

## Chapter 11: Early English Apocalyptic Interpretation<sup>1</sup>

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Ben Jonson, the seventeenth-century poet and playwright, referred in *The Alchemist*, perhaps his best-known play (1612), to “the two legs and the fourth Beast”, and to “the stone” which “falls on the other four straight”.<sup>2</sup> That a popular contemporary author could allude so obviously to apocalyptic imagery drawn directly from the Bible is some indication of widespread familiarity with those passages of Scripture which today rarely receive much attention. There was certainly nothing strange about this in the seventeenth century. Even the most cursory reading of the literature of the time reveals that it was deemed as proper and necessary to understand the books of Daniel and Revelation as it was to read the Psalms or the Gospels. Nor was Ben Jonson the only prominent man of his age to write about biblical apocalyptic prophecy. King James I, James Ussher the Archbishop of Armagh and Joseph Hall, Bishop of Norwich, all published books explaining the meaning of various prophecies in Daniel and Revelation, most of them running to several editions and some being translated into French and/or Latin.

If a king, an archbishop and a bishop could regard the study of prophecy as a serious and necessary matter, it is not surprising that others should come to think likewise. Many, in fact, from all quarters of the ecclesiastical establishment did so, throughout the seventeenth century and beyond. Edmund Hall, a Presbyterian, wrote in 1651 that it was “a sin” to neglect prophecies which gave light to the times:

in the Revelation there are shallows as well as depths; there the lamb may wade, and the elephant may swim ... not understanding, or neglect of searching to understand the prophetic texts of the Old Testament was the cause of the greatest sin and scandal in the Church that ever was committed, the murdering of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Edmund’s brother, Thomas, also a clergyman, maintained “it is our duty

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1 Abridged from ch.2 of *A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), volume XII in the Brill series ‘Studies in the History of Christian Thought’, ed. Heiko A. Oberman. Spelling and punctuation in quotations have generally been modernised.

2 Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist* (1612), Act 4, Sc.5: cf. Dan. 2:31-35 and 7: 7.

3 Edmund Hall, *Manus Testium Movens* (1651), Epistle to the Reader, sig. A2r.

to take notice of the prophecies delivered to us in the Word of God . . . they must not by our negligence be as a sealed book to us".<sup>4</sup> With such convictions widely held by preachers and writers of every shade of opinion, it was to be expected that much attention would be given to biblical prophecy, particularly to the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, and that much paper would be used in the publication of a great number of books and pamphlets throughout the seventeenth century and beyond.

In actual fact, interest in prophetic interpretation predated the seventeenth century by many years, and can be traced back to the earliest years of the Reformation, both on the Continent and in England. Luther had written a commentary on Daniel, and Heinrich Bullinger, his associate in the German Reformation, who was much respected in England, had in 1577 written *In Apocalypsim Iesu Christi*, which was published in English in 1561 as *A Hundred Sermons upon the Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*. John Foxe, best known for his *Book of Martyrs*, which played such an important role in consolidating the English Reformation, also wrote a book on Revelation which for some reason was only published posthumously by his son. William Lamont, a recent authority on the Reformation in England, has noted the influence of Foxe on Thomas Brightman who, to use Lamont's words, "acknowledged his debt to John Foxe for his pioneer labours in the field of apocalyptic interpretation".<sup>5</sup>

With Brightman (1562-1607), we come to one of four men in the early years of the seventeenth century whose efforts to popularise the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation met with notable success and whose work was destined to have a more far-reaching influence than any of them could possibly have imagined. Together with John Napier (1550-1617), Arthur Dent (d.1607) and Joseph Mede (1586-1638), Brightman gave to prophetic study a sense of urgency which it had never previously enjoyed in the history of English religious thought and a respectability which it never wholly regained after the century had passed. While others were also attracted to the fascinating imagery and chronology described by Daniel and John, even making their own significant contributions, it remains true that the foundation upon which all succeeding generations raised their prophetic hopes was laid in the early years by these four learned and articulate men.

The arguments substantiating this assertion are (i) the repeated reprinting of the works of these earlier writers and (ii) continual references to them, particularly to Brightman and Mede, in the writings of later expositors. Napier's book, *A Plain Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint John*, had

4 Thomas Hall, *A Practical and Polemical Commentary Upon the Third and Fourth Chapters of the Latter Epistle of Saint Paul to Timothy* (1658), 5.

5 William Lamont, *Marginal Prynne 1600-1669* (London: Routledge, 1963), 59.

been issued first in 1593 and was reprinted in 1594, 1611, 1641 and 1645 in addition to being published twice in Dutch and four times in French, all between 1600 and 1607. Arthur Dent's *The Ruine of Rome*, also an exposition of Revelation, enjoyed an even greater popularity among English readers, going through at least eleven printings between 1603 and 1662. Brightman's interest in prophecy also included the book of Daniel. His *Exposition ... of the Prophecy of Daniel* appeared first in 1614 and then in 1635 and 1644, while his *Revelation of the Revelation*, which was issued first in Latin in 1609 and again three years later, was published in English in 1611, 1615, 1616 and 1644. The erudite Joseph Mede was undoubtedly the most prolific and influential writer of this early group, perhaps of all prophetic interpreters.<sup>6</sup> His most significant works included *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), issued three times in Latin and three times in English between 1627 and 1650 and again in 1833; *The Apostasy of the Latter Times* (1641, 1642, 1650, 1652); and *Daniel's Weeks* (1643). His collected *Works*<sup>7</sup> were published in 1648, 1663-4, 1672 and 1677.

So when in the 1650s Edmund and Thomas Hall stressed the duty of searching into the prophecies, they did not consider this to be an attempt at defending the discredited views of an insignificant, or extreme, minority. They saw themselves rather as custodians of a tradition established early in the century by scholars such as Mede and his predecessors. John Napier had already asked, with a forceful degree of logic, "To what effect were the prophecies of Daniel and of the Revelation given to the Church . . . if God had appointed the same to be never known or understood?"<sup>8</sup> Arthur Dent, with characteristic candour, had gone further, laying responsibility for imparting the meaning of Revelation squarely on the shoulders of the ministry: "I hold that every Minister of the Gospel standeth bound as much as in him lyeth, to preach the doctrine of the Apocalypse to his particular charge and congregation".<sup>9</sup>

The premise that the books of Daniel and Revelation were an integral part of inspired Scripture and therefore to be accepted and understood, was as fundamental to the Baptist pastor, George Hammon, as it was to the Anglican scholar, Joseph Mede. When men of the stature of Thomas Goodwin, John Cotton, Joseph Mede, Nathaniel Homes or James Durham wrote at

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6 On Mede, who stands out in this early group, if not among all expositors in the seventeenth century, see *supra* ch.7, 'Puritan Profiles'.

7 Mede's 'Epistles', in his *Works* contain further material on prophecy and extensive correspondence with prominent men of his day, again largely on questions of prophetic interpretation and biblical chronology.

8 John Napier, *A Plaine Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint John* (1593), 18.

9 Arthur Dent, *The Ruine of Rome* (1603), Epistle to the Reader, sig. aa1v.

length on the prophecies, expanding and enlarging and sometimes correcting the views of an earlier generation and always seeing fulfilment in their own time, it is not surprising that a host of lesser men arose, of equal sincerity and in many cases, of equal scholarship, to shine forth as lights dispelling the darkness of the "Antichristian world".<sup>10</sup> William Hicks, in *The Revelation Revealed* (1659), a commentary on the Apocalypse expressly intended "for the keeping the saints feet straight, in not stumbling by a false interpreting and applying of this book of prophecies", and as a corrective to "wild applications" of its symbolism, nevertheless maintained that "the things represented in this book are no more mysteries and hidden things, but as clear and accomplished acts unto us".<sup>11</sup> *The Revelation Revealed* was one of the last in a long line of works between Napier's *Plain Discovery* of 1593 and 1660, which attempted to set the study of apocalyptic prophecy fairly within the context of orthodox Christian thought.

Beneath all this, however, lay a deep conviction which gave to these arguments an immediate relevance. It had been expressed by Arthur Dent when he had declared, "For in this age wherein we live, this Prophecy [the book of Revelation] can never be enough opened and beaten upon, that all good Protestants may be armed with it against future times".<sup>12</sup> Richard Bernard had also argued, "It as much belongeth unto us now living, as it did unto others in time past".<sup>13</sup> It was this belief that Revelation, together with the book of Daniel, spoke with meaning and authority to the present generation, which gave to the interpretations of the biblical exegetes an impetus and a vitality which was noticeably lacking in the study of other prophetic books of the Bible. No comparable interest, for example, existed in the writings of Jeremiah, or Ezekiel, or Zechariah, since it was not felt that they spoke with specific reference to the present. With the apocalyptic prophets, however, it is significant that men such as Richard Sibbes and Jeremiah Burroughes, who were not regarded as prophetic interpreters in the strict sense, spoke in terms which indicated an acceptance of this attitude to Daniel and Revelation.<sup>14</sup> David Pareus, the Dutch scholar whose commentary on Revelation had been translated into English, stated the point as succinctly as anyone, "This book is not only worthy to be continually read in the Church and meditated on: but also to contain very profitable and necessary doc-

10 John Cotton, *The Pouring out of the Seven Vials* (1642), 10.

11 William Hicks, *The Revelation Revealed . . . a Practical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John . . .* (1659), Preface, sig. C1v.

12 Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, sig. aair.

13 Richard Bernard, *A Key of Knowledge for the Opening of the Secret Mysteries of St John's Mystical Revelation* (1617), 4.

14 See Richard Sibbes, *The Brides Longing*, 2 and Jeremiah Burroughes, *Jerusalem's Glory Breaking Forth into the World* (1675), 86.

trines, especially for this last age”.<sup>15</sup> Even the moderate Thomas Hall saw fit to defend the relevance of Revelation:

The book of the Revelations is an excellent prophecy of the downfall of the Church’s enemies, and of the great things which in the latter days God will do for his people, even to the end of the world; and therefore the Lord would have us attentively to consider, and humbly and accurately to weigh what is written there.<sup>16</sup>

There were few in the seventeenth century who were disposed to disagree with that.

There was a caveat, however. The need for care in expounding prophecy was illustrated in what had been foretold about the first coming of Christ. Mede had recognised that the Old Testament prophets had often spoken of the first and second advents of Christ as one event and cautioned:

For the old Prophets (for the most part) speak of the coming of Christ indefinitely and in general, without that distinction of first and second coming, which the Gospel out of Daniel hath more clearly taught us. And so consequently they spake of the things to be at Christ’s coming indefinitely and altogether, which we, who are now more fully informed by the revelation of the Gospel of a two-fold coming, must apply each of them to its proper time.<sup>17</sup>

It was with this realisation of hermeneutical difficulties and possible misinterpretations that led some of the leading expositors to appeal for restraint and to sound a note of warning against extreme conclusions. Mede wrote concerning the millennium, “But here (if any where) the known shipwrecks of those who have been too venturous should make us most wary and careful, that we admit nothing into our imaginations which may cross or impeach any Catholic [universal] tenet of the Christian faith”.<sup>18</sup>

Even the moderate Edmund Calamy could agree with his old adversary Joseph Hall on this point. In the preface to Nathaniel Stephens’ *Number of the Beast*, Calamy wrote of many who “by adventuring into this sea, have made shipwreck”, and who had “built upon such weak foundations . . . that they have deceived both themselves and others”.<sup>19</sup> This was entirely in harmony with Thomas Hall’s opinion, expressed in *The Revelation Unrevealed*, where he stated that the book of Revelation, being a difficult part of the Bi-

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15 David Pareus, *A Commentary Upon the Divine Revelation* (Amsterdam, 1644), 15.

16 Thomas Hall, *Commentary*, 5.

17 Joseph Mede, ‘A Paraphrase and Exposition of the Prophecy of St. Peter’ (1642) in *Works* (1672), 611.

18 Joseph Mede, ‘Remaines on Some Passages in the Apocalypse’ (1650), in *Works*, 603.

19 Edmund Calamy, To the Reader, in Nathaniel Stephens, *A Plaine and Easie Calculation of Name, Mark, and Number of the Name of the Beast* (1656).

ble to understand, had given rise to many strange interpretations.

One factor which appears to have carried some weight with many who attempted to interpret apocalyptic prophecy was the principle of progressive revelation. Not only was it believed that there were certain aspects of truth which God had revealed, and would reveal, at specific key moments in history and which He had even reserved for such times, but also that through a diligent study of Scripture, His servants on earth could proceed from already established beliefs to the knowledge of truths hidden from earlier generations. There is no evidence to suggest that this concept was regarded as licence to depart from the fundamentals of the faith. "Present Truth" was the apt term used by Nathaniel Homes in an attempt to convey the idea to his readers:

There is in most generations successively a present truth . . . Now some Believers though they know generally all other saving truths, yet heed not, observe not the present truth, to contend for it in their profession and accordingly to put it into their prayers and supplications.<sup>20</sup>

What is present truth in any generation? he asked. Homes' answer to that question is a classic statement of the concept of progressive revelation or, perhaps, we should say, of progressive understanding:

It is that truth which the corrupt stream of the present times would fain drown, either by doctrine, or disputes, or counter imposition, or persecution, to the great dishonour of the God of truth, and prejudice to Christ. . . . Thus in the time of the Arian persecution soon after Constantine's time, the present truth was to assert the deity of Christ. In Luther's time, at the beginning of our Henry the 8<sup>th</sup>, the satisfaction of Christ apprehended by faith, as the full ground of Justification, was the present truth to be asserted. And now Christ's pure worship and Christ's glorious kingdom (which inseparably concur) are the truths now to be asserted.<sup>21</sup>

Fortified by the immediate relevance of the idea of progressive revelation, earnest and devout scholars could approach Daniel and Revelation, aware of the difficulties of interpretation but not daunted by them, and in the assurance that their labours would not be in vain.

The circulation of such views was reason enough to anticipate prophetic interpretations from a host of biblical scholars well versed in the theological disciplines of the day. It was also an open invitation to others, the "mechanic" preachers with little or no formal qualifications, to unburden a variety of interpretations on a seemingly insatiable public. While this study is concerned primarily with the view of those in the former category it will not be out of place to remark that, in the context of the prevailing religious mood

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20 Nathaniel Homes, *The Resurrection-Revealed Raised Above Doubts and Difficulties* (1661), 278.

21 *Ibid.*, 279.

of the age, which increasingly place the emphasis upon the individual's response to the Spirit's illumination of the Word, it was predictable that men and women from all walks of life should become enthused with the hope engendered by reading Daniel and Revelation and proclaim views which now appear unbelievably naive. Elizabeth Avery's belief that the feet and toes of Daniel's image represented the State and Church of England,<sup>22</sup> Mary Cary's view that the Little Horn of Daniel's fourth beast symbolised Charles I,<sup>23</sup> and John More's opinion that the second beast of Revelation 13 depicted Oliver Cromwell,<sup>24</sup> were all strained interpretations which might have been avoided had the advice of Richard Bernard been heeded.

His *Key of Knowledge for the Opening of the Secret Mysteries of St. Johns Mystical Revelation* had been concerned almost entirely with suggesting principles and rules for a serious study of prophecy and abounded with detailed and fascinating counsel for all would-be interpreters of the Apocalypse. Bernard had carefully enunciated the idea that prophecy can only be understood completely in the light of history. Prophecies relating to the future are difficult to understand and become clear only when they have been fulfilled. Of the early Church Fathers he wrote, "so much the more were they further from beholding the things fulfilled and done; and therefore less able to shew the true meaning, then we which have the fulfilling hereof".<sup>25</sup> The great advantage which the present generation held over the Fathers, and even over the Apostles themselves, was time. Within the perspective of history, prophecy could be understood but, by the same token, all prophecy which still pertained to the future must be approached with caution. As Joseph Hall had suggested, prophecy was not to be held as a licence for making wild guesses about the future.<sup>26</sup> It was this precept which, to their own discredit and often, though mistakenly, to the calumny of more sober scholarship, the extremists chose to ignore.

There were other basic principles of interpretation which it is also necessary to understand in order to reach a fair and objective assessment of the entire brotherhood of prophetic interpreters. Some were less vital than others, but all were recognised, and clearly guided the majority of serious expositors in their attempts to explain the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Joseph Mede expressed an important idea which became self-evident to all scholars of the seventeenth century when he said, "I conceive Daniel

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22 Elizabeth Avery, *Scripture-Prophecies Opened* (1647), 3.

23 Mary Cary, *The Little Horn's Doom and Downfall* (1651), 6.

24 John More, *A Trumpet Sounded, or The Great Mystery of the Two Little Horns Unfolded* (1654), 8.

25 Bernard, *Key of Knowledge*, 93.

26 Joseph Hall, *The Revelation Unrevealed, Concerning the Thousand Years Reign of the Saints with Christ upon Earth* (1650), 13-14.

to be *Apocalypsis contracta*, and the Apocalyp *Daniel explicate*, in that . . . both treat about the same subject”.<sup>27</sup> This premise of the complementary nature of the two books was certainly fundamental to all interpreters of the time. Robert Maton drew attention to another point which others, both before and after him, accepted without question. “It is a currant [sic] axiom in our schools . . . that we must not forsake the literal and proper sense of the Scripture, unless an evident necessity doth require it”.<sup>28</sup> The significance of this exception, of course, was that the greater part of both Daniel and Revelation were written in highly symbolic language.

The recognition of this particular principle, with its implied necessity for a correct definition of the symbolic imagery used in the prophetic writings, was unquestionably one of the key factors in arriving at a satisfactory exegesis of both Daniel and Revelation. Bernard had realised this and had made it one of his major principles prerequisite to the interpretation of Revelation:

The words are figurative, the whole prophecy full of metaphors, and almost altogether allegorical; so we must take heed that we look further than into the letter and naked relation of things, as they are set down, otherwise the book should be full of absurdities, impossibilities, falsities, and flat contradictions unto other truths of Scripture . . . For who can believe a lamb to have seven eyes, a mountain burning to be cast into the sea, and this thereby in a third part to become blood . . . Therefore we must not stick in the letter, but search out an historical sense, which is the truth intended, and so take the words typically, and not literally.<sup>29</sup>

While it is evident that most expositors in the seventeenth century differed from others on many points of interpretation and application, it is also clear that a remarkable unanimity of opinion prevailed regarding what were thought of as the basic symbols of prophetic imagery. Without making an artificial distinction between these varied and numerous representations, it may be said that there were five which were fundamental to even the most elementary interpretations.

In the first place, in symbolic prophecy a day represented a year of literal time. The lead given by John Napier here was followed almost exclusively for years to come and was never wholly to be discarded again: “So then” he said, “a prophetic day is a year, the week seven years, the month thirty years, (because the Hebrew and Grecian month hath thirty days) and consequently the prophetic year is 360 years”.<sup>30</sup> Napier’s explanation of the thirty-day month as a basis for reckoning time is important for understanding the calculations of the prophetic time-periods which were so germane to

27 Joseph Mede, ‘Epistles’, *Works*, 787.

28 Robert Maton, *Israel’s Redemption* (1642), 47-48.

29 Bernard, *Key of Knowledge*, 130-31.

30 Napier, *Plaine Discovery*, 2.

the concept of the end of the age.

Secondly, prophetic beasts symbolised earthly kingdoms, or “Civil and Spiritual” rulers.<sup>31</sup> The extension of this symbol to include more than secular powers had implication of far-reaching influence. An important corollary to this second symbol, was that the heads and horns of the various beasts likewise depicted “kinds of governments”, again both secular and ecclesiastical.<sup>32</sup>

Thirdly, the seas or waters, out of which nearly all prophetic beasts were seen to arise, symbolised peoples or nations.<sup>33</sup> Thus an expositor seeking to understand or explain the sense of a beast emerging from the sea, as in Daniel 7, could know that it represented an earthly power which had come into being from among the peoples or nations of the world.

A fourth symbol, although appearing in the text less frequently, a woman (e.g., Jeremiah 6:2), was widely held to signify the Church.<sup>34</sup> Hence the woman clothed with the sun in Revelation 12 symbolised the true Church, while the scarlet-clad woman of the seventeenth chapter depicted the apostate Church.

In the fifth place, angels when seen in prophetic vision were to be understood as typifying preachers, or those who proclaimed truth, “God’s messengers” on earth, “preachers of the Gospel in the times of Antichrist”.<sup>35</sup>

It may be superfluous to add that all these meanings were derived in accordance with the elemental axiom that “the Scriptures are interpreters of the Scriptures, and the meaning of the Spirit is to be found out by his own words”,<sup>36</sup> and texts could be produced to prove the correctness of each of the foregoing explanations. To borrow the thought which Richard Bernard had incorporated into the title of his book, these were the keys which could unlock the “secret mysteries” of both Daniel and Revelation.

The master-key to apocalyptic interpretation, however, was not to be found among creatures, natural or supernatural. Important as all the preceding principles unquestionably were to a satisfactory understanding of the prophecies, the crucial issue was the question of time. To have any real significance, all other principles, rules or suggestions for accurate exegesis

31 E.g., Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 170; Thomas Brightman, *A Revelation of the Revelation* (Amsterdam, 1615), 430.

32 James Durham, *A Commentary Upon the Book of Revelation* (1650), 547; Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 182.

33 E.g., Bernard, *Key of Knowledge*, 158; Cotton, *Exposition Upon the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation* (1655), 8.

34 E.g., Napier, *Plaine Discovery*, 33; Mede, *Key of the Revelation* (1643), pt. 2, 33.

35 E.g., Cotton, *Seven Vials*, 21; Pareus, *Commentary*, 337.

36 Bernard, *Key of Knowledge*, 14.1

were to be understood within the framework of thought which related all the apocalyptic prophecies to a continuous process of history. This period of time had had its beginning in the days when the prophecies were first given, and would end only when everything foretold had been brought to a final consummation. "From the beginning of the captivity of Israel, until the mystery of God should be finished",<sup>37</sup> Mede wrote of the scope of Daniel's visions. This explains the emphasis given by Richard Bernard to the necessity of an adequate knowledge of history as a background to Revelation:

The matter then of this prophecy is historical, as it cometh to be fulfilled. It is therefore not a spiritual or allegorical, but an historical sense, which in this book we must attend unto, from the beginning of the fourth chapter, to the end of the prophecy. For to John was revealed what things should come to pass here upon the earth, before the worlds end, as far as concerned the Church; and the same he here setteth forth to us, as to him it was revealed. If we then do loose the historical sense, we lose the proper sense of this book.<sup>38</sup>

It was the knowledge of two millennia of history that made the men of the seventeenth century certain that what Daniel and John had written with reference to the future was, in fact, by their day largely concerned with the past. While some events were then in the process of accomplishment and while others remained as yet wholly unfulfilled, the overwhelming consensus of opinion held that the greater part of both Daniel and Revelation had already reached complete and verifiable fulfilment. The past was the master-key to both the present and the future.

Stephen Marshall's observation that "the whole Army of Protestant Interpreters" agreed "in the general scope and meaning"<sup>39</sup> of Revelation, was nowhere more true than when applied to this historicist view. Both the early and later writers of the time were virtually unanimous in assenting to this fundamental position, which was as pertinent to Daniel's prophecies as to those of John. Of sixty-eight separate works on these two books examined during the course of this study, no less than sixty-four subscribed by statement, argument, or implication to this historicist viewpoint. Thomas Brightman, commenting on Revelation 1:1, explained "the matters should be begun by & by, & should flow from thence with a perpetual course without interruption, although the final consummation should be afterward for many ages".<sup>40</sup> David Pareus stated that the time involved was "from the giving of the Revelation, even unto the end of the world".<sup>41</sup> That the historicist con-

37 Joseph Mede, 'The Apostasy of the Latter Times' (1641), *Works*, 654.

38 Bernard, *Key of Knowledge*, 123.

39 Stephen Marshall, *The Song of Moses . . . and the Song of the Lamb* (1643),

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40 Brightman, *Revelation*, 3-4.

41 Pareus, *Commentary*, Author's Preface, 16.

struction should be applied to Daniel in conjunction with Revelation was argued by both Joseph Mede and William Hicks:

. . . what was revealed to Daniel concerning the fourth kingdom but *summatim* . . . was showed to S. John *particulatim*, with the distinction and order of the several fates and circumstances which were to betide and accompany the same . . . therefore Daniel's prophecy is not terminated with the first, but reacheth to the second coming of Christ . . .<sup>42</sup>  
 . . . Revelation is no longer a mystery, but a book of history of memorable acts and passages. Wherein is foretold the several changes that shall befall the secular state or Roman Empire, and to the Church of Christ under the dominion of that empire, until it shall, as that stone prophesied of in Dan. 2. smite the image on his feet and become itself a great mountain and set up upon the top of all mountains.<sup>43</sup>

It was, then, within the context of the historicist position, which viewed the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation as a panorama of successively unfolding events spanning seventeen centuries or more of the Church's history, that all other principles of interpretation were to be applied and related. Any other approach to the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy was effectively excluded.

The preterist interpretation, which proposed that the major prophecies had reached fulfilment in the first century or two of the Christian era, and the futurist view, which sought to postpone their accomplishment until the very end of Christian history, were alternative constructions on the scope of the apocalyptic prophecies which had no significant appeal whatever to the Protestant commentators of the seventeenth century. If either of these contrary propositions intruded at all into their thinking and writing, it was only in order that they could be summarily refuted or that the discreditable source of their origin could be brought to the attention of all who sought after truth, as was frequently thought necessary.

The preterist hermeneutic, according to James Durham, had arisen through the influence of a Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Alcasar, who had put forward the argument that the book of Revelation had reference only to the pre-Constantine age and related solely to the experiences of the Church under the Roman Empire.<sup>44</sup> Henry Alford's statement that "the preterist view found no favour and was hardly so much as thought of in the times of primitive Christianity",<sup>45</sup> is equally true of seventeenth-century Christianity. Henry Hammond, who in 1647 had become chaplain to Charles I, appears

42 Mede, 'Epistles', *Works*, 787.

43 Hicks, *Revelation Revealed*, Preface, sig. C1v.

44 Durham, *Revelation*, 667; Luis de Alcasar, *Vestigatio Arcani Sensus in Apocalypsi* (1614).

45 Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (1866), vol. II, pt. II, 348-49.

to have been the first English writer seriously to have adopted Alcasar's interpretation.<sup>46</sup> Although the work in which his views appeared went through several editions after its first appearance in 1653, there is little evidence of any wider involvement with preterism in pre-Restoration thought. The failure of the preterist position to make any significant impact may be explained by the knowledge of ecclesiastical history which characterised the thinking of most scholars and divines of the time and which naturally precluded any attempt to place all those prophecies of a future bright with hope in a past which frequently had been so hopelessly dark.

Futurism, although it received more comment, made even less impression on English Protestant thought than did preterism.<sup>47</sup> An early attack on the futurist system came from Thomas Brightman, who defined its basic argument and at the same time identified its source of origin. Brightman explained that futurism projected all the prophecies of Revelation into the last three and a half literal years of human history, thereby denying the historicist contention that the book of Revelation had been in the course of progressive fulfilment since the close of the first century AD. If futurism was true, then Brightman wanted to know what comfort the Church had derived, or could derive, from the special blessing promised at the time the book had been written and which was intended for all who would read and accept its prophetic message, which even then was on the verge of fulfilment. "Were men that lived by the space of these 1600 years which are now past . . . altogether devoid of this felicity?"<sup>48</sup> he enquired. Brightman named another Jesuit priest, Roberto Bellarmine, as the originator of futurism, although Bellarmine's views have been traced to the Jesuit scholar, Francisco Ribera.<sup>49</sup> This understanding of the origin of futurism was quickly endorsed and accepted by all succeeding expositors.

In harmony with the strong anti-Romanist convictions of the day, many Protestant expositors saw the wisdom of emphasising this ill-concealed attempt to weaken the strength of the historicist arguments. Jeremiah Burroughes expressed the view that the true meaning of the book of Revelation had been deliberately concealed and distorted by papal scholars:

Hence it hath been, that in the time that Antichrist hath reigned, there hath been so little known of the book of the Revelation, because it hath been applied only in a metaphorical way, and all the glory hath been

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46 Henry Hammond, *A Paraphrase, and Annotations Upon all the Books of the New Testament* (1653).

47 Except, perhaps, in the writings of Edmund Hall, who places more of the prophecies of Revelation in the future than did most of his contemporaries.

48 See Rev. 1:1; Brightman, *Revelation*, 5.

49 L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of our Fathers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 4 vols.), vol. II, 489-493.

interpreted of the glory of heaven . . . there hath been a darkness on the face of the earth in the time of Antichrist's prevailing, and it hath been the care of Antichrist to darken this.<sup>50</sup>

These alternative interpretations originated in papal theology "so as to save their Pope and the present Rome" from being depicted as Antichrist.<sup>51</sup> The fact that Roman Catholic scholars had suggested alternative explanations was enough in itself to render those explanations anathema to every good Protestant. Beyond this, however, the appeal of the historicist position lay in the intrinsic strength of its arguments. Carefully reasoned and subjected to the irrefutable witness of history they made historicism the only valid basis for interpretation.

As is now recognised by many historians of the period, a widespread belief in the imminent second coming of Christ existed in the seventeenth century quite apart from the influence of apocalyptic prophecy. Without detracting from the validity of this reality, it is apparent that belief in the Christ's second advent was considerably strengthened as interest in prophecy developed and particularly as historicist interpretation increasingly anticipated momentous and impending changes in the present order. It is, therefore, desirable to appreciate how the historicism of the seventeenth century arrived at its major conclusion that the end of the age was at hand.

Hugh Broughton, commenting on Revelation in 1610 had written, "I must advise the reader to learn Daniel before he learn this book".<sup>52</sup> This recommendation was further stressed by Mede in reply to a letter from Thomas Hayne in 1629. Referring to the first two prophetic visions of Daniel, those of the great metal image of chapter 2 and of the four beasts of chapter 7, he argued that together they constituted "The A.B.C. of Prophecy".<sup>53</sup> Mede later amplified this somewhat concise definition by stating that all other prophecy was related to the content of these two visions:

For the true account therefore of times in Scripture, we must have recourse to that SACRED CALENDAR and GREAT ALMANACK of PROPHECY, the four kingdoms of Daniel, which are a prophetic chronology of times measured by the succession of four principal kingdoms, from the beginning of the captivity of Israel, until the mystery of God should be finished.<sup>54</sup>

Whatever meaning was to be placed on the ensuing visions of Daniel or John, it could be assumed that agreement would prevail with regard to the four kingdoms. The evidence indicates that this assumption was fully justified.

50 Burroughes, *Jerusalem's Glory*, 87.

51 Durham, *Revelation*, 667.

52 Hugh Broughton, *A Revelation of the Holy Apocalypse* (1610), 26.

53 Mede, 'Epistles', *Works*, 743.

54 Mede, 'The Apostasy', *Works*, 654.

The four kingdoms were first mentioned in Nebuchadnezzar's celebrated dream which had subsequently been interpreted by Daniel and defined as specifically relating to "the latter days". The dream, it will be recalled, had revealed an image in four main sections composed of differing metals. The head of the image was made of gold, the upper abdomen and arms of silver, the lower abdomen of brass and the legs of iron. The feet of the image consisted in part of iron and in part of clay. The image had been shattered and the fragments dispersed by the wind when a stone of supernatural origin had struck it upon the feet. Commencing with the Babylonian empire of Nebuchadnezzar, represented by the golden head, Daniel explained that three further empires would arise successively upon the earth, the kingdoms represented by silver, brass and iron. The fourth kingdom would ultimately be divided into ten nations and the resultant segments would never unite again until "the God of heaven set up a kingdom".<sup>55</sup>

This divine kingdom had been symbolised in the dream by the stone which had struck the image upon the feet, depicting that God would intervene in human affairs during the time represented by the divided nations of the iron kingdom. "These times once finished, all the kingdoms of this world should become the kingdoms of our Lord and his CHRIST".<sup>56</sup> The assurance that "the interpretation thereof" was "sure" did not pass unnoticed. The four kingdoms again figured prominently in Daniel's second vision. In this instance the types were beasts; a lion, a bear, a leopard and a fourth beast "dreadful, and terrible, and strong exceedingly". In accordance with the accepted rule of interpretation and also in accordance with the text itself, the beasts were taken as symbols of the same four kingdoms which had been represented by the four main sections of the image.<sup>57</sup> Even as the legs of the image had ten toes so the fourth beast had ten horns, again depicting the divisions of the fourth empire.

The counting of time on this "SACRED CALENDAR" presented little difficulty. If the Word of God explicitly stated that Babylon was the first kingdom of the four, past history as well as the text, provided the identity of the remaining three. They were the empires of Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome and succeeded Babylon, and each other, in that order.<sup>58</sup> Many commentators believed that the iron legs of the image symbolised the Western and Eastern divisions of the Roman Empire, but this was not as important as the fact that, in both visions, the fourth kingdom was eventually divided into ten parts. "For about four hundred years, the Roman Emperors continued in their majesty, even until the end of Constantine the Great; and then began

55 Daniel 2: 28-45.

56 Mede, 'The Apostasy', *Works*, 654.

57 Daniel 7: 2-23.

58 Mede, 'The Apostasy', *Works*, 654.

effectually to be broken down, and to be dissolved into ten kingdoms”,<sup>59</sup> wrote Thomas Parker, adding that the fall of Rome was fully accomplished by AD 456. Mede dated the end of the Roman Empire from the death of Valentinian in AD 455. In practice, few were concerned about exact dates at this juncture, recognising that the important fact was that the prophecy now focused upon those further nations which had arisen following the barbarian invasions of Rome. Strictly speaking, the Roman Empire had not come to an end; it had been divided and the divisions thereof were to continue in separate existence until the advent of the kingdom of the stone.

Daniel’s second vision had drawn attention to the emergence of another power, placed in time between the settlement of the divisions of Rome and the inauguration of the kingdom of God. Probably no figure in all the Bible has given rise to so many interpretations, and misinterpretations, as the Little Horn which Daniel now described as arising after the previous ten kingdoms, arrogant in its appearance and presumptuous in its claims, and resolutely bent on a course of action totally opposed to the purposes of God.<sup>60</sup> The majority of expositors saw in this cryptic symbol a definite allusion to the long-awaited and dreaded Antichrist.<sup>61</sup> It was, in brief, either the Pope or the Turk, or a combination of the two. Both had emerged as a threat to the true Church at the time required for a satisfactory interpretation of the prophecy.<sup>62</sup> Again, the Little Horn was fundamentally an extension of the fourth empire which “was to keep the dominion and Lordship of the world” until the final kingdom of prophecy,<sup>63</sup> a development within the era of Rome and not a separate phenomenon beyond it.

In the eyes of seventeenth-century expositors both these major prophecies of Daniel had been in the course of fulfilment for some two thousand years. During that time, in the outworking of the historical process, all the salient characteristics they bore had met unequivocal identification with the single exception of the last, climactic event. If it is remembered that the remaining prophecies of Daniel were regarded as supplying details of further events within the compass of this same time-scale, it is not hard to perceive why Daniel proved that the end of the age was at hand.

If, as Mede had suggested, Daniel was a necessary introduction to Revelation, it was of greater significance that Revelation be considered an indispensable conclusion to Daniel. While the latter contained six chapters

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59 Thomas Parker, *The Visions and Prophecies of Daniel Expounded* (1646), 21.

60 Daniel 7: 20-25.

61 E.g., Nathaniel Homes, *Works* (1652), 596; Parker, *Daniel*, 15.

62 E.g., Pareus, *Commentary*, 166; .Homes, *Works*, 255. Luther had held this view of a dual Antichrist.

63 Mede, ‘Diatribae’ (1642), *Works*, 198; Edmund Hall, *Manus Testium*, 13.

of apocalyptic prophecy the book of Revelation had eighteen and naturally enough attracted considerably more attention than the writings of the earlier and shorter book. The resulting stream of commentaries, treatises, sermons and tracts on Revelation, in part or in whole, grew throughout the first half of the century until by the years between 1640 and 1660 it had reached almost flood proportions. This stream, however, did not change in character as it increased in volume. It was still constituted of the same elements and continued to flow in the same direction as before. Understanding of Revelation throughout the seventeenth century was largely the logical development of the historicist interpretation which had been established during the first two decades of the century.

John Napier's *Plain Discovery of the Whole Revelation of St John* was the first work of any significant appeal in the seventeenth century to set forth a well-reasoned approach to Revelation. Napier held that there were two basic prophecies in the book, the first from chapter 4 to chapter 11, and the second from chapter 12 to chapter 22.<sup>64</sup> These prophecies were in a sense repetitive, both covering the entire Christian era from the time of Christ to the last day. The first of these comprehensive prophecies contained the important visions of the Seven Seals of chapters 6 and 7 and the Seven Trumpets of chapters 7-11 which, to Napier, as to all who would follow him, were indispensable to a correct calculation of the age of the world and the expected consummation of history.

Soon after Napier's *Plain Discovery* had appeared in print, Arthur Dent published *The Ruine of Rome* which provided a slightly modified interpretation, although the conclusion remained the same. Dent maintained that there were three basic prophecies in Revelation.<sup>65</sup> In addition to the two suggested by Napier, concerning the importance, scope and relationship of which Dent fully concurred, he also held that the first three chapters were partially prophetic in that they described the condition of the entire Christian Church from its beginning as well as the actual state of the seven churches named.<sup>66</sup> With regard to the seven Seals and seven Trumpets, Dent put forward a view which was adopted by several later scholars, namely, that these two visions were consecutive in their fulfilment. The first six Seals had foretold events which were to transpire from the time of the Apostolic Church until "about some 300 years after Christ, and somewhat more".<sup>67</sup> The seventh Seal included the entire vision of the Trumpets, which "do all belong to the opening of the seventh seal, and are as it were the seven parts thereof".<sup>68</sup> The first

64 Napier, *Plaine Discovery*, 155-156.

65 Dent, *Ruine of Rome*, 15.

66 *Ibid.*, 26.

67 *Ibid.*, 68.

68 *Ibid.*, 87, 90.

four Trumpets described the gradual growth of heresy within the Church, making way for the coming of Antichrist and had been accomplished by about AD 600.<sup>69</sup> The fifth and sixth Trumpets respectively foretold the rise and growth of the Papacy and the Turks and were parallel in time and fulfilment, having commenced at the completion of the fourth Trumpet in AD 600. Dent concluded:

We live under the opening of the seventh Seal, and the blowing of the sixth Trumpet, and the pouring forth of the sixth Vial. . . . Therefore when we see all things fulfilled which do belong unto the sixth trumpet, it remaineth that we should every hour expect, and look for the blowing of the seventh trumpet, and the end of the world.<sup>70</sup>

Dent had reached the same conclusion as Napier, if by a slightly different route.

Six years after *The Ruine of Rome* had first been published Thomas Brightman's *Apocalypsis Apocalypseos* appeared to give a further turn to the interpretation of apocalyptic prophecy. Brightman agreed with Dent in large measure concerning the Seals and Trumpets, but differed in his interpretation of the Vials. The first six Seals extended to the time of Constantine and the seventh included the complete range of the Trumpets, the first six of which reached from Constantine to 1558.<sup>71</sup> The seventh Trumpet, although it contained a review of "things past", was primarily concerned with "modern" times and things to come and included the remainder of the book, again emphasising the seven Vials. Thus, in Brightman's view, the vision of the Vials was not complementary to that of the Trumpets, but rather consecutive to it and was the last of "three notable terms of time, which contain in them the principal changes that are to fall out in the world, even until the coming of Christ . . ."<sup>72</sup> Brightman explained:

It is manifest therefore that this whole space of time from John to the coming of the Lord is divided into three periods of time, & that each of those periods is again divided into seven members so as the first member of that period which followeth, beginneth under the last member of the former, that is so, that as the seven Trumpets have their original from out of the last Seal, so the seven Vials have their offspring out of the last Trumpet.<sup>73</sup>

Just how near the end of the age really was in Brightman's estimation may be seen from his interpretation of the vision of the seven Churches which, in effect, contained in concise form the entire message of Revelation and which was amplified by all the later visions. This first vision was

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 124, 144.

<sup>71</sup> Brightman, *Revelation*, 203, 236, 388.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 510.

to be understood as applying to the Church in general, from its inception to its triumphant conclusion, setting forth under seven ages the decline of the Church from its first purity of doctrine to its subsequent renewal in readiness for the ultimate reward. The last age, symbolised by the seventh Church, had begun in 1547 and Laodicea represented the Church of England.<sup>74</sup>

If one man stood out above the others in moulding subsequent interpretative thought, it was undoubtedly Joseph Mede. Contemporary opinion, as well as the judgement of later scholarship, recognised the significance of his *Clavis Apocalyptica*. John Worthington, Mede's biographer wrote, "he proceeded upon grounds never traced by any, and infinitely more probable than any layed down by those who before him undertook that task".<sup>75</sup> Mede's great contribution to the study of Revelation was his insistence that a correct interpretation depended on the "synchronisation" of certain prophecies, and an understanding of their relationship to each other. The "Key" to Revelation was, in fact, an explanation of the seven "synchronismes" which he regarded as so essential.<sup>76</sup>

To Mede, there were only two major prophecies in the book, that of the Seals and Trumpets which outlined the destiny of Empires, particularly the Roman Empire, and that of the "Little Book opened" which foretold the destiny of the Church and the Christian religion.<sup>77</sup> Again, these prophecies were parallel in scope, covering the whole Christian era, and the purpose of the "synchronismes" was to correlate certain symbols, times and events within each prophecy. For example, the first synchronism stated that in the first prophecy the seventh Seal which included all seven Trumpets, corresponded in time with the Beasts of chapter 13 in the second prophecy;<sup>78</sup> the second synchronism showed that the battle between Michael and the Dragon took place in the time of the first six Seals and the third placed the seven Vials within the time of the sixth Trumpet.<sup>79</sup> With seven such clear rules to harmonise the various parts of Revelation, Mede believed that it was possible to interpret virtually the entire book.

The first six Seals represent six stages in the history of the Roman Empire, reaching to the time of Theodosius.<sup>80</sup> The seventh Seal, or first six Trumpets, depicts the fall and punishment of the Empire and extends from the death of Theodosius in AD 395 to at least the destruction of Constan-

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74 *Ibid.*, 6, 126, 168./

75 John Worthington in Mede, *Works*, 'The Author's Life'.

76 Mede, *Key of the Revelation*, pt. I, 1.

77 *Ibid.*, 13.

78 *Ibid.*, 14.

79 *Ibid.*, 17.

80 *Ibid.*, 61.

tinople in 1453,<sup>81</sup> with the seventh Trumpet reaching right down to the final consummation of the mystery of God. The second prophecy retraces the whole era, with stress upon events concerning the Church. Thus, the war between Michael and the Great Red Dragon symbolises the hostility between the Church and the Roman Empire in the first three hundred years or so of Christian history, and the Vials signify the destruction of the Antichrist, all within the time of the sixth Trumpet.<sup>82</sup> Three Vials are past, the fourth is now being fulfilled, and three only remain in the future. Apart from that, virtually every other detail in the book of Revelation has been accomplished except, of course, those things which relate to the kingdom of God, which cannot be long delayed.

With all this weight of learning and experience behind them, it cannot be surprising that the men who came later should follow similar patterns of interpretation. With Thomas Goodwin in 1639 to Williams Hicks in 1659 and with the host of those who came between them, the influence of Mede and his predecessors can clearly be seen. Goodwin, who took the position that there were two basic visions in Revelation, wrote:

These Seals and Trumpets, which do in order succeed one another, do contain a continued Prophecy of Events following one another in a succession of Ages downward . . . from the first Seal to the seventh Trumpet, is run over all the Time that the Monarchies and Kingdoms of this World . . . should continue and last.<sup>83</sup>

The book of Revelation made it most plain “that we live now in the extremity of times . . . we are at the verge, and as it were, within the whirl of that great mystery of Christ’s Kingdom, which will, as a gulph, swallow up all time”.<sup>84</sup>

William Hicks, in his commentary on Revelation, *The Revelation Revealed*, appealed for moderation to the militant minority of interpreters, such as the Fifth Monarchy Men, stressing that certain prophecies were yet to be completed before God’s kingdom could be established.<sup>85</sup> Among the unfulfilled parts of Revelation’s prophecies, he named the final downfall of the Antichrist and the completion of the pouring out of the Vials. It was true, however, Hicks added, that Antichrist had begun to fall under the second angel of chapter 14, when the true gospel had been first restored under the Waldenses and the early German reformers.<sup>86</sup> It was true also, that with only

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 80, 85, 117.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pt. II, 32; pt. I, 17; pt. II, 113.

<sup>83</sup> Thomas Goodwin, ‘An Exposition Upon the Revelation’ (1639), in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D.* vol. II (1682), 19.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>85</sup> Hicks, *Revelation Revealed*, 341.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

three of the Vials remaining to be emptied upon the declining Antichristian power, the end was much nearer “than the world thinks of”.<sup>87</sup>

Hicks, then, spoke for all students of biblical prophecy in the seventeenth century, regardless of academic background or ecclesiastical leaning, as indeed he did for virtually all Christian believers of the age when, at the conclusion of his book he proclaimed, “Therefore ye saints of God, lift up your heads, for the Lord is at the door, and the day of your Redemption is nigh at hand”.<sup>88</sup> Within the framework of the fulfilling prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, set in the context of established historical fact, no other conclusion was possible.

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87 *Ibid.*, 343-44.

88 *Ibid.*, 346.