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Apocalyptic Speculation and the French Revolution

by Ronald R. Nelson

Dr. Nelson made his début in our pages in 1973 with a study of "The Theological Development of the Young Robertson Smith". We welcome this further study in a different field of European religious history. At a time when many susceptible Christians are captivated by popular apocalypticism, it may be salutary to be reminded of an earlier upsurge of the same kind of thing. Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa, where Dr. Nelson now teaches, is a school of the Reformed Church in America.

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That an apocalyptic mood has descended upon much of the modern world is a cliché of the times. A generation of prophets, religious and secular, has risen to declare the impending end of human history. The Bomb, the population explosion, the menace of communism, the teetering situation in the Middle East, and a host of other real and imagined 'signs of the times' contribute to this apprehension of some impending doom. A concern with the contemporary relevance of the apocalyptic passages of the Bible, a concern once thought to be the bizarre pre-occupation of the lunatic fringes of the church, has found its way into the avenues of mass marketing. Books by Bible teachers bearing such titles as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, *The Terminal Generation*, and *The Beginning of the End* sell millions of copies from the book racks of supermarkets and drug stores. Hollywood of late has discovered the box office value of apocalyptic fears and fantasies. Witness the popularity of such films as *The Omen* and, alas, *Omen II* which purport to deal, however fictionally, with the fulfilment of biblical prophecies of the appearance of the Antichrist. (In *Omen II* the teenage Antichrist confirms his identity with the help of a Bible and the discovery of the numbers 666 'tattooed' on his scalp. Physicians offer further corroboration of his beastly lineage; he has coyote blood in his veins.)

Such nonsense as these *Omen* films would be unworthy of comment in these pages were it not that this crass exploitation thrives on an atmosphere of sensationalism promoted by crystal-ball-gazing uses of Scripture all too often encouraged by well-meaning Christian preachers. It is little wonder that amid the clamour of voices claiming to say something significant about the future of man, some sincere Christians find themselves in deep perplexity as to how to responsibly understand and appropriate the message of the apocalyptic thrust of the Scriptures. There surely is a great need for a wider apprehension of the perspectives on biblical apocalyptic opened up by modern scholarship.¹ There is a need

¹ See for instance Hans Schwarz, *On the Way to the Future: A Christian View of Eschatology in the Light of Current Trends in Religion, Philosophy, and Science* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972) and the bibliography Schwarz includes.

as well for the cultivation among Christians of a more lively historical imagination, a point recently made by Edward E. Ericson, Jr.

If our contemporary prophets had seen reality through enough different eyes, they would have been embarrassed by this mistaking a very few threads for the whole tapestry. Had their imaginations been sufficiently enlarged through interaction with their fellow men, historical and fictional, they might even have developed the power to imagine alternative futures, to imagine the possibility of the introduction of new elements that would upset the particular graph lines which they extrapolated out all the way to their apocalyptic ends. . . . Given our present perspective, how provincial seem the prophecies that Hitler or Stalin or whoever else was the Antichrist. Historical perspective rings down the curtain on one apocalypse after another.²

Beyond its interest as a footnote to the history of Christian thought, this present study in misdirected apocalyptic speculation is intended to serve the expansion of historical perspective Ericson commends and to encourage the sense of proportion, restraint, and discernment in matters apocalyptic for which he calls.

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On both sides of the Atlantic the turmoil unleashed by the French Revolution of 1789 was interpreted by observers as the herald of the Last Days.³ As in earlier periods of social crisis, the prophetic and apocalyptic portions of the Bible provided the light and sense of orientation whereby many sustained their hope in the midst of upheaval and darkness. The idea that this particular time of revolution was foreshadowed in the pages of Scripture found special favour among English Christians. For over a century before 1789 a school of prophetic interpretation that looked forward to the eventual downfall of the French monarchy in conjunction with devastating reversals in the fortunes of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church in France had flourished in England. These beliefs were especially prominent during the long reign in France of Louis XIV (1643-1715), whose expansionist and anti-Protestant policies provoked many a crisis in Anglo-French relations. By the ingenious use of certain numbers found in the *Revelation of St John*, certain expositors managed to predict dates for the expected reversals in French and Roman affairs with what turned out to be rather remarkable accuracy.

² 'Apocalypse and the Loss of Historical Imagination', *The Reformed Journal* 23 (May-June 1973), 12-17.

³ LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation* (4 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946-54), vol. II. 743-48.

During the 1790s the writings of these Bible scholars were extensively republished and quoted as evidence that the signs of the times were being correctly read.⁴

In their approach to the prophecies of the Bible these scholars could claim to stand squarely in a tradition stemming from the Reformation. Martin Luther had taught Protestants to see the varied terms in which the Bible speaks of the Antichrist as finding their fulfilment in the history of the Roman papacy.⁵ He also gave a great impetus to the belief that the *Revelation of St John* should be regarded as a prophetic outline of trials through which the Church of Christ would pass from her first century to her last; the *Apocalypse* for Luther was a veritable key to history and to the future. In his preface to the *Book of Revelation* written in 1545 Luther spoke of its predictive value in this fashion:

Since it is intended as a revelation of things that are to happen in the future, and especially of tribulations and disasters that were to come upon Christendom, 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 Christendom till now and hold them up alongside of these images, and so compare them very carefully. If, then, the two perfectly coincided and

⁴ The following are illustrative of this type of publication: *Prophetic Conjectures on the French Revolution and Other Recent and Shortly Expected Events: Extracted from Archbp. Brown (1551), Rev. J. Knox (1570), Dr. T. Goodwin (1639), Rev. Chr. Love (1651), Archbp. Usher (1655), Dr. H. More (1663), Rev. P. Jurieu (1687), Rev. R. Fleming (1701), Rev. J. Willison (1742), Dr. Gill (1748) and A Remarkable Anonymous Pamphlet (1747) with an Introduction and Remarks* (London: W. Taylor for William Button, 1793). This book was published in Baltimore, Northampton, and Philadelphia in 1794. A German translation was also published in Philadelphia in 1794, under the title *Prophetische Muthmassungen uber die Französische Revolution*. (Joseph Lomas Towers), *Illustrations of Prophecy; in the Course of Which are Elucidated Many Predictions which Occur in Isaiah, Daniel, the Writings of the Evangelists and the Book of Revelation And Which Are Thought to Fortell among other Great Events, A Revolution in France Favourable to the Interests of Mankind, the Overthrow of the Papal Power, and of Ecclesiastical Tyranny, the Downfall of Civil Despotism, and the Subsequent Melioration of the State of the World, Together with Extracts from Joseph Mede, Vitringa, . . . Sir Isaac Newton, . . . Bp. Newton, and Bp. Hurd, 2 vols.* (London, 1796). Thomas Goodwin, *The French Revolution Foreseen, in 1639. Extracts from an Exposition of the Revelation, by an Eminent Divine of Both Universities, in the Beginning of The Last Century* (London: J. Johnson, 1796). By far the most popular of these works was by Robert Fleming. His essay first appeared in 1701 under the title *Apocalyptical Key. An Extraordinary Discourse on the Rise and Fall of the Papacy*. Between 1793 and 1849 it was reprinted several times in England, Scotland, the United States, Germany and France. The list of editions in the British Museum Catalogue, though incomplete, runs to a column and a half.

⁵ John M. Headly, *Luther's View of Church History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 195-265.

squared with one another, we could build on that as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable, interpretation.⁶

Following this method Luther found in the symbols of the *Revelation* an inspired history of the Church in her conflicts with heretics, infidels, and the papacy.

Luther's so-called historicist interpretation of the *Book of Revelation*⁷ had perhaps its most diligent advocates among the English Puritan divines of the Seventeenth Century.⁸ Of these, Doctor Joseph Mede (1586-1638), a Fellow of Christ's College, Cambridge, and Professor of Greek, was regarded as the prince of prophetic exposition.⁹ Concerning his *Clavis Apocalyptica* of 1627¹⁰ it has been said, 'no work on the Apocalypse by an English author from the time of the Reformation down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and even later, has exercised as much influence as this profound interpretation.'¹¹ Since several of the scholars mentioned subsequently in this paper build on Mede's foundation, it will be necessary to briefly summarize his standpoint. It will be recalled that the woes and tribulations that fill the pages of the *Revelation* come in groups of seven and are spoken of as seals to be opened, trumpets to be blown and vials to be poured. Mede relates the six seals of *Revelation* 6 to as many crises of history from St. John's day to the conversion of Constantine (AD 312). From the seventh seal arise seven trumpets. These symbolize in historical sequence the barbarian and Islamic invasions of Christendom. Thus, for instance, the sixth trumpet which looses four angels from the Euphrates River is said to refer to the Turkish expansion that began around 1300. The seven vials of chapter 16 foretell a series of judgments to be poured out on that great mystic beast, the Popish Antichrist. The first vial pertained to the witness of the Waldensians, Albigenians, Wyclifites, and Hussites. The

⁶ *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), vol. 35, p. 401.

⁷ In opposition to the Protestant historical school, Catholic scholars of the Counter-reformation proposed both the preterist interpretation, which sees the Book of Revelation solely as a response to the situation of the late first century church, and the futurist interpretation which projects the tribulations of the Revelation to a yet future fulfilment in the last great apostasy during the reign of a personal Antichrist.

⁸ On Puritan eschatology see Peter Toon (ed.), *Puritans, The Millennium, and the Future of Israel* (Cambridge & London: James Clark & Co. Ltd., 1970).

⁹ Robert Clouse, 'The Apocalyptic Interpretation of Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede', *Evangelical Theological Society Journal*, II (1960), 181-193.

¹⁰ Translated into English in 1643 by Richard More under the title *Key of the Revelation . . . with a Preface Written by Dr. Twisse* (London: R. B. for Phil. Stephens, 1643).

¹¹ Wilbur Smith, *A Preliminary Bibliography for the Study of Biblical Prophecy*, as quoted in Robert Clouse, 'Johann Heinrich Alsted and English Millennialism', *Harvard Theological Review* LXII (1969), 203.

second vial was fulfilled in Luther's destruction of the authority of the Antichrist in large areas of Europe. The third vial represented the religious wars stemming from the Reformation and still raging in Mede's day. Mede believed that four more vials remained to be poured out upon the Antichrist before Christ would return to decisively defeat his enemies and found his earthly millennial kingdom. Though Mede was reticent as to establishing a time-table for these future events, he employed a system of chronology that prompted his followers to be bold and specific in their calculations of what is to come.

198 The reign of the papal Antichrist, according to Mede, would last 1260 years. In some passages of the *Revelation*, events connected with the rule of the Antichrist are said to last 1260 days; other events are said to last 42 months. On the basis of a 30-day month, noted Mede, these periods are equivalent. Since in Mede's opinion all the events in question could not be compressed into 1260 literal days and in view of the fact that on occasion biblical prophets spoke of days as standing for years (*Numbers* 14:34 and *Ezekiel* 4:5), the duration of the 'Beast of Babylon' and his persecution of the saints would be 1260 years. Among expositors who applied this interpretation to the riddles of the *Apocalypse*, there was a considerable variety of opinion about when the demise of the papacy would occur. These differences arose from disagreements as to when the papacy acceded to the function of Antichrist (a variety of dates from the fourth to the seventh century were in use) or about the length of the years in question. But that the *Revelation* spoke of the Roman Church and its destruction in the not too distant future was a common certitude.

II

Having made this summation of the school of Mede, we can proceed with our main concern: the prediction of a revolution in France in conjunction with the fall of the Antichrist.

Of books credited with anticipating the French Revolution through interpreting the *Book of Revelation* in the historicist tradition of Luther and Mede, none was more often reprinted in the revolutionary era than a book that first appeared in 1701 bearing the title *Apocalyptical Key, or Prophetical Discourse on the Rise and Fall of the Papacy*.¹² The author, Robert Fleming (1660-1716), was a Scottish presbyterian minister who spent several years in the Netherlands where he was on intimate terms with William of Orange. In fact it was at William's request, subsequent to his

¹² See note 4 *supra*. The quotations that follow are from an edition published in Boston in 1794 by Adams and Larkin under the title, *Discourse on the Rise and Fall of the Papacy; Wherein the Revolution in France and the Abject State of the King are Distinctly Pointed Out.*

accession to the English Throne, that Fleming settled in England, serving a presbyterian congregation and advising William on Scottish affairs.¹³ It is not so much Fleming's connections with the ruling circle that interests us here, however, as his posthumous celebrity as a long range forecaster.

According to Fleming, the third vial of *Revelation* 16, which Mede had related to the wars growing out of the Reformation, was concluded with the Peace of Münster (i.e. Westphalia) in 1648. The fourth vial then, reasoned Fleming, had begun to be poured out in the second half of the seventeenth century. In his vision of this judgment, the writer of the *Apocalypse* had seen an angel 'pour out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give him glory.' (*Revelation* 16:8-9) Fleming held the prevailing view that the vials symbolized judgments meted out against the Antichrist, but the mention here of the sun suggested to him Louis XIV, the reigning French monarch, who had taken the sun as his emblem. Further, this 'Sun of the Papal Kingdom', as Fleming called him, had, in his wars in Flanders, Burgundy, Lorraine, and the Germanies, 'bombarded' many towns. Thus, said Fleming, 'we may see how properly this scorching and burning of men from above, as if the sun had sent down fire and heat from his body is made use of to characterize this vial.' Noting that the vial was poured on the sun and then the sun given power to scorch men. Fleming prophesied that the sun itself, that is, the French monarchy, would suffer in the period of this vial. 'As therefore,' he observed, 'France was made use of in the influences given, to vex and scorch the Austrian Family, in both branches, so afterwards he himself was tormented when he saw himself obliged to leave Holland, which he was so near surprising, AD 1672; and especially when he was obliged to resign all his conquests in Flanders by the late Peace of Ryswick.'¹⁴

Though he expected the 'scorching of the sun' to continue to make itself felt for some time yet, the demise of the power of the king of France could be anticipated before the expiration of the eighteenth century. Considering the conclusion of the fourth vial, Fleming foresaw that, 'whereas the French King takes the Sun for his emblem and this for his motto, *Nec pluribus impar*, he may at length or rather his successors, and the monarchy itself, at least by the year 1794, be forced to acknowledge that in respect to the neighbouring potentates he is *singulis impar*.'¹⁵

¹³ *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. XIX, 285-86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Fleming, *op. cit.*, 40-41.

Fleming arrived at his date of 1794 for the fall of the French Monarchy by an employment of the 1260 year figure. Since according to *Revelation* 16 the fifth vial will be poured directly 'upon the seat of the Beast', it must correspond to the expiration of the 1260 days (or years) allotted to the Antichrist's rule. He dated the rise of Antichrist from AD 552, the year that Justinian drove the Ostrogoths from Italy and re-established the papacy in Rome. This event Fleming held to be the healing of the deadly wound (*Revelation* 13:3) which thereby 'laid a foundation for the Popes rise and paved the way for his advancement.' By basing his calculation not on the Julian calendar with its 365-day year but on a year of 360 days, Fleming showed that the 1260-year period of the reign of the Antichrist and the beginning of the fifth vial would come in 1794.¹⁶ Hence the French monarchy must be humbled by 1794, ending the fourth vial and leading to the fifth. Though making its first appearance in 552, the Antichrist did not come to fruition until 606 when Pope Boniface III declared the headship of Rome over all churches. On the basis of this date and the 1260 prophetic years, Fleming calculated that the sufferings poured out on the Antichrist would reach their decisive force in 1848 when the Pope would receive a fatal though not immediately destructive blow.¹⁷

In 1701, when Fleming wrote his book, England and France were temporarily at peace after a period of intermittent conflict. But if Louis XIV had purchased peace at a heavy price by the settlement of Ryswick in 1697, he seemed to have more than made up for his losses in 1700 when he succeeded in placing his grandson on the Spanish throne. Fleming viewed Louis' diplomatic victory, however, as an advancement that could 'lay the foundation of the ruin or decay of French power, by exhausting the Kingdom, both as to men and money, in defense of a weak monarchy.' How should England adjust her policies in light of the troubled times ahead? While Fleming said he hesitated to give advice inasmuch as the determination of such weighty matters belonged to national councils for whom he was merely directed to pray, he nonetheless offered his opinion with perfect clarity. He wrote:

And if we do now heartily and unanimously enter upon a war against France, with the assistance of allies, and be but vigorous and faithful in the prosecution of it, securing the source of money and treasure in the heart of America,

¹⁶ *Ibid.* The publisher added a footnote pointing out that if Fleming had not disdained to calculate according to 'the fancier measures of time', he would have hit upon 1793, the year Louis XVI was put to death.

¹⁷ When revolutions swept over Europe in 1848, and in the midst of a popular uprising in Rome Pope Pius IX was forced to flee to Gaeta, Fleming's book was again reprinted in England, Scotland, and Belgium.

and bringing the war into the bowels of a nation where a young monarch is hardly established — I say, if we do this, without loosing our opportunities our peace and security may yet be lengthened out.¹⁸

Fleming's advice is not exceptional except insofar as he claimed to predicate it on an exegesis of words written perhaps sixteen hundred years earlier and in conjunction with events which according to Fleming's own biblical calculations were still nearly a century ahead.

Another passage of the *Book of Revelation* that drew forth a good deal of speculation in connection with the future of France was that of the so-called 'second woe', which some commentators placed at the end of 1260 years. Of this woe the seer of Patmos wrote:

And the same hour there was a great earthquake and the tenth part of the city fell, and in the earthquake were slain of men seven thousand: and the remnant were affrighted and gave glory to the God of heaven. (*Revelation* 11:13)

Certain seventeenth century commentators held that this earthquake referred to a political revolution in one of the ten kingdoms of the Empire of the Antichrist. The Beast, that is the Antichrist, we read in *Revelations* 13:1 had ten horns and ten crowns. As early as 1639 the Rev. Thomas Goodwin had vaguely suggested that the earthquake in the tenth part of the city, the city being the jurisdiction of Papal Rome, might refer to a revolution in the kingdom of France. Goodwin also was among the first to point out that the Greek text read 'seven thousand names of men were slain' and to thereby conclude that in this revolution men would be 'bereft of their names and titles which are rooted out forever and condemned to perpetual forgetfulness.'¹⁹

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The assertion that the earthquake, the fall of the tenth part of the city, and the slaying of names would be fulfilled in France was developed more fully by the Reverend Peter Jurieu in 1687. Jurieu, a Huguenot exile, was minister of the French Church of Rotterdam (during the same period when Robert Fleming's father and subsequently the younger Fleming himself served the Scots Church of Rotterdam). He was also the author of *L'Accomplissement des prophéties ou la délivrance prochaine de l'église*, a work that passed through twenty-two French and twenty-six English editions. 'Now what is this tenth part of this City that shall fall?' asked Jurieu. He answered, 'In my opinion we cannot doubt that it is France. This Kingdom is the most considerable part, or piece of the ten horns, or States, which once made up the great Babylonian City.' While Jurieu

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹ *Prophetic Conjectures*, 19.

looked for the French monarchy to be 'humbled' by the revolution, he also looked forward to its subsequent elevation. He noted that in *Revelation* 16:16 it is prophesied that 'The ten horns which thou sawest upon the beast, these shall eat her flesh and burn her with fire.' Jurieu's comment on this verse was that:

It is clear that these kings who through ignorance or weakness suffered their power to be usurped by the empire of the papacy shall take it again; shall eat her flesh, *i.e.* shall enrich themselves with her benefices and revenues and shall burn her with fire, *i.e.* shall abolish the memory of this Roman Empire, so that nothing but ashes shall remain of it.

Jurieu anticipated a day when France would 'break with the court of Rome' and wholly change the religion of the kingdom. He interpreted the slaying of the seven thousand names of men to mean 'Monks, Carmelites, Augustines, Dominicans, Jacobins, Franciscans, Capuchins, Jesuits and an infinite company of others, whose number is not easy to define, and which the Holy Ghost denotes by the number seven, which is the number of perfection, to signify that the orders of monks and nuns shall perish forever.' On the basis of his own apocalyptic arithmetic Jurieu predicted the 'earthquake' would occur in 1785, though he added, 'if I should be mistaken by nine or ten years I do not think any could justly treat me as a false prophet and accuse me of rashness.'²⁰

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Another scholar who claimed that France was the 'tenth part of the city' was the Scottish writer John Willison in his book of 1742 entitled *Balm of Gilead*. Willison reasoned that the verse referred to France since she was the last or tenth as to her rise and therefore the kingdom that gave Rome the name of the beast with *ten* horns.²¹ A similar idea is found in an anonymous pamphlet that appeared in England in 1747.²² The identification of France with the tenth part of the city was coupled with a proof that the name of the French monarch, translated into Roman numerals, corresponded to the mystical number of the Beast, the 666 of *Revelation* 13:18. The writer distinguished between the ecclesiastical Antichrist (*i.e.* the Pope) and the secular Anti-christ (*i.e.* the King of France). His line of reasoning was to the effect that,

As the kingdom itself was tenth in the order of time or appearance so the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² *Dissertation on the 13th and 14th Verses of the XIth Chapter of the Revelation, or an Enquiry into the True Object of the Second Woe. With Probable Reasons for Shewing that the Tenth Part of the City is Descriptive of France; and that the Earthquake with which it is Threatened Intends of Revolution in the Kingdom.* (London: John Bird) and reprinted in *Prophetic Conjectures*.

name of the first king of France that was Christian and therefore submitted to the papal jurisdiction includes the numerical letters of the beast . . . The name of the first Christian king was Clodovaeus, which is only a corruption of, or another word for, Ludovicus. And therefore it is a good clue leading us both to the commencement of the secular antichristian beast, which must be sometime in the reign of Clodovaeus, and also the conclusion of the papal power in this branch of it, its period of 1260 years properly speaking expiring in a revolution in this Kingdom.²³

Such tortuous exegesis as our anonymous author's would have soon been forgotten had he not chanced to claim the French monarchy, 'the grand prop of the antichristian hierarchy . . . the secular beast' would meet its termination at a time 'when one of the Lewis's shall sit on the throne.' When in September, 1792, the Monarchy was abolished in France and in January, 1793, Louis XVI, put to death, this obscure pamphlet was thought worthy of republication both in England and America. What would a reader convinced of the writer's powers of prognostication be led to expect next from the prophetic time-table? Since in the midst of the earthquake and the slaying of names a 'remnant was affrighted and gave glory to the God of Heaven,' the author predicted that by the French people being 'affrighted' we are evidently to conclude 'that they become converts to pure and primitive Christianity.'²⁴

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The republication during the period of the French Revolution of such literature as we have surveyed above raises the question as to what effect it may have had on public opinion regarding the Revolution. While a comprehensive answer lies beyond the scope of this paper, one may surmise that in the first years of the revolution, prior to the embroilment of the whole Western World in the crisis, these apocalyptic writings served to favourably dispose some segments of public opinion in Great Britain and America toward the French Revolution. For instance, the editor of the *Prophetic Conjectures* concluded his offering of extracts from Fleming,

²³ *Ibid.*, 57. The derivation of the 666 from the king's name was as follows:

L	50
V	5
D	500
O	0
V	5
I	1
C	100
V	5
S	0
	<hr/>
	666

²⁴ *Ibid.* 59.

Jurieu, and others with his own exposition of Ezekiel's mysterious vision of celestial creatures and wheels. (*Ezekiel* 1) The wheel imagery suggested to the writer that the workings of divine Providence were like a complicated piece of 'machinery', 'like the circles of an armillary sphere'. 'We behold the movements of the mechanism but know nothing of the mechanism (so to speak) within.' But as the index of a clock regulates the internal movements of the device, so prophecy 'being dictated by the spirit within the wheels' makes the workings of Providence in history understandable to men. In his vision Ezekiel heard a voice proclaim 'O, wheel.' This cry, said the expositor, should be more accurately translated 'Revolution'. By this, he said, we are informed 'that the proper design and tendency of the wheels, is to effect Revolution . . . The world subsists by revolutions . . . If the voice from heaven cry 'Revolution' in vain would the powers of earth attempt to arrest the motions of these wheels.'²⁵

The Reverend Elhanan Winchester in two sermons preached before the English Parliament in February, 1793, looked for something more conclusive in the plans of Providence than this vision of perpetual revolution. After quoting extensively from Robert Fleming's book of 1701 and then casting an eye at recent events in the French Nation, he informed the gathered dignitaries that the dawning of the millennial reign of Christ on earth was very near at hand.

I regard the late events in France, therefore, as Signs of the Times, and they mark the close of the preceding period with great exactness; and in their light their consequence is very great: they shew us whereabouts we are, and tend to confirm the authority of the Scriptures and especially of the book of the Revelation of St. John.

A new and very important period is now beginning to take place, under the sound of the Seventh Trumpet which will continue to sound from this time to the personal appearance of Jesus, till all the seven vials of the wrath of God are poured out, and until *the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ.*²⁶

No events of the decade of revolution were interpreted as more clearly confirmatory of the correctness of the historicist schema of prophecy with its preoccupation with the conclusion of 1260 prophetic years than

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

²⁶ Elhanan Winchester, *The Three Woe Trumpets of which the First and Second are Already Past and the Third is now Begun . . . Being the Substance of Two Discourses from Revelation XI: 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 Delivered in London on February 9 and 24, 1793*, First American Edition (Boston: John W. Palsom, 1794), 38. See also the comparable sermon of Joseph Priestly, *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies; A Sermon, Preached February 28, 1794* (London: J. Johnson, 1794).

those that transpired in Rome in 1798. It was then that the papacy was made to feel the full force of the winds of revolution. On February 10, 1798, a French Army under the command of General Louis Berthier entered the city of Rome; within a few days the Roman Republic was established and Pope Pius VI driven into exile. These events called forth a flood of prophetic exposition on the theme of the termination of the 1260 years.²⁷ For instance Edward King, a Cambridge-educated barrister, in his *Remarks on the Signs of the Times* (1798) wrote, referring to the Pope's flight from Rome: 'Is not the *Papal power* at Rome, which was once so terrible, and so domineering at an end?' After reviewing various efforts to anticipate the conclusion of the 1260 years and offering a system of his own that worked out to the year 1798, King concluded: 'We have reason to apprehend then, that *the 1260 years are now completed* . . . And if these things are so, then truly that *Great City Babylon is fallen; — is fallen; — is thrown down; and shall be found no more at all.* And nothing remains, but for us to wait, with awful apprehension, for the End.'²⁸

But when the papacy did not wither away, when the predicted evangelical awakening failed to materialize in France, and as the star of Napoleon began to rise over Europe, students of prophecy were forced to make many adjustments in their exegetical systems. The apocalyptic mood and the appetite for prophetic exposition awakened by the French Revolution, however, persisted well into the nineteenth century. Between 1800 and 1840 in England alone not less than 100 books were published dealing with the signs of the times, ten prophetic periodicals were founded, and several prophetic societies and conferences formed.²⁹ Though much of this apocalyptic fervour departed from the lines laid down by earlier Protestant exegesis,³⁰ not a few interpreters persisted in the confidence that history was still unfolding the mysteries of the *Book of Revelation*. The fourth and fifth vials having now been poured, in the coming of the sixth vial, they held, following Mede's suggestion of 1627, they should look for the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the

²⁷ Froom, *op. cit.*, II, 765-82.

²⁸ Edward King, *Remarks on the Signs of the Times* (Philadelphia: reprinted by Jas. Humphreys from the London copy of 1799, 1800), 18-21.

²⁹ Froom, *op. cit.*, III, 266-68.

³⁰ This period saw the rise in evangelical circles of a futurist interpretation of *Revelation* and of the dispensationalist school of prophecy. On the latter see Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960).

return of the People of Israel to the Promised Land,³¹ hopes that were to have their impact on the formation of British foreign policy in the nineteenth century.³²

Is there a lesson to be drawn from this chapter in apocalyptic speculation? A school of prophetic speculation for a season seems to find its expectations dramatically fulfilled. Yet history moves on and the fulfillment and its exegetical basis become unconvincing, even farcical, to a later generation. Surely the timeless commentary then on all such speculation is to the effect that it is not for us to know the times and seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.

³¹ See for instance George Stanley Faber, *A Dissertation on the Prophecies, . . . Relative to the Great Period of 1260 Years; the Papal and Mohammedan Apostacies; the Tyrannical Reign of the Antichrist, or the Infidel Power and the Restoration of the Jews* (2 vols.; Boston: Andrews and Cummings, 1808), II, 217-22.

³² Barbara W. Tuchman, *Bible and Sword: England and Palestine from the Bronze Age to Balfour* (New York University Press, 1956).