The Impact of Apocalypticism during the Puritan Revolutions

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The Puritan revolutions which convulsed the British Isles in the mid-seventeenth century constituted the high-water mark of apocalypticism’s political impact on the English-speaking world.¹ Never before or since have Britain or America been so dominated by leaders imbued with an intensely apocalyptic mentality.² Between 1637 and 1660 the politics of Scotland and England were shaped to a remarkable degree by the fears and aspirations of “the hotter sort of Protestants”, those who called each other “the godly”, but were known pejoratively as “Puritans”.³ Among them were such famous figures as Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, and George Fox. Almost all were convinced that they were living through the climactic years of world history, and playing a significant role in God’s eschatological purpose. This article will investigate the impact of their apocalyptic beliefs on the politics and culture of mid-seventeenth century England and (to a lesser degree) Scotland.

Protestant Apocalypticism

From the early days of the Reformation, Protestants had been fascinated by the apocalyptic Scriptures. The book of Revelation seemed to answer those who argued that God would not allow his church to apostasise for hundreds of years. Martin Luther, despite his initial reservations about the canonicity of
Revelation, believed that the book had predicted the apostasy of the church. When its author wrote about the reign of the Beast (chapter 13), the Woman in the wilderness (chapter 12), and the fall of Babylon (chapter 18), he was predicting the rise of the papacy, the persecution of the true church, and the eventual triumph of Protestantism. Antichrist and the papacy were one and the same.⁴

English Protestants in the Tudor period wholeheartedly endorsed Luther’s identification of the pope as Antichrist. Among theologians the doctrine was an unchallenged orthodoxy until the early seventeenth century, and politicians were at home with the apocalyptic consensus.⁵ Elizabeth I’s leading minister, William Cecil (Lord Burghley), was resolute in his hostility to the “shaven priest at Rome that occupythe the place of Antichrist”. Although he is often portrayed as a poli tique guided primarily by raison d’état, it has recently been argued that Cecil’s attitudes to both foreign policy and the English Catholics were shaped by his apocalyptic convictions. Philip II was seen as leading an Antichristian crusade against English Protestantism and the English Catholics were viewed as agents of Antichrist. Cecil resisted the temptation to indulge in specific eschatological speculation, but his fear of the popish Antichrist partially inspired the aggressive anti-Catholic policies of the late Elizabethan regime.⁶

As well as adopting Luther’s view of the papacy, Tudor Protestants also accepted his historicist approach to Revelation. Unlike modern Protestants, who tend towards either ahistorical or futurist readings of Revelation 6-19, they believed that many of the book’s prophecies had been fulfilled in specific events between the first century and the sixteenth. The seven trumpets, the seven plagues and the seven vials of wrath were repeatedly identified with particular historical events, some past, some yet to come.⁷

But if Tudor Protestants saw the world through apocalyptic spectacles, the spectacles were not particularly rose-tinted.
True, Revelation did predict the eventual downfall of the papacy and the triumph of the saints, but this was to occur right at the end of history; there was to be no future golden age on earth. Augustine had been right. The millennium mentioned briefly in Revelation 20 was not a future period of earthly bliss, but a description of all or part of the church age, in which the devil was limited and the saints could proclaim the Gospel. The Christian’s hope lay beyond history.\(^8\)

Yet from the mid-sixteenth-century, Protestant theologians in the Reformed or Calvinist tradition did begin to take a more optimistic view of the earth’s future.\(^9\) Calvin’s successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, and the English Puritan, William Perkins, argued forcefully from Romans 11 that the Jewish people would be converted to the Reformed faith in the last days. Others developed this idea, and suggested that the fall of the papacy would not signal the end but inaugurate an era of latter-day glory on earth, characterised by peace, prosperity and the dominance of pure religion. Normally, however, this period was not identified with the millennium of Revelation 20. Most Reformed theologians were strictly speaking still amillennialists, even if their expectation of a coming age of godly rule would lead many historians to classify them as millenarian.\(^10\)

Millenarianism proper only took off among Reformed thinkers in the early seventeenth century. Howard Hotson has argued that the major reason for this development may well have been the logical problems associated with the notion of a past millennium rather than any growth in Protestant optimism.\(^11\) Most Protestants thought that the millennium (the binding of Satan and the rule of the saints) had run from the rise of Constantine in 300 AD until 1300 AD or from 1 AD to 1000 AD. But this belief created a major difficulty, for these years were also said to have witnessed the rise of the papal Antichrist! It seemed odd, to say the least, that Antichrist had reigned at the same time as the saints. The simplest way to
resolve this problem was by becoming millenarian; that is, by accepting that the millennium of Revelation 20 would occur at the end of history. The English Puritan, Thomas Brightman, did this in his famous commentary on Revelation, but he rather bizarrely held on to the idea of a past millennium as well. More purely millenarian works were published in 1627 by the German Calvinist, Johannes Alsted, and the Cambridge theologian, Joseph Mede. Mede argued that the era between the early church and the Reformation had witnessed not the millennial rule of the saints, but the 1260-year rule of Satan. Only now, in these last days, was the millennium approaching.12

Such ideas were eventually accepted by many of England’s zealous Protestants. But even in the 1630s millenarianism proper was a rare bird. Many Puritans, like Richard Sibbes, expected the imminent conversion of the Jews and the downfall of Antichrist, but they were not thinking in terms of a literal future millennium. Only after 1637, when the first rumble of Puritan revolt was heard from Scotland, did explicitly millenarian ideas appear among Puritan exiles in the Netherlands and New England, where preachers like Thomas Goodwin and John Cotton began to preach excitedly about the coming reign of the saints. Even in the 1640s, when the millenarian writings of Brightman, Alsted, and Mede were published in English translations in London, the belief that the thousand years of Revelation 20 were just beginning was highly controversial.13

**Apocalypticism and the Origins of the British Troubles**

Yet if pure millenarianism was fairly rare among Puritans before 1640, a more diffuse apocalypticism was almost universal. Protestants right across Europe were convinced that they were living at the end of the age. Their conviction rested in part on their observation of contemporary politics. Since 1618 central Europe had been torn apart by a war that was only to end in 1648. To many contemporaries this Thirty Years War was primarily a confessional struggle between Catholic and
Protestant powers, and the entry of Catholic France on the "Protestant" side did little to change this perception. Protestants were filled with trepidation as they saw vital territory lost, and they placed events in an apocalyptic framework. Rome was identified with the Beast of Revelation, and its present success was both terrifying and exhilarating; Antichrist was raging because his downfall was near. The last days were coming, when the Jews would be converted and Protestantism would triumph across the continent and then throughout the world. The military exploits of the Swedish king Gustavus Adolphus in the early 1630s filled many British Calvinists with great hope. The Scottish divine Samuel Rutherford wrote that Christ was now on horseback, hunting and pursuing the Beast. The death of Gustavus near the end of 1632 dealt a vicious blow to hopes of early victory in the last great holy war, but most Calvinists continued to expect it in the long run.

It was against this apocalyptic continental backdrop that British Puritans saw domestic events. In the 1620s and 1630s their disillusionment with their kings intensified. James was a pacific king with no desire to become embroiled in European war, but his Puritan subjects thought it an outrage that he did not organise a crusade to relieve their suffering brethren on the continent. In Scotland, moreover, James had introduced legislation ordering that communicants receive the sacrament kneeling, a practice that to many Puritans was nothing less than popish idolatry.

If James was bad, his son Charles was even worse. For Charles gave enthusiastic backing to a high church reform movement in England and Scotland, a movement promoted by Archbishop Laud and usually labelled Laudianism or Arminianism. Laudians wished to make Protestant worship more dignified and decorous, to shift attention from the sermon to the sacrament, and to encourage a high Eucharistic theology. As if this was not controversial enough, they questioned Calvin's teaching on predestination and even rejected the identification
of the Pope with Antichrist. Puritans who refused to conform to their liturgical innovations were not infrequently prosecuted and suspended from their ministries.

The effect of all this on British Puritan opinion was electric. Antichrist was now not simply an external threat; he was within the Reformed churches of Britain itself. In a graphic image, Samuel Rutherford claimed that the Laudian bishops were bringing “the Pope’s foul tail first upon us (their wretched and beggarly ceremonies)”, in order that they might “thrust in after them the Antichrist’s legs and thighs, and his belly, head and shoulders”. For how long this would continue Rutherford could not tell, and in the mid-1630s he seriously considered following the example of other Puritans and emigrating to New England, on the grounds that Antichrist may be allowed to ravage Scotland before his eventual downfall.

Yet as it turned out, relief for Puritans came sooner than expected. In 1637 Charles and the Laudian bishops attempted to impose a new Prayer Book on the Scottish kirk. It was to prove their greatest mistake. The Scottish nobility were already angered by the high-handed and arbitrary character of rule from London, and the decision to impose a Prayer Book without consulting either the Scottish church or Parliament was one which angered them deeply. In July, militant Puritans organised a riot against the new liturgy in Edinburgh, and before long they had succeeded in persuading much of the nobility to join their protest movement. In February 1638 the supporters of the protest movement signed a National Covenant, and henceforth they became known as Covenanters.

It would be a mistake to see the Covenanters as an apocalyptic movement per se. Although the Covenant had united most of the Scottish political nation in opposition to the policies of Charles I, the nobility were rarely bursting with the Puritan zeal of their ministers. They saw the Covenant as a way of restoring Scotland’s ancient constitution and their own role
in the polity after both had been undermined by government from London. Many of the ministers, moreover, were at least as much inspired by the model of Old Testament Israel as by thoughts of the end times. Scotland's covenant with God, like that of the Jews, had been violated by idolatry, but it was now being renewed.

Yet apocalyptic ideas were an important presence among the Covenanters. Rutherford, for example, fervently anticipated the conversion of the Jews and the fall of Antichrist. In August 1640, as the Covenanter army prepared to march into England and face the king's forces in battle, Rutherford allowed his apocalyptic imagination to run riot. In a sermon to the troops he speculated that God was beginning his final great work in little Scotland, "a worm of a nation" at the ends of the earth. From here reformation could be taken into England, and from there it might go all over Europe precipitating the fall of Antichrist. Archibald Johnston of Wariston, the lawyer who drew up the Covenant, also believed that the movement was to be "propagated from Island to Continent, until King Jesus be set down on his throne".

The success of the Scottish army in 1640 confirmed such transcendent hopes. It swept past the English forces and occupied Newcastle, forcing Charles into recalling the English Parliament. The Parliament that met was determined to reverse many of the policies of the 1630s, and it contained a powerful Puritan contingent who fully shared the apocalyptic sentiments of their Scottish brethren. The Scottish revolution had given new hope to the godly, leading them to focus intently on the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. In the weekly fast sermons before Parliament Puritan preachers like Stephen Marshall repeatedly employed the images of Revelation. They talked of Babylon, the Whore and the Beast, they insisted that Parliament was fighting a crucial battle in the final war against Antichrist. The Irish Catholic rebellion in late 1641 simply reinforced this conviction. There were rumours that 100,000
Protestants had been massacred by Catholics who claimed to be fighting for Charles I. Puritan belief in a popish plot to undermine Protestant religion in Britain was confirmed. The king was in league with Antichrist.26

It was at this point, on 1 December 1641, that the radicals in Parliament forced through the Grand Remonstrance, a 204-point indictment of the king’s rule since 1625. Yet the close vote on the Remonstrance revealed a deep split within Parliament. Not everyone was convinced by the claim that the king and his government had become an agent of Antichrist. Many cautious MPs began to fear Puritan subversion more than the king’s high-handedness. They were worried by the iconoclastic fervour of the godly, and started to form a substantial royalist party.

In 1642, the divide between these two parties grew steadily deeper. On the parliamentary side, Puritan preachers acted as propagandists and recruiters, whipping up fear of Catholicism and encouraging their hearers to join the crusade against popish Antichrist. On sixty separate occasions, for example, the Puritan Stephen Marshall preached his sermon “Meroz Cursed”, an excoriating commentary on Judges 5:23 in which the people of Meroz are cursed for their failure to fight for the Lord. The predominant assumption in Marshall’s sermon was that England was a new Israel, whose covenant with God was threatened by popish idolatry. But Marshall also assumed that this was a battle between the Lamb and the Beast, the Saviour and the whore of Babylon.27 The Israel paradigm and Revelation, the language of the godly nation and of the global apocalypse were fused together in Puritan rhetoric with explosive effect. When royalists and parliamentarians finally faced each other in battle in late 1642, some parliamentarian banners bore the slogan “Antichrist must down”.

Apocalypticism, therefore, was a crucial element in the lethal cocktail which produced the English civil war. In the first place, it made compromise unlikely. By definition, one did not
negotiate with Antichrist, and once such polarising rhetoric had been employed, conciliatory thoughts were hard to think. Secondly, apocalyptic preaching frightened moderates who began to fear a Puritan plot more than a popish plot and flocked to the king to form a royalist party. Thirdly, apocalyptic beliefs certainly made some men fight for parliament. When a royalist divine spoke to some captured parliamentary soldiers in 1644, they admitted that they had read Marshall and explained why they had fought against the king: “Tis prophesied in the Revelation, that the Whore of Babylon shall be destroyed with fire and sword, and what do you know, but this is the time of her ruin, and that we are the men that must help to pull her down?”

This was a view shared by the London artisan, Nehemiah Wallington, whose personal papers provide a revealing insight into the mentality of ordinary Puritans. By the summer of 1642, Wallington was convinced that the royalist cause was the same as the cause of Antichrist and his support for Parliament was consequently assured. The centrality of apocalypticism can be exaggerated, of course. It is revealing that though the Grand Remonstrance is shot through with fear of popish idolatry and subversion it never once reaches for explicitly apocalyptic language. Apocalyptic ideas were perhaps too speculative and controversial to find their way into official documents, though they appear often in sermons to Parliament. The exception which proves the rule is the radical Puritans’ Root and Branch petition, which identifies the bishops as “members of the beast” and condemns the Laudians for maintaining “that the Pope is not Antichrist”. In many cases, moreover, apocalyptic speculation takes a back seat to the Old Testament notion of a nation in covenant with God. And we do well to remember that by no means all parliamentarians were apocalyptic in mentality, or even Puritan.

Yet the core activists of the parliamentary party, as often as not, do seem to have been peculiarly zealous in their Protes-
tantism and fired by a sense that they were participating in the
great end-times war with evil. From leaders like Pym, Vane
and Cromwell, to humble foot-soldiers like Nehemiah Wal-
lington, the parliamentarians’ heads were frequently filled
with apocalyptic fears and hopes. Without the book of Reve-
lation, indeed, there may have been no English civil war.

**Apocalypticism and Secular Reform**

Yet as well as inspiring a bloodthirsty, holy-warrior mentality,
the apocalyptic Scriptures could also foster a more construct-
ive vision. Throughout the 1640s and 1650s an array of godly
activists and intellectuals were encouraged by the thought that
they were about to see the fulfilment of Daniel’s prophecy that
in the time of the end “many shall run to and fro, and
knowledge shall be increased” (Daniel 12:4). London in 1641
attracted some of the most brilliant intellectuals in the Re-
formed world with the promise of millennial reform. The ecu-
menist Scotsman John Dury, the German scientist Samuel
Hartlib, and the Czech educationalist Comenius had each been
profoundly influenced by the millenarianism of Alsted and
Mede, and seem to have seriously entertained the idea that
London was the centre from which human knowledge and di-
vine rule would spread. None of these men were holy warri-
ors in the mould of Samuel Rutherford or Stephen Marshall,
though they were adamantly anti-Catholic. Instead their ener-
gies were focused on producing an endless stream of propo-
sals for the improvement of human welfare and knowledge.
The drift towards war in 1642 dealt a severe blow to their
hopes, for war distracted attention from these constructive
projects and channelled it into destruction. Discouraged by
these developments, Comenius left England for Sweden.

Hartlib and Dury, however, remained in England, and at-
ttempted to establish a national research and development in-
stitution. Though this goal was never fully met, the two men
were at the centre of extended networks linking various in-
The Impact of Apocalypticism during the Puritan Revolutions

ventors, reformers and scientists throughout the 1640s and 1650s. The Hartlib correspondence, now held in the University of Sheffield, reveals the breathtaking extent of their ambition. Those associated with the reformers drafted countless schemes for the advancement of chemistry, agriculture, technology, medicine, law, mathematics, social welfare, Protestant ecumenism, education and commerce. The years 1645-1660, when England was dominated by Puritan governments, witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of scientific publication. And among the ten most active early members of the Royal Society, established shortly after the Restoration, five had been connected with Hartlib’s circle, including Robert Boyle and John Wilkins. For many of these men, scientific investigation carried with it the hope of reversing some of the worst effects of the Fall. In the millennium man would finally learn to be a good steward, using God’s gifts to cultivate and control God’s earth.  

Apocalypticism and the Restoration of the Primitive Church

However, if some Puritans saw the latter-day glory or future millennium largely in terms of the recovery of man’s dominion over nature, the majority thought primarily in terms of the church. They were convinced that in the last days the Spirit would shine new light on the ancient Word, dispelling the mists of apostasy and false tradition and enabling the godly to restore the glory of the primitive church. Protestantism had always been a primitivist or restorationist movement, of course, deeply concerned to recover the teachings of the New Testament and imitate the original models of church and state laid down in Scripture. But apocalyptic hope intensified such impulses. It lies behind the famous statement of the Pilgrim Father, John Robinson, that “The Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word”.  

Millenarian-fuelled primitivism, however, was profoundly destabilising. Church tradition was called into question right across the board. For if it was true that the church had been
allowed to lapse into apostasy only to be restored to purity in the last days, then even the most basic of traditional teachings could not be taken for granted. Take baptism, for example. For over a thousand years the church had baptised infants into the Christian community, and the magisterial Reformers had seen no reason to question such a well-established tradition. But according to Baptists, Luther and Calvin had been too complacent. The Reformers had underestimated the extent of Antichrist’s success in leading the church astray and consequently minimised the scope of its latter-day restoration. In the last days God was restoring the primitive ordinance of believer’s baptism to the church.36

A similar argument could be applied to the hoary tradition of male clerical leadership, which prescribed that all preaching should be by ordained men. The Quaker leader, Margaret Fell, was in no doubt that the opposition to “women’s speaking” had “risen out of the Bottomless Pit”, during “these many hundred Years together in this Night of Apostacy, since the Revelations have ceased and been hid”. But she was also convinced that the long dark night was drawing to a close: “blessed be the Lord, [the Beast’s] time is over, which was above Twelve hundred Years, and the Darknesse is past, and the Night of Apostacy draws to an end”. In these climactic days, Fell believed, the Spirit was being “poured out upon all flesh, both Sons and Daughters”, just as the prophet Joel had predicted. Now was the time for the apocalyptic restoration of women’s voices within the church.37

The same logic could be turned against persecution. One of the most controversial books published during the English Revolution was Roger Williams’ The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution (1644). Williams was a devout Puritan, but he believed that the church’s collective apostasy was much deeper than most Protestants recognised. Christianity had fallen asleep “in Constantine’s bosom”, and many of the godly still had not awoken, for they were still prepared to follow the Beast by using violence
against religious dissenters. Yet Williams was imbued with apocalyptic hope. God was restoring his church, reawakening it, showing it the folly of persecution. As Williams wrote in 1652, “in these late years God hath made it evident, that all Civil Magistracie in the World is meerly and essentially Civil”. Radical Puritans were once again looking to the primitive church, a voluntary body separated from the state and advanced only by the preaching of the Gospel not by persecution. For Williams, the latter days were bringing the restoration of primitive Christianity.

John Milton’s famous defence of the liberty of the press, Areopagitica (1644), argued along the same lines against press censorship. Milton claimed that though in the apostolic age Truth was “a perfect shape most glorious to look on”, she was later hewed “into a thousand pieces” during the church’s apostasy. Yet God was now “decreeing to begin some new and great period in his church, even to the reforming of the Reformation itself”. If the pieces of Truth were to be recovered and joined together again in these last days, the long tradition of censorship must be ended, and people must be free to publish their ideas, for only in this way could “new light” be shed.

The expectation of new light in the last days also encouraged the growth of doctrinal heresies. This is made abundantly clear by the title of Paul Best’s anti-Trinitarian tract of 1647: Mysteries Discovered, Or a Mercuriall Picture pointing out the way from Babylon to the Holy City, for the good of all such as during that night of general Error and Apostasie, 2 Thess. 2. 3. Revel. 3. 10. have been so long misled with Romes hobgoblins. Best was unafraid to assault the traditional Christian teaching that the Son and the Spirit were coequall with the Father, because he believed that the church had been in the hands of Antichrist for 1260 years. The doctrine of the Trinity was one of the first corruptions that had crept in after the Church had been taken over by “semi-pagan Christians”, beginning with Constantine. Best had the confidence to trumpet his own Socianism because he
was convinced that history was on his side, that the reign of Antichrist was coming to an end: “God be thanked, the time of this general Apostasie is expired, the mystery discovered, and the unity of God, Zachariah 14:9 come upon the stage”.40

Other early modern anti-trinitarians shared Best’s apocalyptic view of church history. Michael Servetus was executed under Calvin in Geneva because he had attacked orthodox belief in a book significantly entitled Christianismi restitutio (1553).41 The apocalyptic tale of the corruption and latter-day purification of Christian doctrine can also be found in the writings of John Biddle, the leading English Socinian during the Puritan revolution,42 and in the work of Sir Isaac Newton, who linked the rise of Antichrist to the persecution of the Arians.43 Finally, John Milton’s rejection of orthodox Trinitarianism was intimately connected to his belief that he was participating in “the process of restoring religion to something of its pure original state, after it had been defiled with impurities for more than thirteen hundred years”.44

Apocalyptic primitivism or restorationism, therefore, allowed radical Protestants to launch iconoclastic critiques of Christian tradition in good faith. Unlike modern liberal theologians, who criticise tradition mainly from the standpoint of rationalism or modernity, these biblicist Protestants broke with the past by claiming that in the last days the Spirit was restoring an even more ancient past, one the church had abandoned. Theirs was an extraordinarily disruptive impulse, one which shattered the theological and ecclesiastical unity of Puritanism. The glue of tradition was melted by restorationist zeal. By 1649, Puritans were deeply divided over many issues, a fact which contributed decisively to the ultimate failure of the Puritan revolution.

Apocalypticism and the Execution of Charles I
From the late 1640s Puritan divisions were acted out on the political stage. With the support of the New Model Army and
powerful commanders like Oliver Cromwell, the Independents gradually superseded the Presbyterians as the dominant force in English politics, and in January 1649, after purging Parliament of Presbyterians, they took the momentous step of executing the king.

The reasoning behind the regicide is fairly clear. After having defeated the royalists in the first civil war, Parliament had been forced to fight a second because Charles I had managed to ally himself with the moderate Scots. Although the result was another parliamentary victory, the war had drained away any remaining sympathy the parliamentarians retained for the king. In their eyes he had betrayed trust when they thought he was negotiating a settlement, and plunged the country into another bitter war. At a prayer meeting of the New Model Army in April 1648, the officers and men resolved “that it was our duty, if ever the Lord brought us back to peace, to call Charles Stuart, that man of blood, to an account for the blood he had shed”. Their resolution was built on the Old Testament conviction that the shedding of innocent blood defiled the land and could only be expiated by the execution of the “bloodguilty” (Numbers 35:33).

Yet besides this Old Testament argument, there was also an apocalyptic logic behind the regicide of January 1649. Puritan preachers in the late 1640s proclaimed that kings and monarchies must fall before Christ ruled. The Psalms had promised that God would strike kings and that the saints would bind them (Psalm 110, 149); Daniel had declared that after the four worldly monarchies collapsed, a fifth godly monarchy would flourish (Daniel 7); and Revelation had predicted the destruction of Antichristian kings (Revelation 17). For many Puritans Charles I was one of these bloodthirsty, persecuting kings. His death indicated that the fall of the Beast and the rule of the saints was imminent.

Such beliefs were not entertained by sectarian extremists alone, but also by learned Independent clergymen like John
Owen, Thomas Brooks, Nathaniel Homes and Peter Sterry. These men did not condemn monarchy per se, but they emphasised that kings would be toppled insofar as they were tyrants, persecutors of the saints, and adherents of the Beast. Homes and Sterry used the apocalyptic statistics of Daniel and Revelation to calculate that the fall of Antichrist was due to happen in the 1650s. Owen was more circumspect, and refused to commit himself to dates, but it has been said that his sermons provide more examples of the apocalyptic argument against kings than those of any other preacher.\footnote{47}

In April 1649, for example, less than three months after the execution of the king, Owen preached on Hebrews 12, a text which speaks of the shaking of heaven and earth. With Cromwell and other regicides in his audience, Owen argued that the earth signified “the multitudes” and the heaven the “political heights and glory” of nations. In the last days, he declared, God would shake the government of the nations, dissolving “antichristian tyranny”. Kings in particular could expect to be shaken from their thrones, for over the past seven hundred years they had shed the blood of countless saints: Lollards, Waldensians, Albigensians and Hussites. “Show me seven kings that ever yet laboured sincerely to enhance the kingdom of the Lord Jesus”, Owen demanded. Yet he emphasised that God’s purpose was not to destroy government itself, but to “translate” and remould it so that it promoted the rule of Christ. Indeed, the new godly nations would be instrumental in the destruction of Babylon. Finally, with government transformed, the godly would flourish, the Jews would be converted, and Christ would usher in his “peaceable kingdom”.\footnote{48}

Owen’s sermon reminds us that Puritan preachers were neither anarchists nor opponents of the established government of England after the regicide. They all clearly believed that God would establish his fifth monarchy through the agency of godly earthly powers. Apocalyptic and millenarian ideas, therefore, provided much needed legitimation for the new re-
The Impact of Apocalypticism during the Puritan Revolutions

The Rump Parliament (as the purged institution was called) was portrayed as an important instrument in God’s end-time work. However, as well as legitimating the Rump, apocalyptic rhetoric also exhorted and threatened it. Since God had raised it up to do a great apocalyptic work, it must fulfil its duty and promote the millennial rule of Christ in every sphere of life; if it failed, it would itself become one of the Antichristian powers. Apocalypticism was an inherently destabilising ideology which generated great expectations that were most difficult to fulfil. If Hartlib’s millenarianism was remarkably constructive, most apocalyptic thought tended to be iconoclastic. In the long run it was unlikely to foster a conservative acceptance of the status quo. Before 1653, however, apocalyptic rhetoric was rarely turned against the new regime. Instead, the general mood among radical Puritans was one of intense expectation.

Cromwell versus the Fifth Monarchists

The millenarian hopes of the early 1650s exercised a powerful influence on both foreign and domestic policy. Stephen Pincus has made a powerful case for seeing the Anglo-Dutch war of 1652-54 as a conflict inspired by apocalypticism. Whereas the war has traditionally been regarded as a trade war, Pincus maintains that it was launched under pressure from religious radicals who wanted a latter-day crusade against Antichrist. Dutch hostility to the new regime in England had led many of its supporters to conclude that the Protestant Dutch were an apostate people whose devotion to mammon and royalty had driven them into alliance with the Beast. Among those who took this line, the Independents (such as Owen) believed that a war was necessary to restore the Dutch to pure faith, whilst the more radical sectarians (such as Major-General Harrison) were convinced that “the Netherlands could only serve as the first stop on the road to Rome to destroy the Whore of Baby-
It is possible that Pincus underplays the economic origins of the Anglo-Dutch war, particularly the role of the protectionist Navigation Act passed by the English regime in 1651. However, there can be little doubt that he has demonstrated the power and pervasiveness of apocalyptic belief in the 1650s. With the levers of power in the hands of Protestant zealots, millenarianism was not mere theoretical speculation; it was practical politics.

The sectarian millenarians who were most fiercely hostile to the Dutch also managed to change the course of domestic policy. In early 1653 they campaigned vociferously for the dissolution of the Rump, and the establishment of a more godly Parliament. Swayed by their arguments, Cromwell agreed. In April he staged a military coup and ended the thirteen years of power enjoyed by the Long Parliament. In July a new assembly met. It was nick-named the Barebones Parliament after one of its many godly members, “Praise-God” Barebones.

Great hopes were riding on this Parliament, and Cromwell himself opened it with a speech which has been seen as marking “the apogee of his millenarian rhetoric of power”. Cromwell reminded his audience of famous apocalyptic scriptures like Daniel and Psalm 68 and hinted that they might be witnessing “the day of thy power” prophesised in Psalm 110, a psalm which predicted that the Lord “shall strike through kings in the day of his wrath”. Cromwell also alluded to “the war with the Lamb against his enemies” and speculated on the conversion of the Jews.

Yet the optimism with which the Parliament began was quickly shattered. It soon became clear that there was an ideological divide between a moderate majority and a vociferous radical minority, a divide that mirrored the different attitudes towards the Dutch. In December 1653, the moderate majority – worried that the radicals’ attempts to abolish tithes signalled
an attack on the traditional social order – returned their power to Cromwell.

To the millenarian extremists Cromwell’s willingness to accept the dissolution of the assembly constituted an intolerable betrayal of the revolution. The Welsh preacher Vavasour Powell saw the situation in the sharpest terms: “Lord, wilt thou have Oliver Cromwell or Jesus Christ to reign over us?” Like another preacher, Christopher Feake, Powell identified Cromwell as the little horn of the Beast mentioned in Revelation. These preachers, together with their army supporters led by Thomas Harrison, soon became known as the Fifth Monarchy Men. Their distinctiveness lay not in their belief that the fifth monarchy of Christ was due to be established imminently (a belief shared by many Puritans), but in their political position. Whereas most millenarians emphasised that God would establish his millennial rule through the powers of the earth (the Rump, the army, the Protectorate), Fifth Monarchy Men believed that it would be done through the direct agency of the saints. Whereas most millenarian Puritans supported the Protectorate, the Fifth Monarchists formed an opposition movement, implacably opposed to Cromwell’s regime. Throughout the 1650s they constituted a constant headache for the regime, though the only Fifth Monarchist rebellion in this period, led by Thomas Venner in 1657, was a farcical failure, despite being timed to coincide with the rising of the witnesses three-and-a-half years after the dissolution of the Barebones Parliament.

Cromwell’s refusal to dance to the radical millenarians’ tune is hardly surprising. Throughout his career, he had been somewhat reticent in his use of apocalyptic language. His letters and speeches contain relatively little in the way of apocalyptic rhetoric, despite the claim of one historian that they are “suffused with scriptural allusions to the millennium”. Cromwell was certainly convinced that God was fighting on the side of the parliamentary armies, just as he had fought for...
ancient Israel. Yet he was cautious about investing events with eschatological significance. Indeed, on reading through his writings and speeches I can only find a handful of passages in which he employed explicitly apocalyptic language or spoke clearly about the last days. Even when writing about his battles with the Catholic Irish he did not invoke the image of the Beast or the Whore of Babylon. Although he sometimes spoke about foreign policy in terms of a struggle of the Protestant interest against the papal Antichrist, he was – like William Cecil – unwilling to go into further detail. In his famous speech to the Barebone’s Parliament, he deliberately drew back when he felt himself straying too far in his speculations: “But I may appear to be beyond my line”, he remarked, “these things are dark”.

By contrast, Cromwell felt no such hesitation about the manifestations of providence in political events. His Barebone’s speech referred repeatedly to God’s “appearances”, and his listeners could have been in doubt as to the events of which he was thinking; the great military victories at Naseby, Preston, Dunbar, and Worcester. God, declared Cromwell, had been “so eminently visible” that even “our enemies” had been forced to confess that he was against them. But Cromwell was less certain about how these particular appearances fitted into God’s eschatological timetable. He probably suspected that they were indeed part of the Lord’s latter-day plan to dethrone Antichrist, convert the Gentiles and restore the Jews; his enthusiasm for the 1655 Whitehall conference on the readmission of the Jews to England was partly inspired by his expectation of their imminent conversion. Yet Cromwell was notably undogmatic about the apocalyptic reading of contemporary events. What really mattered, what he was sure about, was that God had providentially demonstrated his approval of the army and Puritan rule in quite unmistakeable terms. Providence, not the apocalypse, was his guiding light.
The gulf between Cromwell and the Fifth Monarchists was confirmed by his moves to make peace with the Dutch. Cromwell had genuinely believed that God was using the English to punish the Dutch for their sins, but unlike the Fifth Monarchists he did not conceive of the Dutch war as the opening gambit in the final struggle against Antichrist. Instead, he had supported the war in the belief that it would bring the Dutch to their senses, and re-establish them as a godly people in alliance with the English. When the Republican Party began to regain the upper hand in the Netherlands, Cromwell was satisfied and threw himself behind the negotiations which led to peace in 1654. The defence of international Protestantism continued to be a central goal, but “the rejection of apocalyptic foreign policy” was unmistakeable.63

With hindsight, therefore, 1653 was an important turning point. When Cromwell spoke of the “last days” to the first Protectorate Parliament in 1654, it was not to raise hopes of the imminent destruction of Antichrist, but to remind his hearers that according to Paul “perilous times” would come in the last days; men would depart from the faith and follow “seducing spirits and doctrines of demons”. “The mistaken notion of the Fifth Monarchy” was a striking example of end-times delusion.64 Cromwell’s earlier optimism had been displaced by a more pessimistic eschatology. Although he retained his passionate concern for “the people of God” and the cause of the Puritan Gospel, he now displayed more willingness to be pragmatic and compromise with less godly sections of the population. Under the new constitution, the Instrument of Government, he was made the Lord Protector. He established a court and began to adopt some of the trappings of monarchy. The Puritan austerity and simplicity were not abandoned, but the tone of Cromwell’s later letters and speeches was world-weary rather than exultant.

The politically subversive use to which millenarianism was put in the 1650s led other Puritans to retreat from their earlier
enthusiasms. Thomas Goodwin, whose 1640s sermon on the fifth monarchy was published by the Fifth Monarchists in 1654, distanced himself from his earlier radicalism. The Baptist Thomas Collier, whose millenarian sermons to the New Model Army in the late 1640s had envisaged the rule of the saints, now condemned the Fifth Monarchists without reservation. He taught an austere pre-millennialism, according to which the saints would be in a suffering-state until Christ returned to rule personally on earth. The Fifth Monarchist assumption that the saints had to undertake “a smiting, subduing, conquering work” to prepare for the coming kingdom of Christ was mistaken. The saints were simply to submit to the magistrate, even if he was evil, just as Paul and Peter had submitted to the Roman Empire. Because “the heart of man is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked”, the saints should not strive “to be uppermost”, for “rule makes men worse rather than better”. Quietism like Collier’s became fairly common in the 1650s. Disillusioned by attempts to establish the New Jerusalem through politics many of the godly seem to have turned inwards.

Quakers, Diggers and Ranters
The greatest beneficiaries of this change were the Quakers, who made approximately 30,000 converts in the 1650s. Led by charismatic figures like George Fox and James Nayler, the early Quakers bore little resemblance to the respectable and liberal Quakers of today. Like other radical Puritans, the new sect warned of the imminent apocalyptic destruction of the Beast. In 1655, for example, Fox wrote that the Lord was coming to judge:

and before him the hills shall move and the mountains shall melt, and the rocks shall cleave... great earth quakes shall be, the terrible day of the Lord draws near, the Beast shall be taken, and false prophets into the fire shall go... now is the sword drawn... to
The Impact of Apocalypticism during the Puritan Revolutions

hew down Baal’s priests, corrupt judges, corrupt justices, corrupt lawyers, fruitless trees which cumber the ground.67

What made Quakers distinctive, however, was not their ferocious denunciation of the antichristian establishment, but their spiritualisation or internalisation of the millennium. Whereas most Puritans expected God to set up his rule in new political and ecclesiastical institutions, Quakers stood in a radical Puritan tradition that had little interest in forms. Christ, they preached, would come to rule in the hearts of the godly. When a person responded to the movement of the Spirit and to the inner light, the kingdom of God had been set up within them.68

Quaker subjectivism appalled more orthodox Puritans who saw it as undercutting the traditional protestant stress on the objective authority of the Bible and the historical reality of Christ’s atoning death on the Cross. Yet Quakers were simply taking to an extreme the Puritan emphasis on the imminent apocalypse and on intense experience of the Spirit. They provide another illustration of how the stability and unity of zealous Protestantism was damaged by its millenarian and “charismatic” impulses.

Beyond the Quakers lay other even more unconventional sects and individuals inspired by millenarian dreams: “Diggers” who anticipated the imminent establishment of a peaceful, communist society; “Ranters” who believed that Christ was setting the saints free from the moral law, and who blasphemed and fornicated just to prove the point; individual visionaries convinced that they were the Messiah, or Elijah, or one of the Two Witnesses.69 Yet the followers of these extremists were few in number. Much of the population remained wedded to a traditional Prayer Book Anglicanism far removed from apocalyptic enthusiasms. The Puritan crusade to make the English people godly was widely resented and resisted.70
After Cromwell

Among Puritans themselves, however, apocalyptic expectation remained strong, even after the death of Oliver Cromwell in September 1658. Indeed, Cromwell's passing may well have generated new hopes. For many Puritans, the Protector had become an obstacle to the millennium. To those who supported the Commonwealth Cromwell's dissolution of the Rump was a betrayal of the Good Old Cause, whilst to Fifth Monarchists his dissolution of the Barebone's Parliament was unforgivable. With the collapse of the Protectorate of Cromwell's son Richard, these groups saw a new window of opportunity. In the fluid political situation of 1659-1660, millenarian hopes thrived.

A clear indication of this fact can be found in the writings of one of the leading Commonwealthsmen, Sir Henry Vane Jr. Vane was a devout Puritan and had been one of the most powerful politicians in Britain until 1653, when his close friendship with Oliver Cromwell had been destroyed by the latter's expulsion of the Rump. In the five years following that event, Vane had sniped from the sidelines. But in 1659 he saw the chance to establish a commonwealth run by godly men who supported the good old cause and liberty of conscience for all non-subversive groups. Like Rutherford in 1640 and Owen in 1649, Vane dared to speculate that the new political regime would play a key role in crushing Babylon and ushering in Christ's rule. Was it not possible, he asked, that

the beginnings of such a Government as this, as small as they may be at first... may not, however, through the mighty and universal pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh, so grow and increase, as at last to come up unto a perfect day... to the setting up of Christ as King throughout the whole earth, and causing the Nations and Kingdomes of this world to become the Kingdomes of our Lord and of his Christ, in a visible manner here below, for the space of a thousand years?
Vane’s great expectation that a new republican government might deliver the millennium was shared by his close friend, John Milton. Predictably, however, their hopes were to prove far wide of the mark. The confusion of 1659-60 resulted not in the restoration of Christ’s rule but in the restoration of the Stuarts. In 1662, Sir Henry Vane was executed.

Before Vane died, however, he penned his final thoughts on the millennium. His imminent death had only led him to make some minor adjustments to his eschatology. He now realised that the parable of the sleeping virgins in Matthew 25 indicated that after the 1260 years of the Beast’s reign had ended, believers would complacently assume that the kingdom of Christ had finally arrived. Yet this would not happen, taught Vane, until the final three-and-a-half years of persecution predicted in Revelation 11 had run their course. Only after these terrible years, when the witnesses of Christ had been executed, would God raise them to life and usher in his kingdom by the personal return of Christ to earth. Although it was not spelt out explicitly, the assumption was clear: Vane’s death and those of other revolutionary Puritans had eschatological significance. The godly were in the midst of the final fierce burst of persecution, but soon they would rule the earth with Christ.

Conclusion
It used to be assumed that apocalypticism more or less died out after the Puritan revolutions. With the accession of Charles II, the “Merrie Monarch”, such modes of thought were out of fashion. The historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper, summarised this view in an index entry for “Antichrist” in one of his books: “Antichrist: due to fall in 1639, 248; or at least thereabouts, 251; perhaps 1655?, 286; retreats from Scotland to England 1643, 315-16; evaporates 1660, 293”.

However, the example of Henry Vane reminds us of the tenacity of apocalyptic hope, of the ability of millenarians to adapt their eschatological systems to altered circumstances.
Recent historians have emphasised the continuity of ideas and beliefs across the 1660 divide and demonstrated just how much the experience of the 1640s and 1650s continued to haunt Restoration England. Fears of popish plots were as intense as they had been in the earlier period, and apocalyptic ideas continued to circulate and attract attention. Even after the Glorious Revolution, eschatological speculation was widespread. No less a figure than Sir Isaac Newton devoted many of his later years to deciphering the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation.

Yet the truth remains that apocalyptic conviction was never as politically important as during the Puritan revolution. Whilst it was certainly not a sufficient factor in the causation of events, it was arguably a necessary one. Without apocalyptic convictions the outbreak of the British troubles, the splintering of Puritanism, the execution of the king, the Anglo-Dutch war, and the Barebone’s Parliament may never have occurred.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Warren Johnston of Clare Hall, Cambridge, for his comments on this paper. His own research on apocalypticism during the Restoration should fill in a major gap in our knowledge of the subject.

2 Only Elizabethan England and colonial New England stand as serious rivals to mid-seventeenth century Britain in this regard. Yet in the former apocalypticism was relatively restrained and sober in tone, whilst the latter was hardly representative of the rest of colonial America. The only modern parallel which comes even remotely close is Ronald Reagan’s America, where the president and some of his advisors seem to have contemplated the possibility of an imminent Armageddon and identified the USSR as the Gog of Ezekiel 38-39. See P. Boyer, When Time Shall be no More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), 142-146, 162; G. Vidal, “Armageddon”, in his Armageddon: Essays, 1983-87 (London, 1987), 101-114.


7 On the dominance of historicist interpretations of Revelation among early English Protestants see B. W. Ball, A Great Expectation: Eschatological Thought in English Protestantism to 1660 (Leiden, 1975), 71-75; and especially Firth, The Apocalyptic Tradition.

8 See Ball, A Great Expectation, 159-163.

9 Within Lutheranism, by contrast, there developed a polarisation between the orthodox (who retained a pessimistic apocalypticism and did not anticipate an earthly golden age) and heterodox enthusiasts (who displayed great millenarian fervour in the 1610s and 1620s). See Barnes, Prophecy and Gnosis, chapter 6.

10 On these developments see P. Toon, Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel: Puritan Eschatology 1600-1660 (Cambridge, 1970), chapter 2; I. Murray, The Puritan Hope (Edinburgh, 1971), chapter 3.


12 On the rebirth of millenarianism see Toon, Puritans, the Millennium and the Future of Israel, chapter 3; Ball, A Great Expectation, chapter 5; P. Christianson, Reformers and Babylon, chapter 3.


14 The apocalyptic outlook of “the generation of the 1620s” has been particularly emphasised by H. Trevor-Roper, “Three foreigners: the philoso-
15 Letters of Samuel Rutherford, ed. A. Bonar (Edinburgh, 1891), 577.
16 See Milton, Catholic and Reformed, 110-127.
17 The best introduction to the ecclesiastical policies of James and Charles is K. Fincham (ed.), The Early Stuart Church, 1603-1642 (London, 1993).
18 Rutherford, Letters, 544.
22 Samuel Rutherford, Quaint Sermons, ed. A. Bonar (1885), 36.
25 See Christianson, Reformers and Babylon, chapter 5.
26 See C. Hibbard, Charles I and the Popish Plot (Chapel Hill, NC, 1983).
27 Stephen Marshall, Meroz Cursed (1642), 8, 11-12, 33.
31 Gardiner, Constitutional Documents, 140.
33 See Trevor-Roper, “Three foreigners”, in his Religion, the Reformation and Social Change, chapter 5.
36 See for example, Christopher Blackwood's significantly-titled The Storming of Antichrist, in his two last and strongest garrisons; of compulsion of conscience, and infant baptism (London, 1644), esp. 6.
37 Margaret Fell, Women Speaking Justified, Proved and Allowed of by the Scriptures, in A Brief Collection of... Margaret Fell (London, 1710), 340-343.
40 Paul Best, Mysteries Discovered (1647), 10-12.
42 See his A Confession of Faith Touching the Holy Trinity [London, 1648], D4, E3.
44 Complete Prose Works of John Milton, VI:117. The quotation is from the epistle at the beginning of Milton's Christian Doctrine, a work which was largely completed by 1660 but not published until 1825.


The fullest discussion of the origins and course of this parliament is A. Woolrych, Commonwealth to Protectorate (Oxford, 1982).


My understanding of the Fifth Monarchists follows that of Laydon, “The kingdom of Christ and the powers of the earth”, chapter 7.

Cromwell’s attitude to the Fifth Monarchists is clearly revealed in his lengthy debate with one of their leaders, John Rogers. See Abbott, III: 606-616.


The only such passages I have found are in Abbott, I: 430, 543; III: 63-65, 436; 860; IV: 53-53, 264.

Abbott, III: 860; IV: 264.

Abbott, III: 64.


Pincus, Protestantism and Patriotism, 101-191.


H. L. Ingle, First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism (New York, 1994), 328 n.60.

Quoted in H. L. Ingle, First Among Friends, 77-78.

See Nuttall, The Holy Spirit. There are striking parallels here with the mystical, inward and individualising turn taken by some Anabaptists in the wake of the Munster catastrophe and by radical Lutherans after the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. See J. Lecler, Toleration and the Reformation, I: 216-220; and Barnes, Prophecy and Gnosis, chapter 6.


