Luther and English Apocalypticism: The Role of Luther in Three Seventeenth-Century Commentaries on the Book of Revelation

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IN HIS satire *The Devil's Dictionary,* Ambrose Bierce included the following definition: **"Revelation,** *n.* A famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done by the commentators, who know nothing."[1] The book of Revelation, the only apocalypse among the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, has always occupied a marginal role within the field of Biblical interpretation. Its bizarre visions of beasts, dragons, plagues, and cataclysms have inspired poets and artists while confounding more traditionally minded scholars for centuries. England in the early seventeenth century proved an exception to this rule. The flowering of apocalyptic exegesis in this period among academic circles bestowed a new respectability on the book of Revelation as a literal roadmap of church history from the time of Christ to the present, and on into the eschaton. The principal writers in this field, including Arthur Dent, Thomas Brightman, and Joseph Mede, have been dubbed "Calvinist millenarians" by modern historiography. They were certainly Calvinist in their views on doctrine, and also in their melioristic vision of England as the consummation of the Reformation, as an elect nation with the potential to recreate the true church of the early Christians. Their intense belief in the imminence of the end of the world, however, along with the mode of interpretation which they applied to the Revelation, reflected trends in Christian thought redirected by Martin Luther, and largely ignored by John Calvin.

In this paper I will examine Luther's role in three English interpretations of the Revelation, discussing both his influence as an intellectual precedent, and his appearance as a character within these texts. Luther himself never wrote a detailed commentary on the Apocalypse, but in a preface to the 1530 edition of his German New Testament, he outlined a mode of exegesis which emphasized the application of the Revelation to history. This literal approach first appeared in England in a

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1545 commentary by John Bale, a transitional figure often considered the progenitor of the English apocalytic tradition. Later works utilized Luther's model more completely, and I will cite three of these in particular: Arthur Dent's *Ruine of Rome* (1603), an excellent introduction to the mainstream of English commentaries; Thomas Brightman's *Revelation of St. John* (1609), which epitomized the Anglocentric slant inherent to the English version of the paradigm; and Joseph Mede's *Key of the Revelation* (1627), which superseded all previous works in its sophisticated juxtaposition of history with Scripture, bringing the tradition to a kind of conclusion. Although these later scholars cited Luther as an important figure in church history, they did not acknowledge (or realize) any methodological debt to him; adopting a mode of interpretation outlined by Luther, they redirected these ideas towards a scheme which was Calvinist in its hope for worldly improvement.

THE PHRASE "Calvinist millenarian," upon further examination, joins two sets of seemingly incompatible ideas without explaining the origins of this odd combination. Calvin himself expressed little interest in either history or eschatology. William M. Lamont has noticed that like St. Augustine, Calvin "viewed the Apocalypse with detachment: it had a circumscribed, allegorical significance, and that was all. Calvin remained wedded to a view of God as, in all significant things, Unknowable."[2] He concerned himself more with personal salvation than with the salvation of the world, and his sparse and unsystematic views on history tended to look for progressive improvement rather than rapid upheaval. Calvin spoke in terms of a "zeal for daily progress" among the community, and his followers expanded his ideas to encompass the betterment of a much larger group. "Indeed, despite Calvin's Augustinian avoidance of historically oriented eschatology," writes Robin Bruce Barnes, "the hint of progressivism in his thought left the way open for the frank meliorism and chiliasm of many later Calvinist thinkers."[3]

Luther alone among the magisterial reformers displayed a healthy interest in things apocalyptic, and even he only gradually overcame his disdain for the book of Revelation. In a 1522 preface, he condemned the text as "neither apostolic nor prophetic," and suggested that Jerome, who had taken an interest in it, should have devoted his attention to more worthy areas of scripture.[4] He concluded a three-paragraph introduction with the decidedly uninspired opinion, "My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it,—Christ is not taught or known in it."[5] In his revised preface to the Apocalypse in 1530, however, he abandoned the traditional Augustinian interpretation for a more literal stance. Trained in the *via moderna*, Luther inherited the *Quadriga*, or four-fold sense of scripture, the standard medieval hermeneutical

tool. Augustine had set a precedent by insisting on the priority of the literal sense of scripture over the other, higher meanings: the allegorical, which concerns what is believed; the anagogical, which concerns what is hoped for; and the tropological, which concerns moral conduct. Luther further divided the literal component into two senses; the literal-historical, and the literal-prophetic. The first of these emphasized the specific historical situation described in the Bible, and the second addressed the ways in which scripture had been played out in history since the time of the early church.[6] Luther used this distinction primarily as a means of interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New, but his methodology yielded interesting results when applied to Revelation.

Despite his increased interest in Revelation, in 1530 (as compared to 1522) Luther made only a few cautious attempts to identify its various vials, trumpets, and seals with events from church history. He stated at the outset that the Revelation fell under the most obscure sort of prophecy, which foretold the future "without either words or interpretations," but with dreams, visions, and symbols.[7] After commenting on previous expositors' relative lack of success in explaining the Revelation, he presented the basis for his own approach:

> Since [the book] is intended as a revelation of things that are to happen in the future, and especially of tribulations and disasters for the Church, we consider that the first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon the Church before now and hold them up alongside of these pictures and so compare them with the words. If, then, the two were to fit and agree with each other, we could build on that, as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable interpretation.[8]

Luther then embarked on a brief chapter-by-chapter explication of the text, in which he described the physical and spiritual tribulations of the church since the time of Christ. He did not make any attempt to modify the chronology of the book, but read it as a linear account of church history. He identified the four bad angels of Revelation 8 as Tatian, Marcion, Origen, and Novatus, leaders of heretical sects of the second and third centuries.[9] The trials of the faithful were capped by the three woes, in the form of Arius, the fourth-century heretic; Mohammed and the Saracens, "who inflicted a great plague on the Church, with their doctrines and with the sword"; and the papal empire, which committed both spiritual and temporal "abominations, woes, and injuries."[10] "Thus the Church is plagued most terribly and miserably, everywhere and on all sides, with false doctrines and with wars, with book and sword."[11] The remainder of the book after chapter 14 contained only "pictures of comfort" for Luther; in the angels he saw preachers of

the true Gospel revealing the false nature of the papacy, and the seven vials he interpreted as continued attacks on false doctrine which would lead up to the ultimate victory over Pope and Turk alike. He refrained from attributing specific events or names to these angels and vials, but wrote instead of anonymous "learned and pious preachers" who spread the Gospel. He likewise hesitated to assign specific dates to the events of past and future. The overall tone of the 1530 preface, however, suggested that "things are at their worst," and that the recent turmoil associated with the Reformation prefigured an imminent end—a concept which he expanded upon amply elsewhere."[12]

Luther's interpretation of the Revelation, tentative as it was in terms of specifics, nonetheless contained new and seminal insights into the study of church history. Barnes phrased it well, writing that the "crux of all that was new in Luther's reading of biblical prophecy, and the most influential of all his prophetic discoveries, was his identification of the Antichrist with the papacy at Rome."[13] Most medieval commentators believed that the Antichrist was yet to come, and focused their attention on predicting the nature of the coming evil. The few early critics who did associate the pope with the Antichrist, such as Jan Hus and Savonarola, did so on moralistic grounds, using the Antichrist as a rhetorical device to criticize corruption in the Catholic church.[14] By contrast, Luther's attack was rooted in the firm ground of Scripture. He rejected the old church because he perceived its teachings to be perversions of the Word of God, and in so doing he modified the traditional approach to the Revelation.[15] As he saw it, ". . . by means of [the papacy's] book, the world has been filled with all kinds of idolatry—monasteries, foundations, saints, pilgrimages, purgatory, indulgence, celibacy and innumerable other creations of human doctrines and works."[16] Unlike some medieval commentators, who also identified the pagan Turk with Antichrist, Luther chose to apply the image strictly to the papacy, and associated the Turk with the beasts unleashed by the devil after his millennium of bondage.[17]

Thus Luther used both history and Scripture to attack the Pope, and this doctrinal foundation allowed him to carry his polemic one step further. He believed that under the influence of the ungodly papacy the Church had diverged from the true, "hidden" Church which continued to uphold the Word of God under persecution. Luther's reinterpretation of the two cities of Augustine appeared in his 1530 preface, where he stated that one could read the Revelation as a warning against the trials the church will face. In these battles, the enemies of the faithful will obscure the church under heresies and other faults, calling the elect "them damned heretics who are really the true christian Church."[18] Luther was far from being the first to interpret history as God's work, but his insistence on the agreement between the Bible and history led him to mount a novel, doctrinally

based assault on the Catholic Church.

JOHN BALE (1495-1563), a historian and converted Carmelite friar, is generally considered to be the first English reformer to use the Revelation as a pattern of church history; his *Image of Bothe Churches* (1545) "acted as a paradigm" for the English apocalyptic tradition.[19] Bale lacked the hope for renewal in the present world which characterized later writers, placing his faith instead in the Second Coming of Jesus. In general, Bale emphasized the past rather than the future, and he lifted much of his historical material from the 1528 commentary of the French reformer Francis Lambert.[20] The main themes of his work, however, reflect ideas popularized by Martin Luther, and Bale cited Luther's 1530 preface to the Revelation in his commentary.[21] Three concepts in particular make Bale's work remarkable: his reinterpretation of Augustine's two cities, his view of the Antichrist, and his application of historical analysis to Scripture.[22] Bale transformed the two cities into two churches, one true and one led by the Antichrist, who appeared as a general representative of evil throughout church history. He then applied the prophecies of the Revelation to history, establishing a framework which pointed toward the coming eschaton, a framework in which Luther's model was applied to England and fleshed out with references to history. The German reformer, of course, had not applied Scripture to English history or embarked on a systematic exposition of the Revelation. He did, however, provide the ideological basis for such a study with his rejection of the allegorical tradition and with his theories regarding the hidden church and the papal Antichrist. Luther's use of the Revelation in his polemics against the papacy instituted a marriage between Scripture and history which proved fruitful for those such as Bale who systematically applied historical analysis to the Apocalypse.

THESE THEMES were redirected and developed further in a rapidly rising stream of seventeenth-century English commentaries on the book of Revelation. As early as 1603 Arthur Dent commented on the proliferation of exegetes in his Ruine of Rome:

> And true it is indeed, that sundry worthy labours of divers excellent men upon the Apocalyps, are already extant: so as hee may seeme to powre water into the sea, or goe about to mend the Crowes eyes, that will attempt to adde any thing to that which is already published.[23]

Following is an examination of the views concerning Luther held by three of the most important and influential writers in this tradition. These men brought

more than a heightened sense of imminence to the study of religion in England; by combining historical calculation with Scriptural interpretation, they also lent a new respectability to prophecy. Apocalyptic interpretation appeared in the work of John Foxe, for example, but his writings did not prove as influential as these later English studies in the exegesis of prophecy. Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563), disseminated widely under the Elizabethan government, depicted a long historical tradition of conflict between Englishmen and the Antichrist, and did much to popularize the image of a Roman Antichrist. In the final analysis, however, Foxe did not make the "pursuit of the Millennium respectable and orthodox,"[24] and his eschatology was limited severely by its political agenda and by its use of historical sources without an intense interest in the corresponding canonical texts.[25] The later commentaries of Brightman and Mede, by contrast, placed England within a firm biblical tradition by creating a link between the present state of the nation and the immediacy of the eschaton.

Arthur Dent's exegesis, more completely entitled *The ruine of Rome, or, An exposition upon the whole Revelation: wherein is plainly shewed and proved that the popish religion, together with all the power and authority of Rome, shall ebbe and decay . . . written especially for the comfort of Protestants and the daunting of papists,* typifies the mainstream of English commentaries. Dent's book went through at least eleven printings between 1603 and 1662, although its popularity was not attributable to any revolutionary advance it made in the field.[26] The author (d. 1607), a Puritan minister and graduate of Christ's College, Cambridge, was known as an excellent preacher, and his printed sermons went through numerous editions as well.[27] His fervent desire to see the "prosperity of Zion and the ruin of Rome"[28] permeated his exegetical works, bringing a new angle to some established concepts. Following the lead of previous commentators such as John Bale, Dent embarked on a detailed analysis of the Apocalypse, identifying the various vials, seals, trumpets, and beasts as figures from history both ancient and recent, both ecclesiastical and civil. The book of Revelation depicts a series of intercalated visions and events which do not proceed in a logical order from beginning to end, and often seem repetitively parallel. To account for this lack of order Dent adopted the traditional concept of dual prophecies, maintaining that chapters 4-11 and chapters 12-21 both recounted history from the birth of Christ to the end. Dent modified this model by placing greater emphasis on the seven churches of chapters 1-3, but on the whole his analysis drew heavily on the work of previous authors.

Dent's analysis of the opening of the first six seals of Revelation exemplified the literal-prophetic mode of interpretation employed by all three of these commentators. Luther had interpreted this chapter in general terms as depicting the

physical tribulations accompanying the rise of the "ungrateful and the despisers of God's Word."[29] Dent went further by associating most of the seals with specific events in history. In the first seal, for example, he construed the "voice of thunder" as the Apostle John, and the "conquering" rider of the white horse as Jesus, the Word of God, unleashed in the Gospel.[30] He interpreted the "bloudy Warres" of the second seal as the "state of the Church under the tenne great persecutions, raised against it by the persecuting emperors," beginning with Domitian and running until the time of Constantine.[31] The third seal he associated with the famine of 316 A.D., and the fourth with the "pestilence and other contagious diseases" brought by the Huns, Goths, and Vandals around the end of the third century. He predicted that the martyrs crying out under the fifth seal would be joined by those "martyred and slaine for the truth . . . under the great Antichrist of *Rome*, and the bloudy Turke, at and upon the opening of the seventh seal."[32] In his analysis of the sixth seal, Dent was forced by the violence of the images to revert to a metaphorical interpretation, although he apparently searched his knowledge of history for such an upheaval before resorting to an explanation of the commotions as wars between kingdoms in the three hundred years after Christ.[33] Interestingly, Dent followed Luther in concluding that the first six seals depicted physical rather than spiritual or doctrinal corruption, identifying the latter with the six trumpets of chapters 8-9 instead. Dent thus fleshed out the literal-prophetic approach to Revelation 6 by using specific references to history where he could.

The image of the Antichrist leading a false church loomed large in Dent's eschatology. In his exposition of chapter 13 he presented the first beast as the Roman Empire's temporal power, and the second as the Papacy: "By the beast in this place is meant the Roman Monarchy, not in regard of the Civil power thereof, but especially in respect of the tyranny of it, in oppressing the Church."[34] The *Ruine of Rome* was punctuated with belligerent language of this sort, and Dent used "papist" and "Romish" as the worst of epithets. He went so far as to describe the battle of chapter 19 between the armies of evil and the figure on the white horse as a war between Papists and Protestants.[35] He related the fall of the whore of Babylon in the Apocalypse to the decline of papal authority. "Rome," he wrote, "is the great whoore of Babylon . . . the Pope is Antichrist, and the Papacy the beast . . . the utter overthrow of Rome, falleth out to bee, but a little before the comming of Christ to judgement."[36] Dent, like Luther before him, also denounced the Turkish menace without employing direct references to the Antichrist, calling the Turk rather a divine scourge imposed in reaction to human sin.

To support his polemic against the false nature of the Catholic church, Dent adopted the Lutheran concept of a true, hidden church, but with a new twist—in Dent's scheme Luther himself rescued the church from its "former darknesse":

> In vain therefore do the Papists ask us where our Church was before *Luthers* time, sith the holy Apostle here stoppeth their mouth, and tell us plainly, that Christ had his little flock in the wildernesse . . . And therefore visibility is no sound note of the Church, as the Papists do most ignorantly dispute.[37]

Dent reserved a special niche for Luther in his chronology in the midst of darkness, after the sixth trumpet, at the opening of the "little book" in Revelation 10:2. By making the Bible accessible to a larger audience, and by preaching the true Gospel, "*Luther* and his successors, hath dispersed the former darknesse, and beaten down Popery; so also hath it driven back the Turke."[38] Thus Luther acted as the pivot, the turning point when the nature of the Catholic church was revealed and the hidden church, the 144,000 believers with the Father's name on their foreheads (chapter 14) finally reemerged. Dent's use of generally favorable language to describe Luther echoed the near-apotheosis promoted by some of the Reformer's German followers. Because Dent's primary argument concerned the strife between Protestants and Catholics, rather than between branches of Protestantism, it is not altogether surprising that he approved of Luther. Yet even in Dent, one gets a sense of the limitations on Luther's role. The English character of Dent's Protestantism was largely implicit, especially in comparison to a commentator such as Brightman, but underneath his praise for Luther's accomplishments in instigating the overthrow of the Antichrist lay the implication that the Reformation remained to be completed.

THOMAS Brightman's Latin exposition of the Apocalypse appeared six years after Dent's, and was reprinted in English only posthumously. Brightman (1562-1607), a fellow at Queens' College, Cambridge, and later the rector of Hawnes in Belfordshire, exhibited a pronounced disaffection with the church establishment. This man, described as short in stature and intense yet steady in temperament, carried with him at all times a Greek New Testament, which he apparently reread every two weeks.[39] His disillusionment with ecclesiastical hierarchy and his interest in Scripture were matched by his great sense of hope for the future of Britain, a conviction which permeated his exegesis of Revelation. Brightman largely agreed with Dent in his assessment of the seals and trumpets, but offered an expanded interpretation of the seven vials and the seven churches. He saw the vials as signs of the impending fall of Babylon which followed the first six trumpets, beginning not in the time of Luther, but circa 1560 with the coronation of Elizabeth I and the furthering of the Protestant cause. "Then was the *Christian Empire* augmented," wrote Brightman, "with *England,* and *Ireland,* the next yeare after *Scotland* was added, so as now all *Britany with her Isles* that belong to her

was subject to *Christ.*"[40] Brightman claimed a special importance for this addition to the ranks of Protestant nations, because the kingdom of Christ in England, unlike in other nations, would prove eternal.

In his revised analysis of the seven churches of Revelation 1-3, he proposed that the seven letters referred not only to the historical churches named, but also to periods of church history since the time of Christ. In the church of Sardis, for example, which the author of the Revelation described as an evil institution imperfectly reformed, Brightman saw post-Reformation Germany. He predicted great calamity for that nation if it were to continue on its present course; "Like a whirle-wind shall destruction come, sword, fire, and famine, wasting all and some." A later English commentator summarized Brightman's views on the state of Germany:

> [The] Church of *Sardis* reformed: notwithstanding which, she still retained many errors, as Consubstantiation of the Lords supper, and about free-will, justification, good works, &c by which he [Brightman] foreseeing the miserie since come upon them, admonished the *Germans* to consider of it before hand, and to prevent these impending judgements by reformation and timely repentance.[41]

In describing the churches of Germany as the "counterpane" to the imperfectly reformed Sardis, Brightman used both history and Scripture to underline his doctrinal differences with the German Lutherans, and to exalt by comparison the English branch of Protestantism.

Brightman's portrayal of Luther's role in church history reflected his own Anglophilic bias. As previously noted, Luther played no part in Brightman's revised scheme of the seven vials, here a purely English phenomenon. Like Dent before him, Brightman associated Luther with the third angel of Revelation 14 but his language in recounting the acts of the reformer suggested a less favorable view. He ascribed to Luther, "who began to traduce *Antichrist* openly at the year 1517," a decidedly harsh message of exhortation:

> [Luther's works] do wax so warme, yea burne, yea flame out every where with a kind of fiery frequency. Yea, he went so farre in his ardency, that he could not keep himself from using filthy, and obscene similitudes . . . The world was sicke of a grievous lethargy, so that it could not be rowzed from the dead sleep wherein it lay, unlesse *he had thundred* out in a more vehement, and rough manner, than ordinary.[42]

In Brightman's scheme Luther emerged as a prophet like Jeremiah, a vehicle for

divine wrath, and a warning to the impenitent of the eternal damnation awaiting them. He went so far as to claim that the words of Luther "came not from a man," but were "such as the *Holy Ghost* put into his mind and mouth." Nowhere in Brightman's eschatology did he refer to the elements of hope and salvation in Luther's theology; the German reformer preached only fire and brimstone here, whereas all hope was reserved for the future of England.

Whether or not we accept Paul Christianson's hypothesis that because "Brightman became the first prominent commentator to forge a special role for England ... the `elect nation' stemmed from his work, not that of Foxe,"[43] the Anglocentric slant in Brightman's writings provided their unifying theme. In general, his view of history was wholly pessimistic and degenerative, as was Luther's. He concluded by exhorting the nations of the Continent to stop their civil wars and unite against Rome while criticizing countries such as Spain and France for their continued allegiance to the "Whore."[44] Only when speaking of England did he express any hope for worldly promise. He presented England as the counterpane of Laodicea as described in Revelation 3:14-6, a church which the author of the Apocalypse regarded with ambivalence, calling it both hot and cold. Brightman lamented the existing state of the church, which he considered to be doctrinally sound but led by a "popish government."[45] "Nor are thou hot: thy zeale is of no price, losing its heat, it falls as cold as Ice. How else could a reformed Church admit of popish superstitions mixt with it?"[46] An anonymous editor in 1644 did not stray far from Brightman's views when he concluded, "Christ hath begun his Kingdome (at that time he [Brightman] wrote) which was in the dayes of blessed *Queen Elizabeth,* who happily begun and proceeded the worke of Reformation . . . the finishing whereof will be required of this generation."[47] All figures in Brightman's exegesis of the Revelation related to the central conflict between his anxiety over the present state of England and his fervent hope for the establishment of the true church.

If Joseph Mede (1586-1638) could not equal Brightman in force of personality, he eclipsed all others in the technical mastery of his commentary on the Revelation. "A man of encyclopedic information," Mede was an accomplished philologist, mathematician, historian, physicist, and botanist. Devoid of ambition, he declined several ecclesiastical posts, preferring to continue his studies as a fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge. A proponent of mutual toleration between churches, he remained devoutly loyal to Anglican doctrine and usage throughout his life.[48] The systematic detail of Mede's *Key of the Revelation* set the standard for all future works. His main innovation in the field of prophetic interpretation, the synchronism, allowed for two prophecies to cover the same period in history

by running concurrently. No previous expositor had taken this idea as far as Mede; the famous drawing by Haydock of Mede's overall chronology demonstrates the juxtaposition of the seventh seal and the series of trumpets, and of the sixth trumpet and the first six vials.[49] The seventh seal, trumpet, and vial all converge at the end of both secular and ecclesiastical history, and at the beginning of the one thousand year reign of the saints.[50] Mede's placement of the millennium in the future removed him from the mainstream of the apocalyptic tradition, which identified the bondage of Satan as the period between Constantine and 1300. Mede's decision to break with tradition stemmed not from any interest in radical politics, but from the same penchant for accuracy which characterized his entire work. He regarded the time-reckoning scheme of the postmillenarians as arbitrary, and his placement of the reign of the saints in the future reflected this overall meticulosity.

In keeping with the historical precision of his study, Mede tended to present Luther not in the abstract terms of Dent or the nationalistic terms of Brightman, but more in relation to the Reformer's influence on the institutions of his time. Luther once again appeared as the third angel of chapter 14, but with a new emphasis:

> [The condemnation of the worship of the Beast] was accomplished most happily in the former age by the meanes of *Luther*, and his companions and successours. Upon which that notable reformation of the Church which we see, hath followed; men not now singlely, as came to passe at the voyce of the foregoing Angel, but by whole Provinces and Tribes at once every where shaking off the yoake of the Beast for the vindication and reformation of Religion.[51]

Dr. William Twisse, in his Preface to the 1643 edition of the *Key of the Revelation,* came close to the mark in his assessment of Mede's overall purpose, writing that he "shewes that States and Kingdomes in the world Politicall are indeed much answerable to the conditions of the World Naturall, and accordingly represented in Scripture."[52] Mede, using his vast knowledge of human scholarship, crafted an incredibly detailed interpretation of the Apocalypse, but one which was ultimately limited in some senses by his preoccupation with historical correlation.

Despite his loyal attachment to Anglican doctrine and his expressly literalist approach, Mede did not exhibit the Anglophilic sentiments found in Brightman, although his leanings were not as understated as Dent's. Mede's assertion that Antichrist will be "abolished by degrees" over the course of the seven vials strongly suggested an element of progress. In his discussion of the second vial of chapter 16, which is thrown upon the sea of the Beast, he identified "the Sea in the

Antichristian world" as "the whole compasse of the Papall Society," and stated that "*Luther* and other famous reformers of the Church of that Age . . . made a great dismembering of the dominion which was so large in times past, they departed from the body of the Beast."[53] Again he referred to Luther in terms of the great reformer's effect on the contemporary establishment. Mede's language in describing the agent of the third vial was slightly stronger: [The third vial was] fulfilled, when in our ENGLAND, in the reigne of ELIZABETH of famous memory, and also afterwards, those bloody Proctors for the authority of the Beast, were according to the laws made for the purpose punished with death.[54] Mede's glowing rhetoric, probably more a product of political expediency than strong conviction, placed him somewhere between Dent and Brightman in his attitude toward England. He too regarded Elizabeth and Luther as human agents in a divine scheme, but his model lacked the intense nationalism of Brightman. Mede "was no party man."[55] Although he looked to the Church of England for the reemergence of the true, hidden church, his concern with the present and the future lay mainly in the "Generall Resurection" and the fulfillment of history, the completion of the circle in Haydock's drawing.

This English tradition of interpretation, inspired by Luther and initiated by Bale, came to a culmination in Mede's work. Later commentators could apply the prophecies to more recent events in history but could not significantly improve on Mede's masterful treatise. "With all this weight of learning behind them," observed Bryan W. Ball, "it cannot be surprising that the men who came later should follow the same patterns of interpretation."[56] Rather than attempting to advance the field, many scholars during the Civil War period wrote commentaries on Brightman and Mede, or prefaces for reprintings of their works. Only in these later editions, in fact, were the works of Brightman and Mede available to those outside scholarly circles. Before 1640 vernacular translations of Brightman had to be smuggled in from the Netherlands, and Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* was published only in Latin.[57] Brightman's work, which appeared in English in 1644, was preceded by a number of summaries and shorter versions, some of them in verse.[58] Mede's work was published under the auspices of the government; a committee of the House of Commons ordered an English translation of the *Key* in 1643, and the Prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly of Divines wrote the preface in this edition.[59]

Mede and Brightman both examined prophecy in a scientific spirit, rather than for political ends. Through his synchronisms Mede sought to demonstrate the unity of the images in the Revelation, thereby establishing the continuing presence of the resurrected Christ, who would be manifested at the millennium. Brightman, who placed the millennium in the past, used his interpretation to look forward to

a New Jerusalem of true doctrine free of ungodly rule, a consummation of knowledge in which history and the future would be revealed. Despite his keen interest in England's central role in church history past and future, Brightman, like Mede, did not intend his work to be an agenda for political action. Both of these men used the study of Scripture and history primarily to legitimize Protestantism in England, which lacked a strong basis in biblical eschatology and history prior to their studies, Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* notwithstanding. As Michael Murrin remarked, "Revelation justified the break with Rome, giving divine authority to the Reformation."[60] These commentators sought to establish English Protestantism as the derivative of the true church, rather than as a political tool of Henry VIII. Luther had held that history was the work of God, but the English reformers infused a strong Calvinist element of divine progress into history, a concept missing in Luther's earthly pessimism.

Ultimately, these early seventeenth-century commentators underwent the same fate which Luther had experienced at their hands. When later scholars could not improve on Mede's work, they turned to studying the man himself. "Mede was transformed from scholar to prophet. He was not alone: Brightman had gone that way before him."[61] Various factors in the decades before and after 1640 conspired to bolster the popularity of chronologists such as Brightman and Mede. The advance of the Counter Reformation in Poland and Hungary, the capitulation of Henry IV to the Pope in 1593, and the defeats of the Huguenots at the hands of Richelieu all pointed to a bleak future for England. In the 1640s, the censorship of the press broke down, separatist churches emerged from underground, and new elements entered the political arena; in the subsequent revolution, "expectation of a new world" pervaded the thoughts of Englishmen.[62] "To many men," asserted Christopher Hill, "the execution of Charles I in 1649 seemed to make sense only as clearing the way for King Jesus, as the prelude to greater international events."[63] The Fifth Monarchists, a radical sect founded in 1649, reinterpreted Mede's millennium in political and social terms. These men, primarily artisans and journeymen, saw themselves as the divine agents of this plan, and resolved to use force if necessary to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth. Mede himself had shied away from predicting a visible reign of Christ on earth, conceiving rather of a period of security and freedom from persecution within the Church. During the Civil War Presbyterians and Independents alike also looked to Brightman as an apologist for congregationalism, using his millenarianism to dispute the need for a Christian Prince.[64] Thus those who followed Mede and Brightman seized upon themes within their ideologies and applied them to new settings in ways which the authors themselves would not have promoted.

Luther, too, had consistently downplayed his own role in church history. In his

own lifetime the Augustinian Michael Stifel, one of his most ardent supporters, set a precedent by identifying Luther with the angel of Revelation 14:6.[65] Although Luther did what he could to discourage this sort of speculation, he nonetheless emerged as a prophet to some. At his funeral his friend Johann Bugenhagen again identified Luther with the angel of "the everlasting Gospel,"[66] an image resurrected in subsequent apocalyptic writings, including those of Dent, Brightman, and Mede, who carried Luther's application of history to Scripture to an English setting. In so doing they turned these means to ends which Luther would not have intended—just as their own ideas were reinterpreted and redeployed by later English reformers. In their exegeses these men only indirectly acknowledged their ideological indebtedness to Luther by referring to his translation of Scripture into the vernacular and his promotion of the Word of God among the people. In justifying the English apocalyptic tradition they tended to underestimate the influence of Luther's mode of interpretation on both Bale and themselves; they did not realize the extent to which they were using a Lutheran toolbox to build a Calvinist house. In some senses they fulfilled a prophecy outlined by Luther himself in his second preface to the Revelation:

> Many have tried their hands at [interpreting Revelation], but until this very day they have reached no certainty . . . Since, however, we would gladly be certain of its meaning, or interpretation, we will give other, and higher, minds something to think about, and also state our own ideas . . . The scholars, who know history, will know how to reckon this out; for it would take too long to tell all and prove it.[67]

ENDNOTES

1. Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York, 1958).

2. William M. Lamont, *Godly Rule* (London, 1969), 22-3.

3. Robin Bruce Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis: Apocalypticism in the Wake of the Lutheran Reformation* (Stanford, 1988), 33.

4. "Many of the fathers, too, rejected this book of old, though St. Jerome, to be sure, praises it highly and says that it is above all praise and that there are as many mysteries in it as words; though he cannot prove this at all, and his praise is, at many points, too mild." Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther, the Philadelphia Edition* (Philadelphia, 1932), 6:488-89.

5. Luther, *Works*, 6:489.

6. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford, 1987), 153, 158.

7. Luther, *Works*, 6:480.

8. Luther, *Works*, 6:481.

9. Here Luther confuses Novatus with Novatian, the Roman leader of an elitist schismatic movement. Luther, *Works*, 6:482; see also 6:490.

10. Luther, *Works*, 6:483-4.

11. Luther, *Works*, 6:484.

12. Luther, *Works*, 6:484-88. Despite his overall reluctance to engage in specifics, Luther could not resist taking a shot at three of his opponents in his discussion of Revelation 15-16: "The frogs are the sophists, like Faber and Eck and Emser. They croak much against the Gospel, but accomplish nothing, and continue to be frogs," ibid., 6:485. For a representative example of Luther's belief that he lived in the last age, see his *Signs of Christ's Coming, and of the Last Day* (London, 1661), 27.

13. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis*, 42.

14. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis*, 42-3.

15. "Luther paved the way for the modification of [traditional] eschatology by his historicist approach to the last book of the Bible... Henceforth most Protestant writers who commented on the Apocalypses of John and Daniel followed his lead and saw in their highly symbolic visions and dreams 'prophecies' of the downfall of the Turks, of the destruction of the city of Rome, of the demise of the Papacy, and of the ultimate triumph of the protestant Biblical religion." Peter Toon, Puritan *Eschatology* (London, 1970), 6.

16. Luther, *Works*, 6:484.

17. John M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven, 1963), 246; see also Luther, *Works*, 6:486.

18. Luther, *Works*, 6:486-7.

19. Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon* (Toronto, 1978), 8-9.

20. Leslie Fairfield, *John Bale* (West Lafayette, Indiana, 1976), 73.

21. Fairfield, 72. Leslie Fairfield downplays Luther's preface as a direct influence because of its brevity and Bale's infrequent direct references to it in his marginalia, but she demonstrates several Lutheran concepts in the *Image*.

22. Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, 9, 13-5.

23. Arthur Dent, *Ruine of Rome* (London, 1644), Epistle, 2.

24. Bryan W. Ball, *A Great Expectation* (Leiden, 1975), 4.

25. "The causative, and therefore central, factor in eschatology is necessarily theology, and the essentially religious nature of the seventeenth century makes it desirable to approach its eschatology first from a theological standpoint." Ball, *Great Expectation*, 4. Although the Fifth Monarchists later reinterpreted his work, Foxe was no millenarian, and his *Acts* drew upon prophecies such as the sayings of Merlin, the Sibylline oracles, and Turkish predictions, placing him outside the realm of interpretation dealing expressly with the

Revelation. See B. S. Capp, *The Fifth Monarchy Men* (London, 1972), 25-6.

26. Ball, *Great Expectation*, 59.

27. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1950), 5:826-27.

28. *DNB*, 5:826.

29. Luther, *Works*, 6:481-2.

30. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 78-82.

31. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 85.

32. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 88-90; 93.

33. "... there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth. . . ." Revelation 6:12-13, Revised Standard Version; Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 95-6.

34. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 229.

35. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 267.

36. Dent, quoted in Ball, *Great Expectation*, 133.

37. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 267.

38. Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 162.

39. *DNB*, 2:1247. See also Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1990), 156.

40. Thomas Brightman, *The Revelation of St. John, illustrated with analysis* (London, 1644), 123.

41. *Brightman's Predictions and Prophecies* (London, 1641), 3.

42. Brightman, *Revelation*, 155.

43. Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, 100.

44. Brightman, *Revelation*, 193, 195.

45. Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon*, 101-2.

46. Brightman, *Predictions*, 7.

47. *Epitome of Mr. Brightman his Exposition upon the Revelation* (London, 1644), 14.

48. *DNB*, 13:178-9.

49. Joseph Mede, *Key of the Revelation* (London, 1643), 26-27.

50. Mede, *Key*, 122.

51. Mede, *Key*, 95.

52. Mede, *Key*, 3.

53. Mede, *Key*, 115.

54. Mede, *Key*, 116.

55. *DNB*, 13:178.

56. Ball, *Great Expectation*, 87.

57. Hill, *Antichrist*, 27; Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men*, 37.

58. Capp, *Fifth Monarchy Men*, 37.

59. Hill, *Antichrist*, 28.

60. Michael Murrin, "Revelation and two seventeenth-century commentators," in C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich, eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (London, 1984), 132.

61. Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530-1645* (London, 1979), 228.

62. Hill, *Antichrist*, 100.

63. Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London, 1972), 96.

64. Lamont, *Godly Rule*, 51-2.

65. Barnes, *Prophecy and Gnosis*, 54.

66. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Some uses of the apocalypse in the magisterial Reformers," in Patrides and Wittreich, *Apocalypse*, 74.

67. Luther, *Works*, 6:480, 6:482.