Literalism and its Impact on the Commentaries of the Book of Revelation in the 16th and 17th Century British Isles

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Research Question and Method: The question at hand is how the rise of “literalism” affects the interpretation of biblical texts, especially the Book of Revelation, during the turbulent Early Modern Period in the British Isles. By doing extensive reading in the history of biblical interpretation, there can be seen a rise in the literal sense of Scripture which leads to an increase in many commentaries of Revelation expounding a “literal-figurative” meaning to the text.

Discussion:
- The framework of Lutheran Orthodoxy spreads around Europe, but not all ideas are taken.
- John Napier, a Scottish Calvinist, has a background in this system and applies it to his commentary on Revelation.
- His commentary takes many of the prophecies within and applies it to his political and religious circumstances.
- To him the Pope is the antichrist and the world will end between the years 1688-1700.
- A later theologian named Richard Hayter would interpret the prophecies futuristically, not historically in a literal way.

Background: Beginning in the Middle Ages the “literal” sense of Scripture begins to become the more dominant form of interpretation. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther insists that Scripture must be interpreted by its “simple literal sense.” This is continued by the followers of Martin Luther. The Lutheran orthodox framework would impact much of the ideas in biblical exegesis.

Conclusions: John Napier and Richard Hayter can only have such a “literal” interpretation due to changes in biblical exegesis beginning in the Medieval period which impacted the Protestant reformers into understanding the prophecies of Revelation in a literal sense. The literal sense continues to impact exegesis to this day.

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Select Sources: