people used Revelation as a tool for making sense of the world, it seems much more black and white, but the reality is that belief is never homogenous, and when it comes to the end of the world, belief is constantly adapting and shifting.

The Beast and the Mark of the Beast

As noted earlier, my research indicates that identification of a public/political figure or group as the “Beast” has become a crucial signifier of apocalyptic End Times for generations of Christians. Warnings associated with the “Beast” include being tricked into worshiping it and thereby incurring God’s wrath and also accepting its “Mark,” signifying that you are among the unfaithful and deceived. Much of the online discourse concerned with End Times prophecy and COVID-19 revolves around the threat of a “Mark” from the beast of Revelation. I expected the notion of the COVID-19 vaccine as the “Mark” to come up pretty seamlessly in my interviews, and this did happen, but, similar to the notion of “pandemic as plague,” belief continues to shift and my eyes were opened to a variety of opinions when it comes to the vaccine. In the following section, I will address the recurrent points made by my interviewees concerning the Mark of the Beast, but also the variation of belief that exists amongst individuals in this faith-based community.

There is abundant evidence online of people making connections between the COVID-19 vaccine and the “Mark of the Beast,” and despite the vaccine’s claim to safety and efficacy, a

more important matter is at stake for some Christians – eternal salvation. Each of my interviewees had different opinions regarding the vaccine, but even though perspectives vary, the vaccine still plays a major role in how people are conceptualizing this period of time. Mrs. A stated with concern and certainty, “I first started to make correlations between vaccine and the mark of the beast in the early days of the pandemic. When chips were starting to be placed in people, I knew scary things were starting to take place. You can see all of the scary things happening. I mean look at the mandates, we’re being forced to take the vaccine to keep our jobs or stay in school. People can’t travel without being vaccinated. The vaccine isn’t safe, especially for people with weaker immune systems.” Out of all the interviews I had, this woman and I had the most intense and informative conversation concerning the vaccine. She began with this statement and then continued to explain why this vaccine may not be the infamous “Mark” but still plays an important role in End Times prophecy.

Once she established that this vaccine is not the “Mark” but that it still insinuates an approaching apocalypse, she then went on to justify this claim by stating Christians won’t be here at all to receive the “Mark.” She stated, “The COVID-19 vaccine is not the mark of the beast, but the Devil is setting up for the mark. True believers must be removed first before anyone receives the mark of beast because the Holy spirit in us is too strong and it’s keeping the Antichrist from coming into power. The Rapture has to happen before the tribulation period.” Because there are still too many Christians on the Earth and the Holy Spirit resides in them, the Antichrist is unable to manipulate or control the population because God is still present. Once the Christians are removed during the Rapture, then the Devil may rule over the Earth and those who choose to worship him will be given the “Mark.” The mass distribution and encouragement to

take the COVID-19 vaccine thus served as a test run to see who is willing to inject something into them without questioning the origins or true intent of the dose.

This “pre-tribulation” interpretation of Revelation means that Christians will be raptured before the seven year period of damnation that is described in the book of Revelation. The Deacon I spoke with adopted this worldview and it similarly affected the way he interpreted the pandemic. He stated, “We are moving towards a one world government and one world currency. The response to COVID-19 is a precursor to all of these larger global issues, it seemed like a trial balloon, in essence, to push towards globalization. The people pulling the strings learned a lot about what they need to do to make that happen.” Revelation 13 implies very strongly, there will be in the last days, a one world government. That concept is based partly on the scriptural prophecy which indicates a one world leader and consequently a one world government. Revelation 13:7-8 states, “And it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” (Revelation 13:7-8).

Despite this feeling of uneasiness, the Deacon still chose to get vaccinated for reasons relating to health and wellness. He continued, “I had no problem taking the vaccine, because of my own health history, I knew it was the responsible thing to do, my problem lies with government mandating.” It isn’t about the beast or the “Mark;” rather, individuals are becoming more and more concerned with the government’s role in vaccine rollout and their attempt to vaccinate as many people as possible. We continued to talk about this event and he followed this up by saying, “There are always varied opinions within the church, because we knew so little about what is actually going on in the moment, we thought we were dealing with a really deadly

virus and we gave up a lot of freedoms out of fear. Looking back it feels like we were manipulated and weren't given a lot of information from the people that are supposed to protect us. People ended up being coerced into doing something they didn't want to do. So much misinformation is in circulation that it makes you question how can we trust the government ever again?" Here he is shifting away from the historically common narrative concerning the "Mark of the Beast" and begins a dialogue more concerned with the U.S. government and their true intention with American people.

Both the Deacon and Mrs. A argue in support of the looming apocalypse, but differently than what I expected. There appears to be a variety of opinions about the vaccine and its connection to biblical prophecy. Unlike my other interviews, Mr. B contributed something unique during our conversation,

"As to the origins of the disease and the vaccine, I have no substantial comment to make as it is outside my area of concern and study. I will comment, however, that as I understand the vaccine to include fetal tissue from aborted babies and the world-wide forcefulness in which citizens were required/pressured into taking it is completely of the devil himself. Anyone wishing to kill babies and use their tissue for "science" is closely kin to the Pharaoh of Moses and Herod the "Great." The fact that the American Church was nearly shut down during the pandemic and pastors jailed for refusing to submit to the government on this is a very serious turn of events which leads me to wonder what the next excuse to close church will be. Covid affected all of us, but this was to me the biggest issue of all."

The vaccine containing fetal tissue from aborted babies was something I had heard about on social media and in conversation during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, but did not expect it to arise in these interviews. The UCLA Health COVID-19 FAQ page responded to this serious inquiry by stating,

No, the COVID-19 vaccines do not contain aborted fetal cells. However, Johnson & Johnson did use fetal cell lines — not fetal tissue — when developing and producing their vaccine, while Pfizer and Moderna used fetal cell lines to test their vaccines and make sure that they work. Fetal cell lines are grown in a laboratory and were started with

cells from elective abortions that occurred several decades ago in the 1970s-80s. They are now thousands of generations removed from the original fetal tissue. None of the COVID-19 vaccines use fetal cells derived from recent abortions. (UCLA Health, 2023)

There is wide enough concern that public health organizations feel the need to address this on their websites, but who is right if there is a lack of trust between these organizations and real people? The growing and sustained distrust between some Evangelical Christians and the U.S. government fuels these debates and makes the truth very blurry, if there is a “truth” at all.

The Pastor of the church my other interviewees attend, offered a completely different narrative disavowing the connection between the vaccine and the “Mark” but acknowledging the validity of the concerns that arose. He stated, “Portions of Revelation’s prophecy have happened, God warns churches to exist in a state of readiness. Warnings have also happened, we have seen parts of Revelation play out already, and the ultimate judgment is on the verge. But despite this, nobody but the Father knows the day or the hour when Christ will return, which ultimately means mankind can’t fully piece things together, because that would be biblically unsound.” He goes on to say, “the COVID-19 Pandemic brought certain conspiracies to the fore in a big way, but the two beasts of Revelation will come at the same time, one is the mouthpiece, a silver tongued person who is really good at oration, and they will both serve as the prophet for the Antichrist. The Book speaks to bad things, but this pandemic didn’t seem that bad.” He explained that throughout the pandemic he didn’t try to scare people or draw modern connections between unfolding events and the biblical apocalypse, but kept the message concerned solely on being secure in your Faith.

The narrative that the COVID-19 vaccine is the “Mark of the Beast” appears to be shifting amongst certain communities of believers. In the early days of the outbreak, fears and concerns seemed to differ based on what I was experiencing as a member of this community. It’s

interesting that the vaccine still remains a crucial aspect of the apocalyptic narrative surrounding the pandemic, it just functions in different ways. This is in keeping with a plurality of belief when it comes to the end of the world. There isn't a singular view of the End Times for Evangelical Christians and the foundational biblical texts used to make sense of certain crises can ultimately be interpreted pretty freely.

Comfort and Assurance

In my interviews I expected to entertain more discussion surrounding the fear and/or anxiety that may arise when reading about the horrors described in Revelation. While we did discuss the scary or evil things happening in our world, we would always circle back to discussion of the emotions and feelings concerning the ultimate message of Revelation. Mrs. A stated, "I find great comfort in the fact that God has measured everything precisely and holds everything in place. We are about to meet him and that is a beautiful thing." The feelings surrounding the apocalypse appear to not be rooted in fear, which is commonly misunderstood to outsiders. It is important to contextualize the following information regarding the signs and prophecies signaling the End Days, because there is a real sense of calmness and preparedness amongst these specific community members. When discussing topics of evil and horror playing out on earth and in the Bible, it is all overshadowed by the excitement for uniting with the Divine.

But even this excitement and comfort proves to be complex and while this appears to be the overarching feeling concerning the Second Coming of Christ, there is not one homogeneous stance taken. The Deacon conveyed with a heavy heart, "Tribulation and God's judgment is

going to be terrible, but we look forward to it because Christ is going to make everything right, no more wars or sin or sickness, we rejoice for that, however, God is going to judge sin and for those that reject him there is punishment for that and that is the sad reality. It is tough for loved ones and the people that will have to go through that.” While the prospect of meeting Jesus and entering a place in which sin, sadness, and evil don’t exist is a comforting and assuring future, the difficult and devastating flip-side involves potentially losing people that are important to you. This is why there is such urgency to introduce people to God and His mercy, so that they may receive His grace on judgment day and be saved from the evils of the tribulation. In a similar vein, the Pastor expressed a comparable emotion yet spoke with peace and assurance in the face of this circumstance. He stated, “Once we have been taken off of the earth by God’s hand in all of His glory, nobody can hurt us anymore. We are called to not judge, only God can, the book of Revelation really comes down to being ready and feeling secure.”

My conversation with the Pastor and Deacon felt intense and serious, but less directed at me compared to the conversation I had with Mr. B. He seemed to be very concerned about my relationship with God and where I stood in regards to my faith and stated,

“I will get to your question about the pandemic in a moment, but the first and most important question is based on 2 Corinthians 13:5. “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” Philippians 2:12 says, “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Many people call themselves Christians who have never obeyed these two verses. To boil this down to a question that communicates this idea, I will ask you personally, Are you 100% certain that if you died today, you would go to heaven? The second question is similar, If you did die today and stood before God and He asked you, “Why should I let you into My Heaven?” What would you say? I know these questions are direct, but our salvation is determined now rather than later. It really won’t make any difference whether the Covid virus is in the Bible or not if we are castaway from God at His judgment seat.”

I had assumed prior to my conversations that the only thing people in this community did was think of the ways in which phenomena during the pandemic could be “plugged” into Revelation’s “sockets” to simply label an era as the End Times, but that is seemingly not the case. There is much more emphasis and focus on the individual and their status as either saved or unsaved when conversations about the End Times arise. Especially on the local level, people close to me and who have known me my whole life are much more concerned about my salvation and stance through the pandemic. They are secure in their faith, but am I secure in mine? That was the real focus.

People in these communities may look for the signs and connections in order to strengthen their faith and security in God. When biblical prophecy plays out in front of our eyes, it is hard not to believe in the validity and closeness of the apocalypse. I asked Mrs. A why she dedicates so much time to interpreting current events if she was confident in her belief that she will not experience the tribulation and she responded, “the Holy Spirit wants to teach us individually about the things that are most important. He wants to communicate and share knowledge, the things he can reveal to us are the most important things we can know. Revelation is a warning in hopes to get Christians thinking about the rapture and paying attention to what is going on around us so we can be prepared for the final days.” Prophecy about the last days shapes a view of the Bible, God, and the world today for some Evangelicals and studying what God has told believers about the future will help them live more faithfully for the Messiah in our present contexts. This is why many have dedicated their lives to apocalyptic prophecies and the study of the final days. It seems counterintuitive, but it solidifies a world view that reinforces a Christian identity and strong relationship with God.

Mrs. A concluded our conversation with a powerful statement,

“God revealed to Daniel what would happen in the end, but now everything is revealed because we live in the fig tree generation. When the rapture takes place, the true believers in Christ shall rise first, this means our generation might never feel physical death...how cool and exciting is that? I do not believe you or I will die of natural causes. Now people may get too caught up in the specific date and time, but God will let us know the season. Similar to a pregnant woman, we know she will give birth in 9 months but we do not know the exact time or day. God even calls End Times labor pains. He measured everything precisely, he holds everything in place. The word of God transforms you, and we’re about to meet him.”

It is important for Christians to watch for the signs and be ready for what is about to come.

Revelation as a tool for understanding the world is so effective in its means to explain and provide comfort during times of distress such as a global pandemic. While this book reveals “the things that must shortly come to pass” (Revelation 1:1), true favor is promised not to those who crack its code but to hearers who “keep those things which are written therein”(Revelation 1:3). Revelation thus has an ultimate ethical aim, summoning the people of the church to respond wisely to the trustworthy words of God. Revelation unveils the glorious future awaiting God’s people and this small ethnographic sample of Evangelical Christians provides a glimpse of what this notion looks and feels like in the lives of everyday people.

Summary

I went into my interviews thinking everybody would say relatively the same thing, and I was wrong. Each interviewee had a different perspective to offer regarding the timeline of the apocalypse, the “Mark of the Beast,” and biblical plagues, but interestingly, all of these themes still fit into everyone’s apocalyptic narrative in one way or another. While there is plurality of belief amongst individuals in larger systems of religion, major themes seem to remain the same and certain aspects of Revelation’s apocalyptic narrative repeatedly rise to the surface and

dominate discourse during times of crisis. My ethnographic research provides a glimpse into the complexities that emerge when grappling with questions of human existence and life during this period of unprecedented crisis and panic. This ethnographic data helps highlight the differences between people that are commonly assumed to be uniform and establish the grounds for understanding the concerns, hesitations, hopes, and joys of people living every day as if it may be their last.

Conclusion

Christian prophecy about the End Times offers a reassuring and comforting narrative about crisis that makes the events of the times seem less random and unprovoked. Revelation continues to function in a very specific way and its sockets work so seamlessly and reliably that even major global catastrophic events can be explained and understood within a sacred biblical timeline, to ultimately strengthen one's faith and relationship with the divine. In this thesis, I argued that because of the ways in which Revelation's language functions in connection with the broader social institutions, practices, and events, it can be applicable to all kinds of crises, but very specifically to pandemics and epidemics. I also explored how the apocalypse story of Revelation has two very distinct themes of "plagues" and "beasts" and that these themes function as "sockets" into which modern events may be plugged as a way to explain or reassure during a time of crisis. By looking at the historical reception of the book of Revelation and how Evangelical Christian communities used the "sockets" of "beasts" and "plagues" to make sense of global health crises such as the Black Death, the AIDs epidemic, and the Ebola virus, I showed that through the use of these "sockets" a feeling of hope and comfort is provided as a result of connecting the prophecy to the modern period.

After exploring the ways in which the narrative has offered assurance and explanation throughout history, I presented the explicit connections being made between the COVID-19 pandemic and the End Times narrative of Revelation in online social media posts. By looking at Tweets and other online resources posted by people in the United States either during the height of the outbreak (2020-2021) or in the current period of decline (2022-2023), I can demonstrate the specific language and style being used to construe connections between things like the "Mark

of the Beast” and the COVID-19 vaccine or mask mandates. Looking closer at this modern discourse helps illuminate the timelessness of Revelation and its ability to provide an enduring and unfailing explanatory framework for any crisis. Thus, COVID-19 acts as a tool for Evangelical Christians in this time period to make sense of the world through a sacred apocalyptic framework.

Finally, I presented the ethnographic, qualitative data I collected from members of a small church community in Western Maine to better highlight what this looks like for people in my local community. My unique position as a former member of the church allowed me insight into a small faith community that adheres to Revelation’s warnings and lives their lives in accordance with its message of readiness and preparedness. By presenting the stories of four people who use Revelation and other apocalyptic scripture to advise decision making, I add an element of humanity to this project in hopes of bridging a gap of understanding and acknowledging the plurality of belief. Contributing an ethnographic element to this research allowed me to better explore the social dynamics and culture of this group by helping me gain detailed information about the religious beliefs of this community which ultimately aids in a more accurate representation of this faith system.

If further research were to be conducted, more interviews and ethnographic data could be collected from different parts of the country to examine if belief inherently changed based on geographic location. All informants for this study came from the same community in Western Maine, which was a result of the position in which I hold as the researcher. My identity allowed me access into this faith community and trust had already been established. Nevertheless, the insight provided by my informants demonstrates the plurality of belief in a group commonly assumed to be homogenous. I use this qualitative data to argue that Revelation, as a tool, still

functions similarly in the lives of people and even though the ways in which its “sockets” are utilized varies, these “sockets” continue to function regardless. The malleable and vague nature of Revelation’s apocalypse allows Christians to “plug” in modern unexplained or unprecedented events in order to reassure, comfort, and make sense of the crisis within a biblical structure.

I began this research by looking at Revelation’s reception history during historical times of crisis in the most broad sense. I then narrowed it down further to highlight the ways in which people used the apocalypse story to understand and make sense of the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, I presented the stories of four people who all use this specific biblical prophecy to guide decision making and motivate action while navigating lockdowns, mandates, and safety protocols put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Much can be learned about the way people think about life, death, and faith through the study of the End Times, and this research hopefully contributes to an ongoing conversation about the lived experience of Evangelical Christians in a time of a global pandemic. If God has the power to create the world, He has the power to destroy it, and in the meantime, those who fear His word will continue to wait for the end and piece together the connections in preparation for the looming and ever-approaching apocalypse.

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