BENJAMIN KEACH, WILLIAM OF ORANGE AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION
A Study in English Prophetical Exegesis*

INTRODUCTION

Of all the books in the Bible it is doubtless the last, the Apocalypse of St John, that has gained the reputation for being the most conducive to religious extremity. Indeed, some have judged the strange contents of that book to be so hazardous that they have felt it necessary to warn others 'beware of the Apocalypse which, when studied, almost always either finds a man mad, or makes him so'.[1] Such a judgment is, however, a relatively recent one, for it is clear that for much of Christian history the task of interpreting the book of Revelation has occupied a key position on the Church's theological agenda. This seems particularly to have been the case in post-reformation England, where individuals from across the denominational spectrum devoted themselves to a careful study of the prophecies held in that book, convinced that the words in Revelation 1.1 ('The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass') were to be taken literally and with absolute seriousness.

The very considerable interest in the book of Revelation which existed in post-Reformation England is easy to document. Indeed, ever since the publication of John Bale's work, *The Image of bothe Churches after the moste wonderfull and heavenly Revelacion of Sainct John the Evangelist* (1548), a constant stream of works devoted to the book of Revelation poured from the presses. Joseph Mede's *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627) was perhaps the most influential, but there were many others such as Thomas Brightman's *Apocalypsis Apocalypseos* (c. 1600)[2] and John Tillinghast's *Knowledge of the Times* (1654). This list could easily be extended.[3]

Many of the above mentioned works sought to locate the earth's present location on the map of world time, a sensible enough task given the preconception of the book of Revelation as a panorama of history.[4] As might perhaps be expected, these works most often resulted in the conclusion that the writer's own period was the one perched on the brink of the apocalyptic conclusion of the present age. There were of course exceptions, but many who did attempt to set a date for the dawn of the eschatological kingdom put the event at no great distance from their respective presents. Such speculation was widespread. Neither was it limited to those on the religious margins or of questionable intellectual ability. Indeed, even such intellectual giants as Joseph Priestley and Sir Isaac Newton turned their hands to the task of prophetic interpretation as did the one-time master of Magdalene College, Oxford, Thomas Goodwin.[5] Even Charles Wesley attempted to calculate the date for the end of the present age and the dawn of the age to come.[6]

It comes as no great surprise, then, that Baptist writers shared this general and widespread interest in the prophecies. John A. Oddy has already given some

indication of this interest.[7] He notes, for example, the work of James Bicheno (1752-1831), a Baptist minister from Newbury, Berkshire whose interests in the prophecies was considerable. It was Bicheno's view that the events of the French Revolution had particular prophetic significance. Indeed, the year 1789, according to Bicheno, marked the turning point of history, for it was in that year that the great Antichrist (the Roman Church) received a crushing blow.[8] Joseph Tyso (1774-1852) is also of interest, for he took the relatively unusual view (at least in Protestant circles) that the main prophecies of Revelation are as yet unfulfilled. This 'futurist' position was prominent among Catholic expositors of the period, but to find it in the works of a Baptist is, as Oddy notes, quite extraordinary. The Baptist commentator John Gill also showed a keen interest in the prophecies, arguing among other things that 'the conjecture is not improbable' that the end of antichrist's (Rome's) reign will come in the year 1866.[9]

BENJAMIN KEACH AND 1688

Enough has now been said to suggest that interest in the book of Revelation in post-Reformation England was considerable. This is true of both the Baptist community and the broader ecclesiastical society at large. The list of more prominent works mentioned here could easily have been extended, but the purpose of this article is to examine in some finer detail the work of Benjamin Keach, and in particular the publication *Antichrist Stormed* (1689). Seen within the broader context of prophetic interest sketched in above, this work is by no means extravagant in its claims to have detected in the events of 1688 the point at which history and prophecy coincide. Indeed, in many ways the work is typical in stressing the nearness of the end and interpreting contemporary events as signs of the impending eschaton. However, the precise slant of *Antichrist Stormed* (i.e. the view that the arrival of William of Orange marked the drawing to a close of the 1260-day prophecy of Revelation 11.3) and the excitement and intensity with which this view is expressed makes this work a highly illuminating source.

Oddy has noted the extent to which the French Revolution gave rise to a note of eschatological excitement in the work of Bicheno.[10] The reasoning was simple: the Roman Church was Antichrist, and the Roman Church had been dealt a very severe blow by the events of 1789; therefore Antichrist's rule was coming to an end and in its place would come the kingdom of God. The same basic pattern of reasoning also underlies the thrust of Keach's work, *Antichrist Stormed*, for here too it is argued that the Roman Church is Antichrist and that the days of this satanic institution are numbered. Bicheno dated the turning point to 1789; Keach to 1688.

The view that the Roman Church was the incarnation of Antichrist was by no means unusual in the context of seventeenth-century Protestantism. Brightman identified the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17.5) and the beasts of Revelation 13 with the Pope of Rome,[11] as did James Durham.[12] The one-time Bishop of Galloway, William Cowper, is no less clear on the point, stating that the beast of

Revelation 12.7 is none other than the 'Antichrist, the Apostate Bishop of Rome',[13] and Henry More concluded that since both the pope and the great whore of Babylon described in Revelation 17 wear a crown which bears an inscription beginning with the word '*mysterium*' the two are one and the same entity. Thus, according to More, the name 'Whore of Babylon' belongs to 'the Pope with his clergy' for 'they are this *Great Whore* that has *made drunk the Inhabitants of the Earth with the Cup of her Fornication*'.[14] In seventeenth-century England, then, the Roman Church in general and the pope in particular were widely identified with the antichristian beasts of the book of Revelation. Rome was the great Antichrist.[15] Indeed, Keach himself comments on the popularity of this view in the following words: ''tis evident to all who are men of any Reading, that most of our Eminent Protestant Writers, both Ancient and Modern, do affirm without the least doubt, that the Church of *Rome* is the great Whore spoken of [in] *Rev.* 17.'[16]

Given this widespread identification of Antichrist with the Roman Church and the concurrent belief that the book of Revelation charts the rise and fall of this satanic power, it is hardly surprising to find Keach reflecting upon the prophetic importance of the events of 1688. The raw facts, as Keach saw them, were that during the reign of Charles II and James II the Roman Church had had an opportunity to gain once again a firm foothold on English soil. James' own adherence to Romanism was well-known and (unlike that of Charles) publicly practised and his desire to see the removal of obstacles to the Catholic faith quickly found expression following his accession in 1685. Such deeds could hardly but give concern to those who considered Rome to be none other than Antichrist. The various attempts during this period to grant some degree of religious freedom were seen by dissenters as very much a mixed blessing, for while on the one hand such attempts granted to them certain freedoms, they did the same also for the despised religion of the Papists.[17] The unexpected arrival of an heir to the throne in the form of James' son, born in June 1688, was a matter of considerable concern. The child would presumably follow in his father's Catholic footsteps and thus the possibility of an endless line of Roman monarchs was raised. It must therefore have seemed to Keach and his contemporaries that the Roman religion was once again on the verge of establishing itself on English soil.

The future of James's Catholic line was not, however, as bright as the birth of his son had promised. Barely had six months passed since this event than James was on a ship sailing away from England and with him went any hope of a renewal of the Catholic faith in England. In James's place were now King William and Queen Mary, Protestants of unquestionable firmness in the faith. As Keach reflected on this unexpected turn in events, he came to the conclusion that this had all been (as everything was) part of God's plan. Antichrist, Rome, had been 'stormed' by the forces of good. Armed with this interpretation of events, Keach sought in the scriptures confirmation of his view.

BENJAMIN KEACH AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Keach's basic approach to Revelation is standard within a seventeenth-century English context. The book is understood by him as an overview of history (particularly as it touches the Church) stretching from the time of John to the second coming of Christ. Keach is standard also in his interpretation of many of the details of the book. Thus the opening of the six seals described in Revelation 6 are taken by Keach as referring to the beginning of six consecutive periods, the last of which came to an end around 320.[18] The breaking of the seventh seal, which is accompanied in Revelation 8.1 by a short period of 'silence in heaven', Keach takes as a reference to the start of 'A short time of rest for the Church and Saints of God, which began in Constantines dayes and lasted as some conceive till the troubles rose by the Arians'.[19]

The next major sequence in Revelation is the blowing of seven trumpets and again Keach is here fairly typical in the general thrust (though not in all details) of his interpretation. The first six trumpets refer to six further consecutive historical periods which stretch from c. 379 to 1688. The blowing of the seventh trumpet (Revelation 11.15) marks a very significant turning point, for it is accompanied by the pouring out of the seven vials of God's wrath (Revelation 16). It is the beginning of this event that Keach dates to 1688, for he sees in the arrival of William the first stage in God's visitation upon Antichrist. The judgments of God have not yet begun to fall in all their terrible fullness, but they are due within a very short space of time. According to Keach, then, the blowing of the seventh trumpet marks the turning point of history. Up to this point Antichrist (Rome) has reigned supreme, but his days have now come to an end. With the arrival of William of Orange, the first blow has been struck and the fullness of the wrath of God is about to erupt upon his enemies. According to Keach, the destruction of Antichrist is accompanied and in part accomplished by a parallel event, the raising up of the two faithful witnesses described in Revelation 11.1-14. These two witnesses testify during the dark period of Antichrist's rule, but towards the end of this period are slain by the 'beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit' (Revelation 11.7). However, after a short period God raises the witnesses from the dead and they ascend into heaven.

Keach's interpretation of this section of Revelation gives a glimpse of the exciting world in which he believed himself to be living. To Keach, the two witnesses symbolize the faithful servants of God down the ages (Keach, adopting a successionist view of history, has particular regard for the Waldenses and Albigensians in this respect). It is they who bear testimony to the truth during the reign of the Roman Antichrist. The slaying of the witnesses is a reference to the excessively hard times which the faithful had to endure during the 1660-1688 period in England. According to Keach, it was during this period (especially the latter part) that Antichrist made one final attempt to overthrow totally the faithful witnesses to God's truth. The attempt was substantially successful and the witnesses

(English Protestants) died. In part this was a literal death as the execution of 'that godly Woman and Martyr Mrs Gaunt' shows.[20] More generally, however, the death was a spiritual one accomplished by the 'emissaries of Rome' by their policy of

> turning out of places of trust, many good Protestants, and the taking away of *Charters of Cities* and Corporations, silencing worthy Ministers, &c. nay, striking at the root and whole constitution of the English Government, nothing being designed but the utter subversion of the Protestant Religion, things growing every day worse and worse, nothing appearing but the blackness of darkness, and that which was worst of all, many of Gods witnesses seemed to be strangely dispirited, whilest others truckl'd to the Enemies yoak, suffering Chapels to be erected for Popery and Cursed Mass Priests, and Jesuits.[21]

However, in 1688 freedom came in the person of King William. It is his arrival that marks the turning point. Now is the hour of deliverance and the dawn of the time when 'the knowledge of the glory of the Lord shall cover the Earth and waters cover the seas'.[22] King William thus plays a central role in the eschatological drama. Keach writes

> I am persuaded that His present majesty is raised up to do great things for Christ; and tho' some may strive to obstruct the work of God, and uphold an interest for the Beast, yet they shall be blasted in their designs, and come to shame and ruin in the end; for God is risen up, and his Enemies shall be scattered.[23]

In a second publication Keach reflects further on this point and is in fact more confident that the time of the resurrection of the witnesses has already begun. Indeed Keach seems now to have no doubts that it is in the present time that 'the slain Witnesses are a-getting out of their graves'. King William is again praised as the one whom God has chosen to be a 'glorious Instrument' in his hands.[24]

For Keach, then, England is the focal point of this eschatological drama. The arrival of William of Orange and the expulsion of papal power from the shores of England marks the first in a series of deadly blows that will lead to Antichrist's final defeat. It is in England too that the resurrected witnesses are beginning to flex their missionary muscles. For Keach these are exciting times, the more so since Antichrist's ruin is accompanied by Christ's gain. The witnesses are soon to give their testimony and, states Keach, 'from that very time I conclude the Kingdom of Christ will begin'.[25]

Keach, like the vast majority of his contemporaries, is post-millennial in his eschatological expectation: he believes that the literal return of Jesus to the earth will begin only after the period of 1000 years during which the spiritual kingdom of Christ will advance.[26] The literal return of Christ will thus presumably take place somewhere close to the year 2688. Keach believes himself to be living at the time

of the inauguration of the pre-advent millennial kingdom. Indeed, in his own words

> tho' we cannot perfectly foresee what God is about to do, as yet, we being but in the morning of the approaching glory — yet are we full of expectation, that the work of God in respect of these great and longed-for blessings, will not go back again.[27]

An almost exact parallel to this scheme is found in the slightly earlier work of Keach's fellow Particular Baptist, Hanserd Knollys. Knollys was writing before the arrival of William of Orange and thus did not have time to integrate this event into his interpretative scheme, yet he too suggests 1688 as the date for the turning point of history. Knollys is not absolutely certain on this point and leaves some slight room for error; however, in his *Exposition* he more than once indicates his cautious acceptance of 1688 as the date for the onset of Antichrist's road to ruin.[28]

According to Keach, then, the first blow against Antichrist has been struck. Antichrist has been stormed and is now heading for final destruction. Keach is quite confident regarding the date for the conclusion of this process: Antichrist will finally fall in 1697. The mainstay of Keach's argument in support of this date is the 42-month period mentioned in Revelation 11.1-3:

> And there was given me a reed like unto a rod: and the angel stood, saying, Rise, and measure the temple of God, and the altar, and them that worship therein. But the court which is without the temple leave out, and measure it not; for it is given unto the Gentiles: and the holy city shall they tread under foot forty and two months. And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and threescore days, clothed in sackcloth.

The normal understanding of this 42-month period among Keach's contemporaries was that it is to be calculated as forty-two months at thirty days per month, a total of 1260 days. It was also standard in this period to argue that in prophecy a day is equal to a year, thus 1260 prophetic days are equal to 1260 literal years. It was during this 1260 year period that Antichrist (Rome) would reign supreme. It is on this basis, for example, that Knollys calculates his 1688 date, for he puts the birth of papal Rome at 428 at the latest. Adding 1260 years to 428, then, leads Knollys to 1688, the date he gives for the fall of Antichrist.

Keach strays somewhat from this well-beaten interpretive track, though the thrust of what he says is much the same. For him the period of 42-months is equal not to 1260 days but to 1222. Keach has got this (by his own admission) from another source, the author of which he refers to as 'a Late Worthy and Learned Writer'. The work in question is in fact Thomas Beverly's *The Command of God to his People to Come out of Babylon, Revel. 18:4. Demonstrated to Mean the Coming Out of the Present Papal Rome* (1688). Keach further argues that the beginning of papal power began in 475; the end will therefore come in 1697 (475 + 1222).[29] The details of this calculation are relatively unusual. However, the attempt to make such

a computation is completely normal within a seventeenth-century English Protestant context.

In 1697, then, the final ruin of Antichrist will come. However, according to Keach, the reference in Revelation 11.13 to the falling of a 'tenth part of the city' relates to the preliminary and partial destruction of Antichrist (Rome) in one part of his empire. According to Keach this relates to the fact that in 1688 the protestant forces drove Antichrist from Britain, the first in a series of blows which would come to a conclusion with Antichrist's final overthrow in 1697.

> Popery shall fall and go down, but all conclude that the tenth part of this great City falls first, and I doubt not but the providence of God hath brought us forth in the time of the accomplishment of that part of the Prophecy, for that great *Brittain* is that part of the great City, I see no cause to doubt.[30]

It is of course hardly surprising that Keach thinks of his own country as the one in which the eschatological drama is played out: expositors who sought to give a date for the end of the world most often located that event fairly close to their own chronological setting. The same is true of geographical considerations. Indeed, Knollys went so far as to suggest that 'the street of the great city' mentioned in Revelation 11.8 is not just England in general, but London in particular.[31] It is then in Keach's own time and in his own country that he sees the work of God going forth. It is from England that the truth will spread throughout the world.

CONCLUSION AND OBSERVATIONS

Enough has now been said to indicate the general outline of Keach's thinking on the events of 1688 and the way in which he sought to relate those events to the book of Revelation. For Keach, King William's arrival on the shores of Britain and the ousting of the Catholic King James II marks the dawn of the eschatological kingdom. Rome is Antichrist and Rome has been dealt a substantial blow by William of Orange. Antichrist has been stormed and driven out. This process will continue until the final overthrow of Antichrist in 1697. England is the epicentre of these eschatological events and it is outward from England that the Kingdom of Christ upon earth will advance.

Seen within a seventeenth-century English Protestant context, Keach's work *Antichrist Stormed* (and *Distressed Sion Relieved*) is typical in its claim to have detected in the events of history evidence of the working out of God's plan. It is typical also in its attempt to relate contemporary events to the book of Revelation, a work which was seen during Keach's time as one which gave an overview of history from the time of the prophet John to the end of the World. Keach employs fairly standard interpretative principles in seeking to work out his exposition and reflects by and large the kind of prophetic exegetical school existent in England at the end of the seventeenth-century. His work is exceptionally interesting, however, in that it gives a glimpse of what must have been a very exciting world. Keach believes that 1688 saw the breaking of the first rays of the eschatological dawn, with

William of Orange God's chosen instrument. By him God has dealt the first precursory blow to his great enemy the Antichrist of Rome. Even now are the slain witnesses to God's truth getting out of their graves and preparing for a period of evangelism the like of which the world has never before seen. In just eight more years (i.e. in 1697) Antichrist will come to final ruin and the pre-advent millennial Kingdom of Christ will begin.

Keach's work *Antichrist Stormed* raises a number of issues and illustrates several points. Throughout we have seen that Keach fits fairly well into a school of interpretation that was dominant in his day. Indeed, it is only as Keach is seen within this broader context that his work can be appreciated for what it is rather than being dismissed as the musings of a religious eccentric. The seriousness with which he approached the text is obvious and the seriousness with which he sought to explain contemporary events in the light of what he found in Revelation no less so. There were many before Keach who had sought to do the same thing and there were many others who came after him. But Keach is an individual whose circumstances were peculiar to him. Consequently, his understanding of Revelation, like all others, reflects those individual circumstances and is highly personal. In the area of prophetic exegesis, then, it is clear that text and interpreter interact. To explore those dynamics is not only to understand a little of the power of the text, its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, but also to enter, albeit briefly, into the thought world of the interpreter.

NOTES

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1 *Rainbow: A Magazine of Christian Literature, with Special Reference to the Revealed Future of the Church and the World*, 24 vols., 1864-87, 3:55.

2 Thomas Brightman, *A Revelation of the Apocalyps*, 1611. The date of the writing of this work is somewhat unclear. Froom notes that Latin editions appeared in 1609 (Frankfurt) and 1612 (Heidelberg), and gives 1615 as the earliest date for an English edition (see L. E. Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. [1946-54], 2:512 n. 18). However, there is in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester an English edition published in Amsterdam dated to 1611.

3 The extent of the literature devoted to the book of Revelation in post-Reformation England is easily underestimated. However, the bibliographical sections in Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse*, 1978, David Brady, *The Contribution of British Writers between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13.16-18 (The Number of the Beast): A Study in the History of Exegesis*, 1983, and the second volume of Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols., 1946-1954, give some illustration of the richness of the sources.

4 The view that the book of Revelation is such a panorama was standard in the period with which we are concerned. This view has become known as 'historicism' for it sees the whole course of history as the continued fulfillment of prophecy. Thus historicist writers were at pains to pinpoint the exact fulfillment of biblical prophecy in world events and by so doing gain an accurate understanding of where the world is in relation to the end. The approach has now largely died out (though it continues to find dramatic expression in groups such as the Seventh-day Adventists), but as a methodology it dominated English expositions of the Apocalypse from Bale to the nineteenth century.

5 Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) was head of Magdalene College, Oxford, from 1650-1660. He wrote many works dealing with the general topic of prophetic interpretation including a series of sermons preached in Holland in 1639. These were published posthumously in 1683 under the title *Exposition upon the Book of the Revelation*. See further Brady, *Number of the Beast* pp.181-182.

6 See Kenneth G. C. Newport, 'Charles Wesley's Interpretation of Some Biblical Prophecies according to a Previously Unpublished Letter Dated 25 April 1754', *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* (forthcoming).

7 John A. Oddy, 'Bicheno and Tyso on the Prophecies: A Baptist Generation Gap', *BQ* 35, 1993, pp.81-89.

8 See Oddy 'Bicheno and Tyso', pp.84-85. Bicheno's interpretative scheme is dealt with more extensively by Oddy in his 'Eschatological Prophecy in the English Theological Tradition, c.1700-c.1840' (Ph.D Thesis, University of London, 1982), pp.61-64 and by Froom, *Prophetic Faith* 2:746-748.

9 John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 3 vols., 1809, 3:792.

10 Oddy 'Bicheno and Tyso', pp.84-85.

11 Thomas Brightman *A Revelation of the Apocalyps*, pp.349-350.

12 James Durham *A Commentarie Upon the Book of the Revelation*, 1658. Traditional antiromanism runs throughout this work. Note for example the remark on p.573, which is typical of many. 'It remaineth therefore, as was formerly concluded, that the Pope is the very Antichrist, and the papacy the very antichristian kingdom here described'.

13 *The Workes of Mr William Cowper Late Bishop of Galloway. Now newly collected into one Volume. Whereunto is added a commentary on the Revelation never before published*, 1623, p.1004.

14 *The Theological Works of the most Pious and Learned Henry More, D.D.*, 1708, p.598.

15 See generally David Brady *Number of the Beast*.

16 Benjamin Keach *Antichrist Stormed*, 1689, p.1.

17 See generally J. Miller, *Popery and Politics in England 1660-88*, 1975. More specific is B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, 1983, p.109-110 and S. H. Mayor 'James II and the Dissenters', *BQ* 34, 1991, pp.180-190.

18 *Antichrist Stormed* p.ii (Roman numerals are used here to refer to the unnumbered pages of Keach's preface to this work).

19 *ibid.*, p.ii.

20 *ibid.*, p.145.

21 *ibid.*, p.146.

22 *ibid.*, p.188.

23 *ibid.*, p.188.

24 Benjamin Keach, *Distressed Sion Relieved*, 1689. The remarks are found in the two-page 'Address to the Reader' which are not numbered.

25 Keach, *Antichrist Stormed*, p.iii.

26 On the distinction between pre- and post-millennial belief, and the gradual replacement in England of the latter by the former, see further D. W. Bebbington *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 1989, pp.60-63, 81-86.

27 'To the reader' in Keach *Distressed Sion Relieved*.

28 H[anserd] K[nollys], *An Exposition of the whole Book of the Revelation. Wherein the Visions and Prophecies of Christ are opened and Expounded: shewing the great Conquests of our Lord Jesus Christ for his Church over all His and Her Adversaries, Pagan, Arian and Papal; and the glorious State of the Church of God in the New Heavens and New Earth, in these Latter Days*, 1689. As the title page of this work makes clear, Knollys completed his exposition sometime prior to 12 September 1688.

29 Keach, *Antichrist Stormed* pp.136-137.

30 *ibid.*, pp.137-138.

31 Knollys, *Exposition* p.140.

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